

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE GLOBAL CULTURE WARS

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In November 2013, IKEA withdrew a page, from its online Russian catalogue, depicting a family of two women and their baby in their happy home. The image was part of a global campaign by the Swedish mega-home store that re-imagines the kind of families inhabiting its warm, Nordic interiors. It was a timely reappraisal, by the company, of its market. But, in a neat illustration of the way new global trends come up against local realities, IKEA felt it had to keep its Russian families traditional, for fear of being exposed to charges of 'gay propaganda' – now illegal in the Federation – and, perhaps, of antagonising a homophobic market.

At the same time that IKEA edited its Russian campaign, a television programme was aired on federal television, purporting to be an investigation into 'LGBT rights'¹ but actually articulating, in very crude terms, the Kremlin's position on the matter. The programme, hosted by Arkady Mamontov, was called 'Play Actors', suggesting that LGBT activists were playing their role so they could draw their salaries from their Western paymasters. As part of its 'investigation', the programme bugged – or, more likely, used the state intelligence service's recordings of – a private meeting of LGBT activists in St Petersburg, hosted by George Soros' Open Society Foundations. The meeting, which I attended, was in fact convened to strategise how to make the most of the Sochi Moment, and of the unprecedented upsurge of interest, particularly in the United States, in the plight of Russian LGBT people.

At one point in 'Play Actors' we hear a Russian LGBT activist at the meeting thanking Western donors for their support; at another, someone talks about possible 'actions' at Sochi, including that of LGBT-sympathetic athletes holding hands in the opening ceremony. Listening to this, the St Petersburg deputy Vitaly Milonov – a studio guest on the programme – explodes into rage. Milonov, a member of Putin's United Russia party, had been the first to suggest gay propaganda legislation; he is perhaps Russia's most outspoken homophobic elected official. If athletes held hands at the opening ceremony, he fumed on air, "I am not going to let my children watch the Olympics on television!"

This drew a very sharp response from Maria Arbatova, the celebrated feminist writer, the only voice of reason on the show: "Throw your TV away!" she jeered. "Let your children remain completely ignorant about the world!"²

In this interchange is encapsulated the terms of a battle currently being fought: in Arkady Mamontov's studio, in IKEA's advertising department – and globally: Arbatova, the cosmopolitan intellectual, has embraced the inevitable process of globalisation; Milonov, the fearful provincial, is trying to protect his children from the consequences of this process.

On one level, this conversation is as old as the Oscar Wilde indecency trial, or the moral panic against homosexuals in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, when Stalin recriminalised sodomy after a raid on several homosexual venues in Moscow. Explaining the move in *Pravda*, the Kremlin's lapdog intellectual, Maxim Gorky, described homosexuality as a symptom of the "capitalist disease", along with adolescent violence and the opening of the first pet-food store in England. While homosexuality was understood as "the corruption of youth" and duly punished in the Soviet Union, it was allowed to run riot in the capitalist West: the proletariat needed to "crush, like an elephant", this "immoral minority", so as to be able to set up "a truly ethical system" (Essig, 1999, p. 6).

How different is this language, really, from that of people like Vitaly Milonov, or the African leaders who, in the last few years, have sought to criminalise homosexuality even further? Listen, for example, to David Mark, the leader of the Nigerian Senate, and the man responsible for that country's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, passed in early 2014: "There are many good values we can copy from other societies but certainly not this one", he said; his legislation would "prove to the rest of the world, who are advocates of this unnatural way, that we Nigerians promote and respect sanity, morality and humanity."³ Both Gorky and Mark are setting themselves up, across the expanse of the 20th Century, as custodians of tradition and morality, against the juggernaut of Western liberal capitalism.

Nonetheless, what makes the conversation new, in the 21st Century, is the very reach of globalisation, and the speed with which ideas blow across this planet: not just the ineluctable spread of human rights culture and advocacy, but the information revolution and the social media explosion; unprecedented urbanisation and industrialisation, economic migrancy and global tourism; global commodity culture and multinational corporatism (Appadurai, 2001). The conversation about sexuality has thus, itself, become global, and it is changing the world dramatically, as it compels people to talk about things that have traditionally been hidden from view or unspoken: the range of sexual practices beyond that of heterosexuality and the range of gender identities beyond, or between, the male-female binary. As the global debate about Russia's treatment of LGBT people demonstrated in the run-up to the Sochi Winter Olympics, this conversation has opened up one of the deepest, and most unanticipated, ideological clefs of the 21st Century.

The conversation is a global one, although – like IKEA's campaign – it has local, or regional, accents. In countries like the United States and France, it is about what a family looks like and who has the right to make one. In countries like Russia, and in many African states, the conversation is about more basic rights to freedom of association and safety from violence and discrimination. In much of South Asia and Latin America, the conversation now encompasses discussion about gender, and about a person's rights to change the categories of male and female, or to live between them. In the Arab world, the conversation is just beginning, as a budding LGBT movement attempts to change language itself with new value-neutral terminology, while Islamists suggest that same-sex marriage is the inevitable consequence of secularism. Meanwhile, in countries such as South Africa and Brazil, where same-sex marriage is legal, the conversation is about the gap between legal rights and social acceptance. In all these places, precisely because the conversation is new, it is vibrant and often violent, as conservative forces in many societies blow back against the inevitable consequences of globalisation. It is a conversation sparked by IKEA and Google, by *Will & Grace* and Facebook, as much as it is by the policy-makers in the US State Department, the technocrats at the UN High Commission for Human Rights, and the activists on the frontline. Policy advocacy and activism is just one part of the puzzle – and perhaps an even smaller part than it was in previous major global social revolutions, such as the Women's Movement or the Civil Rights Movement – precisely *because* of the power and reach of globalisation.

One of the sharpest examples of this dynamic is offered by the small central African country Malawi, where – in December 2009 – two men performed a public engagement ceremony, which hit the local press under the heading ‘Gays Engage!’⁴ One of the two, Tiwonge Chimbalanga, actually identifies as a woman, but because she and her fiancé, Steven Monjeza, were both born male, the State felt compelled to prosecute them, using the anti-sodomy provisions of the Penal Code which had been inherited from the British, and which had never previously been used against two consenting adults. In a sensational trial that all but brought the country to a halt, the two were found guilty of ‘carnal knowledge against the order of nature’ and sentenced to fourteen years’ hard labour. An international outcry ensued, with threats of the withdrawal of development aid; the country’s president, Bingu wa Mutharika, eventually pardoned Chimbalanga and Monjeza after a visit by the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon. Still, rather than decriminalising homosexuality, his government chose to extend criminal sanction to women, too. This action played the key role in prompting the United States’ Millennium Challenge Corporation, which disburses US Congress money, to suspend a \$3 billion power-infrastructure grant to the country. The grant was reinstated when Mutharika died in 2012, and his successor, Joyce Banda, promised to review the legislation, and declared a moratorium on prosecutions.

Even as Mutharika pardoned Monjeza and Chimbalanga, he was uncompromising in his disapproval: “These men have dishonoured our culture, and dishonoured our religion, and acted against our laws.”⁵ A few months later, addressing an audience in his native chiChewa, he said unequivocally that Western donors had “sent” the two to get married, to test Malawi’s laws.⁶ Both the prosecution and other government ministers had levelled this claim, but there was no evidence to substantiate it: the two celebrants had nothing to do with Malawi’s gay community or its budding LGBT rights movement and were acting entirely independently, spurred by their own longings and by having internalised some of the messages of liberation and possibility abreast in the world, possibly through South African television, which is broadcast by satellite in Malawi. But these messages had clashed with another set, being beamed across the continent by Pentecostal Christian missionaries, referring increasingly back to the Bible to condemn the ‘abomination’ of homosexuality: leading the charge against the accused were clerics who – like Mutharika himself – were calling homosexuality ‘ungodly’ and ‘un-African’ in the same breath, conveniently forgetting that the sanction of homosexuality had been brought to the continent by the double-act of Christianity and colonialism.

Much of the content in the African Christian condemnation of homosexuality was, in fact, shaped and formed in the United States, where, for three decades already, conservative politicians have been using the Bible and deploying such messages in the quest for political power. This triggered what was known, in the United States, as the ‘Culture Wars’. Political Christianity has its roots, specifically, in right-wing Republican Party politics, from the McCarthy witch-hunts through Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush; the Tea Party is its latest incarnation. This political movement found its political foothold as a function of the Cold War, as a bulwark against ‘godless Communists’ abroad and their fellow-travellers back home. If American political Christianity was instrumentalised against countries like

Cuba and the Soviet Union in its first wave, it was domesticated in the second, against the liberal 'bleeding-heart' establishment, which – particularly in the 60s eras of John F Kennedy and Lyndon B Johnson – seemed set on the course dismantling not only racial supremacism but gender supremacism too, with its seeming embrace of feminism: employment equity, the pill, abortion rights, and finally gay rights.

These would become the signal issues of a right-wing political Christian agenda, a counter-trend to what might be called the 'Harvey Milk impulse' of the same era: the way 'special interest groups' such as women and gay people or ethnic minorities such as African-Americans or Latinos began to use their voting power. If political Christianity exerted itself on the conservative Republican Party, then identity-politics exerted itself on the liberal Democratic Party, and the United States cleaved into 'red' states (the colour of the GOP) and 'blue' ones (the colour of the Democratic party). Thus began the American 'Culture Wars', and the division of the United States – seemingly intractably – into a 'blue' crust along the coasts and the Great Lakes district, and a 'red' hinterland everywhere else. As is evident in today's Tea Party rhetoric, the 'reds' cast themselves as outsiders, holding on to 'family values', manning the barricades against a godless urban liberal establishment, characterised by Hollywood on the West Coast and the Washington bureaucracy and the *New York Times* on the East.

In 2009, the Zambian theologian Kapya Koama wrote a path breaking study of what he coined 'the Global Culture Wars': the way that the American religious right was making up for lost ground back home by taking its mission abroad. Koama demonstrated, convincingly, how American religious leaders such as Lou Engel, Rick Warren and Scott Lively were behind the vicious anti-gay legislation in Uganda (Kaoma, 2009).

If the second wave of American right-wing political Christianity was the domestication of its agenda, then its third wave has been in the export of these 'values' globally again, now that political conservatives have lost the war – have lost souls, in their language – at home. All evidence in the United States suggests that the clash over LGBT rights – and marriage equality in particular – is a generational one rather than an ideological one: the Republican Party's own polling has shown that a majority of its own young supporters are in favour of marriage equality. In such a world, argue Kaoma and others, the ideologues are doing exactly what the Victorian missionaries did in the late 19th Century when the Industrial Revolution seemed to be drawing people away from the church: seeking souls elsewhere. And so, writes Kaoma, this second wave of missionaries is "globalising the culture wars": as the West liberalises, they are bringing a new ideological code to the developing world – and particularly to Africa.

It is no coincidence that the notion of 'LGBT rights' is spreading globally at the exact moment that old boundaries are collapsing in the era of the digital revolution, global commodity culture and mass migration. The collapse of these boundaries has meant the rapid global spread of ideas about sexual equality – and, at the very same time, a dramatic reaction by conservative forces, by states and religious groups, who fear the inevitable loss of control that this process threatens.

The 'LGBT rights' movement is itself a vector of this globalisation. For the Indian elites in the entertainment and business sectors who rallied behind the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the early 21st Century, this was something to celebrate: by shucking off the legacy of the British Penal Code many years after the former colonial master itself had done so, India would declare its status as a global player; supporting 'LGBT rights' became nothing less than a fetish of modernity. Similarly, in November 2013, the Vietnamese government urged legislators to consider, objectively, how the world's mores were changing when voting on whether to allow same sex marriages.

For Russians of the Milonov and Mamatov ilk, on the other hand – as for Bingu wa Mutharika and many other Africans and Afro-Caribbeans – a rejection of 'LGBT rights' has become the standard with which to fly all one's grievances about contemporary global iniquities, cultural and economic. It has become the global rallying call for a retreat, back, into the comfort of 'the family' and 'the nation' and 'traditional values' at a time when all seem under threat.

This has a troubling new global equation come into play: the more rights are gained by sexual minorities in some parts of the world, the stronger the backlash against them in others. In the very week that Queen Elizabeth II signed into law the Same-Sex Marriage Act in July 2013, making the United Kingdom the thirteenth country to do so, the Nigerian Congress passed draconian anti-LGBT legislation, also called the '*Same-Sex Marriage Act*'. The act prescribes mandatory sentences of fourteen years for any kind of 'homosexual behaviour', and compels neighbours, colleagues and family members to turn in homosexuals. No activist in Nigeria has so much as mentioned wanting same-sex marriage: the act was cynically pre-emptive, drawing a rhetorical line in the sand against the West as it claimed to inoculate the society against future 'infection'.

By the end of 2014, seventy-six countries still outlawed 'homosexual conduct', most doing so with the old colonial British Penal Code, and six punished it with death. Fifteen countries legalised same-sex marriage, or were in the process of doing so. At the same time, at least ten countries – including Russia and Nigeria – were looking to strengthen their legislation, or recriminalise homosexuality, in reaction. If agents such as the American religious right are, indeed, 'globalising the culture wars', can we say, by extension, that the 'Culture Wars' have gone global – that the world is dividing into 'red states' and 'blue states', much as the United States did in the latter decades of the 20th Century? Is there a global blue team and a red one, each with its own shock-teams and advance troops: militant Christian and Muslim missionaries in red, and development-aid agencies and global human rights NGOs in blue? And if so, are these 'Culture Wars' proxy-wars in the way the Cold War was in a previous era, being battled by actors from the Global North over the bodies and territories of people from the Global South?

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It is useful to look at the way these 'Culture Wars' have played out, in the African context specifically, as a consequence of the AIDS epidemic. Conservative American evangelicals gained a foothold in some African countries thanks to the policies of George W Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which prioritised 'faith-based' HIV-programming, including the preaching of abstinence over the distribution of condoms. This gave American evangelicals an entrée into countries such as Uganda and empowered an entire generation of conservative Christian organisations in East Africa.

In contrast, the largely-liberal establishment aid agencies — particularly those from Northern Europe — strongly pushed an agenda of LGBT rights. This was not just for reasons of equality, but because of the growing evidence that one of the major vectors of HIV-transmission in African societies is 'men who have sex with men' (MSM): precisely those men who do not call themselves 'gay' but who practice homosexual sex. This empowered gay communities in many African countries, who were able to use the public-health portal to begin organising and mobilising.

The AIDS epidemic only heightened many African countries' dependence on the West and in this context there was a new impetus to fight the 'neocolonialism' of development aid. And so, as many Africans become increasingly uncomfortable with their countries' dependence on the West, they looked to find a place to put their pride; they might be poor, but at least they have values! In all the world's global indicators of wellbeing, they can at least lead one: morality. What better way to maintain popular support than through the scapegoating of an unpopular minority in the name of a battle against Western decadence?

Western threats to withdraw aid if the rights of sexual minorities were not respected only seemed to fuel such indignation, and the debate reached something of a fever-pitch on the continent when the British premier, David Cameron, said in November 2011 at that year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting that continued aid to African countries would be conditional on "adhering to proper human rights" and that respect for LGBT rights was "one of the things that determines our aid policy."⁷ Shortly thereafter, the American president Barack Obama issued a presidential memorandum that set the advocacy of LGBT rights as a major foreign policy objective. In the case of Malawi, donor pressure had a clear effect on the lives of Chimalanga and Monjeza, and the suspension of aid had the beneficial effect of President Banda's government's declaration of a moratorium on prosecution and a review of the legislation (the latter never happened). But at the same time, it further tainted local LGBT activists with the slur of being 'foreign agents', more interested in their own well-being than the health of the country.

In Eastern Europe and the countries the former Soviet Union the battle-cry against Western 'neo-imperialism' might be similar, but the terms are different. Here, the 'pro-gay' bogeyman is the European Union (EU), which requires countries wanting to join the club to commit to Western European human rights norms, including equality for sexual minorities. In Poland, the Kascynski twins who ruled their country from 2005 to 2010 built their anti-European, nationalist Law and Justice Party in no small part through the demonisation of that country's budding LGBT movement. In Hungary, long considered one of the more tolerant of the Eastern European nations, a 2012 constitutional amendment that outlawed same-sex marriage was a sop to nationalists who blamed

European accession for the country's economic crisis. And in 2013, as Ukraine wrestled with whether to join the European Union or Russia's new customs union – the prelude to the 2014 Ukraine war – LGBT rights became one of the primary political footballs. Billboards appeared all over Kiev showing same-sex stick figures holding hands: "Association with the EU means same-sex marriage", the slogan read. Most recently, in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has adopted anti-gay propaganda legislation that mirrors the Russian laws.

Both the Ukrainian anti-EU campaign and the Kyrgyz anti-gay propaganda lobby were funded by Russian proxies, and seem to be part of a Kremlin foreign policy agenda that the commentator Owen Matthews (2014) has dubbed a 'Conservative Comintern': an attempt by Russia to re-establish its international influence by setting its value system against that of the decadent West. The Russian president Vladimir Putin made this agenda explicit in a December 2013 *State-of-the-Nation* address, in which he asserted Russia's defence of "traditional values" against the liberal Western trend of recognising "everyone's right to the freedom of consciousness, political views and privacy", a trend, he said, which accepted "without question the equality of good and evil." If a defence against this perversion was "conservatism", Putin was willing to own that tag: "the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state."⁸

Putin seems to want to apply social conservatism as an adhesive to bond the countries of the former Soviet Union together again, in a new sphere of Russian influence. In the Russophone world of the former Soviet Union, the levers being pulled are both the soft ones of propaganda – Russia's formidable state-run federal media, for example, which has a reach all over the former Soviet empire – and the harder ones of threats to withhold trade and, particularly, energy resources.

If the regional battlefields of these 'Global Culture Wars' have been sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe, they have been rehearsed on a global level at the United Nations. In 2008, France and the Netherlands proposed a resolution to the UN General Assembly on the LGBT rights that was sponsored by 96 member states and opposed by 57, led by the Arab nations. At this point, neither the United States nor Russia voted. Since 2000, the General Assembly's terms of reference for a Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Killings had included the words 'sexual orientation' as one of the categories to be investigated, but in 2010 the Arab nations successfully led a motion to drop these words. Since then, pro-LGBT rights nations have twice tried, unsuccessfully, to get the words re-inserted.

But it has been in the Human Rights Council (HRC) of the General Assembly, a 46-member structure which sits in Geneva, where the debate has been most intense, and contentious. Precisely because the difference of opinion on LGBT rights seemed to cleave into a 'West versus the Rest' divide, the European and North American states stepped back at the HRC, and the lead was taken by South Africa and Brazil, both of which have very strong domestic protections for these rights. After initially leading an

African initiative to prevent the issue from being discussed at the HRC in 2011, South Africa bowed to internal pressure from the human rights community back home, and proposed a resolution that noted with 'grave concern' the violations of human rights due to 'sexual orientation and gender identity', mandating the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to conduct further study into matter.⁹

The HRC is an eccentric structure: member-countries of the United Nations General Assembly rotate annually through its 46 seats, and so it is by no means an accurate bellwether of the full global geo-political breakdown. But in July 2011, the South African resolution co-sponsored with Brazil resolution, was passed by 23 votes to 19, with three abstentions. In the 'yes' camp were the United States, the United Kingdom, several other European countries (including Ukraine), many Latin American countries (including Cuba), and two Asian countries, Thailand and South Korea. Apart from Russia, the 'no' votes came entirely from Muslim and African countries; China was one of the abstentions. Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner, reported back the following year, affirming the gravity of the situation, globally, for sexual minorities: at the core of her report was a reassertion of the Vienna Declaration of 1993, adopted by consensus by 171 member states, which subordinates local or regional cultural or traditional norms to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Russia's retort to Resolution 17/19, and to the Pillay report, was to propose a counter-declaration mandating the council to reappraise the relationship between traditional values and universal human rights: this, too, was passed.

The issue seemed deadlocked. South Africa retreated, surprised by the fervour of its fellow-African states, and nursing its own geo-political ambitions in a very 'red' part of the world. Brazil, too, backed off, perhaps because of the growth of right-wing political Pentecostal Christianity in the country. And so the 'LGBT rights' mantle seemed to fall once more to the West, and specifically to the United States, which under President Barack Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – and no doubt spurred by domestic politics – replaced the smaller northern European countries, just by virtue of its size, as the leading global exponent of LGBT equality. Global consciences were pricked, particularly, by the trial of Stephen Monjeza and Tiwonge Chimbalanga in 2011: towards the end of that year, Obama told the United Nations General Assembly that "no country should deny people their rights because of who they love, which is why we must stand up for the rights of gays and lesbians everywhere",¹⁰ and at the end of that year Clinton told the Human Rights Council that "LGBT rights are human rights, and human rights are LGBT rights".¹¹

Six months later, in June 2013, Russia passed its federal anti-gay propaganda law. International protest grew, in the run-up to the Sochi Olympics, as protesters in the West protested the new 'evil empire', and Americans began to speak of Russian gays and lesbians as the 'new refuseniks', needing Western intervention as much as Soviet Jews had in a previous era. Putin, in turn, responded with his December 2013 State-of-the-Nation address, and his media proxies ran programming such as Arkady Mamontov's 'Play Actors', which alleged that Russia's LGBT activists were 'playing' at being gay so they could draw foreign salaries from the West. Thus did the global Culture Wars seem to edge closer to being a new Cold War as Russia and the United States squared off, once more.

In early 2014, the presidents of Nigeria and Uganda, Goodluck Jonathan and Yoweri Museveni, respectively signed into law their countries' anti-gay laws. Both had been expected to veto the laws, but neither seemed able to stand up to the 'Western stooge' slur that would have been levelled against them by many in their constituencies. At the United Nations, the Western countries – and the United States in particular – seemed more determined than ever to pass a further resolution on sexuality and gender identity. This time, they found very strong allies in a quartet of Latin American countries – Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Uruguay – who drove a resolution condemning violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, which was passed by 25 votes to 14, with 7 abstentions. Once more, all the 'no' votes – with the exception of Russia – came from African or Muslim states. But the 'yes' camp now included not only all the Western and Latin American countries sitting on the Council, but four Asian countries too: the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea and Japan. (Although it stepped back from leading the initiative, South Africa was the only African country to vote 'yes'.) Equally as significant, Russia – no doubt having done its own polling – chose not to reintroduce, and reinforce, its 'traditional values' initiative.

The resolution was mild: it did not set into place any kind of regular report-back mechanism on the status of LGBT rights, but simply mandated the High Commissioner of Human Rights to compile another report. This was done to ensure South Africa's 'yes' vote, and – very significantly – India's abstention. China abstained too, as it always has on the issue. As long as its citizens remain economically productive and politically passive, it does not care how they meet their libidinal needs. And as long as China's African clients continue to provide markets and resources, it does not interfere – as the West is perceived to do – with the way these countries see fit to control their own citizens. Still, 'Confucian Family Values' governs China, and even if millions of young people are moving to the city and joining vast new gay communities away from the strictures of the family, they are still expected to marry and procreate. Given China's one-child policy, the pressure is particularly intense: you might be gay or lesbian, but you are your family's only route into the future.

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The dramatic growth of urban gay communities in China, as in India and in Russia, further proves a thesis that was argued two decades ago by the American historian John D'Emilio (1993): that Western industrial capitalism enabled the development of gay and lesbian communities, by uncoupling individual workers from family and fealty. As people moved out of feudal society and into the economy of the city, they began practising a form of personal autonomy. They became valued as much for their productivity as their reproductivity, and they earned the space – literally as well as figuratively – to assert their rights to privacy. This seems to be, almost precisely, what is happening in Asia's megacities today, even if not, yet, in Africa's ones, outside of South Africa.

If Western European sexologists first established the categories of 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' in the late 19th Century, these became not only fixed into identities but politicised during the course of the 20th Century. It was in this bourgeois milieu, with its liberal democratic system, that that profound shift took place: sexuality stopped being simply a form of behaviour ("I sleep with men", "I sleep with women") and became a mark of identity ("I am gay"; "I am straight"). With such an identity marker you could not only gather with others like you, as in Oscar Wilde's days, but you could claim rights on this basis, as in Harvey Milk's: if enough of you banded together, you could even wield political power, in the way that other minorities and special interest groups already did, particularly in the United States.

Nativists from Africa and Eastern Europe might be misguided – or simply disingenuous – when they claim that homosexuality is a Western import. But the concept of 'gay identity' is indeed a Western construct, the result of the capitalist development and liberal identity politics of the Western 20th century. When Museveni signed Uganda's anti-gay legislation into law in February 2014 (it was subsequently struck down, on procedural grounds by the Ugandan Constitutional Court), he was thus not incorrect when he said that the difference between the West and Africa is that "we keep quiet about it".¹²

Museveni's formulation is more sophisticated than that of brash African homophobes, such as Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe or Gambia's Yehya Jammeh, who deny the very existence of homosexuality in African society. The Ugandan president acknowledges that homosexuals exist – and even always have – in his domain, but that they do not talk publicly about it: in this context, any attempt to encourage them to speak out and claim communal identity or rights on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is a form of 'social imperialism'.

When Museveni said these words, to the media, in February 2014, the American ambassador Scott deLisi shot back: "Keeping mothers alive, helping people with AIDS, dealing with food security – that's all about our values as Americans... And if that's cultural imperialism or social imperialism, [then] I'm a social imperialist."¹³

Certainly, there is a level of cultural imperialism – or at the very least, cultural supremacism – in much of the global LGBT-rights discourse. Listen to a gay American soldier on active duty in Afghanistan, participating in a 'Kandahar Pride' event organised by the US Department of Defence at the US base in July 2013: "I think it's very important that we are here representing the United States of America, and we hope that when we leave here, we have left all positive qualities, and what America is like, and that we are an equal country, which treats all our citizens equally."¹⁴ The scholar Jaspir Puar (2007) has coined the term 'homonationalism' to describe such a world-view, and to capture the way that homosexuals have become part of the establishment by gaining the rights to marry and serve in the military.

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars are beginning to examine the 'homonationalism' phenomenon, and the way that people in the West might use support of sexual minorities as a way of justifying both imperial ambitions and racism.

The sharpest example of the latter is the right-wing populist politics of the gay Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, who rose to immense popularity, on an anti-immigration ticket, before his murder in 2002: Fortuyn campaigned to bar migrants to the Netherlands, particularly from the Arab world, because of their cultural homophobia and the threat they allegedly posed to the rights gained by LGBT people. Israel, too, stands accused by its critics of a form of homonationalism: of 'pink-washing' its human rights record with respect to Palestinians, by promoting itself as a gay-friendly country and a gay-friendly tourism destination.

The conventional LGBT rights narrative plots the gradual but ineluctable extension of human rights for sexual minorities from the liberal West outwards to more repressive societies. This liberal paradigm measures regional social and political customs and practices against a universal standard of human rights. Such rights, of course, are necessary and essential. But many scholars and activists, particularly from the global South, are beginning to question the relevance of the above paradigm – and thus the efficacy of a rights-based approach to the extension of sexual freedom – in parts of the world that do not have the same liberal Western tradition that spawned the contemporary 'gay rights' movement, and that have their own histories and customs for accommodating sexual and gender difference.

These critics of the global LGBT rights phenomenon – many from the Arab world – claim that the movement actually makes things worse for sexual minorities, in the way it imposes fixed, binary Western categories of sexuality upon the far more fluid environments that traditionally exist in other cultures. The most eloquent proponent of this view is the Palestinian academic Joseph Massad, a professor Arabic literature at Columbia University, who has written that the global LGBT movement has become a proselytising neo-colonial 'Gay International', provoking unnecessary cultural conflict in the Arab world by imposing its Western 'orientalist' definitions of gay identity on societies they are deeply misunderstood. Such provocations, he maintains, exacerbate rather than ameliorate matters, because of the backlash they provoke. They shut down space, rather than open it up, because homophobic customs which provided cover for homosexual activity, such as holding hands in public or washing one another in a *hamam*, become suspect.

Massad (2007) uses the term "incitement to discourse" to explain the way Western actors trigger social crisis which profoundly alters society in ways not expected, or anticipated, by introducing a discussion on LGBT rights into societies where different sexual and social orders are at work. Although he published his book *Desiring Arabs*, in which he explained "incitement to discourse", in 2007, subsequent events in the Muslim West African country of Senegal could well illustrate his point:

The first epidemiological research demonstrating that MSM were key vectors of the African AIDS epidemic came out of Senegal. As a consequence, French donors helped set up an organisation named AIDES Senegal with the express intention of providing health services and education to the population of MSM, but also as cover under which gay men could begin organising and mobilising themselves and their community, given that homosexuality is illegal in the country. In December 2008, after an anonymous tip-off, nine members of the organisation were arrested in the apartment of their leader, Djadji Diouf, while holding a meeting. Some of them were tortured while in custody, even after having confessed to being gay; they were tried, and sentenced to five years' imprisonment, after the judge found that their organisation was a "cover to recruit or organise meetings for homosexuals, under the pretext of providing HIV/AIDS prevention programmes" (Amnesty International, 2010). A Court of Appeals overturned the sentences in April 2009, and the men were released, but the damage had been done: the sensational coverage of the case in Dakar forced a budding gay community to dive underground, and the age-old community of *godjjen*, cross-dressing men who performed special rituals in the community, evaporated almost overnight. The *godjjen* are transgender, but not necessarily homosexual: the sudden emergence of a discourse about homosexuality into the public domain rendered them instantly identifiable – and vulnerable – as the most visible manifestation of this new 'gay' identity-category, and they simply disappeared.

Five years later, in July 2013, while on his first state visit to Senegal, Barack Obama held a press conference with the country's new president, a liberal named Macky Sall. The American president had recently come out strongly in support of same-sex marriage in his own country, and was, in turn, playing to his domestic constituency, given that the Supreme Court had just overturned the Defence of Marriage Act, which prevented federal recognition of same-sex marriage. He celebrated the ruling, and added that gay people should have equal rights in Africa too.

Sall responded, in effect, that Africa was not ready for this, and offered the often-cited canard that Africans do not preach to the West about polygamy. Sall subsequently defended his position, to Germany's *Die Zeit*, by speaking about how "it takes time" for cultures to change, and that the West was expecting change from Africans too quickly: "You have only had same-sex partnerships in Europe since yesterday, and yet you asking for it today from Africans! This is all happening too fast. We live in a world that is changing slowly!"¹⁵

But the problem with this argument is that – like the Massad critique or the worldview of Arkady Mamontov's 'Play Actors' – it is nostalgic, in that it imagines a world where national or cultural boundaries are still intact enough to be protected against the vectors of globalisation. These arguments have not come to terms with the contemporary world, where actors in the Global South (or 'Global East') might be subject to all manner of influences, but make their own decisions, much as Tiwonge Chimbalanga and Stephen Monjeza did – or, for that matter, the Senegalese men who accepted donor funding to do MSM outreach – and have their own agency.

The defence of patriarchal African leaders that, as Museveni puts it, “we keep quiet about [sexuality]” no longer holds muster, anyway, in the post-AIDS African environment. Indeed, one of Museveni’s own greatest achievements was that he understood that, to combat the AIDS epidemic, his country needed, precisely, to talk about sex and sexuality: he played a key role in starting that conversation, and in jump-starting his country’s response to the epidemic. There is a disingenuousness, too, to Macky Sall’s plaint that the West is asking for recognition of same-sex partnerships in Africa before the continent is ready for it. LGBT activists are demanding something far more urgent, and immediate: basic respect for their human rights; a respect which is, in the context of the AIDS epidemic, not only life-saving but good public health policy too. In the Senegalese example, then, the formation of AIDES Senegal was not – to borrow Massad’s framework – an incitement to discourse itself, so much as a response to the incitement of the epidemic; a response to the incitement, too, if you like, of all the vectors of globalisation impressing themselves upon a mid-sized, mid-income African country in the early years of the millennium.

This is the problem with the ‘Global Culture Wars’ paradigm, when trying to understand the new global discussion around sexuality and gender identity. It assumes that, as at the height of the Cold War, there are actors (Washington, Moscow) and there are proxies (the Global South), and, in so doing, it denies the agency of people who live in countries like Uganda and the Ukraine, in a world where there are, now, as many sources of information as there are ideas. In a country like Uganda or Malawi, some of these ideas might be influenced by right-wing Christian missionaries from the United States, and others might be influenced by liberal human rights discourse. Those of you reading these words might hold the strong opinion that the former are wrong and the latter are right, but in the end, both sets of ideas are African ideas, because they are articulated by Africans and act upon the African context. Our mistake in trying to deal with the challenges we face as human rights advocates, would be to misinterpret one set of ideas as ‘foreign’, just because we disagree with them. This is what the other side does, and why, ultimately, it will lose the ‘Global Culture Wars’, such as they are.

President Sall’s assumption, in his statement to *Die Zeit*, is that outsiders are impressing change upon Africans, and are wanting Africa to change quicker than it is able. But listen, in conclusion, to Olena Sevchenko, one of the leaders of the LGBT movement in another part of the world caught up in the ‘Global Culture Wars’: the Ukraine. Certainly, she said to me,

Ukrainian society is not ready for LGBT rights, this is true. But Ukrainian LGBTs, themselves, they cannot be restrained anymore. They go online. They watch TV. They travel. They see how things can be. Why should they not have similar freedoms? Why should they be forced to live in hiding? The world is moving so fast, and events are overtaking us in Ukraine. We have no choice but to try and catch up.

Notes

¹ 'LGBT' stands for 'lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender', and has become the conventional acronym. I have followed this convention in this paper where appropriate, but not in the title, as this paper does not deal specifically with gender identity or transgenderism. I have not used 'LGBTI' (including 'intersex'), because this is a specific, different set of rights issues, which the current 'LGBT' movement does not yet address.

² 'Play Actors', *Rossiya 1*, 13 November 2013. Translated by Evgeny Belyakov.

³ *vanguardngr.com*, 8 January 2013

⁴ *The Nation* (Malawi), 28 December 2009

⁵ *The Nation* (Malawi), 30 May 2010

⁶ Video footage in 'Two Men and a Wedding', directed by Sara Blecher, SABC-TV, 2010

⁷ *bbb.co.uk*, 30 October 2011

⁸ Putin, V, 'Address to the Federal Parliament', 12 December 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6402>

⁹ See www.arc-international.net for all information on LGBT issues at the Human Rights Council.

¹⁰ Reported in Power, S., 'We Must Stand Up For The Rights of Gays and Lesbians Everywhere', <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/09/22/we-must-stand-rights-gays-and-lesbians-everywhere>

¹¹ Clinton, S, 'Free and Equal in Dignity and Rights', 6 December 2011

¹² See www.cnn.com/2014/02/24/.../uganda-anti-gay-bill/

¹³ <http://www.humanrights.gov/2014/02/26/ambassador-delisi-interview-with-bbc-world-service-on-the-uganda-anti-homosexuality-law/>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSoCcJ4Wbf0>

¹⁵ <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2014-04/macky-sall-senegal/komplettansicht>.

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