

Homocolonialism: Sexual Governance, Gender, Race and the Nation-State

Written by Andrew Delatolla

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ANDREW DELATOLLA, MAY 11 2021

The concept of homocolonialism sits at the intersection of theoretical and empirical research on sexuality in International Relations (IR). This includes the theoretical contributions of Cynthia Weber's *Queer International Relations* (2016) that builds on claims previously made in cultural studies regarding the epistemological and intellectually disruptive project of *queering*; carefully explaining its relevance and importance to IR. It also includes the growing empirical focus on LGBTQ+ identities in world politics, culminating – most recently – in the *Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics* edited by Michael J. Bosia, Sandra M. McEvoy, and Momin Rahman (2020). The Oxford Handbook, reflecting the diversity of this ever-growing sub-field in IR, addresses questions concerning the economy, human rights, conflict, and the Western-centric production of sexual categories of the homosexual/heterosexual, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, and Queer (LGBTQ+). At this intersection, the concept of homocolonialism allows researchers to dissect the norms, politics, and rights regimes related to sex and, specifically, homosexuality, to question their intellectual foundations, understand their global imperialist mobilizations, and study their various consequences.

In this post, I attempt to provide an overview and understanding of the history of homocolonialism; engaging with its conceptual development and practical deployments. Although there are multiple points of view from which the history of the concept can be understood, I relate it back to the issue of statehood and social reproduction. Beginning with a rubric to understand homocolonialism, this post considers homocolonialism as being tied to histories of household governance, statehood, and as part of a wider history of Western empire and colonialism. It will trace its history to the production of heterocoloniality, its gendered dynamics, and intersections with racial-civilizational conceptions related to statehood.

What is homocolonialism?

Defining homocolonialism as the imperialist export of specific norms, politics, and rights regimes related to homosexuality, the concept elucidates the ongoing thrust of Western exceptionalism in global politics (Rahman 2014a, b). Homocolonialism thus triangulates homonormativity (Duggan 2002), homonationalism (Puar 2007; 2013), and homocapitalism (Rao 2020) in its global political export. Although this may seem like a convoluted way of theorising power in relation to sexual politics and governance, and specifically to understand how homosexuality and LGBTQ+ rights are tied to Western-centric imperial and colonial mobilizations, each of these terms have proven to be helpful in thinking about the relationship between sexuality and statehood, culture, and empire.

Homonormativity, as discussed by Lisa Duggan (2002), refers to homosexual engagement with the norms closely associated with heterosexuality. This includes marriage, engaging in family life that mimics the structure of the 'traditional' family, military service, and productive labour. Engagement with these norms are viewed as a baseline for homosexuals to be accepted and provided with rights, ultimately constraining the queer disruptions that homosexuality has historically been associated with. Building on this concept, homonationalism, as discussed by Jasbir Puar (2007; 2013), refers to the incorporation of homosexuals into nationalist narratives, often through the recognition of legal rights related to statehood. These rights, including gay marriage, gay patriotism (by serving in the military), gay labour, signify the state's recognition of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals as full and productive citizens

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whose participation in the state not only plays an important role, but whose visibility in participation contributes to the nation and the state's 'civilized' character (Delatolla 2020; 2021).

Within the context homonormativity and homonationalism, productive labour and engaging in state economies are recurrent themes. The homosexual's engagement in capital production and accumulation has been considered an important cornerstone to the development of LGBTQ+ rights. John d'Emilio (1983) ties LGBTQ+ liberation in the United States to the developing free labour systems, where LGBTQ+ liberation was facilitated by the engagement in and accumulation of capital. Similarly, Dennis Altman (2001) argues that contemporary capitalism and its expansionist qualities have redrawn 'traditional sex/gender orders', facilitating difference and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals. Rahul Rao (2020) pushes the discussion of the relationship between capitalism and LGBTQ+ liberation, or homocapitalism, to consider its global manifestations embedded in homocolonial relations. Rao (2020) examines, for example, how LGBTQ+ rights are supported by the World Bank, discussing aid provision, or suspension – as in the case of Uganda, but also the organisations' reports which tether LGBTQ+ rights to economic development. Here, Rao notes the World Bank's homocolonialist proclivity which links economic development and development aid to LGBTQ+ rights in its Western-centric framing.

This Western-centric framing of LGBTQ+ rights encapsulates assumptions of progress and civilization that reproduce historic notions of Western exceptionalism. Because of these assumptions, the normative and nationalist configurations of homosexuality are subsequently exported globally, acting as a measurement of social progress and political development, and often framed within the discourses of human rights; herein producing homocolonialist dynamics (Rahman 2014a, b). Emanating from, and mobilized by Western states, these rights are not benign, and often turn LGBTQ+ identifying individuals into cultural-political battleground (Dalacoura 2014). Here, attempts to export LGBTQ+ rights can, and have, produced backlash among governments in the majority world, who have pointed to and framed the discourses and categories attached to homosexuality as foreign and a product of neo-imperialism (Cooper 2007; Cottet and Picq 2019; Savci 2021). As a consequence to being tied-up in political manoeuvres, the proliferation of LGBTQ+ rights discourses have also led to the displacement, erasure, and direct targeting of local activists in the majority world by drawing negative attention to their movements (Fayed 2020).

Historicizing homocolonialism in the context of statehood

Notably, the concepts discussed above are part of a contemporary lexicon and are often deployed in research focused on contemporary politics. However, the global politics of sexuality and homosexuality are anything but new or contemporary. Scholars have written about the histories of sexual politics in relation to medicine and medical developments in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gadelrab 2017), empire (Hyam 1991), and social histories of same sex intimacy and relations before homosexuality became globally understood as a binary opposite to heterosexuality (el-Rouayheb 2005). By considering these histories, we can interrogate the historical significance of homocolonialism.

If we are to understand homocolonialism as the expansion of a Western -centric and -exceptionalist understanding and orientation of homosexuality, manifesting in LGBTQ+ rights promotion, that triangulates homonormativity and homonationalism, then the imperial sexual politics of modernity cannot be adequately understood in the deployment of this concept. That is not to say that homosexuals did not exist prior to the twentieth century, but that the politics of sexuality were focused on a heteronormative production tied to social reproduction and statehood, giving way to a heteronationalism that reinforced the binary gendered roles of the household within the state. As such, we can argue that what existed from the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries was not a homocoloniality but a distinct heterocoloniality; one that established the foundations and future boundaries for acceptable practices of homonormativity and homonationalism.

The acceptable practices associated with homonormativity and homonationalism mirror the (hetero) socially reproductive practices including, for example, marriage, service, and economic engagement. The homonormative and homonationalist equivalents being gay marriage, gay service (patriotism), and gay capitalism (homocapitalism). Yet these 'gay' equivalents are bound to a Western/Euro-centric heteronormative and heteronationalist framing of society, politics, and the economy that are trapped by the logics of statehood and which pre-date homocolonial

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impulses.

Here, the heteronormative production of the state depended on gendered divisions of household governance. It is in the structural conditions of 'traditional' Western-household governance that norms of hegemonic masculinity developed and created gendered archetypes. These norms and archetypes, first, justified the gendered conditions of household governance and, second, have been temporally enduring, expanding geographically with empire and colonialism. In the first instance rationality, progress, strength were attributed to masculinity. The characteristics of masculinity were in contrast to the irrational, backwards, and weak 'nature' of women, which sustained a gendered division of labour and legal inequities. Second, while the dynamics of household governance in relation to its masculine production have been challenged through a variety of different feminist movements over time, the gendered relations of household governance became implicated in colonization and the civilizing project. Indeed, as Ann Towns (2009) argues, the status of women has been historically used a measurement of civilized development and progress. By extension, and as argued by Charlotte Hooper (2001), masculinity in its relationship to femininity was also an important measurement to determine a society's level of civilized development and progress.

The gendered relations of household governance were not only a measurement of civilized engagement, according to European imperial and colonial administrators, but were also important for the development of the state. As Patricia Owens (2015) and Frederick Engels (1946) argue, household governance, its gendered division of labour, and relational hierarchies became scaled up into the state. Where Engels ties this social and political transformation in Europe to the internal processes of industrialization and capitalism, Owens looks towards counterinsurgency as a process of remaking household governance. It is possible, when examining the histories of European empire and colonialism to make a similar argument to Owens, one that considers the reformulation of the household into civilized and easily governed units. Here, as in practices of counterinsurgency, the local transformations considered necessary for the civilizing project of imperial and colonial governance did not stop at the household. They continued into architecture, city planning (Mitchell 1988), and governance by means of modernization. As such, European imperial and colonial governance restructured society and statehood towards an orientation that mimicked the European nation-state (Delatolla 2021).

The reinforcement of Western gendered relations by means of imperial and colonial reorganisation of household governance and society, and tied to assumptions of civility, entrenched a hegemonic heteronormativity that was scaled up into the state through modernization reforms (Hatem 1999). This is particularly evident when considering the role of women's movements in Egyptian, Syrian, Palestinian, and Iranian nationalist struggles of the early twentieth century. While these movements were important to political changes and transformations, the role of women in these movements were bound to 'acceptable feminine conduct', requiring 'women to articulate their gender interests within the terms of reference set by [masculine] nationalist discourse' (Kandiyoti 1991, 433). Here, the heterocolonial aspects of the nation-state were reaffirmed through its heteronationalist gender relations.

By historicizing heterocolonialism in this manner, the sexed and gendered dynamics of social engineering become evident, as they do with homocolonialism. Within these dynamics, and as mentioned above, heterocolonialism and homocolonialism actively make use of civilizational measurements, hierarchies, and classifications that intersect with race. It would be a mistake to discuss empire and colonialism, its general histories, as well as its more precise sexed and gendered dimensions, without considering how race is baked in. Here, consideration needs to be given to the orientation of *whiteness* related to conceptions of civilization. Discussed by Sara Ahmed (2007), whiteness is an orientation that guides and is the end goal of the civilizing project. It is not always explicit and is often shrouded in the language of civilized engagement, development, and progress (Hobson 2004). Indeed, when discussing heterocolonial and homocolonial policies and practices it is not solely a reproduction of narrowly framed structures and institutions that regulate sexed and gendered bodies, but an orientation of whiteness that locates these framings in the white-Western world and as being civilized, developed, and progressed.

Heterocolonialism and homocolonialism as orientations of whiteness actively seek to civilize and develop racialized societies. Often this is discussed in relation to the global export of norms, structures, and institutions that seek to order society and governance along sexed and gendered framings, but hetero- and homo- colonial iterations can highlight racial and class exclusions at 'home' in the West. This is evident in processes for LGBTQ+ identifying

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individuals seeking asylum in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Austria, Belgium and other Western states (Shuman and Hesford 2014; McDonald-Norman 2017; Dhoest 2019). Here, otherwise well intended policies of asylum reinforce a specific form of governance around sexuality, one that is exclusionary and limits recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity to a prescribed set of norms.

With regards to LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, the state assumes a particular set of homosexual norms and practices to test the applicant's sincerity and eligibility. This often includes an assumption that once the asylum seeker is living in the Western country that they will 'come out'; engage in promiscuous behaviour; forge romantic and sexual relations for which there is documented evidence. Here, homonormative assumptions are rendered from pre-existing stereotypes that are used to understand whether the asylum seeker can be 'seen' as LGBTQ+ and can be inserted into existing homonationalist structures. In the context of LGBTQ+ asylum, the homocolonial frameworks that are often viewed as a contentious global export become applied to classed and raced bodies seeking protection in Western states that recognize LGBTQ+ rights.

Policies that can be analysed as homocolonial, particularly with regards to LGBTQ+ rights promotion are proposed as being liberatory. However, these policies continue to order individuals in relation to state engagement and social reproduction, they orientate individuals towards 'civilized' practices, and produce an assortment of racist and class exclusions. These policies become a process by which the state continues to manifest itself in relation to the principles of household governance and exported in a civilizing manner. Homocolonial policies are often defended as providing a pathway to legal LGBTQ+ inclusion that is narrowly constrained around civilized and ordered heteronormativity and heteronationalism. In doing so, homocolonialism can displace, erase, and lead to the direct targeting of local activists in the majority world. The consequence of which can obstruct the radical queer politics that have challenged the oppressive and restrictive forces of the gendered and heterosexed nation-state and household governance.

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