

Abstinence Makes the State Grow Stronger: The Politics of Sex Education in Croatia\*

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As the title of my paper suggests the subject matter deals with the Republic of Croatia and its policy on sex education. Similar to many former socialist countries, the religious authorities in Croatia have taken an influential role in the affairs of the state. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate how the interjection of a church-backed sex education policy into the public sphere fuels the imagery of heterosexual nationalism among Croatian citizens. A movement that produces and reinforces notions of ethno-heterosexuality. I use the term “ethno-heterosexual” to emphasize the particularities of the relationship between heterosexuality and Croatian nationalism. Borrowing from Joane Nagel’s concept of ethnosexuality, in which she claims that “ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries,” I extend the concept to foreground how the interplay between ethnicity and religion galvanize to produce a hyper-heterosexualized Croatian national body. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s theory of discourse, I interrogate how state and church apparatus channel power through ethnically charged heterosexual discourses to discipline citizen’s bodies. This perspective carves out a lens through which we can see how church-backed values map onto the social body, grounding ethno-heterosexuality as a form of social control that shores up Croatia’s institutional power.

At this point, a brief introduction of Croatia’s recent history is useful to contextualize the current sex education debate. The Republic of Croatia is officially joining the NATO alliance and is in the process of attaining membership within the European Union. Croatia’s path to Europe, however, is confronted by various challenges,

particularly those in relation to Croatia's policies on sexual and reproductive rights vis-à-vis the EU. Although Croatian policy makers claim that "Europeanization" is their goal, struggles from within jeopardize Croatia's pursuit of EU inclusion. One example of this struggle is the heated controversy surrounding implementation of a national program for sex education in public schools.

The televised debate began in 2003 when Dr. Dragan Primovac, the minister of Culture, Education and Sport announced that the country was losing the population of a small city to drug abuse each year, and that 15% of high school graduates were diagnosed with Chlamydia -- a sexually transmitted disease with possible repercussions of sterility. To effectively combat the problem, he announced a sex education program for public schools that would be European (read liberal) in scope, while upholding the traditional culture of the Croatian people (Martinovic 2008). The mission was left for grass roots organizations to come up with the best program, and two models surfaced: Forum for Freedom in Education, or "Forum," and Parents' Voice for Children, or GROZD. Forum is a liberal program compatible with the Croatian constitution's gender equality act and anti-discrimination laws (Juras and Grdan 2007). It is also endorsed by the European Parliament, making it a favorable step toward EU accession. Grozd, on the other hand, is heavily backed by the Croatian Catholic Church, aligned with conservative factors in the state apparatus. After some initial public debate between supporters of both groups, the dynamics of engagement began to change. While Grozd increasingly gained media attention, Forum became largely marginalized (Bjelic 2008). Consequently, the issue of drug addiction was dropped from debate, as the emphasis on sexuality and its moral implications took center stage.

Focusing a critical eye on the popular discourse of Grozd offers ways of interpreting how the literal shapes the symbolic. This perspective illuminates the operation of ethno-heterosexuality as a mechanism that simultaneously disciplines the national body as it regulates the individual subject. I suggest that the three pillars of Grozd: abstinence, control over masturbation and denial of homosexuality, intricately weave to produce political sentiments of ethnic purity. These features interconnect with structures of family, Catholicism and traditional culture to construct an ethno-heterosexual narrative that champions a hegemonic ideal of Croatian nationhood. This interlocking matrix sets up a virtuous narrative that marks the cult of true Croatian subjecthood.

The concept of abstinence, or the practice of restraining from desire, is a powerful bodily device. It is a form of self-control; a way of disciplining the body from harmful pleasures. Abstinence symbolizes purity, pride, self-governance and strength. According to Grozd policy, abstinence “enables the creation of an important personal trait – that of personal value for sexual life” (Grozd Association 2007: see excerpts from EHEP). Literally, this means that every child represents the natural result of sexual intercourse. The practice of intercourse, as noted by Grozd, is reserved between man and woman living in a community of faithfulness, defined as marriage. Moreover, the use of contraception is to be avoided as it changes the essence of sexual intercourse by creating barriers to successful marriage and enduring family life. In addition, Grozd policy claims that there is no sexual relation safe from pregnancy and sexually transmittable diseases. (Grozd Association 2007: see excerpts from EHEP). While this depiction of sexuality ostensibly reflects church-inspired morals, it also captures an embedded heteronormative

intersection of religion, family, ethnicity, and nation. As talk of abstinence circulates in the public domain, fertile ground emerges for religious and nationalist discourses to dovetail. The conjuring of Catholic values within a predominantly Catholic population has the capacity to marshal Croatian national sentiment by aligning church-backed values with Croatian ideals of ethnic purity, strength and self-governance. This association symbolically connects the Croatian people with the national institutions of Croatia. Hence, the discursive practices of an abstinence-only program stakes claim upon individual values, transferring these morals to the collective national body.

Grozđ also serves to temper public discourse through its stance on masturbation. Adhering to strict Catholic doctrine, the program claims that masturbation represents a sexual turn inward. This turn violates the consummation of sacred love which can only be achieved by turning toward another (Grozđ Association 2007: see excerpt EHEP). This code of self-restraint and self-control underscores the importance of bodily discipline. Refraining from masturbation reinforces the commitment to self-management and virility. Notions of individual desires are curtailed and constructed to embrace traditional cultural norms. Here, the individual body is prevented from turning inward and must overcome selfish desire by developing an ability to control sexual excitement -- thus, remaining virtuous to a higher calling. This current of communalism resonates with the Church's doctrine that loving oneself prevents loving another.

The significance of communalism, or the formation of a collective identity, strikes an important cord within national discourse. This imagery appeals to patriotism since newly independent Croatia had recently fought wars against its ethnic rivals, the Serbian and Bosnian nations. The conjuring of Catholic identity, thus, coalesces with imagined

ethnic purity. This manifestation of religious sovereignty intersects with Croatian's traditional and cultural values by recalling past struggles to maintain Catholicism against the Muslim and Eastern Orthodox "others." Since Croatia's quest for independence is rooted in religiously coded ethnic identity, the preservation of its national body from foreign intrusion is instrumental to institutional stability (Ognyanova 2004). I argue that Grozd discourse acts as a catalyst in reclaiming national unity, not only in defense of ethnic "others," but to thwart western liberal influences as well. The symbolic power summoned by self-control and self-management mobilizes a national/ethnic strategy that raises uncertainties about secularism. Consequently, Grozd policies work to affectively undermine liberal discourses by positioning secularism as a threat to ethno-heterosexual cohesion.

This resistance to secularism connects most significantly with Grozd's position on homosexuality. The Grozd policy states that students need to "develop awareness that homosexual intercourse stands against the very nature of sexual intercourse" (Grozd Association 2007: see excerpts from EHEP). It also requires students to determine the difference between homosexuality as a phase of development as opposed to a lasting trend (Grozd Association 2007: see excerpts from EHEP). One critical implication of this policy is that it plays a determining role in constituting heterosexuality as both a 'natural' and 'normal' set of relations for Croatian citizens (Carbine 1996: 59). Applying a Foucauldian lens, this development reflects the maintenance of bodily control through disciplinary power of normalization (1978). That is, disciplining becomes the task of each individual as she or he submits to the process of constant surveillance by normalized judgments and practices. Put another way, the focus of control shifts to the individual, in

which acceptable and appropriate sexual practices discipline the body, rather than overt forces (Foucault 1978). In the case of Grozd, both students and the Catholic population at large are subjected to regulatory effects through circulating discourses of produced knowledge. These discursive practices serve to both preserve Croatia's ideal of ethnic purity within schools and in the public sphere in a specific historical context. In essence, Grozd embodies a particular sexualized, indeed ethno-heterosexualized, envisioning of Croatian normalcy during a time of EU uncertainty.

Grozd's condemnation of homosexuality summons the appropriate locations for men and women in the gender, sexual, national and religious order of Croatia. Its tactical strategy operates as retaliation against a perceived threat of sexual crossing, or national cultural crossing. As Joane Nagel states "the sexualization of ethnicity arouses passions when there are violations of sexual conduct, raising doubts about loyalty and respectability that stirs emotions when sexual purity is at stake" (Nagle 2000: 124 – 125). By embracing the value system of the "Catholic majority," Grozd appeals to ethno-sexuality to thread the moral codes of heteronormativity within the systematic practice of sex education. Furthermore, by purging the homosexual possibility, Grozd discourse functions as a conduit of affective regulatory power over Croatian citizens. First, it reinforces the purpose of intercourse as a means of social reproduction, thus ensuring the reproduction of loyal subjects. And second, it puts forth an ethnic boundary over who qualifies as a member of the real Croatian body. The stark incompatibility of Croatian nationalism and homosexuality functions as a preventive to the infiltration of western values propagated by the EU (Nagle 2000: 124). In the Croatian case, Catholicism

mobilizes an ethno-heterosexual identity that formidably counters support for gender equality and anti-discriminatory laws (Zrinscak 2004).

The power of heterosexual discourses operates as an integral and sustaining building block of Croatian nationalism. Focusing on Grozd illuminates the existence of an ethno-heterosexual nationalist discourse that is tied to church-backed education. This relationship is one indicator of how state and church apparatus use the organizing principle of ethno-heterosexuality as a mechanism that operates as an effective form of discursive power. These formations signify how historically idealized and religiously sanctioned heteronormative structures are preserved, maintained, and used as methods of resistance against prevailing western values and EU standards.

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