22. Human Geographies: Bodies, Cultures, Societies

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Swiss Association for Geography (ASG)

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22.1

Backlash or reverb? What undoing binary understandings of ‘opposing movements’ can tell us about heteroactivism in Ghana

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In September 2019, the Ghanaian public caught wind of Ministry of Education guidelines on how to include comprehensive sexual education (CSE) in the national school curricula. This sparked a media firestorm. At the height of the controversy, political and religious leaders held that year’s Africa regional conference of the International Organization of the Family’s World Congress of Families in Accra, 31 October and 1 November 2019.

In light of these events, I wrote this piece to contribute to the growing literature on ‘heteroactivism,’ as new forms of ‘pro-family’ and ‘LGBT’ activism proliferate, shifting sociosexual landscapes across the globe. I study how Ghanaian political and religious elites use heteroactivism to shore up political capital, while tying post-colonial and anti-imperial nationalism to ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Gosine, 2009). The majority of work done on heteroactivism has concentrated on Australia, Canada, Ireland, the U.K. and the United States (Browne et al., 2018; Nash et al., 2019). Extending the focus to Ghana is an attempt to reveal how the call to substitute ‘homophobia’ with the new imperative of ‘inclusion’ is also observable in the heteroactivism seen in non-Western contexts, albeit shaped by national realities. As these shifting landscapes act as vectors for competing sexual politics, in this article I ask, what are the roles of religious (inter)national organizations that promote ‘religious freedoms’ on the one end, and (inter)national NGOs that promote ‘sexual/LGBTI rights’ on the other, in shaping debates about changing norms?

I offer up the notion of ‘reverb’ to draw attention to two sets of observable conundrums, as actors attempt to facilitate, resist and/or endure these rapid social changes: the first set is the apparent similarities between practices and political framings of both LGBT advocates and heteroactivists, who seek to achieve different political outcomes. The second are how seemingly diametrically opposed worlds can exist at the same time, and in close proximity: where in one milieu, actors vehemently present LGBT as a category which jeopardizes the country, and in another, actors curate safe and highly visible digital spaces that accommodate queer representations. My exploration of these themes is an attempt to move beyond common notions of ‘Africa’ as a ‘singular place’ (Williams, 2011) that is uniformly homophobic, while offering a more complex alternative to the binarity of the ‘opposing movements’ framing.

REFERENCES


22.2
Sexual Politics in Post-Racial Europe

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Postfeminist discourses surrounding sexuality operate significantly through race and the post-racial agenda. Women of colour take on particular roles in postfeminist sexual cultures. They serve as an embodied ‘prefeminist’ projection. For example, in male supremacist discourses, women in non-Western contexts are considered desirable for (allegedly) being in touch with their natural (hetero-)femininity, as they are deemed unaffected by feminism. Moreover, racialized women are represented as providers of passion and excess. This paper speaks to the way bodies play into intersectional dynamics of inequality and marginalization by including the analytical category of race in examinations of postfeminist sexual cultures. It will do so by arguing that the postfeminist script of female sexual freedom entails unexamined racial underpinnings. Through a discourse analysis of media representations from the UK, Italy and Switzerland, I will illustrate how racialized femininity is valued as a particular commodity in European postfeminist discourse. I will examine how through exoticization and hypersexualization of racialized femininity, women of colour become liminal figures that signal the limits of desirability. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate the value of supplementing the analytical category of postfeminism with the category of race when analyzing ‘sexualization’ in Europe.
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Title:
Feminism and street prostitution policies: comparing neo-abolitionisms in France and the United Kingdom

Abstract:

Since the adoption of the so-called Nordic model in various Western countries, abolitionism has shifted its focus from the abolition of all forms of legal regulation of prostitution to the abolition of prostitution itself, considered as a harm done to all women. ‘Neo-abolitionism’ refers to this new form of abolitionism, which also involves feminists in the project of criminalising the clients of prostitution and not the seller, who is considered a victim. The relationship between feminists and prostitution abolitionism is not new; it has a long and variegated story with radical feminism. However, the recent renewal of public policies dealing with street prostitution in abolitionist contexts almost systematically involves institutional feminists. Prostitution policies have thus integrated the institutional feminist agenda in a lot of Western countries where gender equality public institutions have been established, often in contexts of a strong division between feminists on the issue of prostitution. Sex workers’ rights activists strongly oppose these neo-abolitionist measures promoted by abolitionist feminists, who often are represented at the forefront of the institutional promotion of these policies. Hence, the institutionalisation of feminism and its forms seem to be at the heart of the questions raised by these neo-abolitionist reforms.

This communication will compare the different forms of abolitionism in France, where the 2016 law criminalising the clients of prostitutes was implemented, and in the United Kingdom, where two forms of abolitionism co-exist. Indeed, in Great-Britain (England, Wales and Scotland), prostitution is legal but related activities are crimes, whereas in Northern Ireland, paying for sex has become illegal since 2015, according to the Nordic end-demand model. Feminist abolitionist activists in Great-Britain claim for the application of the Nordic model throughout the country, taking the example of Sweden, France, or Northern-Ireland. The comparison of the French and British contexts allows for an analysis of the role of institutionalised women’s and feminist agencies in the introduction and implementation of these neo-abolitionist reforms criminalising the clients of street sex workers. Indeed, the fieldwork results have shown that feminist public institutions have played a central role in the French adoption of the end-demand model enacted in 2016. The analysis draws on ongoing fieldwork in both contexts with institutional, associative and activist actors involved in these policies. It provides a comparative analysis of feminist public policies on street prostitution, that often resonates with urbanist projects of gentrification and ‘genderfication’ of the cities (Van den Berg, 2013).
22.4
Geneva – A queer city?
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While Geneva benefits from different public policies oriented towards LGBTQ+ rights along with a grounded activist milieu, one can ask to what extent this makes a city more inclusive towards LGBTQ+ people’s and communities’ needs and desires. Indeed, whereas most European/Western global cities have a designated gay neighbourhood, Geneva does not. Rather, LGBTQ+ venues are disseminated throughout the city, questioning the possibilities of queer space itself. Hence, in a context of critics towards pink washing neoliberal policies, the question remains on the ways in which the shapes of cities contribute to enhance intimate senses of belonging for LGBTQ+ people. This paper will offer preliminary reflections on the conceptualisation of queer spaces and queer cities applied to the Geneva case. Drawing on queer scholars who have pointed exclusionary effects of heteronormativity towards LGBTQ+ people and consequent marginalisation in terms of citizenship, this paper will complicate these ideas by questioning how sexuality takes part to senses of belonging and citizenship depending on the places within the city.
22.5
Housing in the Margins: Negotiating Urban Formalities in Berlin’s Allotment Gardens
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SwissGeoscience Meeting 2020

Critical shortages of affordable housing force people into housing precarity across the globe. Drawing from my forthcoming book, Housing in the Margins (Hilbrandt 2020), this presentation explores unruly housing practices and their regulation in the context of the German housing crisis. Through ethnographic research on the ways in which Berliners dwell in allotment gardens despite a law that prohibits housing at these sites, it illustrates how these gardeners negotiate the possibilities of residency with the local bureaucracy, gardening associations and amongst themselves. I pursue this project with empirical and theoretical objectives: studying empirically how people negotiate ways of staying put in allotment gardens and how boundaries around their dwelling practices are drawn, I aim at understanding the production and governance of housing precarity in a relatively rich European city. In theorizing these processes of governance, I seek to unveil the possibilities of conceptualizing informal housing in the context of bureaucracies that are commonly understood to regulate thoroughly, coherently, and according to fixed rules. This analysis highlights the contested terrain of enacting regulations and the exclusions that these negotiations entail. Building on postcolonial theory, anthropology of the state and critical legal geography, the presentation draws attention to the power of negotiations in the governance of urban space.
Worker cooperatives’ potential to transform migrant women’s social position and agency: a case study in New York City

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For many migrant women in New York City, structural discrimination and administrative hurdles complicate access to well-paid and safe labor. Worker cooperatives have been shown to reduce precariousness and economic exclusion of marginalized groups. However, while much is known about the worker cooperatives’ economic impact on workers’ lives, other social effects remain far less explored. The present research contributes to filling this gap by examining the change in the social position and agency of migrant women in their everyday lives after joining a worker cooperative. Combining an intersectional perspective with Bourdieu’s different forms of capital and the concept of self-empowerment, I analyze changes in everyday lives of migrant women who are members of nine different cleaning- or care-worker cooperatives in New York City. A participatory research approach gave access to data sources, including interviews, participant observations and a quantitative survey. The findings reveal that worker cooperatives have empowering effects on migrant women beyond the sphere of paid work. While the additional unpaid workload as co-owners of cooperatives represents an extra burden for many migrant women, they now have better wages, more flexibility and safer workplaces. Furthermore, they acquire different leadership skills, enlarge their social network beyond their ethnic communities and earn increased respect as co-owners of a business. Through worker-ownership, migrant women increase their economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital, which enables them to exercise more agency not only in their paid work life sphere, but also in their families and during leisure time.
22.7
Slow scholarship, better science: Political horizons and practical steps to remake the university

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The slow scholarship movement combines a general critique of current academic norms and institutions with concrete demands and practical suggestions to remake our universities. It emphasises reflexivity, positionality, intersectionality and care as part of our everyday practices in academia.

In the first part of this workshop, we briefly introduce the roots and principles of the slow scholarship movement, and the critique of the logic of competition, the precarisation of academic labour and mechanisms of exclusion it formulates. In the second part, we discuss strategies and initiatives towards slow scholarship (e.g. the Better Science Initiative) and invite participants to share their own experiences and suggestions in an open workshop format.
Emotional geographies of virginal blood

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Worldwide, a heteronormative understanding of femininity requires female bodies to perform virginity at one point in their lives (Abboud et al. 2015). In the cultural context of Kyrgyzstan, a compulsory performance of virginity is often tied to the heterosexual wedding night (Kim 2020) when many women meet the successful performance of the female virgin body, and thus bleeding body, with relief. The trauma of not bleeding, however, reveals the force of the emotional labour at stake in performing virginity and in dealing with one’s sexuality in light of patriarchal ideas of a desirable and thus marriageable female body.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on virginity and gendered and sexualized violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 and inspired by feminist geographic scholarship of the body (e.g. Longhurst 2001, Suyarkulova 2016, Tolia-Kelly 2010) and heteronormativity (e.g. Hubbard 2008), I unravel the emotional geographies of virginal blood. Ambivalent emotions of fear and pain and happiness and pride produce, accompany and normalize performances of virginity and illustrate the power of virginal blood to regulate female bodies mobility in and access to social spaces. Virginal blood, I argue, becomes a core element in normalizing a heteronormative cultural and social order in Kyrgyzstan.

REFERENCES

Migrant counterspaces – Challenging labour market exclusion through collective action

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Abstract

Recent debates within migration studies and labour geographies emphasise the need to acknowledge migrants’ agency and its ability to challenge regulatory migration regimes and precarious work relations. Following this perspective, this paper examines how migrants in Switzerland create a collective “counterspace” in response to difficulties in accessing the labour market. Methodologically, the paper builds on qualitative ethnographic data from two research projects with a migrant organisation. Taking this organisation as an example, we analyse to what extent its members’ collective strategies challenge labour market exclusions mobilized by the state, employers, and society at large. Furthermore, we explore ambivalences in the organization’s strategies with regard to their immediate impact on migrants’ professional lives and existing structural relations. Our findings highlight the important social and relational dimension of migrants’ spatial agency.

Keywords: Migration; Labour; Agency; Counterspaces; Switzerland
22.10
Shooting in the dark – dealing with uncertainty in a digital work environment

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Graphic designers connecting to clients via online work platforms such as 99designs or Upwork spend a good deal of their time doing anything but creating designs. To get to a point where they can execute a paid gig and to do so successfully, they perform a great amount of unpaid work. This includes, for example, working on their online profile, structuring their schedule, and sorting through design briefs. What is more, emotional work goes into handling their own stress and managing relations with clients. In my presentation, I will reflect upon graphic designers’ work using online platforms against the backdrop of invisible work (Star/Strauss 1999), emotional labour (Hochschild 1985), and free labour (Terranova 2000). I argue that the diverse challenges designers on online platforms face are all related to dealing with uncertainty and that this uncertainty is an integral part of working on an online platform. Uncertainty in this context stems from a highly volatile work rhythm, being confronted with an overwhelming amount of information, and platform mechanisms that are not transparent for workers. These insights are based on narratives by designers I interviewed in Bengaluru, India in February and March 2020 as well as an ethnographic analysis of several online work platforms.

REFERENCES
Contested care: Organising and negotiation practices in transnational live-in care arrangements in Swiss private households

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In Switzerland, live-in elderly care has become an increasingly common way to fill gaps in long-term care. Similar to other Western European countries, a market for home care services has emerged, with specialised agencies recruiting care workers from Central and Eastern European countries for temporary ‘around-the-clock’ care in private households. This labour market is highly segregated by gender, ethnicity, and class, and is shaped by complex power relations. Despite the challenging conditions of their working arrangements, their isolation in the private home, and constrained labour rights, live-in carers in Switzerland have successfully managed to organise and to politicise commodified care work in recent years. Drawing on two empirical examples, this paper examines how care workers try to enact change on various levels – from publicly raising their concerns to everyday negotiations in the household. In doing so, it shows how the gendered geographies of the live-in model create specific spaces of negotiation and contestation and how the care workers challenge the arrangement by transcending previously firm boundaries: between the ‘private’ and the public sphere, between the conception of care as labour and care as social relation, and between traditional unionism and community organising.