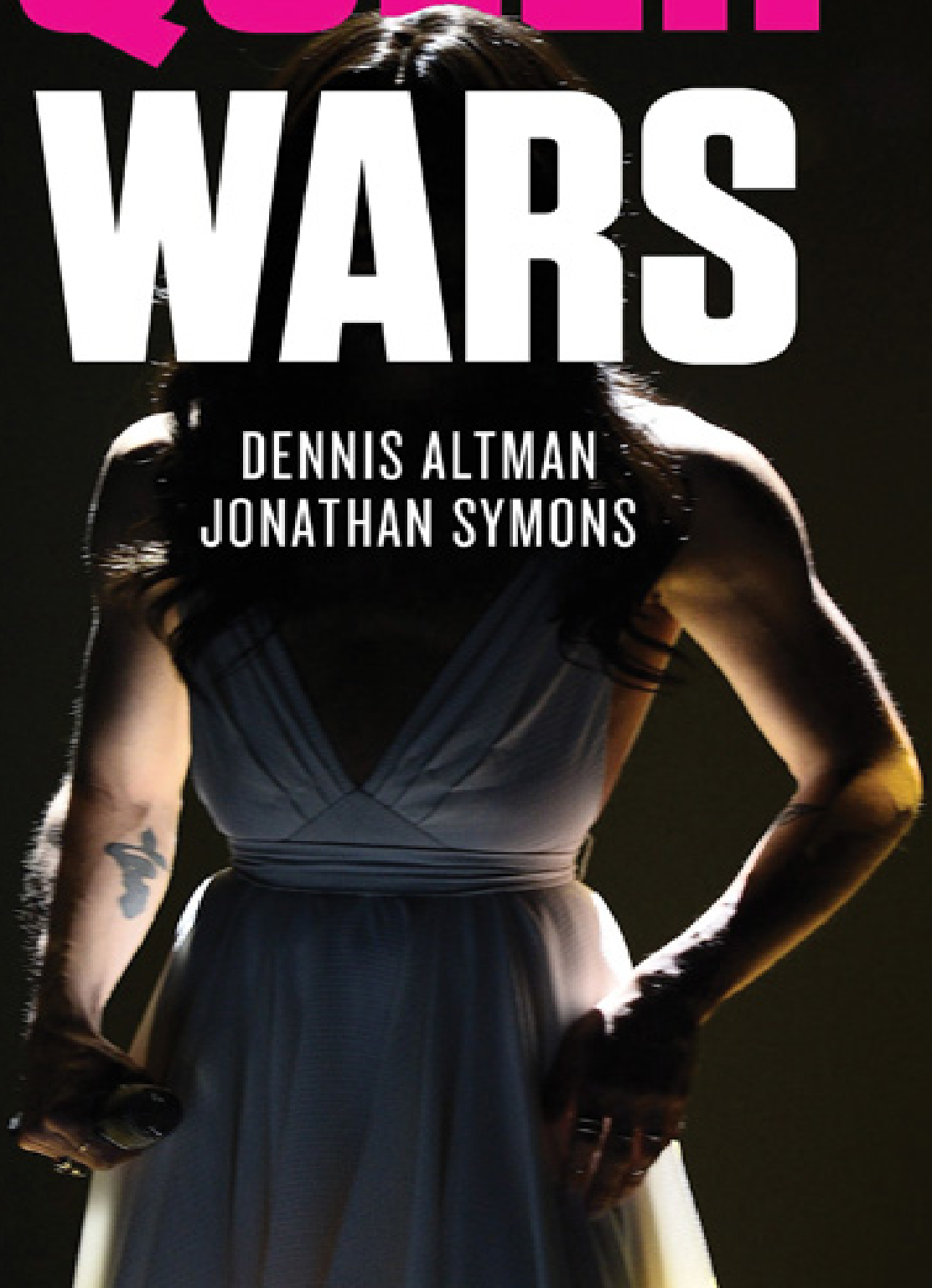


# QUEER WARS

DENNIS ALTMAN  
JONATHAN SYMONS



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# Queer Wars

The New Global Polarization  
over Gay Rights

DENNIS ALTMAN AND  
JONATHAN SYMONS

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# Queer wars: how should we respond to global polarization over gay rights?

When Conchita Wurst won the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest, Russian deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin tweeted that Eurovision 'showed supporters of European integration their European future - a bearded girl'. The contest took place against a political backdrop of rising tension between Russia and the European Union, Russia's passing of anti-gay-propaganda laws, the annexation of Crimea and continuing fighting in Ukraine by pro-Russian rebels. In Copenhagen the crowd booed Russia's entry, the Tolmachevy Sisters (winners of the junior Eurovision who had identified themselves as virgins in press interviews), while Russian audiences jeered the victory of a 25-year-old, bearded, Austrian drag queen. There were petitions against Wurst in Russia, Belarus and Armenia, despite her polling well in their popular vote. Wurst herself explained, 'I really felt like tonight, Europe showed that we are a unity full of respect and tolerance', and when asked for a message for Putin, replied 'we are unstoppable'. She emerged from this divisive contest as an instant symbol of sexual and gender diversity, much as had the Israeli transsexual, Dana International, who won the contest in 1998.

The divisions performed by the Eurovision crowds are more than symbolic. Every year thousands of people are beaten, harassed, raped and even killed because of their real or perceived sexual or gender 'deviations'. It is impossible to give accurate figures, as often the worst abuses are performed by the state, or at least ignored by authorities, as in the case of attacks on homosexuals by vigilante groups in Russia or the widespread 'corrective rape' of women perceived to be lesbian in South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes abuses receive international attention, as in the case of David Kato, a prominent Ugandan gay activist who was murdered in 2011 shortly after winning a law suit against a local magazine which had identified him as gay and called for his execution. At his funeral activists grabbed the microphone to stop the Christian minister preaching against gays and lesbians. Over the next few years the Ugandan Parliament made various attempts to strengthen anti-homosexual legislation, which led to considerable US and European pressure on the Ugandan authorities. The film *Born This Way* (2013) shows the constant threats and persecution faced by homosexuals in Cameroon, a country which allegedly arrests more people for homosexuality than any other. A small group of activists have tried to build a movement there; some of them have now left, seeking asylum in countries where their lives will not be at risk. Like many women and men from Iran, Russia, Uganda and many other countries, they have discovered that to be open about one's sexual orientation, and even more often one's gender expression, is to face ongoing harassment, violence and even the possibility of being killed. Even in the most liberal of countries there is considerable violence and hatred directed at people who are seen as sexually and gender diverse.

We are writing this book in a time when one can point to huge gains in acceptance as well as major setbacks for the cause of gay rights, and sexual rights more generally. We seek to answer two questions: first, why, as homosexuality has become more visible globally, have reactions to sexual and gender diversity become so polarized? Both advocates for and opponents of sexual rights are passionate in their views, leading to a hardening of positions on both sides and the danger that arguments about sexual rights will be perceived as an inevitable cultural clash between western democracies and 'the rest', often countries struggling with

colonial legacies or other forms of social disorder. Amid such polarization both sides lose sight of history; advocates tend to forget how recent are the advances in the west, while their opponents deny the long existence of various forms of sexual and gender diversity in their own cultures.

The book's second question is: what is to be done? As writers who believe passionately in the right of people to choose how they love and how they present themselves, we are equally concerned to think through how we can best achieve these rights globally. Over the past few years there has been a great deal of activity through international fora, as queer and human rights groups, increasingly with government support, have sought to address the situation of people often referred to as 'sexual minorities'. The decision in June 2015 of the US Supreme Court to grant constitutional protection for same-sex marriages (in *Obergefell v. Hodges*) has meant renewed international attention to questions of sexual rights. That same week authorities in Istanbul unexpectedly clamped down violently on a gay pride parade, a sharp contrast to the rainbow lights that illuminated the White House. In September 2015 the United States and Chile organized the first (informal) discussion of LGBT human rights in the UN Security Council in response to reports of Islamic State (ISIS) killings of homosexuals. Seemingly in response, ISIS immediately publicized several more executions of homosexuals.

Writing from the privileged safety of a liberal-democratic state, we are aware that advocates of international change must be cautious in urging action upon others. We might advocate radical arguments within our own communities that we are simply not entitled to make in the international context where other people live with the consequences. Our conclusion - that western advocacy should focus on building an international consensus protecting sexual

minorities from violence and persecution – may seem minimalist, but it stems from respect for pluralism and a concern for the safety of people facing real threats of violence and intimidation. While we should offer support and solidarity for activists internationally on terms that they request, and while we can hope that basic protections will create conditions for more radical social change, we do not believe it is productive to try to impose human rights protections or that we can be radical for other people.

Finally, a brief note on the terminology used in this book, except when we are quoting others. ‘Gay rights’ (which are usually understood to include women as well as men) and ‘LGBT rights’ have become widely used, even though they link ideas of universal human rights with specifically western identities. ‘LGBT’ stands for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans’; Australian usage adds ‘intersex’, but we are uneasy with the assumptions of specific identities underlying these terms. As Robert Lorway wrote of Namibia: ‘Local gender and sexual knowledge becomes repositioned as *undifferentiated* – that is, not fully recognized and in need of elevation to the more secure status of LGBT identities.’<sup>2</sup> In contrast, most United Nations human rights documents refer to ‘sexual orientation and gender identity’ (SOGI) in order to recognize sexual diversity without prescribing specific identities, and at times we refer to ‘SOGI rights’ when discussing developments in international human rights practice. The term ‘sexual minorities’, which is sometimes used, assumes a common sense of identity and community that is only applicable to a relatively small number of people, while ‘queer rights’, which encompasses both homosexuality and gender expression, is more inclusive but overly academic. Further, while we recognize the problems of referring to ‘the west’, we use it as a convenient

shorthand for grouping together the liberal democracies of Europe, North America and Australasia.

In reality, the goal of campaigns for 'queer rights' is the universal application of human rights, irrespective of sexual orientation or gender identity, and many have argued that this is better pursued through building protection for the 'sexual freedoms and rights' of all people. The very concept of 'sexual rights' was born from a feminist critique which rightly saw the subordination of women and the denial of the right to control their bodies as central to both social justice and genuine 'development'. Gay rights cannot be conceptualized without reference to broader concerns for sexual rights and gender equality (including a recognition of diverse forms of gender expression), but the major focus of the book is on the peculiarities of the contemporary international debates about homosexuality, and the ways these have come to stand for broader debates about culture, tradition and human rights.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Strudwick, Patrick (2014) Crisis in South Africa: The shocking practice of 'corrective rape' - aimed at 'curing' lesbians. *Independent* 4 January.
- <sup>2</sup> Lorway, Robert (2015) *Namibia's Rainbow Project*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 39.

# One

## Setting the agenda

It is tempting to see a new Cold War being played out around homosexuality. In 2014 the Winter Olympic Games took place at Sochi on the Russian Black Sea. The Games were carefully planned to enhance the reputation of Russia and its newly (re-)elected president, Vladimir Putin. But they followed the introduction of anti-homosexual-propaganda laws, disguised as protecting cultural values,<sup>1</sup> which in turn led to calls for boycotts of both the Games and some of the major corporate sponsors.

No country refused to participate in the Sochi Games, but the United States made its attitude clear by not sending any high-ranking official, and naming a delegation headed by several openly lesbian and gay sporting figures, including tennis player Billie Jean King. Other major political leaders and most European royalty also refused to attend the opening ceremony, although the king and queen of the Netherlands, flanked by Britain's Princess Anne and members of the Monaqueque and Luxembourggeois royal families, were present. The Dutch decision was somewhat surprising, given the extent to which the country has been a leader in promoting gay rights, and came in for some criticism at home. Nor were attempted boycotts always successful; a seemingly spontaneous boycott of Stolichnaya vodka collapsed when it became clear that the vodka actually came from Latvia, not Russia. Following the Sochi Games the International Olympic Committee announced new rules for the selection of host cities, including a requirement of full non-discrimination, which have yet to be tested.

In the controversies over Sochi and Eurovision one could see cultural battles around gay rights attaining a new international prominence. Such a coordinated international campaign around gay rights in an authoritarian country is unprecedented, even if the protests around Sochi were essentially symbolic. But homosexuality is constantly in the news. In one random day as we started writing this book (30 August 2014) the local Australian press carried stories about the first openly gay member of the Chilean navy, and commentary on same-sex marriage, alongside stories about the brutal lashings of a Saudi man caught using his Twitter account to arrange dates with other men. Not only do these stories point to the role of the state in regulating sexuality, they also underline the extent to which both public attitudes and state control appear to be moving in different directions in different parts of the world.

During the Cold War one of the few things on which both Soviets and the United States could agree was that homosexuality was a dangerous perversion. Indeed both countries saw an increasing fear and rejection around homosexuality in the 1950s, following a brief period after the Russian Revolution when the Soviets seemed to pursue greater tolerance, and the greater sexual freedoms that emerged in the United States after World War II. By the 1970s the social and cultural changes which are loosely associated with 'the sixties' had begun to challenge the dominant assumptions in most western countries that homosexuality was an illness, a sickness or a deviance. The Soviet Union was far slower to move in this direction, and although small gay movements emerged in a few non-western countries, homosexuality, indeed any deviation from 'traditional' assumptions about sexuality and gender, remained heavily stigmatized. While there have been huge shifts in general views of sexuality in the United States this century - epitomized in increasing support for same-sex