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Sexual(ities that) progress: Introduction

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Abstract

This piece introduces the papers for the Sexual(ities that) Progress special issue. It arises out of two sessions at the 2017 American Association of Geographers Annual Conference, where scholars critically interrogated assumptions of progress and the ideals and models that follow from understanding certain spaces and places as 'leading the way' in terms of sexual and gender inclusions. In this paper, we outline some of the key debates and how papers in this special issue address discourses of sexual(ities that) progress and, in particular, the importance of decolonial and postcolonial critiques in such debates. We conclude by noting omissions, the timeliness of the papers and the ongoing need for spatial lenses in exploring the power relationships that reconstitute sexual and gendered lives, cultures, politics and embodiments.

Keywords

Sexual rights, gender rights, LGBTQ, liberal tolerance, decolonial

Introduction

This special issue arises out of two sessions at the 2017 American Association of Geographers Annual Conference (hereafter AAG), where scholars critically interrogated assumptions of progress and the ideals and models that follow from understanding certain spaces and places as 'leading the way' in terms of sexual and gender inclusions. The sessions were framed, in part, as a critique of discourses of sexual progress and the limits and omissions of the liberal tolerances said to underpin such discourses (see for example Conrad, 2014; Filippis et al., 2018; Puar, 2007; Weeks, 2007).

The title for the AAG session used the phrase 'sexual(ities that) progress', and we persevere with the awkward parentheses for this special issue. We use this portmanteau of 'sexualities that progress' and 'sexual progress' in order to connote a number of related meanings and debates. The papers published as part of this special issue advance debates about the ways in which Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ) rights gains and inclusions have become emblematic of 'progressive' politics – and about the associated problems with such discourses of progress (Sabsay, 2012). While much academic work (including the research presented in this special issue) has focused on the progress made in the fight for rights and greater social inclusion by LGBTQ communities – 'sexualities that progress', one might say – we want to situate this special issue within a broader understanding of 'sexual progress' that allows an attentiveness to the different struggles and experiences of those represented by the LGBTQ abbreviation. In particular, we are mindful of how the specificities of trans, non-binary, and genderqueer politics and activism are all too often erased from discussions of supposedly 'LGBTQ' struggles, mirroring the marginalisation of trans, non-binary, and genderqueer subjects from supposedly 'LGBTQ' spaces and representations (Browne and Bakshi, 2013; Doan, 2010).

The term 'sexual progress' also allows this special issue to be situated within longer histories that intertwine transformations of and within heterosexuality (Cocks, 2006); and the interrelations between race, colonialism, gender, and sexuality, and notions of progress (McClintock, 1995) and modernity (Lugones, 2007, 2010). We will return to these themes in the next section where we elaborate on the debates surrounding discourses of sexual(ities that) progress and, in particular, the importance of decolonial and postcolonial critiques in such debates. Throughout, we draw out how the papers in this special issue contribute to such debates. We also make reference to papers from the 2017 AAG session that have not made it into the special issue as they provide additional insight into the broader possibilities for questioning sexual(ities that) progress. The papers in this special issue, as with all research papers, are artefacts of research conducted at a very specific point in time (e.g. in the years running up to 2017). Since then, appeals to discourses of 'progress' have been articulated within political climates that are increasingly reactionary (including in the UK and India) and in which the purported liberalism within which progressive claims are articulated is ostensibly under threat. We will thus conclude the introduction with some brief reflections on the timeliness of this special issue and its omissions.

Sexual(ities that) progress: The importance of spatialities

In the early 21st Century, liberal acceptance of diverse sexual practices and identities, particularly in the metropolitan Global North, has widely been framed in popular discourse of 'progress'. The assumption of gay (and lesbian) progress as well as progress in women's rights has been argued to have created a 'world we have won' in the urban global north (Weeks, 2007). Sexual progress then, as well as political progress in general, becomes measured in terms of shifting attitudes to sexual agency – especially women's sexual agency – and increasing inclusivity and rights gains for LGBTQ people (Lawrence & Taylor, 2019). The clear focus is legislative progression in terms of repeals and decriminalisation, and specific rights gains (particularly same-sex adoption and marriage) (Weeks, 2007). Trajectories of 'progress' are spatially and temporally specific, and their global applicability has been questioned (Kulpa and Mizielinska, 2011), as has their presumed inevitability. The papers in this issue, and those presented in 2017, build on work that has contested narratives of progress in terms of sexualities and genders. They do this both by noting the limitations of these progressive approaches, and by exploring how they are contested by those seeking to recuperate specific forms of heteronormativity, e.g. the processes and practices through which heterosexuality is normalised (see Warner, 1993).

Geographical imaginations of progress often rely on the construction of a homogeneous and antediluvian Global South – an imagination that erases both the achievements of activists therein and the continued injustice, violence and oppression in what are imagined as the heartlands of progress in the metropolitan Global North (Halberstam, 2005; Kulpa and Mizielinska, 2011; Kulpa and Silva, 2016; Silva and Ornat, 2016). The framing of the Global North – and, in particular, Europe – as spaces of progress and modernity relies, for example, on discourses that construct 'gay emancipation' in Europe as under threat from 'backward' and homophobic Muslim subjects (Boulila, 2019; Haritaworn, 2015; Mepschen and Duyvendak, 2012). These geographical imaginaries of sexual progress thus envisage an outward flow of LGBTQ freedoms, rights, and acceptance from a space of liberal modernity in the Global North towards a backward Global South, with dangerous manifestations (Puar, 2007). In 2017, Kay Lalor's AAG presentation explored how spatio-temporal dynamics within sexual and gender progress narratives framed US domestic progress in relation to continued violence elsewhere in the world. Conversely, the Global South is envisaged as issuing forth a reverse flow of migrant subjects, deemed to be a threat to

this progress. Yet, as Rao (2014) shows such problematic 'Locations of Homophobia' in places such as Uganda fail to account for its transnational production as well as local nuance and production. In this issue, these discussions are progressed through Nash and Browne's (2020) paper, which discusses heteroactivist discourses that resist LGBT equalities in Canadian and UK education systems, disrupting the placing of 'homophobia' outside of places that are seen as fulfilling the sexual progress promise via legislation.

Focusing on the circulation of Global North discourses, in this issue Browne et al. (2020) examine the ways in which imaginings of 'other places' recreate lives and politics beyond judicial inclusions, complicating how progress is understood. This analysis moves beyond a comparative lens where places are organised as 'progressive' or 'backwards' in relation to one another, and instead examines geographically-specific engagements with liveabilities (Butler, 2004) on their own terms (see Robinson, 2006). There have been extensive engagements with the limits of sexual progress in the Global North through discourses of homonormativities. Homonormativity was coined to name the 'acceptance of the most assimilated, gender-appropriate, politically mainstream' subjects (Duggan, 2003: 44), emanating especially from the USA (see Brown, 2012). These discussions create opportunities for critiques of discourses of sexual progress – and especially of the idea of sexualities that progress – through an interrogation of the limits and omissions of the liberal tolerances that underpin such discourses. These critiques can take various forms. For example, in the 2017 AAG session, Debanuj Dasgupta presentation investigated the intersections of race, immigration, and trans lives, arguing that attention to these intersections provides the opportunity to disrupt the utopian promises of same-sex marriage. In this same session, ena ganguly situated Kolkata sex workers' contemporary struggles for workers' rights within a wider historical context of medieval structures that – amongst other things – gave sex workers a place in society. This presentation critiqued nationalist discourses and ideas of development in ways that go beyond deconstructing how discourses of progress travel between and differentiate Global North/Global South.

Discourses of 'progress' have also been challenged on the basis that they tend to normalize particular sexual identities and then to globalize them, for instance in the tying of development aid to recognition of LGBTQ identities (Browne et al., 2015). The term homonormativity has been used to question and query how sexual acceptances are constructed through racialised, gendered, classed, ableist and other social norms in ways that privilege particular gay men (and, to some extent, lesbians) (see Duggan, 2003). Critiques of homonormativity have examined how particular normative gay and lesbian subjectivities have become valorised, incorporated, and commodified at various scales – notably at the urban scale. These subjectivities are tied to claims that urban economic progress is enhanced by furthering 'gay acceptance' in order to attract creative elites (Florida, 2004). In taking these discussions forward in this special issue, Hartal and Sasson-Levy (2020) use gay tourism to illustrate how liberal inclusions are attached to specific cities, creating place-based identities that are then sold as sexually progressive in particular ethnicised and racialised ways. Johnston and Waitt made similar arguments in a presentation at 2017 AAG, using Pride-based sporting spaces. Hartal and Sasson-Levy (2020) here use the term the 'progressive Orient' to consider how both Orientalist imaginings and Western associations of progress are brought together to market Tel Aviv as located in the Middle East, but not black like Africa or backwards like Arab states and, in fact, as distinct from the rest of Israel. In doing so, Hartal and Sasson-Levy locate their study at the intersection of a number of debates, not least homonationalism (binary process of national inclusion and exclusion; see Puar, 2013) while responding to calls for more spatial analyses of homonormativities and 'gay acceptances' (Brown, 2009, 2010; Oswin, 2008).

Sexual and gender gains in the Global North have been heavily critiqued by academics and others who see them as limited, flawed and partial, generating new exclusions, divisions and depoliticisations (Duggan, 2003; Bryant, 2008; Richardson, 2017). In this special issue, Hall critically reflects on UK legislative progression and assumed progress in and beyond English primary schools following same-sex marriage and disavowal of 'pretended family relationship' in repealed Section 28 legislation which has led to primary-aged children being predominately introduced to lesbian and gay sexualities in the context of families. He demonstrates how the boundaries of liberal progressive tolerance, and also the effects of these that led to a negation of much called-for resources that experiment with queer praxis in radically disputing and undoing heteronormativities (see DePalma and Atkinson, 2009; Hall, 2020). With research undertaken prior to the complex and high-profile resistances to LGBT inclusive primary education in British schools (and Birmingham Parkfield School in particular), Hall demonstrates that there were limits to how heteronormativities in school spaces could be challenged. He thus demonstrates the reformation of ongoing and new normativities even in times where there was an emerging consensus regarding LGBT inclusion in British schools.

In this issue, Nash and Browne discuss the reactionary contestations of sexual and gender rights that have gained prominence in the past five years. They point to the resistances to sexual and gender inclusions in contexts such as 'sexually progressive' Canada, and the UK, where school spaces formed sites of contestations. Drawing on examples that challenge inclusive sex education and the support of gender non-conforming/trans kids in primary school, they contend that oppositions to sexual and gender equalities need more nuanced considerations of their heteronormative ideologies, conceptualising this through heteroactivism. This analysis names the ways that in places, like the UK and Canada, the presumptions of state supported heteronormativities are challenged. In recognising this as a contestation of what they believe is 'best for society' various forms of 'activism' are seen as necessary to 'reclaim' what is seen as being 'lost' (see Browne and Nash, 2017). More broadly, discussions of heteroactivism, anti-gender and gender ideologies (Correa et al., 2018; Kuhar and Patternote, 2017) work alongside engagements such as Hall's (2020) on the limitations of liberal inclusions. These papers show how countries of the Global North do not function/stand as places of unfettered 'progress' towards sexual and gender liberations, in contrast to homophobic countries in the Global South (Rao, 2014; see also Nash and Browne, 2020).

Final thoughts

This special issue puts the politics of sexualities and the spatial into conversation, finding them mutually constituted through geographical imaginings of progress, limits, and possibilities. The spatial analyses offered by the papers in the issue are grounded in digital spaces, schools, workplaces, and tourism as well as transnational explorations. The papers also take different foci in relation to 'progress', although all engage critically with the concept as a means of understanding and organising sexual lives, politics and spaces. In engaging with, and augmenting, the decentring impetus of queer critiques of progress, this special issue pushes for spatially sensitive considerations of contemporary socio-sexual issues. The articles take feminist, post-colonial, and decolonial critiques in new and innovative directions by exploring the very critiques of progress-discourses that dominate contemporary Global North scholarship on sexualities and gender identities.

Neither the nature of liberal sexual progress nor how it is reacted to or contested can be

assumed in advance, but these will always be inherently spatial in their manifestations and imaginings. This special issue is situated in a moment where critiques of these liberal values and progressions have become less prominent outside of critical queer scholarship and activism. The need for ongoing work in this area is apparent, in part through explorations of the ongoing critiques of sexual liberations (Boulila, 2019; Browne et al., 2020; Hall, 2020; Hartal and Sasson-Levy, 2020; Puar, 2009; Richardson, 2017), and also the need to understand the contestations and resistances that are gaining prominence throughout the Global North (Browne and Nash, 2017; Kuhar and Patternote, 2017; Nash and Browne, 2020). As we move into the third decade of the 21st century, it is clear then that in-depth explorations and examinations are needed of both the ways in which multiple marginalisations and geographical imaginaries of others limit sexual and gender liberations, and ongoing oppositions to sexual and gender equalities from those who seek to 'restore' normative practices, discourses and knowledges of gender and sexuality. Geographers are uniquely posed to undertake these explorations through engaging a spatial lens that explores the manifestations, and mobilities, of power relations that reconstitute sexual and gendered lives, cultures, politics and embodiments.

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