

Decolonizing Our Bodies, Decolonizing Our World: Fighting Heteronormativity, Homonormativity and Homonationalism

Monday 3 November 2014, by [DRUCKER Peter](#) (Date first published: 31 October 2014).

Intervention at the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) World Conference, Mexico City, Friday 31 October 2014.

It's an honour and a privilege to be here at the ILGA World Conference; thank you for inviting me. The conference has given me a very rich picture of how our sexual lives are constrained and how our bodies are colonized.

When I asked [outgoing ILGA Co-Secretary-General] Gloria [Careaga] what we should try to do this morning, she suggested that we try to pull together the threads of the conference. This is a very challenging task. I would like to tackle it by trying to give an overview of three of the main forces we are contending against: heteronormativity, homonormativity and homonationalism. Because I think overcoming these forces is crucial to decolonizing our bodies – which in turn can be, has to be, part of decolonizing our world. So I'm starting from the analysis of the colonial project that Dawn [Cavanaugh of the Coalition of African Lesbians] has just set out.

Heteronormativity

First, briefly, about heteronormativity – briefly, because I think everyone here knows about it. Heteronormativity is straight cisgender supremacy. It includes all the forms of repression and discrimination we've been discussing this week. Just in this morning's news, there are more examples of it: another brutal murder of a trans person in the Philippines; a new arrest in India under section 377. At the same time, heteronormativity includes all the institutions and practices that assume that heterosexuality is the norm, the standard, and that LGBTI people are inevitably a minority, an exception.

The fight against heteronormativity is our key task, everywhere. Because all the countries in the world today are heteronormative – even the countries where the most victories for LGBTIQ rights have been won, where there is apparently the most tolerance.

Homonormativity

Homonormativity is one name (Lisa Duggan's name) for another problem we face. People here have called it by other names: normalization, for example, or mimicry of the straight model. It's a form of lesbian/gay adaptation to heteronormativity – of adopting the models and patterns of the straight order. And it establishes a hierarchy among LGBTIQ people: the hierarchy that Gayle Rubin has described in her work, and that other speakers have mentioned this week.

In this hierarchy, those of us who fit most easily into the straight order are treated as better than those of us who don't fit as well. For example, gay men who seem to act in masculine ways and play

a male role in society are often treated better than gay men who are seen as effeminate or lesbians who are seen as butch – and definitely better than trans or intersex people. I've been impressed this week by the work ILGA has been doing on trans and intersex issues. This hierarchy can also mean that gay men and lesbians who form stable, conventional couples may be treated better than those who don't.

What I want to stress is that, paradoxically, homonormativity has gotten to be a bigger problem as and where some lesbian/gay legal rights have been won, because legal rights can give some gay men and lesbians a better chance of taking their place among the relative winners in neoliberal society. Which gay men and lesbians can be relative winners depends largely on class, on gender, on ethnicity, and on their position in the colonial system. The neoliberal societies we live in are societies of great and growing inequality. And homonormativity can reflect and magnify this kind of inequality among LGBTIQ people: inequality between poor and rich, working-class and middle-class, female and male, black and white, immigrant-origin and non-immigrant-origin.

In this situation, same-sex marriage, for example, can bring benefits to many LGBTIQ people. It can be desperately important to save low-income LGBTI people from being thrown out of their home when a partner dies. But at the same time, it can improve the relative position in our communities of upper-class and middle-class gay and lesbian couples, who can gain disproportionate legitimation from it – and save thousands on income and inheritance taxes. As we fight for reforms like same-sex marriage, we need to find ways to address the inequalities and hierarchies that reforms can reinforce.

Among other things, this means collaborating and allying with organizations of working people, notably trade unions. I'm very glad that ILGA has signed an agreement with PSI, the global umbrella of public sector unions that my own union in the Netherlands is part of. And I was glad to be here for the labour inclusion panel. But I was disappointed by the emphasis in that panel on working with multinational corporations. I don't think that that kind of work challenges the fundamental hierarchies of neoliberal society the way labour work sometimes can.

Homonationalism

Finally, because the neoliberal order is an order of global inequality, of extraction and exploitation as Dawn said, homonormativity can reflect and underline differences on a global scale. This is where homonationalism comes in. The word homonationalism was coined by Jasbir Puar. It defines ways in which lesbian/gay rights can be integrated into the nationalist ideologies of dominant countries. Increasingly, in countries of Western Europe and North America and countries like Israel, people are talking and acting as if homosexuality, or at least lesbian/gay identity and rights, had been invented there – although we know that trans and intersex identities, and same-sex desire and sexual behaviour, have been part of the cultures of Asia, Africa and the Americas for thousands of years.

The cruel paradox is that today, homonationalism in some parts of the world can strengthen heteronormativity in other parts of the world. When sexualities and identities are celebrated as 'Western' in some regions, this fosters their rejection as alien in other regions.

This homonationalism is at work today above all in rich countries like the US and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, for example, the manipulation of lesbian/gay rights in the service of Islamophobia is a major problem. But I think we can see signs of homonationalism among elites even in some so-called emerging countries – like Mexico. At the opening ceremony of this conference we heard a representative of the president of Mexico drape himself in the banner of LGBTI rights and of human rights generally. And we heard clearly that this did not sit well with many Mexican participants here, who are up in arms about major human rights violations in this country, like the disappearance of 43

students in Iguala.

Among the most moving moments of the conference for me have been when a participant from Chiapas described the horrific homophobic violence that has taken the lives of so many LGBTI people in that Mexican state - with the murderers still walking the streets unpunished today. And when he linked that homophobic violence to the violence practised against the indigenous communities of Chiapas, with the participation or complicity of the Mexican state. For me, this is a compelling lesson in the indivisibility of human rights. It faces us with an imperative of solidarity - to which I think we need to respond better than we have so far.

Conclusion

We need to attack heteronormativity, homonormativity and homonationalism at their roots. We need to keep building LGBTIQ movements that are inclusive, movements where trans and intersex people and gender queers and the sexually marginalized are fully equal and play visible leadership roles. Our movements need to be especially supportive of LGBTI people who are organizing as working people, as people who need health care. And our movements need to be in solidarity against all forms of colonialism and oppression.

This approach to building our movement will require resisting pressures. It may sometimes mean biting the hand that funds us. But from what I've seen here at the ILGA World Conference this week, we can rely on an incredible fund of activist experience, of creativity, of resolve and of community support. With all that to back us up, I believe we can succeed in charting our own course - and prevail.

Peter Drucker
