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The cruising past of men seeking same-sex encounters under Albanian communism

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Abstract

Despite the growing sexuality-related scholarship on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the history of non-normative sexualities under state socialism remains theorized mainly through totalizing narratives. These problematic discourses have contributed to the theorization of LGBT+ experience in the CEE region solely through narratives of oppression, criminalization, and persecution of homosexuality, therefore emptying the history of CEE from any development of LGBT+ activism and by rendering the existence of non-normative sexualities even more invisible. I argue that in contrast to such essentialist representations, which in turn are juxtaposed with representations of the West as a homoerotic paradise, there were also different forms of political resistance that contributed to sexual emancipation in state-socialist countries. For this reason, I depart from Western-centric understandings of conventional forms of political organizing and take as a vantage point the cruising areas where men sought to fulfill same-sex desires under the oppressive regime in communist Albania. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, I conceptualize these urban spaces not only as areas of sexual encounter but as grounds of political resistance, therefore ‘queering’ the forms of grassroots politics within the geo-temporality of state-socialism in Albania.

Keywords: state socialism; Albania; homoeroticism; grassroots politics; sexual citizenship

1 Introduction

Under the rule of communist leader Enver Hoxha, Albania constituted one of the most authoritarian regimes in the Eastern Bloc (De Waal, 2005, p. 5). Hoxha sealed Albania off from the rest of the socialist republics and the world. The communist party followed this isolationist policy for half a century and established *Sigurimi*¹ (a secret police system emu-

¹ *Sigurimi* (Security) was the former State Security Police in Albania. It constituted an intricate network of around thirteen thousand uniformed employees, undercover agents, and informers. An estimated one in four Albanians were working for this agency, usually as informants, with recorded instances of husbands who spied on their wives, pupils on teachers, etc. (Abrahams, 2016, p. 19).

lating the Soviet KGB) and other technologies of social control. The women's emancipation model was part of the state rhetoric during communist Albania, which involved policies that supported women's participation in the labor market and military (Këlliçi & Danaj, 2016). This model, developed throughout different stages under the communist rule, failed to promote gender equality by placing a double burden of productive and reproductive labor on women (*ibid.*, p. 144).

As stated by several researchers, there was no form of sexual education in socialist Albania, and speaking about intimacy and sex was considered taboo (Shkreli & Çunga, 2023). Even though women and girls could get an education and go to work, they were still forced to marry and give birth to children (Woodcock, 2016, p. 82). The criminalization of abortion and male homosexual acts was furthered from the establishment of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania in 1944 until the end of the regime. As Lišková (2018, p. 2) argues, the state's socialist morals sanctioned the nuclear family and marriage. They glorified a specifically asexual socialist reproduction in alignment with the regime's requirements for the labor force.

Despite the growing body of scholarship in sexuality studies and (post)-communism, the history of non-normative sexualities in socialist Albania remains little explored. In its attempt to deconstruct the myth of queer invisibility, this article focuses on subaltern queer lives and the forms of resistance that emerged against compulsory heterosexuality in communist Albania. Held common beliefs about the history of social movement for sexual rights follow a linear Western narrative of emancipation. These discourses need to be challenged. For this reason, I depart from Western-centric understandings of conventional forms of grassroots politics and take as a vantage point the cruising strips, where men sought to fulfill same-sex desires under oppressive communist rule. This article focuses on disciplinary mechanisms in the legal realm which sought to control and regulate male 'homosexual acts' under the communist regime and how marginalized sexualities subverted these regulatory schemes through the appropriation of urban territories. I argue that despite the social and legal repression, some gay men exercised their sexual agency by navigating the heteronormative discourses through the transformation of urban spaces into contact zones for sexual encounters.

I begin this paper by introducing Albania's broader political and social context under the communist regime. I unpack the anxieties generated by queer sexualities for state power in the Socialist Republic of Albania and critically explore why the latter was fixated on regulating certain sexual acts. Following a Foucauldian-informed analysis I critically examine how the Albanian state exercised bio-political power by governing reproductive rights through a pro-natalist policy and imposing some of the most draconian laws in the Eastern bloc against consensual homosexual acts (Blinken OSA, 2021). I proceed in the next section by outlining the conceptual background and the methodology based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted for one year between 2022 and 2023 with homosexual men who lived in Tirana during state socialism and heterosexual men willing to share stories relevant to the research. Drawing on my ethnographic study, I argue that despite the official ideology of a 'de-sexualized' totalitarian regime, there was resistance toward institutionalized heteronormativity. This article contributes to the body of literature in sexuality studies in communist Eastern Europe by developing a deeper understanding of queer subjectivities in the context of Albania.

2 Notes on terminology

Like any history of sexuality, finding the suitable vernacular remains a difficult task. The shifting terminologies constitute a challenge for this article in building bridges between the past and present and linguistically navigating between Albanian and English. As Věra Sokolová (2021, p. 15) illustrates in the ethnographic work with the queer community in socialist Czechoslovakia, queer people did not use terms like ‘lesbian,’ ‘gay,’ or even ‘homosexual’ to describe themselves because these terms became popular only after the fall of communism. During the oral interviews conducted in my ethnographic study, informants identified with words such as *gej* (gay), which are commonly used nowadays, even though narrators admitted that these labels were introduced and became known after 1991 when Albania opened its borders to the world. A common offensive term attached to gay men during communism was *pederast*, which was also part of the legal vocabulary used by the Party-State in defining and punishing gay men.

During state socialism, the word *dylber* (which can be literally translated as ‘rainbow’) was used to refer to men who engaged in homoerotic sexual practices, and it is also a label that some of the research participants used to refer to themselves in addition to phrases such as *burra që shkojnë me burra* (‘men who go and sleep with other men’). As Piro Rexhepi observes in their book *White Enclosures: Racial Capitalism and Coloniality Along the Balkan Route* (2023), *dylber* had entered the discourses about queerness during Ottoman rule in Albania. As a coinage, *dylber* referred to male admirers of *bejtexhi*, who were Ottoman-era poets performing Albanian poetry through Arabic script and addressing homoerotic tropes. The *bejtexhi*’s relation to his *dylbers* was poetic and erotic while frequently equating their love for *dylbers* with piety for Islam. The term was later on co-opted by Albanian nationalists in discursively pathologizing same-sex desires, framing them as ‘remnants’ of the old ways of life and as sexualities incompatible with the hetero-normative regime emerging in the late socialist period (Rexhepi, 2023, pp. 71–79).

Like other researchers in sexuality scholarship, I use the word *queer* as a fitting term that captures the best the diversity of narrators’ sexual experiences. The term *queer* has emerged as a dominant conceptual framework in the Global North and can be associated with different definitions (Brown & Browne, 2016, p. 2). I share an understanding of the term which perceives *queer* as a mode of thinking that allows us to question the ways how desires, identities, and practices are produced and help us conceptualize sexuality as dynamic, fluid and historically contingent.

As for the use of the label ‘Central and Eastern Europe’, there are many terms in use denoting what the CEE might stand for, ranging from geographical meaning (Eastern Europe; East; Balkans, etc.) and historical (post-/former communist; post-/former Soviet; Soviet/communist satellite countries; former communist bloc, etc). These terms stem from the entanglements of history and geography and should not be perceived as stable and fixed categories. Undoubtedly, the former ‘East bloc’ did not constitute a bloc at all, as it is problematic to lump together all former communist countries under some broad claims or to enclose CEE within fixed geographical/historical boundaries. Hence, the label CEE is a relational concept used to insinuate hierarchies of power and resistance. The geographical/historical position is used in this paper to critically examine the construction of CEE as an object of ‘Western pedagogy’ (Kulpa, 2011, p. 49) and to problematize the imposition

of Western hegemonic frameworks in the conceptualization of non-Western realities and the ways how the Western time and space are perceived as universal. I use terms like ‘communist,’ ‘Party-State,’ ‘state-socialism,’ and the label ‘Eastern Bloc’ for naming political and economic systems in the former socialist republics during the Cold War.

3 Queering the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania

The hegemonic Western time of progress places the history of LGBTIQ+ movements, which took place in Global North countries, as the only legitimate path to progress that others should follow. As many scholars argue, history is not a linear movement from oppression to liberation, but it has its local nuances and looks different in every country (Kulpa & Mizielinska, 2012, p. 89). Recent developments in the field of sexuality studies in (and about) CEE have recognized the need for *localization* of sexual politics based on their respective geo-temporalities (ibid., p. 5). This localization of sexual politics interrogates universalist discourses that have emerged from hyper-normalized Euro-American queer theory and help us to understand how queer politics play out in the local context. Hence, several scholars have argued in favor of a reconceptualization of sexual politics by contextualizing sexualities within local geographical and linguistic contexts and rejecting the ‘Stonewall era’ and other Western frameworks as signifiers and references in conceptualizing non-Western cultures (Szulc, 2019, p. 33).

Following queer and Soviet perspectives, Kondakov (2017) argues that grassroots politics in Soviet time were differently arranged in comparison to conventional forms of political participation in the West. Kondakov’s analysis enhances the theoretical framework of sexual citizenship (Bell & Binnie, 2000, p. 4) by critically examining the relationship between one’s sexuality and political participation in the USSR context. In any of its readings, citizenship constitutes a disciplinary discourse that makes individual political subjects susceptible to a pre-arranged set of norms and ideologies. In the outlined framework by Kondakov, the acts of resistance toward the disciplinary regime of citizenship derive from the mutually constitutive relation between queer sexualities and material urban spaces that the former claimed for the construction of subaltern urban experiences. Despite the heterosexualized urban space, queer men in USSR joined struggles for the re-configuration of their restricted citizenship by occupying and designating alternative urban material spaces (Kondakov, 2017). Therefore, resistance did not necessarily manifest as formal political organizing but constituted an alternative form of protesting, resulting in the re-organization of Soviet city space.

This conceptualization departs from the Western liberal tradition of claiming rights and inclusion into ‘full’ citizenship, which would constitute an empty signifier in the USSR context, where the right to assembly and street-protesting were curtailed. As argued by Muñoz (2020, p. 8) a reconceptualization of queerness in non-Western realities should depart from identity politics in order to focus on dis-identificatory performances enacted by the minoritarian subjects in disrupting hegemonic discourses of state power. Even though the government guaranteed freedom of assembly and association in its second adopted constitution in 1976 (Andersen, 2005), the political environment was hostile and repressive in communist Albania. Homosexuality remained outlawed until the fall of

communism and men would go to jail for having sex with other men. Under such circumstances, it was unimaginable for Albanians to self-organize around sexual freedom and follow street protests. Nonetheless, men who desired queerly were not plain victims of heteronormative state power and discourses but silently subverted these discourses by searching and appropriating urban spaces to live and embrace their sexuality.

This collection of cruising spaces provides an alternative image of the oppressive Hoxha regime by depicting these sites as places of queer sexualities, which were deemed to be suppressed under state socialism. Following Kondakov's analytical framework, I argue that such erotic topographies in socialist Tirana, where the intimate life became public, constitute a 'silent' form of resistance. Following the Foucauldian informed analysis, in order to deconstruct the 'totalizing' view of power (Kelly, 2022, p. 50), I show that despite the 'de-sexualized' totalitarianism of the communist regime in Albania, no subjectivities were completely powerless and without any agency. As argued by Foucault, power contradicts itself and manifests incongruence by getting involved in the process which tries to annihilate or marginalize some individual(s), and simultaneously participates in the process of establishing and identifying these subjectivities (Foucault, 1977, p. 197).

As highlighted by academics in geographies of sexuality scholarship, human sexualities differ geographically, with space playing a central role in shaping and conditioning sexual desires and identities (Brown & Browne, 2016, p. 1). Scholars argue that spatial relationships produce sexed bodies, and sex itself is policed and relegated to the private sphere through a public/private divide. Under socialism, public spaces were defined by heteronormative images and designed to foster the spirit of collectivism and other socialist ideals. The heterosexualization of the public space was informed by subtle regulative mechanisms (gazing, staring, etc.), which spread discomfort among queer men by conveying to the latter that they do not belong to society at large (Kulpa & Mizielinska, 2012, p. 154).

These disciplinary mechanisms established self-control among queer men and contributed to the heteronormative geography of the public space. Despite this, some queer men transformed public sites into contact zones driven by same-sex pursuit, using some of the city's areas as grounds for 'unconventional' behavior that defied socialist values. Numerous studies (Browne & Brown, 2016) have focused on documenting subaltern urban experiences of gay men pursuing their sexual desires in (semi-) public spaces, where they searched for and engaged with their sexual partners. According to Aldrich (2004), there is a correlation between urban centers and homosexual expression. Despite the official 'sexless' ideology of state socialism, men utilized urban landscapes, which were conducive to homosexual expression.

4 The regulation and policing of male same-sex eros in communist Albania

To shed light on the possibilities for sexual freedom in the socialist period, one has to explore how the Communist regime shaped the lived experiences of queer individuals in Albania. Existing research on sexuality has directed scarce attention to the effects of legal regulations and stigma attached to queerness on individuals. The archival documents available in Albania impose significant limitations in developing the history of sexuality.

Former State Security files remain under-analyzed and therefore we have little knowledge on police surveillance on queers. The Communist Party² formed the government in 1948 and ruled the country until 1991 when the communist regime collapsed (Rejmer, 2018, p. 181). Enver Hoxha was the First Secretary of the party, who ruled the country until his death in 1985. Hoxha's rule sought to establish a totalitarian regime since the early years of socialism (O'Donnell, 1995), and authoritative discourses informed the official ideology. It became increasingly difficult to speak against the official ideology, including for those who governed.

The communist goal of reconstructing everyday life did not only manifest in economic terms through the proletarian revolution, but also sought to transform how citizens thought, acted, worked, and talked about sex. The Party-State deployed purges and police surveillance as a form of social control against those deemed as opponents of ideological conformity (Mëhilli, 2017, p.6). The omnipresent 'watchful' eye of *Sigurimi* and the purge with its review of family biographies would contribute to a mentality of suspicion and ideological orthodoxy. Denouncing someone suspected of disobeying the regime's rule became a way to show loyalty to the party (Woodcock, 2016, p. 80).

The criminalization of 'pederastia' predates communist rule. The first attempts from the Albanian state to regulate 'pederastia' were recorded in 1925 (Pinderi, 2017) resulting from various reports drafted by officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs directed to the Council of Ministers. These reports emphasized the need to propose a bill legislating against sexual activity between two men (*ibid.*). The 'anti-sodomy legislation' was subjected to minor changes during communism (Hazizaj, 2019), but at no point in its development was the question of lesbian relations explicitly raised. Just as the Soviet legislation that exempted female homoerotic desires from its regulatory schemes (Healey, 2004, p. 13), communist leadership in Albania criminalized same-sex conduct only between men. Leaders did not perceive a need to prohibit lesbian relations legally. The policing and regulation of male same-sex desires was done through Article 137 on 'pederastia' pertaining to the Penal Code of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania (Figure 1). According to the statistical records from National Archives in Albania, there were around 270 men sentenced under Article 137 throughout the decades of socialism (Dervishi, 2010). This Article included the following (in the original terminology):

- sexual acts falling under consensual sodomy (punishable with up to 10 years of imprisonment);
- sexual acts between men committed violently and non-consensually, and depraved acts with children or minors (the consenting age was 14 years) (punishable with five to 15 years of imprisonment);

The so called 'consensual sodomy' was punishable with up to 10 years of imprisonment, whereas pedophilia and rape were punished from 5 up to 15 years of imprisonment (Hazizaj, 2019). Even though the last two categories constituted forms of child abuse and

² The Communist Party of Albania (in Albanian: Partia Komuniste e Shqipërisë) was established in 1941. In 1948 it changed its name to Party of Labor of Albania (DBpedia, 2007).

sexuality-related felonies, these sexual offenses were merged with 'anti-sodomy' legislation. Overall, these legal acts pertained to the 'Crimes against the Social Morality' cluster. As illustrated in this section, some of these illegal acts coalesced into those punished by the law against pedophilia. Hence, the legal framework perpetuated the pathologization of male 'sodomy.'

In 1977 the political leadership introduced harsher legal punishment against 'sodomy' by re-classifying acts of 'pederasty' as illegal conduct against the administrative order of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania (Blinken OSA & Hättér Archive and Library, 2021). Specifically, the Penal Code stipulated that 'pederastic acts' were punishable with up to 10 years of imprisonment. Hence, Albania became one of the countries with the harshest legal sanctions against homosexuality among the former socialist republics. The further policing of sexuality in 1977 can be attributed to a combination of historical developments. If we contextualize these draconian measures within the domestic environment of the late 1970s in Albania and within the larger geopolitics, we come across an entanglement of historical events that might have instigated a further crackdown on non-procreative sex as explained further.

Following the Sino-Albanian split,³ these years find communist Albania as a growing insecure state after it had broken diplomatic ties with communist China, its last ally, before withdrawing further into isolation and with economic aid from allies coming to a halt (Mëhilli, 2019). After the break with China, Hoxha's military paranoia reached incredible levels with the construction of thousands of bunkers (Woodcock, 2016, p. 82). Public anxieties instigated by Hoxha routinely fed the collective fear and paranoia of a possible threat and attack from neighboring countries leading to the further militarization of society. Despite a pro-natalist policy, that the Party-State had embraced since the establishment of communism, the fertility rate in Albania started to drop from 1960 onwards (Falkingham & Gjonça, 2001). These circumstances prompted the political leadership to worry about the falling birthrates amidst a growing need for further militarization of the society.

The regime's paranoia culminated with the Constitution of the People's Republic of Albania declaring Marxism-Leninism as the country's official ideology with heavy militarization as its underpinning principle and maternity imposed as a socialist duty (Andersen, 2005). Article 33 of the Constitution stipulated that education was based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology and combined formal education with military training (*ibid.*). Military service and constant training for the defense of the socialist homeland were compulsory under Article 63 for all the citizens of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. In accordance with the Constitution (*ibid.*), marriage and the family were under the protection of the state and society, hence reproduction and compulsory heterosexuality were prioritized and institutionalized under Hoxha's rule.

³ Initially a satellite of Yugoslavia (which helped in the establishment of the communist party in Albania), the Party-State in Albania broke the ties with Tito in 1948. Then Hoxha became an ally with the Soviet Union (1960–1961) and lastly aligned diplomatically with China (1976–1978) until the Sino-Albanian relations ended in 1978 (Mëhilli, 2019).

As argued by Foucault, this embodiment of power over population by the governments is institutionalized through restrictive sanctions and techniques that aim to control human sexuality and reproduction (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). According to Foucault such an understanding of power constitutes biopower and biopolitics that find expression in the form of regulatory controls foregrounded by compulsory heterosexuality that aim to subjugate non-procreative sexual desires. The decline in fertility, coupled with the national need to establish militaristic self-reliance, might have increased the state's interest in clamping down on non-procreative sex activity in communist Albania. Reading these developments through the Foucauldian framework of bio-politics, one can unpack the investment of the Party-State in assigning itself as the controller of population growth by regulating reproduction and punishing sexualities not conforming to the heteronormative order.

At the same time, the newly imposed housing policies under communism had transformative effects on Albanians by making communal apartments popular and by placing family members in proximity to each other. These new material conditions, marked by the impossibility of privacy, affected the sexual experiences of its citizens. In addition, the confiscation policy followed by the Party-State is another factor that might have impacted the lives of queer men in the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. According to Mëhilli (2017, p. 32), who provides a historical overview of the governmental policy on urban planning, a widening inequality in housing unfolded during socialism. Since the communist leadership came to power, local council officials had confiscated housing units under the pretense that 'residents had too much of a living space' (ibid., p. 31). These officials displaced families from their property to other houses, even though the authorities did not have the right to confiscate private belongings. In some other cases, these officials confiscated the property of arrested individuals without receiving approval from the central government, making expropriation a de-facto reality (ibid.). Internal exile was another common method applied to the relatives of those convicted for 'political crimes.' Hence one can understand how living arrangements were shaped by these policies and restricted one's access to housing depending on the socio-economic status of the person.

In her ethnography on communism in Albania, Woodcock chronicles different aspects of life during socialist times. Some of the narrators testified to the difficulty of getting a residence permit in Tirana during the socialist times Woodcock (2016, p. 70). Based on oral histories she found out that many people constantly tried to find the opportunity to live in the capital city since it was the center of political and cultural life. In addition to this, the author notes that in cities such as Kukës (and in other places too) the lack of access to private apartments forced many couples to walk through the fields or find empty barns where they could sit alone and enjoy the intimacy. This urge to find privacy is a sentiment that I noticed in my research as well. Participants argued that the lack of private space exacerbated by the stringent housing policy might have pushed some of them to seek public spaces such as parks and public toilets to live and perform their sexualities, thus bringing a proliferation of cruising strips in Tirana.

5 Shaping the ethnographic research among queer men from communist Albania

The past decade has witnessed a shift in the construction of collective memory of subaltern queer lives (Arondekar, 2005), by collecting oral histories, who have been rendered illegitimate subjects of archivization. The research material I analyze in this paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork consisting of in-depth semi-structured interviews focused on personal experiences of men pursuing same-sex desires in the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. These personal narratives have enabled me as an ethnographer to reconstruct a network of cruising sites in Tirana during communist Albania. During my fieldwork in Tirana, I conducted eight interviews with narrators aged between 36 to 81 years old. Most of the interviews took place in person between June 2022 and July 2023, except for one interview scheduled online due to the interlocutor living abroad. Several interlocutors preferred to meet in an informal setting such as a café. I ensured fully informed consent of my participants and secure data management and storage of the empirical data. Before I analyze these interviews in the following section, it is essential to describe the characteristics of the group of narrators whom I interviewed.

Three interview narrators self-identified as gay men (born between 1940 and 1970) who spent their youth years in Tirana during communism. Two of the interview participants still live in the capital city, and the third narrator resides in Greece, where he migrated together with his family after the fall of communism. I reached out to them through my personal contacts with LGBT+ communities and activists in Tirana. The interviewees' names have been altered in order to retain their anonymity. Only one of the informants, Tore (81 y/o), was 'out' (in the contemporary understanding of 'coming out') as a gay man during communism. In contrast, the other two, Sotiraq (63 y/o) and Ari (65 y/o), said they had to disguise their real identities due to social stigma. Therefore, they were forced to lead double lives as heterosexuals, with only a few family relatives and acquaintances knowing about their sexual orientations.

The perceived experience of 'otherness' is a common denominator in their accounts, alongside the use of public areas in Tirana where the narrators engaged in (sometimes anonymous) male same-sex acts. While there was a unitary legal framework, narrators experienced structural discrimination differently. The participants' narratives differed in their encounters with the state structures. Because of being openly a gay man during communism, Tore was arrested at the age of twenty by the communist authorities. He was convicted of 'pederasty' and was sentenced to three years of imprisonment. Tore gave a detailed account of the circumstances of his arrest:

Apparently, somebody had spied on me at the Party branch. I learned years later that the ticket officer at one cinema in Tirana was an undercover agent for *Sigurimi*, who overheard two young men speaking about me. They were talking about a night in Pezë (a village twenty kilometers away from the city center) where I had joined a sex party with five other men. Later, a letter was issued and sent to my house, and I was legally prosecuted. The authorities accused me of corrupting the youth and forcing young men to have sex with me, which was a false claim.

It must be underscored that these personal narratives cannot paint a complete picture of queer life in state socialism, as these accounts are confined to the capital city and do not represent voices from other cities and areas. In another interview conducted with Xheni Karaj, a contemporary lesbian activist and executive director of ‘The Alliance against Discrimination of LGBT’ in Albania, closely in touch with community members, Karaj argued that ‘due to the stigma and internalized trauma, gay men from the communist period hesitate to talk about their experiences, and only a few of them have decided to open up and reach out to local organizations’. One of the reasons is homophobia, which according to recent surveys (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024), remains rampant in Albania and forces many members of the LGBTI+ community to lead a double life due to fear of discrimination, harassment, and social stigma.

In order to gather insights into the topic, the other narrators included in the ethnographic study are acquaintances and family relatives who accepted the invitation to share stories of men who were outed as ‘gay’ in the communities where they lived in Tirana and Elbasan. During the family visits, I conducted specific interviews to raise issues that I wanted to discuss later in the recording. Sometimes family relatives would share stories in informal conversations without me starting the recording. These interviews focused on their perceptions and personal memories of queer men and stories concerning the cruising sites. All the narrators lived (mostly) in Tirana during the communist regime and were aged between 50–70 years old. They all held university degrees, and six of them self-identified as heterosexual men, with one narrator identifying as a lesbian (Xheni, 37 y/o). According to the informants, there were cases of heterosexual men who were interrogated by the *Sigurimi* just because they were spotted near individuals who were deemed as non-heterosexual.

My research is limited in several ways: I included a small sample of participants. Interviews were carried out in Tirana and Elbasan and excluded participants from other rural areas. Whereas one of the limitations of the empirical data gathering is the low number of the participants of the queer community it remains a challenge for scholars to reach out to queer men willing to share their personal narratives; hence this methodological obstacle deserves more attention in future academic work undertaken on ‘sexual dissidents’. The scope of my ethnographic fieldwork is therefore narrow and excludes personal narratives on lesbian eros. Previous research (Healey, 2004, p. 73) on lesbian love in other countries during state socialism demonstrates that women, unlike men, did not use urban public spaces to express homoeroticism. Concealed from the public eye, lesbian networks were mainly confined to the private domain, while the queer urban communities were exclusively male. The prevalence of male subcultures in the cruising sites contributes to methodological obstacles in researching how lesbians self-organized and pursued their sexual desires. Undoubtedly, new avenues of research should focus on female same sex-desires in order to disrupt lesbian invisibility and to initiate an understanding of why the Party-State did not perceive a need to include female same-sex relations in its regulatory schemes.

In order to interpret the personal narratives of the qualitative research, I use a Foucauldian-informed interpretative practice developed by Maria Tamboukou (2008). This framework of narrative epistemology enables researchers to understand narratives as: effects of power and knowledge; modalities of power; and as productive and constitutive

of subject (ibid.). Narrative epistemology suggests that narratives or stories are not just a way of conveying information but are integral to the construction and interpretation of knowledge. It enables us to understand the process of narrative formation as crucial for unpacking how knowledge is produced and reconfigured, how storytelling shapes our understanding of reality and untangling the complex relationship between knowledge, identity, and social context. In this light, I am interested to see how my participants' narratives reflect, and are limited by, existing power structures and larger social discourses about sexuality or how they resist these discourses. On the other hand, the narratives of my informants are not only spaces where discourses circulate, but also the tools that potentiate the negotiation of those discourses.

6 'How we survived communism and even had sex' – cruising strips in Tirana

Contrary to the common belief, the circumstances in former communist countries provided more political grounds for resistance than what is commonly believed (Sokolová, 2021, p. 19). This also applies to Albania. Despite the conviction of hundreds of men on 'sodomy' charges during communism in Albania, there appeared to be an urban homosexual subculture taking shape in Tirana. This subculture was known for its sexualized territories and use of urban space. Many informants claimed that under such circumstances, where freedom of assembly was not allowed, the only forms of resistance in subverting the norms of the sex-gender system were confined to the urban spaces (and even there were marginal). Queer men established clandestine networks by constructing alternative spaces to exercise sexual agency. As Sotiraq – one of the people I interviewed – claimed, queer men had little sense of a community due to the lack of terminological and political means for mobilizing and that finding a sexual partner was a challenge due to the fear of legal punishment:

I have been lucky to have a family who knew of my sexuality but did not kick me out of the house. Let's say that they were somehow silently supporting me. I remember them talking and referring to me with the following expressions 'Well, he is that type of bloke.' You should be aware that we didn't know about terms like *gay* or *homosexual* in that period. These terms came to us very late, almost when communism was overthrown. Just imagine that until 1991 we did not even have a sense of community or collective identity as gay men. You should get the gist of that system: *pederasts* were persecuted by the law. Therefore, we were forced to experience our sexuality 'underground'!!

According to most of the interview participants, Tirana offered more opportunities for sexual pleasure as a city in comparison with smaller towns and areas in the countryside:

Tirana was a liberal town compared to other cities and villages in Albania. The cruising sites were mainly the green parks, especially the zones around the artificial lake. Or the cinema. I was very fond of cultural events, and I was flirting with men on these occasions. Generally, 'we' were cruising in areas that were not well-lit to avoid any by-passer gazing. The parents of some of us knew where their kids were going when the twilight approached but approved of it silently... (Sotiraq, 63 y/o)

As illustrated in Sotiraq's testimonial, Tirana had several public spaces where men with same-sex attractions could look for sexual partners, ranging from public bathrooms, theaters, recreational parks, etc. The area around the artificial lake, away from the city center, was one of the most well-known cruising strips due to the surrounding bushes and trees, which were conducive for men to engage in sexual intercourse and avoid the by-passers gazing. In these locations men would create spaces of communication which were not allowed to be publicly performed. In Tore's account, theaters would be a contact zone where men would socialize with other men and flirt:

We used coded language to show interest and attraction... some gestures included winking, shaking the head... I have slept with a lot of dancers and actors. I would usually wait for them at the theater entrance after the play, and then we would go to an apartment. When neighbors saw men entering my flat, they usually whispered, '*ja i erdhën...*' (here they come again). A peculiar place that I would use to have sex was the school. My partner and I would go inside the schools after twilight by the time all pupils had gone home. I would drive those men crazy. 'There is no one like Tore,' they would say. Let me tell you that those schools' walls have been shaken many times...

While reminiscing, Ari recalls how cruising grounds were the place of his first sexual experience with another man. He was frequently visiting and strolling around these cruising strips observing other men engaging in erotic acts and admits that such experience helped him to recognize his attraction toward men. Interestingly, the informants do not recall any memory of police patrolling the cruising sites, even though it was generally known that these were sexualized territories for queer men. Nonetheless, Sotiraq and Ari shared their perceived fear of being followed whenever they would go and cruise for lovers in parks.

In a Foucauldian framework, panoptic technology instills the awareness that you are being surveilled all the time, even in cases where one might think that is exempted from surveillance (Chaput, 2009). Due to the 'watchful eye' of *Sigurimi* – the focal point where the supervision originates from – no citizen can ever know if they are being supervised or not (Caluya, 2010), especially in a context like communist Albania, where the secret police bugged thousands of citizen's homes and recruited around two hundred thousand informers (Rejmer, 2022, p. 27). As Foucault illustrates through the 'carceral continuum' (Foucault, 1978, p. 201), the power is ubiquitous and disperses in a capillary form. Hence supervision is exercised on every level. With citizens fearing permanent surveillance, a need to prove to the party that they are loyal citizens to the socialist ideology emerges. The interviews from the qualitative research show that a sense of being 'permanently surveilled' from the Party-State was present among heterosexual men whom I interviewed. As Piro points out, there were ways the state used different techniques of surveillance on men who pursued sex with other men:

I lived in Elbasan between 1975 until the late 2000s. I remember one guy who worked in a grocery store. Everybody in the neighborhood knew about his sexuality, that he wanted to have sex with men. People called him 'Beni the butthole.' I think he was supervised all the time. Personally, I never went to the shop where Beni worked because I was afraid of surveillance and being seen around him.

According to testimonials, even youth organizations such as the Democratic Front,⁴ which were in charge of the political education of the masses during socialism, internalized the regulatory role of external authorities and ensured that the social norms of the communist society were respected. This punishment of citizens as sexual dissidents shows what Foucault frames as the automatic functioning of power (Foucault, 1977, p. 198). Nonetheless, there was resistance against the legal domain regulating male same-sex eros. There were myriad ways how queer men negotiated their sexual citizenship during the communist period, as exemplified by the narrator below:

I get so annoyed when I listen to the youngsters nowadays who believe that the youth only suffered during the socialist regime. You know... we also had our glorious days during those years, and we resisted [referring to engaging in same-sex sexual acts – annotation by the author] in creative ways, despite the repression that the system produced. (Sotiraq)

As we can see from the participants' narratives, gatherings in private apartments were a privilege for only a few men seeking same-sex contacts. Given these circumstances, men resorted to public spaces and spatially organized to have sex together. The criminalization of sex between men by the Albanian law and 'ubiquitous' surveillance apparatus did not prevent men from gathering in certain locations used as sex contact spaces.

7 Conclusion

Drawing on my ethnographic study, I argue that despite the official ideology of a 'desexualized' totalitarian regime, there was resistance toward institutionalized heteronormativity. Contrary to the Western-centric understating of progress and sexual liberation, resistance to hostile laws goes beyond formal political organizing. It also includes the strategies of everyday resistance that queer men in former socialist republics showed by claiming urban spaces for themselves and subverting state power. Queer people had the opportunity to transgress norms of socialist prudishness that would allow them to exercise personal agency to some extent. The repressive sexual policies imposed by the Albanian Party-State in the socialist era did not prevent men from pursuing same-sex encounters in urban landscapes in Tirana. These public urban areas were transformed into transitory sites for sexual freedom. Queer men constructed private networks by gathering in public spaces and adopting various communication strategies, such as coded language.

This collection of cruising urban spaces shines a light on the oppressive Hoxha regime by contributing to the shaping of the history of communism. Following Kondakov's analytical framework, I argue that the urban spaces in socialist Tirana, where some men found ways to resist hostile laws, such as the criminalization of homosexuality, and claim spaces for themselves, are a 'silent' form of resistance.

⁴ Initially called 'The National Liberation Front,' this was regarded as the largest youth organization responsible for the social organization and the political education of the masses. In August 1945, it was renamed 'The Democratic Front' (Omari & Pollo, 1988, pp. 16–18).

The scholarship on queer lives during the socialist era remains under-theorized because the study of queer sexuality is in its infancy. Mapping and locating personal memories of queer men enables us as scholars to tap into the clandestine network of ‘sexual dissidents’ whose existence was forced underground by state power structures. For this reason, the cruising spaces should be perceived not merely as sexualized territories but as sites of collective memory, resistance, and subversion to the legal gaze of the Albanian communist state. This paper centers on sexuality as a legitimate analytical category in historical inquiry, which can enrich and transform the study of communism. Oral history as a methodological approach is crucial not only for its potential to fulfill blank spots of the communist past but it serves to give voice to marginalized identities. This work contributes to the body of literature on communist studies in Central and Eastern Europe with a substantive focus on Albania’s history of sexuality. Building on oral history, this article offers new perspectives on the history of sexuality and state socialism in general in communist Albania.

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Appendix

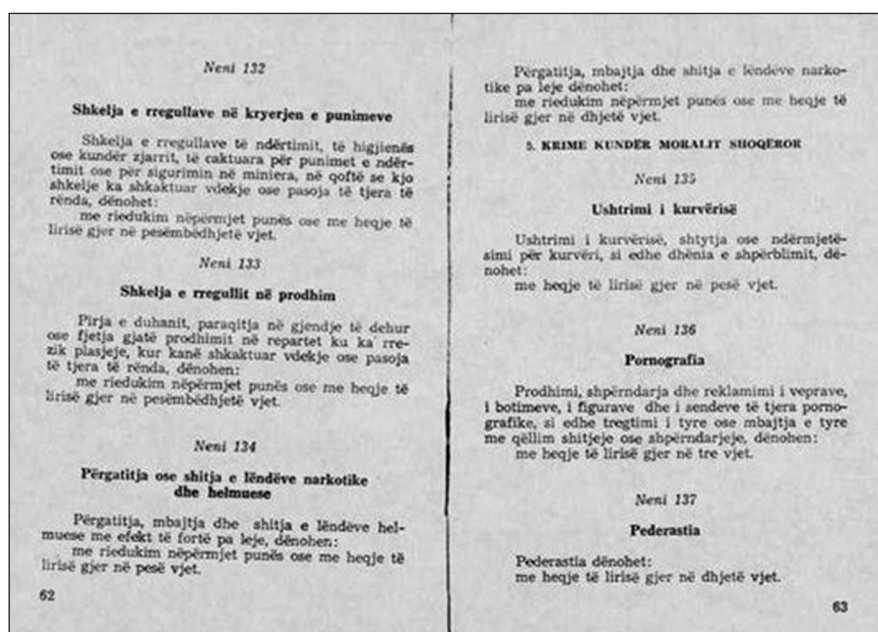


Figure 1 Excerpt from the Albanian Penal Code (1977)

Source: exhibition print, Blinken OSA