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Author(s): Dennis Altman

Source: *Social Text*, No. 48 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 77-94

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466787>

Accessed: 02/06/2011 15:01

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Rupture or Continuity?

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF GAY IDENTITIES

Dennis Altman

No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Early in 1995 posters appeared on streetposts in Manila's Malate district advertising a new gym, with illustrations of muscular (white) men taken, presumably, from overseas gay magazines. The posters seemed to promise a luxurious gym/sauna of the sort found in Paris or Los Angeles, but the gym itself is in an old garage, as small and dark as the other gyms that dot the Taft Avenue area. In the distinction between the image and the reality lies much of the paradox of the apparent globalization of postmodern gay identities.

Modern and *postmodern* can be used here interchangeably, for both terms represent the rapid reshaping of extensive areas of life and economy in previously underdeveloped parts of the world to fit the needs of Western capitalism. Most people live in an intermediate position between tradition and (post)modernity, and structures of sex and gender reflect the ambiguities and contradictions that this intermediacy imposes. I think of examples such as a Filipino anthropologist who after seven years studying in the United States still identifies with the *bakla* (effeminate homosexuals) of his native town; but also of young American street kids who bash "fags" and yet will sleep with other men for money (or sometimes, unacknowledged, with each other for affection).

It has become fashionable to point to the emergence of "the global gay," the apparent internationalization of a certain form of social and cultural identity based upon homosexuality. He—sometimes, though less often, she—is conceptualized in terms that are very much derived from recent American fashion and intellectual style: young, upwardly mobile, sexually adventurous, with an in-your-face attitude toward traditional restrictions and an interest in both activism and fashion. Images of young men in baseball caps and Reeboks on the streets of Budapest or São Paulo, of "lipstick lesbians" flirting on portable telephones in Bangkok or demonstrating in the streets of Tokyo—none of which are fictitious—are

part of the construction of a new category, or more accurately the expansion of an existing Western category, that is part of the rapid globalization of lifestyle and identity politics, the simultaneous disappearance of old concepts and invention of new ones.

These observations do not only reflect a Western interpretation; references to “global society” are common in publications from gay groups in developing countries. (For example, the term is used in *Gaya Nusantara*, the publication of the Indonesian gay/lesbian network.)¹ There is evidence of this new gay world particularly in Southeast Asia, South and Central America, and Eastern Europe. The most obvious indicator is the development of commercial space, that is, of entertainment venues, restaurants, and shops that cater to a distinctly homosexual clientele. Both Western and non-Western experiences suggest that such space provides important opportunities for gay men and lesbians to meet and to develop social and political ties. (One of the first gay groups in Manila took its name from the Library, a bar where its first meetings were held.)

Based on the listings in the 1994–95 *Spartacus International Gay Guide*, the commercial scene seems to be expanding rapidly outside the so-called First World. The *Guide* lists each of the following places as having more than twenty commercial establishments catering to gays: Bogotá, Budapest, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Lima, Manila, Mexico City, Monterrey, Prague, San José (Costa Rica), San Juan, and Tangier. In addition, Brazil and Japan are listed as each having five cities with more than twenty establishments, and Thailand is listed as having four cities with more than twenty establishments.² These figures—which should be regarded with some skepticism—suggest that affluence is one, but certainly not the only, factor in explaining the emergence of a commercial gay world. Note, for example, the relative overrepresentation of Latin America as against the underrepresentation of Chinese East Asia, which suggests that there are political and cultural factors involved.

Such crude counting, however, does not adequately emphasize the impact of Western-style consumerism, as in the growth of luxurious discos in a number of places or the development of overtly gay saunas very different from traditional bathhouses. Another significant indicator of its impact is the development of a gay/lesbian press (for example, in Mexico, Brazil, Hungary, and Hong Kong), which is almost always related closely to both a commercial world (for advertising revenue) and enough political freedom to escape censorship. But perhaps most significant is the emergence of gay/lesbian political groups.

Gay organizing has something of a history in South and Central America, with origins in the 1970s in Brazil, Mexico, and the southern cone, which were then crudely—and cruelly—repressed by the rise of military regimes, especially in Argentina and Chile.³ But such organizing

has increased worldwide in the 1990s, especially in Eastern Europe and in Asia. Note, for example, the first Asian Lesbian Network, organized by the Thai group Anjaree in 1990; the first Indonesian Lesbian and Gay Congress in December 1993 attended by members of ten groups; the existence of the Progressive Organization of Gays in the Philippines since 1992; Japanese developments around the 1994 International AIDS Conference in Yokohama and a subsequent demonstration organized by Occur, a group of Japanese lesbians and gay men; and the first organized meeting of gay-identified men in India at the end of that year.⁴

The basic question is whether these developments suggest a fundamental change equivalent to the creation of powerful gay communities with economic, social, and political clout as in North America, Australasia, and northern Europe.⁵ Is there, in other words, a universal gay identity linked to modernity? This is not to argue for a transhistoric or essentialist position (à la Whitam or Boswell⁶) but rather to question the extent to which the forces of globalization (both economic and cultural) can be said to produce a common consciousness and identity based on homosexuality. Critics have argued that globalism and consumerism create individualism and greater life choices, which consequently lead to the emergence of Western-style identities and identity politics. As Rosalind Morris put it: “We know that the apparatus of power is different in every society and that the discourses of sex and gender differ from context to context. Yet a considerable body of critical theory persists in a mode of historical analysis—the emphatically linear genealogy—that derives from the West’s specific experience of modernity.”⁷

To avoid slipping into this linear genealogy we need to understand sexuality as involving the complex and varied ways in which biological possibilities are shaped by social, economic, political, and cultural structures. The argument about the reshaping of homosexualities in developing countries offers a particular way of understanding the whole fabric of the sex/gender order.⁸ The contemporary world is simultaneously experiencing the creation/solidification of identities and their dissolution: we don’t know yet if identities based on sexuality will be as strong as those based on race or religion. The idea of “gay/lesbian” as a sociological category is only about one hundred years old, and its survival even in Western developed countries cannot be taken for granted.

The problem thus becomes one of finding the right balance between tradition and modernity, while recognizing that these terms themselves are vague, problematic, and politically contested; appealing to “traditional moral values” in many Pacific islands, for example, means appealing to imported Christian ideals which were central to the colonial destruction of existing social structures. As Allan Hanson writes (of New Zealand): “‘Traditional culture’ is increasingly recognized to be more an invention

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constructed for contemporary purposes than a stable heritage handed on from the past.”⁹

There is a constant danger of romanticizing “primitive” homosexuality, seen very clearly, for example, in the popular anthropology of Tobias Schneebaum, who writes (and presumably believes): “It was in Asmat [West Irian], however, that I felt for the first time part of a universal clan, for Asmat culture in some regions not only allowed for sexual relationships between men but demanded that no male be without his male companion, no matter how many wives he had or how many women he might be sleeping with.”¹⁰

Similarly, Western romanticism about the apparent tolerance of homoeroticism in many non-Western cultures disguises the reality of persecution, discrimination, and violence, which sometimes occurs in unfamiliar forms. Firsthand accounts make it clear that homosexuality is far from being universally accepted—or even tolerated—in such apparent paradises as Morocco, the Philippines, Thailand, and Brazil: “Lurking behind the Brazilians’ pride of their flamboyant drag queens, their recent adulation of a transvestite chosen as a model of Brazilian beauty, their acceptance of gays and lesbians as leaders of the country’s most widely practiced religion and the constitutional protection of homosexuality, lies a different truth. Gay men, lesbians and transvestites face widespread discrimination, oppression and extreme violence.”¹¹

What Constitutes a “Modern” Gay Identity?

Arguing that the very idea of a homosexual/heterosexual divide only became dominant in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, George Chauncey writes: “The most striking difference between the dominant sexual culture of the early twentieth century and that of our own era is the degree to which the earlier culture permitted men to engage in sexual relations with other men, often on a regular basis, without requiring them to regard themselves—or be regarded by others—as gay. . . . Many men . . . neither understood nor organized their sexual practices along a hetero-homosexual axis.”¹² Today, becoming “gay” is to take on a particular set of styles and behaviors. As Paul Russell’s protagonist writes: “Almost through an act of will, I had made myself embrace this new identity of mine and never look back. I had gay friends. I ate at gay restaurants. I went to gay bars. I had my apartment near DuPont Circle.”¹³

Chauncey’s formulation is probably true for most societies, many of which are far more relaxed about homosexual behavior, at least among men, than were the pre-gay liberation United States and Western Europe.

Of Java, for example, Benedict Anderson argues that “male homosexuality at least was an unproblematic, everyday part of a highly varied Javanese sexual culture”¹⁴; similar comments are often made about Bali. North African men are often claimed to regard sex with boys as totally natural.¹⁵ There is an extensive literature suggesting that homosexual behavior—though not identity—is widespread throughout Latin America, where what is crucial is not gender but whether a man is “active” or “passive.”¹⁶

The only possible generalization may be that there exists a far greater variety of understandings of sex/gender arrangements than tends to be recognized by official discourses. Moreover, attempts to use Western terminology—*gay people*; *men who have sex with men*, *bisexuals*—often block us from understanding the different ways in which people understand their own sexual experiences and feelings. Reporting on a discussion among gay and lesbian Asians at a recent International AIDS Conference, Shivananda Khan argued:

There were strong cultural frameworks of “third gender” which have had a long history and many within such groups have played socio-political-religious roles in their societies. To transpose Western understandings (and subsequently HIV/AIDS prevention programs) is to destroy these social constructions and recreate them in a Western mold. Discussion revolved around moving away from gender diomorphic structures that arose from the West and talk about Alternate Genders, in other words more than two genders. . . . Similarly we should be talking about lesbian identities and gay identities, should be discussing homosexualities instead of homosexuality, communities instead of community.¹⁷

In most traditional Asian and Pacific societies, there are complex variations across gender and sex lines, with “transgender” people (Indonesian *warias*, Thai *kathoe*, Filipino *bayot*, Polynesian *fa’fafine*, etc.) characterized by both transvestite and homosexual behavior. As Gilbert Herdt writes, “Sexual orientation and identity are not the keys to conceptualizing a third sex and gender across time and space.”¹⁸ In many societies there is confusion around the terms. Different people use terms such as *bayot* or *waria* in different ways, depending on whether the emphasis is on gender or on sexuality: the terms can refer to men who wish in some way to be women, or they can refer to men attracted to other men. Anthropology teaches us the need to be cautious about any sort of binary system of sex/gender. Niko Besnier uses the term *gender liminality* to avoid this trap, stressing that such liminality is not the same as homosexuality: “sexual relations with men are seen as an optional consequence of gender liminality, rather than its determiner, prerequisite or primary attribute.”¹⁹

Certainly most of the literature about Latin America stresses that a homosexual *identity* (as distinct from homosexual *practices*) is related to

the rejection of dominant gender expectations, so that “a real man” can have sex with other men and not risk his heterosexual identity. As Roger Lancaster puts it: “Whatever else a *cochon* might or might not do, he is tacitly understood as one who assumes the receptive role in anal intercourse. His partner, defined as ‘active’ in the terms of their engagement, is not stigmatized, nor does he acquire a special identity of any sort.”²⁰ Thus the *nature* rather than the *object* of the sexual act becomes the key factor.

In Western countries during the hundred years or so before the birth of the contemporary gay movement, the dominant understanding of homosexuality was predicated on a confusion between sexuality and gender. In other words, the “traditional” view was that the “real” homosexual is the man who behaves like a woman. Something of this confusion remains in popular perceptions. But for most Western homosexual men it ended with the development of the gay movement at the beginning of the 1970s (although even today “drag” remains an important reminder of the idea that sexual subversion is also gender subversion). As Gail Rubin has pointed out: “Since the mid-nineteenth century there has been a slowly evolving distinction between homosexual object choice and cross-gender or trans-gender behavior. . . . The development of the leather community is part of a long historical process in which masculinity has been claimed, asserted, or reappropriated by male homosexuals.”²¹

Modern forms of homosexuality often exist side-by-side with older traditional ones, and the boundaries can appear either blurred or distinct depending on one’s vantage point and ideology. Thus some homosexuals in non-Western countries seek to establish historical continuities while others are more interested in distancing themselves, psychologically and analytically, from what they consider old-fashioned forms of homosexuality, especially those that seem based on crossgender lines. In Indonesia, for example, local men who identify themselves as gay will sometimes sharply distinguish themselves from *banci* or *waria* (terms which include effeminate men and, occasionally, masculine women²²) but in other contexts will identify with them. The title of the Indonesian lesbian/gay journal *Gaya Nusantara*, which literally means “Indonesian style,” captures this ambivalence nicely with its echoes of both traditional and modern concepts of nation and sexuality. It is often assumed that homosexuals are defined in most traditional societies as a third sex, but that as well is too schematic to be universally useful. As Peter Jackson points out, the same terms in Thailand can be gender *and* sexual categories.²³

To identify as homosexual without rejecting conventional assumptions about masculinity or femininity (as with today’s “macho” gay or “lipstick lesbian” styles) is one of the distinguishing features of modern homosexuality. This new freedom is both distinctively different from any premodern formations of sexuality and intimately related to other features

of modern life. Modern homosexualities are characterized by the following characteristics: (1) a differentiation between sexual and gender transgression; (2) an emphasis on emotional as much as on sexual relationships; and (3) the development of public homosexual worlds.

Homosexuality is no longer considered an expression of “really” being a woman in a man’s body (or vice versa), but rather as physically desiring others of one’s own gender without necessarily wishing to deny one’s masculinity/femininity. These changes are played out in somewhat different forms in different cultural settings. Thus Jackson speaks of there being four or five categories of sex/gender (*phet*) in Thailand, and of the new masculinization of homosexuals so that gay men—an emerging category—are those who desire each other. Richard Parker has written of the emergence of new “systems of thought in Brazil,” whereby “sexual practices have taken on significance not simply as part of the construction of a hierarchy of women and men, but as a key to the nature of every individual.”²⁴

Similarly, the term *gay* suggests not only a sexual but also an emotional definition. As Christopher Isherwood once said, “You know you are homosexual when you discover you can love another man.”²⁵ In other words, imagining same-sex relationships as the central part of one’s life marks the real creation of a specific homosexual identity. We are speaking here of an emotional as much as of an erotic economy. As one (anonymous) survey of homosexuality in Pakistan put it: “‘Gay’ implies a legitimation of a relationship that runs counter to family, and therefore gay life does not exist in Pakistan in general, or in Karachi in particular. From a practical standpoint, two lovers would find themselves without a social context. . . . Human beings do tend to develop emotional bonds, and in Pakistan these bonds either result in tragedy or unacceptable (to a Westernized sensibility) compromise to steal private moments of tenderness or sexual release.”²⁶

There are growing accounts of such relationships in developing countries and a move away from relationships between locals and Westerners to relations which are, at least on the surface, open and egalitarian, both in terms of unspecified role playing and in terms of emotional (and often sexual) reciprocity. There is a clear distinction between a willingness/desire for sex between men and the creation of this desire as a central emotional lodestone. I think of a Moroccan friend who defined himself as homosexual, not bisexual, and thus consciously set himself apart from other presumed bisexual men. There is a need to examine emotional as much as sexual fantasies; the latter are likely to be polymorphous (as revealed in much sexology research) but the former are often at the same time conservative (settling down in a couple) and subversive (where the couple is of the same gender; thus the enormous reaction against gay marriage or recognition of gay couples).

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One might ask whose scripts are being played out as more people in developing countries adopt the idea of forming homosexual couples. This goes beyond the expression of sentiment as part of even transitory sexual transactions; “I love you” is often a necessary excuse for sex as it is for many Western teenagers. But as someone once asked me, Is the move to imagine oneself in a lasting homosexual relationship the acting out of Chinese opera or soap opera? As most societies exhibit a great deal of homosociability, and often physical affection between men, does this mean that all we are seeing is a Westernization—and perhaps a limiting—of already existing relations? The rhetorics of liberation and modernity rarely allow for the fact that each change contains a restrictive as well as a liberatory component.

A new willingness to discuss homosexuality openly has accompanied the creation of a specific “gay world,” which is defined socially, commercially, and politically. With these changes has come the development of the “gay community” as a recognized part of most Western industrialized societies, in some countries enjoying a considerable degree of legitimacy and recognition by the state. In part this reflects the ideology of individual rights and fulfillment—the Jeffersonian “right to happiness” applied to sexuality. In part, too, it grows out of a recognition of pluralism and cultural diversity, which have been important factors in changing attitudes towards homosexuality in the Netherlands, Canada, and Australia. These ideas may be inappropriate in other settings, as Jackson argues they are in Thailand²⁷ and as Peter Fry suggests for Brazil: “The concept of the modern homosexual falls on deaf ears in a culture where homoerotic practices are highly generalized and where masculinity and femininity are regarded as more important than homo- or heterosexuality.”²⁸

In Brazil and Thailand, and in other (usually richer) parts of the developing world, a small elite see themselves as interconnected with a global network via groups such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association and an international commercial scene in which they participate. Others (often from similar class positions) are more critical: in the early 1980s Stephen Murray and Manuel Arboleda noted that “Mexican liberation organizations eschew the term ‘gay’ because their leadership do not consider Anglo gay culture to be what they aspire to emulate. They are also sensitive about ‘cultural imperialism’ from the north and the elitism of expensive local replicas of Anglo gay bars.”²⁹ However, some of the most virulent of such critiques are themselves imported via Western conceptualizations of postcolonial and subaltern analysis.

The existence of a commercial gay world cannot be read as bringing with it the same consciousness in different societies. Is Shinjuku, the area in Tokyo with the heaviest concentration of gay bars and shops, really like

the Castro in San Francisco? If not, where are the differences? There is a constant need to disentangle commercial and media images from changes in consciousness. The United States is so consumer-defined that the gay movement was quickly co-opted and turned into an interest group and a niche market (with gay resistance increasingly expressed in aesthetic terms—*queer* rather than *anticapitalist*).³⁰ Neither the development of a political movement nor its incorporation along American lines is necessarily the outcome for other societies.

It seems clear that *some form* of gay and lesbian identity is becoming more common across the world. As gay identities increase, so the number of men having homosexual sex may *decrease*. This is suggested by one observer of India (despite a lack of distinction in his piece between identity and behavior):

Is it any surprise then that in India you run into bellboys at hotels, men on crowded local trains, the guys in the seats next to you in the movies, all of whom are more than adequately interested in fondling your penis? India has no gay movements and perhaps never will. There are no gay magazines; perhaps they don't need them. There are no gay bars per se; again, perhaps they are not necessary. . . . Bedding someone back home was far easier than over here.³¹

It is certainly possible that many people in developing countries, whatever their exposure to Western media imagery and consumer affluence, will not adopt Western sexual identities, or that terms such as *gay*, *lesbian*, even *queer* will be taken up and changed much as English names are adopted in the bars of Patpong and Shinjuku. Critics have argued that “even” in the West many men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay may not be closeted (imperfect) homosexuals but may be consciously rejecting a particular identity.³² Yet many non-Western homosexuals are nonetheless attracted to a Western model, which they seek, consciously or not, to impose on their own movements. They are aided by discourses of human rights and the more specific language of AIDS/HIV (thus recognition of a gay community becomes a frequent demand at most international AIDS conferences). When such demands are voiced in the name of representing Asians or South Americans, is it to be understood as the oppressed demanding to be heard or as a new stage of internalized imperialism? And what about those official voices from countries such as Iran or China who decry homosexuality as a result of “Western decadence,” ignoring the rich homoerotic traditions of their own precolonial history?

Globalization and Sexual Identities

The images and rhetoric of a newly assertive gay world spread rapidly from the United States and other Western countries after 1969. American gay consumerism soon became the dominant mode for the new gay style of the 1970s. Despite a radical gay movement born in the 1968 student riots, by the end of that decade an American-derived commercial gay world had grown up in Paris, and the Marais was a recognizable gay quarter on the model of Castro or the West Village. Looking back on notes I made on a short visit to Brazil in 1979, I find they reflect many of the issues I am now struggling with in relation to the Philippines and Indonesia: the meanings of apparent mimicry of Western forms; the role of class and age divisions in the gay world; the somewhat different public display of homosexuality in countries where the conventions of body contact are somewhat different to those we take for granted in the West.³³

In one sense the importation of gay style and rhetoric is part of the ongoing dominance of the so-called First World. Filipino writer Vicente Groyon III reflects all the contradictions and ambivalences at play when he writes:

You are reading the latest copy of *Interview*, one of the trendy fashion-slash-lifestyle monthlies that tell you what to wear, what to talk about and how to live. You are under the impression that you belong to the world the magazine describes, and not in this tropical, underdeveloped, unstable country. You dream of escaping to this world full of perfect people, with perfect faces and perfect lives and perfect clothes and perfect bodies.³⁴

The ever-expanding impact of (post)modern capitalism is clearly redrawing traditional sex/gender orders to match the ideology and consciousness imposed by huge changes in the economy. The impact of economic growth, consumerism, urbanization, social mobility, and improving telecommunications places great strains on existing familial and personal relations, and on the very conceptions of self with which people make sense of these arrangements. Discussions about the changes demanded by capitalism tend to fluctuate between nostalgia and celebration: what one person sees as an increase in personal liberty another may well read as the destruction of valuable traditions.

We cannot discuss the development of modern forms of sexual identity independent of other shifts, which at first glance may not be directly relevant. In the new urban industrial areas created by the much vaunted economic growth of “newly industrialized countries,” large populations of young people, attracted by the prospect of jobs, have probably weakened and certainly changed their relations to their families. It will become easier for the millions of people attracted to the new boomtowns of south-

ern China to act out gay identities; as entrepreneurs see profits to be made from catering to these new identities, the regime's ability to maintain social control will be tested. Equally, of course, the rapid economic growth of China and other East Asian economies is leading to major shifts and expansion in commercial sex work.

In a sense, globalization is capitalist imperialism writ large, and many of its features continue and perpetuate the erosion of custom, of existing kinship and villages/communities, and of once-private space in the interests of an expanding market dominated by the firms of the First World. What was once accomplished by gunships and conquest is now achieved via shopping malls and cable television. Whether this amounts to something new or merely to a speeding up of existing relations is a complex question. Robert C. Connell has noted that "European imperialism, global capitalism under U.S. hegemony, and modern communications have brought all cultures into contact, obliterating many, and marginalizing most. Anthropology as a discipline is in crisis because of this."³⁵

One might describe the current debates around changing forms of homosexuality as presenting a choice between political economy, which argues for universalizing trends, and anthropology, which argues for cultural specificities. There are people with strong emotional and career investments in each camp, and whether a Thai or a Colombian argues that modernity destroys indigenous cultural forms or provides new space for sexual freedom may tell us more about their own place in the world than about what is actually happening. It is obvious that both economic and cultural forces are changing sexual regimes and the relationships between the sex/gender order and other economic and cultural structures. What is less clear is how such changes enter into the psyche. Are the luxurious saunas of Paris and Bangkok, or the emerging gym cultures of Santiago or Osaka affecting deeply held values, or are they merely superficial shifts in style?

What seems universal—even something as specific as a homosexual bathhouse or a disco—will be changed and mediated through the individual culture and political economy of each society. As Katie King argues: "We need to talk of homosexualities and therefore of various forms of 'gay': When I now talk about 'global gay formations and local homosexualities' I am talking about layerings of maps and territories that also interact, correct, and deconstruct each other, that describe distinct and important systems of material circumstances."³⁶ But arguments for cultural specificity can sometimes lead us to forget the "systems of material circumstances" to which King refers. Thus Anne Allison in her fascinating book about Tokyo hostess clubs argues that attempts to define things as "essentially Japanese" (and hence not comparable with other societies) ignore "politics, economics, history and class."³⁷

The significant aspect of the contemporary globalization of capitalism

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is the growth of affluence in many countries and the corresponding greater freedom for individual choice it makes possible. Affluence, education, and awareness of other possibilities are all prerequisites for the adoption of new forms of identity, and the spread of these conditions will increase the extent to which gay identities develop beyond their base in liberal Western societies. (They are not, however, *sufficient* prerequisites, as authoritarian governments in both the Middle East and East Asia have made clear.) In turn, the development of such identities may well swamp existing homosexual/third sex cultures, as has been claimed for Indonesia, Mexico, and India.

Globalization in the form of increased travel and communication between countries similarly adds pressure to adapt to hegemonic cultural forms; while tourism plays an uneven role in the construction of new forms of homosexuality, it has clearly been crucial in such areas as the Caribbean, North Africa, and parts of Asia (e.g., Sri Lanka and Bali).³⁸ Moreover, increasing numbers of people from Third World countries travel to the West, and this becomes another factor in cultural transmission.

But globalization is extremely uneven in its effects, simultaneously reducing and creating all sorts of shifting cultural and communal ties. As Virginia Vargas writes of Latin America: "An incomplete and subordinate process of modernization has had an ambivalent effect, increasing the marginalization of wide social, regional and cultural sectors on the one hand, while at the same time facilitating the integration and a broadening of the horizons of those same sectors, giving rise in the past few decades to a chorus of voices coming from the latter who have been traditionally marginalized from the process of political transformation."³⁹ The problem for these voices is how to avoid speaking a language of outmoded nostalgia, how to select from the constant influx of new ideas, styles, and technologies those that can be used to improve human life rather than merely reshape it to fit the demands of a global market.

The crucial question is, How do new forms of sexual identity interact with the traditional scripts of sex/gender order? Peter Jackson has argued eloquently for a continuum:

While gayness in Thailand has drawn selectively on western models, it has emerged from a Thai cultural foundation as the result of efforts by Thai homosexual men to resolve tensions within the structure of masculinity in their society. I also maintain that the proposition that gayness in Thailand is a "western borrowing" is misplaced and overlooks the internal structuring of Thai masculinity, from which Thai gay male identity has emerged as a largely continuous development.⁴⁰

I am less convinced that this formulation applies in other countries, where there is probably more of a rupture between traditional and modern forms

of gay identity. Even in the West developments vary from country to country. Vernon Rosario claims that there is a decline in gay consciousness in Paris and a return to the concept of shared citizenship.⁴¹ I would argue that this has always existed (summed up in Foucault's well-known ambivalence about "coming out," an ambivalence that included both personal and political reservations).⁴² A tension between claiming universal rights for individual diversity and claiming communal rights for specific groups is hardly new; few societies are likely to pursue a politically correct solution with the same zeal as Americans have. It is difficult to imagine affirmative action in hiring lesbian/gay faculty becoming a reality in equally rich societies such as Kuwait or Hong Kong.

Thus, a discussion of new or modern homosexualities needs to incorporate the following:

- a sense of the continuing importance of premodern forms of sexual organization. This is also (though less) applicable in the West: what is the film *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* if not a return to older notions of homo-sex/genderfuck/drag as one and the same, a statement that embraces *both* queer *and* pre-gay liberation formations?

- a consideration of whether the movement toward a sense of identity/community is similar or noticeably different for women. To date, several characteristics (e.g., the lower number of visible lesbians and the ambivalent relations between gay men and feminist movements in general) are very similar to those of the West, but such similarities may well disguise larger differences. There is no reason to assume that the current ideology, which constructs a common homosexuality as sufficient to embrace existing differences between women and men, will be adopted in non-Western countries.⁴³

- more sensitivity to class/caste divides. The romantic myth of homosexual identity cutting across class, race, and so on doesn't work in practice any more than it does in the West. The experience of sexuality in everyday life is shaped by such variables as the gap between city and country; ethnic and religious differences; and hierarchies of wealth, education, and age. The idea of a gay or lesbian/gay community assumes that such differences can be subordinated to an overarching sense of sexual identity, a myth that is barely sustainable in comparatively rich and affluent societies (though, hardly surprising, does best in relatively harmonious settings such as the Netherlands).

- the persistence of different family patterns despite growing affluence and apparent Westernization. As Shivananda Khan suggested, "Significant numbers of gay-identified men are apparently repositories of cultural history, teachers of their nephews and nieces in the extended family, holders of family traditions, who perhaps continue to live with their parents and take care of them. . . . The unmarried son/daughter

who may have developed a sexual identity, but places that role within a family structure.”⁴⁴ My interviews with several apparently Westernized gay men in Manila have borne out this pattern as relevant to the Philippines, and Stephen Murray argues that it is a central factor in most developing countries.⁴⁵

■ the complications of the diaspora. Some homosexuals of Asian origin living in the West seem to make no distinction between their situation and that of people back home; thus the introduction to an anthology of gay and lesbian South Asian writing links together “an Indian professor at an Ivy League university, [and] a Pakistani practicing law in Vancouver” with “a married woman who must see her female lover secretly in New Delhi [and] . . . an old man who has lived out a lonely life in a rural village.”⁴⁶ While this seems to me to blur crucial differences, it is also true that some of the most potent gay influences from overseas come from immigrants, whose experiences are often reflected back to their original homelands.⁴⁷

■ the interactions among developing countries themselves. It is misleading to assume that all influences stem from the West (or the North in a somewhat different taxonomy). Thus there are ongoing and close contacts between the new gay organizations of Southeast Asia. Partly because of the resources made available through HIV programs, groups such as Pink Triangle (Malaysia), Library Foundation (Manila), KKLGN (Indonesia), and People Like Us (Singapore) are extremely aware of and interested in each others’ activities. Similar networking exists in Eastern Europe and South America.

Conclusion

The forces of global change (including HIV/AIDS and the surveillance of and interventions into human sexuality it has spawned) means that homosexuality is increasingly interrogated.⁴⁸ This also means that some people will benefit from imposing a Western analytic model to explain sexuality; often they will be Third Worlders with a personal or professional investment in modernity. Traditionalists will respond either by denial (often because of Western-derived moralities) or by seeking to build a nationalist version of homosexuality, with romantic claims to a precolonial heritage which is seen as differentiating them from Western homosexuals. In my own conversations with homosexuals in Asia there is an ongoing ambivalence about the extent to which they are constituting themselves as part of a global identity. As Eduardo Nierras puts it, “When we say to straight people, or, more rarely, to Western gay people, ‘We are like you’ we must remember to add, ‘only different.’”⁴⁹

Clearly what is at work is a complex compound of tradition and modernity, themselves better understood as ideal points on an academic continuum than as descriptions of fixed realities. Gay identities may emerge in different ways and without the overtly political rhetoric of the West. I suspect that gay separatism, for example, as expressed in the creation of “gay ghettos” in major U.S. cities, is likely to be less attractive in many societies, even where the economic preconditions for it seem to exist. This becomes a test of the globalization thesis: new identities may well develop but their development is not predictable through Western experience. On the other hand, the differences are not as great as sometimes claimed (nor should we forget that Western gay life is no more monolithic than non-Western gay life). It is worth remembering Chris Berry’s unspoken comment when a young Chinese man told him: “It is not possible to do whatever you want to do in Chinese culture. It’s not like Australia”:

The writer didn’t mention that he had never felt able to discuss his sexuality with his parents. That he knew 17-year-olds who had committed suicide. That he had been told three out of five calls to the Lesbian and Gay switchboard were from married men. Not because he felt Eddie’s Chinese situation was just the same as other people’s Australian situations, but because he realized Eddie’s situation was Eddie’s alone.⁵⁰

The more I see, the more skeptical I am of sharp divides between Western and non-Western experiences of sexuality, and the surer I become that we cannot discuss sex/gender structures independent of larger socio-political ones. We may well need a political economy of homosexuality, one which recognizes the interrelationships of political, economic, and cultural structures. Far from assuming a linear progression toward a Western-style queerness, this would recognize that the ongoing shifts in sexual identities within Western societies see the playing out of very similar tensions and factors; if we were capable of imagining Thailand or Brazil as the norm and then measuring San Francisco or Sydney against them our sense of what is modern and traditional might be somewhat altered. Most people negotiate numerous models of identity in everyday life, and what might seem paradoxical or contradictory to the observer is no more than evidence of the human ability to constantly reshape him- or herself. Sexuality, like other areas of life, is constantly being remade by the collision of existing practices and mythologies with new technologies and ideologies.

Notes

I am grateful to the Australian Research Council for support, and to a number of people whose ideas have helped me shape this paper, among them Eufracio Abaya, Ben Anderson, Chris Berry, Sandy Gifford, Shivananda Khan, Peter Jackson, Laurence Leong, Alison Murray, Dede Oetomo, Anthony Smith, and Michael Tan.

1. There is very little relevant literature on the internationalization of lesbian identities. But see Alison Murray, *No Money, No Honey* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), and Took Took Thongthiraj, "Toward a Struggle against Invisibility: Love between Women in Thailand," *Amerasia Journal* 20 (1994): 45–58. My own research has largely been concerned with male gay worlds in Southeast Asia, to which I have particular access; while I mention lesbians at various points it is without any illusion of having firsthand knowledge.

2. Christian van Maltzahn, ed., *Spartacus International Gay Guide*, 23d ed. (Berlin: Bruno Gmunder, 1994–95). This is a widely used listing of all commercial and social/political places that cater to any sort of homosexual clientele.

3. See Barry Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 142–43; Ian Lumsden, *Society and the State in Mexico* (Toronto: Canadian Gay Archives, 1991); Edward MacRae, "Homosexual Identities in Transitional Brazilian Politics," in *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America*, ed. Arturo Escobar (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992); and Joao Trevisan, *Perverts in Paradise* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1988).

4. See "Anjaree: Towards Lesbian Visibility," *Nation* (Bangkok), 25 September 1994; Peter Murphy, "Militancy Hits Manila," *Sydney Star Observer*, 25 August 1994; "Newly Out in Japan," *Los Angeles Advocate*, 4 October 1994; and *Report on Emerging Gay Identities in South Asia: Implications for Sexual Health* (London: Naz Project, 1995).

5. On the development of these communities, see Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); and Barry Adam, *Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*.

6. See Frederick Whitam and Robin Mahy, *Male Homosexuality in Four Societies* (New York: Praeger, 1986); and John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

7. Rosalind C. Morris, "Three Sexes and Four Sexualities: Redressing the Discourses on Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Thailand," *positions: east asian cultures critique* 2 (1994): 39.

8. The term is Gail Rubin's. See her "Traffic in Women," in *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review, 1975); and "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge, 1984), 267–319. Compare Rosemary Pringle, "Absolute Sex? Unpacking the Sexuality/Gender Relationship," in *Thinking Sex*, ed. R. W. Connell and G. W. Dowsett (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992), 76–101.

9. Allan Hanson, "The Making of the Maori: Culture Invention and Its Logic," *American Anthropologist* 91 (December 1989): 899.

10. Tobias Schneebaum, *Where the Spirits Dwell* (New York: Grove, 1988), 433.

11. Sereine Steakley, "Brazil Can Be Tough and Deadly for Gays," *Bay Windows* (Boston), 16 June 1994.

12. George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic, 1994), 65.
13. Paul Russell, *Sea of Tranquility* (New York: Dutton, 1994), 231.
14. Benedict Anderson, *Language and Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 278.
15. For a rather uneven survey of the subject see Arno Schmitt and Jehoeda Sofer, *Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Moslem Societies* (New York: Harrington Park, 1992).
16. The literature on Brazil is particularly rich. See, for example, Richard Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions* (Boston: Beacon, 1991); and Rommel Mendes-Leite, "A Game of Appearances: The 'Ambigusexuality' in Brazilian Culture of Sexuality," in *Gay Studies from the French Cultures*, ed. Rommel Mendes-Leite and P. O. de Busscher (New York: Harrington Park, 1993).
17. Shivananda Khan, "The Naz Project (London)," *Quarterly Review* (July–September 1994): 7–8.
18. Gilbert Herdt, ed., *Third Sex, Third Gender* (New York: Zone, 1994), 47.
19. Niko Besnier, "Polynesian Gender Liminality through Time and Space," in Herdt, *Third Sex, Third Gender*, 300.
20. Roger Lancaster, "'That We Should All Turn Queer?' Homosexual Stigma in the Making of Manhood and the Breaking of Revolution in Nicaragua," in *Conceiving Sexuality*, ed. John Gagnon and Richard Parker (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 150.
21. Gayle Rubin with Judith Butler, "Sexual Traffic," *differences* 6 (summer–fall 1994): 96.
22. See Dede Oetomo and Bruce Esmond, "Homosexuality in Indonesia," English version of a paper published in Indonesian in 1990 (private communication).
23. See Peter Jackson, "Kathoeys <Gay> <Man>: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific," in *Sites of Desire/Economies of Pleasure*, ed. Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 1996).
24. Jackson, "Kathoeys <Gay> <Man>"; Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions*, 95.
25. In conversation with the author. See Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, new ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 40.
26. "Gay Life in Pakistan: An Assessment," an unsigned paper made available by the Pakistan AIDS Prevention Society.
27. See Jackson, "Kathoeys <Gay> <Man>."
28. Peter Fry, "Why Brazil Is Different," *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 December 1995, 7. But compare Richard Parker, "'Within Four Walls': Brazilian Sexual Culture and HIV/AIDS," in H. Daniel and Richard Parker, *Sexuality, Politics, and AIDS in Brazil* (London: Falmer, 1993), esp. 73.
29. Stephen Murray and Manuel Arboleda, "Stigma Transformation and Reflexication: 'Gay' in Latin America," in *Male Homosexuality in Central and South America*, ed. S. Murray (New York: gai saber Monograph #5, 1987), 136.
30. This is the (perhaps overstated) argument of Donald Morton. See his "Politics of Queer Theory in the (Post)Modern Moment," *Genders* 17 (fall 1993): 121–50.
31. Kim, "They Aren't That Primitive Back Home," in *A Lotus of Another Color*, ed. Rakesh Ratti (Boston: Alyson, 1993), 94.
32. See Michael Bartos, "Community vs. Population: The Case of Men Who Have Sex with Men," in *AIDS: Foundations for the Future*, ed. Peter Aggleton, Peter Davies, and Graham Hart (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994).

33. See Dennis Altman, "Down Rio Way," in *The Christopher Street Reader*, ed. Michael Denny, Chuck Orleb, and Tom Steele (New York: Coward McCann, 1983), 214–19.
34. Vicente Groyon III, "Boys Who Like Boys," in *Ladlad: An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing*, ed. Neil Garcia and Danton Remoto (Manila: Anvil, 1994), 111.
35. Robert W. Connell, "The Big Picture: Masculinities in Recent World History," *Theory and Society* 22 (1993): 601.
36. Katie King, "Local and Global: AIDS Activism and Feminist Theory," *Camera Obscura* 28 (January 1992): 82.
37. Anne Allison, *Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 80.
38. On gay tourism, see Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Dennis Altman, "Encounters with the New World of 'Gay Asia'", in *Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities: Asian and Pacific Inscriptions*, ed. Survendri Perera (Melbourne: Meridien, 1995), 121–38.
39. Virginia Vargas, "Academics and the Feminist Movement in Latin America," in *Making Connections*, ed. Mary Kennedy, Cathy Lubelska, and Val Walsh (London: Taylor and Francis, 1993), 145.
40. Peter Jackson, "Kathoeys <Gay> <Man>."
41. Vernon Rosario, "Sexual Liberalism and Compulsory Heterosexuality," *Journal of Contemporary French Civilization* 16 (1993): 262–79.
42. This point is discussed in most of the biographies of Foucault. See, for example, David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Hutchinson, 1993).
43. For a Western lesbian view of gay life in Japan that does not recognize the possibilities of these differences see Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 241–46.
44. Private communication, 5 February 1995.
45. Stephen Murray, "The 'Underdevelopment' of Modern/Gay Homosexuality in Mesoamerica," in *Modern Homosexualities*, ed. Ken Plummer (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
46. Rakesh Ratti, Introduction to *A Lotus of Another Color*, 11.
47. There is a growing literature about gay and lesbian Asians in Western countries. For an introduction to the discussion see Dana Takagi, "Maiden Voyage: Excursion into Sexuality and Identity Politics in Asian America," *Amerasia Journal* 20 (1994): 1–18.
48. On the impact of HIV/AIDS on non-Western homosexualities see Dennis Altman, *Power and Community* (London and Philadelphia: Falmer, 1994), passim.
49. Eduardo Nierras, "This Risky Business of Desire: Theoretical Notes for and against Filipino Gay Male Identity Politics," in Garcia and Remoto, *Ladlad: An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing*, 199. The anthology furnishes many examples of this ambivalence.
50. Chris Berry, *A Bit on the Side* (Sydney: emPress, 1994), 64.