

# Different Rainbows, Third World Queer Liberation

Friday 5 July 2019, by [KINSMAN Gary](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2002).

***Different Rainbows*, edited by Peter Drucker. Gay Men's Press: London, 2000. 222 pages, U.S. \$19.95 (paperback).**

THIS COLLECTION IS the first of its kind on the emergence of “queer” movements in all their diversities in the “third world.”

For far too long, writing and theorizing about the experiences of same-sex eroticism and movements has been dominated by the theories and accounts generated in the west, applying largely to white middle class gay men and to a lesser extent lesbians, then imposed on and exported to the rest of the world.

Such a procedure does violence to diverse indigenous sex and gender practices which have a different social and historical character in many of these countries. Those using the western-derived gay/lesbian “model” can view these indigenous sex/gender practices as “backward” and assume they will simply “develop” as they have done in the west.

Contributors to this book challenge this mythology and subvert, de-stabilize and challenge this “model.” The diversity of sexual and gender practices in “third world” countries reveals how much can be learned when we move away from the common U.S. image of “gay liberation” as based in coming out, ghettoization, and buying gay.

They also examine what we can learn from the diverse sexual and gender politics taking place in the “third world.” Other books that address some of these topics have a rather different character, being far more developed from a western standpoint or more in relation to queer theory (such as in post-colonial, queer, *Theoretical Intersections*, edited by John C. Hawley [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001].)

Two problems are encountered immediately: the meaning of “queer” and “third world.” Is “queer” an adequate expression for the diverse experiences of sexual and gender practices engaged in by same-sex lovers in these countries and does it submerge gender differences? And is “third world” an adequate expression for the many countries and cultures included in this book?

Certainly the term “queer” as defined and used in western queer theory is critically discussed in this book. I use “queer” here in a more open-ended sense to point towards the diverse erotic and gender practices engaged in within these countries, whether these are indigenous erotic and gender practices that are not lived in any way as gay or lesbian, transgendered practices, or self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual or even “queer” identifications.

The problem of bringing all these countries together despite their many differences as the “third world” is also noted by editor Peter Drucker, but “I have preferred it to euphemisms such as [developing](#)’ or less developed,’ or ideologically laden (though more accurate) ones such as

dominated' or dependent.'" (37n)

## **Broadening and Challenging Queer Theory**

Queer theory, which has specific western social and historical roots, has generally not been much interested in the non-western world. In contrast this book provides much more of a grounded social analysis from the social standpoints of people engaged in queer sex and gender practices in these countries, also raising important theoretical questions not only for queer sexual and gender organizing in the third world but also for queer activists in the imperialist countries.

This is a powerful book where contributors tell us about the relation between the brutally repressed 1968 student movement in Mexico and the emergence of a gay and lesbian liberation movement in that country (Max Mejia, "Mexican pink").

We also find out about the tensions within the African National Congress in South Africa between those "traditionalists," "nationalists" and "fundamentalists" who like Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe argue through a contradictory amalgam of African nationalism and Christian fundamentalism that "homosexuality is un-African"—an odd reversal of the language of the colonizers—and those committed to democratic social transformation who support lesbian and gay rights (Mark Gevisser, "Mandela's stepchildren" homosexual identity in post-apartheid South Africa").

In response to these fundamentalist assertions "queer" activists in sub-Saharan Africa and India have rediscovered histories of earlier indigenous same-sex erotic practices.

Gay liberation and socialist activist Peter Drucker's contributions as editor in contextualizing the book and drawing out important themes from the collection are considerable. The individual contributions themselves are very rich in bringing different voices and perspectives, opening up spaces for exploration of which I can only give you a taste here.

The contributions are uneven, as to be expected in a collection of this kind, including contributors like Margaret Randall and Australian Denis Altman who are well known in the west, and others not well known who also provide some of the most informative analysis.

## **The Contributions**

The book starts off with a series of articles on organizing in Latin America. This section includes an important history of the emergence of gay and lesbian organizing in Mexico (Max Mejia) and the organizing of support for gay and lesbian rights within the Brazilian Workers Party (James N. Green).

Norma Mogrovejo's important article on lesbian visibility and organizing in Latin America covers the relation of lesbian organizing to feminism, including major tensions with heterosexual feminists and men who have sex with men, the assertion of difference and the limitations of "gender" in dealing with lesbian experiences.

This essay deals with organizing in Mexico, Chile and Nicaragua, which is where the quote "a revolution within the revolution" comes from. Margaret Randall offers further exploration of the difficulties of women who have sex with women organizing in Nicaragua, problems with the Sandinistas trying to shut down autonomous organizing, and how women's and feminist organizing both opened up—but also limited—a space for lesbians to organize.

We then move to Gevisser's important article on organizing in South Africa, with the amazing but still limited progress that grew out of the anti-apartheid struggle and the involvement of "queer"

activists within it.

Despite the protection of lesbian and gay human rights in the South African constitution, the everyday lives of queer people in South Africa remain marked by oppression and exclusion. While legal and constitutional changes are vital, we also have to focus on transforming the fabric of everyday social life and the social relations and practices of marginalization and discrimination.

This points to the need to move beyond a simple "rights" perspective that demands that queers be included within existing social forms, to challenging and transforming these forms and institutional relations.

The article by Dennis Altman on the emergence of gay identities in Southeast Asia holds major insights but also profound difficulties. His research too often tends to take up the standpoints of western gays. While noting the uneven development of sexual identifications he sometimes views these as earlier forms of what has developed in the west.

Later even he notes that "there is virtually nothing written from the point of view of the 'local,' and there is a great need to hear these voices." (147) This is central to developing the analysis that we need. While Altman notes some important shifts in the social organization of sexuality, he does not always recognize the continuing power and hold of imperialism and capitalism.

The article on India (Sherry Joseph and Pawan Dhall) is fascinating although it could have gone into more depth on the impact of communalism and fundamentalism in limiting and shaping "queer" organizing.

John Mburu's article on organizing in Kenya details some of the same-sex erotic practices that existed in sub-Saharan Africa prior to colonization demonstrating that these practices were not "un-African." It was the impact of colonial rule and imperialism that stigmatized these social practices.

The interesting article on China (Chou Wah-shan) details some of the practices or strategies of appropriating family and kin through *tongzhi* (same or homo and goal, spirit or orientation) discourses. In contrast to western constructions of lesbian and gay, these approaches view sex and sexuality as only one part of life; *tongzhi* practices "manipulate their indigenous cultural resources so as to expand and reclaim their personal and social space." (195)

In a number of countries the emergence of organizations have been tied up with the social responses to AIDS/HIV. Even where lesbians, gays and queers are not at all accepted, groups have been able to occupy a certain social space through their involvement in the social response to AIDS.

Many of the contributions also detail the importance of organized religion as sex and gender regulation, and the problems of religious fundamentalism including dominant strands within Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in holding back the emergence of sex political movements. This points to the importance of the development of secular approaches in these countries.

### **Uneven and Combined Social Construction**

Drucker in his important introduction and conclusion details some of the ways we can account for and theorize the gender, sexual and political diversities made visible in the book. His contribution includes an innovative development of the Trotskyist theory of uneven and combined development, in order to produce a notion of uneven and combined social construction in relation to sex and gender in "third world" countries.

He employs this concept to explore indigenous gender and sex practices and how these have been

impacted by and reshaped by global capitalism and imperialism. As he puts it:

The term has the significant advantage that it avoids any implication of a uniform process moving more or less quickly in a single direction, which the idea of “globalization” seems to suggest. The idea of “combined and uneven social construction,” by contrast, can help us understand how different indigenous starting points, different relationships to the world economy, and different cultural and political contexts can combine to produce very different results—while still producing identifiable common elements of lesbian/gay identity in one country after another. It can help us understand how some indigenous forms of sexuality can be preserved within a global economy and culture, changing to a certain extent their forms or functions; how new forms can emerge; and how indigenous and new forms can be combined. (15)

This allows Drucker to establish the continuing social basis for both indigenous erotic and gender practices as well as more clearly defined lesbian, gay identifications. Countries in the “third world” are influenced by the classifications of heterosexual/homosexual established in western capitalism, as well as still being able to hold onto some of their indigenous sex and gender practices. The latter are also being transformed in the context of global capitalism and imperialism and the resistance of sex political movements around the world.

In these contexts same-sex lovers can engage in creative and active transformations of their indigenous sex and gender practices, combining them in new ways with aspects of western-generated notions of gay and lesbian. At the same time the relation between imperialism, sexual regulation and sexual politics needs to be much more fully explored.

As Drucker notes, the gay and lesbian identifications that have emerged in the west cannot emerge in the same ways in the “third world” precisely because of imperialism and the relations of underdevelopment—which mean that most people have less access to money, that there is less commodification of services, less public community formation for gays and lesbians, less ghettoization and less specifically lesbian/gay identity formation than in the “overdeveloped” imperialist countries.

### **Social Construction Without Eurocentrism**

Drucker and the contributors provide an important emphasis on the relation of “queer” organizing to the left but they also detail important and continuing problems with currents on the left and with forms of nationalism. The relation of “queer” struggles to other movements like feminism and Black liberation is also painted in.

It is clear that even though the development of autonomy for “queer” movements is key, this also has to be seen as mediated and organized through other social relations and struggles. While this is also true in the imperialist countries it is even clearer in “third world” countries where queer experiences are mediated through relations of underdevelopment, colonialism, imperialism, poverty, capitalist globalization, gender, class, nation, race, ethnicity and more.

Drucker also raises important critiques of much queer theory. It is not just culture and discourse that are important for queer politics but also poverty, imperialism and underdevelopment. As Drucker at one point puts it, “Full lesbian/gay equality requires Third World Liberation in a broader social sense: liberation from poverty and dependency.” (211)

Women also need other social options aside from marriage and economic dependence on men. Queer struggles are then not separate from but are an integral part of a general democratizing movement for social transformation. Seen from the perspectives of the “third world,” queer struggles need to

be socially and politically integrated with other social struggles based on practices of autonomy and alliance building.

Drucker also questions whether social power is really as “diffuse” as queer theory sometimes contends. For people in the “third world,” the power of state agencies, multinational corporations and the International Monetary Fund are very direct, not diffuse.

Drucker’s contributions and the book as a whole deepen a social constructionist perspective about the making of sexualities—a perspective originally based only on the white European-derived experience—thus beginning to develop a social constructionist approach without Eurocentrism.

### **The Dialectics of Identity**

Drucker also broaches important questions about sexual and gender identity. (I am leaving aside for now the many problems with identity-based theorizing.)

Drucker’s notion of the dialectics of identity allows him to grasp identity as fluid and variable, and allows him to develop a much broader notion of sex political organizing in the “third world” that moves far past the limitations of gay and lesbian classifications.

He suggests that “Lesbian/gay movements could be defined as embracing everyone who wants to fight for greater sexual freedom, rather than as proclaiming and defending ghettos.” Later he suggests that “The great diversity of identities gives substance to the idea of an alliance of all the sexually oppressed, rather than a movement around a single lesbian/gay identity.” (215, 217)

This begins to suggest a perspective for liberation without ghettoization and perhaps without commodification, important insights for queer struggles in the “third world” but also in the west.

This book is an important beginning and in conclusion I raise a few questions and concerns intended to take this exploration further.

As I already suggested we need to go further in tracing out the relations between imperialism, sexual regulation and resistance. There is a suggestion by Drucker that capitalism is only “economic” in character and that marxism is only about the “economic.” In my view a broader analysis of capitalism, which includes its social and cultural dimensions and views it as a form of cultural revolution, would be very useful.

While I view marxism as a broader critical analysis of capitalist political economy and social relations, it does need to be transformed to fully include the insights of feminism and queer liberation.

The emphasis by Drucker and others on transgendered experiences is important and quite central to third world queer liberation, especially given western queer theorists’ attempts to think through sex as separate from gender. It is clear that in the “third world” this cannot be done—and I suggest it cannot really be done in the imperialist countries as well.

At the same time the book’s use of “transgendered” often lacks clarity, running together a number of differing situations (e.g. some societies where there are more than two social genders, with being treated as the “other” gender in a two-gender system).

In Drucker’s analysis there is also still a concept of a “biological sex” even though transgendered movements and theorists are challenging the assumptions of the biological and the distinctions between sex as “biological” and gender as “social.”

This book is a vital beginning. It needs to be followed up by more studies defined by the standpoints of “queers” in the third world. It also provides us with a basis for developing a stronger activist queer left internationalism.

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