



‘Pretend to be straight!’ What’s wrong with the world?

written by Antu Sorainen
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On February 26 [the Guardian reported](#) of new UK Home Office guidelines according to which the country would send back openly homosexual asylum applicants to Afghanistan with the encouragement to ‘act straight’. The news circulated widely in the social media, awakening outrage among interest groups. The Guardian quotes Heather Barr, a senior researcher at [Human Rights Watch](#),



saying: 'Living a life where you are forced to lie every day about a key part of your identity, and live in constant fear of being found out and harassed, prosecuted or attacked, is exactly the kind of persecution asylum laws are supposed to prevent.'

She has a point: this would be a standard definition of persecution engraved in infinite human rights instruments at international and national levels. More specifically, the UK Home Office [guidelines](#) state the following- after summarizing at length how homosexuality remains both taboo and source of persecution in Afghanistan: "Whilst space for being openly gay is limited, subject to individual factors, a practising gay man who, on return to Kabul, would not attract or seek to cause public outrage, would not face a real risk of persecution."

This wording does surprise - it feels very difficult to believe that the UK Home Office would issue such guidelines today. Only moments earlier the momentum within diverse international political arenas was strongly behind advancing LGBTI rights - with the likes of the UK operating on the front lines.

I have followed lobbying efforts for LGBTI rights from the vantage point of UN human rights standard setting and monitoring since the early new millenium, with particular focus on Finland. I wish to concretise the shift that I have witnessed via the following glimpses. The first glimpse is from a hearing in 2003 at the Finnish parliament where a large public seminar was arranged to discuss the country's first official Human Rights Report.

In the hearing a representative of an LGBTI rights NGO made a lengthy intervention outlining numerous flaws in Finnish legislation, including forced corrective surgery on intersex children. Yet this statement was largely ignored, and virtually erased from the eventual report - with only a fleeting mention under one paragraph concerning minority groups. This side-lining echoed the marginal role that LGBTI issues had more broadly in the Finnish context - the country for example only just legalised same-sex marriage a few weeks ago.



During the early millennium LGBTI rights were very marginal also internationally, and their status as issues covered by UN human rights instruments remained uncertain.

The next glimpse is from an informal NGO briefing in 2007 at the Palais Wilson in Geneva during a session of the UN Human Rights Committee – the expert body monitoring how state parties comply with the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The briefing introduced a document called '[Yogyakarta Principles](#)' – namely the findings of an influential international expert meeting on how existing human rights provisions addressed also LGBTI rights.

When placed in the wider trajectory of UN advocacy for LGBTI rights, these principles embodied a significant shift: earlier efforts within the UN had been largely geared toward a new binding covenant focusing explicitly on LGBTI rights. This was an understandable goal considering how much the UN human rights treaty portfolio had expanded including, for example, the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) adopted in 2006.

The Yogyakarta Principles argued, instead, that no new covenant was necessary as LGBTI rights were already covered by numerous existing UN human rights treaties. These included, so the argument continued, numerous provisions for discrimination and treatment of minority groups, which the Principles then detailed. One can easily be persuaded by this argumentation – most UN human rights covenants are so broad in their wording that one can easily locate vastly different interests under their provisions. Simultaneously this shift in advocacy strategies speaks of something else: that there simply was not sufficient international momentum behind a new treaty targeting LGBTI rights explicitly.

In reality the story entails numerous additional details. Yet for the sake of space I will merely conclude how this shift in advocacy proved tremendously successful as I discovered via my next glimpse. This time we are in year 2013, during which I followed three full sessions of the Human Rights Committee as a part of [my](#)



[ongoing ethnographic study.](#)

For diverse reasons in the interim period I had a broader pause in my study of the contemporary human rights phenomenon, and was thus approaching the field with a fresh gaze. The shift at the Palais Wilson was significant: LGBTI rights had become a staple in the issues raised by the Committee. As I inquired on the matter, one Committee member remarked that the Committee now made a point to address the issue with every single state. Further, LGBTI issues had also become something that virtually all states raised in their opening remarks.

In other words, by 2013 LGBTI rights had moved from being almost non-existent in 2003 even in such a 'model human rights country' as Finland (Halme-Tuomisaari 2010), to the very core of UN human rights monitoring as a whole.

Why is all this relevant considering these new UK Home Office guidelines? It speaks of a sharp turn in policies around LGBTI rights – of a dramatic departure from an established state of affairs that a mere diplomatic nano-second earlier would have appeared unthinkable. One can just picture it: the UK state delegation beginning its opening remarks in front of the Human Rights Committee, with 'the international' gathered at the Palais Wilson once again to testify of the global progress of human rights. The UK delegate would emphasize in the opening remarks how improving LGBTI rights remains a paramount concern for the state – and upon being asked to elaborate what this means in regards to rejected homosexual asylum seekers, respond: 'oh, we just tell them to act straight'!

One can almost feel the effects of such a diplomatic stink bomb even via such an imaginary scene. In other words, all this would be utterly unthinkable. It would constitute a dramatic breach of what has over the past decade become accepted as the established state of things, as the embodiment of 'progress' – and also a direct breach of the by-now customary interpretation of numerous provisions of the ICCPR. Why are we witnessing this proposal by the UK Home Office?



It can be read to suggest dramatic unpredictability, almost a sliding of sorts of an ‘international morality’ – for lack of a better world. It forms yet another testament of the dramatic shift that we have seen over the past few years in international diplomatic jargon and political decision making, often echoing the continued rise of nationalistic policies and the mainstreaming of racist discourses.

It is worthwhile to highlight two further examples with similar tenor – both of which would also have been unthinkable only a short while back. The first one is the proposal for a constitutional reform in France in 2016 to alter nationality clauses and allow for nationality to be retroactively deprived of French nationals convicted of treason ([Halme-Tuomisaari 2016](#), in Finnish). The second is Trump’s by-now infamous executive order – challenged by courts – to ban entry into the US for individuals originating from seven muslim-majority countries, including green card holders in the US. Both of these initiatives – like this new UK Home Office policy – speak of attempts to actively, retrogressively challenge, even change the law so as to annihilate protections that we have come to expect as the norm.

These initiatives are not isolated as we know. Rather they are, beyond a doubt, symptomatic of far wider and more profound shifts away from policy and law making that over the past decades has commonly been seen to embody ‘progress’ – or at least what was accepted as forming the backbone of diplomatic language, nevermind reality. Similar prognosis emerged from the [Virtual Edition on the Anthropology of Human Rights](#) of [PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review](#) , which I co-edited with [Josh Clark](#) in 2016. The edition summarized articles discussing human rights published in PoLAR over the past two decades, and invited their authors to add afterwords to connect the articles to the present day.

With virtually no exception the afterwords conveyed the same message: that things had grown worse in regards to the societal position of human rights in every way.



One does not need to look far to see indications of this development – of a sudden and unexpected normalization of political talk that simply appeared as unthinkable, and increasingly also new policy guidelines and legal decisions that would have awakened outrage. The moral compass of our age seems to be fundamentally unhinged, spinning wildly in all directions. It is chilling to think where we are heading.

COMMENT by Antu Sorainen

Jeffrey Weeks, a significant figure in gay & queer studies since 1977 said recently (4 March 2017) in Liverpool Sexing the Past Conference that “human rights really basically changed everything. While in the 1970s we were only a few hundred activists – and very exited to be among that small number – now we are talking about millions, in terms of gay identities. A common identity gets a generation energized, to do stuff – but it is not the ‘truth’. The younger generation of course has its own fresh views.”

But how fresh or welcome are some of these new views? For example, the Pride marches are more and more about the police and military marching in huge troops, and people cheering at them. What is the politics of cheering at army and police presence in heart of a struggle for being something that the state control forces often have helped to put down – and still keep doing so in many instances. Is it about homonationalism or something more complicated, hopefully more critical, to cheer for the public space that enables coming out also for those who serve in these traditionally homophobic forces? How is the discourse of human rights linked to this phenomena?

Unfortunately, conservative and even racist voices are increasingly loud also in lesbian and gay communities. The fantasy of “belonging” which the human/sexual rights discourse has fed if not provided has created a new ugly monster as its shadow effect – the lesbian/gay bigotist. The history of the long hard struggle to gain sexual rights is easily forgotten, and, as a consequence of the denial of this



history of political struggle, many now think that it is “a natural” privilege to belong to (even if only still on the fringes) of the charmed circle as a white Western gay or lesbian. Out and proud has come to mean to some out conservative, nationalist, racist and proud of all that.

Jack Halberstam wrote in [his recent blog review on the film *Manchester by the Sea*](#) that it is “a film where we finally understand why the white man is sad, why everyone else is bad and why despite being sad because everyone else is bad, he learns to be a dad — all attempts to make diversity mean something, to resist systems that criminalize communities of color while representing white crime as law and order, to rethink sex, are quickly dismissed as identity politics, political correctness or authoritarian feminism”.

Maybe, to help us to understand how lesbian/gay bigotry is happening, we could modify Halberstam’s first sentence to act as a new queer device. This might be needed in order to try to come in terms of who are the so called “alt-right” white gay and lesbian Trump allies, such as [Milo, who publicly assaults trans* people](#), for example.

Even if alt-right is largely (still) an US thing, and the LGB bigotry attitudes in the Nordic and European countries are less visible, they are worryingly in increase. Therefore, the appearance of Milo and his ilk call urgently for an analyses of why the white lesbian/gay is sad, why “other” queers save the white middle-class lesbians/gays are bad, and why - despite being sad because all these other queers are so bad - s/he learns to be reproductive; a mom or a dad or a ally of the most nationalist forces against any other ways to be queer than the marrying and reproductive one (to paraphrase Halberstam). These alerting trends are anything but “fresh” and “natural” new generation’s response and attitudes we should “understand”. To think like this is about being ignorant and not-interested in queer world-making, in terms of more diversity, equality and social justice.

At the same time than Milo appeared near Trump’s regime, human rights have been THE crucial issue for Putin and his politics of neo-traditionalism, in



attacking the Russian gay community. Trump is clearly offering a leeway for Putin's ideologies and interestingly challenging the core US discourse on individual rights. Further, the increasing UK discourse against queer asylum seekers and immigrants is also highly alarming. Are we witnessing how the two imperialist edges bordering the continental Europe - Russia and the UK, both encouraged and supported by the US - are perverting, attacking or turning against the values that have been highlighted as the core of the rhetorics of "Europe", the anti-war geopolitics and the humanist tradition EU has been flagging on, at least in committee reports and official talks? Even if this idea of Europe has already been badly tainted and fragmented by the EU member state policies themselves.

We need to redescribe our critique towards EU and the US by taking also an account of the bigotist white lesbians and gays. The newly-gained rights to be "included" sexually in some legal regimes creates homonationalism, as some people have started to imagine queer whiteness as their "natural" safeguard and are expressing this in the political arenas, both queer and straight. However, their imagined white-queer-inclusive states would no doubt sacrifice them in the first possible instance for the war, or to use them as scapegoats in order to gain exactly such political targets which would do not include them once some bigger goals have been reached.