

“Same-sex issues in a cross-cultural perspective: The strange similarities between John Howard and Mahathir Mohamad”.

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Introduction

This paper was one of several written for a roundtable in which participants analysed lgbtq partnership issues in the culture from which they came or lived. The roundtable was designed to open up a cross-cultural dialogue regarding recognition of same-sex relationships, and the barriers to it. This paper therefore begins by drawing attention to the need to develop culturally-specific strategies for recognition of lgbtq relationships. However, it argues that while one needs to acknowledge the different forms which lgbtq relationships can take in different countries, there can also be some surprising similarities in the discourse used by conservative politicians who oppose recognising same-sex relationships. (The full range of lgbtq relationships could not be analysed in a paper of this length). This paper focuses on the Howard government’s opposition to the recognition of same-sex relationships in Australia. That case study is then contrasted with the views of a very different politician, whose “Asian values” approach has led to critiques of western attitudes towards homosexuality, namely Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Contrary to Mahathir’s analysis, his own views are shown to show strong similarities with those of John Howard. In short, while there may be significant differences in the lgbtq identities across cultures, there can be surprising similarities in the heteronormative discourses which marginalise those identities.

Background

Issues of legal recognition of same-sex relationships are particularly complex when one comes to look at them in a comparative cross-cultural perspective. For example, recognition is clearly not the priority in those countries where same-sex relationships are illegal and severely punished. Similarly, in some societies, lesbians may be more concerned about resisting forced heterosexual marriage than recognition of same-sex relationships (Offord and Cantrell 2001: 243). But, even in those countries where fighting for legal recognition is a possibility, the comparative issues can be vexed ones.

For issues of same-sex recognition are inevitably also issues of identity, of what is to be recognised. We are talking about cultures in which the numbers and forms of genders, sexes, forms of sexual relationships and the factors pertinent to identity can be very different. In other words, legal recognition of relationships always raises the issue of what form of relationships will be recognised, and that potentially varies widely from country to country (and even within sub-cultures within countries). For example, in some countries women who love women may prefer not to emphasise the sexual nature of the relationship. Meanwhile, Peter Jackson (2001: 15) argues that in the Thai case what is at issue are not sexual identities but rather eroticised genders. Consequently, the conceptual frameworks which both scholars and activists use are frequently culturally biased. For example, concepts of same-sex relationships can assume cultures in which there are binary conceptions of sex. Even Queer Theory, while it potentially allows for more plurality in acknowledging diverse sexualities is, precisely for that reason, insensitive to attempts to fix identity in culturally-specific ways. It can also be criticised for the cultural specificity of its own critiques e.g. of

binary opposites. Hence the lively critiques of the 2004 London Queer Matters Conference published in the June 2005 issue of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*.

Furthermore, “recognition” is potentially subject to the same type of critiques that Chou Wah-Shan has made of “coming out” in his work on same-sex eroticism in Chinese societies. Chou (2000: 5; 2001: 32-3) argues that “coming out” involves individualistic, western assumptions regarding the need for explicit, open statements to one’s family and society, including the assumed centrality of sexuality to an individual’s identity.

However, one would not want to overstate Chou’s case. He neglects some of the heteronormative ways in which the individual has been defined in liberal democratic thought, which I’ll be coming to later. Furthermore, as Antonia Chao has pointed out in the Taiwanese context, the lack of individualisation in some Chinese societies, particularly in regard to the failure to differentiate individuals from their family structures, can lead to significant problems for gays and lesbians. For example, because of the ways in which heteronormative familial structures are normally assumed, gays and lesbians can have difficulties accessing accommodation and hospital treatment (Chao 2002: 369-381). But also, and Chou Wah Shan would probably agree, one wouldn’t want to emphasis the differences so much that we forget the common concerns that can exist. In particular, Antonia Chao’s work indicates the importance of analysing the implications of government discourses and practices when minority eroticised relationships are not recognised.

Furthermore, Peter Jackson has drawn attention to the “parallels... with the situation of g/l/t people from diverse societies who are not united in any essential way but whose common yet always different experience of being marginalized because of their perceived gender or erotic difference provides a basis of communication and a

sense of common purpose” (Jackson 2001: 21). Consequently, the strategy in this paper will be to attempt to turn the tables. This paper will not focus on analysing the complex differences in lgbtq identities across cultures, and the need that poses for nationally and culturally-specific strategies for both decriminalisation and recognition. That need will be taken for granted. Rather, this paper will focus on the discursive construction of the mainstream, heteronormative identities that marginalise all of those who are not in traditional heterosexual relationships — including those in same-sex relationships (who are the focus of the current paper).

In order to demonstrate just how much those discourses can have in common, the analysis here will focus on the discourse of two ostensibly very different, contemporaneous political leaders from the Asia-Pacific region, namely Australian Prime Minister John Howard and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. The two are old opponents given Mahathir’s arguments (2000a: 31, 37; 2002: 63) that Australia was not culturally Asian and should be excluded from trade organisations such as the EAEC. They also have opposing views on issues ranging from globalisation to free trade policies. The fact that one (Howard) is from a country where male homosexuality has been decriminalised and the other (Mahathir) from a country where it has not been, merely illustrates the surprising similarities even more powerfully. Furthermore, these similarities exist despite official claims that Australia is an equitable, tolerant, western culture and Mahathir’s claimed contrast between “Asian values” and western moral decadence.

Howard and Mahathir.

Australian government Department of Foreign Affairs documents present an image of Australia as a multicultural, multiracial though predominantly western country,

situated in the Asia-Pacific region. Australia's central values are depicted as being those of tolerance, equality and respect for the individual's human rights (Australian Government 2003: 1,2).

There are several bases on which this self-depiction could be challenged. Two of them are Australia's treatment of indigenous peoples and asylum-seekers — both of which have been condemned by the United Nations (UN 2000; UN 2002). However, the much vaunted Australian values of respect for human rights and equality also do not extend to same-sex citizens. The UN has also criticised the federal Australian government for discriminating against the same-sex partner of a war veteran, whom it refused a pension on his partner's death (UNHRC 2000).

Sex between consenting adults was decriminalised in most Australian states by the 1980's (although only since 1997 in Tasmania). Most Australian state governments now have legal recognition of same-sex relationships in some form and one wouldn't want to underrate the importance of such reforms. Some measures are quite innovative, such as the Tasmanian legislation, which can recognise a wide variety of partnerships and commitments. However, the story at federal level is very different. There Australia has had a socially conservative Liberal government, the Howard Government, since 1996. Prime Minister John Howard has long argued that conventional heterosexual marriage and families are the best welfare institutions that society has devised. Howard's "tolerance" does extend to arguing that homosexual relationships should not be illegal. However, Howard argues that heterosexual families should be supported by legislation not just for their social benefits but for economic reasons, in order to reduce welfare costs and encourage self-reliant citizens. Consequently, same-sex relationships and parenting are less preferable personal choices that may be "tolerated" (i.e. not criminalised) but should not be "endorsed" by

providing government entitlements. In 2004, Howard reaffirmed his long-term views when his government passed federal legislation banning same-sex marriage (Howard 2004; Howard, *The Australian*, 24 January 1996; Johnson 2003: 48-51).

Consequently, lack of legal recognition of same-sex relationships at the federal level has legitimated discrimination against same-sex couples in areas ranging from workplace entitlements to social welfare entitlements, pensions, health benefits and access to assisted reproductive technology. Superannuation schemes can now recognise “interdependent” relationships (although this has not been fully extended to public sector schemes). The arguments used against equal rights for same-sex parenting in conception and adoption include an emphasis on the so-called Rights of the Child, that has been utilised in so many other countries (Johnson 2003: 51; Ho 2005: 149-161). Meanwhile, gay and lesbian asylum-seekers have been widely discriminated against (Millbank 2002: 148). Same-sex couples migrating have to apply separately while heterosexual partners qualify to apply together. Overseas same-sex partners of Australian citizens can apply to immigrate (see further Yue 2005), under a policy introduced by the previous Labor government. However it is at Ministerial discretion and based on the recognition of an interdependent relationship rather than a full recognition of a same-sex relationship.

So, Australia’s treatment of same-sex couples at federal level provides a clear warning against taking western proclamations of tolerance and human rights uncritically. However, of more interest to the analysis here is the fact that Australia’s treatment of gays and lesbians also doesn’t reflect the values ascribed to Europeans by Asian critics such as Mahathir, who criticise such countries for their positive attitudes towards homosexuality. Mahathir (2003) explicitly argues that his category of

European includes “those who migrated and set up new nations in America, Australia and New Zealand”.

As is widely known, Mahathir argues that attempts to improve the position of same-sex citizens in Malaysia are attempts to impose western values on Malaysian society and are another form of colonialism. For example, in his controversial speech at the 54th Umno general assembly in 2003, Mahathir argued that:

The world that we have to face in the new decades and centuries will see numerous attempts by the Europeans to colonise us either indirectly or directly. If our country is not attacked, our minds, our culture, our religion and other things will become the target. In the cultural and social fields they want to see unlimited freedom for the individual. For them the freedom of the individual cannot be questioned. They have rejected the institutions of marriage and family. Instead they accept the practice of free sex, including sodomy as a right. Marriage between male and male, between female and female are officially recognised by them (Mahathir 2003).

There are many other speeches in which Mahathir has made similar comments (e.g. Mahathir 2002: 92).

Mahathir’s arguments regarding the relationship between homosexuality, westernism and colonialism are obviously contentious. As Baden Offord explains:

Homosexuality is always conflated with perceived moral evils, and, moreover, it is sometimes conflated with democratic rights....Mahathir’s

claim is a type of inverse ‘orientalism’ where the play of the postcolonial power is to describe homosexuality as a Western social trait which was brought to Asian cultures by imperialism.Asian leaders like... Dr Mahathir thus use homosexuality as a discourse of cultural and geographical difference. ... that can be deployed to maintain a kind of cultural purity (Offord 2003: 45).

Mahathir’s claims about western values are particularly bizarre at a time when the US is attempting to impose Religious Right values on aid programmes around the world, for example through advocating sexual abstinence and discouraging abortion. It is also a strange construction at a time when the Christian Religious-Right is allying itself with Hindu and Islamic fundamentalists to try to intervene in the United Nations over issues such as abortion and homosexuality (Buss 2004: 258). After all, despite Mahathir’s claims in the quote from him above, John Howard has passed federal laws banning same-sex marriage and George W. Bush has attempted to amend the American Constitution to do so. Howard specifically argues that heterosexual marriage and the heterosexual family are “institutions which have been fundamental to our society since it began” (Howard 2004).

Needless to say, there is also extensive evidence that same-sex desire is hardly a product of the west or colonialism. Indeed, Mahathir is being as dismissive of local forms of lgbtq identity as many western theorists are accused of being. Thailand is a good example of a society that retained its independence and staved off western colonialism but whose traditional culture acknowledges complex forms of non-heterosexual love and attraction (Cook and Jackson 1999: 4). Far from homosexuality being a colonial phenomenon, western legal prohibitions against gay male sex were

often imposed on colonised societies which had more complex attitudes towards sexual diversity and didn't necessarily legally prescribe same-sex behaviours (see e.g. Bhaskaran 2002: 19; Aspin 2002: 92; Smith 1994: 241-2). More recently, far from cultural globalisation necessarily imposing western gay identities on others (including via Mahathir's own discourse), resources such as the internet have been used in countries such as Malaysia to strengthen local glbtq communities in the face of legal oppression (Khoo 2003: 235).

Nonetheless, as Olivia Khoo (2003: 230-235) has pointed out, the depiction of homosexuality as the dissolute colonialist, western other was one which Mahathir was only too happy to exploit with the imprisonment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on sodomy/conspiracy charges. Australian responses to these charges are particularly interesting. Alexander Downer (2000a; 2000b), the Australian Foreign Affairs Minister, didn't explicitly object to the use of sodomy charges, although he did suggest that the length of Anwar's sentence, as well as the judicial processes involved in Anwar's case, were questionable. Mahathir (2004) defended himself by arguing to an Australian journalist that: "For your peers, sodomy is something that bishops do, so its quite alright, but for us, no. We don't accept a man who is capable of this kind of act to become prime minister of Malaysia". Yet, Downer's attitude to Anwar's sentencing is particularly poignant once you realise that he is himself a former leader of the Liberal Party of Australia which Howard now heads as Prime Minister. Allegations that Downer had had affairs with men (which he strongly denied) were used to undermine his leadership (Williams 1997: 14). Mahathir might doubt whether Malaysians would elect a gay or bi-sexual man to be Prime Minister, the Liberal Party machine had similar doubts about Australians. Furthermore, the argument that the Leader immediately prior to Downer, John Hewson, was "soft" on

gay issues had been used to mobilise social conservatives against his leadership (Maddox 2001: 222-225).

Mahathir's occidentalist account of western values, overlooks the fact that traditional conceptions of the liberal democratic citizen actually constructed the apparently "individualised" citizen as a white, male, property-owning head of family. The heterosexual family was therefore central to constructions of liberal citizenship (Richardson 2000). Its central role is being returned to in many of the debates opposing same-sex marriage where it is argued that marriage between a man and a woman is a foundation of civilization, as well as a central feature of Judeo-Christian and other religious values. Prime Minister Howard's arguments in these respects sound remarkably similar to George W. Bush's (Howard 2004; Bush 2004). They also sound similar to Mahathir's lament: "Where will the family go? Where will the struggle for family values end up. What indeed will constitute family as homosexuality becomes respected in many societies?" (Howard 2004; Mahathir 2000b: 134)

Of course Mahathir's motives are different from Howard's. Both are trying to mobilise homophobia and reinforce heteronormative family structures. However, Mahathir is also trying to mobilise a post-colonial nationalism by critiquing an alleged western "respect" for homosexuality. His mobilisation of family values was in the context of depicting Asian values as being family and community-oriented compared to the alleged rampant individualism of the west. Mahathir was trying to win a section of the Islamic vote, including from PAS, the Pan-Islamic Party.

By contrast, Howard and Bush are both trying to mobilise the social conservative and Christian-right vote. Howard also has a long history of trying to mobilise voters against various racial and religious "others" (see further Johnson 2004

and 2000: 38-69), even if they are different “others” from Mahathir’s. In the lead-up to the 2004 election, Labor, Greens and Democrat politicians claimed that Howard was using same-sex marriage issues as an electoral wedge issue, equivalent to his past usage of Aboriginal issues and asylum-seekers (*Senate Hansard* 12 August 2004: 26508; 26545). The Labor politician who most explicitly pointed out the links between Howard’s mobilisation of race and his mobilisation of same-sex issues was Senator Penny Wong, a Malaysian-born Shadow Minister who is also Australia’s only “out” Labor politician at federal level (*Senate Hansard* 12 August 2004: 26550). There was also a nationalist aspect. Howard (2004) explicitly argued that the Australian parliament should ban same-sex marriage in order to prevent socially engineering Judges from recognising overseas same-sex marriages and therefore imposing the values of other countries on Australia. In short, Howard may not fear “western” influences overall but he was concerned about importing values from more small “1” liberal countries such as Canada.

Conclusion.

The differences between Mahathir and his Australian counterpart are clear even from the brief analysis given above. (Unfortunately, considerations of length preclude a more detailed study). However, from the point of view of people in non-heterosexual relationships, the heteronormative elements of the two politicians’ arguments seem remarkably similar. Unlike Mahathir, Howard does not support making male homosexuality illegal. However, both Howard and Mahathir see heterosexual families and heterosexual relationships as the bedrock of their respective countries’ political and social values. Both fear the threat of other countries’ more favourable attitudes to homosexuality being imposed on their own nations.

So, Mahathir and Howard have turned out to have relatively similar views in some respects. It is true that lgbtq communities in particular countries will need to develop culturally-specific strategies at both local and international level that are relevant to their own identities and needs. However, those cross-cultural lgbtq communities may have a surprising amount in common when it comes to opposing the ways in which conservative politicians construct heterosexuality as the only legitimate form of citizenship. While lgbtq identities may differ, the identity of the mainstream Malaysian and Australian citizen remains heterosexual. It is that heteronormative construction of citizenship which also poses the major barrier to any form of recognition of lgbtq relationships.

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