

Rethinking Homonationalism

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In my 2007 monograph *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (hereafter *TA*), I develop the conceptual frame of “homonationalism” for understanding the complexities of how “acceptance” and “tolerance” for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated.¹ I had become increasingly frustrated with the standard refrain of transnational feminist discourse as well as queer theories that unequivocally stated, quite vociferously throughout the 1990s, that the nation is heteronormative and that the queer is inherently an outlaw to the nation-state. While the discourse of American exceptionalism has always served a vital role in U.S. nation-state formation, *TA* examines how sexuality has become a crucial formation in the articulation of proper U.S. citizens across other registers like gender, class, and race, both nationally and transnationally. In this sense, homonationalism is an analytic category deployed to understand and historicize how and why a nation's status as “gay-friendly” has become desirable in the first place. Like modernity, homonationalism can be resisted and re-signified, but not opted out of: we are all conditioned by it and through it.

In *TA*, for instance, I critically interrogate LGBTQ activist responses to the 2003 Supreme Court ruling in *U.S. v. Lawrence*, which decriminalized sodomy between consenting adults acting in private, bringing into relief how the celebration of the queer liberal subject as bearer of privacy rights and economic freedom sanctions a regime of racialized surveillance, detention, and deportation. *TA* shows how homonationalism goes global, moreover, as it undergirds U.S. imperial structures through an embrace of a sexually progressive multiculturalism justifying foreign intervention. For example, both the justifications and the admonishments provoked by the Abu Ghraib photos rely on Orientalist constructions of Muslim male sexuality as simultaneously excessively queer and dangerously premodern. The discursive field produced around Abu Ghraib enlists homonormative U.S. subjects in the defense of “democratic” occupation.

It has been humbling and also very interesting to see the ways homonationalism as a concept has been deployed, adapted, rearticulated, and critiqued in various national, activist, and academic contexts; giving rise to generative and constructive debate was my true intent in writing the book, which was derived not as a corrective but as an incitement to debate. The language of homonationalism is appearing in academic and activist projects across North America, Europe, and now India. For example, a Paris-based group called “No to Homonationalism” (Non a l'homonationalisme) is contesting the campaign proposed for Gaypride in Paris because of its taking up of the national symbol of the white rooster.² A 2011 conference on sexual democracy in Rome took issue with the placement of World Pride in the area of the city housing the highest percentage of migrants and staked a claim to a secular queer politics that challenges the Vatican as well as the anti-migrant stance of European organizing entities. And as I will discuss below, critical commentary on Israel's gay-friendly public relations campaign coalesced

into various coordinated movements against “pinkwashing,” or Israel’s promotion of a LGBTQ-friendly image to reframe the occupation of Palestine in terms of civilizational narratives measured by (sexual) modernity.³

At times the “viral” travels of the concept of homonationalism, as it has been taken up in North America, various European states, Palestine/Israel, and India, have found reductive applications in activist organizing platforms. Instead of thinking of homonationalism as an accusation, an identity, a bad politics, I have been thinking about it as an analytic to apprehend state formation and a structure of modernity: as an assemblage of geopolitical and historical forces, neoliberal interests in capitalist accumulation both cultural and material, biopolitical state practices of population control, and affective investments in discourses of freedom, liberation, and rights. Homonationalism, thus, is not simply a synonym for gay racism, or another way to mark how gay and lesbian identities became available to conservative political imaginaries; it is not another identity politics, not another way of distinguishing good queers from bad queers, not an accusation, and not a position. It is rather a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality. To say that this historical moment is homonational, where homonationalism is understood as an analytics of power, then, means that one must engage it in the first place as the condition of possibility for national and transnational politics. Part of the increased recourse to domestication and privatization of neoliberal economies and within queer communities, homonationalism is fundamentally a deep critique of lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses and how those rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to citizenship—cultural and legal—at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations. The narrative of progress for gay rights is thus built on the back of racialized others, for whom such progress was once achieved, but is now backsliding or has yet to arrive. I have thus theorized homonationalism as an assemblage of de- and reterritorializing forces, affects, energies, and movements. While the project arose within the post 9/11 political era of the United States, homonationalism is also an ongoing process, one that in some sense progresses from the civil rights era and does not cohere only through 9/11 as a solitary temporal moment.

The following brief discussion of homonationalism in relation to pinkwashing and Palestine may help demonstrate the complex ways I see homonationalism as neither identity nor political position. Homonationalism and pinkwashing should not be seen as parallel phenomena. Rather, pinkwashing is one manifestation and practice made possible within and because of homonationalism. Unlike pinkwashing, homonationalism is not a state practice per se. It is instead the historical convergence of state practices, transnational circuits of queer commodity culture and human rights paradigms, and broader global phenomena such as the increasing entrenchment of Islamophobia. These are just some of the circumstances through which nation-states are now vested with the status of “gay-friendly” versus “homophobic.” The conflation of homonationalism and pinkwashing can result in well-intentioned critiques or political stances that end up reproducing the queer exceptionalism of homonationalism in various ways.⁴

It is thus important to map out the relations between pinkwashing and homonationalism, or, more precisely, the global conditions of homonationalism that make a practice

such as Israeli pinkwashing possible and legible in the first place. In connecting Israeli pinkwashing to a broader global system of power networks, I am demonstrating the myriad of actors that converge to enable such a practice. Pinkwashing has become a commonly used tag for the cynical promotion of LGBT bodies as representative of Israeli democracy. As its use as a shorthand proliferates, it must be situated within its wider geopolitical context. That is to say, pinkwashing works because both history and global international relations matter. So while it is crucial to challenge the Israeli state, it must be done in a manner that acknowledges the range of complicit actors. Historically speaking, settler colonialism has a long history of articulating its violence through the protection of serviceable figures such as women and children, and now the homosexual. Pinkwashing is only one more justification for imperial/racial/national violence within this long tradition of intimate rhetorics around “victim” populations. Further, Islamophobia has proliferated since the beginning of the “war on terror,” but it also predates 9/11 in various forms (see, for example, Edward Said’s periodization of Islamophobia as heralded during the end of the cold war). Pinkwashing works in part by tapping into the discursive and structural circuits produced by U.S. and European crusades against the spectral threat of “radical Islam” or “Islamofascism.”

Then there is the function of capitalism. The neoliberal accommodationist economic structure engenders niche marketing of various ethnic and minoritized groups, normalizing the production of, for example, a gay and lesbian tourism industry built on the discursive distinction between gay-friendly and not-gay-friendly destinations. Not unlinked to this is what I call the “human rights industrial complex.” The gay and lesbian human rights industry continues to proliferate Euro-American constructs of identity (not to mention the notion of a sexual identity itself) that privilege identity politics, “coming out,” public visibility, and legislative measures as the dominant barometers of social progress.

Within this nexus of history and economy, Israel appears as a pioneer of homonationalism, being perfectly situated to encourage the normalization of some homosexual bodies in relation to an increasingly violent occupation of Palestine. This homonationalist history of Israel, or the rise of LGBT rights in Israel, parallels the concomitant increasing segregation of Palestinian populations, especially post-Oslo. Moreover, the United States is in no small part culpable for the effectiveness of Israeli pinkwashing, as it is to a large extent directed toward citizens of the United States, Israel’s greatest financial supporter, and more generally to Euro-American gays who have the political capital and financial resources to invest in Israel. U.S. settler colonialism is inextricably intertwined with Israeli settler colonialism. Through their financial, military, affective, and ideological entwinement, it seems to me that the United States and Israel are the largest benefactors of homonationalism in the current geopolitical configuration, as it operates on three scalar registers: internal, territorial, and global.

NOTES

¹Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

²Laura Thouny, “L’affiche de la gay pride, pomme de discorde entre association,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/societe/20110417.OBS1451/l-affiche-de-la-gay-pride-pomme-de-discorde-entre-associations.html> (accessed 17 January 2013).

³For a brief history, see <http://truth-out.org/news/item/12553-de-pinkwashing-israel> and <http://www.pinkwatchingisrael.com/about-us/> (both accessed 17 January 2013).

⁴See the discussion in *jadaliyya*: Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdashi, "Pinkwatching and Pinkwashing: Interpenetration and Its Discontents," *Jadaliyya*, 9 August 2012, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6774/pinkwatching-and-pinkwashing_interpenetration-and-; and Heike Schotten and Haneen Maikey, "Queers Resisting Zionism: On Authority and Accountability beyond Homonationalism," *Jadaliyya*, 10 October 2012, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7738/queers-resisting-zionism_on-authority-and-accounta.