

queer centres and peripheries

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Gradually queer theory, which emerged out of the particularities of academic and political situations in the USA in the 1990s, has begun to interrogate its relationship to the rest of the world. It is, of course, not surprising that analysis of (homo)sexuality from within the USA should be largely US-centric, remarkably uninterested in developments in other countries, even those as seemingly close in culture and politics as Canada and the United Kingdom.¹ Yet there are signs of some interest in what might be termed ‘non-western’ societies, in particular the relevance of ‘queer’ to rapidly shifting notions of sexuality and gender regimes. There is now an extensive literature on the ways in which homosexuality is being shaped and changed by ‘modernisation’² and equally on how hostility to modernisation often expresses itself in the persecution of homosexuals. (One current example comes from Egypt, where since 2001 there has been a vicious clamp down on homosexuality, often linked to the rhetoric of defending traditional religious and cultural values.³)

Very few of the discussions of ‘modern’ forms of homosexuality are posed in comparative terms; indeed, the vast majority are written without reference to similar developments in other parts of the world. Thus one can read first-rate studies of the diversity of (homo)sexual cultures in, say, Brazil, South Africa and the Philippines, none of which refer to each other or seem interested in uncovering broader patterns. There are a few anthologies, but with the notable exception of Peter Drucker the editors rarely do more than politely summarise their contributors’ discussion.⁴ (Drucker’s work is shamefully ignored by most of the queer academic industry, perhaps because he works at its margins.) As almost everything written in English assumes the western world as an unstated default model, the growth of gay and lesbian ethnographies actually perpetuates western dominance.

Equally, while 'queer' appears largely a preoccupation of first-world English-speaking societies—the word has not been taken up to any great extent in other languages, even in French, Spanish, German or Dutch where there is an extensive literature on homosexuality—there is increasing interest in how the term, and the various theoretical manoeuvres associated with it, might be adopted to local conditions. One example comes in Ruth Vanita's collection, *Queering India*, where the term is employed consistently by at least several of the Indian-based contributors.⁵

The question of terminology cuts across larger debates, namely those over the past decade about the apparent 'globalisation' of homosexual identities. The phrase 'global gay' (where the term is meant to apply to both women and men) has come into the language over the past ten years, particularly since it was popularised by an *Economist* cover story ('It's Normal to Be Queer') in 1996. There are several websites that use the term and <www.gay.com>, the best known web page for homosexuals, uses it as a default setting. Groups like the European-based ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association), in existence since 1978, and the US-based IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission) are committed to both the globalisation of sexual identities and the extension of human rights to specifically encompass these. After long and bitter debate Amnesty International has now adopted a policy that punishment or discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is indeed contrary to international human rights.⁶

Some critics of these organisations have pointed to their neo-colonial implications, claiming that the very language employed enforces western concepts of sexuality on societies with different traditions of organising gender and sexuality. This critique has been made strongly by students of sexuality in Thailand,⁷ and in India there have been bitter disputes about the language of gay and lesbian identities and the ways in which they obliterate older concepts of sexual behaviour and identity. While I have some sympathy for this claim—and the sometimes uncritical universalism of those organisations seeking international homosexual rights—it is impossible to single out sexuality as if it were not caught up in much broader moves towards the creation of universal epistemological and political norms. Massive industrialisation and urbanisation, the diffusion of consumerism and western images of sex and gender, and the growing international language of democracy and human rights, all underlie ways in which people are reshaping their sense of personal possibilities in ways that are to some extent scripted by the social and economic relationships of capitalism. Cultural influences will persist and modify how these are acted out, but in the end 'traditional' forms of gender and sexuality will only survive if there is massive ideological pressure to maintain them, as is the case in some fundamentalist Islamic societies.

Claims that western conceptualisations of (homo)sexuality are irrelevant or oppressive in other parts of the world forget the newness of gay and lesbian identities even in the heart-

land of the 'queer west': there is ample historical evidence that only in the past half century did many people identify themselves as homosexual in the first world. The novels of John Rechy, starting with his 1964 bestseller *City of Night*, identify a world of diverse sexual identities and practices that are strangely like those asserted as 'different' in, say, Bangladesh or Cambodia today. 'Gay' and 'lesbian' identities were as alien to most Americans and Europeans in the 1930s (indeed the 1950s) as they are in much of the poor world today: indeed more so, because there were no equivalents to the signs of 'gayness' from the rich world that today are purveyed through mass media and have become part of the new world of global consumerism. (Shows such as *Will and Grace* are very popular in countries such as South Africa.)

Nonetheless the clumsiness of universalist claims often means they lend themselves to criticism as neo-colonial intervention. The *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* renamed itself the *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* in 1999, while retaining an exclusively American board and publishing almost entirely US-based material. Even their 'not the American issue' (May–June 2003), with articles on gay and lesbian life in a number of European and Asian countries, is largely written by Americans, some of whom seem remarkably unaware of local movements and writings. The *New York Times*, presumably to atone for past neglect, tends to use the word 'gay' in all stories that mention homosexuality, even where (as in the already cited story on Egypt) the term is culturally inappropriate.

I used the expression 'global gay' in several articles I published in the latter part of the 1990s and was surprised by the intensity of the reaction.⁸ I was simultaneously read as prescribing a western model for the rest of the world and as recognising cultural and political diversity. I am less interested in those reactions than I am in the underlying question: namely does globalisation mean that an identity politics that developed in the liberal industrial world is now relevant in countries with very different cultural, economic and political histories and structures? (Note: as I go on to argue, the term 'western' is a particular sort of generalisation, more precise than its opposite 'non-western', but still able to conceal significant differences between and within states.)

More generally the question could be posed as how does globalisation impact on sexuality? The impact is both direct and indirect: globalisation changes the material conditions out of which sexual behaviours and understandings are built. This will affect people both within and between countries, as in the development of a substantial (homo)sex trade in western Europe, which becomes a route for large numbers of young men from poor countries of both the former Soviet bloc and wider afield to enter the global economy, often without making that choice. (Of course, many more women are caught up in this particular linkage of sex and money, but I am unaware of any specific market for lesbian sex as part of the international sex industry, except where lesbian acts are displayed to cater to specific male fantasies.) The

uninterest of almost all queer theory in the relationship between sex and money (obviously not true for feminism) is one of the reasons for its striking failure to say much of relevance outside the metropolitan rich world.

But globalisation also changes perceptions and discourses as images and information are dispersed and allows for new organisation around sexuality, through the institutions of both civil society and international agencies. Globalisation is at work as much in the spread of an international discourse of human rights as it is in the spread of certain sorts of consumerism, and out of this universalising discourse comes a new avenue for organising around sexuality, perhaps more developed in Latin American discussions of 'sexual rights', which imply the right of the individual 'to have control over and decide freely in matters related to his or her sexuality, free of coercion, discrimination and violence'.⁹ Most recently it was the government of Brazil that took the lead in introducing a resolution to protect 'human rights and sexual orientation' in the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. But even the USA, which abstained on that particular initiative, can officially support the Centre for Civil and Human Rights in Skopje under whose aegis 'sexual determination' can be defended.

In the contemporary world, sexuality becomes a marker of the ways in which globalisation is both liberatory and repressive. The problem with the emphasis on globalisation is the temptation of linear thinking, namely the belief that all societies will necessarily move towards the same ways of regulating and organising sexuality and identities. While it is possible to assert that globalising culture, whether via *Sex in the City* or the *Eurovision Song Contest*, will affect people's perceptions and imaginings of themselves, it is less clear what new constructions of self and sex they may produce in different settings.

This article began as a paper written for the first ever 'queer' conference in the former Yugoslavia, held in Zagreb in April 2003, and remarkable for its ambition to combine the local and the global. The conference took place alongside a cultural festival, which included live performances, films and art exhibitions. As part of the festival, New York actor David Drake presented his *Son of Drakula*, a show in which he seeks his own Romanian–Croatian roots and in which he attends the 'World Dracula Conference' sponsored by the Transylvanian Society of Dracula. The pseudo-academic pretentiousness caught in Drake's caricatures ('Re-inventing Vlad: When Romanian History Meets Western Pop Culture') was unfortunately replicated in the (real) conference.

The organisers of Queer Zagreb expressed a desire to explore the particularities of their situation and an equal desire to situate themselves within a global (or essentially US) framework of queer theory. The use of 'queer' and the combination of theory, performance and activism were both to some extent strategic decisions, which through the apparently radical

optique of 'queer' also provided space for people who were sympathetic to homosexual issues without wishing to declare their own sexuality. There is an irony in the way 'queer' simultaneously promises a radical sexual politics while denying specific behaviours or identities, thus allowing anyone to proclaim themselves as 'queer'; but in this case the term provided an important shelter. (It did have a couple of bizarre consequences, such as the woman from Bosnia who spoke for twenty minutes about 'identity and transition' without ever mentioning homosexuality or indeed any form of sexual behaviour.)

The non-Yugoslav speakers were predominantly American, who largely held forth without any concession at all to the fact they were in an ex-communist former Yugoslav republic.¹⁰ In actual usage most of the locals spoke of gay and lesbian identities, rather than queer (and in private they were fairly critical of the utility of the term). Indeed there seemed to be a de facto division: when international theory was invoked so too was the 'q' word; when local conditions or activism was discussed it was under the rubric 'LGBT'.¹¹ Not surprisingly, the emphasis was on sexual identities rather than behaviour: the former is needed to create a political movement; the latter too easily feeds the prejudice that homosexuality is no more than a form of licentiousness. Maybe only in countries where there is already a certain degree of sexual tolerance does it become possible to research and discuss sexual behaviours that seem to veer from the conventional. Indeed what was most striking about the discourse of the conference, in retrospect, was its abstractness and the unwillingness to engage (from either foreigners or locals) with actual sexual experiences or formations. (There was an almost palpable unease when I asked various locals about the extent and organisation of prostitution in ex-Yugoslavia, although it is hard to believe it is not fairly common.¹²) The most memorable judgement on 'queer' came from the most distinguished of the Americans present, who commented that queer theory was invented by accident and proved too lucrative to abandon.

Equally absent was any sense of historical sociology, in particular an attempt to explain what was fairly constantly stressed, namely the prevalent dislike and hostility towards homosexuality shared across all of the ex-Yugoslav republics and marked in both Muslim Bosnia and Orthodox Macedonia. This is a common observation: the very good *Rough Guide to Croatia* draws attention to the 'macho', 'pure, martial values of the patriarchal Balkan male'.¹³ Homosexual rape and very vicious attacks on alleged homosexuals (often of course perpetuated by the same people) seemed a characteristic of the war in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.¹⁴ In a very interesting paper on class, ethnicity and homosexuality in Macedonia, Sasho Lambevski states, 'The public sphere, the citizen and the state are constructed as (a heterosexual, misogynist homophobic) *man*',¹⁵ but with little reflection on why and how this may differ from other societies, except for some references to the historical influence of Turkish rule.

This is, of course, stereotyping of the worst sort, but whether this caricature actually describes anything distinctive about 'Yugoslav' constructions of gender and sexuality was not raised in any of the presentations. In the same way, fairly basic questions about the links between economics, ideology and attitudes to sexuality were barely raised. In discussion the consensus seemed to be that religion was a major factor in accounting for the taboos around homosexuality, particularly in those parts of the former Yugoslavia that had experienced an Islamic or Orthodox revival as part of the nationalistic traumas of the past decade. No-one seemed to be analysing economic shifts with changes in sexuality, although there is a probable connection between rising affluence and greater expression of individual identities,¹⁶ and much of ex-Yugoslavia remains desperately poor.

In formal presentations there was great emphasis—and particularly in several talks from Bosnia and Macedonia—on the legal frameworks that exist and theoretically might protect homosexuals, however defined, from persecution. Equally HIV/AIDS was almost totally ignored, even though specific reports on the situation in other countries tended to acknowledge in passing the dilemma of the epidemic being characterised as 'a gay plague'. Ex-Yugoslavia differs from much of the non-western world, including parts of the former Soviet Union, in that HIV/AIDS does not appear to have been a major organising point for an emergent gay movement.

The Slovenians, on the other hand, reiterated the Slovenian claim to greater tolerance (read Europeanness) and the early pre-independence origins in the 1980s of a Slovene gay and lesbian movement. As elsewhere I was struck by the way in which radicals, in this case queer radicals, often echo the nationalist rhetoric of the governments they otherwise criticise. Claims to extend citizenship to homosexuals often reflect the eagerness of 'queers' for inclusion in national institutions, as is very apparent in the US enthusiasm for entry into the armed forces.

The most interesting, if underexplored, comments at the conference came from a couple of young Croats, who commented on the 'schizophrenia', or tension, inherent in their enterprise in a society that was post-communist and seeking to simultaneously create a national identity while joining a wider Europe. One should not underestimate the extent to which acceptance of homosexuality is seen as a marker of 'modernity' in Europe, symbolised in the Vienna tourist board's concern about the image of Austria among gay travellers ('gay guides' to Vienna are widely available across the city.) This is beginning to be echoed in other parts of the world, as in the inclusion of anti-discrimination references in the South African constitution and as in recent remarks by the Prime Minister of Singapore that seemed to disavow previous views of homosexuality as contravening 'Asian values'.

An attempt the previous year to organise a gay pride march in Zagreb had been greeted with violence by local skinheads—themselves another sign of globalisation—though not to

the extent of a similar demonstration in Belgrade the previous year. Queer Zagreb was, however, supported by the city government and protected by city police. At the opening event, in a packed-out city theatre, a small group of protesting Christians stood with anti-homosexual placards in the street, doing their best to make the Americans feel at home.

As the main organiser of Queer Zagreb, Zvonimir Dobrovic, put it, Croatia today exists in a global world with distorted centres and the disappearance of specificities. The combination of global discourses and local conditions creates identities that resemble but also remake the ways in which we imagine ourselves. Two young Serbian men, Bojan Dordev and Sinisa Ilic, presented a performance piece, *Konstrukcija (Queer) Identiteta na Istoku uz Pomoc Zapadnih (Queer) Slika*, which interrogated with some irony the use of pop (and globalised) cultural references in the 'identification and construction/constitution of identity'. This piece also questioned the (largely US) concept of 'coming out', and by extension other (predominantly US) images of particular forms of gay identity that were on display at the conference.

It used to be fashionable to speak of 'centres and peripheries', recognising the unequal relations between the North Atlantic and Japan, on the one hand, and the rest of the world (often categorised as 'developing' or 'third world'), on the other.¹⁷ The distinction becomes useful in discussing the tensions between the universal and the specific inherent in the 'queer' project in 'non-western' countries, where the economic, political, social and cultural conditions both resemble and are different from those in which a public homosexual movement emerged in first-world countries in the 1970s. I flew across the world to attend Queer Zagreb, but in some ways the distance between Vienna and Zagreb is greater than that between Melbourne and Vienna: go several miles from the modern heart of Zagreb and one is in a mix of wooden shanties and community-style apartment blocks that evoke a world no longer existing in western Europe. It is hard to remember that little over a decade ago Croatia was involved in the most bitter civil conflict in post-Second World War Europe. (The distance is all the more striking because Croatia was for a long time a loyal outpost of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and shares a religious and architectural tradition with Austria.)

As 'queer'/LGBT movements emerge in very different societies one sees new homosexual identities marked by the simultaneous existence of powerful western imagery and weak models of western political activity. One of the great paradoxes in this story is that while the USA is undoubtedly the dominant *cultural* influence on international gay and lesbian movements, the *political* impact of the American model is very limited, in part because the USA lags behind most western European countries in protecting homosexuals.¹⁸ Movements in other, particularly non-western, countries fluctuate between an unproblematic view of the US way of being/doing homosexual(ity) as a universally applicable model and an

equally problematic retreat to cultural specificity that denies anything other than the local. As Ian Buruma wrote of East Asia, 'intellectuals have often oscillated between reactionary nativism and total Westernization'.¹⁹ This pattern of oscillation is all too common among homosexual activists in the non-western world.

One of the most striking examples I know is when a Japanese group invited the assistance of an American psychologist to help prepare and undertake a survey evaluating 'self-esteem' among Japanese gay men, ignoring the very different cultural assumptions about the self in the two societies. In the same way the proliferation of 'Stonewall' celebrations across the world represents the adoption of a US event (already highly mythologised within the USA) without much reflection on its relevance to local conditions.

The opposite attitude involves an occidentalism that presents the local as intrinsically different to some sort of homogenised first world, in which the style and mores of affluent urban homosexual worlds are presented as applicable across whole countries, thus obliterating, say, a rural black lesbian from Arkansas, while insisting at the same time on the local specificities of whichever non-western country is invoked. You can't generalise about our experience, stress the defenders of cultural authenticity, while happily generalising about 'the West'.

While the organisers were well aware of these dilemmas, the Zagreb conference risked reinforcing the dominance of Atlantic-centrism, in part because of the heavy reliance on resources, both material and intellectual, from New York and London. One striking example was that the (English language) books available, through a local—and very good—bookshop, were exclusively published in those two cities: there is a 'queer' literature in English from countries such as India, the Philippines, South Africa and Brazil, but it is largely unknown beyond local borders. The starkest example was a reader in 'G/L/Q' studies that contained four chapters on 'the rest of the world'—all written by American academics. The question I posed in my talk—can Zagreb talk directly to Manila and Rio?—is not, of course, a question confined to the little world of queer studies, but it was particularly resonant in a country that has undergone huge social and political transformation in the past two decades compared with the experience of any western country, outside perhaps Spain and Portugal. The international women's movement has been far more successful in building bridges across the global south, which has been very difficult for the gay and lesbian movement, hampered as it is by lack of resources and in most cases hostility from governments.

One of the Croat speakers, Gordan Bosanac, spoke of the problem facing embryonic homosexual movements in ex-communist states in terms of 'an extremely shortened puberty. One has limited time to grow up, and at the same time, is closed in the library filled with "know-how" books. What are the chances of such a subject to authentically express him/her/it/self?' Leave aside the problematic claim to an authentic self, this comment echoes an experience

I once had in Manila listening to young Filipino men talk of their homosexuality, and only realising in retrospect that the language they used was highly shaped by their common reading of a couple of American texts on ‘coming out’. In both cases much of the conversation took place in what was for some Filipinos and for all ex-Yugoslavs a second language, even though the English fluency displayed at Queer Zagreb was quite extraordinary.

For Croats and Slovenes the options are far greater than for groups in, say, Indonesia, South Africa or Ecuador. This is not necessarily because the local environment is more supportive (in these last three examples there are growing gay and lesbian movements and in the latter two there is more legal recognition than in many western countries). But in the European context with its human rights regime (enforced by the European Court of Human Rights) and a growing sense of shared values and references, more external support and pressure has been placed on government to cooperate. There have been proposals in the Croat Parliament to recognise gay marriage and the 2003 gay pride march was supported by the Dutch and Norwegian embassies. Queer Zagreb was filmed by an Italian documentary film crew, even though there seemed a remarkable lack of interest from ‘Yugoslavs’ and Anglo-Americans alike in the rather different development of homosexual studies in, say, France, Italy and the Netherlands.

At the same time, the status of the ex-Yugoslav republics as former Communist states—and thus part of the now forgotten second world—and the traumatic experiences following the break-up of the Yugoslav state mean that the assertion of ‘queer’ politics in the former republics, with the exception perhaps of Slovenia, will have certain resonances with other parts of the non-western world. On the last night of the conference a couple of the organisers were talking of the need to develop a ‘post-communist, post-colonial’ analysis of their situation. Implicit in this is the possibility of rescuing queer theory from its highly developed navel gazing and making it relevant to the great majority who live outside the metropolitan Atlantic world.

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1. Even as erudite a scholar as Steven Seidman in his recent *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life* (Routledge, New York and London, 2002) appears to have no references to non-US examples.
2. In addition to the sources listed in my *Global Sex* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001) see, for example, H. Carillo, *The Night is Young: Sexuality in Mexico in the Time of AIDS*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002; Alyssa Howe, 'Undressing the Universal Queer Subject: Nicaraguan Activism and Transnational Identity', *City and Society*, August 2002; Tom Boellstorff, 'Indonesian Gay and Lesbian Subjectivities and Ethnography in an Already Globalised World', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 30, no. 2, 225–42.
3. Sarah Kershaw, 'Cairo, Once the "Scene", Cracks Down on Gays', *New York Times*, 3 April 2003.
4. See Peter Drucker's introduction and conclusion to his edited anthology *Different Rainbows*, Gay Men's Press, London 2000; Gilbert Herdt, *Same Sex, Different Cultures*, Westview Press 1998; S. Murray, *Homosexualities*, University of Chicago, Chicago, 2000; Saskia Wieringa and Evelyn Blackwood, *Female Desires*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999; Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan (eds), *Queer Globalisations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, New York University Press, New York, 2002.
5. Ruth Vaita (ed.), *Queering India*, Routledge, New York, 2002.
6. See Amnesty International, *Breaking the Silence*, London, 1997, and subsequent reports on the Amnesty International website <<http://www.amnesty.org>>.
7. Rosalind Morris, 'Three Sexes and Four Sexualities', *Positions*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1994, 15–43.
8. I summarise the debate and some of the reactions in *Global Sex*, Chapter 4.
9. Bonnie Shepard, 'The "Double Discourse" on Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Latin America', *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2000, p. 112.
10. 'Non-Yugoslav' is an uneasy word, but one that took on particular meaning in a context where, apart from several Poles, all those present who were not from the former Yugoslavia came from western liberal democracies.
11. 'LGBT' refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. Sometimes this is expanded to include intersex and queer, leading to an unpronounceable list of categories.
12. See, for example, Misha Glenny, 'The Death of Djindic', *New York Review of Books*, 17 July 2003, 32–3.
13. Jonathan Bousfield, *The Rough Guide to Croatia*, Rough Guides, London, 2000, p. 308.
14. See Peter Tatchell, 'Queer Serbia! Queer Kosovo!', *QX* (London), no. 231, 26 May 1999; Boris Davidovich, *Serbian Diaries*, Gay Men's Press, London, 1996.
15. Sasho Lambevski, 'Suck My Nation—Masculinity, Ethnicity and the Politics of (Homo)sex', *Sexualities*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1999, p. 412.
16. John d'Emilio has argued this in terms of the rise of gay/lesbian identities in the USA. See his 'Capitalism and Gay Identity' in A. Snitow, C. Stansell and S. Thompson (eds), 'Powers of Desire', *Monthly Review*, New York, 1983. For an economic analysis of changing concepts of homosexuality in Thailand see Peter Jackson, 'Gay Capitals in Global Gay History', in R. Bishop, J. Phillips and W. Yeo, *Postcolonial Urbanism*, Routledge, 2003, pp. 151–63.
17. In the 1970s 'centres and peripheries' was a popular phrase in left-wing critiques of neo-imperialism and is associated with the work of Immanuel Wallerstein and Johannes Frank. See the summary of these arguments in Peter Taylor, *Political Geography*, Wiley, New York, 1985.
18. For a comparative analysis of movements see Barry D. Adam, Jan Willem Duyvendak and André Krowel, *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics: National Imprints of a Worldwide Movement*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1998.
19. In Buruma, 'AsiaWorld', *New York Review of Books*, 12 June 2000, p. 55. The relevance of this debate to queer studies is explored by some of the contributors to R. Phillips, D. Watt and D. Shuttleton (eds), *De-centering Sexualities*, Routledge, London, 2000.