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Sexuality, Globalization and Ethics

Some Reflections

Tom Claes

Abstract

In his pioneering work *Global Sex* (2001), Dennis Altman argues that globalization deeply influences our understandings of and attitudes to sexuality. However, the very notion of globalization itself sparks heated controversy. Different types of globalization theories single out different processes and markers of globalization and hence point to different markers of globalised sexualities, often leading to different evaluations of this emerging 'global sex.' But the ante, so it seems, is upped, for morality and ethical thought are fundamentally embedded in the ways of life they are practiced in. If globalization has fundamentally restructured human ways of living and is deeply affecting our worldview, then we will have to think through our old and, perhaps, tired (sexual) ethics. A sexual ethics of globalization, therefore, has to be complemented by a critical study of ethics and morality under the conditions of globalization itself. Only then a global sexual ethics can emerge.

Key Words: Ethics, Sexuality, Globalization

Sexuality, Globalization and Ethics

1. Introduction

The title of this paper, 'Sexuality, Globalization and Ethics' betrays perhaps a bit of hubris, an overestimation of one's own intellectual capabilities, or, even, just plain stupidity. Probably all three are to a certain extent accurate. It is always dangerous to put three big words in the title of your talk. And how can you fit an exhaustive discussion of three big words like these in such a limited paper such as this one? The answer, of course, is simple: you cannot. Therefore: I won't even try. What I want to do is of a more limited nature. I will formulate some observations and thoughts on how different types of globalization theories single out different markers of 'globalized sexualities.' These different theoretical 'lenses' have an impact on our evaluative stances towards what is taken to be 'globalized sexuality,' often siding with the general evaluation of the globalization processes that are linked to the theoretical perspectives. Differences qua theoretical model and orientation are important in framing what 'globalized sex' *is*, in determining its main characteristics.

But these theoretical differences are not the only ones that are important. Preestablished moral agendas are important in this respect as well. These agendas steer not only what we take 'global sex' to be, but also prefigure its evaluation. In this paper I will only briefly touch upon this issue and focus on the relations between the theoretical perspective and the identification and evaluation of globalized sex. A more exhaustive treatment of the relations between globalization, sexuality and ethics should at least integrate both. But given the limited time and space I'll postpone a discussion of the way moral agendas interact with the definition and evaluation of global sex to a later occasion.

I will end this paper with some observations on what all this could mean for our ethical reflection in general, and for our ethical thinking on sexuality in particular. Or, differently put: *how might globalization affect the way we think ethically about sex and sexuality now?*

2. Sexualities and Globalization

The *Locus classicus* for any discussion of sexuality and globalization is Dennis Altman's pioneering publication *Global Sex*. Published in 2001, it was probably the first book-length treatment of the way in which globalization impacts on sexuality. Altman carved out a research agenda build around his basic argument that "changes in our understandings of and attitudes sexuality are both affected by and reflect the larger changes of globalization."¹ These changes, according to Altman, reflect the wider social changes brought on by globalization. Sexuality takes on and reflects some of the characteristics and changes resulting from globalization. According to Altman, these changes are "simultaneously leading to greater homogeneity and greater inequality." He identifies capitalism as the main driving force behind all this. Global capitalism engenders a global - transnational and transcultural - consumer culture, that is being "universalized through advertising, mass media, and the enormous flows of capital and people in the contemporary world."²

Altman presents a rich and balanced overview and discussion of the many ways in which globalization processes change our sexual lives and influences the social organization and meanings of sexuality, creating new opportunities and benefits, but at the same time also leading to new dangers and wrongs. Globalization, e.g., creates new

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possibilities where sexual identities are concerned, it contributes to the decline of 'traditional' - and often oppressive - ways of regulating sexuality, and brings new and exciting economic opportunities often benefiting women who now have more chances of becoming economically independent. But these developments stand in harsh contrast to the obvious downsides of globalization. We witness an upsurge of defensive traditionalism all over the globe resisting the new and often foreign ways of living and organizing our sexual lives. And poverty drives thousands of women into forced prostitution, often as victims of ruthless trafficking practices controlled by organized crime.³

Sexuality lies at the core of our lives and of modernity. This is no different and perhaps even more so in a globalizing world. But globalization itself is a highly contested phenomenon, stirring up heated debate and controversy. Often examples from the sexual domain are mobilized as illustrations of both the beneficial opportunities as well as the dangers and costs of globalization itself. The perceived characteristics of this 'global(ized) sex(uality)' are important to how globalization itself is evaluated. Altman, therefore, is right when he observes that "[i]ncreasingly sexuality becomes a terrain on which are fought out bitter disputes around the impact of global capital and ideas."⁴

'Global sex,' then, stirs controversy. Some welcome at least some aspects of this globalizing sexuality, others tend to stress the negative impact of the process of globalization on sexuality. These diverging attitudes towards and evaluations of 'global sex' are related to what one takes to be the dominant characteristics and processes driving globalization, thereby providing a lens for identifying what are taken to be the dominant characteristics or 'markers' of this globalized sexuality. In the next paragraph

I will heuristically sketch out some of these links.

3. Globalization Theories and Sexuality

A. Globalization - the phenomenon

In order to specify and evaluate the impact of globalization on sexuality, we have to have an idea of what globalization is about, about what are its defining characteristics, its dominant driving processes, and its foreseeable direction and possible outcomes. But this, in itself, is already a daunting task, for “the idea of globalization is a source of great controversy: not just on the streets but in the academy too” and “[w]ithin the academy, no singular account of globalization has acquired the status of orthodoxy.”⁵ Colin Sparks correctly remarks that “[c]ommon sense has it that it is the defining characteristic of contemporary society” and he goes on noting some of the obvious reasons for this, like the vast and rapidly growing flows of money, goods, services and people around the world, the fact that modern technology enables us to effortlessly communicate and interact with people around the globe, etc. “There is agreement,” he states, “that globalization means greater interconnectedness and action at a distance, but there is vigorous debate on other theoretical questions.”⁶

Defining globalization is a tricky business. Just for the sake of sketching out some of the linkages between sexuality and globalization, I’ll stick with Manfred Steger’s definition and take globalization to refer to “a multidimensional set of social process that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of

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deepening connections between the local and the distant.”⁷

Steger, not claiming originality, also make a useful distinction between different dimensions of globalization. He identifies three basic dimensions, i.e., economic, the political and cultural.

The economic dimension of globalization has to do with the fact that the world has become one global market, dominated by transnational corporations and organized on capitalist principles. The global economic world (order), furthermore, is increasingly deregulated, orchestrated by transnational economic institutions. It also means that local economies and entrepreneurs increasingly are integrated within the global economic system.

The same processes of heightened integration are at play in the political dimension. It is assumed that - up to a certain level - the importance and power of traditional nation states has eroded. Although many doubt whether this leads to a real ‘demise’ of the traditional nation-state, it is probably safe to say that nation-states increasingly are functioning within a world order that limits their economic options and manoeuvre space. Global economy rules not only the world, but also national economies, thus curtailing the possible impact and power of traditional political institutions. But not all is left to the global economy. In a globalized world, all kinds of international and transnational political institutions gain influence and curtail the political and judicial options open to nation-states. Also, we witness a rising global impact of non-official international organizations. Both types of organizations and institutions, by the way, often seem to have attained a certain level of ‘moral’ authority that surpasses that of the more traditional national political institutions. Increasingly

these institutions advocate ideas about cosmopolitanism and sometimes even of world governance, or, on a lesser scale, of world citizenship and of responsible global stewardship on an ecological and social plane.

The third dimension of globalization, the cultural dimension, has to do with processes that impact on issues of meaning and values. The explosion in ICTechnology and the rapid global spread of mass media and access to information make themselves felt all over the world. People everywhere can, in principle at least, know what is happening everywhere else. It also means that ideas, alternative life-styles etc. become more visible to all. One of the more contentious aspects is whether this cultural globalization leads to the emergence of a 'world culture' (whatever this would mean) and whether this is a good or a bad thing.

If this is what globalization is about, how, then, do theories about the phenomenon relate to sexuality?

B. Globalization - the theories and their descriptive and evaluative lenses

The 'vigorous debates' referred to earlier and the three dimensions discussed in the previous paragraphs are important to how precisely the impact of globalization on sexuality is portrayed and subsequently evaluated. Sparks makes a useful distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' theories of globalization.⁸ 'Weak' theories are according to Sparks a development of existing theories concerning the impact of capitalism on a global scale. These theories are continuity theories. Their main explanatory paradigm is an economic one. 'Strong theories,' on the other hand posit a more radical qualitative difference between the global(izing) and the pre-global(izing) world. We could label

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them as discontinuity theories. Without necessarily discarding the importance of the economic dimension, they tend to focus on cultural processes as the most important levers for and outcomes of globalization.

These two (ideal-)types of theories identify different processes as the main motors of globalization and hence will also highlight different dimensions of globalization as the most salient one. Subsequently, they will also tend to single out different aspects as the defining characteristics of the global, or globalizing, world. This, in turn, has an impact on how globalization and its effects on sexuality - and hence also 'global sex' - will be evaluated.

Continuity theories

Adherents to a version of the continuity theory come in two varieties, depending on the overall appreciation of the capitalist processes they identify as the main motor for globalization. On the one hand we have those who strongly oppose the mechanisms and effects of capitalist economic globalization. On the other hand we have the neo-liberal cheerleaders who, on the whole, applaud economic globalization. I start with the latter.

The neo-liberal variant has a favourable attitude towards and appreciation of globalization. Neo-liberals champion the spread and intensification of free trade and the loosening and dissipation of national (economic) barriers. They, among other things, refer to an alleged increase in democracy (political dimension) worldwide and defend the beneficent effects of the heightened access to world wide information and greater mobility as the result of the globalization of capitalism. They welcome the emergence of layers of 'global culture' since this means the creation of the global consumer.

Anti-globalists, on the other hand, play up the negative effects of all this, like the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor, the devastating effects of capitalist consumption and consumerism on ecology, and the destruction of local cultures and ways of life. They will tend to portray the rise in inequality, the rise of world poverty and the creation of the 'global poor' and the 'global underclass,' forced and unforced economic migration, a cultural unification based on the reshaping of citizens worldwide as consumers (of mainly Western) goods and services orchestrated by transnational companies that cannot be controlled (if they wanted to) by national governments and local authorities, etc. as some of the main, and mostly negative, outcomes of globalization.

'Globalizing/globalized sex' to the anti-globalists will predominantly mean the breakdown of traditional ways of (sexual) life, social bonds and cultures with its accompanying negative effects on (sexual) health and social cohesion; the creation of a global rich(er) class versus the global poor where the rich can and often do enjoy availability of wider sexual repertoires and consumerist pleasures, while the poor become the global (often migratory) proletariat - or perhaps even worse, since the global spread of HIV/AIDS in many developing countries has led many children parentless - leading to a rise in forced prostitution and trafficking. Women, to state but the obvious, are by far the worst off of all this.

Neo-liberal continuity theorists may point towards the growing distribution of wealth and to the world-wide spread of opportunities, both economically as well as politically and culturally. Instil democracy first - by economic and political pressure - and the rest will follow is their adagio. Sometimes this indeed means that the political,

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economical and cultural participation of women all over the world has taken a turn for the better. Campaigns for gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights - brought together by the WHO under the heading of sexual health - in many places around the globe do seem to have an effect. They can even point to international and local initiatives for countering the spread of HIV/AIDS as examples of the beneficial effects of globalization.

Discontinuity theories

Discontinuity theories will tend to focus on the (possibly) more positive effects of globalization. Not only has the world become a global market, it also has become a smaller place. Increased possibilities of mobility and worldwide communication structures have enabled us to come into contact with and travel to places in (nearly) the whole world. There no longer is a hiding place - what happens somewhere in the world can become global news in an instant. This also means that information can be disseminated in an instance and that new and exciting alternatives to traditional ways of living become known worldwide often leading to the formation of new identities and 'experiments in living'. Discontinuity theories also appreciate the post WW-II changes in political structures and point out the (alleged) demise of the nation state, accompanied by the rise in the authority of transnational worldwide organisations and their agendas (UN, NGO's, etc.). These transnational networks, furthermore, are linked to local grass-roots movements promoting, e.g., human (and women's) rights, etc. Discontinuity theories will stress the growing global awareness of both globalization itself and of its consequences and mobilizing possibilities - be these good or bad.

There is a further distinction possible within the discontinuity theories, depending on the stance taken towards cultural globalization. The world has come within our view. But this ‘view,’ of course, is often controlled and orchestrated by powerful multimedia corporations and furnished by a consumerist paradigm. This raises questions about possible standardisation (often voiced as warnings against ‘Americanization’ or ‘McDonaldization’) but also about the possible emergence of a ‘global culture.’ At the same time, cultural globalization also refers to processes of resistance and hybridization. An emerging ‘world culture’ – or what could be labelled as such – does not necessarily mean the eradication of local and non-western cultures. Indeed, it often has as a side effect the bolstering of the local cultures. We should therefore think about ‘global culture’ more in terms of a new global layer of communication, practices and meaning to which people from all over the globe can relate to.

Transcribed to sexuality this gives us different markers of globalizing sexualities: non-heterosexual and hybrid sexual identities become a possibility and reality for many; (international) programs and projects directed at securing sexual and reproductive rights and sexual health are blooming, often serving as anchor points for even wider emancipatory agendas, etc.

What are the respective merits and demerits of the ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ theories and their take on globalization and global sex? Needless to say, both perspectives are up to a certain point accurate. The weak and strong theories Sparks refers to are ideal types of theories. Most globalization theories combine the economic, political and cultural dimension. Altman, e.g., although putting economic processes and effects centre stage,

combines all three in his analysis.

4. The Globalization of Sexualities - some examples and disputes

The globalization of sexuality, the emergence of 'global sex' generates some real, substantial and important moral questions. Let me briefly introduce two discussions that have gained momentum in the wake of globalization: the first on the legitimacy and moral standing of 'commercial sex' and the second on the normalizing impact of development programs aimed at promoting sexual health.

A. Prostitution vs. Commercial Sex - Trafficking vs. Migration

Libraries can be filled by books, articles, position papers, legal documents, TV series, movies, reportages etc. on the issue of sexual trafficking. No one really denies that the forced deportation of people into sexual slavery is a very, very bad thing - except, of course those who benefit from all this. But this does not mean that the reaction towards what has been come to be labelled as 'trafficking' is as uniform. Two semantic pairs stand in stark opposition in the whole of this discussion. On the one hand we have a discourse in which the notions of 'prostitution,' 'trafficking' and 'exploitation' take center stage. On the other hand, a growing body of literature and studies emphasises notions like 'sex work,' 'migration' and 'agency.' The *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children*, adopted by the UN in 2000 did not end the debate on trafficking, but rather invigorated it. Both 'camps' are engaged in heated debates, not only about the facts of the matter (how many, from where to where, modalities, etc.) but also about the terms (see, e.g.,

Agustin's attack on the very notion of 'trafficking' itself), about the most realistic and opportunistic ways of dealing with these issues, but also about moral aspects of prostitution versus sex work. No doubt, these discussions and often very heated debates are informed and prefigured by the preexisting moral agendas I referred to earlier. But also the sheer magnitude and growth of the issue, and the complexity drive the discussion forward.

One could say that the issue of trafficking has challenged the western (often hypocritical) moral consensus towards prostitution, leaning towards mild acceptance and soft legal regulation. Prostitution became more or less tolerated in many western countries. But things started to change when the prostitutes started pouring in from all over the globe, and sex tourism started to show its more ugly side. Surely all this couldn't be a good thing, and surely, we should help the (mostly) women to escape their predicament? Of course, but the discussion became more complicated when research by, e.g., Agustin, Kempadoo and others showed the cultural, economical, and social complexity and the ideological backgrounds to these issues.⁹ Factual discussions about trafficking and prostitution became discussions on the moral standing of sex work, its relation to international migration, poverty, and so on. The narrow focus on the sexual aspect perhaps clouds our reaction and policies towards it. We should, so Christien Van den Anker argues, widen our perspective discussing these issues, including and taking into account wider issues of migration and trafficking for other 'industries' than the 'sex industry' as well.¹⁰

As said before, nobody will doubt the real misery associated with forced prostitution. But globalization and its effects have shown us that in a globalized world

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sometimes simple moral categories and agendas won't fit the complexity of reality. 'Global sex,' in this case in the form of 'prostitution' or as 'migratory sex work' stretches many of our established moral convictions and reasonings to their limits.

B. Sexual Health

Discussion on sexual health are another example of how globalization destabilizes moral certainties and fuels moral discussions I'll use an example from the literature on sexual health and development to briefly illustrate this. In 2004 the WHO published a progress report on reproductive health research entitled "Sexual Health - A New Focus for WHO." The WHO writes that "if they are to achieve sexual and reproductive health, people must be empowered to exercise control over their sexual and reproductive lives, and must have access to related health services."¹¹ Recognizing the all-importance of poverty as one of the decisive hampering factors in the possibility of enjoying sexual health, the WHO also points to the need of 'comprehensive sexuality education' in order to further sexual health.

Again, nobody doubts the benefits of sexual health. But just as is the case with prostitution vs. commercial sex, there are some important ethical issues and discussions associated with this 'new focus' and the programmes devised for implementing and promoting it. In 2005, e.g., Vincanne Adams and Stacy Leigh Pigg published *Sex in Development*. The volume brings together articles discussing how local moral 'investments' in sex are shaped by "science, medicine, technology, and planning rationalities."¹² In their introduction, Vincanne and Adams raise questions about how development programs focussing on sexual and reproductive health attempt to create a

universal ‘normal’ (their terminology) sexuality. The contributors to the volume all address the “attempts made to objectify sex and sexuality in the name of health and well-being.”¹³

These are real and important issues. The balancing of on the one hand, respect for and ‘preservation’ of traditional non-western moral economies of sex, and on the other hand, responding to the real need and demands for sexual health in all its forms and consequences, is a hard issue to tackle. If it is the case that an ‘objective’ or ‘medical’ and surely ‘western’ view on sexuality gets globalized through these programs, where does this leave us regarding the respect for non-western traditions? What is the cultural pay-off of these well-meant initiatives? These are hard question, and answers to them may divide the large group that in general welcome cultural globalization.¹⁴

5. Ethical Reflection on Sex in a Global Context

All this raises question about how to ethically reflect on and deal with these and related issues. Without any doubt, globalization and its effects on sexuality has contributed to intensifying the scope and often depth of standing moral issues and discussions regarding sexuality. It has also perhaps generated some new and perhaps even more pressing ones. But globalization may yet have an even more important effect on our ethical thinking, for the ante, so it seems, is upped. If morality and ethical thought are fundamentally embedded in the ways of life they are practiced in and if globalization has fundamentally restructured human ways of living and is deeply affecting our worldview, then we will have to think through our old and, perhaps, tired

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(sexual) ethics.

A sexual ethics of globalization, therefore, has to be complemented by a critical study of ethics and morality under the conditions of globalization itself. Only then a global sexual ethics can emerge.

In my view - but I don't have the space to elaborate on this further - many contemporary moral sexual agendas and theories with which we confront the pressing issues surrounding 'global sex' are based on local (meaning, in this case, western) and often restrictive 'concepts of sex' that get universalized. Furthermore, we often tend to overplay the importance of the sexual aspect (as we westerners recognize and identify it) which often leads to ignoring local sexualities, identities and meanings, and is often counterproductive to dealing ethically as well as socially with the issues. We need to move from a sexual ethic to a global ethic in which sexuality plays an important role but where sexuality issues are dealt with from a wider perspective than sexuality as such.

In 1974-1975 Bernard Williams published an article on what he called 'the truth in relativism.' He argued that relativism is not an option when for a group living in outlook S1, another outlook S2 becomes a 'real option' signifying among other things that for those living within S1 going over to S2 is a real, meaningful and (psychologically) sane possibility, and when going over to the other outlook does not preclude the rational comparison between the outlooks and the rational acknowledging of one's going over to the other outlook.¹⁵

'Global sex' and the moral issues associated with it make it poignantly clear that the world has become a global arena for 'sexperiments.' Cultural as well as political borders are dissipating and the upshot of all this is that a simple, or 'vulgar' as Williams

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it once called it, relativism is no longer an option, thus forcing us to think through not only ethical issues but also issues of how to do ethics itself.

Notes

1. D Altman, 2001, *Global Sex*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p. 1.

2. Altman, *Global Sex*, p. 1.

3. D Altman, 'Sexuality and Globalization', *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2004, pp. 63-68.

4. Altman, *Global Sex*, p. 1.

⁵ D Held and A. McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization*, Polity, Cambridge, 2002, p. 2.

6. C Sparks, 'What's Wrong with Globalization?', *Global Media and Communication*, vol. 3, n. 2, 2007, pp. 133-155.

7. M B Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, p. 13.

8. Sparks, 2007.

9. Agustín, Laura María, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007; and Kempadoo, Kamala and Jo Doezema, *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*, Routledge, New York and London, 1998.

10. Ch Van Den Anker, 'Trafficking and Women's Rights: Beyond the Sex Industry to 'Other Industries'', *Journal of Global Ethics*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2006, pp. 163-182.

11. WHO, 'Sexual Health - A New Focus for WHO', *Progress in Reproductive Health Research*, no. 67, 2004, p. 2.

12. V Adams and S L Pigg (eds), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality and Morality in Global Perspective* Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2005., p. 1

13. V Adams and S L Pigg (eds), *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality and Morality in Global Perspective*, p. 1.

14. For a different take on these issues, see, e.g., A Cornwall, S Correa and S Jolly, *Development with a Body: Sexuality, Human Rights & Development*, ZED Books, London & New York, 2008.

15. B Williams, 'The Truth in Relativism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 75, 1974, p. 217. .

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182.

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