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Homosexuality as cultural battleground in the Middle East: culture and postcolonial international theory

Katerina Dalacoura

The culture wars over homosexuality in the Middle East are studied here in the context of the theoretical debate on culture in International Relations and, more specifically, through a critical examination of postcolonial international theory. The paper argues that, although postcolonialism can offer a useful framework, it also has, in its poststructuralist variants, significant limitations in addressing the controversial issues surrounding homosexuality as cultural battleground in the Middle East. These limitations derive from an unconvincing interpretation of the relationship between the Middle East and modernity; and a problematic approach towards moral agency. The paper serves a dual purpose. Through the use of the empirical material, it furthers the debate within postcolonial international theory by bringing evidence to bear in support of its humanist or materialist strands. The theoretical discussion, in turn, by highlighting the intertwining of culture and power in the debates on homosexuality, strengthens the case for respecting homosexual rights in the Middle East region.

Introduction

Homosexuality has, in recent years, become a source of intense cultural contestations at a global level. These contestations are frequently understood as pitting Western against non-Western actors and values, with the former seen as defending homosexual rights and the latter opposing them. This is a simplification, of course, and in some instances it is wrong. Social tolerance and legal acceptance of homosexuality in the West – in so far as we can generalise about it at all – is recent and, at best, partial; homophobia is still pervasive; practice, as opposed to the law, remains discriminatory. In non-Western societies attitudes are varied and complex. Nevertheless, in international diplomatic fora and in global media the binary between ‘West’ and ‘non-West’ – crude and misguided though it is – has become pervasive. For example, in Uganda since 2011, despite the intervention of American Christian evangelical groups in support of anti-gay legislation, the furor surrounding homosexual rights has unfolded in terms of ‘African’ against ‘Western’ values.¹ In Liberia the president of the country and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, defended in 2012 the criminalisation of homosexuality in her country by declaring: ‘We like ourselves just the way we are’.²

As in parts of Africa, in the Middle East opposition to homosexuality has become a means of affirming cultural integrity and authenticity. Homosexuality has been rendered an element in the region’s ‘culture wars’; this is a term used in a variety of Middle Eastern contexts since the 1990s to refer to the contestation within and also between societies over identity issues, often couched in terms of moral values. In the culture wars over homosexuality in the Middle East cultural integrity and authenticity are almost invariably (this is no exaggeration) defined and asserted in juxtaposition to the West, which either epitomises the threatening cultural outsider or becomes a tangible opponent through the actions and policies of governments, NGOs and individual activists.

Human rights violations over sexual orientation and identity in the Middle East are widespread and well-documented.³ A number of brave and notable exceptions notwithstanding,⁴ mobilisation of Middle Eastern civil society groups on behalf of homosexual rights remains limited. Resistance to such rights on the

part of Middle Eastern governments, and social leaders of all hues, continues to be staunch. The domestic battles over homosexuality in Middle Eastern societies are also partly played out at the level of international diplomacy. When, in 2003, Brazil proposed a resolution to the UN Commission on Human Rights condemning human rights violations originating from prejudices towards sexual orientation, there was strong opposition from a number of African countries, Russia, the Holy See and conservative lobby groups and NGOs.⁵ However, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC),⁶ which represents 57 states, also played a pivotal role, with the ambassador of Pakistan reportedly denying the existence of homosexuality in his country.⁷

My starting point in this paper is that the culture wars over homosexuality in the Middle East are a legitimate and significant focus for debate in International Relations (IR). Although not wars in the conventional sense, but only metaphorically, culture wars shape people's lives on a personal and collective basis, causing untold misery and even physical injury and death. They are, furthermore, symptomatic of a global resurgence of culture as a focal point both in domestic and international politics. In the post-cold war world, characterised by self-fulfilling prophecies of clashing civilisations, contestations over culture became powerful determinants of international relations. In the 1990s a number of bloody conflicts – for instance in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda – appeared to centre on identity. Religion, as an aspect of identity and a source of political contention, was also in the ascendant in the post-cold war setting, with the resurgence of fundamentalist movements and a growing putative association between certain religious beliefs, terrorism and violence.

IR has engaged with these events and trends at a theoretical level.⁸ The discipline was already becoming receptive to the causal significance of ideas meanings, perceptions, norms and values in international relations. As it moved away from treating material factors as the primary or sole determinants of world politics it became more hospitable to the notion that culture does matter in world politics and that theory must accommodate it and account for its role. Arguably IR had been already dealing with issues that later came to be defined as 'culture'. Nevertheless, the explicit use of the term 'culture' marked a shift in the parameters of the debate, manifested in a proliferation of articles, monographs and edited volumes.⁹

The growing focus on culture within IR is possibly one reason, among many others, for the convergence between postcolonialism and IR theory. After a period of relative neglect of the work of Edward Said,¹⁰ postcolonialism has become a focus of debate in IR, to the point that postcolonial international theory is now a distinct and significant branch of IR theory. While leaving aside the broader question of postcolonial international theory's strengths and weaknesses, this paper argues that it offers a suitable and valuable theoretical framework for understanding the debate on homosexuality in the Middle East. This is for two reasons. First, many of the authors who have dealt with the question of homosexuality in the Middle East, as we will see below, have done so through a postcolonial lens, so in a way the paper builds on an existing debate. Second, and more directly in IR terms, postcolonial theory – alongside constructivism and the English School – engages directly with the role of culture in international relations. All three schools of thought, exceptionally in the context of IR theory, go beyond enquiring whether culture plays a role to addressing the question 'how does culture play a role?' in international relations. However, while constructivism and the English School place culture in international relations alongside power (understood in the realist sense of military and political power),

for postcolonial IR theory culture is power; in other words, it is the stuff of ferocious and often violent conflict and constitutes an element in very unequal relationships.

The definitions of 'culture' are numerous and this has sown confusion; furthermore, the term is used all too easily in a vague, 'catch-all' fashion, often when other concepts are found lacking. In a broad sense 'culture' is 'any interpersonally shared system of meanings, perceptions and values'.¹¹ Within English-speaking IR and for the purposes of this discussion, however, culture has two, more specific meanings (which are distinct, though inter-related): on the one hand, it refers to modes and norms of artistic expression and aesthetic appreciation and, on the other hand, to the body of ideas, values and practices which serve as a marker of collective identity. Postcolonial authors use culture in both senses, as we will see below. However, when it comes to the culture wars on homosexuality in the Middle East, culture is seen, by participants, as an identity issue and cultural authenticity is presented as a tangible characteristic, an 'essence', which must be protected from outside attacks and attempts to undermine it.

The paper has three parts. The first outlines my interpretation of the history of same-sex relations and the emergence of the concept of homosexuality in the Middle East and offers a snapshot of the current contestations over homosexuality and culture in the region. The second part posits the view that, although postcolonialism can help us make sense of these contestations, its poststructuralist strand, represented in particular by Joseph Massad's writings, rests on a dubious and unconvincing interpretation of the relationship between the Middle East and modernity and undermines the idea that the participants in the culture wars on homosexuality in the Middle East are free and responsible moral agents. The third part returns to the broader theoretical discussion and shows how the paper's findings strengthen the humanist or materialist strands of postcolonial international theory.

Same-sex relations and the concept of homosexuality in Middle Eastern societies

The framing of the culture wars over homosexuality in the Middle East may suggest a picture of starkly juxtaposed cultures perennially clashing over this issue, but actually masks a long and complex history. The identification of heterosexuality with cultural authenticity in Middle Eastern societies is a distortion of the historical record. Although not overtly discussed and acknowledged, and despite being forbidden by law, same-sex relations and homoerotic love, as well as pederasty, were widely practised across Middle Eastern societies for many centuries.¹²

In the Koran, the holy book of Islam which is the majority religion in the Middle East region, a number of verses (though very few, in actual fact) refer to same sex relations directly and indirectly.¹³ There is a reference to sodomy in a hadith confirmed by various imams: 'If you find two men practising the action of the people of Lot [sodomy] kill that who has an active sexual role and that who has a passive sexual role'.¹⁴ The debate on the interpretation of sources was intense and continues to be so,¹⁵ but it is fair to say that that sodomy became prohibited by both Sunni and Shia Islamic law.¹⁶

Despite these religious and legal prohibitions, however, 'same-sex relationships for men and women in the Mediterranean-Muslim world were implicitly recognised cultural practices, as long as they remained discreet and respected certain conventions'.¹⁷ In his magisterial history of Islam, Marshall Hodgson

shows that in Islam's 'middle period', from the mid-10th century until around 1500, there existed 'a conventional pattern of homosexual relations',¹⁸ often between an older man and adolescent youth. While cautioning against the 'unexamined sexual assumptions' with which Western literature is replete, Hodgson summarises the matter thus:

Despite strong Shar'i disapproval, the sexual relations of a mature man with a subordinate youth were so readily accepted in upper-class circles that there was often little or no effort to conceal their existence. Sometimes it seems to have been socially more acceptable to speak of a man's attachment to a youth than to speak of his women, who were supposed to be invisible in the inner courts. The fashion entered into poetry, especially in the Persian. The narrative poetry, indeed, conventionally told of love affairs between men and women; but the person to whom lyric love verse is addressed by male poets was conventionally, and almost without exception, made explicitly male.¹⁹

A more recent work by Khaled el-Rouayheb on the cultural history of the Arab-Islamic world shows that in the Arabic literature of the early Ottoman period (1516-1798) there were numerous casual and sometimes sympathetic allusions to homosexual love,²⁰ and that 'Much if not most of the extant love poetry of the period is pederastic in tone, portraying an adult male poet's passionate love for a teenage boy'.²¹ Rouayheb suggests that, although sodomy was prohibited by Islamic law and religious scholars viewed it as an abominable sin, 'many of them clearly did not believe that falling in love with a boy or expressing this love in verse was therefore also illicit'.²²

The 19th and early 20th centuries, however, brought major changes in attitudes towards same-sex relations. Michel Foucault's description of the emergence of the concept of homosexuality in Europe can help us interpret these changes by placing them in a wider historical perspective.²³ Foucault argued that 'the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterised',²⁴ specifically in Westphal's 1870 article in *Archiv für Neurologie*. 'The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.'²⁵ He argued that, from the 18th century, the beginning of the persecution of peripheral sexualities entailed

an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical object of them. The nineteenth century 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. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality.²⁶

Other analysts credit broad social and economic forces, including urbanisation and industrialisation – not only medical–psychiatric discourse and labelling practices – with playing an important role in the formation of modern homosexual roles.²⁷ Be that as it may, and irrespective of causation, the key point here is that, from the 19th century on, the concept of homosexuality begins to emerge in the Middle East as well. There, as elsewhere across the colonised world (for instance in Africa and India), developments ran in parallel and almost contemporaneously to those in Europe.²⁸

As homosexuality gradually became a distinct category in the 19th century Middle East, it also started to attract opprobrium and disapproval.²⁹ This was partly the result of European cultural influences and morals, which were highly

critical and condemnatory of homosexuality and affected the region through colonial penetration. European travellers complained about the openness with which men in the Ottoman Empire expressed their passion for boys.³⁰ In his travels to Paris between 1826 and 1831 the eminent Islamic scholar Rifa'ah Tahtawi noted that the love of boys in Europe was considered morally reprehensible and thought that was how it should be.³¹ Similar processes were occurring in Iran. The Qajar period (1785–1925) started with notions of beauty which were not gender-differentiated but this had changed by the end of the 19th century.³² Male beauty as an object of desire was disavowed and beauty was feminised. Love was 'heterosexualised'; 'Iranians became acutely aware that Europeans considered love and sex between older and younger men as prevalent in Iran and that they considered it a vice'.³³

By the 20th century many Arab historians and literary historians had become hostile towards homosexuality and uncomfortable with the pederastic themes in their literary heritage. European Victorian attitudes were adopted by the new, modern-educated and Westernised elites.³⁴ The shift against same-sex relations was associated with modernisation. Love of boys became a sign of 'backwardness' and 'progress, rationality and civilization' required its suppression.³⁵ According to Afary, in the Middle East '[The] notion of modernization now included the normalization of heterosexual eros and the abandonment of all homosexual practices and even inclinations'.³⁶

In the second half of the 20th century a further important transformation occurred in attitudes towards homosexuality in the Middle East. Having now taken root as a distinct category, homosexuality began to be seen not only as reprehensible but also – and herein lay the new development – as an integral part of the Western cultural onslaught against 'authentic' Middle Eastern cultures. This was partly a response to the observation that the West was becoming more accepting towards homosexuality. However, it also meant gradually forgetting that the identification and condemnation of 'the homosexual' had been previously integrally linked in the Middle East with European colonialism.

Homophobia is frequently associated with the rise of Islamism in the Middle East. However, we saw above that the rejection of homosexuality was associated with modernisation and its values.³⁷ The stigmatisation of homosexuality is shared by the religious and the secularists (as well as Muslims and Christians).³⁸ For example, the period preceding the 1979 revolution in Iran witnessed a backlash against the Shah's gender reforms, with leftist critics of Pahlavi autocracy, Western imperialism and consumerism partially joining forces with conservative Islamists against the regime.³⁹ Ali Shariati, the leftist-Islamist thinker whose writings were pivotal in the intellectual movement against the Shah, condemned the Western 'cultural revolution', especially the emancipation of women, and denounced the Western 'recognition of an openly gay lifestyle'. Reacting particularly to the small gay male subculture that by the 1970s was taking root in elite circles in Tehran, and ignoring century-old practices which still persisted, Shariati 'accused the West of recognizing a vice that the Middle East had refused'.⁴⁰ In modern day Turkey Kemalists and Islamists share equally negative responses to homosexuality but 'the former [Kemalists] are probably more hateful because it threatens the essence and principles of the Republic'.⁴¹

Nevertheless, if antipathy to homosexuality in the Middle East cannot be exclusively associated with Islamism, there is no doubt that the latter's rise and expansion after the 1970s exacerbated the tendency to vilify homosexuality and depict it as part of the West's corrupting cultural influence. The Islamic Republic which was installed in Iran following the revolution increased and systematised the persecution of homosexuals. The war against openly gay men and transgres-

sive heterosexual women intensified in the post-2005 period of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. The torture and execution of two teenage boys in July 2005 made international headlines. Ahmadinejad claimed that in Iran there were no homosexuals, 'not one'.⁴²

An instance of the degree to which homosexuality has become an issue of contention in the Middle East was the 'Queen Boat' case, a cause célèbre in Egypt in the early part of the 2000s.⁴³ In May 2001 the Egyptian authorities raided the gay nightclub Queen Boat in Cairo and arrested 52 individuals. The case caused a furore inside but also outside Egypt and led to its international condemnation for the persecution of homosexuals. It was also discussed in the context of the UN Human Rights Council 2011 Report on homosexuality mentioned in the introduction.

Homosexuality is not actually an offence on the Egyptian statute books, so those arrested on Queen Boat were charged with and convicted on the grounds of 'debauchery' or fujur, as well as for 'contempt for religion'.⁴⁴ (Though amended in 1961, the law on fujur was initially introduced by Egyptian nationalists in 1951 as part of the anti-colonial struggle against British 'immorality'. It specifically targeted state-licensed brothels, which serviced the British military.) In the intense debate on the Queen Boat case in Egypt, homosexuality was constructed as a threat to the country's culture, as articulated in the chief prosecutor's statement that 'Egypt has not and will not be a den for the corruption of manhood, and homosexual groups will not establish themselves here'.⁴⁵ 'Gay' dress was described as 'un-Egyptian' and homosexuality was deemed to be part of 'the globalisation of perversion', a Western-driven process. The outcry from international rights groups, the European Parliament and Western governments confirmed that the West was intervening in defence of homosexuality, enabling government officials to depict the prosecutions as a way of protecting Egyptian cultural values from Western decadence. Caught in the middle, Egyptian human rights movements became divided over the issue and ultimately refused to stand up for the rights of the homosexuals.⁴⁶

The Queen Boat case, and others similar to it, reveals how 'cultural authenticity' can be constructed as a collective good which needs to be protected from outside attack. In this case, because authenticity was defined 'against' the West, the latter represented the cultural opponent against whom 'local' values must be defended. Culture can therefore assume a clear dimension as a focus of identity in domestic society and form the basis for an international confrontation. The irony is that legal instruments which are used to censure and persecute homosexuals derive from European criminal codes, often the Napoleonic codes,⁴⁷ as Asad AbuKhalil reminds us:

What passes in present-day Saudi Arabia, for example, as sexual conservatism is due more to Victorian puritanism than to Islamic mores. It is quite inaccurate to attribute prevailing sexual mores in present-day Arab society to Islam. Originally, Islam did not have the same harsh Biblical judgement about homosexuality as Christianity. Homophobia, as an ideology of hostility toward people who are homosexual, was produced by the Christian West. Homophobic influences in Arab cultures are relatively new, and many were introduced...from Western sources.⁴⁸

Homosexuality, modernity and moral agency

The interpretation of the history of same-sex relations and homosexuality in the Middle East in the above section suggests that, in the relations between states,

societies and regions, culture and power are inextricably linked. It is precisely because postcolonialism studies culture, not alongside power but as intertwined with it, that it constitutes a useful analytical framework for the case of homosexuality as cultural battleground. This section demonstrates why this is so by briefly outlining the postcolonial understanding of culture introduced by Edward Said. It subsequently contends that the post-structuralist strand within postcolonialism – of which one author who deals with homosexuality in the Middle East, Joseph Massad, is emblematic – is wide of the mark in its approach to modernity and moral agency in relation to homosexuality.

Culture is at the core of Edward Said's work, and in particular of *Orientalism* (1978),⁴⁹ which laid the foundation of postcolonialism as a distinct school of thought. Said links culture to Gramsci's notion of hegemony: 'The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony'.⁵⁰ Hegemony relies more on consent than on coercion. According to Gramsci, hegemonic elites create a cultural system that promotes such consent and legitimises their position. Culture is therefore part of the reproduction of social and economic systems of power. Said uses Gramsci's framework to argue that Orientalism is part of the idea of Europe, an idea that crucially depends on the depiction of European identity as superior to non-European peoples and cultures.⁵¹ Said also employs Foucault's notion of a discourse to define Orientalism as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient'.⁵² For Foucault identity is culturally constructed through a series of exclusions. Said builds on Foucault to argue that European literary and academic texts are pervaded by pernicious representations of the Islamic and Middle Eastern worlds. For Said power has a crucial role in the production and dissemination of the various 'truths' regarding the Oriental 'other'. In a later work, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that imperialism was served by cultural forms such as the novel and that this continues to be the case, even after the formal end of colonialism.

Said defined culture as 'those practices, like the arts of description, communication and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure'.⁵³ He also saw it as 'a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought'.⁵⁴ I noted in the Introduction the two distinct, though inter-linked senses of 'culture', as artistic production, on the one hand, and as a focus of identity, on the other. From the above definitions, particularly the second, it would seem that Said understood the term 'culture' in both senses, or even as being somewhere between the two. He placed culture at the core of international relations. Conversely, he treated the international dimension as crucial in his understanding of culture.⁵⁵

Said's placing of culture within an international context, and his linking of it with power, highlight two crucial aspects of the culture wars over homosexuality in the Middle East. One author who joined the intense political and academic debate on homosexuality in the Middle East, using Said's approach and concepts as a basis, is Joseph Massad.⁵⁶ Massad argues that the West's apparent intent to 'protect' the rights of homosexual men and women is part and parcel of its hegemonic project, which is underpinned by exporting ideas and concepts (such as 'homosexual' or 'gay'). The 'Gay International', as he calls it – the network of global activists which promotes homosexual rights – 'creates' the homosexuals it allegedly seeks to protect and actually harms them. The

emergent agenda of sexual rights, more generally, which the West internationalised in the 1980s and 1990s through ‘international’ human rights activism has made women and ‘homosexuals’ the two prime victims of human rights violations in Arab countries.⁵⁷ This passage summarises Massad’s argument well and deserves to be quoted at length:

By inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary. Because most non-Western societies, including Muslim Arab societies, have not subscribed historically to these categories, their imposition is eliciting less than liberatory outcomes: men who are considered the ‘passive’ or ‘receptive’ parties in male–male sexual contacts are forced to have one object choice and identify as homosexual or gay, just as men who are the ‘active’ parties are also forced to limit their sexual aim to one object choice, either women or men. As most ‘active’ partners see themselves as part of a societal norm, so heterosexuality becomes compulsory given that the alternative, as presented by the Gay International, means becoming marked outside the norm – with all the attendant risks and disadvantages of such a marking. Also, most Arab and Muslim countries that do not have laws against sexual conduct between men respond to the Gay International’s incitement to discourse by professing antihomosexual stances on a nationalist basis. This is leading to police harassment in some cases and could lead to antihomosexual legislation. Those countries that already have unenforced laws begin to enforce them. Ironically, this is the very process through which ‘homosexuality’ was invented in the West.

It is not the Gay International or its upper-class supporters in the Arab diaspora who will be persecuted, but rather the poor and nonurban men who practice same-sex contact and who do not necessarily identify as homosexual or gay.⁵⁸

Massad makes a number of valid points. He highlights the often-neglected issue of class and its impact on the debate on homosexuality in the Middle East. He also emphasises the need to place the debate within an international context in order to reveal all its dimensions. However, his argument hinges on a flawed assumption: that the Middle East lacked the concept of homosexuality before the ‘Gay International’ introduced it in the 1980s. He writes, as we saw above: ‘Because most non-Western societies, including Muslim Arab societies, have not subscribed historically to these categories [homosexual, heterosexual], their imposition is eliciting less than liberatory outcomes’.⁵⁹ The word ‘historically’ is used vaguely here but, for his argument to be consistent, Massad can only be saying that the concept of ‘the homosexual’ became prevalent in the region after the 1980s – and that this happened as a result of a Western imposition, a point to be taken up below.

Massad’s argument echoes a number of postcolonial interpretations of modernity which emphasise difference as opposed to commonality and suggest distinct historical experiences rather than a common universal experience. For Siba Grovogui, postcolonialism, while rejecting ‘native essentialism’, entertains the possibility of alternative conceptions of society, law and morals and aspires to a different kind of universalism, based on deliberation and contestations among diverse political entities.⁶⁰ Gurminder Bhambra speaks of ‘multiple modernities’ as opposed to modernity.⁶¹ LHM Ling and Anna Agathangelou’s

approach to world politics is based on a vision of 'multiple worlds' which are 'entwined'.⁶² Phillip Darby and AJ Paolini refer to the 'heterogeneity of meaning and narrative'.⁶³

In contrast to Massad and in (indirect) criticism of the above thinkers, however, the history of same-sex relations and homosexuality, as presented by the research discussed in this paper, reveals a picture of commonality rather than difference between Europe and the Middle East. We saw above that the emergence of the concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality in the Middle East from the 19th century onwards – in a parallel (in the sense of both similar and contemporaneous) albeit not identical process to that in Europe – is well documented by researchers such as Afary, Rouayheb and Najmabadi.⁶⁴ Murray and Roscoe (although not subscribing to the notion that modernity represents a sharp 'break' when it comes to the idea of homosexuality) suggest that Western and non-Western societies have a lot in common in their approaches to homosexuality. In their words: 'What might be termed "pre-modern", "modern", and "post-modern" homosexualities actually co-exist in contemporary societies, Western and non-Western'.⁶⁵ General histories of the region, for example the work of Hodgson,⁶⁶ already mentioned, and Timothy Mitchell,⁶⁷ reinforce the view that modernity as a conceptual sea-change engulfed the Middle East from the 19th century onwards. None of this implies that the Middle East became 'like' Europe in the process or that the Middle East 'modernised'. Instead, the more nuanced and important proposition is that, with the advent of modernity in the 19th century, a body of common concepts, ideas and ways of thinking emerges which renders inter-societal communication between Europe and the Middle East possible. For good or ill, and at least in relation to homosexuality, there has been a single notion of time since that historical point.

Massad's argument on modernity and the Middle East is closely linked to the second problematic idea implied by his views on homosexuality: that Western actors, not the people of the Middle East, shape and control the debate on homosexuality in the region. Massad denies that he claims that 'lesbian and gay identity in Egypt is strictly a product of US and European-based transnational queer organizations'.⁶⁸ However (and he admits as much by using the word 'strictly') there is no escaping the conclusion that he does. For Massad, gays in Egypt and the Middle East more generally are not free, morally responsible agents, making choices about their sexuality and gender, because these choices are enforced on them by someone else, namely the West.

On this issue Massad's approach has a lot in common with a postcolonial strand of thought which treats at least some of the elites dominant after the end of colonialism as creatures of the West, imbued with Western ideas and 'presuppositions'.⁶⁹ For example, in the words of Ling: 'Postcolonial scholars have documented amply those anti-colonial struggles that, once won, unreflexively reproduce the same old colonial power relations, including old hierarchies of race, gender, class, and culture'.⁷⁰

Massad is right to claim that Western interventions in the homosexuality issue distort local realities. It is also the case that these local realities cannot be understood without reference to the international context, within which 'cultural identity' is defined, invariably against the West. However, he pushes the argument further than that and speaks of domination and the ability to determine

these realities. It is this, more extreme argument of his that is challenged by a string of authors who marshal evidence against the idea that homosexuals in the region are creatures of the West. For example, Scott Long argues that Massad has an exaggerated sense of the coherence and capacity of the 'Gay International' to achieve results,⁷¹ and that a collective identity has developed indigenously in the Middle East (and in Egypt in particular, which is Long's focus): 'many men do identify as "gay", and they are not only rich, Westernized Cairenes'.⁷² Furthermore, Massad's assumption 'that men in Cairo or Tanta adopt an alien identity passively at the prompting of Western models denies individual inflection or equivocation'.⁷³ Momin Rahman posits that many gay Muslims would challenge 'the exclusive identification of homosexuality and homo-eroticism with "western" culture, simply by first acknowledging that there are those from Muslim cultures who are, as we understand it, "gay"'.⁷⁴ Finally, Rahul Rao argues:

While there is much truth to Massad's claims about the aggressively orientaling tendencies of some contemporary Western LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] activism, there is also something deeply troubling about his denial of the agency and subjectivity of Arabs who are appropriating and reworking Western identities in their struggles for sexual self-determination. Massad dismisses such individuals as unrepresentative – 'a miniscule minority', 'small groups of men in metropolitan areas such as Cairo and Beirut' – but also, more ominously, as 'native informants' to Western activists, a phrase that is loaded with colonial memories of indigenous elites engaged in traitorous collaboration with colonizing powers.⁷⁵

A humanist alternative

Rahul Rao's critique of Massad over agency is a self-proclaimed postcolonial critique, albeit from a very different interpretation of postcolonialism. The disagreement between Massad and Rao is symptomatic of the wider rift between postcolonialism's post-structuralist⁷⁶ and humanist or materialist strands, which runs through the writings of many of its theorists and effectively renders postcolonialism a 'divided house'.⁷⁷ The source of the rift can be traced to Edward Said's conflicting and ultimately self-contradictory views on Michel Foucault, and specifically the latter's approach to power and agency.

Foucault claimed that there is a discourse of power and another discourse that runs counter to it.⁷⁸ He argued that, where there is power, there is resistance to it.⁷⁹ However, he did not explain why and how power is resisted, leaving us to wonder on what grounds a responsible moral agent would do so. His anti-foundationalism made him refuse to say why power should be resisted, what principles legitimate a just resistance.⁸⁰ Another reason why Foucault failed to explain how power is resisted is that his definition of power (at least in his *History of Sexuality*) is extraordinarily woolly: he does not see 'power' as deriving from the state or as a form of rule or the domination of one group over another but, rather, as 'the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization'.⁸¹ Foucault treats power as an 'impersonal, deterministic structure and thereby fails to

explain how power is exercised by individuals who bear the responsibility for their actions'.⁸²

Some would question the idea that Foucault denies agency. It seems incontrovertible to me, however, that it is fatally undermined by his anti-foundationalism. More pertinently, it seemed so to Said. Orientalism drew on Foucault extensively, as we saw. However, Said's political activism and his commitment to the importance of the 'author' or 'agent' affirmed his belief in agency.⁸³ In *Culture and Imperialism* he made the case that resistance is possible. Most explicitly, in a paper on Foucault Said complained that the latter let power go 'more or less unchecked', because he saw it as being 'everywhere'. 'With this profoundly pessimistic view went also a singular lack of interest in the force of effective resistance to it, in choosing particular sites of intensity, choices which, we see from the evidence on all sides, always exist and are often successful in impeding, if not actually stopping, the progress of tyrannical power'.⁸⁴

We saw in the previous section that Massad claimed that his argument built on Said's ideas. However, Massad's denial of agency, which places him in the poststructuralist camp, close to Foucault, by implication distances him from Said (or at least the line in Said which affirms agency). The evidence from the case of homosexuality in the Middle East, as interpreted in this paper, suggests, contra Massad and in agreement with Rao (or contra the Foucauldian postcolonial line and in agreement with the line in Said which affirms agency), that those individuals in the Middle East who identify themselves as homosexuals and may choose to proclaim themselves as such are responsible agents, not passive victims of Western domination. The self-description of men and women in the Middle East as homosexual is not pre-determined by Western hegemony but the result of choice by morally responsible individuals. The choices of those individuals may be constrained by Western hegemonic structures but are not pre-determined by them. With regards to modernity and historical time, the spread of the idea of 'homosexuality' in the Middle East from the 19th century onwards shows that, after that point, Middle Eastern societies and their citizens begin to share with Europe common notions and ordering principles about the self, society and the world. This does not mean that Europe and the Middle East have identical experiences of modernity with regard to that issue. It means that they begin to have in common a sufficient number of concepts to make these experiences mutually intelligible and allow communication across societies and regions. Europeans and Middle Easterners become fellow travellers in the modern condition.⁸⁵

Conclusion: implications for homosexual rights in the Middle East

I have argued that the empirical material, as presented and interpreted in this paper (through my inevitably limited, partial and subjective lens, of course), can contribute to the debate between the different interpretations of postcolonial international theory by highlighting the weaknesses of its post-structuralist strand and buttressing a humanist or materialist interpretation. In turn, the conclusions of this theoretical discussion, by shedding light on the insidious intertwining of culture and power in the debates on homosexuality in the Middle East, may strengthen the foundation for respect for homosexual rights in the

region. Postcolonialism has, arguably, failed to become a platform for a radical critique.⁸⁶ A humanist or materialist perspective, from its starting point that there exists a commonality of experience, underpinned by modernity, between the West and 'non-West' (and with the understanding that universalism is not by necessity imperialist), can provide such a platform.

If, as is argued in this paper, those individuals who choose to assert their homosexual identity and rights in the Middle East must be recognised as responsible and free moral agents, the same applies to those who persecute and oppress them. In treating homosexuals as deviants and traitors to their 'culture', the latter have chosen to shun their societies' historical past which, as we saw, included the widespread practice and tacit acceptance of what later came to be called 'homosexuality'. In simplistically associating 'homosexuality' with 'the West', they conveniently forget that the category 'homosexual', and the opprobrium associated with it, was closely associated with 19th century European colonialism.⁸⁷ Historical amnesia is combined with a deliberate overlooking of the continuing and widespread existence of same-sex practices, particularly in more 'traditional' settings, such as the madrasas (religious schools).⁸⁸ These practices are tolerated in so far as they do not endanger central institutions, in particular the family.⁸⁹ Similarly to what continues to happen in some Western settings,⁹⁰ it is only when homosexual identity is asserted and homosexuals demand respect, as such, that they are deemed a threat to the social order.

The negative attitudes towards homosexuality held by the bulk of Middle Eastern societies buttress and, in turn, are buttressed by authoritarian governments, conservative religious leaders, traditionalist patriarchs and, not least, matriarchs. Their authority is shored up by the call to protect an 'authentic' culture which, if it ever existed, has long ago been wiped out. At the current juncture of Middle Eastern history, Islamists (and in particular the fundamentalists among them), both in government and in opposition, steer their fellow citizens in the direction of collective oblivion and wilful ignorance when it comes to the subject of homosexuality. The vilification of homosexuals in the Middle East epitomises the distortions and subjugations brought about by the search for an elusive 'authentic' cultural self.

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Notes

1. Cheney, "Locating Neocolonialism, 'Tradition,' and Human Rights."
2. Ford and Allen, "Nobel Peace Prize Winner defends Law criminalizing Homosexuality," 101.
3. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have produced a string of reports on the subject. See www.amnesty.org.uk; and www.hrw.org.
4. Activism in support of the rights of homosexuals in Middle Eastern societies is growing. See, for example, Helem, accessed April 13, 2013, <http://helem.net/>; KifKif, accessed April 13, 2014, <http://fr.kifkifgroup.org/p/about-us.html>; and Aswat Group, accessed April 13, 2014, <http://www.aswatgroup.org/>.
5. O'Flaherty and Fisher, "Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and International Human Rights Law," 299–231.
6. One cannot equate the oic with the Middle East but there is overlap.
7. Girard, "Negotiating Sexual Rights," 44.
8. It was responding not only to world events but also to wider trends in the social sciences and the humanities where culture was emerging as a distinct area of enquiry and as a 'master concept'.
9. Halliday, "Culture and International Relations"; Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*; Jacquin-Berdal et al., *Culture in World Politics*; Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*; Lapid and Kratochwil, *The Return of Culture and Identity*; Lawson, *Culture and Context*; and Reeves, *Culture and International Relations*.
10. Nair, "Forum," 80.
11. Jacquin-Berdal et al., *Culture in World Politics*, 2.
12. Murray and Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities*.
13. Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 81. According to the Koran: 'Must you, unlike [other] people, lust after males and abandon the wives that God has created for you? You are exceeding all bounds' (26: 165–166). The following two verses are taken together: 'If any of your women commit a lewd act, call for witnesses from among you, then, if they testify to their guilt, keep the women at home until death comes to them or until God shows them another way' (4: 15). 'If two men commit a lewd act, punish them both; if they repent and mend their ways, leave them alone – God is always ready to accept repentance, He is full of mercy' (4: 16). Verse 16 refers to verse 15, though it must be noted that it is only in the 20th century that a majority of religious scholars interpreted it to refer to homosexuality. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 52, 326.
14. Mezziane, "Sodomie et masculinité chez les juristes musulmans," 286 (author's translation).
15. Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 117–122.
16. Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 81.
17. *Ibid.*, 79.
18. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 146.
19. *Ibid.*
20. El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*.
21. *Ibid.*, 1.
22. *Ibid.*, 3.
23. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*.
24. *Ibid.*, 43.
25. *Ibid.*, 101.
26. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 42–43.
27. Murray and Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities*, 4, 310–314; and Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*.
28. Rao, *Third World Protest*, 175.
29. El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*; Afary, *Sexual Politics*; Najmabadi, "Gendered Transformations"; and Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*.
30. El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 92–93.
31. *Ibid.*, 156.
32. Najmabadi, "Gendered Transformations," 89.
33. *Ibid.*, 91–93, 97.
34. El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 160.
35. Zubaida, *Beyond Islam*, 22.
36. Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 162–163.
37. The relationship between Islamism and modernism is more complex than this sentence may suggest. Although Islamism nowadays is often (and not always accurately) associated with anti-modernism, it emerged in the late 19th–early 20th century within the context of Islamic modernism.
38. Zubaida, *Beyond Islam*, 22.
39. Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 11.
40. *Ibid.*, 242.
41. Öktem, *Another Struggle*.
42. Cooper, "Facing Scorn."
43. Pratt, "The Queen Boat case in Egypt."
44. *Ibid.*, 131–132.

45. Ibid. p. 137.
46. Ibid., 139–141.
47. Long, “The Trials of Culture,” 16. In a telling illustration of this point, Kerem Öktem points out that homosexuality is not criminalised in Turkey but it is in Northern Cyprus, where the British introduced anti-sodomy laws. Öktem, *Another Struggle*.
48. AbuKhalil, “A Note on the Study of Homosexuality,” 32.
49. Said, *Orientalism*.
50. Ibid., 5.
51. Ibid., 7.
52. Ibid., 3.
53. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xii.
54. Ibid., xiii.
55. Chowdhry, “Edward Said and Contrapuntal Reading,” 111.
56. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 48.
57. Ibid., 37.
58. Ibid., 188–189.
59. Ibid., 188.
60. Grovogui, “Postcolonialism,” 231, 44.
61. Bhabra, “Historical Sociology.”
62. Agathangelou and Ling, *Transforming World Politics*, 142.
63. Darby and Paolini, “Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism,” 371.
64. Afary, *Sexual Politics*; El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*; and Najmabadi, “Gendered Transformations.”
65. Murray and Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities*, 313.
66. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*.
67. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.
68. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 187, fn 101.
69. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 59. For other postcolonial theorists alternative ways of ‘resisting’ the West, which do not involve internal subjugation, are possible. Nandy writes that some Indians managed to combine ‘critical awareness of Hinduism and colonialism with personal and cultural authenticity’. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, 27.
70. Ling, “Said’s Exile,” 138.
71. Long, “The Trials of Culture.”
72. Ibid., 19.
73. Ibid., 19–20.
74. Rahman, “Queer as Intersectionality,” 956.
75. Rao, *Third World Protest*, 176.
76. Maffettone, uses the term ‘post-modernist’, which could also be appropriate. Maffettone, “How to Avoid the Liaison Dangereuse.”
77. Rao, “Postcolonialism”; and Rao, personal communication.
78. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 101.
79. Ibid., 95.
80. Faubion, “Introduction,” xx; and Hoy, Foucault, 10.
81. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 92.
82. Hoy, Foucault, 10–11.
83. Duvall and Varadarajan, “Traveling in Paradox,” 86.
84. Said, “Foucault and the Imagination of Power,” 151.
85. The argument developed in this paper, in support of commonality as opposed to difference, has parallels with the latest wave of critique of poststructuralist, postcolonial theory (and postcolonialism tout court), which is currently being waged from a humanist or materialist perspective. See Gandhi, “The Pauper’s Gift”; and Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*.
86. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 23.
87. Bleys shows that the ‘tropes of homophobia...remain themselves imbedded, intentionally or not, in a European discourse’. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion*, 267. Bleys’ work, which places the Middle East and Islam alongside other regions in the period 1750–1918, reinforces my argument in this paper.
88. Zubaida, *Beyond Islam*, 23. Afary et al. point out that, in his statements on the Iranian Revolution, Foucault conflated engaging in same-sex relations with acknowledging homosexual rights. Foucault’s anti-modernism led him to hope that the revival of traditional culture in Iran would lead to fewer restrictions on sexuality, but he was wrong. Afary et al., *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, 162.
89. Khan, “Not-So-Gay Life in Pakistan,” 275–285.
90. Murray makes similar arguments and draws a parallel between ‘the will not to know’, as he calls it, in Islamic societies and the US army ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ policy on gays. Murray, “The Will not to Know,” 17.

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