

Calogero Giametta, *The Sexual Politics of Asylum: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the UK Asylum System*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. ISBN: 9781138674677 (cloth); ISBN: 9781315561189 (ebook)

The Sexual Politics of Asylum is an ethnography studying sexual orientation and gender identity in the UK asylum system. The book develops Calogero Giametta's doctoral research, informed by his subsequent postdoctoral work on "sexual humanitarianism" in the Mediterranean. The book analyses the experiences of LGBT migrants claiming asylum in Britain. It examines how the rules and requirements of the British asylum system force claimants to understand their experiences and identities in particular ways. It charts and critiques how Western-centric epistemologies of sexuality and gender are reproduced through the need for migrants to make themselves legible and believably "authentic" to the immigration case workers assessing their claims for asylum. In this way, the book examines what happens when the categories of sexuality and gender move.

This study examines the contradictions of an asylum system that welcomes applications from people being persecuted on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity; uses that humanitarian act to legitimate Britain's place in the world; but makes those asylum-seekers unwelcome, and often unbelievably, in the process. The book opens with the poignant story of the researcher's first meeting with a gay Pakistani asylum seeker, Umar. He tells of the impossibility, for him, of continuing to live in Pakistan without fear of harm, but quickly slips into sharing his anxiety that the immigration adjudicator will never understand "how bad it is in my country for people like me" (p.1). Giametta reflects on how, by having to repeatedly tell immigration officials a now well-rehearsed narrative of his intimate sexual history, as well as his experiences of abuse and violence, Umar ended up feeling deeply conflicted about the need to tell a story of his home country that lacked nuance and erased happier memories of it.

Giametta records the stories of asylum-seekers' lives in their countries of origin, paying attention to the ambiguities and ambivalences that can be important to their sense of self, but which can harm their cases. He records too their ambivalences about LGBT life in Britain and the harm that the asylum system, constant threats of detention and deportation, as well as enforced impoverishment, can have on their well-being. This research was conducted in the Greater London area over a two-year period from 2011 to 2013. It draws on interviews with over 60 individuals, who had either been granted refugee status in the UK or, in the majority of cases, were still going through the asylum determination process. Alongside these interviews, Giametta conducted fieldwork with their legal representatives, NGO workers tasked with supporting them through their asylum claims, and activists campaigning for the rights of LGBT migrants. During part of his research Giametta worked for a charity as a part-time asylum support worker which, he reflects, gave him a much starker understanding of the realities of life for LGBT asylum seekers in the UK.

By studying the treatment of gender and sexuality within the context of the (British) asylum system, Giametta is able to “trace similarities and differences among the conditions of *subalternity* to which gender and sexual minorities can be exposed in different geopolitical spaces” (p.5). He does, however, approach their subaltern status with caution, recognising that although all the participants in his research came from countries where same-sex desire is either illegal or harshly constrained by a lack of social acceptance, in other ways several of his participants enjoyed relatively privileged lives within their countries of origin. His focus, then, is less on their subaltern position in those countries of origin, and more on investigating the ways in which the asylum process itself is productive of states of subalternity. This is a deliberate attempt to disrupt the homogenizing narratives of personal journeys from oppression elsewhere towards “liberation” in (and by) a liberal UK. Thus, the book explores what is lost in the “act of translating, and more specifically, how the loss in translating gender and sexual categories has material consequences when it is politically used *against*” (p.6) people claiming asylum on the basis of their sexuality or gender expression. He positions this

loss within the context of the “terrain of suspicion” within which asylum seekers find themselves, where exceptional processes of detention and containment have become the norm, and supposedly “progressive” asylum categories are assessed through a process which continually questions the authenticity of each claimant. Central to the book is a critical investigation of the contradictions within the extension of new form of “homonormative” citizenship (Brown 2012) to certain sexual and gender minorities within the UK and elsewhere. It questions:

How can one translate sexual citizenship in geopolitical contexts different from the neoliberal spaces where individuation and the choosing-citizen operate at large? Or more precisely, how does sexual citizenship translate in places where people have little or no access to private space, or where relationality, community, or family are more central experiences than in those neoliberal societies defined by a privileging of individual rights? (p13-14)

He rightly assesses that these newly acquired rights in the UK come to shed light on the experiences of sexual and gender minorities subjected to violence and a lack of similar rights in other locations. It serves to externalise sexism and homophobia outside of Western European contexts. In the process sexual and gender minority asylum seekers come to be understood as victims in need of rescue, rather than people with fundamental rights of their own. This logic of (sexual) humanitarianism places suffering at the centre of its protective structures; but also re-centres the responsible Western individual capable of acting compassionately on the world at the same time. For Giametta, building on the work of Nick Mai (2014), this sexual humanitarianism comes to define the borders of Europe, with “LGBT friendliness” increasingly becoming one of the markers that is believed to distinguish European “civilization” from other parts of the world. When LGBT migrants lodge a claim

for asylum, this border materializes in the ways they are forced to tell their stories in order to be believed as “authentic”.

Chapter 2 focuses on the recurring themes that arose during Giametta’s research, paying attention to the mental processes that shaped his respondents’ experiences of being asylum seekers within the British immigration system. Three key themes from the respondents’ biographical narratives structure this chapter: their realisation and awareness of difference; the ways in which they came to understand and express their sexuality or gender identity; and the vulnerability and anxiety that they experienced upon arrival in Britain. Many of the migrants he spoke with believed that it was more possible to lead open LGBT lives in the UK and aspired to do so. Nevertheless, their impoverishment throughout the asylum process curtailed their ability to embrace the commodified signifiers of LGBT life in London. Many also recounted experiences of racism that distanced them from mainstream LGBT spaces in the city. In analysing these narratives and experiences, Giametta is sensitive to the ways in which class matters both in shaping who could make themselves appear authentically “LGBT”, but also in their capacity to negotiate the hardships of the application process.

In Chapter 3, Giametta changes his scalar focus to explore global dimensions of contemporary sexual politics. This chapter provides a thorough review of recent debates about global sexualities and the emergence of homonationalism (Puar 2007) as a hegemonic force structuring contemporary sexual politics globally. He argues that Western concerns about homophobia in the Global South frequently serve to occlude the experiences of trans people around the world. This chapter serves as an excellent primer on the complexities of understanding, questioning, and challenging the dominant forms of sexual politics in varying geopolitical contexts. Building on Rahul Rao’s (2014) important work, he articulates the dangers of ascribing homophobia to fixed geographical locations. This often leads to problematic assumptions about the pervasiveness of homophobia within the cultures of particular nations (principally in Africa, the Middle East, and the subcontinent). Giametta

demonstrates that his respondents were frequently complicit in reproducing such tropes in the narratives they told about their lives in relation to the asylum process.

Chapter 4 examines the legal processes and discourses of sexual humanitarianism within the British immigration system. Here Giametta's respondents repeatedly voice how they found themselves on the receiving end of very strong assumptions about what their experiences must have been like in their countries of origin. In this context, he traces a genealogy of "discretion" in relation to UK legal constructions of homosexuality, which continues to be mobilized in the adjudication of cases lodged on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Giametta questions the ways in which "objective" methods for evaluating the credibility of claimants constrain the biographical narratives they can tell about their former lives.

Following from this, Chapter 5 examines how systems of sexual humanitarianism utilise universalising narratives of liberation, victimhood, and a lack of individual agency. Here Giametta uses ethnographic data to explore the ways in which respondents experienced their lives in Britain, demonstrating that they frequently had to develop a capacity to "navigate, or better, 'surf' (Boellstorff 2010) essentializing social and legal readings of their subjecthood that construe them as either victims or liars" (p33). This chapter sensitively explores what happens when LGBT migrants come to internalize and over-identify with their status as "victim". For many of respondents attempting to fit into and make themselves proximate to London's LGBT cultures, this was experienced as simultaneously both a limiting and an expanding experience.

Chapter 6 concentrates on the material conditions of LGBT asylum seekers' existence in the UK, demonstrating how an asylum processing system based on containment, suspicion, and the constant threat of deportation serves to constrain their mobility, desires, and aspirations. Giametta uses his respondents' voices effectively here to demonstrate the effects of the constant threat of destitution and homelessness had on their well-being, chipping away

at the very resilience and survival instincts which might have inspired their migration in the first place.

In the concluding chapter, Giametta demonstrates how the capacity for asylum claims on the basis of sexuality and gender identity is based on very rigid understandings of these categories that seldom correspond to the complexity of the lived experiences of LGBT migrants. He argues that there are limits to strict identity politics in postcolonial times, especially when those identity categories become implicated in securing the borders of the nation-state. If I have one frustration with this timely and insightful study, it relates to the author's insistence on framing his participants and their experiences as "queer" when, by his own admission, none of the migrants he worked with identified as such. For sure, the complexity of their life stories and experiences challenge and question the fixed identity categories used to assess their cases, but I question whether the reflex turn to queer explanation for this adds anything new to the analysis of the UK asylum system and the politics of contemporary sexual humanitarianism? Where I think *The Sexual Politics of Asylum* makes a far more profound and original contribution is through its recognition that the humanitarian logics of contemporary sexual politics serve to silence the subjectivities of the very subjects it seeks to "rescue", thus perpetuating their subaltern status and refusing to "listen to the contradictions, inconsistencies, and tensions" (p151) within their narratives. This reinforces a "structural ignorance" about the lives of those who cannot or will not make their lives intelligible in relation to dominant European identity politics. Giametta ends his book with a powerful call to provincialize contemporary identity politics and the political strategies associated with them. This is an important challenge for critical geographers to take up.

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