



Sexuality and Globalization

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Abstract: Globalization has an impact on all aspects of life, including the construction, regulation and imagination of sexuality and gender. This paper aims to suggest some of the ways in which this impact is occurring, primarily in the developing world, with some emphasis on questions of HIV, sexual identity, and human and sexual rights. In issues of sexuality, as in other spheres, globalization increases inequalities, acting both as a liberatory and an oppressive influence.

Key words: HIV; homosexuality; social movements; prostitution

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During the 2002 Gay Games in Sydney a number of meetings were organized by Asia/Pacific Rainbow, a group of self-consciously gay, lesbian, and bisexual activists from across south and east Asia and Australasia. Many would question whether these identities are meaningful in Asia, arguing either that there is no room for homosexuality in traditional Asian morality, or alternatively that traditional Asian arrangements of sexuality and gender allow for a far richer diversity than is suggested by the Western terms of (homo)sexual identity politics. Preliminary discussions in the planning of Rainbow stressed the need to avoid these sorts of arguments in favor of a pragmatic stress on organizing around homosexual advocacy using the language of international human rights.

One of the Indian participants wrote of his experiences at the opening ceremony of the Games:

I could see the distance we have to travel back home before we get to a point of celebrating our

sexuality without fear or repression. I could also feel the euphoria of freedom where it exists, and the desirability of it, for it is inherently good. But most of all I could feel a validation of what I do back home, for unfolding before my eyes was an ideal that could be had, and playing at the back of my mind was the actual oppression I witness every day I live and work in India. (Bondyopadhyay, 2002)

This quote illustrates the complexities involved in applying universal norms of both freedom and sexual identity to societies with very different cultural and social structures from those which produced the particular construction of “gay” and “lesbian” identities. Arguments around the tensions have taken place in recent years in most non-western countries, often with a conflation of “tradition” and the legacy of colonialism, with the result that post-colonial states such as India, Zimbabwe, and Malaysia defend the retention of anti-homosexual laws that are in fact legacies of colonialism (Phillips, 2001; Reddy, 2002). At the same time gay and lesbian groups are emerging in most countries with sufficient political space for any sort of political organizing, and gay pride parades are now held in cities as different as Manila, Johannesburg, and Sao Paulo. Are we to understand this as a product

1. Much of this article is based on my book *Global Sex*, and for the sake of manageability, most of the sources cited for this article are additional to those cited there.

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of globalization, in all the ways that term is currently understood?

If by globalization we understand the range of shifts in the social, economic, and cultural spheres which are part of the growing movement of peoples, ideas, trade, and money across the world (Held & McGrew, 2002; Soros, 2000), then globalization affects sexuality in a number of interconnected ways. The common thread is perhaps the growth of consumerism and individualism, features which seem more easily transferred with economic growth than specific political values. It is important to recognize that similar rhetoric and appearances may mask significant differences: it is easier to globalize fashion than underlying attitudes. The music, the clothes, and the hairstyles in the discos may be the same, but the meanings are likely to vary.

As young people pour into the rapidly growing cities across the third world, they are exposed to new media images, through cinema, television, and above all the Internet, which offer radically different ways of imagining sex and gender arrangements and identities. Increasingly people live in a world rich in conflicting and hybrid imagery. Young Saudi and Egyptian men studying the Koran also see images of sexuality on television which they are taught are evil, while young people flock to discos in Shanghai, Jakarta, and Lima to dance to music and video images from the United States (Farrar, 2002). While the current U.S. administration fosters a conservative position on reproductive rights and sexual education, the images of the dominant U.S. film and video industry offer new ways of constructing lives, along with identities based upon sexuality and gender. Of course not all electronic images come from the United States, and globalization implies a greater degree of international imagery, as through the popularity of Latin American telenovelas (Allen, 1995; Sinclair, 1996) or the films of Bollywood.

Such "new ways" are only possible because of massive social and economic changes that create the conditions to break away from old ways of doing things, much as the Industrial Revolution reshaped personal relations in nineteenth century Europe. In the past thirty years there have been enormous shifts in China, as tens of millions of people have moved from the countryside to booming metropolitan centers, where

there is a freedom to experiment in "personal life" unimaginable in their village (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002; Dutton, 1998). Out of these shifts people are creating new forms of sexual behavior and norms, which in his discussion of contemporary Mexico Hector Carrillo terms a "new hybridity" (Carrillo, 2002). As he points out, older forms of acting out homosexual behavior coexist with imported identities, so that one finds in Mexico, as in most other parts of the world, what some writers have termed a "global gay" identity. For many people sexual desire coexists with a "desire for modernity," that is, a desire to be part of the affluence and freedom associated with images of the rich world.

As a consequence of these shifts, the "traditional" ways of regulating and controlling sexuality decline. These shifts are perhaps most obvious in much of East Asia, where there has been a rapid collapse in the last thirty years of arranged marriages in favor of marriages entered into through the free choice of the couple concerned. Evidence for shifts in sexual behavior are harder to establish, though one can find a range of examples from different parts of the world. In Thailand there are claims of a declining use of sex workers by young men, paralleled by a greater degree of premarital sex as young women become less likely to postpone intercourse until marriage (Perrin, 2002). In Zimbabwe there are reports of "kissing and smooching" in nightclubs, to the dismay of older Zimbabweans (Runganaga & Aggleton, 1998). Perhaps most significant, if hardest to measure, are ways in which a stress on female pleasure as legitimate is spreading with the diffusion of a mixture of Western feminism and consumerism. Certainly reports from a number of societies speak of the growth of "dating" as social conditions change and unmarried girls are no longer subject to the total surveillance of their families.

I do not want to suggest that the changes in the regulation and experience of sexuality are always liberatory. The greater mobility and (in some cases) affluence associated with globalization mean traditional family and community ties are weakened, while allowing for new patterns of private life to develop. This is most obvious for women, who often carry a disproportionate burden of the consequences of rapid economic change. On the one hand economic

“development” means that millions of women become economically independent and are able to imagine new ways of living (thus the quick spread of marriage by choice, of women controlling their own reproduction, of single women building lives for themselves, of extensive changes in dating and extra-marital sex). Others are far less lucky, as economic shifts leave them destitute and without either communal or state support to look after themselves and their children. The “feminization of poverty” has become an international phenomenon as a result of pressure to adopt neo-liberal economics policies that have thrown millions of women into the search for poorly paid and badly protected jobs (Parrenas, 2001).

Globalization is leading to new forms of inequality, as people differ radically in the opportunities they have to benefit from rapid change. While many people have been able to move into middle class lifestyles, many more, especially since the financial crashes in countries as far apart as Indonesia, Argentina, Russia, and Turkey, have been pauperized, and at a time when the state’s ability to provide basic services is declining. For some, globalization means the ability to emulate the lives portrayed in U.S. movies and television. For many, it means increasing struggles for survival, through petty crime, begging, and sex work. It is not surprising that two influential books on the meanings of globalization share the title *Globalization and Its Discontents* (Sassen, 1998; Stiglitz, 2002).

Critiques of globalization along these lines have become increasingly mainstream, as even institutions like the World Bank acknowledge the failures of too rapid an imposition of market economies and too precipitous a withdrawal of government services (Milanovic, 2003). In the case of sexuality one might point to a corresponding gap as increasing numbers of people in non-Western societies become aware of the possibilities for far greater individual autonomy elsewhere through their exposure to Western societies and media. The tensions between the local and the global are reflected in developing movements such as that among homosexuals or sex workers (Altman, 2003; Berry, Martin, & Yue, 2003; Drucker, 2000; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998), where models derived from images of the first world are blended with very different social and cultural environments. In turn such

movements confront a strong backlash to what their opponents characterize as Western decadence and social collapse (this rhetoric, similar to that of the religious right, infuses critiques of Western liberalism expressed by exponents of “Asian values”). It is safe to predict that just as globalization is sharpening a sense of economic inequality in the world, so too it is ensuring that very different conceptions of the sexual will become politically contested.

Mobility, Health, and Human Rights

The mobility associated with globalization is as much between as within states, and few countries remain unaffected by the influx of large numbers of migrants, often unwanted and marginalized (Martin, 2000). This huge movement of peoples creates considerable social tension as large numbers of people move to societies with very different regimes of sexuality and gender. Thus there is considerable conflict between, say, South Asian immigrants to Britain, who seek to maintain communal cohesion by arranging marriages through contacts “back home,” and their British-educated children who often resist such moves.

Prostitution is certainly not the invention of globalization, but it is being reshaped by increasing population movements and collapsing social cohesion. While it is not clear that prostitution is expanding, it is certainly being globalized, as large scale trafficking in young women and men means that most major world cities have an extremely cosmopolitan sex work force, often through the organized smuggling of people—from Moldova and Albania to Western Europe; from Nepal to India; from Mozambique and the Congo to South Africa. One recent report talks of the importation of “gigolos” from Jamaica and Nigeria for “high society” women in Bangkok (“Rising Demand,” 2002). Most dramatic has been the huge movements of young people from the former Soviet Union into the international sex industry in the past ten years, with estimates of perhaps half a million young women and men moving west as sex workers since the end of the Cold War. Not for nothing was the Iron Curtain described as “the world’s largest condom.” “Sex tourism” underlies part of the growth of prostitution,

but is probably less significant than sometimes claimed. Except in a few holiday destinations the majority of customers are local. Nor, of course, is all sex tourism based on prostitution: the term might also be deployed to describe the many lesbians and gay men who travel to events such as the Gay Games or Sydney's Mardi Gras, or the wholesale exodus of American college students for spring break vacations (Josiam, Hobson, Dietrich, & Smeaton, 1998; Maticka-Tyndale, 1998).

The most dramatic examples of the effect of globalization on sexuality come through the rapid growth of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In many senses AIDS is an epidemic of globalization, both in terms of its spread and its response. It is symbolic that the epidemic, first identified in the hospitals of the United States, is most prevalent in the poorest countries of the world, and there are effectively now two epidemics, a small one in rich countries, which is growing slowly, and a rapidly expanding one in much of the poor world where the huge advances in medical therapies are largely unavailable. The epidemic is spread by the relentless movement of people, the breakdown of old sexual restraints, increasing needle use, and the unwillingness of authorities, both governmental and religious, to confront the real needs of prevention (Barnett & Whiteside, 2002; Farmer, 1998). But the growing international mobilization to counter HIV/AIDS is also a sign of globalization, and as part of this response, development resources are made available to groups working with "men who have sex with men" and sex workers, which is extremely politically controversial.

In part because of HIV/AIDS, questions of sexuality are becoming more central to debates about international human rights. International meetings on population (Cairo 1994), women (Beijing 1995), human rights (Vienna 1993) (Desai, 1999; Smith & Pagnucco, 1998), and AIDS (the General Assembly Special Session in 2001) have all seen major debates about sexual rights, and human rights organizations, led by Amnesty International, have started considering cases related to sexuality. Some scholars are developing theories of "sexual rights" as a way of prioritizing the protection of individual autonomy over the claims of culture, religion, and tradition (Petchesky, 2000; Stychin,

1998).

War crime prosecutions for rape in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, along with considerable publicity surrounding "traditional" punishments for adultery and homosexuality, are altering the language of human rights law to encompass what was once regarded as private, and beyond the reach of law. Similar to the assertions of the gay/lesbian groups in Rainbow is international support for the rights of women to choose when and with whom to have sex, and to have access to the technologies of reproduction and sexual health. In the last few years the brutal gang rape of a woman in Pakistan, accused of sex with someone outside her caste, and the sentencing to death by stoning of a Nigerian woman found guilty of adultery, became international causes celebres, with few people prepared to defend the unlimited right of states to ignore the protection of basic human rights in the name of custom and religion.

As arguments around sexuality move from the private into the public realm, strange parallels emerge in very different social, cultural, and political settings. The bitter battles over attitudes to sexual diversity in American schools were matched in an attempt a few years ago to ban homosexuals from entering Thai teachers' colleges. The concept of gay marriage has become a political issue in South Africa, the Philippines, and most of Europe as well as the United States. Restrictions on condom advertising are contested in Malaysia, Chile, and the United States. Almost all authoritarian regimes are repressive around matters sexual: the punitive ways of the Taliban are well known, but the Hindu Tamil Tigers are said to have imposed ten years imprisonment in underground jails for prostitution.

Because every society has its own particular hypocrisies over sexuality, it is sometimes difficult to understand the extent to which a more universal set of sexual norms and behaviors are emerging. Clearly the extent to which women are subordinated is a crucial variable—one would not expect the same attitudes to sexuality in Sweden as in Indonesia—but the differences are not absolute. Sweden has criminalized anyone who seeks the services of prostitutes (Kulick, 2003), while the Suharto regime created a whole set of rules governing the "proper" behavior of women. In

both cases the state saw its role as protecting innocent and vulnerable women, even though one was a liberal social democracy and the other an authoritarian regime committed to defending “Asian values” against Western excesses.

While most liberal Western countries have moved towards a more interventionist approach on matters of sexual rights, other parts of the world have sought to resist these moves as part of a general reaction against “modernization” and “Westernization.” The old Communist language of “bourgeois decadence” is today echoed in the ways in which leaders such as Robert Mugabe and Mohammed Mahathir attack sexual “permissiveness,” often defined by tolerance of homosexuality, which becomes defined, however ahistorical this may be, as a Western import. The United States, as so often, seems the exception. The Bush Administration has reversed much of Clinton’s support for international family planning programs, and forced the United Nations Population Fund to cut back on a number of its programs by withholding \$34 million, following claims that the Fund supported abortions in China.

Some might argue that governments should seek to remain neutral in matters of personal behavior and morality, enforcing neither a liberal humanist view of human rights or positions derived from particular religious or cultural backgrounds. Yet the AIDS epidemic illustrates graphically that the line between private and public is increasingly blurred. While some countries have adopted prevention programs advocating abstinence outside of, and postponement of sexual relations until and fidelity within marriage, the realities of human sexuality mean that such programs can only be partially successful. In the long term, effective prevention means access to and knowledge of condoms, acknowledgement of sex work and homosexuality, and cooperation with those involved in such behaviors, stigmatized or not.

The state inevitably affects sexuality through a myriad of laws and regulation, and the choice is not whether it should intervene but what forms its interventions should take. Support for “family planning” and reproductive health technology can be used to enforce top-down population planning, as was the case in very different ways in China and Romania in

the 1990s, or it can be used to enhance women’s choices and empowerment. The United States has backed various forms of reproductive policies for half a century, and any American administration will face strong and conflicting domestic pressures on how foreign aid is used in such programs.

With some reluctance governments and international organizations are coming to accept that they cannot avoid matters to do with the “private” and basic arrangements of sexuality and gender. The battle lines that divided those supporting “traditional” strictures on sex at the 1994 Cairo conference, where the Vatican and the Reagan Administration found themselves allied with fundamentalist Islamic states, are repeated today, for example at the U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. Claims by feminist, gay, and human rights organizations for particular positions to be adopted by international bodies are prefiguring a debate which will become more central, and places otherwise bitterly antagonistic governments—e.g. the United States and Iran—on the same side.

Defenders of globalization claim that it is ensuring an increase in individual freedoms and affluence. An analysis of whether such an increase is apparent at the level of sexuality and gender is a significant test of these claims, and a reminder that massive social change almost always has both victors and casualties. It also reminds us that globalization does not necessarily mean homogenization. To end where I began: in Thailand, as in most Asian countries, one can find men who identify as “gay,” and there are numerous venues in Bangkok which are immediately recognizable as part of a global gay world. At the same time many other Thai men identify as *kathoey*, a particular sort of effeminate man who approximates, but is not the same as a “nelly queen,” as depicted in the very successful Thai film *Iron Ladies*. Globalization means greater diversity within as well as between nations, but it certainly does not eliminate cultural differences. ♦

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