

HETEROACTIVISM

Kath Browne & Catherine Nash

EMERGING RESISTANCES TO sexual and gender rights in recent years have been under-theorised, particularly in relation to recent resistances labelled as “anti-gender” or as opposed to “gender ideologies.” We argue that the concept of heteroactivism offers more trenchant insights into or ways of interrogating resistances to sexual and gender rights that move beyond a consideration of opposition to “gender ideology.” It is a critical, yet under-theorised, feature of contemporary sexual politics in places, and our focus has been on where sexual and gender rights are supposed to have been “won.” Here we propose that heteroactivism, as a form of resistance, can be understood as both an ideology and a set of practices, deployed by those seeking to reassert the superiority and centrality of heteronormativity for both society and individuals. Such activism seeks to avoid accusations of homophobia or anti-gay motivations, often appearing supportive of LGBT rights more generally, for example supporting civil partnerships whilst opposing same-sex marriage. Heteroactivism encompasses but is not beholden to religious tenets and cannot be consistently aligned with any political or cultural movement, as its formulation is historically inflected and place-based. In the contexts we study, that is, the U.K., Canada, and Ireland, heteroactivism has specific racialised framings as well that cannot be disentangled, but are instead mutually formative.

We argue that heteroactivism is a useful analytic for the 2020s and encourage scholarship that seeks to understand the complexities of

activities that resist sexual and gender equalities in the Global North (and Global South). Heteroactivism, as a concept, seeks to name a set of ideologies and related practices¹ orientated around re-inscribing heteronormativity (encompassing gender and sexualities) as the foundation principle for society. Heteroactivism names the ways that sexual and gender rights are contested within and beyond “liberal democracies” and “LGBT friendly” nations. Heteroactivism then names the new oppositional, ideological and practical response to sexual and gender equalities that are rooted in a belief in the centrality of heteronormativity found in the confluence of gendered, classed, and racialised norms within man/woman divides that come together in normative heterosexual relationships as foundational to a healthy and sustainable society (Browne and Nash 2017, 646; Browne et al. 2018; Nash et al. 2019; Nash and Browne forthcoming). This short piece will expound some of the key features of heteroactivism. It then contends that heteroactivism, and sexual and gender politics more broadly, are inherently geographical.

Heteroactivism: Conceptualising Resistances to Sexual and Gender Rights

The concept heteroactivism, we propose, enables an examination of the claims about the centrality of normative biological sex, traditional gender roles, and heteronormativity, as “best” for society. Given this broad conceptualisation, a heteroactivist perspective is also useful for considering opposition to trans rights, academic scholarship on gender, sexuality, and race as well as critiques of universities and public education grounded in claims about, among other things, freedom of speech and religion, parental rights, and the welfare of children (see, Nash et al. 2019; Nash and Browne in press). Heteroactivism seeks to conceptually enable critical discussions of “anti-gender” and gender ideologies (see e.g., Kováts 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Gunnarsson Payne 2019). While these terms are useful in acknowledging and exploring how heteroactivists discuss what they understand as new sexual and gender formations, they are also limited in that heteroactivists are not necessarily “anti-gender.” They are in favour of normative gender orders and

gender ideology is a term used by heteroactivists to indicate something that they claim exists (Gunnarsson Payne 2019), rather than offering a theoretical framework with which to engage the underpinning premises.

In our work, we have observed three key contours of heteroactivism:

I. Not the USA Christian Right

Much of the scholarship about anti-LGBT activism in the Global North has focused on the Christian Right, specifically, the political activism of these groups in the USA (see e.g., Stein 2001; Burack 2014). When we incorporate a geographical sensitivity to our inquiries, we can detect other forms of activism distinctive from the USA Christian Right. Resistances to heteronormativity worldwide erupt from myriad political, social, and philosophical locations beyond those based in the USA Christian Right. From our research, a focus on the resistances of the Christian Right is not adequate because:

I. Heteroactivism is not necessarily grounded in religious arguments about sexuality and gender (e.g., humanist-based arguments), and arguments aimed at broader publics may rarely rely on religious premises.

II. Heteroactivism is not necessarily an ideology expounded only by the so-called far right (Christian or otherwise), although it can be (Gunnarsson Payne 2019). In fact, some far right groups support LGBT rights, for example, when they use it to denigrate or single out “Muslim others” as “homophobic,” and as a threat to liberal forms of sexual and gender equalities (Haritaworn 2015). These homonationalist arguments can co-exist with heteroactivism (Wellner and Marienfield 2019). Further, so-called left wing groups, often regarded as unquestionably in support of sexual and gender rights, may work against sexual and gender rights such as those opposed to trans rights (see, Browne and Nash 2017; also Sullivan 2019). Thus, whilst we agree with Jenny Gunnarsson Payne (2019) that “anti-gender politics” have gained momentum, as has the far right in Europe, those who are opposing sexual and gender rights are not only, or necessarily, far right.

III. USA cultural norms do not travel or circulate intact as globalisation scholars and critiques of Americanisation have long argued. The

critique of the “globalisation of the Christian Right” (Butler 2006; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) is crucial in considering the circulation of ideas and the effects this has on everyday lives, within and beyond the USA. It cannot be presupposed that the Christian Right is being exported and globalised although there is little doubt their influence (both ideologically and financially) is far-reaching. Rather, a nuanced geographical lens is required to detail how local, regional, national, and global resistances are creating complex interconnected transnational networks (Rao 2015; Browne and Nash 2017; Nash and Browne forthcoming).

2. Not Anti-Gay/Not “Bigoted”/“Homophobic”

In some places, in the contemporary context, heteroactivists can no longer rely on the vilification of homosexuality as their central argument in opposition to sexual and gender equalities (Browne and Nash 2015; Nash and Browne forthcoming). The homophobe label has been a powerful signifier particularly in contexts where both culturally and legislatively hate speech is supposedly prohibited. Heteroactivist groups are very aware of the power of these labels and how their objections can be perceived as such. Thus, they seek to narrow the meaning of the term homophobia to mean only a personal dislike or “fear” of LGBT people. This narrowed meaning allows heteroactivists to avoid accusations that they are “homophobic” or that they are arguing that LGBT people or their families are “inferior.” Indeed when they are called homophobic or transphobic, although rarely biphobic as bi people, issues, and rights tend to be rendered invisible (Maliepaard 2015), they can argue that they are the ones under attack or that the claim is intended to silence them.

3. Pro Heteronormativity

Heteroactivism’s main focus is on building arguments that assert the centrality of heteronormativity for the health and welfare of society, as well as having benefits for individual lives, particularly children. These claims imply that there are deficiencies in other relationship forms and they often pathologise trans and gender non-conformity (see, Browne

et al. 2018; Nash and Browne forthcoming). Heteroactivists can claim they are supportive of sexual and gender equalities, and more importantly “equal rights,” all the while arguing against more liberal legislative advances. For example, in the same-sex marriage debates in the U.K. in 2014 and in Ireland in 2015, heteroactivists deployed nuanced and subtle arguments that valorised the “traditional family,” while simultaneously claiming that same sex marriage and families are inferior, but not (necessarily) wrong.

How Heteroactivism Moves: Contesting Origins and West As Best

Heteroactivism is a spatially nuanced concept that offers new analytical capacity that is sensitive to cultural and geographical specificities. In our work, we have focused on the U.K, Ireland, and Canada where there is state-supported and broader public support, for sexual and gender rights and equalities (Browne and Nash 2017; Nash and Browne forthcoming, Nash and Browne in press). In these places, heteronormative moral values around sexuality and genders have been dislodged from their historically central position, which has often been violently enforced both by the police and “civil” society. However, heteroactivism cannot be seen solely through national or local lenses. Heteroactivist discourses evolve but are in a constant state of flux through the transnational flows, movements and reconfigurings of ideas, activisms, and ideologies. Transnationalism, as an orientation, allows us to investigate the movements of ideas, tactics, and support that are critical to fluctuating national and local oppositions to sexual and gender right (Browne and Nash 2014; Nash and Browne 2015; Nash et al. 2019; Nash and Browne forthcoming).

Our research shows that alongside national contestations regarding LGBT rights, there are grassroots mobilisations flaring up around more regional or local issues such as sexual education in schools or freedom of speech at universities. Local points of contention often feed into and co-create broader national debates and may feed into transnational movements and contestations. What is clear from our work is that activisms

and practices travel, and as they do, they touch down in specific geographical contexts and are reworked in relation to context, historical norms, and relations of power. This reworking can remain locally based or can become embedded in transnational oppositions, which can in turn inflect local debates, reconfiguring the place of “origin” and questioning the idea of “a centre” from which ideas, activisms, and points of contention originate. Therefore, the resistances to gender and sexual rights that we are experiencing contemporaneously, are relational formations that are locally manifest in similar and diverse ways.

Building on these transnational understandings, our work also contests what Rahul Rao (2015) terms the “locations of homophobia,” namely ones that are visible in the Global South (e.g., Uganda) but that emanate or are generated in the Global North, particularly the USA. Placing “homophobia” in the Global South, or in Eastern Europe, creates a specific geographical imaginary that has effects for the Global North, as well as the Global South (Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011; Browne et al. 2015; Kulpa and Silva 2016; Lalor and Browne 2018). Focusing work on heteroactivism on places in the Global North that are supposedly “leading the way” in terms of sexual and gender politics, refuses the location of opposition to sexual and gender rights solely within the Global South.

Final Thoughts

Contemporary and emerging resistances to sexual and gender rights have been under-theorised in current scholarship particularly in the narrow focus on “anti-gender” or on those opposed to so-called “gender ideology.” Conceptualising resistances through the concept of heteroactivism offers insights for both activists and academics who are aware of the emergence of resistances to sexual and gender rights and are seeking to articulate the ways these are manifest. We argue that heteroactivism, as a concept, offers an important way of interrogating how resistances to sexual and gender rights have moved away from anti-gay rhetorics towards an activism that seeks to recuperate and reaffirm the place of the heteronormative family as “best for society” and as “best for children” and can be taken up in myriad formulations that can defy explana-

tions grounded in religion or nationalist, populist or left/right politics.

There is far more to be done to explore, understand, and conceptualise the resistances to gender and sexualities as they are shifting and changing within liberal democracies. For example, scholars could explore whether the concept of heteroactivism could support explorations of what is termed state homophobia (transphobia and biphobia); how heteroactivism works with, or contests, homonationalism; how people engage with the practices and activisms that we have named heteroactivism and what makes these activisms attractive. There is a pressing need for more nuanced, complex, and spatially sensitive engagements with the relationships between far right/conservative groups/populism and sexual and gender politics both within and outside of heteroactivism. Finally, in places such as the U.K., there are those who would oppose trans rights, but yet seek to disrupt heterosexual orders in terms of same sex marriage, employment rights and so on. Heteroactivism might offer some starting points for this, and many other explorations of activisms that seek normative sexual and gender orders.

KATH BROWNE is a Geography Professor at University College Dublin. Her research interests lie in sexualities, genders, and spatialities. She has researched and written on LGBTQ lives, equalities and liveabilities, lesbian geographies, gender transgressions, queer methods/methodologies, and women's spaces. Since 2012, she has worked with Catherine J. Nash (and Andrew Gorman-Murray) exploring heteroactivism. In this project, they examined transnational resistances to LGBTQ equalities. She is currently leading an ERC consolidator project (BeyondOpposition) that develops from this research.

CATHERINE NASH is a Professor Emerita of Geography at Brock University, Ontario. Her current research interests include changing urban sexual and gendered landscapes in Toronto; a focus on digital technologies and sexuality in everyday life; new LGBT mobilities; and a consideration of international resistances to LGBT equalities in Canada, the U.K., and Australia. She has a number of journal

publications and her books include *Queer Methods and Methodologies* (with Kath Browne, Routledge 2010), and *An Introduction to Human Geography* (with Erin Hogan Fouberg, Alexander Murphy and Harm de Blij, Wiley and Son 2015, Canadian edition). For more information, see <http://www.catherinejeannash.ca/>.

REFERENCES

- Browne, Kath, Niharika Banerjea, Leela Bakshi, and Nicholas McGlynn. 2015. "Gay-Friendly or Homophobic?: The Absence and Problems of Global Standards." *Antipode Foundation: A Radical Geography Community*.
- Browne, Kath, and Catherine J. Nash. 2014. "Resisting LGBT Rights Where 'We Have Won': Canada and Great Britain." *Journal of Human Rights* 13.3:322–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2014.923754>.
- . 2017. "Heteroactivism: Beyond Anti-Gay." *ACME An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16.4:643–52.
- Browne, Kath, Catherine J. Nash, and Andrew Gorman-Murray. 2018. "Geographies of Heteroactivism: Resisting Sexual Rights in the Reconstitution of Irish Nationhood." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 43.4:526–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12255>.
- Burack, Cynthia. 2014. *Tough Love: Sexuality, Compassion, and the Christian Right*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Butler, Jennifer. 2006. *Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized*. London: Pluto.
- Gunnarsson Payne, Jenny. 2019. "Challenging 'Gender Ideology': (Anti-)Gender Politics in Europe's Populist Moment." *The New Pretender*, February 10. <http://newpretender.com/2019/02/10/challenging-gender-ideology-anti-gender-politics-in-europes-populist-moment-jenny-gunnarsson-payne/>.
- Haritaworn, Jin. 2015. *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others*. London: Pluto. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183p5vv>.
- Kováts, Eszter. 2017. "The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy." In *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, edited by Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan and Andrea Pető, 175–89. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43533-6_12.
- Kuhar, Roman, and David Paternotte, eds. 2017. *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kulpa, Robert, and Joanna Mizielnińska, eds. 2011. *De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives*. Farnham: Ashgate. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315576107>.

- Kulpa, Robert, and Joseli Maria Silva. 2016. "Decolonizing Queer Epistemologies: Section Introduction." In *Routledge Research Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities*, edited by Gavin Brown and Kath Browne, 139–42. London: Routledge <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315613000>.
- Lalor, Kay, and Kath Browne. 2018. "Here Versus There: Creating British Sexual Politics Elsewhere." *Feminist Legal Studies* 26.2:205–13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-018-9385-0>.
- Maliepaard, Emiel. 2015. "Bisexual Spaces: Exploring Geographies of Bisexualities." *ACME An International Journal for Critical Geographers* 14.1:217–34.
- Nash, Catherine J., and Kath Browne. 2015. "Best for Society?: Transnational Opposition to Sexual and Gender Equalities in Canada and Great Britain." *Gender Place and Culture* 22.4:561–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2014.885893>.
- . Forthcoming. "Resisting the Mainstreaming of LGBT Equalities in Canadian and British Schools: Sex Education and Trans School Friends." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*.
- . In press. *Heteroactivism: Resisting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Rights and Equalities*. London: Zed.
- Nash, Catherine J., Andrew Gorman-Murray, and Kath Browne. 2019. "Geographies of Intransigence: Freedom of Speech and Heteroactivist Resistances in Canada, Great Britain and Australia." *Social & Cultural Geography* 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2019.1652929>.
- Rao, Rahul. 2015. "Global Homocapitalism." *Radical Philosophy* 194:3849.
- Stein, Arlene. 2001. *The Stranger Next Door: The Story of a Small Community's Battle over Sex, Faith, and Civil Rights*. Boston: Beacon.
- Sullivan, Andrew. 2019. "The Hard Questions about Young People and Gender Transitions." *New York Magazine Intelligencer*, November 1. <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/11/andrew-sullivan-hard-questions-gender-transitions-for-young.html>
- Wellner, Fabienne, and Antonia Marienfeld, A. 2019. "Homosexuality and the AfD: That Doesn't Go Together: The Entanglement of Homonationalism and Heteroactivism in Germany." Conference Paper. RGS-IBG Annual International Conference, August 30, London.

NOTE

1. The term activism is an appropriate way to conceptualise the practices of those who seek to reiterate heteronormativities and their manifestations through campaigning, protests, lobbying and other activities that were once the purview of LGBT/Q activists who stood outside of state normalisations and legalities.