Political Homophobia in Comparative Perspective

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The way I see it, homophobia—not homosexuality—is the toxic import. Thanks to the absurd ideas peddled by American fundamentalists, we are constantly forced to respond to the myth—debunked long ago by scientists—that homosexuality leads to pedophilia. For years, the Christian right in America has exported its doctrine to Africa, and, along with it, homophobia. ... Not all Ugandans are homophobic. Some say there are more pressing issues to worry about than gay people and believe we should have the same rights as anyone else. But they are not in power and cannot control the majority who want to hurt us (Mugisha 2011).

Introduction

The wave of anti-authoritarian revolts that began to roll across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 coincides with another contemporary trend: a widespread, caustic focus on sexuality, in the form of overtly political homophobia. Among the most striking incidents of the latter trend was Egypt’s 2001 “Queen Boat” case, which saw fifty-two men prosecuted in a special national security court on charges related to same-sex intimacy. A decade later, as Mubarak toppled from power, the Muslim Brotherhood was expected to fill the post-authoritarian vacuum. But with the broad suppression of Egyptian civil society generally and sexual minorities in particular under Mubarak, we would hardly anticipate that the concurrent global homophobic impulse would have sufficient local footing upon which to gain political traction. Still, when the Brotherhood joined forces with old enemies in the junta to support a set of constitutional amendments in Egypt’s first

post-Mubarak vote, they did so amidst mysterious warnings about a triumphant secularism threatening to unveil women as in France, ban the call to prayer, and permit men to marry men (Slackman 2011).

Of all the fears contending forces could summon to reinforce their political stature in Egypt, why leap to sexuality? Specifically, why skip past far more globally-prevalent calls for decriminalization of sodomy, directly to demands for same-sex marriage, as if sexual minorities everywhere claim the same rights that define LGBT organizing in only a handful of countries? Egyptian sexual minorities have few durable networks, suffering from both authoritarianism and the campaign of harassment starting in 2001. The small LGBT organization Bedayaa was founded only in 2010, primarily for social and educational purposes, and a joint statement they issued with other Arab sexual minority groups in May 2011, still in the heady first months after Mubarak’s ouster, called merely for “peaceful coexistence” and denied any intent “to persuade you to accept our gender identity.”

The invocation of such incongruous marriage fears demonstrates the particular power of homophobia, not as some deep-rooted, perhaps religiously-inflected sentiment, nor as necessarily a response to overt provocation, but as a conscious political strategy often unrelated to substantial local demands for political rights. We interrogate political homophobia as a state strategy, political movement, and transnational phenomenon, powerful enough to structure the experiences of sexual minorities and expressions of sexuality. We consider political homophobia as purposeful, especially as practiced by state actors; as embedded in the scapegoating of an “other” that drives

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4 While the term had been used previously, Boellstorff (2004) seems the first to have developed this concept theoretically.
processes of state building and retrenchment; as the product of transnational influence-peddling and alliances; and as integrated into questions of collective identity and the complicated legacies of colonialism. Specifically, we target the overt deployment of homophobia in political rhetoric and policy, as a remarkably similar and increasingly modular phenomenon across a wide range of cases. While the more brutal examples of hatred and violence grab headlines, we see this dynamic just as clearly in less overtly repressive contexts—for instance, the Philippines, where an emerging LGBT rights movement has begun to contest Catholic dominance of the (constitutionally secular) state (see Weiss, forthcoming). The broad application of more and less oppressive homophobic strategies suggests that homophobia may be more effectively globalized than homosexuality (Murray 2009).

In our analysis, “unexpected” forms of political homophobia must be examined as typical tools for building an authoritative notion of national collective identity, for impeding oppositional or alternative collective identities that might or might not relate to sexuality, for mobilizing around a variety of contentious issues and empowered actors, and as a metric of transnational institutional and ideational flows. Homophobic political strategies range from straightforward or seemingly “rational” processes of marginalization—of branding gay rights, like so often women’s or ethnic minorities’ rights, as either “special interests” and thus not a priority, or as a threat to the nation—to vilification and abuse. The most familiar example of the latter is the dehumanizing humiliation of Muslim men at Abu Ghraib, in Bosnia, and elsewhere, through forced (homo)sexual postures and brutal sodomy. Such sexualized violence parallels wider racialized, misogynist, and militarized forms of Islamophobia (Hersh 2004; Puar 2005), even while Western “saviors” bewail Muslim states’ paucity of human rights, especially for women, but also for sexual minorities.

Whatever their timbre, such processes of identification and ostracism have long been recognized as part of state formation when couched in terms of race—consider the work of Anthony Marx (1998) or Susan Olzak (1983) on the crystallization of racial categories and ever-stronger ethnic claims in the course of postcolonial nation-building, as part of the assertion and
technology of political and market power. That same effort to control populations and to mold citizens toward a certain norm, both for purposive ends and to manifest authority, applies equally well to sexuality, even where LGBT rights have secured a foothold. The politically-charged homophobia that can enforce heteronormativity or prod citizens to suspect and fear a new category of social evil seems, in this light, a “natural” part of state-making and interstate intervention, however heretofore under-examined.

We seek, therefore, to disentangle the how and why of the transnational diffusion and domestic enactment of political homophobia, including transphobia, noting evidence of parallel processes in cases ranging from contemporary Uganda (Kaoma 2009); to Iran, where sodomy may now be punished with death by hanging (Korycki and Nasirzadeh, forthcoming); to Indonesia, where pressures for Islamization are increasingly refracted through lenses of gender and sexuality (Weiss, forthcoming); to post-Communist Europe, where Polish and Russian authorities have targeted small gay rights movements for sometimes violent and public suppression (O'Dwyer, forthcoming). As these and the other cases demonstrate, contemporary homophobia subsumes—and indeed, frequently elides—complex dimensions of gender and sexuality.

In many ways, these patterns trace the development of a modular notion of homophobia as part of US national security strategies during the Cold War, as David Johnson (2004) describes, and stepped up anew particularly against the backdrop of the “war on terror.” Michael Bosia’s (forthcoming) treatment of modular homophobia in contexts of state crisis and Kapya Kaoma’s (2009) exploration of transnational evangelical activism during the Bush Administration extend Johnson’s analysis. Presaging contemporary modularity, too, is the spread of homophobia under colonial flags in the nineteenth century (Binnie 2004: 77-78; Sanders 2009) and as a tool of health professionals particularly in the twentieth (Terry 1999). Embedded in Western imaginaries, but

5 “Homophobia” as a term offers us two benefits. First, it is an easily understood, familiar shorthand, used both within academia and outside; and, it is describes a set of discourses and policies linked to the West and now increasingly modular.
exported and adopted alongside a range of economic and technological practices, homophobia brings to mind those “globalized localisms” (de Sousa Santos 2006) anchored securely in the rhetoric and policies of powerful actors outside the West.

“Homophobia” likewise stands synecdochically for both a larger push to delegitimize in advance rights that have not been claimed and for diversions from larger crises and threats to existing authorities, including those arising from the pressures of globalization. David Murray (2009a: 148) evocatively captures this prestidigitation, with reference to Barbados:

> These discourses [against homosexuality], combined with the absence of local gay and lesbian voices in the media, result in what I call a “spectral” sexuality that haunts the Barbadian mediascapes, where a threatening, perverted and/or sick sexualized body or group of bodies are continually incarnated in discourse but never fully instantiated in the flesh. These deviant ghostly bodies haunt the dominant media discourse of a national body imagined to be heterosexual and masculine, which is perceived to be under attack from outside and inside forces.

Such diversions reflect a complex but little-heeded dimension of neoliberal globalization in which sexual politics, including a fetishized threat to national identity and a quest for bodily discipline, can either distract from or undercut economic deregulation, depending on the position of those who exploit homophobic politics. What Arjun Appadurai (2006) dubs the “fear of small numbers” enables state and social opinion-leaders to incriminate a tiny, sometimes barely or not yet self-identified, minority, often drawing more on imported than domestically-sourced language, agendas, and strategies.

A set of core similarities thus undergirds this modularity within individually distinctive cases and dynamics. To tease out that common thread, we first explore better ways to conceptualize homophobia as a specifically political and modular construct and force, then examine how homophobia has been studied thus far and why scholars have so clearly and chronically bypassed or misconstrued it. Finally, we consider the empirical and theoretical implications of a careful, critical focus on politicized homophobia. As a result, we differentiate overt claims to political legitimacy through homophobia from private, religious, and interpersonal sentiments that
have not been taken up as political tools, with the understanding that there is no necessary and fixed relationship between political homophobia and extant private homophobia or even local sexual discourse.

While we recognize that private, religious, and interpersonal sentiments are political in that they are produced and reproduced in contexts of power, the discourses and policies of modular political homophobia in fact have had the power to reshape local structures of sexuality. This is not to say that Presidents Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Kaczyński of Poland, or Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia, for instance, were not motivated by personal religious belief in pressing homophobic agendas, or that they lacked social allies who shared these sentiments. Whether in Louisiana, Russia, Singapore, or Malawi, we can and must distinguish between private beliefs and political homophobia, even while acknowledging the potential for private or religious sentiments to pervade political contests or processes of state and nation building. We suggest that the salience of these attitudes as strategic tools has more to do with local and global politics than with private meditations, as evidenced by the modularity of political homophobia across traditions and in both secular and religious states.

**Conceptualizing homophobia as political and modular**

More often than not, scholars of the political dimensions of social life either ignore or mischaracterize the emergence of political homophobia, despite its often stunningly violent and repressive character as well as its frequent absurdity. Yet, as this wave of repression increases in virulence, coming to encompass not just imprisonment and harassment, but even torture and execution, it has required no substantive self-defined LGBT community or local, above-ground organizing before splashing onto shore and seeping into elites’ political strategies. At the same time,

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6 Jin Haritaworn (2010-11) traces how activism related to hate crimes, travels, too (with its own racialized, carceral aspects).
Western practice as well as Western leaders have offered sustenance and support to the birth of more specifically-tailored, localized homophobia, as embodied, for instance, in the passage of a constitutional amendment in 2005 in Uganda banning “gay marriage” in line with US (but not Ugandan) iconography.

Moreover, this homophobic wave is despite, and profoundly contradicts, the significant progress that LGBT rights have made in other corners. Homophobia is invoked where fundamental rights to sexual and gender self-determination remain unclaimed and sexual minorities have not thought in terms of a shared political identity or full legal equality. And yet homophobia lingers, too, as an easily accessible form of social differentiation and privilege, even where legal equality is achieved or in sight. The progress of this wave, in short, indicates that homophobia has gone modular, being imposed in a consistent way across diverse contexts, while sexuality itself, as much research demonstrates, is not similarly modular (Blasius, forthcoming; Hoad 2000; Epprecht 2005; Broqua, forthcoming).

And with its emphasis on the transformation of sexual identities, scholarship has failed to theorize either the influence of such changes on homophobia or the global diffusion of similar forms of homophobia. As the study of sexuality has moved beyond the West, scholars have trained their gaze on the influence (or not) of Western models of sexuality spread by global LGBT activists or tourists, not on the politics of the homophobia local sexual minorities increasingly face on their own streets. Even while historians have examined homophobic state policies in the past, and anthropologists, its sociocultural manifestations (e.g., Rubin 93; Murray 2009b), scholars concerned with the contemporary nexus of social movements and the state limit their analysis of homophobia to its manifestation as a target of LGBT rights activism, decoupled from the state. In fact, there is no focus on specifically state-sponsored or politically-charged homophobia to match the emphasis on specifically LGBT human rights activism, nor do we have a theoretical framework for understanding homophobia as a named and explicit feature of the state, tracing its influences, origins, and multiple
global manifestations. Even queer theory, given its disciplinary proclivities, focuses on homophobia often as a facet of heterosexism that forms and transforms the sexual subject who is organizing to claim certain rights.

This bias in favor of studies of LGBT human rights activism over analysis of the repressive apparatus of powerful state and social actors might itself be a reflection of lingering homophobia within the social sciences. Political science, for example, continues to treat gay politics as marginal to and outside the parameters of a fetishized understanding of the state and society—a tendency that is part and parcel of the enduring dismissal of scholarship on marginal identities across the social sciences, including scholarship by gays and lesbians, who are simultaneously derided as “frivolous” and feared as “uniquely powerful” (Duggan 1994: 2). In the reductionist views of mainstream scholars, LGBT politics represents only one application (and a rarely considered one at that7) of new social movement theory, so that homophobia-as-politics is reduced to nothing more than a variable reflecting static religious values and traditional attitudes about sexuality, whether organized by public opinion or by political leadership.

Alternately, misguided tolerance might produce a similar misconception: as liberal theorists and social scientists dissect the homophobe, they mistakenly render him or her exogenous to both the state and to analysis. These approaches come to mirror theories of sexuality that “predict” or “privilege” the progressive normalization of lesbian and gay identities and disappearance of outdated dogmas of the past, a view long favored among activists and increasingly prominent in the media. Recently, for example, pundits have seized on survey data to foretell not only the ultimate success of marriage equality in the US, but the death of homophobia. Yet suggestions of homophobia’s much-touted end, like those of history and Mark Twain, have been greatly exaggerated. Homophobia remains not just alive, but aggressively kicking.

7 But consider, for example, Adam, et al. 1999 as an exception to the rule.
Homophobia and Research: Beyond “Sexual Modernization Theory”

To understand how current research has largely failed to address politicized homophobia, even when it understands sexuality as an overt and contentious aspect or product of political action, we distinguish five key approaches that dominate the relevant work. We address, too, how those theories have informed or been informed by public advocates in the field of LGBT human rights. It is important to keep in mind that much of the research on sexual identity does not seek explicitly to complicate or even to comprehend the politics of homophobia—and adds significantly to our theoretical understanding and empirical knowledge of sexuality in its own right. One common approach is to consider the diffusion of LGBT politics, primarily within a human rights frame, and theorize homophobia (if at all) as constraint; a second views the politics of sexuality as contest between LGBT advocates and their antagonists, framing state homophobia as a reaction to the diffusion of an “American” model of LGBT activism; a third associates homophobia with tradition, ignorance, paranoia, or other forms of social ill; and, fourthly, a kind of sexual modernization theory sees homophobia as unnecessary to theorize, as it belongs to a social past we will eventually overcome. The fifth strand comprises scholars who view same-gender desires and gender identity within structures of heteronormativity or masculinity.

The first approach, which fits within a broader literature on diffusion, often emphasizes practices such as brokerage (Chabot and Duyvendak 2002) or the available transnational networks through which collective action frames are adopted or adapted (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005) to consider how deeply a Western model of sexuality has penetrated communities across the globe. Those who view global LGBT politics through this lens explore linkages across national contexts, the interplay of global and local forces that impel social practice, and the kinds of resources available in the contexts in which LGBT sexuality has implanted, starting with the diffusion of models across the Atlantic and later outside the US and Europe (e.g. Adam, Duyvendak, Krouwel
Bosia and Weiss 1999; Wright 2000; Gevisser and Cameron 2004). Homophobia through this lens is a local backdrop, not what is diffused.

Dennis Altman has been a leader in this school through his work examining the mix of global and local forces that shape sexual identities in contexts around the world (for example, Altman 1996, 2004, 2008). Altman considers the transformations brought about by capitalism and economic globalization, for example, as each propels urbanization, impinges on extended families, provides resources for greater autonomy from existing social forms, undermines authority, and provides access to novel ideas. Other scholars join Altman in exploring the effect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic as a global force necessitating a response in communities around the world, particularly as international institutions and transnational activism have framed AIDS through rights and access-based policies across new contexts (Weiss 2006; Peacock, et al. 2009; Roberts 1995; also Altman himself, 1998, 2000, 2008). A growing literature on sexual citizenship, too, interrogates sexuality and sexual rights as forms of international governance and mobility that provide an “escape from locality, family, and history,” empowering citizens as they weaken sovereignty (Stychin 1998; 2000: 603). In this vein, too, is work exploring how rapid, recent changes in the laws applicable to lesbians and gay men in particular has reshaped not just their legal rights and options, in ways simultaneously empowering and constraining, but also their legal consciousness and relative “equality” (Harding 2011; Vaid 1995).

Much of this research has yet to offer a compelling theory of political ostracism and oppression, or of how sexual identities and stigmatization align. For instance, while homosexuality and AIDS are in many ways associated by scholars and policy makers, that association is not linked through specific histories or contexts even to a set of identifiable social institutions or actors. As well, these approaches examine how social or political life “constrains” or “inhibits” LGBT organizing, particularly in the European context, where, for example, scholars argue that French Republican hostility to civil society challenged the elaboration of US-style LGBT activism and
inhibited some policies of integration such as marriage equality (Duyvendak and Fillieuile 1996; Fassin 2001). Even when, for instance, Bosia unlocks a genealogy of orientalizing and Americanizing homophobia in the French context, he is more concerned with the effect of homophobia on activism or AIDS politics than with the reason state actors deploy homophobia, other than its rhetorical sense (Bosia 2005, 2009).

The second pattern of research builds from the first, homing in on the implications of transnational diffusion. This approach proposes that the global Westernization of same-gender sexual intimacy has coupled LGBT activism and homophobia within the framework of a sexual “clash of civilizations” waged domestically as well as globally. While Thomas Linneman argues that spiraling perceptions of anti-Christian sentiment in a broader domestic culture that embraces LGBT rights spurs the US Christian right’s homophobia (Linneman 2004), Joseph Massad provocatively indicts a “Gay International” composed of activists at organizations like the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA)\(^8\) and the US-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) as well as primarily US-based gay scholars (Massad 2007). Responding to growing Western polemic and activism challenging Muslim states that imprison or execute men who engage in male-to-male sexual and social activity, Massad blames this Gay International for an “incitement to discourse” that imposes homosexuality and a concomitant Western sexual binary upon local cultures that have more fluid understandings of sexuality. This discourse, claims Massad, has led Muslim countries to punish self-identified “gay” Muslims in their midst and threaten the well-being of men who merely practice same-gender sexual intimacy.

Massad’s analysis, which spans colonial and neo-colonial experience across various sites in the Muslim world, endows his Gay International with the discursive legacies of Western orientalism and the institutional power of government ministries and universities.

\(^8\) ILGA’s board is composed of at least two representatives from each region of the world, selected by local delegates at regional conferences.
While broadly sensitive to local practice, Massad’s conceptualization of state homophobia as a reaction to Western LGBT strategies is radically limited. In geographic terms, he fails to account for the similar strategies of state homophobia across the US and Europe, like the political homophobia, sponsored or encouraged by political and religious officials, that has thrived amidst a surge of xenophobic nationalism and angry boundary-drawing in post-communist Russia or Poland (Kon 2010; Graff 2010). Massad is silent about the variety of challenges “at home” for his LGBT imperialists during the decades he outlines, including the religious right, the spate of antigay initiatives in the US (see Duggan 2004), and the decimation of the AIDS epidemic, and so ignores the serious damage to their domestic agendas, let alone their global reach, in the 1980s and ’90s. In brief, Massad’s Gay International seems a weak challenger to state and social actors in positions of authority. Even when supranational pressures, particularly from the EU, and domestic political alignments have turned many activists from “commercial” or popular identity-building mobilization to more exclusive, formal policy remedies (e.g., Bernstein 1997), these efforts are highly targeted. Most importantly, even if Massad is right that contemporary repression arises directly in reaction to global LGBT incitements, he does not address the variety of local and global factors that move state actors from indifference to repression, so foregrounding LGBT organizing unsatisfactorily casts the exogenous incitement itself as sufficient to provoke a state’s endogenous homophobic repression.

A similarly critical and engaged scholarship emerging in the aftermath of “911” interrogates the often mutually-reinforcing association of LGBT rights, nationalism, and Islamophobia. These scholars have identified “homonationalism” as a new variant of LGBT activism. Central to this project is a kind of “pinkwashing,” through which state actors not only encourage LGBT activists to condemn homophobia in Muslim communities, but also themselves embrace LGBT rights to cloak their own racist and oppressive policies against Muslims (Duggan 2003; Puar 2006, 2011; Kunstman 2008; Ahmed 2011; Haritaworn 2010-11). While homonationalism is a powerful new
force in politics, much of this work has yet to analyze the persistently oppressive homophobia that pushes either a vapid LGBT rights agenda devoid of social justice or a militant and racist nationalism. Consider, for example, Cohen's work on the persistence of homophobia in the African American community and its effect on the response to HIV/AIDS (Cohen 1997). In order to understand the cleavages and divisions that structured AIDS politics as a series secondary marginalizations, Cohen outlines both the politics of race that define African American sexuality and the structures of power within the community. Homophobia enfeebles community organizing against AIDS, then, due to the strategies that empowered actors pursue to seek legitimacy by defying racial categories and challenging racial mythologies. Similarly, a full interrogation of homonationalism would consider homophobia as an aspect of a system of inequality (inclusive of racism and misogyny) that compels LGBT activists to pursue strategies of normalization and legitimation.

The third pattern of research has sought conceptually to undermine (and depoliticize) homophobia as akin to a social disease: dangerous, certainly, but on the cusp of a cure. This approach includes considerations of homophobia as backward or prejudiced, as well as psychosexually primitive. Theorist Martha Nussbaum's musings on disgust and marriage equality are very much in this vein (2004, 2009, 2010). She characterizes the "problem" of LGBT rights, such as opposition to military service or marriage, as a manifestation of disgust. The disgust impulse, Nussbaum explains, though a nearly universal human response, is also a "visceral" one (2010: 13), arising from a disorienting psychological process that separates the self from the body's more animalistic and mortal nature. Through a series of sub-rational cognitive extensions, individuals project their disgust on other individuals or social groups; by implication, disgust becomes the public policy variant of a deeply primordial reaction, leading to "panic" and fear of contamination. Other scholars reach similar conclusions, by simply equating the religious motivations of opponents
of marriage equality with hatred and disdain (Denike 2007), or by detailing the similar, long-standing pathologization of both racial and sexual difference (Somerville 2000).

Feelings of disgust or disdain are significantly under-theorized. Disgust, in fact, might be deliberately cultivated as an aspect of good taste (Korsmeyer 2002). Indeed, we see such a process in the details Nussbaum draws from homophobes themselves, who revel in discussing the gory details of same-gender intimacy. Homophobes may enjoy the vicarious enactment of that which gives them disgust—witness Abu Ghraib. They can also willfully cross the contamination line, soaking themselves in the very bodily fluids they find disgusting, as their punches draw blood or as they rape to “correct” and humiliate.

The fourth category of research is a variant of the third, but in this strand, homophobia is often dismissed as religious or traditional, with some explanatory variable offered as a (poorly-specified) antidote to homophobia. The classic work along these lines is Boswell’s Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality. Boswell argues that urbanization increases tolerance for same-gender sexual intimacy and de-urbanization, the rejection of such sexualities (Boswell 1980). Scholars on contemporary politics likewise offer urbanization as a predictor of tolerance, along with factors more traditional to social movement analysis, while homophobia appears only among the religious, moral or traditional forces that array against LGBT rights (Wald, Button, and Rienzo 1996). That the widely-celebrated work of urban planner Richard Florida (2002) finds the most economically promising cities to be those that score well on a Gay Index, a proxy for tolerance of “creative class” nonconformity, has sparked similar strategies and analysis, in contexts from Cincinnati to Singapore. Opening up to gays is taken as both harbinger of and facilitator to economic vitality, and thus as an all but inevitable stage in development—notwithstanding evidence to the contrary, of domestic agendas nested in conservative mores that ultimately trump steps to lure global capital (Weiss 2005). Similarly, quantitative analyses of recent votes on marriage equality
have suggested that homophobia, measured as rejection of marriage equality, correlates with such factors as age, religiosity, ideology, and born-again Christianity (Egan and Sherrill 2006, 2009).

Considerations of disgust or tradition too frequently treat homophobia only as the public manifestation of a private attitude. It might serve as an appeal to or justification for individual choice, a collective statement of aspiration or reprobation, or a constraint on politics. This reading is emblematic of both US politics itself and of methods commonly used to study politics in the US, which tend to see in voting behavior or public opinion the root “causes” of political practice. Homophobia in these approaches is never theorized as related to the state in a deep and profound way, and these approaches are of little use in attempting to understand the politics of homophobia outside settings in which opinion polls, interest group lobbying, and referenda are standard features of political life. While certainly, leaders can channel popular sentiment, especially as we move farther from contexts in which state practice even appears tied to public opinion or beliefs, we are left only with powerful state and social actors. These forces choose homophobic repression absent a public call to do so, often providing details about foreign LGBT organizing (or sexual practices) in order to arouse—not respond to—popular disgust. In the democratic West, as Johnson (2004) explores, homophobia is less private belief than public compulsion that defines and describes the very “love that dare not speak its name” in order to stimulate condemnation and anxiety.

Even when forms of urbanization that foster diversity and tolerance are considered, homophobia itself remains something to be overcome in good time, suggesting an approach with all the anticipations and shortfalls of the sexual equivalent of modernization theory. Undergirding Egan and Sherrill’s statistical analysis, for instance, is the growing perception that younger voters will inevitably bring about a generational change that will all but eliminate the homophobic impulse in society, notwithstanding the diversity of possible incentives for such an impulse. They conclude that the transformation in attitudes across recent ballot measures relating to marriage indicates a
“swift pace” unprecedented in US politics (2009: 15). Likewise, analyst Nate Silver of the popular blog FiveThirtyEight has modeled the future of same-gender marriage ballot initiatives in the US, predicting that within four years, nearly half the states will vote to oppose a marriage ban, concluding with the fiftieth, Mississippi, in 2024 (Silver 2009).

The International Lesbian and Gay Association is among those policy groups subscribing to this variation of modernization theory. Reporting on state homophobia, ILGA notes that such policies of repression are both artifacts of “a certain time and context in history,” linked to the colonial past or religious beliefs, and a product of “conservative interpretations of religious texts” (Ottosson 2007: 4). ILGA’s analysis effectively privatizes such laws as the result of ignorance, fear, and intolerance. Finally, ILGA inverts historical chronologies to conclude that the emancipation of sexual minorities is a precursor to democracy, thus nicely closing the loop between the urbanization assumptions that support both political and sexual modernization theories.

These recent efforts parallel earlier studies that place sexual identity on an historical continuum that culminates with a Western-style sexual binary, in which heterosexuality and homosexuality stand opposed. The emerging consensus is that sexual identity does not evolve along a shared trajectory, even after exposure to Western influence. The roster of available forms and practices of same-gender social or sexual intimacy does change in response to both global and local influences, but not per any uniform pattern of modernization—raising two issues of concern. First, changes in sociability related to sexuality might not address state homophobia absent the prior evolution of domestic LGBT identity and politics, and, in fact, evolving practices do not necessarily indicate even a shared pattern of politicization. Second, evidence suggests that while politicized homophobia is imbedded in local dynamics, state actors and their allies are adept at adopting a shared and apparently modular characterization of Western LGBT organizing as a foil. Even if homophobia serves some local political purpose, then, that purpose has no necessary relationship with patterns of sociability and mobilization among local sexual minorities (for instance, Msibi
2011). Former Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi offered a classic (and revealing) example when he noted, “Now we are seeing men wear earrings to make it easier for them to be identified by other men.” Moi seems to have forgotten that many Kenyan men, including Maasai warriors, wear earrings.9

Finally, a set of scholars, including those in queer theory, do focus explicitly on oppression, but without conceptualizing political homophobia as we have described it (Sedgwick 1990; Warner 1993). Following Foucault, such approaches consider sexuality as an encompassing discursive structure that propagates normal and abnormal possibilities, elaborating, too, on the ways feminist and race theorists have unlocked the social power and meaning of gender and race. This perspective also extrapolates a critique of LGBT activists as bounded sexual subjects, pulled by, even as they contest, the forms of their marginalization, though often without naming homophobia’s practitioners as feminists sometimes did with misogynists. Included in this strain is constructivist or postmodern work on “queer” identities that meshes poorly with positivist policymaking (c.f., Duggan 1994: 4, 9-10).

For instance, Gayle Rubin (1993) embraces the turn to the social reproduction of sexuality, and condemns the essentialist politics that have been reborn today in defense of sexual minorities. She compels scholars to address the persistence of certain ideological formations that not only determine “normal” sexuality but create categories of forbidden or persecuted sexuality. Rubin examines both state prosecution and social policing of homosexuality to trace a genealogy of an oppression that is just as creative as it defines same-gender sexuality as it is destructive in its suppression of it. Nevertheless, she references “homophobia” only in passing, using it as shorthand for specific claims made against LGBT activists. As such, Rubin’s analysis of repression does little to help us understand why persecution becomes a state strategy, rather than just part of a broad

system of sexual subjectivity. Even as Sedgwick (1990) invokes homophobia much more directly, it remains similarly ambient, if powerfully so. Left out is a comparative understanding of why and how political and social leaders transform homophobia from a normalizing discursive structure into a hotly contested political object. While the state is heteronormative and masculine, heteronormativity and masculinity are not themselves “homophobic”; they might remain dogmatic yet uncontested (Boellstorff 2004) or they might as easily normalize some sexual minorities through the grant of marriage as block such equality (e.g., Bonthuys 2008).

**Homophobia: Mapping a New World Order**

While these disparate traditions each make meaningful contributions to our understanding of both sexuality and patterns of mobilization around same-sex intimacy, none directly addresses the process and implications of the global spread of politicized homophobia. Instead, we can start with Altman (1998:16), who defines homophobia as “all forms of discrimination/persecution/denial which are related to hostility to homosexuality.” The most ambitious attempt thus far to apply this framework to political processes is Murray’s *Homophobias* (2009b), although some contributors to that volume either bypass the active engagement of the state or problematize the very concept of homophobia as a raced and gendered construct. The result is an avowedly more anthropological collection, that troubles conventional wisdom on relations and structures of inequality without targeting the particularity and modularity of the new wave of political homophobia.

We attempt here to begin to remedy that gap—to trace the roots of homophobia as a state strategy, political movement, and transnational phenomenon with potentially critical impacts on sexual minorities’ experience and expression of sexuality. Our approach proceeds through four core dimensions: exhuming the purposeful, conscious dimensions of political homophobia, especially as practiced by state actors, and of the “fear of small numbers” that drives politicized homophobia
more broadly; examining the role of transnational influence-peddling and alliances; probing questions of collective identity; and weighing the legacies of colonialism for subsequent trajectories.

We start with the same assumptions as Murray and his collaborators—that homophobia is socially produced, variously manifested, and entangled in enduring patterns of gender, class, and racial inequalities (Murray 2009c: 3-4)—but then train our gaze on its implications as a fundamentally political phenomenon. First, we stress that homophobia is a purposive strategy, adopted by state and social actors. This cohort includes the obviously empowered elites in a given society, as well as close allies and associates of those elites. But we might also consider actors in the context of competition over state institutions and authority, including those seeking either to dislodge current leaders or curry favor with them. By focusing on the purposeful nature of political homophobia, we join with studies of nationalism that home in on the public and political manifestation of hate as it affects policy and politics (Snyder 2000).

This dimension sits apart from existing structures of normative sexuality that might independently curb same-sex intimacy. As performed both publicly and in private, normative sexuality often provides alternative avenues for sexual expression; at the same time, it rarely rises to the level of invective associated with political homophobia, given the fundamentally (inter-)personal rather than public stakes at issue. In fact, structures of normative sexuality often contradict the claims made by political homophobia and must change to conform to the new demands of the state. So, for instance, tacit permission of or willful lack of attention to private same-sex intimacy, or uncritical acceptance of a “third sex” as cultural status quo, falls victim to the codification and politically-charged standardization of gender and sexual roles across a range of temporal and regional contexts.

Second, comparative analysis reveals clear transnational patterns, not only in the diffusion of LGBT rights, as so much of the extant literature suggests, but at least as importantly in the
diffusing of homophobia. This process has profound predicates. Just in terms of brute demographics, in no context in the world are LGBT citizens the threat they are made out to be; the ubiquitous specter of married, child-rearing gay men or lesbians inflates a tiny, often meek and nearly- or fully-invisible minority, to nation-destroying stature, much as anti-Semitism has done, and frequently at the same time. Similar to the protection racket described by Tilly (1985), in which the state extracts taxes or other resources to secure its constituencies against dangers the state itself has conveniently defined, homophobic state and social actors create a gay peril against which they seek to organize state efforts. In the process, those elites secure their own privileges. Indeed, political homophobia often takes root before a critical mass of sexual minorities even begins to think of itself as “lesbian,” “gay,” or “transgender,” let alone to endow these identities with any collective, political significance, threatening or otherwise—since as Melucci (1995) as well as Mansbridge (2001) aptly describe, that “identization” process is far from automatic or assured.

This dynamic suggests our third point—one we cannot overemphasize. The diffusion of a certain set of human rights claims in LGBT organizing now is at best coincident with and in fact often follows the diffusion of a political homophobia. In many cases, it is the latter that situates same-sex intimacy in terms of Western concepts of LGBT community. Theorizing the spread and political nature of homophobia allows us to explore the implications of such preemptive homophobia—based as it is on borrowed images and rhetoric rather than local developments—on the development locally of mobilizable collective identities such as those of emergent sexual minorities.

In this way, while recognizing prejudice to be just as constructed and contingent in the global north as south (contra Murray 2009b: 7-8), we recast the trajectory of the social development of sexuality to take homophobia, especially in this modular form, as the initial point of departure. In other words (generalizing for the sake of argument), political homophobia incites a Western sexual binary, which in turn structures reactive organizing among sexual minorities.
through identities that draw from the Western binary. This framework differs from most theorizing about race—for example, the work of Anthony Marx (1998), who sees locally-prevalent notions of difference as deeply rooted in local histories and political struggles. Nevertheless, our approach precludes any linear progression from normative homophobia to LGBT liberation. Locally and globally, sexual minorities as well as veteran and emergent LGBT movements fight shifting, simultaneous wars against both extant structures of sexuality and newly mobilized forms of modular homophobia, their foils and foes at the same time domestic and transnational. That tension goes far to explain the constitutionalization of similar marriage laws in California and Uganda, as the same manifestation of a kind of politico-sexual eternal return.

Lastly, given the postcolonial contexts into which imported homophobia increasingly intrudes, we see value in considering colonial legacies specifically. Such legacies are hardly deterministic, but cannot be ignored: colonial laws and prejudices, as well as particular processes of anticolonialism and postcolonial nation-building, feed or quell politicized homophobia. Homophobia as state practice has been a legacy of (primarily) British colonialism, which compelled the adoption of sodomy laws across the empire (Sanders 2009; also Kaoma 2009). Furthermore, changing local sexual practices outside the West often responded to an emerging metropolitan conceptualization of sexuality in the nineteenth century, with significant changes in both sexual and gender practices (Najmabadi 2005). Later, national liberation leaders used political homophobia to stigmatize the West, without irony reinforcing or imposing Western laws against same-sex intimacy (Hoad 1999; Epprecht 2005; Lee 2011: 140). And throughout, local activists and sexual minorities in much of the world have been obliged to negotiate not only inherited hegemonic legacies with regard to sexual identity and behavior, but also a precarious balance between Western disdain for homophobic policies presumed drawn from Islam, and equally discriminatory US standards applied outside the US.
With these dimensions in mind, we return to our original empirical puzzle. Put simply, given that a majority of countries have decriminalized same-gender sexual relationships, many of them in the last decade, we might forgive those who see LGBT rights as on the march globally. Same-gender sexual intimacy (particularly between women) is legal somewhere on every continent and nearly everywhere on some continents, and stereotypes notwithstanding, there are no clear patterns among the holdouts. Muslim-majority Turkey lifted restrictions in 1857, as did Jordan in 1951. Vietnam and Cuba ended legal prohibitions decades ago. Fourteen countries in Africa have never had a criminal prohibition on the books, and fifty-four countries worldwide now also prohibit discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation, of which nineteen also prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity. Seven countries include anti-discrimination clauses in their constitutions (Bruce-Jones and Itaborahy 2011: 8-14).

On the other hand, we find simultaneously the paradoxical persistence and even resurgence of politicized homophobia. Sexual minorities in fourteen countries face a higher age of consent—including in the US states of Virginia and, in some circumstances, Nevada, as well as in Canada, notwithstanding provisions for marriage equality. Seventy-six countries currently restrict same-gender sexual intimacy by law. Of those, all or part of seven states deem these forms of sexual expression capital crimes. In this last category is Iran, which only adopted explicit prohibitions on homosexuality (beyond criminalizing fornication) in the 1990s, as well as Uganda, which just recently considered extending capital punishment to cases of “aggravated homosexuality.” Indeed, the last decade has seen criminalization strengthened, positive rights repealed, new restrictions adopted, and statutes manipulated to imprison sexual minorities and LGBT and HIV/AIDS activists, across the globe. Governments and their allies have used the power of both media and religion to launch broad campaigns against same-gender sexual expression.

Nor does transnational governance burnish the picture. In February 2011, the UN declined to reinstate ILGA’s full consultative status (granted in 1993, then suspended the following year after
a campaign by Christian-right activists), nor has the UN adopted a policy against the criminalization of homosexuality advanced by a diverse consortium of members. Yet, activists applauded when four months later, the UN narrowly passed a resolution introduced by South Africa merely to commission a study of discriminatory laws and violence against individuals on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, to be followed by a panel discussion and determination of a plan of action for redress. The resultant report, issued in November 2011, urged member states to take immediate legal or other steps to monitor and safeguard rights related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and for the Human Rights Council to “investigate and report” violations (Human Rights Council 2011: 25). Even US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s strident declaration at the UN Human Rights Council that December that “gay rights and human rights ... are one and the same” is undercut by the fact of LGBT citizens’ dubious de jure and de facto equality in the US itself.

Egypt occupies a pivot point in the story of contemporary political homophobia, not only as it surfaced after Mubarak’s fall, but for the Mubarak regime’s explicit prior use of homophobia to secure its legitimacy against the rising Muslim Brotherhood. To return to a notorious case, mentioned earlier: the men arrested in 2001 at the Queen Boat dance club faced charges of “debauchery” and “public obscenity.” These arrests occurred in a period of challenge to the regime, following the Muslim Brotherhood’s significant showings both in the 2000 parliamentary elections

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and in subsequent elections for the national Bar Association. Tortured with anal exams akin to “virginity tests” the military conducted on female democracy activists in 2011, these men were tried at a special national security court under emergency laws dating to the political crisis occasioned by Sadat’s assassination in 1981, while media published their names and addresses. Accused of undermining the state, two dozen were convicted. The Queen Boat incident demonstrates not deep cultural or religious tendencies—the crackdown was of unprecedented severity, and the Muslim Brotherhood remained a beleaguered opposition force—but the state’s use of homophobia to claim social legitimacy. The broadcast over state media of a TV miniseries based on the notoriously anti-Semitic Protocols of the Elders of Zion a year later followed the same pattern, using demonization to distract critics and drum up a “rally round the flag” effect.

As pivotal as the Queen Boat trials were, seen in a wider context, they followed, rather than set, a trend. Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, for one, has used homophobia as political strategy at key moments throughout his career in government. In 1997, facing rising discontent that culminated in a massive general strike, as well as a growing HIV epidemic, his government prosecuted the country’s first post-liberation president, by then long retired, on sodomy charges stemming from accusations based on his tenure in office. Again in the 2011 run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections, confronting international pressure even from neighboring states, Mugabe’s allies in an insurgent branch of the Anglican church battled regime critics in the church leadership in Zimbabwe over the ordination of openly gay men in the US. Similarly, Malaysian authorities twice (though not successfully) prosecuted former deputy prime minister and later opposition figure Anwar Ibrahim on sodomy charges in the context of direct internal and external challenges to the regime. Meanwhile in Poland, the nationalist Kaczyński twins exploited a small and embattled LGBT movement to build a right-wing party that challenged the European Union’s impingement on Polish

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sovereignty, earning then President Lech Kaczyński the sanction of the European Court of Human Rights in 2007 for banning LGBT pride events in 2004-05 as mayor of Warsaw. Poland even extracted a protocol allowing an opt out of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in the drafting of an EU constitution, justified specifically to free Poland from embracing those same-sex unions that European institutions have not, in fact, required of any state (O’Dwyer, forthcoming).14

Global neocolonial networks have also embraced state homophobia, as Kaoma (2009) describes. While Uganda has received much international attention for repressive policies fueled by a network of evangelical Christian missionaries, other states fit the same pattern, among them the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. International outcry secured a pardon for a gay couple sentenced to an extended jail term in Malawi in 2010,15 where same-sex relations between women were also newly criminalized the following year. Moreover, the notion of homosexuality as imported, which extends from myths of “moral imperialism” to those about foreign sponsorship of homosexual recruitment, is widespread. Conflation of homosexuality with neocolonialism entwines conservative Christian agendas with nationalist tropes, enhancing church leaders’ sociopolitical power—notwithstanding the genuinely imperialist interventions of US-based activists in Uganda, Liberia, and elsewhere.

The Theoretical Implications of Homophobia as a Target of Research

The study of political homophobia extends well beyond the experience of (homo)sexuality and its stigmatization or repression. Importantly, situating homophobia as part of the process of state and national self-definition and legitimation helps to explain how authorities create a “we” among the majority of citizens, at the cost of framing a minority as outsiders; such an approach highlights the politics and process of collective identity and the invention or imagining of political

14 The protocol, applicable to Poland and the United Kingdom, but for very different purposes, prohibits European courts from overturning domestic laws on the basis of the Charter.
traditions and practices that forge and enforce those identities (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 1991). Understanding how political homophobia becomes modular, and with what effects, adds to our knowledge, too, of collective action and social (counter)mobilization, and particularly of how similar discourses and policy proposals travel as tools and practices in political contention, including among states themselves.

And our focus on the interplay of formal and informal, and local and translocal politics, not only recognizes sexuality in context as a core part of political identities and agendas, but allows us to broach subtle dimensions of neoliberalism’s ever-increasing sway as sometimes a constraint and sometimes a compulsion on states and regimes. Amy Lind (forthcoming) particularly targets these dimensions, in examining the confluence of discourses of citizenship, political economy, sexuality, and “the family” in Ecuador. Although legal strictures on sexuality have been dramatically relaxed since the late 1990s, negotiation of neoliberal political and economic reforms has kept LGBT activists’ and adversaries’ focus on policymaking, extending to legislating, for example, what sort of family is entitled to full consideration by the state.

Such connections between neoliberalism and sexuality can seem like a perversion of Polanyi’s “double movement” (Polanyi 2001: 136), in which states that embrace globalization economically and otherwise as their ticket to “development” at the same time protect themselves from the domestic upheaval structural adjustment and integration invite, but by vociferously restricting bodies and cultural change instead of markets. Central to this project is maintenance of a particular order entangled with sexuality and gender, sometimes affirming locally-couched heteronormativity, other times transforming gender and sexual norms, yet always readied for battle against mythical foreign dangers known as “LGBT activists,” who stand as surrogates for the financial capital and international institutions that have compelled social transformation and limited the regulatory capacity of the state. LGBT forces both hypothetical and real are glossed as narrow special interests ranged against the common good, that represent useful “signifiers of the
‘crisis’ of liberal politics itself” (Duggan 1994: 2). As Bosia (forthcoming) and Korycki and Nasirzadeh (forthcoming) clarify, however, targeting non-normative sexualities and identities as part of a state project of conformity and control may proceed through, against, or absent liberalization; these processes, rather, are part of the machinery of state power, thrown into relief at times of sociopolitical strain on or of challenges to that power.

Decades of research have asserted and reaffirmed the centrality of gender and sexuality to our experience of political life. Yet that research has largely sidestepped the equally political challenges to those very identities, even as national leaders define the body politic as heterosexual, as political activists condemn as antinational those who flout authority, and as transnational powers press the adoption of ever more repressively discriminatory policies. Sexuality—its manifestations as well as its suppression—must be acknowledged as not just a worthy target for social scientific study, but as a truly central one, particularly amidst the steady onward march of present-day politics of violent intolerance and exclusion. Indeed, our focus on political homophobia activates oppression as a category of analysis that is produced and productive, remarkably transmutable as it is available to political and social leaders as a means of legitimation and control, but at the same time defining of sexuality in ways that constrain and construct a specific, Western-oriented response. In other words, a Western trope of political homophobia has seized the terrain. It is on that field that sexual minorities in locales around the world and globally are forced to do battle in their own defense.

Moreover, the limits to current research present clear policy implications. Political homophobia is subject to intervention in a way sexuality and gender identity have not been: the spread and calculated deployment of homophobia may be stemmed through domestic and international condemnation (including of the actions of a given state’s own agents) and isolation. The EU has been a particularly important force toward that end. EU pressure compelled Romania, for instance, finally to repeal the last vestiges of antigay legislation, whittled down over the course
of decades, in 2000. On the other hand, the EU is hardly omnipotent in this regard, as Polish repression demonstrates (See O’Dwyer, forthcoming, for further discussion of the implications of EU conditionality, particularly for post-Communist Europe.)

Or we can compare international responses to state homophobia specifically. While the US equivocated on a response to Uganda’s 2009 sweeping antigay legislation (dubbed the “kill the gays” bill), despite the importance of US funding to Uganda generally and specifically in the fight against HIV/AIDS, the UK and Canada issued staunch statements of reprobation and Sweden determined to cut all development assistance to Uganda. One reading might see such condemnation as quasi-imperialist, and hence itself reprehensible. However, that reading ignores both the fact that political homophobia is so often substantially imported—borrowed by segments within those countries with power to condemn rather than an organic local impulse—and the reality that without basic rights to dignity, livelihood, and self-realization, local activists may be powerless to contest political homophobia independently, without “boomerang” activism from abroad (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Using available tools of diplomacy and transnational activism to combat political homophobia—as a complement to defending the political rights of sexual minorities—clears a path for domestic activists to claim and enjoy rights in accordance with local priorities and mores, to develop their collective identities absent preemptive suppression, and to block the further diffusion and exploitation of politicized homophobia.

Through this approach, we hope to bring political homophobia to the forefront, with the explicit recognition that this prejudice is neither “natural” nor inevitable, nor will it simply fade into impotence with the passage of time. Rather, homophobia is a core instrument of governance in the contemporary world, all the more nefarious for being misunderstood.

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