

## Global Theories and Sexuality

### Prologue

In a chapter of *Sexual Cultures and Migration in the Era of AIDS* (Herdt, 1997) entitled *Others Have Sex With Others: Captain Cook and the Penetration of the Pacific*, John Gagnon re-explores the Western encounter with Polynesia, but with his gaze specifically on matters of sexuality. His is a contribution to ongoing debates about who Captain Cook was to the 'Indians' of Hawaii and who he is to both core and marginal cultures of the contemporary world order (see Moorehead, 1966; Obeyesekere, 1992; Pagden, 1993).

Captain Cook's journals, and those of his literate seamen, are a foundational text concerning the first encounters of Europeans and Polynesians (with the proviso, of course, that they are all written from European perspectives). The documents contain a limited record of the sexual encounter between British sailors and Polynesian women (the records are almost exclusively hetero-erotic), which, Gagnon notes, can be taken as a starting point for the sexual exoticization of Polynesia, and the southern Pacific region more widely, as a freely sexual paradise, celebrated in Hollywood films such as *Hurricane*, *Rain*, *South Pacific* and *Return to Paradise*. Such portrayals are linked with the expansion of sex tourism in the region by Americans and Europeans and, importantly, have also influenced the direction of academic, especially anthropological, research (think of Margaret Mead's work on the meanings of adolescence in Samoa).

We are all positioned culturally; we cannot step outside culture. So, with regard to anthropological and cognate investigations of the sexual other, Gagnon argues:

Since these 'disciplines' are an integral part of the expansionist Euro-American culture..., the anthropological traveller shares the subtle attachments to the cultural past that are threaded through the cultural present. As a consequence, in the contemporary collision between cultures (a collision that includes anthropologists and their practices), myth and fantasy are fused with data and theory in the constructed space of objectivity. (Gagnon, 1997, p.25).

This is the key to Gagnon's choice of Captain Cook in a book otherwise concerned with sexual cultures and migration in the era of AIDS. To make sense of the sexual encounters on Cook's voyages, we must appreciate that we are other to:

- a) the Polynesians of the late 18th century, whose perspectives are silent in the written record
- b) British sailors of the late 18th century - their cultural world is separated from ours in time
- c) present day Polynesians, albeit they have been increasingly influenced by Euro-American values and material culture.

If we can attempt to make sense of others having sex with others in the eighteenth century, we may have some clues, looking through history, to the nature of sexual relations between Polynesians and others today. In terms of my own interest in this paper - the relationship between processes of globalization and sexuality, Gagnon draws a conclusion which calls into question some of the recent literature which, in broad outline, has argued that under the influence of a worldwide response to HIV and AIDS, and ever increasing population mobility, Western forms of sexual *identification* (particularly lesbian and gay identities) are expanding into non-Western settings (albeit mainly metropolitan non-Western settings).

Gagnon asks the question, how is it that Polynesian women and British sailors of the late eighteenth century apparently enjoyed mutually beneficial, unproblematic sexual relations, given the cultural distance between them, including of course no common language. Without going into all the details (read Gagnon's fascinating chapter), it appears that there was a mutual expectation of penile-vaginal intercourse (with no mutually incompatible variations, e.g. a desire for oral sex by one party, or eroticization beyond the physical act), the encounters were initiated by the women, without predatory sexual violence by the European men, as in other colonial encounters, and, critically,

during the initial encounters the sex did not depend on significant convergences between cultural meaning systems since it did not extend into the larger networks of cultural life beyond the confines of the harbours where the ships were anchored.

This particular example illustrates how it may be possible for networks of sexual contact to expand beyond established cultural boundaries without necessarily intersecting or clashing with cultural expectations of sexuality: sexual practice underdetermines sexuality as a cultural product. This is an important point to bear in mind in thinking about the globalization of sexualities.

A second tendency in work on globalization of sexualities is, driven by the theoretical linking of globalization with the late or post-modern condition, to think of "global queering" as a modernization, and by implication, a de-traditionalization. This is to betray an old tendency to construe non-Western societies as somehow resembling the pre-modern phase of Western societies, a view long expunged from anthropology. It can lead to a rather different conclusion about globalizing sexualities, as in Gagnon's rather pessimistic closing notes:

...the worldwide decline in cultural diversity and, usually unmentioned, sexual diversity as indigenous people are threatened by physical destruction or cultural transformation. Demographically small and culturally different cultures everywhere in the world are in danger as a result of changes in local habitats and the incursions of representatives of centralizing or expanding nation-states or economic enterprises. In the absence of the creation of protected regions (cultural zoos?) it is clear that many small-scale experiments in human living will disappear in the next (21st) century.

But equally importantly there is a new homogenizing incursion into the cultural and sexual life of all societies, great and small, by the mass media centred primarily in the United States and Europe. Here the danger is not to bodies, but to the actual content of diverse sexual scripts in many societies.

(Gagnon, 1997, p.36).

## **The problem**

My interest in globalization and sexuality stems from an earlier research project (with Kevin Eisenstadt, Katie Deverell and Jason Annetts) on the social and sexual networks of gay men in Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham (Annetts, Eisenstadt and Gatter, 1996). As part of this project a small sample of men were interviewed about their lifetime mobility and its connection (if any) with sexuality. Among them were men who had migrated to London from elsewhere in the UK, and others who had migrated from elsewhere in the world, including West Africa, Latin America and Australasia. As an exploratory piece of research it raised questions about cultures of sexuality in places of origin as contrasted with cultures of sexuality in London; motivations for migration both to and within London; the development of a sense of sexual identity for individuals; and the complex relations between sexuality and migration. To put it very briefly, we found, as might be expected, that sexual careers were relatively idiosyncratic, and sexuality was problematic as a central analytic concept for ordering experience, even among a sample of men who at the time of the research project openly embraced the identity “gay” (they could not have been recruited to the study otherwise). There was much contingency in pathways to such a proclaimed identity, with no obvious telos.

I presented some of this material at a conference in Amsterdam in 1997 (Beyond Boundaries) at which there was also a session on globalization chaired by Dennis Altman, where he presented a paper on the “Global Gay”. The reaction of the audience to this session was instructive. The paper presenters seemed implicitly to agree that globalization of Western minority sexual identities (lesbian and gay identities in the main) was occurring. Also, there was at least a hint of a teleological argument: that such identities were somehow denied in “traditional”<sup>1</sup> societies, and were a product of modernization (the process) identified with modernity (the status). In one sense their emergence would be an inevitable result of the globalization of the late modern or postmodern condition. At the same time, given the seductive quality of the term modernization (who can argue with Tony Blair against it?), and (I hazard a guess) the subject positions of most of the academics writing about the globalization of lesbian and gay identities, there is an identifiable tendency to see the process as somehow a “good thing” and not problematic.

The audience appeared to split into two camps in response, and these generally followed the lines of whether the delegates were from the West or not. The Western delegates (especially the Americans) seemed relatively uncritical of the notion of

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<sup>1</sup>It seems to me that a conflation is still made by many sociologists between “traditional” as a pre-modern state of Western societies, and “traditional” as a quality of contemporary non-Western societies. There is a temptation here to see parallels between the Western past and the non-Western present.

globalization in relation to sexuality, indeed even saw it to some extent as a liberatory force. In contrast, African and Asian delegates argued that sexuality cannot be unravelled from other aspects of globalization, especially economic questions. They argued that globalizing processes played into the hands of established political, fiscal and intellectual élites, as has been claimed in development studies in relation to AID programmes. In this view the poor and disenfranchised would not benefit from any supposed sexual liberation in much the same way they were not benefiting from new production or information technologies. Being gay was likely only to be a beneficial outcome for some members of existing privileged castes.

Reflecting on this conference led me to certain questions. How can we link theories of globalization in the social sciences, located mostly in social and cultural theory, and the influence of globalization on sexualities? In other words, can we connect a broad, high level theoretical theme with description of sexuality as a field of investigation. Is globalization theory explanatory in relation to detailed empirical studies of contemporary sexualities around the world? Secondly, and relatedly, given that I started from a study of migrants with minority sexualities, how do we connect the movements of actual persons with the movement of capital and information which is said to typify globalization? Is it even sensible to consider actual migration and globalization as part of the same analytic? I can't pretend to have answered these questions, but the rest of the paper concerns what I think are some productive avenues for thinking and for empirical research. The general problem, I think, stated in the simplest terms, is that, where sexuality is concerned, there is a gap between a burgeoning and highly detailed descriptive literature on non-Western sexual cultures (particularly by anthropologists), and the much more abstract theoretical concerns which typify much of the literature on globalization. What I think might be aimed for is a better theoretically informed analysis of emergent sexual cultures, but one which also incorporates reflexive consideration of the centrality granted sexuality by the perv academy (perv being a loose synonym for queer, as coined by Angie Hart).

### **Characters of globalization**

Globalization implies high mobility - of capital, of persons, of information, the speed of communication being limited only by the velocity of electronic transmission. With this comes a sense of the contraction of time and space. This much seems to be agreed among most theorists of globalization. There is unprecedented contact on a planetary basis, and our senses of here and there are diminished. Globality is contrasted with locality, but locality becomes an infinite number of points through which global flows occur. Neighbourhood becomes a problematic concept, especially in terms of its being a location within which people have sustained face-to-face interaction and a sense of place and belonging. A simple definition of globalization, offered by Paul Kennedy (1988), is "the inter-connectedness of capital, production, ideas and cultures at an increasing pace" (note that such a definition specifies no source or direction of globalization).

Globalization also sets up problems for constituting the proper research objects of sociology and anthropology. Sociology was premised on the nation state as the unit

within which observations are made: we can have a sociology of Britain, of Germany, of Canada (with Quebec nationalism as a complicating factor). Central to ideas of globalization though is the theme of the demise of the nation state: movements of capital are freed from the control of national governments, and much economic activity is increasingly transnational - the role of the state as a self-determining entity becomes ever smaller - and witness the growth of international justice and humanitarianism as phenomena under trans-global control. For anthropology the unit of analysis has frequently been a (relatively small) community which is ethnographically described as a set of interconnecting persons, institutions, symbols, concepts and practices. Though always linked into larger systems, the communities for anthropological study had always to have some concretely identifiable integrity. If locality becomes a space through which there is constant movement, and constant connection elsewhere, what is it that anthropologists are studying (a question considered in a sophisticated way by Appadurai, 1996)?

Where differences of opinion amongst theorists begin to appear is where these broad, rather nebulous processes are specified in terms of empirical examples. Zygmunt Bauman, in his short book *Globalization: the human consequences*, argues that the processes of globalization are not evenly distributed. To be an effective actor within globalization requires the ability to be mobile.

Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values - and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern times.

(Bauman, 1998, p.2).

To be mobile, though, requires access to capital - firstly economic capital, but then social and cultural capital as well. For the "haves", becoming globalized also radically releases them from duty towards others, since there is no fixed community toward whom they owe allegiance. Bauman goes on to argue that the new speed and freedom which goes with having capital creates also a new polarization. Concentration of capital in some hands leads to its denudation elsewhere, so, he argues, globalization and territorialization, integration and parcelling out are mutually complementary processes. This is also an argument about agency - those who own capital and are global are the agents, those who don't are the patients, or as Bauman labels the two groups, tourists and vagabonds. Tourists have consumer power and the ability to follow economic opportunity wherever. Vagabonds are static, immobile, dispossessed.

Everybody may be *cast* in the mode of the consumer; everybody may *wish* to be a consumer and indulge in the opportunities which that mode of life holds. But not everybody *can* be a consumer. To desire is not enough; to make the desire truly desirable, and so to draw pleasure from the desire, one must have a reasonable hope of getting closer to the desired object....All of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be choosers.

(Bauman, pp. 85-86).

As a matter of fact, the worlds sedimented on the two poles, at the top and at the bottom of the emergent hierarch of mobility, differ sharply; they also become increasingly incommunicado to each other. For the first world, the world of the globally mobile, the space has lost its constraining quality and is easily traversed in both its 'real' and 'virtual' renditions. For the second world, the world of the 'locally tied', of those barred from moving and thus bound to bear passively whatever change may be visited on the locality they are tied to, the real space is fast closing up. This is a kind of deprivation which is made yet more painful by the obtrusive media display of the space conquest and of the '*virtual* accessibility' of distances that stay stubbornly unreachable in non-virtual reality.

(Bauman, pp. 87-88).

In sum, Bauman's view here of globalization is a rather dystopian one, based on a bipolar (I don't mean manic depressive) vision of globalization. So far, though, we haven't connected in ethnographic detail with identified situations of globalization (and perhaps it is tempting because of the very language and symbolism of globalization to avoid grounding analyses).

### **Globalization and sexuality**

Sexuality became a theme within globalization theory largely because of AIDS. Here was an epidemic of global proportions which linked infection (largely) with sexual behaviour. Many of the influential early campaigns for prevention and care, in the West, developed via community based groups often premised on shared sexual identification (the epidemic was first noticed in gay men in San Francisco and New York - subsequent AIDS services and activism in America and Europe have retained large contributions by gay men and lesbians). Experience from the West has been taken up in sexual health campaigning elsewhere in the world, whether under the aegis of governments or donor AID programmes. Members of Western sexual minorities have been involved in these campaigns in non-Western countries. They have taken with them their own concerns and identities, which some analysts now clearly see as contributing to the process of globalizing identities. A key contributor here has been Dennis Altman, who has taken an political economy view of globalization and HIV/AIDS. He argues for a political economy perspective since globalization affects economic, political and cultural aspects of life:

...it is clear that globalization impacts on sexuality in all three ways. Economic changes mean that sexuality is increasingly commodified, whether through advertising or prostitution...Cultural changes mean that certain ideas about behaviour and identity are widely dispersed, so that new ways of understanding oneself became available that often conflict bitterly with traditional mores....And the political realm will determine what forms are available for sexual expression, so that there is a far more overt "gay" world in Manila than in Singapore, despite the considerable gap in wealth, in part because of different political regimes.

(Altman, *full ref.* p.563).

Altman identifies the emergence of Western style gay cultures in Bangkok and Buenos Aires, and then proceeds to link the emergence of such identities with AIDS work. Organizations founded under the influence of the Global Program on AIDS (GPA) set up a worldwide network which

enabled links to be made with other trans-national social movements, particularly among gay/lesbian organizations, sex-worker groups and some women's organizations.

(Altman, p.586).

Programs around HIV/AIDS have done a great deal to further the spread of identities such as "sex worker" or "gay men"/"bisexuals"/"men who have sex with men" and the further globalization of movements based on such identities.

(Altman, p.567).

The latter point is illustrated by the example of Proyecto Girasol in El Salvador which reported the establishment for the first time in El Salvador of a positive self-identified gay community via the empowering activities of the project. He claims this example is of a process occurring over the past decade "across the world".

### **Being more specific**

A much more detailed discussion of emergent sexual cultures outside the West is to be found in Richard Parker's ethnographic work on Brazil (and a host of other authors on Brazil). His latest book, *Beneath The Equator* (1999), gives much more precise detail of globalizing effects than the sources discussed so far. In it he traces the history of different forms of Brazilian homosexuality and how they have intersected with modern Western influences. He is careful to argue that superficial resemblance of some sexual cultures in, say, Rio de Janeiro, to those in San Francisco, mask ways in which sexual subjectivities remain different. He also compares different cities in Brazil, and looks at the life histories of individuals who have migrated, either within Brazil or abroad, for reasons connected with sexuality. He considers in detail as well the ways in which different areas of particular Brazilian cities become sexualized. Through this he illustrates the localization of forms of sexual performance in what is (in the case of Rio de Janeiro) a global city full of tourists (in both the common sense and Bauman's usage). We have here a very clearly specified set of processes which includes spatial differentiation, global influences (again AIDS organizations are mentioned) and the perpetuation of certain more "traditional" forms of sexual identification, based around a passive-active dichotomy rather than hetero-homosexual.

This is all well and good but we have gone from rather unanchored theoretical accounts to detailed description which isn't really theorized. Something is missing in

the middle. Before suggesting how the gap might be bridged some further observations from an anthropological perspective can help. First, the examples cited as evidence of global sexualization processes have particular qualities. Brazil has a peculiar status between first and third worlds, and has long been celebrated as a sexual playground by Westerners. Brazil contains a myriad of sexual cultures which has attracted social scientists of sexuality for some time. Manila, Bangkok, and other Asian and Latin American examples are all cities with metropolitan histories located in cultures which have to some degree endorsed same-gender sexualities, allowing that they have had sex-gender systems different from Western ones (e.g. various forms of "third" gender). I would suggest that globalization of Western lesbian and gay identities is much more advanced in these examples than elsewhere around the globe, and that the people involved are mainly Bauman's tourists, i.e. members of economic, political and cultural elites who are highly mobile. Related to this point is that there is an entire continent - Africa (with the exception of South Africa) which doesn't get mentioned. One of the first ever attempts to map African homosexualities is a collection edited by Murray and Roscoe entitled "Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: studies in African Homosexualities" (1998).

This pioneering work charts the exclusion of homosexuality from the ethnographic record of Africa, largely under the influence of anthropologists either uninterested, unaware of, or hostile to the subject. More recently, this position has been taken by some post-independence African governments, which treat homosexuality as a Western perversion and import (notably Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe). However, the authors illustrate through historical and contemporary sources a very wide range of same-sex patterns throughout the continent, all of them indigenous, and varying in their cultural treatment from condemnation to celebration. Within some societies same sex patterns were formalized and granted named social roles.

These terms and roles were the basis for social identities incorporating sexual and gender difference, some stigmatized, some not. This is significant, because many recent historical and cultural studies of sexuality have claimed a unique status for Western sexual identities, especially "gay" or "homosexual" identity, as constructs produced by social and historical factors specific to Western societies.

(Murray and Roscoe, 1998, p.271).

There are examples given in the book of individuals self-defining in terms of nonmasculine male labels and nonfeminine female labels, and participating in associated sexual subcultures. Thus the identity formation processes mirror those traced since the nineteenth century for lesbians and gay men in the west, yet they have produced different kinds of identification.

What the African examples lack is an identity and lifestyle in which homosexual relationships are primary and *not* based on gender difference. In other words, the African systems do not define people solely on the basis of sexual object choice. They do, however, universally expect heterosexual marriage and procreation, though not necessarily heterosexual desire, orientation or monogamy.

In contrast to the homophobia Western homosexuals confront, the social pressure on Africans who desire same-sex relations is not concerned with their masculinity or femininity, their mental health, their sexual object preference and its causes, or the moral status of their sexual preference - but primarily with their production of children, especially eligible heirs, and the maintenance of a conventional image of married life. The social code does not require that an individual suppress same-sex desires or behaviour but that she or he never allow such desires to overshadow or supplant procreation. This is a less drastic social contract than the one offered to Western gays - to either repress same-sex desires and behaviours altogether or to accept a social outlaw status. *At the same time, it largely forestalls homosexual identity construction, stigmatization, and subculture formation.*

(Murray and Roscoe, 1998, p. 273).

Africa is generally more remote from globalizing processes than much of Asia and Latin America (compare Murray and .....1996 on Islamic homosexualities; or Cornwall, 1994, on Brazil). It would be unintelligent to compare Rio de Janeiro with, say, Lusaka in Zambia (a city of which I have some experience). Just recently it was reported in the gay press here that a small lesbian and gay organization was trying to set itself up in Lusaka, rather like GALZ in Zimbabwe. This is a form of organizing premised on international (or trans-national) lesbian and gay identity politics. But in Zambia it is only happening in the capital, again among an elite caste.

The African examples challenge us to be wary of a) assuming that processes of globalization in relation to sexual identities are proceeding evenly and in the same way across the globe, and b) making ethnocentric, teleological assumptions about the overall direction of change in sexual identities. Or, to put this point a different way, we need to take seriously the possibility of de-centring sexual orientation as an organizing concept, since this doesn't seem central to African models and, more radical even, pay attention to the place of sexuality within wider cultural value systems - Foucault (1978), and now Giddens (1992) argue that sexuality became the truth of the self in Western society, and that now we live in a culture of intimacy. This is not necessarily the case everywhere, and we need to be careful of the power implications of assuming the undifferentiated globalization of Western sexual identities, which may be teleological at best, neo-colonialist at worst.

### **Theorizing the particular.**

As some kind of conclusion to this paper I turn to the work of Arjun Appadurai (1996) who, as an anthropologist, has produced a complex analysis of the cultural dimensions of globalization.

His first major point is that globalization is not the story of cultural homogenization (Americanization or whatever), and that the anthropological archive illustrates this well. Theories which assume homogenization, such as traditional core-periphery models of the world economy, are not borne out by empirical observation.

He argues for a distinctly culturalist view to be developed in relation to social and cultural dimensions of globalization. In this we are to avoid the noun form culture, since it reifies cultures as objects with measurable attributes. The adjectival form "cultural" steers us away from this - it focuses us on difference, as a contrastive rather than substantive matter. The cultural then is a dimension of phenomena to do with situated and embodied differences. Appadurai suggests we use cultural as a heuristic device to talk about difference, rather than as a property of individuals or groups.

Of course, not all differences are cultural. Cultural differences are those which express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities (which he is careful to state is not identical with the idea of ethnicity as a naturalized category). We should restrict the term cultural to refer to forms of difference which are mobilized to articulate boundaries of difference (note emphasis on process rather than attribute). Related to cultural is the idea of culturalism, which in the contemporary world Appadurai sees as the mobilization of identity politics at the level of the nation state (ethnic conflicts within nation states are examples of culturalism, as is queer politics).

Identities, including sexual identities, can profitably be explored from a culturalist perspective.

Alongside a theorised model of cultural and culturalism, Appadurai proposes an analytical framework within which the cultural needs to be considered. This begins from the empirical observation that in a complex global economy there are disjunctions between economy, culture and politics as never before (and, he says, we are only just beginning to theorize these disjunctions). For the framework, Appadurai proposes there are five dimensions of global cultural flows which need to be taken into account. These dimensions are fluid and irregular, and are perspectival, i.e. relative to social actors, groups, nations and so forth around the world. They are also, he says, increasingly disjunctive. They are:

#### **a) ethnoscapes**

The landscape of persons, including tourists, immigrants, refugees and guest workers - moving individuals and groups. In addition there are more established local networks, but, critically, the two constantly interpenetrate.

#### **b) mediascapes**

The dissemination of information and images electronically, at great speed.

#### **c) technoscapes**

The global configuration of technology, which progressively breaks linkages between production and locality

#### **d) financescapes**

The disposition of world capital

## e) ideoscapes

Ideological, political products, derived ultimately from the Enlightenment, and articulated by the state - freedom, rights, welfare, sovereignty, (and, I would add, humanitarianism, environmentalism).

These five kinds of “scape” are all building blocks for the creation of, in Benedict Anderson’s (1991) term, imagined worlds. They need to be considered as separate dimensions, rather than complements of a whole, because of disjuncture. At the same time Appadurai emphasizes the strong role of the imaginary in globalization, since we are all exposed to many influences which we do not experience on a face-to-face basis.

Turning back to sexuality, we can begin to piece together the differences, in a globalizing world, between say a gay Thai businessman in Bangkok and a Igbo man in non-metropolitan Nigeria. From a culturalist and historical perspective each exist in cultures with different traditions concerning non-heterosexual relations. Each tradition is to do with prescription of gender roles, though in different ways. The significance of sexuality to identity will vary from the Western model. At the same time, the Thai businessman exists in a very different ethnoscape from the Igbo man, exposed to a much wider range of “tourists” (the Igbo more resembles a vagabond in Bauman’s schema). The Thai has much greater access to media images, and to capital. He is very professionally mobile. His ideoscape will also be very different. It is within this context that we can trace how certain sexual discourses come to be realized in different lives across the globe. These will change with globalization, but, following Appadurai, there is no reason to assume the inevitability of a universalization of Western models of non-heterosexuality. In this, I think, John Gagon was overly pessimistic.

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