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Analysing Sexualities in the Shadow of War: Islam in Iran, the West and the Work of Reimagining Human Rights

We live in the shadow of war. A confrontation between Iran, the United States and Israel, if ignited, would escalate existing violence worldwide and could become nuclear. This situation has been produced in part by the Iranian state, from which President Ahmadinejad proclaims a desire to end the existence of the state of Israel while simultaneously questioning the 'myth' of the Holocaust; in part also, by the history of self-interested, anti-democratic interventions in the Middle East of the USA and other western powers, including support for Israeli oppression of Palestinians; and by the USA's current refusal of diplomatic dialogue alongside military threats against an Iran seeking nuclear technology. Meanwhile Pakistan, which, like Israel, already possesses nuclear weapons, risks falling under the rule of Islamic fundamentalists. All this takes place in the context of culture wars between 'Islam' and 'the West' (both problematically homogenized in dominant representations), which have a long history including the Algerian War (1954–1962) and the Iranian revolution founding the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, but became heightened in focus from 2001 after the events of 9/11. These global culture wars are centrally focused on issues of gender and sexuality.

The discourses of the US and UK governments have come to focus on gender as a central, rather than marginal issue, in tandem with the

ascendancy of 'human rights' in foreign policy discourse. The rights of women have been significant in the discourses of Bush and Blair justifying military interventions, particularly in Afghanistan, and more generally central in challenging Islamic politics. Tony Blair for example has commented that the position on women of Islamic extremists and terrorists is 'reactionary and regressive' – alongside acknowledgement of the Koran as 'way ahead of its time in attitudes to marriage, women and governance' (Blair, 2006) and contemporary progress on women's political rights and education in many Muslim majority states (Blair, 2007). Feminist analysts have noted this centrality of gender (Ware, 2006), interpreting such discourses in the light of 'postcolonial' feminist theorizations of the ways in which representations of 'third world women' as requiring assistance and defence are mobilized in western political discourses (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988). But increasingly it is not only 'women', but sexuality and 'sexual orientation' that are at issue. UK Labour government minister Ian McCartney has recently announced that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is seeking the universal worldwide decriminalization of homosexuality and 'developing a strategy for promoting and protecting the human rights of LGBT people overseas' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2007; similar moves are being made in the Netherlands). This is a very positive development, but it nonetheless creates new paradoxes and tensions, including tensions between emphasis on LGBT human rights abroad and the lack of human rights granted to some LGBT asylum speakers in the UK from states such as Iran (for example in the case of Pegah Emambakhsh, initially declined asylum on grounds that she could not demonstrate she was a lesbian, documented by the Iranian Queer Organization (2007) who criticize the UK government's new international stance in this context). Meanwhile gender and sexuality remain central in defining the Islamic State in Iran, where a recent purge by police is reported by Human Rights Watch to have involved 'arbitrary arrests of thousands of men and women . . . under the banner of "countering immoral behavior"' (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

These political and cultural dynamics are likely to be crucial in shaping sexualities in decades to come. New wars and further violence could further heighten emphasis upon cultural differences, fostering more repressive approaches to women's sexuality and same-sex sexualities in Muslim societies and communities, together with a policing of sexual relationships between Muslims and other groups in the West and worldwide through violence, intimidation and hate – from all sides. Conflicts conducted through economic sanctions regimes such as those currently proposed by the USA against Iran at the United Nations, will directly or indirectly influence the form and extent of globalization, migration, consumption of goods and services related to sexuality, and access to

media, the internet and sexual knowledges, and hence shape societies and cultures globally.

The prominent claims concerning women's sexuality and same-sex sexualities in the discourses of both western liberal interventionists and Islamic governments gives urgency to the task of analysing related aspects of contemporary sexualities in a global context. But while gender and sexual relationships between men and women are being addressed to an extent (e.g. Khan, 2001; Ware, 2006), academic and political attention to the place of same-sex sexualities is less developed (as observed by Shahidian, 1999: 195, who also notes a general lack of research about sexuality among Iranians). One of my 'visions' of the future for research on sexualities is therefore that far more concentrated empirical research and theorization is needed to address such international and transnational dynamics.

Has *Sexualities* addressed such concerns? After ten years I would say there is room for improvement, though no doubt this in large part reflects work submitted and the state of the field of academic work on sexualities, which is less institutionalized in many Islamic states. The journal has had more extensive global coverage than many others, with articles on Ghana, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, for example, and a special issue on Transgender in Latin America (Vol. 1 no. 3); and 'Submissions from outside the rich West' have been expressly sought by the editor (Plummer, 2005). However, articles related to Muslims and Islamic societies have been somewhat limited in number and themes. In 1999 the journal published Hammed Shahidian's 'Gender and Sexuality Among Immigrant Iranians in Canada', a strong piece focusing on heterosexuality (Shahidian, 1999); and Sasho Lambevski's 'Suck my Nation' on relations between Albanian and Macedonian men in Macedonia (Lambevski, 1999). In 2002 the journal published a piece by Gert Hekma, 'Imams and Homosexuality: A Post-Gay Debate in the Netherlands', in a unique 'Topical Issue' section (Hekma, 2002); a more recent article explored gay/*gay* identities in Turkey but gave little comment on religion (Bereket and Adam, 2006). Overall the journal has been good at revealing the disjunctures between actual sexual practice among many Muslims and institutionalized Islamic teachings, but not so strong in critically investigating Islamic texts, law and institutional, political, and international discourses addressing sexualities, or western representations of these (for example, work on Islamic conceptions of sexual and reproductive rights: Obermeyer, 1995). Work addressing religion by researchers from within states with majority Muslim populations is a notable absence.

Part of the problem is that the field of Sexuality Studies emerged in sociology, particularly from its relationship to psychology and biomedicine, as a distinct and narrow specialism, carved out in the tradition

of scientific objectivity established by figures such as Kinsey. While feminism and gay liberationism sought to link sexualities to wider power structures in society, particularly of gender, counter-veiling tendencies from the McDonaldization of academic production and the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) culture in the UK risk inhibiting attempts to link sexualities to international and multi-dimensional debates over the global geo-politics of religion, racism, ethnicity and colonialism. Yet there is an even more limited engagement with sexualities in forums for debate over 'race' and multiculturalism such as the journals *Ethnicities* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, or in the field of International Relations (e.g. in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* or the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*). Nevertheless it must be acknowledged that despite important contributions by writers such as Petchesky (2000), a major gap in existing sexualities research is the study of international and transnational relationships between 'the West' and 'Islamic societies', particularly through the study of international governmental organizations and governance; international non-governmental organizations; and 'global civil society' – the scope and nature of which is hotly contested (Kaldor, 2003; Keane, 2003).

Let me be more specific. Western LGBT movements have developed international LGBT organizations, such as the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, which have adopted a focus on human rights to campaign at an international level. They have also successfully influenced mainstream human rights NGOs such as Amnesty International to address LGBT human rights. On the other hand, many postcolonial states have constructed new anti-colonial nationalist ideologies which are patriarchal and stigmatize same-sex sexualities (see for example essays by M. Jacqui Alexander on Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas, Chetan Bhatt on Hindu nationalism in India, and Oliver Phillips on Zimbabwe all in Weeks et al., 2003). This has also been the case in Iran following the 1979 Islamic revolution (contrary to the view of Foucault, who unwisely suggested the Islamic revolution could be interpreted as an expression of the 'general will': Foucault, 1988). From such analyses, and other postcolonial or critical analyses from the Global South, it becomes clear that representations of formerly colonized states as lacking human rights in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity need to be interpreted with reference to critiques of global racism, Orientalism (Said, 1978) and various cultural hierarchies. Some suggest that western LGBT human rights organizations inappropriately universalize western cultural norms. Even where 'human rights' in relation to allowing same-sex relationships are accepted, some may question the reliance of such organizations upon, for example, the concepts 'Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender' to frame human rights claims, in the light of the cultural specificity of such concepts

(e.g. Saiz, 2004: 65–8). But it is necessary to both empirically research whether or to what extent use of such concepts persists, and also to theorize from this, to determine the implications for broader cultural analyses and global politics. Where is the research doing this international analysis to facilitate critical interventions in contemporary debates and conflicts?

These absences are largely a consequence of the nature of politics and international relations as disciplines – particularly the latter. This is despite the growth of feminist international relations, which still tends to lack attention to sexuality (Sylvester, 2001; Steans, 2006). Related work certainly is emerging in transnational cultural studies and interdisciplinary global feminist and women's studies and postcolonial studies, and it would be good if more of this would find its way into the pages of *Sexualities*. But typically this captures cultural dynamics and the agency of grassroots social movements without focusing in detail on political institutions and governance, or upon the crucially influential work of international non-governmental organizations, often mediated by a discourse of human rights. If the central place of sexualities in the global culture wars is to be taken seriously, understood and transformed, then we need much more detailed empirical work on mediating international and transnational social processes.

For example: Human Rights Watch is a global human rights organization based in New York. In recent years it has developed an LGBT Rights Program, the Director of which is Scott Long. Alongside the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (US-based), the International Lesbian and Gay Association, Amnesty International and others, Human Rights Watch has taken an increasingly prominent role in campaigning for LGBT human rights globally. In this context it might potentially be a prime target for critics of cultural imperialism. But what emerges from empirical study?

As someone born and raised in the UK, of no religion and racialized as White, I have been following and analysing the approach of Human Rights Watch via its website (<http://www.hrw.org/>), press releases, and communications via the Euro-Queer Email list. The Euro-Queer list is a crucial European political communication network for campaigns against discrimination, hosted by Queernet, a project of the Online Policy Group which provides 'free online services for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer, questioning and allies, HIV/AIDS, sexual and gender rights, and leather/S&M communities' [<http://www.queernet.org/>]. Anybody who registers with QueerNet Groups can browse mailing list message archives, and hence verify the data drawn upon later in this essay, from email exchanges in June, July and August 2007.

Recent months have seen reports of purges emerging from Iran (Human Rights Watch, 2007), including suggestions in US newspaper the *New York*

Times that some of the individuals targeted may have been so due to involvement in same-sex sexual behaviour, or related identifications. This led to Human Rights Watch being asked to verify such claims. However Human Rights Watch initially declined to state that those men involved were being targeted due to 'homosexuality' pending investigations in Iran. The organization emphasized that the accusations being made in Iran were framed as accusations of '*lavat*' – a concept which, similarly to 'sodomy' in the English speaking world, can encompass both consensual and non-consensual activity.

Following inquiries, Jessica Stern, a researcher for the LGBT Rights Program of Human Rights Watch reported seeking a conversation with Nazila Fathi the *New York Times* reporter, and that Fathi 'was not at the press conference where the judiciary's spokesperson presented information about these cases', hence:

the evidence does not support a conclusion that this was a conviction based on sexual orientation or consensual gay sex. I'm unaware of any reliable information about the alleged victims. (Stern, 2007)

Human Rights Watch, and specifically the Director of its LGBT Rights Program Scott Long, were then criticized on the Euro-Queer list by a number of individuals – including Brett Lock, associated with the UK Queer activist group Outrage! – for failing to provide information to the western press and LGBT campaigners to support criticism of the Iranian state for human rights abuses against homosexuals (see queernet.org, 2007 emails from Rex Wockner, Brian Miller, Brett Lock and Hossein Alizadeh, all 13 July 2007). This occurred in the context of broader tensions and antagonisms on the list over a longer period between Human Rights Watch and other organizations and contributors, but (I would emphasize) engagement with the various issues raised is not my purpose here.

In a later email responding to critics on 14 July 2007, Scott Long commented:

the fact is that all stories in the Iranian press have described this in terms that state or strongly imply it was a case of rape, and reports from people who know the accused have given at least circumstantial suggestions likewise. This hardly means that rape (or according to reports, multiple rapes) definitely was the charge. (Nor obviously does it imply they are in fact guilty of it.) However there hasn't been a single indication that it was a charge of consensual homosexual conduct, and at Human Rights Watch we are not going to say that in the absence of evidence . . . Human Rights Watch is in no more position than anyone else now to make some grand determination as to whether this is a case involving consensual homosexual conduct among other charges, or whether the men were 'gay' . . . If we assume every rape charge in Iran to be a case of consensual *lavat* or consensual sex, we will be mobilizing every day or hour in defense of every accused rapist. (Long, 2007a)

Several observations can be made from examining these comments and surrounding exchanges. First, it is apparent that Human Rights Watch is not unthinkingly applying western cultural categories such as 'homosexuality' in its interpretation of sexualities in Iran. On the contrary, the exchanges suggest that the emphasis upon the cultural specificity of sexualities and related discourses and representations, which is characteristic in sociological and interdisciplinary critical academic research on sexualities, is informing the practice of this human rights organization. The disjuncture between '*lavat*' and 'homosexuality' is carefully addressed. Indeed further, it is apparent from the exchanges that in the light of repeated experiences and successive disputes, Human Rights Watch has institutionalized procedures to ensure it obtains appropriate evidence and attempts to interpret this through specific contextual prisms of language and cultural meaning. A key example of one such institutional procedure is that Human Rights Watch will not endorse media reports of anti-homosexual or anti-gay persecution until it has obtained evidence from within the state concerned that same-sex behaviour or identities are indeed at issue, understood in the light of the specific conceptual languages used in law and in political discourses in different societies. (For further evidence see e.g. Scott Long's letter to Mrs M.C.F. Verdonk, Minister of Alien Affairs and Integration, Ministry of Justice, The Netherlands, which includes detailed quotation of Iranian law on *lavat* and other concepts – Long, 2006). Moreover, and relatedly, it is clear that Human Rights Watch's approach to sexual orientation issues is developed with a consciousness of women's human rights and children's human rights issues and agendas, such that the possibility of '*lavat*' labelling rape of women or children is a central consideration alongside the possibility of it labelling consensual same-sex behaviour.

In these exchanges, ongoing at time of writing, Outrage! (on which see: Lucas, 1998; petertatchell.net, 2007) also acknowledged the specificity of *lavat*, but struck a different emphasis, with Peter Tatchell arguing: 'the Iranian government, courts and state media cannot be trusted when they say that people have been executed for rape, kidnapping, sodomy, hooliganism and other acts of criminality. We should never take such claims at face value and always maintain a healthy scepticism towards any charges made by the tyrants in Tehran' (Tatchell, 2007). Scott Long made a lengthy response on 27 August 2007, emphasizing that Human Rights Watch does not take Iranian government claims 'at face value', and stressing the importance of evidence (Long, 2007b).

My purpose here is not to arbitrate or judge these ongoing disputes over sources of evidence and strategy; rather it is only to demonstrate briefly a considerable sophistication in the approach to interpretation of evidence being adopted by Human Rights Watch as an important human rights

non-governmental organization, even if generalizing to other human rights NGOs is problematic. Analysed in the context of contemporary academic debates over the character of the international politics of sexuality, and related transnational social movements and organizations, the evidence here challenges those who depict western human rights discourse, LGBT human rights movements and related organizations as imposing cultural categories of sexuality out of context. It suggests that rather than seeing western-based human rights organizations as the vanguard of a globalizing lesbian and gay identity politics, in fact human rights organizations may be considerably more sensitive to cultural differences and problematic translation processes than national or sub-national LGBT organizations, or individuals influenced by western lesbian and gay culture and politics in the context of globalization (on which see e.g. Binnie, 2004).

It would seem that Human Rights Watch's LGBT Program is engaged in and committed to a profoundly difficult 'politics of translation', in which empirical research and critical thinking on the form of sexual behaviour and meanings in different settings is inherent. Such human rights organizations, furthermore, appear to be crucial players in mediating the understandings of sexuality appearing in the western media. Given their central position of mediation and/or translation in conflicts over meaning, empirical research on these organizations is likely to yield important insights. Yet in contemporary academic research, international NGOs working on same-sex sexualities continue to lack sustained empirical study. Academics need to recognize, document and validate the sophistication of some of the work occurring in international NGOs, such that informed criticism is possible.

Ken Plummer, editor of *Sexualities*, has emphasized a desire for the journal to publish articles on the 'lived experience' of sexualities rather than only about 'discourses, narratives, representations, stories' (Plummer, 2005: 5). There is certainly a need for an academic space for such work, including detailed empirical studies of sexual practices and relationships, and my suggestion of developing work on international non-governmental organizations is, to a degree, in tension with this. But we do need to recognize that the reason that work on political governance, movements and discourses, and sexual or intimate citizenship have appeared, developed and persisted in *Sexualities* (founded as an interdisciplinary social science/cultural studies-based journal from a Department of Sociology) is because the disciplines of politics and (especially) international relations remain so impervious to analyses of sexualities. As long as these exclusionary disciplines remain so unreconstructed, it is vital that there is a space for developing work on sexualities in global civil society, international governance and international organizations. Alongside this, there is a need for more research from within societies such as

Iran where there has previously been less sexualities work, and more translation and reading in the West of work that already exists. In the current global political context the need for such work on the politics of dialogue and translation becomes more urgent.

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