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## Understanding Queer Oppression and Resistance in the Global Economy: Towards a Theoretical Framework for Political Economy

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# Understanding Queer Oppression and Resistance in the Global Economy: Towards a Theoretical Framework for Political Economy

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## ABSTRACT

The study of sexuality, especially queer sexuality, has occupied a historically marginal position within political economy. Where feminist scholars have addressed the topic, they have typically done so through the lens of women's sexual labour and social reproduction and/or by framing sexual orientation and gender identity as a variable through which patterns of differentiation may occur. Most critical political economy ignores sexuality entirely. As a result, matters of queer oppression and resistance have not been systematically investigated or theorised. This paper addresses this gap by fusing together insights from the emergent 'queering IPE' literature with two other strands of scholarship that integrate queer concerns into the study of global capitalism: the 'globalisation' and 'state-centric' frames. Based on this, I propose a theoretical framework for understanding queer struggle and apply this to the analysis of LGBTI politics and activism in Ghana. The paper argues that queer oppression and resistance are important topics of inquiry in and of themselves in political economy. At the same time, a broader ontological shift is required to recognise the constitutive role of sexuality within political economic phenomena, which has potentially far-reaching implications for future research agendas within and beyond the study of queer politics.

## KEYWORDS

Queer theory; feminist political economy; LGBTI activism; sexuality; Ghana

## Introduction

The landscape of queer struggle is globally uneven. Over the past two decades, LGBTI<sup>1</sup> activists and movements around the world have achieved significant wins, from the decriminalisation of homosexuality to the recognition of marriage rights. Yet it is not all a good news story. The expansion of global LGBTI organising and the formal institution of LGBTI rights in some contexts have paralleled—or rather dovetailed with—a number of more worrying trends: pushbacks, retrenchment, and expanded criminalisation. One well-known example is the Ugandan government's 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act, which sought to make same-sex relations punishable by life imprisonment. Elsewhere, queer activists and communities have faced fresh and renewed constraints on their rights to free association, assembly, and expression. In Poland, for example, President Duda and the ruling nationalist-conservative party, Law and Justice, made anti-LGBTI politics a central plank of their 2019 re-election campaigns (Mendos 2019). As of June 2020, more than 100 municipalities across the country had adopted 'against LGBT propaganda' or 'pro-family' resolutions (Ciobanu 2020).

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Even in countries with seemingly comprehensive legal rights and protections for LGBTI citizens (or at least well-established LGBTI movements), queer politics remain highly contentious. In 2015, the United States Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling that legalised same-sex marriage across all states. Barely ten months later, the newly-elected Trump administration began a concerted campaign to roll back trans rights, including attempts to remove access to key healthcare services and reimpose the ban on trans people serving in the military (Levin 2019). Such intra-country controversies and shifts indicate that formal rights are not a panacea for queer oppression, nor do they constitute an end goal for queer activism in and of themselves. Rather, queer sexuality is a site of ongoing political contestation and power struggle—and an important vector of political values—across a range of geographic settings. Of particular interest from a political economy perspective is the key role of the state in regulating queer sexualities and disciplining norms pertaining to gender and sexuality, in this instance by instituting or intensifying anti-queer laws and rhetoric, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as ‘state-sponsored’ homophobia (Mendos 2019). The US and Polish cases also illuminate how heterosexist, anti-queer politics are being reconfigured and rearticulated through right-wing populist and authoritarian projects in the contemporary juncture.

Despite the interconnections between state, politics, and sexuality, political economists have not historically paid much attention to the topic, especially to matters of queer oppression and resistance. This blind spot can be explained, in part, by the discipline’s traditional emphasis on state-market relations,, in which matters of the so-called private sphere—sex, intimacy, corporeality—are seen as outside the boundaries of the economy (see Smith 2018). However, feminist scholars have long challenged the state-centric and productivist biases of mainstream political economy (Waylen 1997, 2006, Peterson 2002, 2003, Bakker 2007, Steans and Tepe-Belfrage 2010) and highlighted the extent to which states and markets are themselves gendered (and racialised) structures (Elson 1993, Steans 1999; Peterson 2003, Waylen 2006, Bhattacharya 2018, Tilley and Shilliam 2018). This scholarship has also rendered visible the vital contributions made by households and reproductive labour—which is disproportionately carried out by women—to the global economy (Bezanson and Luxton 2006, Bakker 2007, Hoskyns and Rai 2007, LeBaron 2010).

In this sense, thinking about sexuality and political economy is scarcely new, since interest in (pre-dominantly) women’s labour and bodies has necessarily involved engagement with sexual matters. However, beyond a relatively small number of overtly ‘sexualised’ topics and studies—e.g. on biological reproduction, violence, sex work—sexuality often appears as an addendum in critical political economy analyses. In this context, it operates as a shorthand to refer to sexual orientation and gender identity, which is then acknowledged as an axis or variable—akin to age or ability—along which patterns of differentiation occur. Put otherwise, unlike gender (and perhaps increasingly race), sexuality is not considered as ‘ontologically central’ (Waylen 2006, 147) to critical political economy, nor is it assumed to function in a constitutive (as opposed to consequential) way within political economic phenomena.

Situated within this wider disciplinary terrain, the topic of non-normative or queer sexualities has not been consistently or comprehensively investigated. Indeed, at the time of writing, a key word search for ‘queer’ in the annals of *New Political Economy* provides zero hits. While there are some notable exceptions to this silence, including V Spike Peterson’s scholarship (1999, 2002, 2003, 2017, 2020) and Nicola Smith’s (2018, 2020) recent work on queer political economy, the discipline is still some way off embracing—or even fully identifying—the far-reaching implications an ontological re-consideration of sexuality’s role in global capitalism would entail. Nor do we have a concretely-elaborated set of political economic theories or tools through which to study sexualities in the global economy and in particular, as is my focus here, questions of queer oppression and resistance.

This paper seeks to address this gap by formulating a political economy approach to the study of queer struggle. It is inspired, in part, by my own attempts to investigate the political economy of LGBTI activism and HIV prevention in Ghana, which spotlighted some of the limitations and lacunae within the existing scholarship. Weaving together the experience (and empirics) of this research with insights from an interdisciplinary set of literatures spanning feminist and queer IPE,

development studies, and sociology, the paper articulates a theoretical framework for analysing queer struggle. Specifically, it fuses together key ideas from the emergent ‘queering IPE’ scholarship with insights from what I term the ‘globalisation’ and ‘state-centric’ approaches to sexuality and capitalism. I attach the caveat that these categorisations have been developed as an analytical device to identify different strands and evolutions in thought on sexuality and political economy, there are various points of overlap between them. In short, the aims of the paper are threefold: to critically survey and integrate the scholarship on (queer) sexuality and political economy; to develop a theoretical framework for understanding queer struggle that draws on and moves forward this literature; and to illustrate this framework through analysis of queer politics in Ghana..

The paper begins by considering how sexuality and struggle have typically been approached within political economy, notably by feminist scholars, and by further contextualising the blind spot on queer sexualities in relation to the queer theory-political economy impasse. In section two, I develop my theoretical framework for analysing queer struggle using five key dimensions, which encompass: (1) the role of the state in shaping, regulating, and disciplining queer sexualities; (2) a structural rather than individually subjective orientation; (3) the relationship between heteronormativity and capitalism across different scales and modes of governance; (4) the everyday political economies of queer lives and resistance; (5) an understanding that sexual injustices are not incidental to the global capitalist economy but are (re)productive of it. The third part of this paper uses this framework in practice to analyse the terrain of queer struggle and LGBTI rights in the West African state of Ghana. The paper concludes by considering new paths of inquiry and potential research agendas within this field.

## **Sexuality and struggle in (feminist) political economy**

Feminist political economists have cultivated longstanding lines of inquiry into gender and sexuality. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist scholars viewed sexuality primarily through the lens of women and women’s sexual labour, as part of a wider attempt to theorise the links between (social) oppression, (economic) exploitation, and patriarchy under capitalism (Hartmann 1979, Vogel 1983, Mies 1986). This tendency to focus on women’s sexuality—within capitalist (and male-dominated) power relations—has remained a common thread in the literature, particularly in terms of analysing the role of women’s bodies and labour in processes of capitalist accumulation and the production of goods and services, and in the reproduction of human beings and society more broadly, that is, in social reproduction (Laslett and Brenner 1989, Federici 2004, 2012, Bezanson and Luxton 2006, Hoskyns and Rai 2007). Silvia Federici (2012, p. 24) describes these dynamics specifically as ‘the subordination of our sexuality to the reproduction of labor power’. While the feminist political economy literature on women’s work and social reproduction is far from homogeneous, these contributions have usefully served to re-locate sexual labour—which takes place both inside and outside the household, in the home and in the market—firmly within the parameters of the global capitalist economy.

As a result of this orientation towards women, ‘struggle’ in this context is typically considered to encompass issues such as sexual violence (Federici 2004, True 2012; see also Elias and Rai 2019), sex work (Agathangelou 2006, Jeffreys 2008, Kotiswaran 2011), and other forms of gendered inequality related to biological reproduction, childcare, and/or the care economy (Arat-Koç 2006, Bergeron 2011, Fraser 2016). Again, these struggles play out across the gendered and, importantly, racialised global relations of production and reproduction (Davis 1981, Glenn 1992, Bhattacharya 2017). Indeed, renewed interest in concepts of social reproduction in recent years has pushed these debates in new theoretical and empirical directions, prompting greater consideration for how gender interacts with other axes of oppression and difference such as race, migrant / citizenship status, and geography (Pearson and Kusakabe 2012, Anderson and Shutes 2014, Naidu and Ossome 2016) and diversifying what terrains of struggle are considered social reproductive in character (Arruzza 2017). These constitute important advances; yet women are still widely understood as

the primary subject of analysis in the literature when it comes to body politics and therefore *women's sexuality* as the primary object of investigation.

### **A queer theory-political economy impasse?**

The centrality and stability of the category 'woman' to feminist analyses has been increasingly questioned since the 1990s, stemming in part from the work of Judith Butler and other queer theorists (Butler 1990, 1993, see also Peterson 2017). Queer scholarship unsettled foundational accounts of sex and gender and, in so doing, demarcated more clearly between the study of *gender* and the study of *sexuality* (Rubin 1984). Within political economy, however, the uptake of queer approaches has been, at best, partial (Smith 2018). This is frequently attributed to disagreements over the primacy of the 'cultural' vs the 'economic', or the 'discursive' vs the 'material'. In other words, political economy has been critiqued by queer scholars for failing to adequately recognise and theorise the social relations of gender, sexuality, and race under capitalism (see, for example, Butler 1998, Ferguson 2004); while queer studies are accused of being overly preoccupied with discourse, difference, and identity, and of neglecting questions of class (see, for example, Hennessy 2000, 2006, Binnie 2004, Drucker 2015, Seers 2017).

The debate between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler is an oft-cited example of this impasse. In brief, Butler criticised Fraser's (1997) categorisation of gay and lesbian struggles as 'injustices of recognition'—as opposed to 'injustices of distribution'—and accused Marxist political economists of dis-embedding queer struggle from capitalism. The result of the Fraser-Butler debate has been described as a 'stalemate' (Bernans 2002:50), but it raises some important questions about how we conceptualise the roots and drivers of sexual injustices, as well as the forms and foci of struggle that emerge from different configurations of oppression and exploitation in the global economy. The debate also highlights the various ways in which queer scholars have drawn on and been influenced by (feminist) political economy and *vice versa*, including a number of fruitful rapprochements between queer theory and political economy (Duggan 2003, Bergeron and Puri 2012, Jacobs and Klesse 2014, Peterson 2017, Smith 2020). As Smith outlines (2018), then, queer theory's emphasis on uncoupling and deconstructing naturalised heterosexuality and gender norms is far from incompatible with the core concerns of political economy, in terms of how power, wealth, and resources are distributed, and the relations and hierarchies through which this distribution occurs. In light of this, I do not wish to spend further time elaborating the synergies (or tensions) between queer theory and political economy, not least because that has been done elsewhere in the literature (Smith 2018, see also Bergeron and Puri 2012). Rather, I want to consider exactly how a political economy approach to queer struggle might be theorised, drawing on three strands of literature that have usefully integrated queer concerns into the analysis of global capitalism.

### **Towards a theoretical framework for queer struggle**

The snapshots of contemporary queer struggle that opened this paper demonstrate two ostensibly simple points: firstly, that the state represents a key battleground for queer activists and movements around the world; and secondly, that macrolevel structures, processes, and practices have important implications for queer individuals' lived experience, within and beyond their erotic/embodied lives. When I say within and beyond here, I mean that queer oppression is shaped by the interactions and interconnections between multiple axes of oppression—i.e. not exclusively sexual orientation or gender identity—and, moreover, that sexual injustices have material bases and drivers—i.e. not just cultural-symbolic ones. These insights are foundational to a political economy approach to queer struggle and, as such, provide the first two dimensions of my framework, which I summarise as: (1) *an interest in the role of the state in shaping, regulating, and disciplining queer sexualities*; (2) *a structural rather than individually subjective orientation*.

Underlying this first dimension is another foundational concept: the queer analytic of heteronormativity.<sup>2</sup> Dimension 1 is thus intended to shed light into the role of sexuality—and specifically heterosexual norms—in maintaining and perpetuating particular economic structures and power relations within the historical and contemporary nation-state. It further illuminates—at an ideological level—how heteronormative logics work to legitimate and uphold culturally and historically-contingent divisions of labour and household configurations by grounding these in ideas of ‘universality’ (Sears 2017, p. 173). These questions of historicisation and spatialisation are important, since it is evident that capitalism does not, always and everywhere, depend on the heteronormative family unit. This is the case, for example, in some Global North contexts where significant sections of the population now ‘live through wage labor outside of heterosexual families’ (Fraser 1997, p. 272). Yet it is also evident that capitalist society continues to work through, promote, and perpetuate heteronormative family structures and the gender division of labour (albeit in shifting and transformative ways) across many other contexts, including parts of the Global South.

This concern for heteronormativity and the state is informed by the ‘state-centric’ approach to queer sexuality and capitalism (Bergeron and Puri 2012, Lind 2012, Peterson 2017, 2020). In this vein, Suzanne Bergeron and Jyoti Puri (2012) call for scholars to theorise sexuality and (Marxist) political economy beyond reproductive and sexual labour (within the family) and in relation to the institutional, legal, and structural mechanisms through which hegemonic configurations of gender and sexuality are constructed and privileged. Peterson (2020) pushes this line of analysis further by setting out a ‘critical genealogy’ of state-making practices that centralises the regulation of the family. She notes that ‘unruly’ sexual relations represent both a political and economic problem, since they threaten the (literal) ‘reproduction of the state/nation’, as well as ways in which interconnecting hierarchies of race, gender, and class are legitimated and maintained, notably through inheritance and citizenship laws (Peterson 2020:190). This framing is useful in that it very clearly places queer sexuality—and the concept of heteronormativity—within the more conventional boundaries of political economy research. It also underlines why intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality matter for understanding state formations across space and time.

While much of the state-centric literature has focused on the Europe and North America, scholars such as Amy Lind (2009, 2012) have sought to unpack the relationship between state policies and heteronormativity in the Global South and to identify the linkages between North–South geopolitical spheres as produced through neoliberal development reforms and actors such as the World Bank (see also Bedford 2005, 2009). In addition to a state and structural orientation, this suggests another key dimension of a political economy approach to queer struggle: (3) *a focus on the relationship between heteronormativity and capitalism across different scales and modes of governance*. This dimension offers a means to explore the structural linkages and interplays between global capitalism and dominant sex/gender regimes—and how these unfold in concrete, material (and corporeal) ways—not just in relation to nation-states, but in relation to the ‘layers of institutions that are involved in defining and regulating our intimate lives’ (Lind 2009:35). Put otherwise, dimension 3 facilitates analysis of the materiality of queer sexuality as it is grounded and reproduced across multiple sites and scales, and through different modes of global (and local) governance. This includes inter- and surpa-national organisations, international financial institutions, development agencies, and NGOs.

Although Peterson’s (1999, 2017, 2020) work also focuses on heteronormativity and the state, she uses queer theory in a more integrative fashion to push feminist scholars beyond binary ways of thinking about men and women in the global economy (Peterson 2002, 2003). In this articulation, the queer concern for deconstructing binaries and unsettling stable or taken-for-granted concepts is applied to both the gender binary and fixed categorisations of sexual orientation, *and* to other boundaries and dichotomies, such as ‘productive’ and ‘reproductive’, ‘public and ‘private’. Given the synergies between the queer project of unsettling binaries and wider feminist critiques of ‘masculinist/modernist dualisms’ (Peterson 2005, p. 507), I do not consider this to be essential to understanding queer struggle, *per se*, but more a cross-cutting concern within feminist and queer political

economy. Similarly, while I am not specifically including a dimension on the relationality and multiplicity of oppressions, frequently conceptualised as ‘intersectionality’ (Crenshaw 1991), I see this as fundamental to a feminist political economy approach. As such, it is threaded throughout this paper’s theoretical discussion, framework, and analysis. Furthermore, I address the importance of understanding intersecting or, more specifically, *co-constituting* social relations—race, class, gender, sexuality—within the global economy in detail in my discussion of dimension 5.

The state-centric literature has moved forward understandings of queer sexuality and capitalism in a number of valuable ways, notably by: incorporating the queer analytic of heteronormativity into political economy analyses; illuminating the key regulatory and coercive powers of the state vis-à-vis intimate and family relations; and interrogating how heteronormativity links to the cultural, legal, and the economic. However, rarely has this literature extended beyond analysis of the (re)production of heterosexist family and gender norms and models—typically construed as heterosexual couples living in male-breadwinner households with children—to connect these structures and dynamics to the actual lived experience of queer individuals in different settings. In other words, it frequently notes *who* is excluded—queer, transgender, and gender non-conforming individuals and couples, other queer configurations of love, desire, family, corporeality etc—but does not provide empirical insight into the lives of these excluded populations themselves (or into the forms of resistance they take up). As such, there is a way in which existing approaches to the study of queer sexuality in/and the state risk reproducing some of the same occlusions and oversights they seek to disrupt. This suggests a fourth key dimension in my theoretical framework: (4) *a concern for the everyday political economies of queer lives and resistance*. I am informed here by the turn to the everyday in feminist IPE (Elias and Roberts 2016, Elias and Rethel 2018), as well as longstanding feminist work that documents the gendered character of global economic processes and their implications for women’s everyday productive and reproductive lives. The point here is not simply that the ‘global’ affects the ‘local’, the ‘macro’ affects the ‘micro’, but that non-elite and, importantly, non-Western actors’ engagements with, and articulations of, everyday political economic processes may both reproduce and resist broader patterns of global economic transformation. Given the resonance of concepts of resistance within queer studies (Warner 1991:16), this seems an apt formulation for a political economy approach to queer struggle. Thus, while heteronormativity remains critical as an organising analytic for studying queer sexualities within political economy, this should be conceptualised to include more quotidian microlevel practices, formations, and relations (i.e. in addition to the state and supra-state levels), as well as the acts and modalities of resistance that challenge them (i.e. in addition to mainstream social movements).

Interest in evolving modes of global governance and their impact on microlevel queer politics ties into a more longstanding concern among Marxist scholars of capitalism and sexuality: the relationship between axes of social differentiation—such as gender and sexuality—subjectivity, and the mode of production, including how this has shifted under conditions of neoliberal globalisation (D’Emilio 1983, Hennessy 2000, Altman 2001, Drucker 2015). From a theoretical perspective, this ‘globalisation frame’ is useful for analysing how changing material conditions—the restructuring of the economy, shifts in the organisation of production, patterns of work, income levels, standards of living, the social division of labour, the arrangement of the household—may enable and produce certain affective and/or erotic ties and ways of being, including sexual identities and practices. This is an important insight, since dimension 2—a structural rather than individually subjective orientation—should not be read as a call for political economists to jettison, *tout court*, questions of identity when it comes to understanding queer struggle; rather, it is to make the point that the identitarian is in itself intrinsically linked to the structural and the economic (and cannot be abstracted from this context). Put otherwise, bringing sexuality from the periphery to the core of our inquiries allows us, in the words of Peterson (2003, 1), to ‘map identities and culture in relation to conventional economic phenomena’.

What a political economy framework does necessitate, however, is a move away from the account of politics and power typically associated with queer theory—i.e. in which power is diffuse and

produced through discourse—towards one that holds to something more systematic and systemic in character. In other words, *contra* a poststructuralist queer account where power works in a ubiquitous, anti-totalizing way, a political economy approach understands separate ‘systems’ of oppression—gender, race, sexuality—as structurally related to, and therefore as structural features of, the global capitalist economy (see McNally 2017, Bhattacharya 2017, Petersen 2003). This question of structural *interrelatedness* brings me onto the fifth and final dimension in my theoretical framework.

While dimensions 1–4 may seem relatively uncontroversial from a critical political economy perspective, the fifth dimension is, I anticipate, the more challenging one. This draws on recent work on sexuality and feminist IPE that talks explicitly of ‘queer/queering political economy’ (Smith *et al.* 2015, Smith 2016, 2018, 2020). Viewed through this queering IPE lens, it is insufficient to acknowledge sexuality as a variable in political economy analysis, what Smith calls an ‘add queer and stir’ approach. Rather, queering political economy requires an understanding of how political economic structures, processes, and transformations shape and are shaped by sexuality, as well as gender (Smith 2018, see also Pettman 1996, 2000, True 2012). In other words, it seeks to understand how the logics of heteronormativity—the complex web of social relations that normalise and naturalise sexual and gender difference—are imbricated in the logics of capitalist crises and other economic transformations. To this end, the queering IPE frame is not only useful for studying queer sexuality and struggle (though, as this paper argues, these are in themselves important and still overlooked topics of inquiry) but is in fact essential for understanding a whole range of political economic phenomena—globalisation, crisis, austerity—that are not obviously or ostensibly sexualised in character.

Underpinning this argument is my earlier point about the *constitutive role* (rather than consequential effects) of sexuality within the global capitalist economy. Peterson’s (2005:499) conceptualisation of ‘empirical’ vs. ‘analytic gender’ is insightful for understanding this framing, which differentiates between ‘the study of how men and women ... are differently affected by, and differently affect, political economy’ and the study of how ‘masculinity and femininity ... produce, and are produced by, political economy’. Following a similar logic, sexuality is operating in this framework as an *analytic* rather than a variable to be observed in an exclusively empirical sense; it is, as Bilge and Scheibelhofer usefully describe it, ‘an axis of power *both constituted by and constitutive of* other axes of power and forms of dominance’ (2012:255, italics mine).<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the ontological shift required to mobilise *analytic sexuality* must be preceded by an understanding of how social relations—race, gender, class—are not just entangled in but co-constituted through processes of production and reproduction. As per my discussion of governing sexuality, these relations (and their attendant inequalities) are further regulated and legitimated through particular legal-judicial and ideological practices.

This account is not intended to impute theoretical equivalence to race, gender, and sexuality; like other axes of oppression, they operate in complex and differentiated ways across the heterogeneous sites and scales of the global economy. Rather, it is, as Angela Davis (1981:66) highlights, to recognise that historically and spatially specific forms of gender, racial, and—I would add—*sexual* oppression are in themselves ‘systematically related’ to patterns of economic exploitation. Davis’ account focuses on the interrelationship of racism and sexism in Black women’s experiences of domestic labour in the US, which included routine forms of sexual and physical violence. In this paper, I seek to expand on these insights by articulating sexuality as a specific axis of oppression that is internal to, rather than independent from, the global economy (and by linking this to historical and contemporary state practices, processes of social and economic development, and everyday forms of violence and resistance). To summarise this, I conceptualise the final dimension in my framework as: 5) *an understanding that sexual injustices are not incidental or consequential to the global capitalist economy but are (re)productive of it.*

The ‘queering IPE’ scholarship has pushed discussions of sexuality and capitalism onto new ontological and empirical terrain, particularly by including the study of men and masculinities (Smith 2012). However, despite its commitment to the international, much of the queering IPE literature

continues to take the Global North—or the advanced industrial countries of Europe and North America—as the primary unit of analysis, or at least the primary point of departure empirically.<sup>4</sup> This unevenness may reflect a wider disciplinary divide between ‘transnational/global queer studies’ on the one hand and queer IR (and IPE) scholarship on the other (Weber 2016:12).<sup>5</sup> Against this background, the political economy of LGBTI politics in non-Western countries remains under-researched in the literature.<sup>6</sup> To be truly international, then, the queering IPE approach needs to be more thoroughly elaborated in contexts beyond the Global North and to be grounded through empirical research in the experiences—and practices of resistance—of queer individuals within these settings. I aim to address this, in part, in the following case study.

To sum up, this analysis has identified five dimensions of a political economy approach to queer struggle: firstly, a concern for the role of the state in shaping, disciplining, and regulating queer sexualities; secondly, a structural rather than individually subjective orientation; thirdly, a focus on the relationship between heteronormativity and capitalism across different scales and modes of governance; fourthly, a concern for the everyday political economies of queer lives and resistance; fifthly, an understanding that sexual injustices are not incidental to the global capitalist economy but are (re)productive of it. In the following section, I apply this framework to the analysis of queer politics and activism in Ghana. This case study has a dual purpose: to illustrate the framework through its practical application; and to highlight the importance of analysing the political economy of queer struggle in contexts beyond the Global North. Empirically, the following discussion draws on intensive ethnographic research conducted in Accra, Ghana between 2012–2015, which includes participant observation, in-depth interviews with community and NGO-based activists, allies, and other queer working class individuals, and documentary analysis of newspaper reports, policy documents, and other organisational materials.

For the purposes of clarify and amplification, each section of the following analysis is linked to a specific dimension (or dimensions) within the theoretical framework. However, it is worth noting that the sections and dimensions are interconnected rather than discrete (and indeed that each could be justifiably investigated through longer empirical and theoretical engagement).

## **Dimensions 1-2: the state and politicised homophobia in Ghana**

Homosexuality has become increasingly politicised in Ghana over the past fifteen years. In 2006, newspaper rumours that an ‘international gay conference’ was being organised in Accra prompted outcry among leading political and religious figures (BBC 2006). While the exact origins of the gay conference story are unclear, the controversy marked the first in a series of public flashpoints over homosexuality in the West African state. This climate of politicised homosexuality continues today: in February 2021, for example, a newly-opened LGBTI community centre in Accra was shut down by the Ghanaian police, following widespread pushback from journalists, politicians, and religious leaders (Akinwotu 2021).

In the legal realm, Section 104 of Ghana’s Criminal Offences Act prohibits ‘unnatural carnal knowledge’, which is described as ‘sexual intercourse with a person in an unnatural manner or with an animal’. ‘Unnatural manner’ is not itself specifically defined, but has been interpreted to include any form of penetrative sex that is not vaginal-penile, such as anal sex between men (Jeffers *et al.* 2010). Consensual unnatural carnal knowledge with a person aged 16 years or over carries a charge of misdemeanour, with anyone found guilty facing a prison sentence of up to three years.<sup>7</sup> Cases of unnatural carnal knowledge are difficult to prosecute, however, due to the high standards of evidence required (Williamson *et al.* 2017) and very few arrests resulted in prosecution between the period 2013–2019 (Mendos 2019:328). Nonetheless, the law underpins a deeply hostile political and cultural climate in which the imprisonment, extortion, blackmail, and intimidation of queer individuals—or those who are suspected of being queer—is commonplace.

Many of the ‘against the order of nature’ laws—also referred to as ‘sodomy laws’—that criminalise homosexuality in parts of the Commonwealth originate from Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.

This was the first ‘model’ sodomy law of the British Empire, which was subsequently reproduced across Britain’s African colonies (Human Rights Watch 2006). These laws represented a key part of the regulatory mechanisms through which the ‘civilising’ impulses of the colonial project were operationalised and legitimated (Stoler 1995, 2002). While the genealogy of these laws and practices varies according to country context, in former British colonies like Ghana, they laid important historical and legal foundations for more contemporary structures of heteronormativity and homophobia (see Epprecht 2005).

This brief history highlights the critical role of the colonial and postcolonial state in Ghana in regulating and disciplining norms pertaining to sexuality, including through legal prohibition. It also challenges reductive, Orientalist accounts that characterise ‘African homophobia’ as a somehow timeless or trans-historical phenomenon. Studies from other parts of Africa and the Caribbean show how homophobia and hetero-patriarchal sex/gender regimes are not only bound up in the histories and experiences of colonisation, but have become increasingly encoded within the cultural and political-economic practices of postcolonial state-building (Alexander 2005, Ndjio 2012, Rodriguez 2017, Currier 2018). In Ghana, the politicisation of homosexuality since the early 2000s has similarly worked to enmesh homophobia within debates on national identity and citizenship, political and economic sovereignty, and anti-imperialism. These dynamics highlight the shifting and contingent ways in which (heteronormative) sexuality is configured in relation to statehood in the contemporary Ghanaian context, as well as the impact of colonial antecedents in the control and regulation of queer sexual and gendered subjectivities.

### **Dimensions 3-4: development, sexual health, and everyday queer activism**

Section one of this case study has applied, primarily, dimensions one and two of my theoretical framework, highlighting: the politicisation of homosexuality within/through the state as a key feature of the topography of queer struggle; and the importance of locating the constitution (and prohibition) of (non)-normative sexual subjectivities within a specific structural and historical context. However the emergence of pervasive forms of anti-gay political discourse in Ghana belies a more complex set of dynamics in which community-based activists and NGOs have begun to work explicitly on LGBTI rights and sexual health advocacy. To this end, it pertains to dimensions 3 and 4 of my framework, regarding the relationship between heteronormativity and capitalism across different scales and modes of governance—in this instance, international development actors focused on global health, national government and policymakers, and local NGOs and activist groups—and the everyday political economies of queer lives and resistance.

The rapid growth of sexual rights-based initiatives in Ghana over the past two decades reflects increases in global development funding to tackle the HIV epidemic, as well as significant shifts in Ghanaian public health policy. In this context—and in contrast to their politicised stance on homosexuality—the Ghanaian government has worked with local, national and international development actors to develop targeted interventions for those most at risk of HIV, notably Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) and female sex workers. According to Akua Gyamerah (2017), this constitutes a ‘paradigm shift’ in national HIV policy.<sup>8</sup> At a more microlevel, rights-based health interventions have sought to prevent HIV infection by mobilising, educating and empowering queer Ghanaian communities. This sexual health/empowerment agenda has typically been operationalised through peer education programmes, whereby queer men are recruited by local NGOs to carry out HIV prevention work among their peers.

The proliferation of global health funding and initiatives focused on HIV in Ghana has transformed the landscape of queer activism. Most notably, it has created space within Ghanaian civil society to discuss and organise around MSM sexual health and, by extension, LGBTI rights. These activities provide a powerful counterpoint to narratives of politicised homophobia in Ghana (and again illustrate the importance of analysing queer struggle within and beyond the state and across multiple modes of governance). This complex set of dynamics has brought increased visibility—for better

or worse—to queer Ghanaian communities and activists, and has worked to reconfigure local modalities of queer politics, with mixed effects. For some Ghanaian activists, the organisations that have sprung up around HIV and sexual rights are viewed as crucial sites of political consciousness-building (as well as sharing life-saving information on sexual health) and, as documented in other parts of West Africa (Armisen 2016), a number of the men involved in this work have gone into other types of human rights activism.

According to other more community-based activists, however, development's overwhelming focus on HIV has bolstered homophobic stereotypes of gay men as 'vectors' of disease and assumptions that homosexuality is being promoted by 'the West', which has, in turn, reinforced anti-queer hostility and stigmatisation. This reveals how global health initiatives interact in complex, unintended ways with context-specific constructs of gender and sexuality, including forms of political and cultural homophobia. It also suggests that, in this context, different governing codes and frames—policy, legal, developmental, cultural—are converging around queer sexualities, as a key site of contestation. This includes the global governance of epidemiological subjects, such as MSM, which complicates and contradicts the national governance of sexual citizenship, including unruly sexual subjects such as 'homosexuals'.

Finally, some longstanding activists note that the expansion of HIV funding and programmes aimed at MSM in Ghana has unhelpfully shifted the goalposts for queer activists in the country, drawing them away from more radical forms of organising into formalised NGOs that focus primarily on (men's) sexual health, at the expense of other priorities and concerns. Co-opted into the top-down and managerialist *modus operandi* of the global development industry, formal LGBTI/MSM organisations struggle to connect with the communities they are supposed to represent. Reflecting on this NGO-isation of activism, the Executive Director of Ghana's first LGBT rights organisation, CEPEHRG, Mac-Darling Cobbinah comments:

Over the last five years, most of our funding is targeting HIV, condoms, lubricant and everything. It looks like we are becoming more of an HIV organisation than the LGBTI movement.

Indeed, beyond the purview of mainstream development interventions, queer community activists identify a much broader set of priorities for struggle than sexual health: decent work; an adequate standard of living; freedom from violence; the right to mental health. These priorities reflect the material bases and drivers of queer oppression in Ghana (as well as their affective consequences), which include limited access to the labour market, especially in the formal sector, discrimination in employment and housing, pervasive anti-queer violence, and rejection by family and friends. As one community activist, Francis Tetteh explains:

That is the challenge I have with our governments in Africa and with the Ghanaian government. A gay person can be arrested and charged with the sodomy law. And then you go for those Global Fund monies which are specifically for gay men to run a program on HIV. So the question I ask myself is, 'How effective are those programs?'

For activists like Francis, it is hard to reconcile the contradictions that arise from public health approaches to LGBTI rights in a context of continued criminalisation, where queer individuals experience multiple forms of oppression and inequality. Rather than focusing exclusively or even primarily on HIV, the everyday political practices of Francis and his peers centre around a different set of concerns: offering material support to other queer individuals—in the form of money, basic essentials, or shelter—providing community mediation to reduce the incidence of homophobic violence, and, on occasion, pursuing criminal justice cases against perpetrators of violence and abuse. In the final section of this case study, I explore the political economy of anti-queer violence in more detail.

### **Dimension 5: heteronormativity and everyday violence in Ghana**

Anti-queer violence, widely documented across parts of Southern and East Africa (Reid and Dirsuweit 2002, Msibi 2016), is an endemic feature of working class queer life in Ghana. While reliable statistics

on the scale of homophobically-motivated violence are not available, a number of incidents have received attention within the mainstream media. This includes a gang attack on a suspected gay marriage ceremony in Accra in 2012 (Okertchiri 2012), gatherings of 'anti-gay mobs' in Tamale in March 2013 (Daily Guide 2013), a brutal assault on a young man in the Nima area of Accra in 2015 (Daily Guide 2015), and an attempted lynching of two women accused of lesbianism in Kumasi in 2018 (Nettey 2018).

Media accounts of anti-queer violence were borne out in the testimonies of my research participants, who recounted wide-ranging experiences of sexual and physical violence, from partners, family members, neighbours, and employers. A number of participants reported being sexually harassed by employers who suspected they were gay and one participant had been physically beaten and chased out of his workplace after his employer heard rumours about his sexual orientation. Another young activist, Ziggy Laryea, was asleep in bed when his mother's boyfriend entered his room and violently beat him, breaking his leg. Ziggy believes he was targeted for his feminine mannerisms and preference for wearing women's clothes and make-up. Ziggy was eventually thrown out of the family home and, after a period of homelessness, moved into a shared compound house in another part of Accra.

Feminist political economists have documented how unequal gender norms and power relations in the global economy are disciplined and enforced, through both legal and extra-legal forms of violence against women (Davis 1981, Mies 1986, Federici 2004, True 2012, Elias and Rai 2019). This violence is traced through different stages of capitalist development: from the era of primitive accumulation, in which women were subjected to witch-hunts (Federici 2004), through colonial and neocolonial practices of slavery and exploitation (Davis 1981, Mies 1986, Federici 2004), to contemporary forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence and war crimes (True 2012). Taking place across the productive and reproductive spheres, violence against women is understood to reinforce and reproduce wider relations of social and economic inequality, as part of what Elias and Rai (2019:219) call the 'gendered disciplinary practices' of the everyday.

Expanding this political economy account of violence to encompass homophobic and anti-queer violence further illuminates how unequal sex/gender norms are constituted across the legal-judicial, political-economic, and socio-cultural realms (and, in so doing, the constitutive rather than consequential character of sexual injustices). In the Ghanaian context, the criminalisation of homosexuality works in combination with queer men's exclusion from the formal economy—especially pronounced for feminine-presenting queer men—and the manifold forms of violence they encounter, at home and at work, to create a powerful nexus of oppression and marginalisation. At the everyday level, beatings, loss of jobs and employment opportunities, and episodes of homelessness further sanction those who threaten gender norms, the heterosexual family, and the gender division of labour, and/or are seen as otherwise 'unproductive'. Living at the intersections of class and sexuality, it is not surprising that activists like Francis identify the right to live without violence and the right to an adequate standard of living as key priorities for queer organising.

## Conclusion

This paper has developed a political economy approach to queer struggle based on five key dimensions. These dimensions encompass heteronormativity, the state, and modes of global governance, everyday queer politics and resistance, and the materiality of queer oppression, using sexuality as a key analytic (as opposed to a variable). The framework also includes and is premised upon an overarching assumption regarding the (re)productive character and functioning of sexual injustices with the global capitalist economy. To formulate these dimensions, I drew on recent work that seeks to integrate queer theory into political economy—what I termed the 'queering IPE' approach—as well as a more interdisciplinary set of literatures that specifically address queer sexuality and capitalism, namely the globalisation and state-centric approaches. I further linked these insights to longstanding feminist political economy scholarship on the interrelationship between race, gender, and class

and on violence against women and processes of capitalist development. This framework was applied in an heuristic fashion to the analysis of queer politics in Ghana, in order to illuminate the regulatory regimes and neoliberal normativities that govern queer sexuality at a state and transnational level—and how this relates to the histories and afterlives of colonialism—the impacts of social development processes and global health initiatives on the terrain of queer politics, as well as the everyday struggles and forms of resistance that make up queer lives.

I propose this theoretical framework not to suggest that future studies must be all things to all people, as it were; of course, particular dimensions within the framework may take on greater degrees of prominence depending on the particular research question, methodology, or setting. Rather, the framework is intended as a means to more concretely theorise and systematically orientate political economy research into queer sexuality and struggle (and to spotlight various possibilities for further inquiry). Looking ahead, this analysis suggests that future studies should prioritise the (transformative) impacts of development and other macro-economic shifts on queer politics and resistance in different geographical settings, especially those outside Europe and North America, including shifts in the organisation of global production—in supply chains, labour markets, and dominant modalities of work and labour—and how this impacts on queer lived experience. There is a particular gap in the literature regarding how sexual orientation and gender identity mediate workers' experience of exploitation across global relations of production and reproduction (and in their interstices). The political economy of anti-queer politics in countries such as Poland and the US, to name just two, and their entanglement in contemporary authoritarian-populist projects is similarly under-researched. With global contestations and conflicts around LGBTI rights proliferating rather than contracting, this type of substantively and empirically queer research agenda could be extensive in scope and scale.

While it is a central contention of this paper that the study of queer sexuality and struggle should no longer remain on the margins of political economy, the Ghanaian case also speaks to the centrality of sexuality (and sexual oppression) within a broader range of political economic phenomena and the extent to which these are, put simply, sexualised: processes of social development, including global health funding, policy, and practice; the politics of postcolonial state-building and constructs of citizenship; and the NGO-isation of activism, within and beyond the field of LGBTI rights. As with the above examples, this is not simply about prioritising marginalised or 'fringe' topics and sub-populations; these sexualised dynamics are important because they reveal something systematic about the system as whole. In this sense, the queer research agenda I outline here is just the tip of the iceberg, since it necessarily entails recognising the constitutive role of sexuality within the global capitalist economy (and addressing how this is entangled in but not necessarily analogous to gendered and racialised dynamics within states and markets). In other words, it proceeds from the assumption that capitalism relies on historically and spatially differentiated forms of sexual oppression, alongside those of race and gender, which are co-constitutive of, rather than epiphenomenal to, class relations and patterns of economic exploitation. If taken seriously, this could have far-reaching implications for existing practices of theory- and evidence-building in political economy, as well as the ontological assumptions that guide this research.

## Notes

1. Where this refers to mainstream social movements or constructs of rights and/or identity, I use Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex (LGBTI). Elsewhere, I use queer to encompass a broader range of non-normative gender identities, expression, and forms of sexuality, which may not be fixed or stable.
2. Berlant and Warner (1998, 548) define heteronormativity as 'the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organised as a sexuality—but also privileged'. In this sense, heteronormativity may rely on the institutions, laws, and practices of the state, the education system, and the Church, as well as an array of everyday social practices.
3. The difference between empirical and analytic sexuality, i.e. sexuality as a variable vs. sexuality as an analytic, speaks to a broader set of tensions between positivist and interpretivist approaches in the social sciences.

These tensions have even shaped feminist debates on intersectionality, referred to memorably as ‘the intersectionality wars’ (Nash, 2018).

4. Lind (2009; 2012) and Kate Bedford’s work (2005; 2009) are an exception here, in the sense that they draw on (feminist) political economy approaches to study matters of global sexuality. However, these contributions are primarily in dialogue with development studies, that is, they are part of an attempt to ‘queer development’ (Lind and Share, 2003) rather than the field of IPE, per se.
5. More broadly, Picq and Cottet (2019) link this paucity of research to the continued predominance of ‘Anglo-centric’ ways of knowing and being within the academy, which shapes both the practice of queer studies and understandings of queerness (Picq & Cottet, 2019).
6. No doubt, there are also complex ethical and political challenges facing feminist scholars in/from the Global North seeking to conduct ‘transnational’ queer research, particularly in light of postcolonial feminist critiques of unequal power relations, positionality, and representation (see Mohanty, 1994; Parashar, 2016; Hundle et al, 2019).
7. As this suggests, the Constitution of Ghana does not provide any protections on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. It does, however, enshrine protection from discrimination on the grounds of ‘gender, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status.’ (Article 17, Constitution of Ghana, 1992)
8. Specifically, this is understood as a move from a ‘general population paradigm’ (that assumes a low level *generalised* heterosexual epidemic) to a ‘key populations paradigm’ (that recognizes the existence of a *concentrated* epidemic among certain socio-demographic groups or key populations, namely female sex workers and men who have sex with men) (Gyamerah 2017:75).

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