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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice
Thought Paper

‘Envisioning Economic and Sexual Justice Spatially’

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Q1. ‘From your activist and/or academic position, what are the most pressing concerns surrounding the intersection of economic and sexual justice? With respect to which concrete issues does that intersection appear most relevant?’

How can we square sexual justice with economic justice? How can we integrate a concern for sexual and economic justice in our work when they so often appear incompatible or unrelated in academic discussions? Material concerns often appear highly marginal within sexual politics, as Richard Goldstein in his polemic against the Gay Right has contentiously and provocatively claimed ‘poverty is the only dirty secret left in our community’ (2002: 19). More surprisingly, this marginality of the economic has often been reproduced in academic research on the transnational politics of sexuality as Geeta Patel (2006: 25) has argued: ‘Too often the literature on transnational sexualities portrays sexuality as being constituted outside capital, outside political economies, outside transnational or global finance’.

The intersection of economic and sexual justice is highly relevant within media and academic discourses around the pink economy that have constructed lesbians and gay men as an affluent niche market in late capitalism. Guy Hocquenghem (1993: 93) has argued that: ‘the anti-capitalist movement can often be pro-family, and indeed anti-homosexual’. Erotophobia and homophobia on the Left is widespread. It may be less explicit and more understated nowadays but it has not gone away completely. This legacy has meant that some political economic accounts of gay male consumption and the pink economy have been problematic and even harmful. For instance we see David Evans’ highly voyeuristic depiction of what he terms the ‘virilisation’ of gay male consumption with a particular emphasis on the paraphernalia associated with leather and sadomasochism contained within his pioneering book on the material basis of sexual citizenship (Evans, 1993). Despite these concerns about the way erotics and sexual politics have been integrated within some political economic analyses, there are studies in which economics and sexuality are integrated more productively. Lee Badgett has powerfully critiqued dominant discourses about the pink economy - debunking myths of gay and lesbian affluence, arguing that: ‘the real economic difference [of lesbians, bisexuals and gay men] comes from the harmful effects of employment discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual people’ (1997: 70). Others have argued that the myth of lesbian and gay affluence is dangerous in playing into the hands of the Right as Hardisty and Gluckman (1997:218) have noted: ‘Recently, a new stereotype has crept into the antihomosexual literature of the right. In addition to being portrayed as immoral, disease-ridden child molesters, gay men and lesbians are now described as superwealthy, highly-educated free spenders’.

Stereotypes of affluence therefore fuel notions that gay rights are ‘special’ or additional rights, and that lesbians and gay men are a privileged minority in no need of legal protection against discrimination on the basis of homophobia.

Q8. ‘What scale is helpful to you as you approach these questions? The national? The global? The regional? The local? The South-South? Something else? To whom do you look for responses that will secure sexual and economic justice? The state? Transnational social movements? Bretton Woods institutions? Civil society organizations?’

This question invites discussion of the spatial in relationship to the intersection between economic and sexual justice. Given the considerable spatially uneven nature of economic and sexual practices we need to consider *spatial justice* in relation to economic and sexual justice. Reflecting on the spatial politics of social justice, Don Mitchell (in Brown et al, 2007: 9) has stated that: ‘I can never decide if the fact that everything has to take place *somewhere* is so obvious as to be banal or quite profound’. Recognition of the significance of space and place within everyday life means that space should not be merely seen as the backdrop, or canvas across which economic/sexual practices take place, but rather that such practices are constituted in and through space. Space is not simply a passive container. For instance consider the notion that the city is a generator of eroticism as Henning Bech argues: ‘The city is not merely a stage on which a re-existing, preconstructed sexuality is displayed and acted out; it is a space where sexuality is generated. What is it about the city that stimulates? Surely that altogether special blend of closeness and distance, crowd and flickering, surface and gaze, freedom and danger’ (1997, page 118). The dramatic growth of research on queer globalization and transnational sexual politics in recent years has brought questions of spatial scale to the fore within issues of sexual and economic justice. Here it is important to emphasise as many geographers and others have argued, that scales are not absolute factual taken-for-granted entities – nested containers like Russian dolls, existing in a clear relation to one another. Rather, we need to recognise that the construction and production of scale is a dynamic political process. For instance consider how within conservative nationalist discourses, non-normative sexualities have been constructed as non-local threats to the national scale of governance. In research on queer globalization and transnational sexualities some scales have been privileged (e.g. the global, neighbourhood); while others have been neglected (the national, regional, small cities). Some writers are now arguing that we need to go beyond scalar thinking – and focus instead on networks – examining the connections between nodes within transnational (and other) networks. This draws attention to the flows and links between transnational actors in different locations.

The spatial politics of economic and sexual justice can be thought through in the work of Richard Florida – specifically his highly influential book *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Florida’s ideas around the *creative class* have become important in urban policy agendas associated with city development and regeneration strategies. Florida argues that economically successful and entrepreneurial cities in the US are those that contain concentrations of bohemians, gays and immigrants. Rather problematically he

argues that: 'to some extent, homosexuality represents the last frontier of diversity in our society, and thus a place that welcomes the gay community welcomes all kinds of people' (2002: 256). There also problems with his notion of creativity in relation to class, locating it within the middle class, ignoring vernacular, working class forms of creativity. Florida's argument suggests that cities shown to be open to gays are also open to innovation and supportive of entrepreneurialism.

There can be tensions between the erotic and strategies for city promotion to attract international lesbian and gay tourism. In a study based on Manchester, Howard Hughes (2002) has argued that the branding and marketing of the city's gay village nationally and internationally is having potentially deleterious consequences on the space itself leading to a loss of ownership and a 'de-gaying' of the space. He also notes criticism of these marketing campaigns for 'promoting sex' and giving a poor impression of the city.

Discourses around gay entrepreneurialism and the marketing of gay tourist destinations produce distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate sexual subjectivities. A distinction between affluent, entrepreneurial, professional gays of the creative and tourist economy and those who are the 'queer unwanted' – whose lifestyles are less respectable and do fit the narratives of urban regeneration strategies. Stephen Tomsen's (2006) research on homophobia in New South Wales in Australia has drawn attention to the law's distinction between 'innocent' and 'guilty' victims of homophobic attacks around notions of respectability. Tomsen shows how spatial ordering was significant to the drawing of these distinctions between 'innocent' and 'guilty' victims of homophobic attacks. He argues that the formation of respectable, gentrified gay and lesbian spaces has helped to reinforce distinctions between proper and improper homosexualities. Thomsen wants us to recognise the negative consequences associated with the de-sexing of lesbian and gay cultural identities associated with the development of respectable gentrified spaces. This has meant that the people who use spaces for public sex have become further marginalised as improper and have become the guilty victims of homophobic attacks. In articulating a vision for economic and sexual justice we need to recognise the significance of the erotic and sex itself in articulating distinctions between those whose bodies are seen to matter, and those who are seen as without value. Moreover an awareness of the scaling of economic and sexual practices can help us recognise the limits of visions of economic and sexual justice that are rooted in fixed scales such as the local or the national.

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