

SEXUALITY POLICY WATCH
ASIA REGIONAL DIALOGUE ON SEXUALITY AND GEOPOLITICS
Hanoi, April 10-12, 2009

Summary and Commentary on Proceedings
by
Rosalind Petchesky and Radhika Ramasubban

Introduction

The Asia Regional Dialogue on Sexuality and Geopolitics presented a fascinating challenge on a broad theoretical level to older modes of reasoning that are static, fixed in space and glacial in time. Its organizers suggested instead that we think in terms of “interconnectedness and flows” and chose four empirical themes that reflect more fluid, cutting-edge frames through which to reimagine sexualities in the rapidly changing Asian context: *Viagra vs. Condoms*; *Negotiating Multiple Identities*; *Sexualities in the Tech Era*; and *Migrant Labor and Sexual Politics*. The rich presentations and discussions at these four sessions—each organized around one overview paper and two short papers—revealed sexualities as *lived* through a remarkable variety of circuits and flows that slice through the macro structures and institutions of state, religion, science/technology and economic relations, partially fragmenting and destabilizing those very structures. Moreover, the discussions pointed to new potentials for sexuality as, on the one hand, a domain of progressive social transformation and, on the other, a site of further individualization, alienation and exploitation (to use some still relevant Marxist concepts).

Cutting across all the topics listed in the agenda, we observed a series of tensions that invite further investigation:

- individualizing v. socializing trends
- pleasure v. danger
- agency v. regulatory control
- permeable, porous v. resealed borders.

None of these paired terms is mutually exclusive; rather, they signify coexisting possibilities that emerge from four kinds of flows we shall tentatively call (A) Floating Discourses, (B) Floating Identities, (C) Floating Technologies, and (D) Floating Bodies and Borders. In turn, as we saw frequently in the papers, each of these flows reconfigures, and is configured by, power relations of gender, ethnicity, race, class and the State, so that even while they float across blurred borders, these flows encounter deliberately erected barriers to their self-expression.

A. Floating Discourses

In the session on “Viagra vs. Condoms: Unequal Partners,” what continually resurfaced were ways that market, medical and public health discourses have been redefined in the era of

neoliberal globalization but also deployed to resuscitate older norms of gender, ethnicity, race and sexual expression. On a macroeconomic level, the Viagra syndrome reflects how medical practice, especially for privileged groups, has become thoroughly marketized and privatized (compare medical tourism). Pharma industries, so eager to seek out new markets for new (‘glamorous/pleasurable’) technologies, show no interest in improving proven and efficacious existing technologies (condom). On a symbolic level, Viagra serves to reinforce traditional patriarchal norms by reviving the erect male penis as the primary signifier of sexual pleasure.

In contrast, condoms represent ways in which both public health and the state operate as regimes of governmentality for the poor, the marginalized, sexual minorities and People Living with AIDS. Insofar as condoms have come to signify danger, risk, disease and non-pleasure, they are symbolically classed and racialized, while some of the ads for condoms we viewed are clearly meant to reinscribe heteronormativity. We saw as well the active role that religious authorities play here; along with PEPFAR (the US program for distributing funds for HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention) and national health regimes, we find Vatican, Hindu right and Islamic leaders condemning condom distribution and stirring up old moral panics about inciting the alleged “promiscuous” tendencies of the underclass.

B. Floating Identities

The presentations in Session II, “Negotiating Multiple Identities: Sexual and Other Selfhood Issues,” gave us a vibrant landscape of lived sexual variability, fluidity, and shifting and reinvented identities that blur gender and sexual categories. This kaleidoscopic panorama of sexual and gender diversity contrasts sharply with the deadening fixity of identity categories and prompts an ethical question: Do some forms of recognition, especially medical and legal, come at the price of losing this fluidity and variability? Certainly official recognition can seem a positive step, even liberating in some cases, such as the recognition (in Indonesia) of the right to change one’s name, religion or even gender on official forms. On the other hand, official definitions of fluidity might turn moral self-image on its head, as when HIV positive women who become mothers are denied the right to see themselves as “good” women.

In all, however, as the discussion amplified, it would seem that identities and identity politics trap us in a contradiction from which it is difficult to escape. On the one hand, law, human rights mechanisms, and biomedical practice cannot tolerate ambiguity or in-betweenness; they require categories—clear legal subjects (of discrimination and violence, or rights) and defined diagnostic groups (e.g. “gender dysphorics”). With sufficient resources, individuals can access medical approval and technologies for sex reassignment surgery or reproductive technologies that facilitate biological parenting by gay men, lesbians and trans people—a brave new world of possibility. On the other hand, how does this help the trans person whose risk of cancer makes hormones dangerous or who doesn’t want surgery? Indeed, social movements too push us toward distinct, mono-identities for organizing purposes, or to obtain donor funds. The reproduction of fixed identity and body categories flies in the face of the instability and variability of sexual desire and gender expression, not only among individuals but also across the life cycle. It denies the in-betweenness and flux that so many bodies actually live.

C. Floating Technologies

The Dialogue’s third session, “Sexualities in the Tech Era: Progress or Pathology,” disclosed a whole new dimension of shifting boundaries and sexual possibilities introduced by digital technologies and cyberspace. Here the tensions between individual and social, private and public, virtual and real geographies/identities, isolation and connectedness, freedom and surveillance—and ambiguities about what these designations even mean in the digital age—became particularly salient. Digital technologies – internet, video and, above all cell phones, the most cheaply and widely accessible technology across Asia – as used in socializing, social networking and performance, are acting as sluice gates for qualitatively and quantitatively enhancing flows and connectivities across sexuality landscapes. Cell phones are creating “new political assemblages” beyond the family, state and laws, allowing their users to do illegal things legally and to be private in public spaces. With them, people of diverse sexualities, youth, female migrant workers and left-behind wives of migrant workers are overcoming loneliness and gaining new entry points to pleasure, self-determination, a sense of agency, and mutual protection against violence. Above all, they are utilizing the technologies to advocate for citizenship agendas across physical borders and spaces as well as social borders of gender and age, changing the power relations within families and the terms of sexual negotiation.

Nevertheless, our discussion in this session also raised a number of caveats and doubts. For example, we remarked the potential use of cell phones as tracking devices to control the sexual behavior of girlfriends, wives and young people, even as we recognized cell phone cameras could provide testimonial evidence against perpetrators of harassment and police brutality against queer folks and sex workers. On a more existential but nonetheless troubling level, what does it mean that the self, with all its complex identities, becomes embodied in a portable e-device—one so easily replaced, lost or stolen? All this suggests that, in regard to the spectrum of sexual freedom and sexual oppression, ICTs are not one thing or another. They can reinforce traditional gender binaries and forms of sexual control, but they can also open up new terrains for political organizing as well as adventuring and social networking.

D. Floating Bodies and Borders

Floating (migrant) populations have long been stigmatized and scapegoated as vectors of disease and contamination. This stigmatization is typically accompanied by prohibitions against marriage or “race mixing” and contradictory stereotypes of migrant ethnic “others,” both women and men, as either desexualized or hyper-sexualized. The fourth session, “Migrant Labor and Sexual Politics: Known and Unknown Linkages,” provided telling examples of these forms of marginalization and exclusion as well as calling our attention to one of the most striking paradoxes of neoliberal globalization: Its tendency to make borders more permeable and porous gives rise simultaneously to the resealing of borders in the wake of hysteria and moral panic about migrant “hordes.” Such panics over migrant flows—including internal migrants marked as ethnic minorities (as in Vietnam)—are always racialized and result in new “states of exception”

through a range of surveillance policies such as brothel raids, rehabilitation camps, and other forms of detention and confinement.

Yet here again we found a realm of intense regulation and scrutiny was also riddled by cracks and openings for possible self-expression and even organizing, as when Filipino lesbian migrant workers in the Gulf States evade strict rules and domestic confinement, finding outlets for social connectivity and sexual pleasure—sometimes with the aid of cell phones. The session highlighted the need to develop effective campaigns for open borders and transnational human rights citizenship that would be more inclusive of migrants as workers as well as sexual citizens. To meet this formidable aim we need to deconstruct the work that racialization of the state and the nation still does to fortify national identity and a belief in the superiority of local elites, keeping citizenship an exclusive, exclusionary status. It remains true—more than ever through the discourse of “trafficking” that strips cross-border migrants of agency and dignity—that (1) “alien” migrant populations help to consolidate nation-states and population hierarchies; and (2) these divisions, produced through the regulatory mechanisms of biopolitics that Foucault exposed, invariably involve the intersections of sexuality, gender, race and ethnicity. So the challenge is to link demands for sexual, reproductive and health rights for migrants to a wide range of citizenship rights that would break down not only divisions of gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality but also the dichotomy between “citizen” and “stranger.”