The underlying assumptions of sexual diversity

After decades during which the words ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘gender identity’ were rarely uttered in formal, intergovernmental meetings at the United Nations, a debate is unfolding at the Human Rights Council in Geneva on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The discussions at the Council have focused political attention on discriminatory laws and practices at the national level and on the obligations of States under international human rights law to address these through legislative and other measures.

(United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2012: 9)

This recent report is the first by the United Nations (UN) explicitly to include sexuality within its human rights framework and detail member obligations towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed and questioning (LGBTIQ)/queer1 individuals. As such, it represents a significant milestone in the global legitimization of queer identities and rights. Many of us living in Western countries have witnessed the rise in public visibility resulting from the gay liberation movements that emerged in the West in the late 1960s and 1970s and the consequent recent citizenship advances such as same-sex partnerships and anti-discrimination laws. No doubt we have all similarly experienced resistance to LGBTIQ politics, often from religious groups but also from those who are more broadly in favour of the traditional social organization of genders and families, exemplified most recently by the Russian Duma’s outlawing of homosexual ‘propaganda’ in June 2013 (although same-sex acts remain legal). Nonetheless, there have been significant changes in the public visibility of sexual diversity, and in light of these the underlying assumption around sexual issues is understandably one of progress towards social acceptance of sexual diversity. This view is shared by both queer and mainstream individuals, political organizations and, indeed, by some prominent queer academics such as Jeffrey Weeks (2007) in his optimistic overview of queer politics since gay liberation.

In this essay I will describe the main theoretical analyses of sexuality and demonstrate how they both underscore and undermine the common-sense public idea of progress. I begin with the ways in which sexual diversity is assumed to be a ‘natural’ minority deviation from normative gender regimes and identities in public culture, despite the fact that the foundational academic
theories of sexual stigma were anti-naturalist and based on a critique of institutionalized gender identities. The Western capitalist liberal democratic societies in which gay liberation first emerged had established models for minority politics, and I suggest that this context, together with the cultural dominance of naturalist explanations of the sexual, combines to render queer politics as one of a ‘natural minority’ rather than a politics of full gender and sexual diversity. I then turn to the broader sociological explanations of the conditions that are understood to permit sexual diversity, focusing here on the consequences of Western modernity for the emergence of modern sexualities. I argue that, whilst these explanations are resolutely anti-naturalist, they nonetheless contain other assumptions, primarily that modernization processes are the key trigger to sexual diversity. In the final section, I bring both preceding sets of assumptions and critiques together to consider the contemporary internationalization of LGBTIQ politics and the assumption of progress behind these recent expansions. I argue that there is an assumption of Western exceptionalism underpinning the contemporary internationalization of queer rights and that this must be challenged to deliver a more effective politics of sexual diversity.

Sexual diversity as sexual minorities within institutionalized gender structures

Second wave feminist critiques argued that the basis of gender inequalities was social rather than natural and hence that we could transform social institutions, laws and ideologies to challenge oppression and move towards gender equality (Rahman and Jackson 2010). These theories fundamentally challenged the culturally dominant naturalist or essentialist understandings of gender, which effectively explained the subordination of women as an inevitable function of their biological capacities compared to those of men, based on ideas of inferiority in physical strength and mental capacity and their ‘natural’ role in child-bearing. The success of social explanations of gender has resulted in a genuine paradigm shift whereby many countries and international organizations such as the UN have explicit protections against gender discrimination, including policies to support women’s equality and access to resources. Furthermore, many different feminist theorists agree that the social construction and regulation of sexuality was a key technology of gender oppression. The strand of feminist thought known as radical feminism is largely credited with developing these insights, notably through Kate Millett’s (1971) analysis of patriarchy as a social system, Adrienne Rich’s (1980) critique of institutionalized heterosexuality and Catharine A. MacKinnon’s (1982) description of sexuality as the ‘linchpin’ of gender inequality. Again, we have seen significant successes in how sexual violence and exploitation are dealt with in the public and legal realms through the broad acceptance of radical feminist critiques. More specifically, there has been a recognition that the dominant understanding of ‘natural’ male sexual aggressiveness is, in fact, a socialized ideology and set of behaviours that reflect the patriarchal organization of society. Both by mainstreaming the idea that gender is socially produced, therefore, and by locating sexuality within the techniques of gender, institutionalized, normative heterosexuality has largely been opened up to scrutiny in significant ways.

What has been less successful has been the translation of these theories to the public understanding of non-heterosexual identities and behaviours, despite the fact that most radical feminist theories argue that the social construction of gender has created understandings of non-heterosexual or non-normative sexualities in relation to the dominant view of sexuality within normative gender. As Rich (1980) argues, the institutionalization of heterosexuality as particular forms of masculinity and femininity provides the basis for the stigmatization of homosexuals. The first wave of gay liberation from the 1970s contributed similar theoretical analyses, most notably in Mary McIntosh’s (1996 [1968]) argument that the social labelling of the homosexual
as deviant served to police the majority into heterosexuality. Ken Plummer’s (1975) identification of the broad social scripts of sexual stigma and Michel Foucault’s (1981) characterization of the emergence of the homosexual as a deviant ‘species’ through medical, psychological and legal practices that aimed to invest normative heterosexuality with social dominance. Moreover, by drawing on Foucault’s theories and cross-cultural anthropology, the academic literature since the 1980s has emphasized that the equation of sexual behaviours with specific, discrete, sexual identities was a consequence of modern ideologies of regulation and science in the West and that, in fact, historical and cross-cultural evidence demonstrated a variety of homo-erotic behaviours and potentialities in all people, which did not universally equate same-sex acts with a homosexual ‘type’ of person. These two major insights about the relationality of hetero/homo and the historically specific social creation of a stigmatized essentialist homosexual identity have remained at the analytical core of the gradual institutionalization of sexuality studies in most Western academics since the era of gay liberation, regardless of different theoretical or disciplinary approaches. This critique of normative gender or heteronormativity as the basis of the social stigma of homosexual identities, same-sex behaviours and non-normative gender has, however, largely transformed academic rather than public discourse.

The lobbying for LGBTIQ human rights has been based on a minority and ethnic identity model that fundamentally reassures the majoritarian nature of heterosexuality precisely because it is based on essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality. As the recent report from the UN cited on p. 75 puts it, we are ‘born’ that way and, because of that essential fact, we can have rights. Thus, the individualism central to liberal rights strategies reinforces the individualism of essentialist understandings of sexuality, so that queer identity politics compounds rather than deconstructs the dominant construction of gender that creates the oppression in the first place. This is not to deny that rights discourses and strategies based on identity politics have been successful in many contexts. Identity politics works because it provides a basis to represent experiences of oppression and for collective political participation, and we have seen the legislative and cultural impacts of queer identity politics reach a critical threshold in the last ten years or so, mostly in Western countries but also in some from the global south.3

Influential gay liberation theorists such as Dennis Altman (1993 [1971]) initially hoped, however, for the eventual dissolution of the binary gender framework that makes the category of homosexuality socially significant, but that has clearly not been the consequence of gay liberation, either sociologically or politically. Similarly, Weeks (2007) acknowledges that, whilst gay liberation began as a revolutionary force to end sexual categorization, its sociological reality became about asserting a specific form of self-identity, and an essentialist one at that (ibid.: 81–5). Despite the lack of actual scientific evidence for an innate ‘cause’ of homosexuality, the ‘appalling appeal of nature’ remains the dominant cultural framework for understanding gender and sexuality in ‘scientific’ realms and in popular culture (Jackson and Rees 2007), demonstrated by the worldwide pop hit from Lady GaGa, ‘Born This Way’, released in 2011 with the following lyrics: ‘No matter gay, straight or bi, Lesbian, transgendered life, I’m on the right track, baby, I was born to survive’. What we have is a world of public culture that celebrates being ‘born this way’ and promotes rights on the basis of identifiable, stable, ‘natural’ sexual identities.

The Western capitalist liberal democratic societies in which gay liberation first emerged had established models for minority politics (Epstein 1992), and this combined with the cultural dominance of essentialist explanations of sexuality to create queer politics as representative of a ‘natural minority’. Identity concepts such as ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, ‘trans’ man or woman are now commonplace in human rights and public discourse, but, whilst these concepts emerged from sustained academic interrogations of the social organization of sexuality and gender, in their public emergence they have combined only a partial analysis of the social regulation of sexuality
('discrimination is socially based') with the dominant common-sense 'essentialist' understandings of these aspects of human identity. For example, the recent campaigns for marriage equality in many countries have sought equality with heterosexuals, confirming the dominance of heteronormativity and seeking a place for a natural minority within that, thus reifying essentialist versions of sexual identity. Sexual diversity politics has become synonymous with sexual minority rights, rather than presenting the fundamental challenges to gender structures envisaged in the initial wave of gay liberation.

The emergence of modern sexualities in the West

The Age of Enlightenment in Europe resulted in a fundamental shift in ways of thinking about societies, politics and human nature, primarily away from faith-based frameworks towards rationalism. Enlightenment thinking framed attempts to explain fundamental changes in European societies during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, which was understood as a distinctly different 'modern' period that was defined by reason and progress (Callinicos 2007). Sociologically speaking, modernity is empirically defined by the expansion of Western imperialism from the sixteenth century, the advent of modern rational capitalism, and its complex divisions of labour, mass industrialization and consequent urbanization, and the application of rationalization to bureaucratic organization, particularly in the realm of government expansion (Turner 1990). This period is also identified with the development of scientific approaches to studying the physical world, subsequently applied to the study of human behaviour, as in the development of medical knowledge of the body and the emergence of psychology as a scientific discipline. There is broad agreement that these key sociological aspects of modernity have been instrumental in constructing the essentialist understanding of sexuality in the West (D’Emilio 1993; Greenberg 1988; Weeks 1989). The re-organization of gender divisions and ideologies based on wage-labour/domestic binaries during industrialization created a more rigid distinction between masculinity and femininity, and consequently a normalization of homo-social, gender segregated, work and leisure spaces. Thus we see the advent of a passive, domestic femininity idealized in the middle classes most of all, but operating in a regulatory fashion through all classes. Concurrently, the massive urbanization of industrialization led to large-scale, potentially anonymous, homo-social leisure spaces, where sexual activity was increasingly difficult to police. Historians of modern sexuality therefore argue that the need to both assert middle-class gender norms and regulate perceived working-class sexual license, produced more legal, moral and social emphasis on a rigid, marital path for sexual activity, and an increasing stigmatization of all non-normative sexual activities, including homo-erotic activity amongst men who spent much of their working and leisure lives in homo-social spaces. For example, in many Western countries, developing policing infrastructure targeted women sex-workers and homosexual activity after laws against ‘sexual depravity’ were introduced or bolstered (Greenberg 1988; Weeks 1989).

The consequences of modern capitalism and the resulting increase in technologies of bureaucratization and social control therefore provide the impetus to create our modern sense of homosexuality as a stigmatized behaviour, but it is the related development of medical and psychological sciences that fundamentally shifted our understanding of sexuality to an essentialist aspect of human character, creating what Foucault described as a type of person who is a homosexual, rather than people who might engage in homosexual acts. This medical psychological model legitimized legal and social regulation, often through studies of ‘deviant’ sexual behaviours; it became the dominant institutional and cultural way of understanding sexuality by the beginning of the twentieth century (Weeks 1989), and remains with us today as part of common culture, although mainstream psychology has moved away from its characterization of
Sexual diversity

homosexuality as a psychological disorder. Individualized, psychologized, essentialist, sexual identity is a creation of the modern Western world and that is the first basis for understanding the emergence of contemporary sexual diversity. Moreover, this Western understanding of normative and non-normative gendered sexual identities was used to police sexuality both within ‘home’ nations, often creating a nationalist ideal of ‘respectable’ sexuality, and in the imperial sphere as part of ‘civilizing’ colonial ideologies (McClintock 1995). For example, Murray (1997) suggests that much of the regulation of public homosexuality in Muslim cultures is due to the impact of Christian colonialism that sought to use ‘Eastern’ sexual depravity to justify Western moral superiority, something that Peletz (2006) also suggests was present in colonial Southeast Asia and has been documented in India (Vanita and Kidwai 2000: 191).

Of course, for the vast majority of the modern period, non-normative sexualities have been stigmatized in the West, so we also need to understand how the shift towards the acceptance of gay rights occurred. The impact of political movements has already been discussed briefly, and the structural sociological basis to this political emergence was the increasing material independence of women through access to education and employment opportunities and the consequent de-traditionalization of family structures in advanced capitalism since the mid-twentieth century. Since normative gender defines sexuality, more flexible gender led to a cultural space for non-normative sexualities. Thus, in the West we saw the rise of social justice movements based on identities other than class from the late 1960s onwards, both taking advantage of and provoking changes in these broadly democratic societies, resulting in a paradigm shift in democratic values to include multiculturalism and gender equality as part of its key criteria and, less consistently and much more recently, sexual diversity.

The role of market and consumer capitalism in creating and sustaining LGBTIQ sub-cultures has also been important to community and identity building in rich Western societies. Decriminalization and/or public visibility led to community organization for both politics and for sexual lifestyle behaviour and consumption, at first clustered in gay metropolitan ghettos, but now widened to include much of public consumer culture (Evans 1993; Hennessey 2000). The period of gay liberation in the West is also the period in which the ‘Golden Age’ of social democracy (Callinicos 2007) gave way to consumer societies and the withdrawal of the state from much public provision, uniformly characterized as producing ever increasing emphasis on individualist social and political forms, and in particular drawing upon the discourse of a successful sexual identity to promote goods, services and lifestyle. Sex sells not merely through titillation, but overwhelmingly because the essentialist way we understand sexual identity makes it excellent shorthand for a broader sense of lifestyle identity that is the contemporary language of consumerism (Bauman 2005). The sociological basis of gay liberation has included resistance to stigmatized essentialist understandings of sexuality, the de-traditionalization of gender divisions and their institutions and latterly the shift towards an individualist culture, overwhelmingly experienced through essentialist lifestyle consumption and compounded through individualist liberal rights strategies. Moreover, these various processes are derived from the momentum of modernity in the West or, to put it another way, modern sexual diversity has emerged from a combination of modernization processes that are first and foremost identified with Western modernity.

The contemporary internationalization of sexual diversity as Western exceptionalism?

As Altman (1993 [1971]) puts it, ‘the essence of gay liberation is that it enables us to come out’ (ibid.: 237). This reminds us that the political venture of sexual diversity is fundamentally
dependent on the public visibility of sexual identity and the recognition of the legitimacy of political claims, both of which have emerged through modernization processes. This model of politics requires subjects who identify as queer and are able and willing to self-organize around this identity, and it requires that space exists within civil society for group association and that institutional routes are available for subsequent political demands, again, all factors that broadly comprise Western liberal democracy. The absence of public LGBTIQ identities, either through legal prohibition and/or cultural homophobia, combined with the lack of democratic institutions, are seen as fundamental obstacles to queer equality in those, mostly non-Western, countries where queer rights do not yet exist.

Sexuality has only very recently emerged as a concern for intergovernmental human rights organizations, most prominently the European Union (EU) and the UN, although the former remains the only one to have mainstreamed sexual diversity rights (Kollman 2009). This recent internationalization is, however, based largely on a Western understanding of sexuality and sexual diversity politics. Moreover, when queer rights are resisted in international contexts, the broad explanation of this resistance defaults to the ‘traditionalism’ of non-Western cultures, either as nations or minority immigrant populations, exemplified in academic arguments such as the World Values Surveys (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), discourses about sexuality deployed in international gay rights organizations such as the ILGA, and increasingly in Western mainstream politics. My concern is that both assumptions of a Western essentialist model of sexuality and Western experiences of modernity underlie this contemporary model of queer internationalization, combining to put forward a model of ‘diffusion’ of sexual diversity from the West to the (less developed) ‘rest’ and thus potentially positioning queer politics within a neo-colonialist project.

The broad sociological understanding of modernization processes as central to the development of sexual diversity in the West is being combined with the Western discourse of public sexual identity to put forward a claim that the presence of LGBTIQ rights indicates the exceptionalism of Western modernity. For example, Mepschen et al. (2010) argue that gay politics has undergone a ‘remarkable shift’ that has moved them centre-stage in the civilizational defence of European and specifically Dutch culture against the multiculturalism represented by Islam. They argue that secularism and sexual freedom have developed as key aspects of contemporary Dutch identity, and indeed that the progress of gay rights within this movement has been exceptional, resulting in a normalization of gay identity. It is this exceptionalism, however, that permits the use of homosexuality to challenge Muslim cultures as outwith modernity:

Gay rights discourses have thus offered a language for the critique of Islam and multiculturalism – an idiom that underscores an Orientalist discourse that renders Muslim citizens knowable and produces them as objects of critique. Sexuality offers a prism through which cultural contrast comes to be perceived, temporally, as the difference between modernity and tradition.

(Mepschen et al. 2010: 970).

Queer politics are thus being incorporated into ‘homonationalist’ discourses to stigmatize racialized minorities further (Puar 2007), and in particular they are contributing to Islamophobia within the West. We therefore have a dilemma for queer politics wherein the perception that sexual diversity is a Western phenomenon creates a cultural division that both permits the use of LGBTIQ in racist, orientalist discourses and, on the other side of the divide, permits a resistance to LGBTIQ public visibility based on a defence of cultural integrity against the globalization of Western culture. For example, the recent Russian ban on the promotion of homosexuality is
seen as ‘... part of an effort to promote traditional Russian values over Western liberalism, which the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church see as corrupting Russian youth and contributing to the protests against Putin’s rule’.

This framing of homophobia occurs both at the national level, as in the Russian case (where most public opinion supported the law), and at the transnational level, as in the case of Muslim resistance from both minority populations and Muslim majority states who identify themselves with a trans-national Islamic identity. Moreover, state-led homophobia is increasingly deployed as a tactic by particular governments to boost their nationalist and anti-Western credentials (Weiss and Bosia 2013).

We should therefore be aware of the fact that current human rights strategies are based not only on Western constructions of gender and sexuality, but also on Western experiences of coming out and its consequences. The trajectory of social change around sexuality in the West has been conditioned by political and social structures that have produced a particular, Western essentialist understanding of sexuality. We are therefore potentially promoting the globalized expansion of a Western, essentialist, sexual minority politics rather than culturally relevant forms of sexual diversity. The research evidence on sexual diversity from non-Western cultures demonstrates that there are significant historical and contemporary differences in understandings of sexuality that are, in contemporary times, being variously influenced by, adapting and resisting globalized Western understandings of sexual identities (Aggleton et al. 2012; Lennox and Waites 2013; Lind 2010; Weiss and Bosia 2013). The challenge for contemporary sexual diversity politics is to render these complex intersecting sexual formations visible in a context where both global homophobias and Western globalized sexual politics exist in a dialectical relationship. Moving beyond this dialectic will require more leadership roles for queer movements from the global south (Lennox and Waites 2013), more trans-national dialogues between West and non-West (Lind 2010) and, above all, a recognition that current Western-led sexual diversity politics is not a universal teleological project, but one that is limited to a minority accommodation model based on Western essentialism. Even in the West, these limitations are apparent in the emergence of citizenship rights that mirror and thus support heterosexuality rather than disrupt it, usefully characterized by Duggan (2002) as ‘homonormativity’. If we are to see genuine sexual diversity (which must include gender diversity) around the world, we have to resist the homocolonialist impulse to assume that Western understandings of sexuality define the totality of possible sexual diversity.

Note

1 I use LGBTIQ and queer synonymously to refer to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, intersex and questioning people and associated politics since this is common usage in academic texts, although in public texts LGBT remains most used.

2 See the annual summary of queer rights provided by the International Lesbian and Gay Association, by Lucas Paoli Itaborahy and Jingshu Zhu (2013).


References


