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## Critical review

# Whither queer world cities? Homo-entrepreneurialism and beyond



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### ABSTRACT

This paper contains critical commentary on the emergence and future research tasks for queer world cities, a cross-disciplinary field of inquiry positioned at the intersection of urban globalization studies and the geographies of sexualities. It seeks to advance the concept of homoentrepreneurialism in order to understand the sexualized worlding of cities under the hegemony of neoliberal urbanism. Recent developments in Buenos Aires and other Latin American cities are used as illustrative examples of how sexual diversity and cosmopolitan tolerance are increasingly interwoven with entrepreneurial quests to upgrade the global competitiveness of a city and thereby attract tourists, capital, and a select group of (homo-)sexual citizens. The paper takes critiques of geographical elitism seriously in its interpretation of homonormativity, but relationality and geographically uneven development prevail over reparatory substitution. Commentary on research projects from other world regions is also provided, and a research agenda is proposed.

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### Introduction

This paper contributes to the critical investigation of the city-based globalization of queerness emerging at the intersection of two well-established bodies of research – urban globalization studies and the geographies of sexualities. My intention is to delineate the contours of this nascent field, also proposing directions to advance its research agenda. Although informed by published works, this essay analyzes projects in progress discussed in sessions during the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers. These are indicative of the *problématiques* and theoretical tensions in the consolidating field of queer world cities. Organized by Natalie Oswin and collaborators, the sessions drew attention to entanglements requiring further study. On one hand we observe the worldwide proliferation of entrepreneurial projects

on globalizing cities; on the other, we encounter increasingly conspicuous policies of sexual diversity and associated politics of (in-)tolerance. In other words, this research assesses how the social mainstreaming of globalized (homo-)sexual dissidence produces selective forms of queerness in world cities, where sexual citizens appear to be complicit with neoliberal designs of cosmopolitan urbanity.

Within this analytical framework, my commentary focuses on homo-entrepreneurialism, a sexualized genre of economic and cultural interventions incorporated to the governing technologies of globalized neoliberal urbanism. Whereas my own research focuses on Buenos Aires and metropolitan Latin America – from where this essay also draws illustrative examples, the notion could also be productively applied to other cities regardless of developmental gaps and cultural differences. My intention is not to showcase homo-entrepreneurialism as a universal category of analysis. Rather, this paper seeks to define, locate, and probe the limits of

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this constellation of policies and politics emerging in certain urban nodes – which economic and state actors strategically select to advance market-oriented, global-city projects. Those advocating for more encompassing geographies of sexualities criticize the geographical elitism that they believe plagues urban understandings of homonormativity. Although sympathetic to these arguments, my approach differs. Instead of reparations to be achieved by shifting the geographic focus away from conspicuous spaces of homo-normative politics, I suggest relational readings of homo-entrepreneurial city worldings in order to adequately place such processes within multi-scalar contexts of geographically uneven development.

The paper is organized into two sections and concluding remarks. The first defines homo-entrepreneurialism as a genre of urban entrepreneurialism, also locating homo-entrepreneurial constellations geographically, within institutional formations, and power discourses. The second section moves beyond homo-entrepreneurial sites in a relational approach that locates these spaces within broader geographies. The postcolonial turn in urban globalization is particularly useful to both *world* and *queer* cities differently (both terms used as verbs). Moreover, it helps us provincialize EuroAmerican definitions of (non-)normative sexualities, thereby generating more fruitful understandings of localized assemblages within globalizing sexualities.

### Defining and locating homo-entrepreneurial urbanism

The notion of homonormativity became widely influential in critical studies of sexuality after Duggan (2002) formulated it to critique the rise of gay neo-conservatism to the fore of American politics in the 1990s. Thus, homonormativity problematizes sexual politics under neoliberalism, highlighting the increasing social acceptance of certain forms of sexual dissidence but not others (Stryker, 2008). Favored sexual citizens conform to norms such as marriage and the (class-based, racial, and male) privileges of contemporary capitalism. They possess high levels of human capital, the cultural determinations and consumerist mores expected by an upper-middle-class white society (Richardson, 2005). Moreover, while departing from the traditional heteronormative canon, they belong in stable (often legally-married) couples and conform to cisgender behaviors – for instance, luxury weddings of two appropriately-dressed grooms or brides are now far from outrageous even on the cover of popular magazines. Bell and Binnie (2004) seminal work urbanized homonormativity by showing that this political complex coalesces with entrepreneurial regimes of urban governance to produce selectively sexualized city spaces and events. These are then mobilized to upgrade the local position within the global inter-place competition for hypermobile economic resources: recasting a city's symbolic desirability and broadening its appeal helps to harness investments, talent and the commercial boosts that come from global tourism (see also Hubbard, 2011: 176–203; and Rushbrook (2002) earlier work on the tourism-oriented exoticization of gay neighborhoods).

Much has been written about entrepreneurialism since Harvey (1989) identified the then emerging mode of urban governance accommodating to early processes of globalization and concomitant neoliberalization. Urban entrepreneurialism has travelled far via thick networks and extensive policy-transfer circuits: market-centric approaches are now ubiquitous and common-sense among policymakers worldwide who tap them to solve urban problems by harnessing external resources (Clarke, 2012; Peck and Theodore, 2010). Moreover, in the twenty-first century, and particularly since the 2008 recession, researchers note the heightened leverage of global capital in the governing of cities through processes of financialization in an age of austerity (Peck, 2012). In the United States, the proliferation of longstanding mechanisms such as tax-incre-

ment financing for redevelopment is increasingly accompanied by ever more intricate schemes to transform (financialize) even the most basic municipal services, including the regulation of street and public parking; these day-to-day city operations become financial instruments that yield future revenue streams to service public debt, which is often held by large institutional investors (Ashton et al., 2012; Weber, 2010).

Therefore, homo-entrepreneurialism is a genre of an increasingly variegated neoliberal urbanism. Entrepreneurial interventions are now highly diversified, even though they were initially centered on the attraction of selected sectors, such as for example the celebrated FIRE (finance, insurance and real-estate) cluster of 'office economies' or the hyped high-tech industries of the dot-com bubble. In particular, cities that aspire to attain world-class status but are nevertheless mired in less-competitive positions within global circuits of capital and technology increasingly rely on various mechanisms to leverage their comparative advantages for economic development. These include locational assets and environmental amenities as well as connections to expatriates and other communities of hyper-mobile, part-time populations in addition to traditional tourists (Bose, 2014; Kanai, 2013; Kanai and Kutz, 2013; Hodson and Marvin, 2010). Culture-led, creative and experience-oriented strategies have also proliferated within a diverse array of regional settings that includes smaller cities in Europe threatened by decay and under pressure to reinvent themselves globally, unevenly developed metropolitan agglomerations in Latin America, and burgeoning urban centers in the rapidly-changing Asia Pacific (Allingham, 2009; Kanai and Ortega-Alcazar, 2009; Yeoh, 2005).

Within this variegated landscape, the themes of sexual diversity and cosmopolitan tolerance are increasingly apparent in the cultural strategies of Latin American cities aspiring to world-class status. Although these cases are hardly exceptional in a global context and many parallels can be traced vis-à-vis counterparts in Euro-America and elsewhere, they remain understudied, especially by critical research from outside the region. In cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires the global-tourism mindset is explicit: English-language campaigns emphasize the city's appealing gay-friendly character while newly-created agencies and programs cater to LGBT (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender) travelers. But even more locally-oriented actions, such as São Paulo's prominent gay pride parade, become opportunities to showcase spectacular vistas such as the glitzy high-rises along the iconic *Avenida Paulista*, and emblazon a diverse, integrated and safe urban society. Nonetheless, class selectivity is betrayed by the imagery used in the ground-breaking *In Bogota You Can Be* (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender), devised by the city's department of urban planning. Sexual citizens are portrayed against selective settings of an orderly, inclusive, and investment-ready city, which is dotted with sustainable bicycle-lanes, sanitized supermarkets and a modern airport – locations that are also featured in international campaigns advertising Bogotá's rise as a world-class business center.

Much remains to be studied in each individual case. Future research will need to take stock of the heterogeneity and contingency of homo-entrepreneurial approaches in Latin America and elsewhere. Actually-existing homo-entrepreneurial assemblages are geographically variegated due to their individual path-dependent territorial trajectories, and they are also highly mutable in their localized manifestations. Yet, this paper posits that a policy convergence within the region's globally-oriented cities in which selective sexual tolerance is increasingly conflated with the soft cosmopolitanism of tourist-friendliness and investment-readiness. This shift is far from linear and is mediated by various factors at multiple scales of socio-political regulation that shape urban life.

The early twenty-first century is witnessing a partial, contested, geographically uneven and open-ended transition from neoliberalism to post-neoliberalism in much of Latin America. On one hand,

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