

Homophobia: Reflections on the Way Forward¹

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In the field of social planning, a wicked problem is defined as a problem that resists attempts to solve it due to incomplete, contradictory or changing parameters. Wicked problems such as climate change, social injustice and gender violence share a number of characteristics that render them epistemologically “wicked”: formulation is elusive, right/wrong solutions do not exist, provisional solutions trigger new problems, models are not applicable. Homophobia, a persistent problem that resists solution and is difficult to define with precision, is indeed one of such wicked problems.

Recent scholarship on sexual prejudice and homophobia has advanced global understanding of Western and non-Western systems of gender/sexual oppression as well as the many subtle influences that shape attitudes to LGBTI individuals in an interconnected world. A phobic paradigm has largely been replaced with a more comprehensive, less clinical approach that considers a wide range of attitudes and behaviours in response to sexually motivated oppression. Queer theorists from a variety of cultural backgrounds have put forward notions such as “homonationalism” and “pinkwashing” that contribute significantly to current debates on the Global LGBTI Divide (friendly countries mainly in the West and Latin America versus hostile countries elsewhere).

Concurrently, scholars in Spanish and Latin-American Studies have contributed in no small way to global LGBTI debates, producing histories of cultural genres such as Queer Cinema and Lesbian and Gay Literatures in each of the major national traditions in Central and South America, Spain, Mexico, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. In Spain, Argentina and Mexico, queer scholars and activists are collaborating across institutional and national borders to contribute politically grounded theories as well as academically sound policies. These include some of the egalitarian marriage and gender-identity legislation that has been passed in Spain and across the Americas since 2005.

However, scholars in both fields are yet to adequately address the vexed question of the persistence (and rekindling) of homophobia in the new legal and social scenarios, which emerged with the apparent normalisation of homosexuality and same-sex families; in particular, the role of language habits and cultural discourses in validating non-traditional expressions of homophobia is far from having been properly described and understood. The urgency of multidisciplinary research on the numerous factors that underpin homophobic attitudes, expressions and behaviours is

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proportional to the growth of homophobic violence against LGBTI-identified individuals. This gap in knowledge is even more glaring as evidence keeps mounting to suggest that Western-led support to LGBTI groups in homosexual-hostile countries is backfiring, while friendly countries that stop short of legalising egalitarian marriage are perceived as contributing to perpetuating sexual biases.

Homophobia as a wicked problem requires, from the cultural field, a methodical study of the cultural drives that underpin new and emerging expressions of sexual prejudice in societies where affirmative legislation (such as same-sex marriage) has been passed in recent years, prompting a sense of full LGBTI normalisation and, in some cases, a boost of national pride. A study of cultural expressions of anti-homosexual discourses (in literature, cinema, TV and the press) should yield a robust understanding of the cultural dynamics of new and emerging forms of homophobia.

The legal consideration of LGBTI persons has become a deeply dividing issue of far-reaching consequences in the beginning of the 21st century. This global divide has been mapped against other international fault lines based on religious beliefs and economic development. In many countries, decriminalisation of homosexual acts and legalisation of same-sex marriage have sparked heated social debates which in some cases have had political consequences. As I draft this note, same-sex marriage is legal in 20 countries: 12 in Western Europe, 6 in the Americas, as well as South Africa and New Zealand. Gender-identity legislation and anti-discrimination laws have been passed in a larger number of jurisdictions around the world. Despite this, international whistleblowers such as the UN Human Rights Committee and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights warn of a global increase in rates of homophobic crimes. Alarmingly, homophobia grows not only in countries where same-sex couples and transgender individuals are discriminated against (such as the media-exploited case of Russia) but also in those where LGBTI individuals enjoy full legal rights.

The need to achieve a deeper, more nuanced, multicultural and comprehensive understanding of the cultural dynamics underpinning homophobic expressions has been long established in the literature (Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Epps, Valens, and Johnson González 2005; Puar *Terrorist Assemblages*; Martin *et al.* 2008; Tin 2008). This need is now beyond any reasonable doubt and it is further supported by police and medical statistical analyses that link hate speech to street and gang violence, gender violence, and suicide (e.g. Auestad 2015). In addition, a number of studies reveal recent upward trends in violence against LGBTI individuals globally, on both sides of the Global Divide (Imber 2009; Witthaus 2010; Trappolin, Gasparini, and Wintemute 2012).

Research on cultural expressions of homophobia in Spain and Latin America goes back a long way. The study of literary and cultural traditions using LGTBQ perspectives took off in the 1990s (Smith *Laws of Desire*; Carrier 1995; Foster and Reis 1996; Balderston and Guy 1997; Martínez-Expósito, *Los escribas furiosos*; Molloy and Irwin 1998; Mira 2004). In recent years numerous country-specific studies have emerged in all fields, including highly influential analyses of national queer cinemas (Foster 2003; Perriam 2013; Smith, *Mexican Screen Fiction*), television (Smith, *Contemporary Spanish*

Culture; Villarejo 2014), cultural studies (Epps, Valens, and Johnson González 2005; Pérez-Sánchez 2007; Lewis 2010) and social history (Dehesa 2010; Cleminson, Medina, and Vélez 2014). Many of these studies are theoretically robust and display an acute awareness of international debates on the legitimacy of anti-homophobic actions. Importantly, Latin-American queer theorists seem to be perhaps more attentive than others towards the intersectional dimension of homophobia; dialogues with postcolonial and decolonial theorists are frequent and often result in instances of "border thinking" (Horswell 2005; Mignolo 2013) and the use of Southern epistemologies (Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002). Emerging research on transgenderism, transsexuality and transphobia (Platero 2008; Lewis 2010; Preciado, *Testo Junkie* and *Pornotopia*; Peralta and Mérida 2015; Mérida 2016) is acutely aware of its transnational dimension as well as the role of language hegemony and its impact on the matrix of multiple oppressions that defines TT experiences.

Queer theorists have advanced the conceptual and notional framework of homophobia in several important ways. Since the term was first academically used by George Weinberg in 1972, its original clinical sense ("a phobia about homosexuals [...] which seemed to be associated with a fear of contagion") was gradually de-medicalised and variously qualified. Firstly, consensus on whether homophobia actually is a phobia necessitating clinical treatment has never existed; consequently, scores of academics and activists have proposed alternative nomenclatures for sexual prejudice that avoid the "-phobia" suffix. Secondly, the "homo-" prefix came under fire from queer quarter on the grounds that it did not properly account for distinct phenomena such as lesbophobia, gayphobia, biphobia or transphobia. These debates are rarely nominalist; their political clout is manifest in national parliaments that legislate on these matters as well as in media practices such as the 2012 Associated Press decision to advise against the use of the "-phobia" suffix.

While the term "homophobia" is clearly insufficient and perhaps misleading, it has gained broad acceptance in the literature as proposed alternatives (e.g. "heterosexism," "sexual prejudice") seem to either be even more insufficient or lacking in "aha effect." The reluctant survival of the term in current Queer Theory and LGBTI activism is somehow parallel to the maintenance of the term "homosexual." In a recent *festschrift* to mark the 40th anniversary of Dennis Altman's landmark essay *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971), a group of Australian queer theorists reflected on the multiple legacies of gay liberation using the expression "After Homosexual" (D'Cruz and Pendleton 2013) not only in its chronological sense but implying also two other meanings of the preposition "after": the logical (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*) and the metaphoric (*à la manière de*). Thinking homosexuality today, it is implied, is indelibly marked by previous thinking, but central notions such as "the homosexual" have ceased to be markers of radicalism, central ideas such as "liberation" have been overtaken by contenders such as "normalisation," and, more importantly, new internet-fostered intersectional and international alliances have emerged that render obsolete the predominantly white, Western model (Altman 2013). Homophobia has undergone a similar process of re-semantisation and gradual emptying of meaning, starting with the evacuation of its clinical denotation and pathological connotations. Despite all its perceived deficiencies, the term "homophobia" has been repeatedly instrumentalised by queer activists and academics and has become an immediately recognisable notion in key reference works such as the 2003 French-

language *Dictionnaire de L'Homophobie* (English translation Tin 2008), the Australian history of homophobia (Robinson 2008), and public-impact actions such as the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (since 2004 observed on May 17 in some 120 countries and particularly strong in Latin America, Spain, the Netherlands and the UK).

Queer theorists have also developed a broadly accepted taxonomy that describes different aetiologies. Notions such as “internalised homophobia,” “social homophobia” and “institutional homophobia” are now well established and make up the core of benchmark homophobias against which new, emerging modes can arguably be described. Importantly, a variety of institutions that practice or condone homophobic practices have been described, many of which are locally and nationally relevant. In the Spanish-speaking world the cultural influence of the Catholic Church is particularly strong and has been studied in detail (Lugo Rodríguez 2006; Talvacchia, Pettinger, and Larrimore 2014; Taylor 2014). Yet, most QT analyses of religion-driven homophobia to date stop short of describing regional and local nuances such as the influence of leftist thinking on Liberation Theology and, more recently, Pope Francis’ public statements on the pastoral care of homosexuals.

Regarding the broad notion of “homophobia” and the cultural discourses it articulates I would suggest that homophobic practices and discourses in the West are growing in complexity to adapt to a changing legal environment. Often appearing to be non-violent, tolerant and even accepting, they ultimately belong to an interlocked matrix of oppression that seek to perpetuate asymmetrical power relations, as per the intersectionality paradigm. A preliminary scan of these practices allows for at least four new kinds of homophobia.

Micro-homophobias: everyday, low-intensity, non-physical violence against homosexuals, bisexuals and transgender individuals, along the lines of the notion of micro-machismo as developed by Bonino for the Madrid Centre for Masculinity Studies (Bonino 2004). Expressions of homophobia have rapidly changed in last 40 years, from broad and undisputed acceptance, even celebration, to the current trends of pathologisation and criminalisation. With legal and cultural changes, the expression of homophobia is morphing into new modes, displaying quite interesting parallels with the ways in which machismo and gendered violence are morphing in ways that avoid legal definitions. While some analysts define micro-machismos, I would suggest to put forward the notion of “micro-homophobia,” along the lines of “micro-” or “post-machismo” (low-intensity acts of non-physical, utilitarian, covert, coercive or critical violence that are hardly visible to the legal system). This is one of the possible ways to analyse domestic violence in same-sex households (Renzetti 2014).

Use of gay-friendly discourses to enforce normalising agendas: taking as a model the logic of Altman’s “After the Homosexual”, it can be argued that in the age of the rapid adoption of anti-discrimination and same-sex marriage legislation an “after-homophobia” paradigm must indeed be called for. There is an urgent need to document anti-homonormative practices that denounce LGBTI policies aimed at reproducing heteronormative values such as gender binarism and

monogamy. The proposition that enforced normalisation can in some cases degenerate into endo-homophobic behaviour must be fully tested (Martínez-Expósito, "Homofilia y homofobia").

Appropriation of gay-friendly discourses for homophobic purposes: the notions of "pinkwashing" (posturing as gay-friendly in order to obtain soft-power or reputational benefits) and "homonationalism" (rationalisation of migrants and refugees as "primitive") (Puar, *Terrorist Assambalgas* and "Rethinking Homonationalism") to denote not only states and corporations but also individual attitudes and behaviour. Nation branding strategies in Spain and Argentina (and Mexico to some extent) exemplify this kind of appropriation of a civil rights agenda for national and in some cases partisan interests. More broadly, the notion that homosexuality is part of the national identity or partakes of the nation's self-image (numerous instances of which can be found in particular in the case of Spain) is frontally opposed to the long tradition of constructing it as foreign, malignant influence or import. These two inverse discourses (homosexuality as ours versus homosexuality as theirs) contain important clues on contemporary homophobias.

Catholic discourses on homosexuality represent an interesting area in which traditional and emerging homophobic expressions are tightly intertwined. The role and impact on national and global LGBTI debates of Argentinean Jorge Mario Bergoglio as president of the Argentine Episcopal Conference (2005–2011) and then as Pope Francis (2013–) deserves scrutiny.

There is no need to emphasise the urgency of this kind of reflection. Homophobia is a "wicked" problem in a double sense: it is a problem that resists solution and it is a malignant, obnoxious problem that continues to poison the lives of millions around the world.

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