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1

Introduction

WORLD CULTURE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

On June 27, 2013, then US President Barack Obama stepped out of *Air Force One* onto the dry tarmac at the Leopold Sédar Senghor Airport in Dakar, Senegal. It was the first stop on a three-country trip where Obama was scheduled to meet with leaders from government, business, and civil society in Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania. Almost five years into his presidency, Africans had grown disappointed that the first truly African American president, and someone with *direct* ties to Africa, had failed to fulfill his promise of deeper engagement with the continent. The symbolism of the occasion became palpable when, hours after touching down at the airport, the president and first lady, Michelle Obama, set sail for Gorée Island, the infamous shipping port of the Atlantic slave trade just off the coast.

That same day, Obama participated in a joint press conference with the recently elected Senegalese president, Macky Sall (The White House 2013). The US president emphasized the importance of the “rule of law,” which was the “foundation for governance . . . human rights and economic growth.” “It’s a pillar of our democracy,” he said, as he hailed the “representatives of civil society, which is incredibly strong here in Senegal.” Several observers believed his choice to visit Senegal—in particular, making it his first stop on the continent—reflected America’s view that the nation was a strong democracy and a source

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of stability in a region marred by corruption and endless coups (Look 2013). Obama praised the country for weathering a political storm the prior year when Abdoulaye Wade, the country's previous president, had sought to stay in power beyond the term limits laid out in the constitution. "There were some significant questions as to whether Senegal's democracy would continue to represent the will of the people," Obama opined, but in the end, civil society leaders were "able to maintain the pressure and to maintain a focus on the peaceful transfer of power and the continuation of democratic traditions." Wade was ultimately ousted in a landslide election, which international observers considered to be free and fair and that brought Sall to power. Just before Obama spoke, President Sall had highlighted the country's "common vision" and "shared values" with the United States, including "democracy, freedom, human rights, good governance."

The joint press conference, and the trip, were off to an auspicious start until an American journalist asked Obama a fateful question: "Did you press President Sall to make sure that homosexuality is decriminalized in Senegal?" Then, turning to Sall, the journalist stated, "You just said you embrace democracy and freedom. As this country's new President, sir, will you work to decriminalize homosexuality in this country?" The questions came on the heels of the US Supreme Court's 5–4 decision that struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, no doubt the foreign backdrop of what would become a national firestorm in Senegal. Western journalists often use such tactics to publicly shame and embarrass leaders of African countries on the world stage—not about their foreign policy, but about their national affairs, affairs that often touch on deep cultural issues. In this case, the journalist's confrontational question to Sall had much to do with the US's relative position of power vis-à-vis Senegal, and it was an exercise and reminder of America's dominance on the world stage.

Obama confessed he did not bring up the topic of homosexuality in his closed-door session with President Sall. But he nevertheless took the bait and dove headfirst into what most Senegalese people consider to be extremely sensitive and controversial waters. *United States v. Windsor*, he held, "was not simply a victory for the LGBT community, it's a victory for American democracy." It confirmed a commitment to basic fairness and equality under the law, though he reminded the audience the ruling did not apply nationally (that would come two years later with *Obergefell v. Hodges*). Obama continued, pointing out that although different countries, peoples, and religions have different traditions and beliefs, "when it comes to how the *state* treats people, how the *law* treats people, I believe that everybody has to be treated equally." He added, "So, my basic view is that regardless of race, regardless of religion, regardless of gender, regardless of sexual orientation, when it comes to how the law treats you, how the state treats you—the benefits, the rights and the responsibilities under the law—people should be treated equally. And that's a principle that I think

applies *universally*, and the good news is it's an easy principle to remember." This statement was directed to the Senegalese public, but it was also directed to the American people; as a US State Department official observed, "Wherever the president is, he is always speaking to the American people."¹ And this was "something that was important to Americans."² Through such condemnations, politicians aim partly to shore up their base and show constituents they champion their values not just at home but abroad.

Obama was measured yet unequivocal in his statements in front of the American *and* Senegalese press, which put President Sall in an uncomfortable position. Senegal's newly elected leader had just lauded the United States' financial support and reaffirmed the countries' shared values. But he knew he would face a stinging national rebuke if he publicly agreed with Obama about gay rights. So Sall walked a fine rhetorical line, holding fast to his country's refusal to decriminalize homosexuality while still expressing Senegal's commitment to human rights and Western values:

now, on the issue of homosexuality . . . you said something very important—general principles which all nations could share, and that is the respect for the human being and non-discrimination. But these issues are all societal issues basically, and we cannot have a standard model which is applicable to all nations, all countries—you said it, we all have different cultures. We have different religions. We have different traditions. And *even* in countries where this has been decriminalized and homosexual marriage is allowed, people don't share the same views.

President Sall challenged the journalist's suggestion that his country needed to decriminalize homosexuality, noting a difference in local traditions and values. He recognized the values of "respect" and "non-discrimination," which "all nations could share." But at the same time, he also quickly asserted Senegal's cultural distinction—"different cultures," "different religions," "different traditions"—backtracking and rejecting universalism or any "standard model." Instead, he suggested a vision of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000). But he also noted something that is often overlooked—that the acceptance of gay rights is not a foregone conclusion. This is true even in the West, where, as Sall put it, "people don't share the same views."

The Senegalese press, which is largely opposed to homosexuality, widely cheered Sall's remarks later with colorful headlines like "No, We Can't" (a reference to the famous pro-Obama campaign slogan, "Yes, We Can"); "Macky says no to Obama"; "Obama makes a plea for the homos, Macky says no!"; and "President Sall has closed the debate on homosexuality" (Nossiter 2013).

But at the press conference, Sall also had to find a way to align Senegal with the United States (and the West), and his full response struck a more conciliatory tone, revealing his desire to not alienate his American counterpart

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or jeopardize Senegal's ties and reputation—and potential future financial assistance—which were strategically important for the poor developing nation. He continued:

Senegal . . . is a very tolerant country which does not discriminate in terms of inalienable rights of the human being. We don't tell anybody that he will not be recruited because he is gay, or he will not access a job because his sexual orientation is different. But we are still not ready to decriminalize homosexuality.

Here, Sall expressed his ostensible support for two views that are deeply held by the West: the principle of nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation, and the Weberian idea that in a modern bureaucracy, social differences should be eliminated and only the best, most qualified person should be hired for any position. His use of the term "sexual orientation" was also a subtle nod to Western human rights discourse. Drawn from biomedical and psychological research, the term presents sexuality not as a choice but as "a fundamental aspect of our underlying human nature," one that is as much emotional as it is sexual (Waites 2009, 144–45). This makes it a useful term around which to make legal claims, and activists prefer it as they seek to incorporate sexual minority rights into existing human rights treaties. But despite Sall's lofty rhetoric, Senegal does not, in fact, protect sexual minorities from employment discrimination.

What was most striking, however, about the press conference with Obama was Sall's rhetorical concession to the validity of these values. In this exchange, he was acting out the position of the "dominated" in relation to the "dominant," as described by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his seminal 1984 book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*—showing, as a Senegalese, his taste for the local position on homosexuality while also claiming adherence to supposedly universal Western values. Bourdieu (1930–2002) was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, and he primarily studied power, culture, and inequality. In *Distinction*, he tells us, the working class enjoys social practices that are associated with its lower class position, even as they express a belief in the superiority of the behaviors of the upper classes. They will choose, for example, to go to a football game rather than attend a classical concert, but they nevertheless *recognize* the classical concert as the more legitimate, more high-culture practice. Similarly, Sall, despite his refusal to support the decriminalization of homosexuality in Senegal, *recognized* the value of "tolerance," the "inalienable rights of human beings," and the importance of "non-discrimination." He paid homage to Western values, and to what I call, in this book, "world (or global) culture." As he put it:

I've already said it in the past, in our Cabinet meeting, it is Senegal's option, at least for the time being, *while we have respect for the rights of homosexuals*, but for the time being, *we are still not ready to change the law*. (emphasis added)

Even as Sall refused to support the decriminalization of homosexuality, global culture still haunted his comments, appearing in his talk of job "discrimination," in his use of the term "sexual orientation," in his insistence on "respect for the rights of homosexuals." He tried to stake out a middle ground, to raise the specter of the possible slow evolution of his society while, at the same time, rejecting any immediate change. The divided president spoke again:

But of course, this does not mean that we are all homophobic. But the society has to absolve these issues. It has to take time to digest them, bringing pressure to bear upon them, on such issues. It is just like capital punishment. In our country, it has been abolished for many years. In other countries, it is still the order of the day, because the situation in the country requires it. And we do respect the choice of each country. But please be assured that Senegal is a country of freedom and homosexuals are not being prosecuted, persecuted. But we must also show respect for the values and choices of the other Senegalese people.

Sall went so far as to refuse the labeling of his nation as "homophobic," assuring the world that "Senegal is a country of freedom and homosexuals are not being prosecuted, persecuted." His response—tracking between pro- and anti-world culture orientations—offers a glimpse into what it means to be a nation under the weight of global culture.³ On the one hand, he challenges the *doxa* of human rights, "the point of view of the dominant" as Bourdieu defines it, "when it presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view" (1994, 15). But on the other hand, he accepts, at least in front of the US president, that human rights and nondiscrimination for gays and lesbians are values that ought to be adhered to, thus showing his continued investment in the global "rules of the game," despite openly flouting them. It was a moment where the global met the national, and the forces of the global ended up victorious. Sall's reference to capital punishment adds another striking dimension to the exchange, exemplifying what sociologist Michèle Lamont (2000, 18) calls "boundary work," where "Each group perceives the other as lacking with respect to the specific universal moral rules each embodies and privileges most". After the conclusion of Obama's trip, Sall pushed a much harder line in the local Senegalese press, stating, "I will never compromise the values of Senegal. I will never accept being manipulated by foreign powers. I said it to the president of the United States, that certain practices will not thrive in Senegal" (Leral 2016).

The tense press conference between Presidents Obama and Sall reflects some of the key dynamics and themes that cut throughout this book. It displayed the hubris of a US journalist injecting themselves into the cultural and domestic affairs of another nation and shaming that nation on the world stage. There is also a highly unequal power relation, where Senegal, the country facing external pressure, is economically, militarily, and politically subordinate to the intervening nation-state. And then there is the rhetorical dance that President Sall performed to placate the powerful West without undermining his own nation's sovereignty, democratic processes, and popular will—the very same will Obama himself insisted Senegal should respect when he discussed its recent elections. The dissonance these conflicts create can be heard in the contradictions and reversals that marked Sall's comments that day. As we will see, this dissonance is also reflected beyond the presidency and throughout an internally divided and fractured state. Finally, the Sall–Obama press conference shows how Western interventions, which are seen by many as “meddling,” can rile up the local population, increasing resentment for the West and generating a renewed attention to, and rejection of, homosexuality.

Western interventionism, of course, runs far deeper than one journalist's question and a few presidential remarks. Since the end of the Cold War, many Western governments have increasingly sought to champion and integrate gay rights into their diplomacy, foreign policy, and international development programs, advocating directly for the end of anti-sodomy laws and for rights and protections for sexual minorities and their families (Burack 2018; Thoreson 2014).⁴ What I call the *geopoliticization of homosexuality and gay rights* in this book reached a fever pitch in 2011, especially in the United States. That year, President Obama, taking the most decisive step any US president had taken up to that point, issued a memorandum affirming his support for integrating sexual politics into the United States' geopolitical relations, stating, “under my Administration, agencies engaged abroad have already begun taking action to promote the fundamental human rights of LGBT persons everywhere” (The White House 2011). In December of that same year, his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, delivered her momentous speech at the United Nations, declaring, “some have suggested that gay rights and human rights are separate and distinct; but, in fact, they are one and the same.” This echoed her famous 1995 speech as first lady at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in which she declared, “women's rights are human rights.” Under Obama, Secretary Clinton went on to oversee the drafting and signing of the United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. During her tenure, the US Department of State spearheaded the Global Equality Fund, a massive partnership of nations, foundations, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), and businesses that, to

enshrine abroad the recent legal gains won at home, were all dedicated to fighting for LGBT rights around the world. Considering these developments, the 2013 encounter between Sall and Obama only hints at the fuller story of how global forces bear down upon postcolonial nations in the Global South. Those forces do more than attempt to publicly shame nations for their criminalization of homosexuality. They also harness vast resources—including immense capital endowments and superior global networks—to reshape law and legal practices on the ground.

But what happens when Western forces try to intervene in a nation's local legal scene—in particular, a nation like Senegal in the postcolonial Global South? In what ways do these countries find themselves caught up in larger historical and geopolitical dynamics that grip both sides? What effects do these global forces have on local actors and local legislation? In short, in the ongoing debates over gay rights, what really happens when the global and the national come *face to face* with one another?

These are some of the core questions this book wrestles with, and my contention is that the presence and interventions of pro-gay nations and institutions ultimately produce myriad and unintended distortions, failures, and consequences that all too often exacerbate the problems they seek to resolve. These interventions produce palpable tensions, and they often divide nation-states from within. They undermine local democratic structures and the collective conscience. And paradoxically, they fan the flames of resentment against the West, against gay rights, and against gay people. In complex ways, these resentments also touch on anger over colonialism and its present legacies, global economic inequality, Western cultural disregard and domination, and even the politics of migration. No doubt the efforts of Western actors reflect genuine concern for human rights, but *The Great Refusal* looks at the ways these good works often lead to a fracturing process and Pyrrhic victories. In fact, one of the greatest ironies in the West's crusade to constitute and then liberate "gay" subjects in Senegal, and throughout the Global South, is how such advocacy and interventionism have intensified anti-gay sentiment and led to the complete disavowal and deterritorialization of the gender and sexual non-normativity that once existed and was tolerated there in the not-so-distant past. The failure of global forces to consider and understand how local legal actors and populations perceive foreign interventionism into a nation's sexual politics not only injures these states by refusing them "recognition," nor does it merely insult them by continuing a long history of cultural domination. It also undermines the viability of the very sexual minorities they intend to support. Even worse, today the fierce rejection of homosexuality has become the vector through which local populations express their broader resentment against the West. In this sense, global interventionism has turned same-sex-loving people—who are now seen as being aligned with powerful

Western forces intent on cultural destruction and the exploitation of native populations—into twenty-first-century scapegoats.

In analyzing these various dynamics, this book contributes to a growing field of scholarship that critically engages with the fraught relationship between the Global North and Global South, and the myriad consequences of Western interventionism. In their work on the “AIDS Enterprise” in Malawi, for example, Swidler and Watkins (2017) have examined the cultural, cognitive, and physical disconnect between foreign donors on the one hand and local brokers and recipients of foreign aid on the other, which has led to distorted perceptions of reality, “fantasies” that bedevil well-intentioned aid work. In the case of China, Long (2018, 2024) showed that while external interventionism pushed the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to reduce its overtly violent crackdown on AIDS activism, these interventions also led the CCP, worried about its sovereignty, to develop new nonviolent repressive modes of biopolitical governance. In a different arena, Seymour (2019) and Autesserre (2010), looking at the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), have pointed to the routine failures of international peacekeeping and protection to address the underlying local causes of violence, and the interlocking social, cultural, political, and economic origins of conflict. Seymour, for her part, highlights the irrationality of reintegration programs for child soldiers, providing them with training and certificates only to send them back into the socioeconomically deprived conditions that initially put them at risk of becoming child soldiers in the first place. Autesserre similarly explores how international peacebuilders have focused almost exclusively on top-down policies like organizing elections, forgoing support for bottom-up programs like grassroots conflict resolution, which would address the local roots of violence. All these accounts, in their own way, highlight how global forces seeking to intervene in countries in Africa and beyond exacerbate the problems they hope to resolve. Though *The Great Refusal* analyzes a different domain—the geopolitics of homosexuality—it contributes to this body of scholarship by attending to the complexities, irrationalities, and unintended consequences of international (Western) interventionism. My analysis, however, tells a somewhat different story of how international organizations interact with functioning and democratic state institutions, specifically the judiciary, and the conflicting ways in which the state responds.

John Meyer and the Theory of World Culture

In his theory of world culture, the sociologist and neo-institutionalist John Meyer offered a powerful explanation of the rapid and radical transformations that took place in the global environment after World War II. Nations, he observed, had become more uniform and more united, converging on a

single model, what he called “world culture.” World culture is a “worldwide cultural frame” (Drori and Krücken 2009, 21), a set of global scripts hovering above us like modern-day platonic forms, extending over every sphere of life, diffusing and dictating rules for social action, and shaping and reshaping peoples, institutions, and nations. It is defined by Enlightenment principles such as rationalism and individualism, progress and universality (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Strang and Meyer 1993; Meyer et al. 1997). Though it has its roots in the West, this culture has spread its tentacles out to the four corners of the globe, becoming a normative ideal to which all nations ought to aspire. And in the decade following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union—an event Russian President Vladimir Putin has called “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century”—this global, unifying culture was in full bloom (Osborn and Ostroukh 2021). Politicians, activists, journalists, and scholars all hailed various versions of it, whether they called it the era of “globalization,” the “flat world,” the “Pax Americana,” or the “end of history.” Seemingly triumphant, this new era promised peace and security, economic prosperity, and the protection of individual rights and liberties from infringement by the state or other citizens.

A network of nations, global institutions, and global professionals championed this transformation as well: academics and aid workers; intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and European Union (EU); international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch; and many Western governments like those in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Together, these parties constructed a postwar “world society,” which promulgated “world culture” and ultimately gave rise to an international system known as the “world polity.”

Meyer’s theory of world society is indebted to the German sociologist Max Weber ([1905] 2002; [1921] 1978), whose work on rationalization and bureaucracy greatly shaped Meyer’s thinking. For Meyer, world culture was a *rationalized* culture, one where science set the parameters for legitimate knowledge, where bureaucracies patterned “everyday life within standardized impersonal rules” (Meyer et al. 1987, 24), and where power shifted from religion and tradition to a secular, legal-rational authority exercised with predictability and without prejudice (Nonet and Selznick 2001; Savelsberg 1992).

One of the overarching cultural ideals, or myths, at the core of this new world culture was the idea of social agency. At the institutional level (which included the nation-state), world culture forged legalistic and rational arrangements out of loose, often patrimonial, social ties, and traditional governing bodies became modern bureaucracies of *intentional* action. At the individual level, world culture converted an undifferentiated horde of powerless peasants into differentiated persons and ultimately into “sovereign actors.”

The seeds for such a radical transformation in the construction of a global reality first appeared with “the Enlightenment view of humanity,” which “place[d] the rational, opportunistic individual at the center of the universe” (Boyle and Meyer 1998, 213). These new individualized subjects were constructed as rational and autonomous, “authorized centers and sources of all social action” (Meyer and Jepperson 2000, 105). Liberated from the old world’s traditional binds of religion and family, persons were no longer defined exclusively by their group membership. Instead, “modern identities” were now “properties of the individual, chosen by the individual, and freely alterable by the individual” (Frank and Meyer 2002; Meyer 2009, 289). This new technology of the self—an entity imbued with agency to act in accordance with its own internal wants, needs, and desires—replaced the need for God (or the devil) as the motivator of human action.

Three decades of scholarship produced by Meyer and his colleagues showed convincingly how this world culture grew to become a dominant global ideology, spurring conformity in policy across nations. Today, for example, most countries are governed by constitutions and a central government with specialized ministries (Kim et al. 2002); they often have tripartite military with an army, air force, and navy (Finnemore 1996, 336–7); they collect and report data on populations and the economy; they have formal mass-education institutions (Meyer et al. 1992); they have similar university systems with near-identical curricula, despite a wide variation in national labor markets (Meyer 2000; Meyer and Ramirez 2000); and they have a formal legal system, with diverse areas of legal specification, such as administrative, family, trade, and criminal law. Increasingly, many countries have passed laws that protect the environment (Frank et al. 2007) and safeguard the rights of women, children, and ethnic and racial minorities (McNeely 1995; Bradley and Ramirez 1996; Berkovitch and Bradley 1999). One driver of such change was the deep anxiety national leaders felt about what other nations were doing and how they compared. They felt enormous normative pressure to adhere to global scripts to appear legitimate on the world stage, and especially in the eyes of the more dominant nations that had originated world culture.⁵

World society theorists argue for the cultural force of these norms and the overwhelming symbolic pressure all nations feel to replicate them. As political scientists have noted, these transnational norms propel legal changes by heightening “norm visibility” (Ayoub 2016). Global norms even offer activists and local populations something to mobilize around, allowing them to put pressure on nations to see themselves through a common global standard to which they feel compelled to conform. But world society theory also emphasizes the importance of links to world society institutions (e.g., IGOs and INGOs). The more activists and local populations are linked to these institutions, the more pressure they can put on governments to

implement world culture. Local organizations (norm brokers) and global institutions (norm entrepreneurs) can work together to give world culture norms local salience in a particular country. In this way, without denying domestic factors, global forces and processes can significantly shape domestic policies.

In short, an adherence to global scripts grants nations legitimacy. This is evident, for example, when governments pass pro-gay legislation and directly reference other nations that have passed similar laws, nodding rhetorically to the “international standards of human rights” (Kollman 2013). In 2016, for example, the government of Nauru, an island country of about twelve thousand people in Micronesia, decriminalized homosexuality to be more in line with its international treaty obligations and to show “progressive leadership” (Reuters 2016). As demonstrated by several European countries who decriminalized homosexuality to join the European Union, nations may recognize gay rights for more instrumental reasons as well. But in both cases, the effects of world culture’s spread—to countries that enact gay rights for instrumental reasons and those that enact them as a symbolic gesture—are the same.

SOVEREIGN SEXUAL SUBJECTS

World culture’s rise has had an enormous impact on sex and sexuality. Tracking the repeal of sodomy laws and the liberalization of other state policies on sexuality, David Frank and colleagues showed how world culture brought greater tolerance for those living outside the bounds of traditional heterosexual life (Frank and McEneaney 1999; Frank et al., “The Reform” 2009; Frank et al., “Global Dimensions” 2009; Frank et al. 2010; Frank and Moss 2017; Velasco 2020). This occurred as societies shifted from an ancient communal concern for collectives—the nation, tribe, and family—to a modern preoccupation with the individual as an independent and free-willed actor, a historical epoch when, as the nineteenth-century French sociologist Émile Durkheim ([1893] 1997) put it, “the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion” (122).⁶ Such a world historical event laid the ideological groundwork for gay identity and gay rights as “individuals attain sacral standing across more and more dimensions: age, sex, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on” (Meyer and Jepperson 2000, 105). To quote Frank and Meyer (2002):

There is an ongoing reformulation of the formally elaborate family system into a network of individuals, freeing sexuality and gender from earlier social constraints. The process produces identity claims which abound in new groups of entitled individual persons—women, gays, lesbians, children, the aged, and so on. (95)

World culture has bequeathed us an ideology of persons as autonomous, self-directed, and calculating rational actors, unbound by tradition and unmoored from a duty to family and community. In all aspects of human life, world culture centered and valorized the individual above all else. “Gay identity” and “gay rights” are thus two products of this sacralization of the individual, made possible by the new “cultural opportunity structure” brought forth by world culture that turns individuals—among other things—into sovereign sexual subjects (Frank and McEneaney 1999; Frank and Meyer 2002; Frank et al., “Global Dimensions” 2009; Frank et al. 2010).

The figure of the sexual sovereign had already begun to emerge in the nineteenth century with the scientific invention of the “homosexual,” a process the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1978) traced in *The History of Sexuality*. Sexologists at the time—working in fields ranging from criminology to psychology to medicine—produced a new understanding about sexuality and those people who engaged in same-sex behavior. Foucault (1978) writes that in:

the nineteenth century, the homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. . . . The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (43)

What was significant about this development of sexual subjectification was that homosexual acts went from a set of practices any person was capable of to an expression of an inner essence, a specific “type” of person, a constitution, psychology, and physicality.

Foucault dates the scientific construction of the homosexual to 1870, when Karl Westphal, a Berlin-born German psychiatrist, published a paper about individuals who experienced “contrary sexual sensations” (Foucault 1978, 43). According to Westphal, theirs was a “congenital reversal of sexual feelings,” which resulted from “moral insanity” and imbalance (Foucault 1978, 43). For the first time, sexual feeling was tied to biology, creating a new medicalized understanding of same-sex practice and desire. In fact, scholarship since Foucault has shown this type of medicalization going back even further. In 1862, Karl Heinrich Ulrich, a German lawyer, coined the term “urning” to describe men who engaged in same-sex behavior (Leck 2016). “Uring” was a sexual in-between stage, a “man who felt sexually attracted to another man,” who was, in fact, “a woman’s spirit in a man’s body” (Chauncey 1994, 49). Subsequent scholars continued to frame the language of same-sex attraction in more medical terminology. Karl-Maria Kertbeny, an Austro-Hungarian journalist, first used the term “homosexualität” (homosexuality), popularizing what was the emergent scientific theory of sexuality. In his work, *Entdeckung der Seele* (*Discovering the Soul*), the German physician Gustav Jäger (1884) also took

up the term “homosexual,” and Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, an Austro-German, borrowed it for his 1886 study *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which analyzed all manner of “sexual perversity” and wherein homosexuality was featured as exemplary of uncommon social, but also biological, factors: “Sexual desire . . . is a physiological law” (Krafft-Ebing [1886] 1906, 25). Finally, in 1904, the preeminent sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, a German physician, developed a “sexual intermediacy” and “third-sex” theory, which rejected the prevailing view of homosexuality and heterosexuality as distinct orientations and instead posited they were two opposite ends of a continuum. While these were all congenital views of homosexuality, in which the sexual instinct was presumed to have psycho-physiological roots, they were also an early form of individualization dressed in medical garb.

Despite the tendency to pathologize same-sex desire, it is notable that most of these early sexologists drew on their biological theories to champion the decriminalization of sodomy. Kertbeny was one of the first to push for the repeal of Prussian sodomy laws. Ulrich publicly defended urnings and homosexuality. Havelock Ellis, the first and most prominent British sexologist, argued that homosexuality was natural and should not be criminalized. And most notably, Hirschfeld’s *Scientific Humanitarian Committee* (SHC) marked the beginning of the “first homosexual rights movement” (Dose 2014; Beachy 2015, 85). “It was precisely the open, public agitation of the SHC,” Beachy (2015) writes, “that distinguished Germany from other European countries. In the name of popular enlightenment, the SHC sponsored dozens of public lectures, primarily in Berlin but also in other major German cities” (93).

Along with this process of building a new kind of medical and legal subject, a cultural process of individualization began taking shape as well. Newly constituted “homosexuals” started to organize their lives around their sexual desire, forming “self-consciously” homosexual subcultures and spatial enclaves, or “gayborhoods” (Ghaziani 2014). The seventeenth-century *molly houses* in London were among some of the earliest of such spaces, where men forged companionship and community (Bray 1995). But by the late nineteenth century, large and *visible* gay subcultures popped up in major cities across Western Europe, including Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, and Copenhagen (Edsall 2003; Rydström and Mustola 2007; Jackson 2009; Beachy 2015).⁷ Every few years, a gay scandal rocked the collective conscience. The Eulenberg scandal in Berlin, the Oscar Wilde scandal in London, the *Messes Noires* scandal of Adelswärd-Fersen in Paris, the Great Morality scandal in Copenhagen, and the Santeson Affair in Stockholm were all clear reminders of the growing gay presence in these cities. No place, however, rivaled Weimar Berlin’s open and vibrant gay subculture, which was lionized in Christopher Isherwood’s two classics, *Christopher and His Kind* and *Goodbye Berlin*, the latter of which tells the story of the twilight of the Golden Twenties and the rise of Hitler.

Capitalism and urbanization helped make possible the creation of these gay-identified enclaves (D’Emilio 1983; Adam 1985). As traditional, land-based kinship systems weakened, increasingly more people transitioned to wage labor in urban areas. Working the land was no longer the sole means of subsistence, and people were freed from the necessity to marry and produce children as a means of survival. Familial pressures to do so also became less potent when individuals could survive outside the family through wage labor. As a result, people enjoyed greater freedom to organize their lives around their same-sex desire. By the mid-twentieth century, similar same-sex sexual subcultures spread to many countries outside of Northwest Europe (Fink and Press 1999; Green 1999; Seabrook 1999). And in 1969, the Stonewall Riots in New York City unleashed a wave of militant pro-gay activism and visibility, built in large part upon the social networks that already existed among self-identified gays, lesbians, and transgender people in gay urban enclaves.

Taken together, the birth of the “homosexual,” the political push to decriminalize sodomy, and the emergence of same-sex subcultures made homosexuality and homosexual identity increasingly salient in the minds of citizens around the world. In the wake of the barbarism of World War II, and against the backdrop of the student movement, women’s movement, anti-war movement, environmental movement, civil rights movement, and gay liberation movement that rocked Western capitals, Western nations placed a new political focus on building global institutions that would champion individual rights.

By this time, the world culture view of sexual sovereignty had completely taken hold. Sexuality was not only individualized but also constructed as self-willed and self-affirmed. In *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism*, British social theorist Anthony Giddens (1992) captures this well in his concept of “plastic sexuality,” which describes a new sexual order in which sexuality becomes a possession over which the individual has absolute control. Throughout the West, as a novel set of laws emerged to protect this vision of sexual sovereignty, it triumphed both culturally and legally.

SEX AND CIVILIZATION

Sex and sexuality, however, have long been sites of struggle and symbolic boundary-making. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud ([1930] 1962) drew a direct historical connection between sexuality and civilization, arguing the latter only appeared where there was a repression of Eros, and the redirection of sexual instincts into civilizational pursuits like art, literature, music, and science. Following Freud, the German sociologist Norbert Elias ([1939] 1994) detailed in his *Civilizing Process* how sexuality became a major fault line in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe between what was

considered to be the sexually libertine aristocracy and the sexually ascetic rising bourgeois classes. As they consolidated their power, the bourgeois classes were the central drivers of a new sexual ethic *inside* European societies. Their “inner worldly asceticism,” as Elias called it, shrouded sexuality in shame, forcing it behind the scenes of public life and into the confines of the bourgeois family (Elias 1998, 154):

The rising bourgeoisie opposed the code of good manners with a different pattern of civilization, a moral code. It was this code, which surrounded the whole area of sexuality as one of the largest danger zones of human existence with a differentiated, finely-meshed fence of prohibitions, the strict observation of which was treated as the touchstone of the bourgeois respectability of families as well as their individual members. (204–5). (emphasis added)

At first, this new sexual ethic distinguished the rising bourgeoisie from the morally loose aristocracy and the morally lacking lower classes *within nations*. But, in time, it slowly permeated the entire class edifice to become a national, and then European, ethic. The consolidation of this set of values represented the attainment of “civilization.” “The concept of civilization,” Elias (1994) opined, “indicates quite clearly in its nineteenth-century usage that the process of civilization—or, more strictly speaking, a phase of this process—had been completed and forgotten” (88–89).

As Ann McClintock (1995) shows in her seminal book, *Imperial Leather*, once the age of imperialism took off, this bourgeois sexual ethic was deployed to distinguish Europeans from people in other parts of the globe, especially those in countries Europe colonized. Ideas about sex and sexuality soon shaped notions of racial and national belonging, as they marked supposed differences between the White European and the other (Frühstück 2014). During their colonial exploits, Europeans often encountered social organizations of sexuality—including practices like polygamy, female husbandry, and homosexuality—that were at odds with their newly constituted ethic (Munro 2012). For European intellectuals and colonists, these practices proved the “primitiveness” of non-Western peoples, a mark of their social, cultural, and even evolutionary inferiority (Greenberg 1990; Murray and Roscoe 2001). Western scientific discourses about racial difference were also built on and made legible through discourses about sexual difference (McClintock 1995; Frühstück 2014; Sreenivas 2014).

Homosexuality in particular was a key axis of social distinction for Europeans, who viewed the accepted homosexual practices of many non-Europeans as evidence of their racial and civilizational inferiority (Bleys 1995, 145–92; Vijayakumar 2021a). The historian Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) records

the lasting impact of these views on nineteenth-century Iran: “By the early nineteenth century, Iranian men had become acutely and increasingly aware that Europeans considered Iranian older man–younger man love and sexual practice a vice” (33–34). This anxiety over European judgment led to a denial and disavowal of the homoerotic element, for example, in visual representations and love poetry. It also transmuted homoeroticism into a “masqueraded” heterosexuality, constituted the homo/hetero binary, and “redefined homosexual desire from natural to unnatural and abominable, blaming it on the undesirable social practice of women’s seclusion and gender segregation” (Najmabadi 2005, 55).

But the West has also long been at the forefront of not just judging but attempting to *refashion* the sexual tastes and practices of other peoples. Past Europeans saw the particular sexual practices and regulations dominant in the Global South as signs of racial inferiority. In time, however, Europeans endeavored to impose their sexual ethic on those other “races” through law and legal institutions, attempting to globalize Elias’s *civilizing process* and internationalizing struggles around the regulation of sexuality (Bleys 1995). This process laid the foundation for what this book explores, the geopolitics of sexuality. As Elias describes it, “people only wanted to accomplish this process for *other nations*. . . . They wished above all to disseminate it” (1994, 88–89).

And thus, colonial powers came to criminalize homosexuality in their colonies. This was a pivotal moment, an early play of domination within what Steinmetz (2016) calls a “colonial field,” whereby specific laws and practices were extended from the colonial metropolises to the colonies. In 1860, for example, Britain introduced Section 377 into the Indian Penal Code, a model anti-sodomy law. In subsequent years, such laws “stretched across Asia, the Pacific islands, and Africa, almost everywhere the British imperial flag flew” (Gupta 2008, 87). These colonial antecedents provide a necessary background for understanding contemporary global conflicts around homosexuality. And it is critical to understand that the modern-day criminalization of homosexuality across the former British, as well as French, empires are an “alien legacy,” the result of a purposeful colonial imposition (Gupta 2008; Sanders 2009; Frank et al. 2009a; Asal, Sommer, and Harwood 2012; Han and Mahoney 2014).

And yet, the values and principles that define “civilization” continued to shift. By the end of the twentieth century, the idea of sexual sovereignty had triumphed, and former European colonial powers radically shifted their stance as a result. In stark contrast with their forerunners, contemporary Europeans now believe the right to engage in same-sex practices is a *fundamental human right*, and they now define tolerance for sexual diversity as exemplary of “modernity,” “progress,” and “enlightenment” (Sanders 1996; Waites 2009; Petchesky 2000). Today, for the global field of human rights, or world society, the embrace of gay rights is the true *marker of civilization*. Pro-gay laws and a

national acceptance of gay rights is a “pink” litmus test of one’s belonging to these “modern” times (Rahman 2014), functioning as “a new racism” targeted against those who resist it (Binnie 2004). The “deployment of queer rights both at home and abroad,” Rahman (2014) explains, “operates in a ‘homo-colonialist’ fashion that renders resistant populations inferior in relation to superior Western values” (283). More ominously, Jasbir Puar’s (2007) concept of “homonationalism” suggests Western nations use their pro-gay laws to strengthen their own national identity, to challenge (Muslim) immigration, and to justify imperialism by demonizing non-Western peoples as anti-gay, and thus in need of reform.

The Dutch case is paradigmatic. For the last two decades, many politicians in the Netherlands, especially on the populist right, have questioned Muslim immigration, arguing that the failure of immigrants to integrate has undermined Dutch values of gender equality and a tolerance of homosexuality:

Debates regarding which communities, countries, cultures, or religions are more, less, equally, similarly, or differently homophobic miss a more critical assessment regarding the conditions of its possibility and impossibility, conditions revolving around economic incentives, state policies on welfare and immigration, and racial hierarchy, rather than some abstracted or disengaged notion of culture *per se*. (Puar 2007, 29)

Even on the political left, the celebration of a democratic ethos has at times drifted into a “nationalization of liberal values, which results in separating those who truly belong and those who betray a foreignness” (Duyvendak et al. 2022, 223). In this way, liberal values have, in fact, become exclusionary tools within the context of Dutch society (241), a phenomenon Duyvendak has termed “liberal nativism.”

Though it is not the focus of this study, I would also like to briefly mention that the politics of gender have been just as fraught as the politics of homosexuality (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991; Gal and Kligman 2000). Throughout the twentieth century, states of all political persuasions drew on their expanded bureaucratic capacity to solidify sovereignty over women’s reproduction and to police sexual practices (e.g., Rubin 1999; MacKinnon 1982; Brown 1992; Canaday 2009; Luker 1984; Pateman 1988; Kligman 1998; Roberts 1997; Gal and Kligman 2000; Puri 2016; Stychin 1995; Eskridge 2008; Zilney and Zilney 2009; Wilde 2020). Women carried the “burden of representation,” their bodies marking the contours of a nation’s physical and symbolic territory (Mostov 1995; Yuval-Davis 1997). Thus, like the politics of homosexuality, the politics of reproduction is always a politics of the state and state-making (Le Naour and Valenti 2003), with the state and/or citizenship contributing “not only to changing reproductive practices, but also to the creation of new kinds of political actors and subjectivities, in domestic and international arenas” (Gal

and Kligman 2000, 15–16). What Wendy Brown (1992) calls the masculine state “controls and regulates the sexual and reproductive construction and condition of women,” as “male social power” is increasingly located in and harnessed by it (29). Debates about reproduction help political entities constitute themselves, their authority, and their legitimacy. This is equally true in postcolonial contexts, where gender has been a key site of contestation. Colonialists justified imperialism with claims that indigenous traditions oppressed women; in turn, anti-colonial nationalists used that tradition to construct an identity in opposition to Western modernity (Mani 1987; Chatterjee 1993).

GLOBALIZING SEXUAL SOVEREIGNTY

By the 1980s, world society institutions, which were largely made up of Western governments, IGOs, and INGOs, started to spread the idea globally that this newly constituted gay community should be protected by law. “The post-Stonewall wave of activism,” Laura Belmonte (2021) writes, “quickly cohered into a transnational LGBT movement more visible and geographically broader than preceding efforts. New NGOs focused on global LGBT equality arose and began holding international conferences, lobbying supranational bodies, and invoking human rights accords. Advocates around the world coordinated actions protesting injustices in individual countries” (109–110).

In the early 1990s, world society institutions made securing the legal right to sexual self-determination a global priority (Sanders 1996; Waites 2009; Petchesky 2000). Sexual minority rights discourse was internationalized (Drucker 2000, Adam et al. 1999, Phillips 2000, Altman 2001, Binnie 2004). Legal scholars and social movement organizers likewise reinterpreted global human rights conventions so they included sexual orientation. Since same-sex practices were still largely criminalized across the globe, this change suddenly meant most countries in the world were guilty of violating human rights (Heinze 1995; Wintemute 1995; Petchesky 2000). The International Lesbian and Gay Association achieved consultative status at the United Nations in 1993, the first time a group focused on gay rights received an official imprimatur from that international organization (Sanders 1996). In *Toonen v. Australia*, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) extended the prohibition on sex discrimination established in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to cover sexual orientation, thereby challenging laws that criminalized same-sex behavior (Wintemute and Andenaes 2001; Waites 2009). In 2006, the Yogyakarta Principles, which apply international human rights law to “sexual orientation,” was signed (Corrêa et al. 2008, 29; O’Flaherty and Fischer 2008). The same year the Declaration of Montreal, a document adopted

at an international conference, reaffirmed LGBT rights and called on the UN to champion those rights globally (International Conference on LGBT Human Rights 2006; Kollman and Waites 2009; Swiebel 2009). In 2008, the “Statement on Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity” was presented by sixty-six nations at the General Assembly of the UN (United National General Assembly 2008).

At the regional level, the European Court of Human Rights outlawed sexual orientation discrimination (Graupner 2000, 426). Today, the European Union bans discrimination in employment and vocational education and requires new entrants to decriminalize homosexuality as a condition of entry (Wintemute 2005, 190; Gerhards 2010), in line with the EU Treaty of Amsterdam’s (1997) anti-discrimination clause (Bell 1998, 65). This expansion of human rights to encompass the right to sexual self-determination reflects a broader trend in the movement in “world culture.” And international LGBT rights advocates work with global and supranational organizations to pursue rights around the world (Kollman and Waites 2009; Swiebel 2009). From 2011 to 2012, the United Nations made sexuality a priority, issuing a report on the discrimination of sexual minorities and formally establishing the protection of sexual minorities as an obligation of its member states.

But pro-gay nations and international organizations did not content themselves with the reinterpretation of international human rights conventions; they also pushed more directly for gay rights on the ground in countries around the world (Kollman and Waites 2009; Swiebel 2009). The United States, for instance, integrated LGBTQ advocacy into its diplomacy and foreign policy (Encarnación 2016). Though the United States’ involvement in this area took off during the Obama administration, it had begun as far back as the 1990s (Burack 2018; for a general history of transnational LGBT activism, see Thoreson 2014). Even development aid has been weaponized, with some Global North countries cutting or threatening to cut aid to countries, mainly in the Global South, that criminalize same-sex acts or whose treatment of sexual minorities is deemed to be particularly egregious (Ewins 2011; Sarpong 2012; Kates 2014; Saltnes and Thiel 2021). After Uganda passed its 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, for example, the Biden White House (2023) and the World Bank Group (2023) retaliated against the country, issuing sanctions and stopping all new development financing.

World society institutions also supported LGBT rights by funding transnational advocacy networks and local groups (Keck and Sikkink 1998). They are among the largest contributors, for example, to the Global Equality Fund, a US State Department-led initiative started under Secretary Clinton in 2011 to support sexual minority civil society organizations in over eighty countries. Contributors included those who were the first to break away from the global

status quo in the 1970s and are now among the countries that are the most unique in their legal profiles: Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Uruguay. The United States itself is a curious case because it long exported world culture abroad while lagging behind other, more liberal nations at home.

Between 2011 and 2015, the Global Equality Fund supported LGBT-focused civil society organizations with roughly \$24 million, 8.5% of which went to sub-Saharan Africa in 2015 alone. That same year, it offered a total of seventy-five grants, which included small awards, emergency assistance, and technical assistance (US State Department 2015).⁸ Even Western-based corporations increasingly engage in this kind of human rights promotion and activism with threats of boycotting anti-gay countries (Sandler 2019), arguing that LGBT discrimination hurts business (Zappulla 2017). As Nicolas Guilhot (2005) argues about human rights and the promotion of democracy:

by linking activist groups to remote foundations in Washington or elsewhere, by channeling financial assistance or sending political advisors or organizers . . . this emerging global network also contributes to the transformation of politics into a field that is less the expression of local, historical, and social developments than the reflection of global trends and practices. It does not only make possible all sorts of interference and occult influence, but it also coats them in the glorious appearance of progressive struggles and solidarities. (29–30)

The stakes of this negotiation are incredibly high. The force of world culture takes many different forms—economic, legal, bureaucratic, administrative, and political. And the world order it forges is one where more powerful, more central nations rooted in the West exert enormous pressure and influence on smaller, less powerful countries, especially in the Global South. In championing world culture, the powerful not only seek to impose new laws that decriminalize same-sex practices; they also seek to constitute hyper-individualized sexual sovereigns in every corner of the globe. The goal, then, is to change the legal and sexual order. But on an even more fundamental level, it is also about exporting subjectivities and ways of seeing from the West to the rest.

The Dark Side of World Culture

And yet, there has often been an amnesia about the origins and aims of world society and world culture, one that has stripped away the critical perspective from Meyer's original formulation. Much scholarship today tends to treat world culture—especially in the realm of human rights—as a normative goal. But Meyer's original intervention was quite different. He sought to reveal the socially constructed nature of our conception of human rights, which the West

defined as a universal “good.” His theory, thus, is not a roadmap for a liberal Western project, as many people often assume, but a full accounting of the social construction of a global reality. Building on the works of Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, Meyer’s phenomenological explanation of the global order explains the practices through which a worldview forms, then comes to be taken-for-granted, and finally gets internalized as real. As he points out, however, the resultant global reality is precarious, and it requires constant adjustments, legitimation practices, and ritualized enactments. That is, world culture was not an *a priori* transhistorical norm lying in wait to be adopted. It was not discovered but made, birthed into existence through its implementation and reinforced through language and regular conflict.

A second major component of Meyer’s intervention deals with the sacred versus the secular. However secular world culture appears now, early world society theorists were clear about its occult origins and its missionary zeal. “The institutions of the West,” Meyer and colleagues wrote, “devolve from Western religion and the church” (Meyer et al. 1987, 28). Christianity was the first world culture, and Western Christendom the first world society, an

overarching cathedral within which the modern cultural system developed: a common, highly legitimated, boundaryless polity where ultimate authority was located at the peak of the vaulted dome (God) and devolved on human entities (popes and priests, kings and nobles) as subordinate beings, with much to say about social ontology, actors, and the relationships among action, nature, and the ultimate. . . . The frame derives directly from the Christian church and the invisible conceptual “Kingdom of God” that the earthly church organization was supposed to represent in an imperfect way. (Meyer et al. 1987, 28)

Like modern-day world culture, Christianity was a transnational, universalist, and totalizing ontological system (Meyer et al. 1987, 28–29). It was transnational because it created a “unified symbolic structure encompassing a wide variety of cultures and people,” generating a high level of idealized homogeneity (isomorphism) across vastly different contexts (Meyer et al. 1987, 28).⁹ It was universalist because everyone and everything both inside and outside its sphere of influence were implicated in its doctrine. And it was a totalizing ontological system because it made claims about the “rules of nature and moral purpose,” and about reality, humanity, and the significance of people’s lives (Meyer et al. 1987, 27). In other words, both Christianity and world culture provide answers, but they also prescribe actions.

According to Meyer, the global scripts of *today’s* world culture are rooted specifically in the Protestant and Anglo-American world. “The Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment progressively built modern individuals and states” (Drori et al. 2009, 267), which reached their high point during the

postwar period. If the Enlightenment uprooted religion, it did not uproot religiousness. Thus, in a move deeply reminiscent of Durkheim's (1912) *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Meyer articulates his critical perspective on the modern world order's unending religiosity:

We should not be misled by the view that modern authority structures are "secular" rather than "religious." Authority structures define the sacred and relate to it the profane. Whether the sacred involved transcendent deities (Jehovah, God, and Allah) or transcendental concepts (equality, freedom, rights and livelihood) at its ultimate root is irrelevant, for the sacred in a sociological sense is always religious. (Meyer et al. 1987, 29)

And so, as modern world culture increasingly focused on rational and secular outcomes like economic development, education, social well-being, and the health of the population, and as it championed new global ideals like individual freedom, liberty, and human rights, the old themes of "salvation" remained.¹⁰ "Almost all elites," Meyer writes, believe

salvation lies in rationalized structures grounded in scientific and technical knowledge in states, schools, firms, voluntary associations, and the like. The *new religious elites* are the professionals, researchers, scientists, and intellectuals who write secularized and unconditionally universalistic versions of the salvation story, along with the managers, legislators, and policymakers who believe the story fervently and pursue it relentlessly. This belief is worldwide and structures the organization of social life almost everywhere. (Meyer et al. 1997, 174) (emphasis added)

Despite Meyer's gimlet-eyed recognition of the religious roots of world culture and the socially constructed nature of its precepts, world society literature has largely resisted walking through the door he cracked open to grapple directly with the continuities between the missionary zeal of the past and that of the present, between the first world society (Christendom) and the contemporary one (Western liberalism), between the desire to "save" the soul and the desire to "liberate" the modern subject. But it is critical to understand that world culture, no matter what era it takes shape in, strives for universalism, which is realized in world society's missionary impulse.

A growing critique of world society theory is that it "downplays or ignores entirely the role of conflict, power, and resistance in the enactment and transmission of (Western) world-cultural scripts" (Cobb 2014, 290). It tends to de-emphasize power and persistent global conflict in favor of a consensus-driven story (Finnemore 1996; Hirsch 1997; Buttel 2000; Koenig and Dierkes 2012; Cobb 2014). In their review of the literature on the global diffusion of public policies, Dobbin and colleagues (2007) offer a similar assessment, writing:

“world polity” approach depicts an increasingly global political culture comprising broad consensus on the set of appropriate social actors (individuals, organizations, and nation-states have replaced clans, city-states, fiefdoms), appropriate societal goals (economic growth and social justice have replaced territorial conquest and eternal salvation), and means for achieving those goals (tariff reduction and interest rate manipulation have replaced plunder and incantation). (451)

These authors, however, point to coercion as an important driver of diffusion and adoption. These forms of coercion include setting conditions for receiving aid, loans, or other benefits. Powerful entities can also indirectly coerce weaker ones by changing the environmental conditions and norms they face, which can then pressure weaker entities to adapt. Finally, coercion can take the form of “dominant ideas” that “become rationalized, often with elegant theoretical justifications, and influence how policy makers conceptualize their problems and order potential solutions” (Dobbin et al. 2007, 456). This latter form of coercion—what Bourdieu would call “symbolic domination”—is particularly strong, because more powerful nations have a vast academic and technical apparatus at their disposal to legitimate, universalize, and export their viewpoint.

The Challenge to World Culture

Even as the framework of world society illuminates the diffusion and adoption of global cultural scripts—scripts Meyer himself critically recognized as social constructs bound up in their own religiosity—world society theory has not fully explored the potential for conflict and open rebellion.¹¹ Despite its claims of embodying “universal” values, the embrace of world culture is not happening everywhere, and “the critique that world society literature fails to adequately account for heterogeneity or the persistence of illiberal challenges, appears increasingly relevant in the context of laws governing sexuality” (Hadler and Symons 2018, 4).¹² Numerous countries still refuse to decriminalize sodomy, to say nothing of those who have embraced even more repressive legislation. On the African continent, for example, most countries do not even feign conformity to Western ideals. They have made no attempt to align their laws and practices with world culture; in fact, they often outright reject it.

Scholars have observed this “growing disintegration, fragmentation, heterogeneity and regionalization” in the world polity (Beckfield 2010, 1051–52). In the case of homosexuality, many have noted a rise in “illiberal world models” since the mid-2000s (Kretz 2013; Beyrer 2014; Hadler and Symons 2018, 23; Gonsalves 2021). The expansion and recognition of LGBT rights at the United Nations, for example, has similarly met increasing challenges from some

member states (Saiz 2004). Perhaps this is one reason why the UN has not moved to include a right to same-sex partnerships within its nondiscrimination clause (Waites 2009). Regional organizations are pushing back as well. ASEAN member states, for example, despite signing on to other human rights treaties, have refused to incorporate sexual orientation and gender identity into the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (Langlois 2014).

Illiberal nations are increasingly making the same claims to universality as liberal ones, noting that most of the world's population does not approve of homosexuality (Voss 2017). At the UN, several member states resisted including a right to same-sex marriage in the nondiscrimination clause (Waites 2009), seeing liberalization as Western imposition (Saiz 2004; Voss 2017). Similarly, despite signing international human rights treaties, many regional IGOs outside the West still refuse to incorporate sexual orientation and gender identity into their human rights declarations (Langlois 2014). These challenger states "argue that there is a potential 'Clash of Civilizations' and that the West is trying to not only create new rights but impose those rights upon others" (Voss 2017, 19).

But it is not just nations far outside of the West, in Asia or Africa, that are resisting world culture's stance on homosexuality. The stark divisions over the issue of homosexuality are found even closer to the Western core of world culture, in places like Poland, Latvia, and Slovenia (O'Dwyer and Schwartz 2010; Ayoub 2014). Russia has increasingly become a global anti-gay policy leader, regularly emphasizing its "moral sovereignty" to challenge human rights norms around sexuality. The country argues such norms need to account for "traditional values" and work around the majority will, especially in public contexts (Wilkinson 2014; Horvath 2016). This rationale has been the basis for the country's own anti-gay propaganda law, which criminalizes public discussions of homosexuality with minors or in the presence of minors (Wilkinson 2014).

By the early 2000s, the upward trend in the decriminalization of homosexuality began to flatten, stagnating at roughly 60 percent of countries (Figure 1.1). Moreover, new counterforces took shape, fueling fresh divisions and "illiberal world models" (Hadler and Symons 2018). Empirical evidence of polarization is mounting. A great deal of research points to a variety of explanations for this, from a lack of modernization and economic development to the strength of old traditions and religious beliefs; a story that pits the resilience of traditionalist and survivalist cultures against secular-rational and self-expressive ones (Inglehart and Baker 2000). Nationalism and colonial heritage play a role as well (Buss and Herman 2003; Asal et al. 2012). In line with transnational norm literature, scholars have shown that in countries where global norms lack local legitimacy, gay rights will be slow to take hold (Kollman 2013).

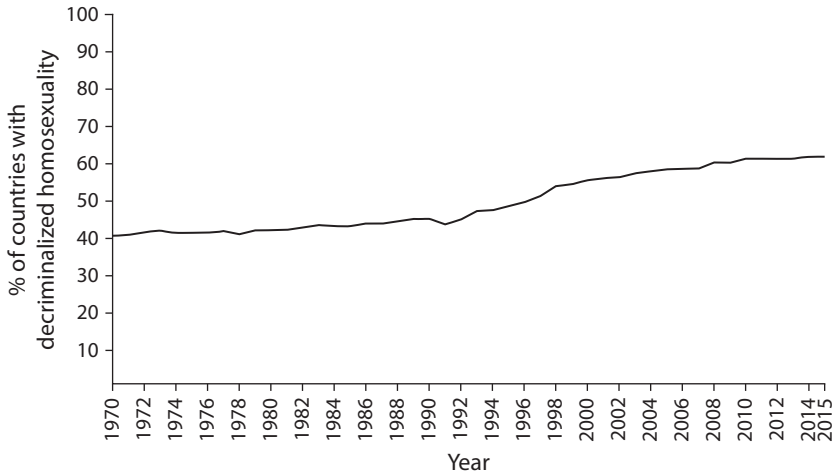


FIGURE 1.1. Percentage of countries with decriminalized homosexuality.

Those states that effectively link sexual politics to national identity, legitimacy, and social hierarchy provide rich soil for anti-gay policies (Symons and Altman 2015). In Poland, for example, the tight link between religion and national identity helps frame gay rights as an external foreign force (Ayoub 2014). In Eastern Europe, O'Dwyer and Schwartz (2010) point to the added impact of illiberal elites, anti-gay rhetoric, weak EU-conditionality, and party systems. The fact that opposition to gay rights also circulates closer to the Western core, fueled by national and transnational illiberal organizations, including religious groups, political parties, think tanks, and governments within Western countries (see Fassin [2010, 2014] on France; Browne and Nash [2014] on Canada and Great Britain; Zivi [2014] on the United States) only adds grist to the mills of non-Western defenders of anti-gay resistance.

Anti-gay policies, as some researchers have suggested, may also reflect a *backlash* against global gay rights norms and the normative pressures coming from the agents of world culture, Western nations, and institutions (Massad 2007; Fassin 2010; Rao 2015). Indeed, before local populations even begin to make demands for gay rights, rights discourse can already fuel “anticipatory countermobilizations” by social conservatives who react preemptively to what is happening in the broader global environment (O'Dwyer 2013; Weiss 2013; Dorf and Taroo 2014). Research beyond LGBT politics provides support for this finding. For instance, Bail et al. (2018) have shown that increased exposure to opposing views can lead individuals to hold ever more strongly to the views they already have or, worse, to move toward even more extreme positions. Strikingly, the authors found this digging in more often among

conservatives who were exposed to liberal views (Bail et al. 2018). This point echoes the qualification Ayoub (2016) makes when he suggests that the increased visibility of LGBT rights may ultimately lead to momentary backlash, though for Ayoub, this backlash may still (paradoxically) lead to progressive change by increasing the visibility of LGBT issues and laying a foundation for future success.

In 2012, the *Atlantic* published an article entitled “The Obama Administration’s Bold but Risky Plan to Make Africa Gay-Friendly,” warning that American interventionism in support of LGBT rights in sub-Saharan Africa has led to a backlash directed at sexual minorities (Corey-Boulet 2012). In Liberia, as the author explains, reactions to Hillary Clinton’s December 2011 declaration that she would “ensure that our foreign assistance promotes the protection of LGBT rights” were swift and fierce because, as the author points out, most of “Sub-Saharan Africa is marked by widespread homophobia as well as chronic dependence on foreign aid, in particular from the U.S., and the idea that those two issues might now be linked seemed to upset a lot of people here” (Corey-Boulet 2012). Within three months of Clinton’s declaration, Liberia, one of the United States’ closest and most faithful allies on the continent, saw a flurry of bills proposing to ban same-sex marriage, to increase the offense of same-sex practices to a second-degree felony with more prison time, and to criminalize engaging “in acts that arouses [sic] or tend to arouse another person of the same gender (male/female) to have sexual intercourse” (Corey-Boulet 2012). Even Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Liberian president, declared in January of 2012 that she would veto any bill proposing the legalization of same-sex practices or marriage. This was just three days after Secretary Clinton had attended Sirleaf’s second inauguration.

Anti-gay rhetoric and policies may also be used instrumentally for domestic statecraft. In such instances, this “political” or “state homophobia” becomes a tool in local power struggles for purposes of governance and security and for diverting attention from national crises like high unemployment, economic stagnation, and slow growth (Bosia and Weiss 2013). “State homophobia” exploits local anti-gay sentiment by connecting sexual minorities to foreignness (often the West) to solidify domestic support (El-Menyawī 2006; Pratt 2007; Bosia and Weiss 2013). The effectiveness of such tactics depends on how populations perceive the “foreign” and the normative pressures coming from Western societies and institutions.

The findings within this strand of illiberal-trend literature have contributed significantly to our understanding of why some nations have failed to embrace gay rights, and this book builds on its most important insights. But this scholarship largely focuses on *older laws on the books* and misses the emergence of

brand-new forms of anti-gay legislation. Notable exceptions are Wilkinson's (2014) study of Russian anti-gay propaganda laws and Kaoma's (2013) study of the "Kill the Gays" bill in Uganda—though like the rest of the countertrend literature, these are largely single case studies, not cross-national comparative analyses of anti-gay laws and their relation to pro-gay laws over time. Second, these studies often privilege *domestic explanations* and focus largely on local anti-gay political movements, various sources of local, population-level resistance to gay rights (e.g., Weiss 2013; Ayoub 2014), and the political uses of homophobia (Bosia and Weiss 2013). These assessments tend to overlook, however, how global dynamics may also be at work; after all, if those forces can easily work in pro-gay directions, couldn't they just as easily work in anti-gay ones as well? Finally, both the liberal-trend and illiberal-countertrend literature tend to isolate *individual explanatory factors*—like religion, economic development, nationalism, links to world society institutions, or the acceptance of global norms—to explain variations in gay rights. But they leave underexplored the deeper relational and structural divisions that lie beneath the different ways nations regulate same-sex love and desire, and that animate the global struggle for and against gay rights.

My approach in this study pushes forward this previous scholarship to offer just this type of relational approach. Instead of foregrounding how specific national measures impact laws, my goal here is to highlight the ways these measures, when taken together, can tell us something important about how the relative positions of nations, or put differently, how the structure of relations among nations, ultimately shapes law and legal institutions. More concretely, beyond any specific variable, it is this structure that matters for the regulation of sexuality and the geopolitics of homosexuality.

One of this book's central arguments is that the study of the geopolitics of homosexuality requires this kind of relational and structural frame. Senegal, as we will see, is located at the bottom of global social space, which is defined both by anti-gay legal regimes *and* a subordinated social position relative to the powerful Western nations that forged the interventionist global field of human rights. Articulating such power disparities puts inequality and hierarchy at the heart of the ongoing conversation about gay rights. It also helps us understand why the geopolitics of homosexuality are so fraught, and why they generate so much conflict and contestation, resistance and resentment. Senegal—or any nation—*always* interprets the geopolitics of homosexuality, the diffusion of gay rights, and the proliferation of gay identity from its relational standpoint, from its relative social location vis-à-vis other nations. Senegal's resistance, then, is not merely cultural, but reflects a marginal structural position—economically, politically, and symbolically—in the global hierarchy.

Reading Bourdieu: A Relational and Multi-Scalar Sociology

If John Meyer is one presiding scholarly presence in this book, the other is Pierre Bourdieu, whose work on relationality and power reverberates throughout sociological scholarship. And if Meyer helps sketch out the emergence and spread of world culture, Bourdieu helps us illuminate the conflictual dynamics undergirding that process. His theoretical apparatus complements and enriches world polity theory and helps us grapple analytically with the darker side of world culture, of which Meyer so eloquently wrote.

Drawing in part on the structuralist revolution, Bourdieu developed a powerful, epistemological and methodological tool kit for producing knowledge about the social world. That tool kit is built on the concepts of social space and fields.¹³ Both concepts suggest that if we want to understand any given actor or entity—who they are and what they do—then we must locate them within a larger system of relations. Social space is the first such system, a “multidimensional” space where each position within that space is defined *in relation* to all other positions—that is, by their “relative proximity and distance” to one another. Put simply, any single social agent, practice, or property cannot be understood except in relation to all other agents, practices, and properties. Bourdieu calls this principle “applied rationalism” (1991c), and Emirbayer (1997) refers to it as a “relational sociology.”¹⁴ We can think of the global space of nations as a general multidimensional space, where the relative position of nations expresses their similarity and difference across a given set of characteristics—in this book, their legal regulations on homosexuality.

But Bourdieu is also useful because, in addition to his concept of social space, he adds the accompanying notion of fields. Fields are institutionalized, semi-autonomous subspaces of social space, and they follow the same logic of relationality. But they are defined specifically as sites of *contention* and *contestation* among those who stake out opposing positions. They emerge where there are the greatest accumulation and consolidation of field-specific forms of capital (i.e., the political field, the economic field, or the academic field). They have their own logics that members follow, and they are animated by a competition for the right of “legitimate nomination”—that is, for the right to determine and impose the principal lens through which all other agents of the field (and often everyone in the more general social space) must perceive the world.¹⁵ For instance, the global field of human rights is a specific space organized around specific forms of capital, such as economic resources, global political networks, and academic credentials.

Bourdieu deployed his concept of fields to offer a more precise and nuanced definition of one of the core institutions of social scientific inquiry, the state, which he conceptualizes as an entity made up of multiple fields, “all riven by

internal divisions and axes of domination” (Steinmetz 2017, 371). In Bourdieu’s words, “these agents gradually built up this thing that we call the state, that is, a set of specific resources that authorizes its possessors to say what is good for the social world as a whole, to proclaim the official and to pronounce words that are in fact orders” (Bourdieu 2014, 33). Numerous scholars after Bourdieu have studied various conflicts *inside* the state and between and within its varied fields (e.g., Wacquant 2009; Lara-Millán 2014; Seim 2017). In a country’s juridical field, jurists play an important role in upholding the “coercive norms” that construct and legitimate the state. Like agents of any field, however, jurists also compete with each other to impose symbolic systems that prioritize their own interests and values to improve their standing in material and symbolic hierarchies within and beyond the state. As we will see in the case of Senegal, the officialdom who inhabit the country’s national juridical field are not of one mind but are instead locked in a battle and torn asunder by external pressures and competing sources of legitimacy and accountability.

But as the literature on globalization and diffusion has long pointed out (for a review, see Meyer 2010), the state does not exist in a vacuum; global forces also bear down upon it. And to capture the various machinations of these fields and their simultaneous operation, many thinkers, including Bourdieu himself, have attempted to take field theory up in scale so that it addresses these global dynamics (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1997; Bourdieu 1999a). Bourdieu’s analysis of the international level shares many of the same features of his work at the national level (Pouliot and Mérand 2012), but his foundational epistemology has proven to be incredibly generative partly because it is so flexible, and scholars in the Bourdieusian tradition have put to good use the concept of a “global field” to look at different empirical contexts in a variety of ways.¹⁶ This body of global field theory pays close attention to objective positions, subjective perceptions, and struggle (Go and Krause 2016, 15). Go (2008), for example, describes a “global field” as a worldwide arena in which states and other actors (corporations, NGOs, INGOs, etc.) compete over “species of capital” and “the rules of the game” (207).

This move toward analyzing global fields led naturally to the consideration of multi-scalar dynamics, and there has been an impressive array of Bourdieu-inspired studies that consider various combinations of local, national, regional, and global levels of analysis (e.g., Dezalay and Garth 1996, 2002, 2010; Casanova 2004; Heilbrun 2014; Steinmetz 2016; Buchholz 2016, 2022; Baczko et al. 2017; Sapiro 2018, 2024). Among other insights, this important body of scholarship has pointed out that global fields within a multi-scalar framework may be relatively autonomous (Buchholz 2016, 2022). In some cases, they may operate according to their own logics of practice, acting at counter-purposes with national fields. Indeed, global fields that are made up of transnational and supranational institutions often compete directly with national fields for

power (e.g., Lebaron 2008; Cohen 2011; Dezalay and Garth 2011; Georgakakis 2011; Vauchez 2011). But the boundaries between fields at multiple levels are also often porous, as key players at the global/transnational level, like global elites and professionals, who have the most varied forms of economic, cultural, social, and linguistic capital (Bigo 2011), also play critical roles in specific national fields. These agents tack back and forth between these different scales (Fourcade 2006; Dezalay and Garth 2011), using the status and capital they've acquired in the transnational field to create advantages for themselves in the national field, and vice versa. In fact, Guilhot (2005) points out that the symbolic boundaries between the national and international, the governmental and nongovernmental, the for-profit and not-for-profit, and the elite and the grassroots are revealed as illusory by the many agents who constantly shift back and forth between them (and who are, in fact, the same agents who forge these boundaries in the process).

Another critical insight provided by this multi-scalar literature has been that nation-states are always already international. They are always working within a multi-scalar hierarchy of domination inside a world structure; that is, national fields exist within and are shaped by the "constraints of international structures" (Baczko and Dorronsoro 2022, 213). Pascal Casanova (2004) writes that "nothing is more international than a national state" (36). National fields are thus the product of "transnational histories" and forces, a fact that is often obscured by the obvious salience of national traditions (Sapiro 2018, 17). One clear example of this is the case of imperial and colonial fields that birthed postcolonial states (Steinmetz 2016; Sapiro 2018).

In this study, I bring together the concepts of global social space, the global field, and the national juridical field into a single overarching framework, underscoring the theoretical advantages of the topological, multi-polar, and distinctively multi-scalar nature of Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus (Wacquant and Akçaoglu 2017). This multi-scalar approach maps global social space, i.e., the structure of relations among nations, and firmly locates Senegal within it. It traces the emergence of the global field of human rights and outlines its contestations with Senegal's national juridical field. And finally, it illuminates the particular effects the global field of human rights does (or does not) have on the ground there. As the reader will soon discover, the divisions in global social space are reflected and refracted inside the nation of Senegal, inside its juridical field, between the high-level ministry of justice and the low-level magistrates of the courts.

My main aim in using Bourdieu's relational and multi-scalar sociological approach in this way is to complicate and make more dynamic world society theory. I take seriously the critiques of this theory and the transnational norms literature that deemphasize "conflict, power and resistance" (Cobb 2014, 290) in favor of a more sanguine, consensus-driven story of transmission and

(continued...)

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