

NOMOREPOTLUCKS

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Trending Homonationalism – Natalie Kouri-Towe



Homonationalism has quickly become one of the hottest concepts circulating in queer spheres across North America, Europe, and the Middle East. From queer activist projects such as *Pinkwashing Israel*, [1] the No Homonationalism campaign in Germany, [2] and the array of queer anti-apartheid groups popping up across North America (e.g. *Queers Against Israeli Apartheid* in Toronto), [3] to blogs and leading academic publications in queer theory, homonationalism has quickly become one of the most talked about terms in queer cultures. The reason homonationalism has gained so much popularity despite its jargon heavy character is that it references a series of seemingly disparate but related processes, including: neoliberalization and globalization, racism and imperialism, and heteronormativity and homophobia.

Homonationalism functions in complementary ways to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which describes how the West produces knowledge and dominates 'the Orient' through academic, cultural and discursive processes. [4] Like Orientalism, homonationalism speaks to the ways Western powers (such as the U.S. and Canada) circulate ideas about other cultures (like Arab and Islamic cultures) in order to produce the West as culturally, morally, and politically advanced and superior. However, unlike Orientalism, homonationalism speaks particularly to the way gender and sexual rights discourses become central to contemporary forms of Western hegemony.

Jasbir Puar coined the term homonationalism in 2007 with the publication of her book, *Terrorist Assemblages* [5]. A coupling of Lisa Duggan's concept of homonormativity [6] and a poststructural critique of nationalism, homonationalism is at once a description of contemporary racial and economic relations in Western sexual rights discourses and an explanation of global narratives around sexual human rights, immigration and democracy. Homonationalism couples the idea of normative claims from homosexual subjects into state inclusion with mobilizations of liberal and normative sexual minorities as exceptional subjects in the state in opposition to queer deviants. Put more simply, homonationalism is the process where some queers (mostly upper-middle-class and rich gay men and women) gain acceptance and status in Canadian (or American) society through consumerism, economic mobility, and the securing of individual rights, such as gay marriage. By appealing to the rights of the individual (rather than collective rights) and turning to the state for inclusion instead of mobilizing in opposition to the state, we have entered into an era where some queers have gained admission into the dominant social, political, and economic order.

This is not to say that public and private institutions are now spaces of liberation for gender and sexuality. If anything, homophobia, sexism, misogyny, transphobia and other forms of gendered subjugation are often insidious rather than overt, particularly when the language of rights is being used. The inclusion of some sexual minorities into the fold acts as a screen to draw attention away from the continued asymmetrical conditions that structure our current social, political, and economic context. Ironically, the inclusion of normative sexual subjects is contingent on the maintenance of heteronormative standards; so gays can be just like straight people, as long as they don't rock the patriarchal boat. This process also erases how any achieved rights have come through collective struggles on the part of the subjugated, rather than through the benevolence of the nation. Homonationalism offers a critical lens that reveals how this process happens, and what else it produces, by demonstrating how some queers have been able to gain a conditional inclusion into Canadian culture by making sexual rights complicit with neoliberal demands for free markets, individualism, and Western moral superiority.

How homonationalism works:

- 1) The Inclusion Argument:** Sexual minorities should call for inclusion in the state through liberal rights of the individual (e.g. gay marriage). The struggle for individual rights replaces the struggle for collective rights, collective resistance, or the transformation of asymmetrical power formations.
- 2) Good vs. Bad Queers:** The call for inclusion is predicated on making the distinction between good queers and bad queers. These appeals argue that most sexual minorities are no different than members of dominant society, and thus that these queers deserve to be recognized as part of the mainstream. Here, bad queers are offered as the undesirable other to help sell the good queers to Canadian society, since bad queers are dangers to society or drains on state resources. They include racialized queers, people who are HIV-positive, poor and homeless queers, drug users, non-status queer migrants, etc.
- 3) Reinforcing the Social Order:** Once the right kind of queers are welcomed into the state, these institutions can use the newly admitted 'good queers' as evidence that symmetry has been achieved, effectively dismissing larger concerns over the rights of those who remain marginalized and subjugated. Further, the inclusion of sexual minorities under the terms of individual rights is then used in propaganda by the state to demonstrate how civilized, modern, liberal, and democratic the West is, particularly in opposition to backward, pre-modern, and non-democratic states (such as in the Middle East) – a tactic rooted in Orientalism.

The equation is simple: *Racist/Imperialist/Neoliberal State + homonational queers = Racist/Imperialist/Neoliberal State – responsibility for human rights violations.* A few queers gain access to individual rights and acceptance under the state, and in exchange, the state is able to use these queers to conceal the state's continued enactment of violence and violation of human rights.

To better help understand how homonationalism functions on a daily basis, I'd like to turn to three examples of current trends in homonationalism today. These include the Canadian government's immigration policies and practices when it comes to queer asylum seekers, the surge in marketing of gay tourism to Israel, and the controversy surrounding the inclusion of Queers Against Israeli Apartheid in the Toronto Pride parade.

Canadian taste in queer asylum seekers

The Culprits: Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism in Canada, and Citizenship and Immigration Canada

The Crime: Showcasing queer asylum seekers from Iran while simultaneously increasing deportations and detentions, and decreasing total numbers of refugees admitted into Canada.

The Homonational: Queer asylum seekers in Canada are commonly scrutinized for their gender presentation and sexual practices in judgments over their refugee claims. Asylum seekers are regularly denied status and deported on the basis that they don't appear to be gay. In 2009, Kenney was quoted in the Toronto Star singling out queer asylum seekers from Iran as ideal claimants, a sentiment he recently echoed in *Xtra!* (December 19, 2011). The concurrent violation of the basic human rights and dignity of queer and non-queer asylum seekers is masked by Kenney's pronouncements of support for queer-iranian refugees. There's a double move happening here: Kenney offers Iranian queers as evidence that the immigration system in Canada is just and unbiased, while the immigration system continues to be racist, misogynist and homophobic; at the same time, by singling out Iranian asylum seekers, Kenney is also able to make a claim about Canada's moral superiority in juxtaposition to Iran's moral deficiency.

Cruising apartheid: pinkwashing & gay tourism in Tel Aviv

The Culprit: Israel's re-branding campaign

The Crime: Normalizing the Israeli state's military occupation and apartheid policies (including the construction of the separation wall) by marketing Israel's cosmopolitan city, Tel Aviv, to international gay tourists.

The Homonational: Queer communities across North America and Europe have seen a rise in advertisements, articles, and other cultural and commercial materials featuring Tel Aviv as an ideal tourist destination for queers. Tel Aviv is often spotlighted in travel and lifestyle magazines for its gay nightlife and beaches. These kinds of public relations and marketing campaigns aim to generate two things. First, they bring foreign income into Israel, supporting the state's economy through consumerism. Secondly, they normalize the Israeli state by turning a militarized and occupying power into an innocuous vacation destination. Through the images of beaches and gay parties in Tel Aviv, Israel's violations of human rights are hidden from public perception. Further, queer tourists who travel to Israel gain entry into state and national belonging by participating in consumerism as ideal tourists.

Pride Toronto and the making of the modern homonational: who really belongs in the parade?

The Culprits: The corporatization of Toronto Pride and the Israel lobby in Canada

The Crime: Israel lobbyists in Canada threatened Pride Toronto's funding in 2010 and 2011 if the Toronto-based group, Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA), was permitted to march in the parade. Lobbyists targeted Pride's main funding sources, including TD Bank and the city of Toronto, to try to get Pride's funding revoked.

The Homonational: In 2009, Israel lobbyists first began pressuring Pride Toronto to ban participation of QuAIA in the parade. Over the following three years, Toronto's queer community became split over debates about censorship at Pride and who belongs in the annual Pride parade. Local queers and the larger Toronto public debated whether Pride was a space for politics or a celebration of gay identity. In the courses of these debates, members of the queer community in Toronto began to act as what they imagined to be neutral arbiters in debates about Pride and politics. In doing so, they presumed that it was possible to have a non-political position on debates around the parade and political messaging. These queers thus took the place of the liberal state in judging what types of rights claims are legitimate. In this case, the celebration of sexual rights is argued to present a neutral stance – reflecting the terms of inclusion at the level of the state and dominant social order. In turn, other claims to human rights, even when those claims are articulated in conjunction with sexual rights, such as the claims to rights of queer Palestinians, become threats to the coherent belonging within the state that homonationalist queers rely on. Only queers who already have rights can speak to which rights-based claims are deemed acceptable.

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References:

- [1] Pinkwashing Israel: <http://www.pinkwashingisrael.com/>
- [2] No Homonationalism: <http://nohomonationalism.blogspot.com/>
- [3] Queers Against Israeli Apartheid: <http://queersagainstapartheid.org/>
- [4] Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
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- [6] Duggan, Lisa. 2002. *The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism. Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*. Eds. Russ Castronovo & Dana D. Nelson. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

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