

Solidarities in the quest for queer utopias

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Abstract

This commentary on Andrew Tucker's 'A Sexuality Pivot' highlights the relevance of his call in the face of violent backlashes against equalities experienced by queer people – especially trans. Solidarity through difference and beyond scale, I argue, is key for imagining and building queer utopias that exceed the boundaries of the violent present.

Keywords

Difference, equalities, feminist solidarities, heteroactivism, scale

Andrew Tucker's (2024) article, 'A Sexuality Pivot: Thinking through Solidarity, Geographies of Sexuality, and a World in Transition', is an important and timely call for geographers of sexualities to work towards a more sustained engagement with solidarities in order to better understand agency formation across places and scales, especially in the too-often overlooked Majority World. Moreover, Tucker sees such a renewed interest in sexuality-based solidarities as an important contribution to wider debates around a 'world in transition', allowing sexuality scholars to develop alternative readings of the dramatic present shaped by frequent crises and geopolitical events that seem to point to the acceleration of the decline of the US and Europe's hegemony at the global scale. This process is not purely economic or geopolitical; it also includes a variety of actors, practices, and discourses ingrained within longstanding homophobic, masculinist, and racist ideologies.

Writing from South Africa, Tucker brings to the forefront the relevance of solidarities for sexed and gendered subjectivities in contexts characterized by

widespread violence and discrimination (Mkhize et al., 2010). When translating this analysis of violence and discrimination against women and LGBTIQ people within the broader picture of the 'world in transition', Tucker's analysis seems to underplay how the challenges to the liberal sexual politics of the US-led global order emerge not only from the rise of new regimes hostile to the equality of women and LGBTIQ subjects, often in the name of anti-Western imperialism (Edenborg, 2023), but also from coalitions of diverse actors, organized across places and internationally, opposing the so-called 'gender ideology' (or 'wokery' in the jargon of right-wing policymakers and media). At the same time as these coalitions have become increasingly influential in several countries, discursive and physical violence against sexed and gendered subjects has risen

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(Carastathis, 2018). In the US, the backlash against equalities has included, among others, book banning, the proliferation of anti-drag and anti-trans bills, the criminalization of access to gender-affirming care and abortions, and limitations to the possibility to teach about queerness in school.

Building on Chitty's (2020) conceptualization of 'sexual hegemony', Cockayne has recently argued that these measures are:

all examples of how when a given society's sexual hegemony is challenged, surplus populations become particularly visible and targets of discrimination. From the point of view of sexual hegemony, this backlash is in large part a struggle over who has the right to access the property status of children – a group who the political right are never able to imagine as queer and/or trans – and parenthood, and over what terms like 'the family' can or should mean and for whom. (2024: 16)

The centrality of reproduction and the figure of the (innocent, not to be 'deviated') child in the backlash against equalities has been part of the discursive tropes of anti-gender campaigns across the world (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017), leading key-intellectual Paul Preciado (2013) to ask 'who protects the queer child?' Geographers Kath Browne and Catherine Nash have coined the concept of 'heteroactivism' to highlight the central role of place in the formation of what appears to be both an ideology and a movement (Browne and Nash, 2017; Nash and Browne, 2020). 'Heteroactivism' brings together a variety of subjects and groups (e.g., anti-abortion, anti-immigration, religious, fascist, freedom of speech and religion, parental rights, supremacist) opposing sexual and gendered equalities discourse and legislation as well as feminist and queer academic scholarship. They caution against a supposed 'gender ideology' aimed at displacing the heteronormative family and the 'natural' order, thus posing a real threat for children to be raised safely in 'healthy' societies (Rasmussen, 2023). Moreover, heteroactivism frames gender as a colonial Western imposition on global masses, thus resonating with the discourses (which Tucker also refers to in the paper) accompanying the approval of anti-LGBTIQ legislation.

Confronted with such (increasingly violent and widespread) backlashes, queer people might benefit from acknowledging the possibilities offered by solidarity as a key organizing principle to navigate a persistently painful present. This makes Tucker's paper particularly timely and important as it invites the reader to consider the centrality of solidarities to fight injustices related to sexualities. In line with well-established geographical scholarship (e.g., Featherstone, 2012), Tucker (2024) conceptualizes solidarities 'not as "pre-given" or already formed, but as forms of connection, shared purpose, and mobilisation that must be actively worked for, often in the face of (and as the result of) forms of inequality and injustice'.

Questioning the lack of scholarship around 'the agentic efforts of local communities to directly, and collectively, challenge forms of injustice and inequality that draw together different groups', Tucker (2024) discusses the case of Cape Town where men who have sex with men (MSM) and queer women have collaborated and self-organized, revealing how 'sexed and gendered differences appear to have been (at least temporarily) set aside in the face of persistent sexuality-based discrimination and violence, which affect both men and women with same-sex desire'. These forms of solidarity across sexed and gendered differences have a long history within queer communities, the most cited case being the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Brown and Di Felicianantonio, 2022; Brown, 1997), but they have also manifested in other instances, such as care and sharing knowledge in the face of rising sexualized drug use (Di Felicianantonio, 2023; Florêncio, 2023).

Asserting the centrality of solidarity as an analytical category in the field of geographies of sexualities has the potential to highlight the ways that 'Global North actors, discourses, and policy processes may hinder the development of local solidarities due to, potentially, a misalignment of priorities and activities between Global North and local actors. Conversely, work on solidarities may also allow scholars to consider the possibility of generative connections and forms of solidarity across scales' (Tucker, 2024). Such trans-scalar generative connections and forms of solidarity

among queer communities have manifested clearly in the case of recent dramatic geopolitical events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Shevtsova, 2023) and the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip (Prager, 2024).

We can therefore appreciate how the sexuality-based solidarities that Tucker envisages echo the principles of feminist + solidarity. In the words of madeleine kennedy-macfoy (quoted in Gül Altınay and Pető, 2022: 485), 'when we act in solidarity with others, we think beyond the self, recognise our bond with others and in doing so, strengthen the foundations on which we can build collective justice and freedom'. This work beyond the self emerges therefore as work through difference that exceeds prefixed boundaries (and scales):

feminist + solidarity really is about ... maybe you can't change the Taliban's mind, maybe you don't have the political power to undo what's happening there, but you can go out there every day and say, 'I don't accept this. This is not okay. I know this is not okay. If this happened to me, it wouldn't be okay. It's not okay if it's happening to a woman in Afghanistan. I don't speak her language, I don't understand her culture, I don't know her religion, but she's a woman and this shouldn't be happening to her. This shouldn't be happening to any human being. (Shaharзад Akbar quoted in Gül Altınay and Pető, 2022: 485–486)

As Tucker argues, affirming the power of solidarities beyond scale and through difference (not limited to gendered and sexual) requires acknowledging the longstanding legacies of colonialism and the pervasiveness of racial capitalism. These often taken the form of what Qais Munhazim (2024) has recently defined as 'imperial solidarity' to account for the 'civilizing mission' of (white, European/US) 'saviors' towards the (queer) ones to be 'saved' from the evil of 'backward' cultures. According to Qais Munhazim, 'imperial solidarity' celebrates specific forms of queer representation – such as the queer soldier, the queer politician, or the queer police officer – serving the interests of oppressive powers, while condemning the violence of those others who cannot be reconciled with the imperial project.

Against these tendencies, a decolonial and radical posture is needed to establish practices of recognition and solidarities that go beyond one's own immediate experience and knowledge (Martin, 2020). This opens the possibility for queer people to imagine a world beyond the one shaped by violence and discrimination in the here and now. Solidarities therefore represent a key tool to build queer utopias, because, as Muñoz (2009: 1) reminds us,

the future is queerness's domain.... The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there ... we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.... Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.

This insistence on the future is not aimed at downplaying the importance of present efforts against oppressive normative structures that make queer lives disposable or, in 'friendly' terms, tolerated. Solidarity practiced here and now across (social and spatial) difference might be the only antidote to the violence experienced by sexed and gendered subjects, leading to more just futures.

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