

Notes on Sexual Relationships and their Political Recognition in an Intercultural Context

Mark Blasius

City University of New York (*in absentia* due to illness)
mblasius2005@yahoo.com

Presented by Rico C. Barbosa

Positive Action Foundation Philippines, Inc.

Early discussions about this roundtable informed my thoughts about it as a place where participants would discuss the distinctive issues of same-sex sexual relationships in the regions from which they—and the audience—hails. I thought of it as an opportunity for cross-cultural comparisons and intercultural sharing of experiences to give rise to new knowledge of same-sex relationships. Finally, the roundtable seemed a forum to address some of the problems that arise when same-sex partners come from different countries—problems of mobility and of cultural difference among the partners, of the choice of whether and how to reside together, for example—with the goal of recognizing these problems as political ones (with the word “political” broadly understood).

Let me begin with an anecdote. A gay man who lives in an Asian country recently said to me, “same-sex relationships and gay marriage are things that rich people can have; they’re not relevant to poor countries.” While one can understand this as reflecting cultural factors such as the importance of family ties complicated by great

consequences of disapproval in the absence of LGBT support systems and lack of private space that may keep same-sex relations “closeted”—in the western sense, I was shaken by the statement into a realization about the economics of homosexuality. My own realization was that perhaps the level of material well-being of same-sex partners and their possibility for economic independence from birth families (including, of course, the economic contribution they often make to them anyway) may shape whether their same-sex relationships will be socially recognized as having a sexual or erotic component and a social status relatively equal to heterosexual marriage and kinship. Without these circumstances of well-being enough for relative economic independence, how are same-sex relations that have a sexual component recognized legally and morally as distinct from (ostensibly) nonsexual close same-sex relationships that are given widespread social recognition? On the other hand, “gay marriage” is only one kind of relationship where having a sexed or gendered body, living in a socio-economic unit, and experiencing erotic pleasure are all bundled together. Recognizing that not all people who erotically love other people either fit into or want this pattern, what other options can our political imagination offer? What ways of living same-sex erotic relations in Asia can we draw upon in imagining, or re-imagining, the political economy of sexuality?

A second issue for this roundtable became clear to me recently when I met some women in Amsterdam involved called Love Exiles (www.loveexiles.org). They are same-sex couples who must live in a third country because neither of the partners can take the other to live in their own home country. This brought into focus for me the problem of statism—the primacy of the nation-state in determining both people’s life

options and their aspirations. In this case, it is how the nation-state, in coercing people's options and aspirations for a "home," harasses same-sex partners in their relationships of love and caring for each other. Love exiles have to think beyond their own nationality—putting themselves in exile due to their love—in order to create a new home, substituting their love of each other for their national identities and the supposed political guarantees of their respective nation-states. This eclipse of nationalism and critique of state power arising from intercultural same-sex relations of erotic love and caring has broader implications for politics, as well as relevance to the roundtable's specific focus on the political recognition of sexual relations.

Thirdly, my recent exposure to queer Filipinos in Amsterdam and to queer migrants in my other city of residence, New York, has shaped my thinking about this roundtable. These queer migrant communities, including other diasporic Asian queer communities, are transforming the single-issue politics of a sexual rights-based agenda through the influence of social justice as conceived in a global context by migrants. From my own experience, migrant queers often make coalitions with other diasporic communities to the extent that common experiences with interacting local and transnational forces that produce economic inequities, cultural misrecognition, and social inequalities that focus the police powers of the state upon them, serve as sources for activism. This gives the national agendas of LGBTSI activism a broader perspective and makes them more deeply based within ethnic communities in different national settings. (To be sure, the precarious status of migrants often limits the extent to which they can openly participate in such activism.) Further, the existence of diasporic queer

communities also brings into cross-cultural contact different conceptions of how to live in one's body, of the relation of one's gendered body to one's socio-economic life options, and of non-heteronormative kinds of pleasure people can give and receive with their bodies. This potential development of enabling conditions for sexual rights and their relation to other political issues, as well as a broadening of the meaning of sexuality through cross-cultural political work, seems central what has been termed "queer globalization."

Thus, for this roundtable, I have come to think of three types of political recognition of same-sex sexuality. One is recognition of the political economy that makes same-sex erotic relations possible in different locations in Asia. Another is recognition of the constraints of nationalism and statism on such same-sex relations and the political opportunities opened by intercultural same-sex relations between people from different Asian (and other) national cultures. A third type of political recognition involves how Asian queer diasporas within western societies are shaping LGBTSI political agendas in those societies, and how these diasporic communities may also influence agendas for the political recognition of same-sex relationships in Asia.

July 2005