

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Corinne Lennox and **Matthew Waites**, eds., *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The Commonwealth: Struggles for Decriminalisation and Change*. London: Human Rights Consortium, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 2013. 562 pp., \$33.00 paper (9780957354883), open source at <http://commonwealth.sas.ac.uk/publications/house-publications/lgbt-rights-commonwealth>

The Commonwealth of Nations was established in 1931 to formalize continuing relations between the United Kingdom and the increasing number of its former colonies, although its present 54 members includes those not colonized by Britain. Its statement of principles made in Singapore in 1971 was the closest document to a constitution or charter until the Commonwealth Charter, published in March 2013. This recent statement of values includes affirmations of democracy and individual rights, but no mention of issues surrounding sexuality or homosexuality, although mainstreaming rights is now a key mission of the organization and the growing internationalization of sexual human rights is affecting this NGO (<http://thecommonwealth.org/our-charter>). This new edited collection by Corinne Lennox and Matthew Waites is the first to document this increasing activism around sexuality. It represents an original contribution to understanding struggles for sexual diversity politics both globally and in the more specific comparative context of the Commonwealth.

After the comprehensive introduction by the editors, the first two essays address the historical colonial provenance of both antihomosexual legislation and transformations in understandings of sexuality that such laws contributed to. The British legacy thus sets the stage for an overview of how LGBT rights have become visible in Commonwealth forums (Chapter 4); subsequent essays in Chapters 5–18 examine specific countries or regions such as South Asia and the Caribbean. The first three of these chapters are on the white Commonwealth countries of the UK, Canada, and Australia, and remind us both of the relatively recent arrival of LGBT rights and the severe historical opposition to queer politics in these countries. The following chapters focus on East and South

Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. They are self-contained accounts of the historical and contemporary landscape for LGBT rights in specific countries in these regions, often authored by activists rather than academics. In gathering this evidence, the editors have put together a significant resource for understanding individual and regional contexts for LGBT rights. For example, the comparative chapter decriminalization strategies in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan demonstrates key differences in national cultures and political opportunity that have progressed rights in India, and made them less likely in the other countries. Above all, nuance to specific contexts is key; such analysis prevents lazy characterizations of Asian or Eastern cultures as uniformly resistant to queer rights based on underlying assumptions that equate LGBT rights with Western modernization.

This collection is significant for two other reasons. First, the editors use their opening and closing essays to illuminate the political contexts that have permitted and prevented change in these examples. In doing this, however, they resolutely avoid both a “progressive” model of queer rights based on Western experience *and* a simplistic reduction of homophobia to British colonial control. In the current era of the internationalization of LGBT politics, this middle ground is often difficult to tread because of political investments in particular versions of postcolonialism and queer human rights politics, but I think Lennox and Waites provide the correct, empirically based approach that attempts to illuminate the realities of LGBT politics on the ground. This is not to say that they avoid theoretical analysis but rather that it is a grounded theoretical approach. They argue that the national specificities of the movements are far more important than international discourses or rights structures, even where the latter have been used as resources in the local context. Whilst being careful to limit the generalizability of their comparative analysis, they do identify some broad common processes; primarily the building of alliances beyond exclusively LGBT groups, and a concurrent legitimization of human rights within regional, rather than international, contexts. If we are to continue promoting an international framework of queer rights, their analysis suggests that we might benefit from efforts to engage more directly with regional, pan-Islamic, Asian, and African rights bodies, which uniformly ignore questions of sexuality at present, and that we defer to local priorities and strategies rather than assume that internationalizing Western strategies is the only way to advance queer freedoms. The editors argue that this evidence from the Commonwealth reiterates the need to develop a southern led strategy of international queer politics and one, moreover, that takes account of the intersectionalities of sexual subjectivity with, at the very least, class, culture, gender, and the political

structures available). In this sense, this collection provides an astute analysis of the complexities of resistance to LGBT rights, asking us to consider both national cultures of gender regimes, historical legacies of colonial legislation that have become woven into postcolonial national projects by governments and political movements, and the differences in what human rights mean to different cultures.

The third significant contribution of this collection is its attempt to bridge the gap between academia and activism, both in its tone and analysis, and in its open source availability (see the link above). This obviously makes this book an easy resource for teaching and I can see its relevance for many courses that deal with queer politics and its recent internationalization, and for those that address the increasing role of sexuality in international development more widely. Individual chapters are available through the open source site, making it easy to focus students on particular case studies and also providing resources for academics who are focused on national or regional studies.

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