

A background of white barbed wire on a white surface. In the bottom left corner, there is a large, colorful flower with petals in shades of purple, blue, green, and red.

SPW Working Papers, No. 9, October 2014

Ranking Homophobia: Comments on the Spartacus International Gay Travel Index

by Justin Perez



SEXUALITY
POLICY
WATCH

Ranking Homophobia: Comments on the Spartacus International Gay Travel Index¹

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Published by Sexuality Policy Watch - a project based at ABIA

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¹ This ranking is compiled by the Spartacus International Gay Guide and is available online at <http://www.spartacusworld.com/gaytravelindex.pdf>

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I. Introduction

Through examining one way sexuality activists used the Spartacus International Gay Travel Index (or, Gay Travel Index), I aim in this paper to complement critical understandings of lesbian and gay tourism, as well as comment on the increasingly significant role that calculative technologies, such as the Gay Travel Index, play in how rights can be claimed and legitimized. Critical scholarship in many parts of the world has convincingly pointed out the menacing ways that lesbian and gay tourism tends to reproduce colonial hierarchies (Alexander 2005; Puar 2002). On the one hand, then, I would be remiss in this commentary, to not point out the colonial assumptions embedded in the Gay Travel Index. Yet, through a case study of the ways that some sexuality activists in Peru have appropriated and politicized this ranking, I hope to contribute a more nuanced understanding of some of the consequences of both tourism and quantification.

On May 27 and 28, 2013, several popular Peruvian news outlets published the results of the Spartacus Guide's Gay Travel Index, a ranking of countries based on their "gay-friendliness" for gay and lesbian tourists. Highlighting Peru's ranking in the Gay Travel Index, the articles' headlines included "Peruvians are the most homophobic in the region" (Rodríguez 2013), "Homophobia: Peru is the least tolerant country in Latin America for gay tourism" (Peru.com 2013), and "Peru is the most homophobic country on the continent" (Trome.pe 2013). Immediately following this outburst of media attention in response to the Gay Travel Index, on May 30, sexuality activists denounced the Peruvian state through a letter sent to the United Nations and the International Human Rights Commission, citing the systematic violation of rights in Peru against the LGBT population (Peru21.pe 2013). Based on this sequence of events, it appears as though something intended to be commercial was being reinterpreted in Peru and, in part, effectuating political consequences.

Several months later, I observed a conference in Peru, directed at professionals in Peru's tourism industry, about the benefits of attracting lesbian and gay tourists. The conference featured two speakers, both of whom expressed two divergent perspectives on lesbian and gay tourism. The first was a foreign bed and breakfast owner, who had opened up a "gay-friendly" bed and breakfast less than two years ago in Lima's posh Miraflores district. He spoke of his experience catering to foreign gay and lesbian tourists. After giving some facts and figures about the number of tourists that come to Peru every year, and estimates of the number of tourists who

are lesbian and gay, he outlined some points to keep in mind about working with lesbian and gay tourists: they travel in couples, they speak English, and they have an interest in social media (so, nothing actually particular to lesbian and gay tourists). He felt that lesbian and gay tourism is good for Peru because it contributes to the “apertura mental”, or the opening of the mind of Peruvian society. The next speaker, a sexuality activist in Lima, immediately tempered his celebratory tone. He pointed out the homophobia inherent in the idea of gay and lesbian tourism, noting how the conference itself was convened not because of a desire to offer more social inclusion for the lesbian and gay population, but because data showed they may spend more money than heterosexuals on tourism and are tolerable as consumers. He then cited Peru’s low ranking on the Gay Travel Index. He argued that instead of finding ways to capture the “mercado rosa [the pink market],” Peru ought to institute legal protections for lesbians and gays that negatively affect Peru’s rankings.

As an observer, I was particularly struck by the activists’ final comment and the strategic use of the Gay Travel Index. In my view, on the one hand, the activist could have just as easily dismissed the Gay Travel Index’s rankings on numerous grounds, including, but certainly not limited to, its bias towards certain regions of the world and its overtly commercial intentions. Yet, the Gay Travel Index’s calculative qualities, or at least its appearance of calculation, particularly its hierarchical ranking scheme and its use of indicators, appears to ultimately enable a particular way of framing sexual rights claims that has certain resonance in contemporary political landscapes. That is, a landscape where quantitative measures are valorized, because they appear to be apolitical (Dehesa and Mukherjee 2012, cited in Pecheny and Dehesa 2014). In the scenario I observed in Peru, sexuality activists legitimized claims about the Peruvian state not through a specific description of the complexities of Peruvian culture and the nuances of the experiences of homophobia in Peru, but by reconfiguring supposedly “apolitical” technologies to support their claims. This reconfiguration, I argue, helps draw attention to the assumptions that go into the creation of the ranking in the first place.

II. Literature Review

In the previous vignette, the comment by the bed and breakfast owner about the inability to articulate specific differences between gay and lesbian tourists and non-gay and lesbian tourists speaks to a point that has been repeatedly made about gay and lesbian tourism: it has been shown to be, at the end of the day, not entirely

different from tourism, broadly conceived, and especially regarding its entrenchment in colonial relationships of power (Alexander 2005; Puar 2002). Notably in Latin America and the Caribbean, ethnographic research has explored the complexity of the relationships that result between foreign gay and lesbian tourists and the people they encounter, particularly when these relationships emerge from sexual and monetary exchanges (La Fountain-Stokes 2002; Padilla 2007). Some of this research has demonstrated that the effect that gay and lesbian tourism has reaches beyond the boundaries of these transactions, if such boundaries even exist at all. For instance, in her ethnography of “queer enclaves” in Cuba, Noelle Stout (2014) found that alternative forms of kinship emerged between foreign tourists and Cuban hustlers, and that the expectations of intimacy and reciprocity vary along lines of class, race, and nationality among those participating in and affected by these relationships. In Barbados, David Murray (2007) found that while lesbian and gay tourism reproduces colonial assumptions about difference and distance, it also exposes tourists to different cultural arrangements of homosexuality and homophobia. And in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Paul Amar (2013) found that city planners advanced a project of a “respectable” national identity by targeting and policing sex tourism.

Within all this complexity, one ultimately finds that the representations of places produced and disseminated by the gay and lesbian tourism industry and its attendant guidebooks rarely approximate the actual experiences of tourism and the impact that it generates. As several authors have pointed out, such representations are often designed to portray destinations as “stuck in time”, rendering those “touristed” upon as objects of consumption and fetishized natives (Alexander 2005; Cantú 2002). In his analysis of gay travel guidebooks about Mexico, for instance, Lionel Cantú found that these representations are carefully crafted to attract tourists with depictions of an opportunity to experience an exotic land and people, but in a way that does not expose the tourist to the homophobia of exotic places:

Yet for queer tourism there also exists a “border” tension between the lure of an exotic paradise and the dangers of homophobia in foreign lands. Here Mexico seems to represent a homosexual paradise free from the pressures of a modern “gay life style,” where sexuality exists in its “raw” form yet where the dangers of an uncivilized heterosexual authority also threaten. (Cantú 2002, p. 148)

The Spartacus Guide historically has been a longstanding example of the guidebooks produced by the gay and lesbian tourism industry. It emerged in the 1960s and distinguished itself from similar travel guides of

the era, such as Damron's, by covering travel destinations outside of North America (Coon 2012). In pointing out the colonial discourses and assumptions that inhere in the Spartacus Guide, M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) found that the guidebooks exemplify the ways that gay and lesbian tourism follows the patterns of consumption mapped by circuits of white, heterosexual capital and that this tourism produces and maintains the colonial hierarchy. Alexander's insight reveals a paradox when considering the real life example I offered above: How could something so explicitly commercial (i.e., a document designed to stimulate and direct tourism) come to be used as a veritable source of knowledge about homophobia in Peru? Given the way that technical expertise has become a *lingua franca* in contemporary political terrains (Pecheny and de la Dehesa 2014), I suggest that calculation, and its appearance of neutrality, enabled activists to refer to the Gay Travel Index as a source of "fact" about homophobia in the Peruvian context. By inserting the Gay Travel Index into the politics of sexuality, I suggest that the sexuality activists provide a further opportunity to illuminate some of the assumptions that went into its creation.

III. Sexuality Activists in Peru and the Gay Travel Index

The Spartacus International Gay Travel Index rates all of the countries that have travel destinations included in the Spartacus International Gay Guide, a total of 138 countries. As the description of the Gay Travel Index explains, it is "updated on a regular basis" in order to account for the "positive as well as negative changes to our gay world."² The Gay Travel Index is compiled based on a series of fourteen categories. For each category, every country is assigned a positive or negative point value based on whether that indicator reflects "gay-friendliness" or indicated danger for homosexuals. These points range from -3 to +3, although certain categories, such as death sentence for homosexual acts, are assigned -5. For example, if a country has strong anti-discrimination legislation, then it can be scored 1, 2, or 3 in that category. If the country does not have anti-discrimination legislation, then it is scored as 0. On the other hand, if a country has HIV travel restrictions, then it can be scored -1, -2, or -3. If it does not, then it is scored as 0. Sweden, the country that was given the highest score, received a total score of 9. Iran, the country that ranked lowest on the Index, was given a score of -14.

2 At the time of writing, the most recent update was February 2014.

There are two qualities of the index that I wish to draw attention to: its ranking scheme and its use of indicators. The pervasiveness of ranking in social life is not hard to miss: “Rank order may be only one form of numerical expression in mathematics but, in various forms, it is a powerful dynamic in social life almost everywhere” (Guyer 2010, p. 124). In the case of Peru, headlines in popular national newspapers almost daily note Peru’s ranking in something. Furthermore, these rankings tend to be ordinal. In the case of the Gay Travel Index, for example, there is really no way to ascertain the magnitude of difference in “gay-friendliness” or “homophobia” between individual points on the ranking scale.

The Gay Travel Index purports to represent the “gay-friendliness” of different countries. To do this, the Gay Travel Index transforms complex issues like homophobia, visibility, and rights into fourteen basic, and sometimes arbitrary, categories. This reduces the complexity of cultural and social phenomena to a simple ranking scheme that facilitates comparison between the otherwise disparate ranked elements. This is precisely the process that Kevin Davis, Benedict Kingsbury, and Sally Engle Merry (2012) have observed regarding how indicators have become central technologies for global governance, human rights, and international development. For these authors, indicators simplify data and “name the resulting product” (Davis et al. 2012, p. 74). Consequently, for the Gay Travel Index, the arduous process of understanding “culture,” in this case, how alternative and non-normative sexualities are lived, experienced, and stigmatized in different contexts, is sidestepped by simplifying “gay-friendliness” and “homophobia” to a set of indicators and reconfiguring them into a ranked arrangement.

If the veracity of gay and lesbian travel guides, and their antecedents like colonial travel accounts, has been based on “having being there”, then the indicators are doing different work, and opening up space for different effects. Whereas witnessing and testimony establish the authority of travel guides (“I was there and this is how it is”), the veracity of the Gay Travel Index is realized through instruments of rankings and indicators. Indicators turn social and cultural phenomena, like religion, law, and homophobia, into technical problems or measurable dimensions of the life world. By doing so it also validates its own positivist perspective of technical and legal measures as an ideal solution. For instance, if there is discrimination towards sexual minorities, this can be fixed through anti-discrimination laws.

Existing research has made the problematic assumptions of gay and lesbian tourism visible. For instance, being

recognized as a viable consumer does not necessarily engender equality and that traveling as a gay or lesbian person does not benefit all groups evenly. However, the Gay Travel Index is a component of gay and lesbian tourism that is based on an additional set of assumptions about what a good society looks like and how states ought to achieve it. As Kate Bedford (2010) observed in the case of the Global Gender Gap report, indicators can be arbitrary and can be based on assumptions about ideal goals and solutions. For instance, in the case Bedford examined, the ranking assumed that the “50/50% split” between men’s and women’s share of domestic labor is a universally agreed upon goal. In the case of the Gay Travel Index, one underlying assumptions about what a good society is, is not just that a good society allows lesbians and gays to consume as lesbians and gays, but also one with a state that incorporates specific forms of legal protections for sexual minorities. In this way, the indicators themselves can be seen as “not simply things or artifacts, but dynamic processes” that can influence how sexuality can be represented and practiced in everyday life (Corrêa, de la Dehesa, and Parker 2014, p. 78).

I now turn to a specific category of the Gay Travel Index, the “religious influence” category, to demonstrate how indicators obscure the underlying political and cultural claims that go into their creation. As the Index explained, “some of the negative categories reflect the degree of negative influence—for example the category ‘religious influence.’” Because the influence of the Catholic church is stronger in the Vatican City than it is in Portugal for example (where the Catholic church still plays an important negative role) the Vatican City was ‘awarded’ -2 points and Portugal only -1” (Spartacus 2014). Peru received a -2 in this category, meaning that the influence of the Catholic Church is “the same” in the Vatican as it is in Peru. Furthermore, other Latin American countries, including Argentina where the current Pope is from, received -1. In the Gay Travel Index, the complex relationship between religion and sexuality is simplified and turned into a 0, -1, -2, or -3. As an indicator, “religious influence,” which ostensibly accrues legitimacy by neutralizing specificity and cultural context, hides the assumptions it makes precisely about religion and sexuality.

Perhaps more troubling, though, than the arbitrary method in which points were applied, was the assumption that religion is necessarily and inherently antagonistic to gay and lesbian selfhood. This meant that Latin American and Middle Eastern countries received lower scores in this category than their northern European counterparts. The existence and explanation of the category of “religious influence” however, further indicates how the Gay Travel Index reproduces colonial imperatives. What ultimately resulted was that Latin American countries and Middle Eastern countries tended to rank at the bottom of the Index, while Northern European

countries tended to rank higher.³ As observed in critical literature on the subject this view echoes 19th century Northern European disdain for Catholic ultramontanism, which was one ideological argument used to legitimize the Northern European colonial project, especially as crafted and propelled by the “Black Legend” myth about Spanish colonization (Mignolo 2003). Even though religion and progressivism in Latin America are not necessarily antithetical (Carrillo 2013), the Gay Travel Index reproduces particular Enlightenment, Northern European notions about Catholicism by placing negative values in “religious influence” for Spain and its previous colonies. Spain, for instance, is the only European country in the top ten on the list to receive a negative score in the “religious influence” category. This furthermore conceals the growing influence of dogmatic Catholicism in French sexual politics.⁴

The existence of the “local hostility” category as part of the rankings established by the Gay Travel Index further demonstrates the colonial underpinnings of the report. One of the discursive moves that M. Jacqui Alexander identified in her analysis of the Spartacus International Gay Guide was how it maintained colonial power structures by making assumptions about the users of the guide: “the writer, the imagined reader, and the reader as a potential tourist consumer are all positioned as white and Western, and thus familiar to one another and within each other’s cultural proximity and milieu” (Alexander 2005, p. 83). This category assumes that the reader is not a “local”. Thus, in places where there is “local hostility” towards gay travelers, the assumption is that the gay tourist is culturally distant from the culture of the travel destination. Middle Eastern countries are exceptionally characterized as having “hostile” local populations, as are Latin American and Caribbean countries. This category also performs the discursive function of “nativizing” certain populations. That is, “an ongoing process through which an essential character is attributed to the indigenous—the ‘native’—which derives largely from the relationships to geography or to a particular territory, which in turn structures the context within which this ‘native’ is to be imagined and understood” (Alexander 2005, p. 70). Instead of characterizing locals as “friendly”, they are characterized as “hostile”. Countries in the Middle East, for instance, where recent political activism coupled with longer-term wars gave these countries negative scores on the rankings, conjured the place itself as an unstable and hostile monolith. This, in turn, structures the way that the essential spirit or

3 Countries predominantly associated with Islam were also given negative scores. This can be interpreted as an orientaling gesture. See Boellstorff (2005) and Gaudio (2009) for rich ethnographic evidence that dispels myths of a negative relationship, or at least ambivalence, between Islam and gay livelihoods.

4 I would like to credit Sonia Corrêa for drawing attention to this point.

character of the population is understood.

Returning to the anecdote that I opened this paper with, one of the activist's most salient points was his use of the Gay Travel Index. At the conference, he posed the question to the audience: "How is it that Peru is at the bottom of the Spartacus list of the most homophobic countries? Why are Argentina and Brazil fighting to be on the top of the list?" The Gay Travel Index, according to the activist, shows that Peruvian society and the Peruvian state is the most homophobic of South American countries. Ecuador and Bolivia, for instance, both have national anti-discrimination laws. This was seen as quite ironic because in dominant discourses about national distinctions "Bolivia, is supposed to exist so Peru does not have to be last place on every ranking." I interpret this as one key moment of appropriation of the Gay Travel Index by the LGBT movement. In this instance, claims about homophobia in Peru were evidenced through Peru's position on a ranked scale. Instead of enabling a "thick description" or nuanced understanding of homophobia internal to Peruvian society or examples of how it is lived and experienced in everyday life among Peruvians, the reinterpretation of the Gay Travel Index renders homophobia visible only through external comparison.

Given the assumptions and stereotypes that the Gay Travel Index reproduces, perhaps one would have anticipated that sexuality activists in countries like Peru would have also critiqued the Gay Travel Index. In the previous anecdote, for instance, activists eloquently critiqued the enterprise of gay and lesbian tourism for recognizing lesbians and gays only as potential consumers. It is thus notable that the Gay Travel Index, an element of the gay and lesbian tourism industry, was instead used at the conference I observed as evidence to substantiate claims against the Peruvian state.

The question I raise is therefore: How, then, could it come to be used in this way in Peru? What, as Jane Guyer has asked about rankings, gave the Gay Travel Index rankings "recognition, resonance, and power?" (Guyer 2010, p. 126). I point specifically to the technocratic qualities of the Gay Travel Index, which transform a rather arbitrary rankings scheme into a legitimate form of knowledge that is both easily recognized and resonates, especially in a context like Peru where World Bank evaluations, United Nations rankings, and human rights and development reports have become the lingua franca. The Gay Travel Index at once enables Westerners to "consume" a touristic conscience by directing their tourism to "tolerant" locales, but it also offers an alternative way of producing and substantiating knowledge in gay and lesbian tourism that is different than the appeal to

eyewitness testimony that has historically legitimized travel guides and their colonial travel antecedents. While for some, the Gay Travel Index may be undeniably and egregiously “colonial”, for the sexuality activists in Peru participating in the event I have observed, it was strategically appropriated as an opportunity to make demands and advocate for rights.

IV. Conclusion

Homophobia is a far more complex phenomenon than can be captured by a couple of indicators. Yet that is precisely what indicators are supposed to do. They are intended to represent complex phenomena so they are easy to understand, eluding complexity to facilitate ranking and comparison. As the case of the Gay Travel Index in Peru demonstrates, there are generative possibilities to the elisions engendered by rankings and indicators. As Davis, Kingsbury, and Merry observed, “indicators often express ideologies about the ideal society and the process of achieving it. But what they actually communicate, and to whom, may not be what their producers and promulgators sought to communicate” (Davis et al. 2012:78). In the case of Peru, analyzed in this article, it is possible to see how commercial data produced by the gay and lesbian tourism industry is open to alternative uses. Claims about the state and society in Peru were made because the degree of “religious influence” in Peru is a “-2” and the degree of Peruvian’s hostility to lesbians and gays is “-2”, not exactly because of the inherent truth-value of these calculations, but rather because these evaluations were situated in a context of rankings and indicators. Examining how sexuality activists reconfigure the objects of knowledge, like rankings – which seem to inevitably reproduce colonial inequalities -- illustrates the ways that the rankings are not in and of themselves an end when they are put into play.

Contestations of sexuality -- in this case those relating to the rights of people of non-conforming sexual identities and practices are both significant to understanding and offer an ideal arena to observe how the politics of knowledge are staged and play out in real life. The example of the Spartacus Gay Travel Index and how it came to matter in the “political” instance I have analyzed in this paper, I suggest, sheds light on the contemporary politics of knowledge. Detailed, nuanced descriptions of a place, based on first hand experience (i.e., a travel guide or an ethnography) did not possess the gravitas of technical knowledge, or at least an aesthetic of technical knowledge, that could bolster political claims. The assumptions that went into the creation

of the Gay Travel Index are just as imbricated in colonial legacies as those that went into the creation of its travel guidebook predecessors. Yet this embeddedness in colonial legacies does not foreclose its potential. The activists in the case I have examined were aware of and could recognize these assumptions. Rather, for them what really mattered politically was how the techniques of calculation, often construed to give a more scientific and apolitical approximation of reality, actually worked to offer flexibility, leaving space open for reinterpretation and unanticipated political consequences.

In “Biopolitics at the Crossroads of Sexuality and Disaster: The Case of Haiti,” Rosalind Petchesky recommended that transnational sexual and health activists ought to be more attentive to the knowledge and leadership of “local groups working on the ground whose knowledge, courage and expertise are often formidable even if their resources are small” (2014:30). As a final point, I wonder what a ranking of homophobia would look like, for instance, if the indicators were grounded in dialogues with local groups about their experiences of homophobia and the ideal social, political, and legal mechanisms that work against it? How could “homophobia” be ranked if one recognizes that indicators (e.g., “religious influence”) might actually indicate different things about “homophobia” in different contexts? How, then, would qualitative, nuanced descriptions of the experiences of homophobia work to strengthen the way calculation of it can be done?

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