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Old Wine in New (Champagne) Bottles?

In the past 10 to 15 years and stretching beyond the confines of national and state boundaries, it is clear that there has been a huge discursive explosion regarding same-sex relationship recognition. Political, religious, professional and media commentators have fuelled the debates with their timely, vibrant and often polemical outpourings both supporting and attacking the rights of same-sex couples to have access to official partnership registrations and/or marriages. Legal experts have produced guidance on the details of new legislation, outlining the current state of play in countries such as the UK (e.g. Gray and Brazil, 2005) whilst businesses offering bespoke 'gay weddings' have sprung up in response to same-sex couples having the choice to 'marry' and celebrate their 'big day' in style.

In cases where the state has moved to formally regulate same-sex relationships, this has often been in no small part due to the high profile campaigns for equal treatment waged by lesbians, gays and their allies. The emerging history of these campaigns is yet to be fully acknowledged and documented, but they have been pivotal, as Nancy Nicol and Miriam Smith's contribution to this issue makes clear. Not surprisingly, many of those in LGBT communities in Europe, North America and elsewhere have seen these developments as positive and progressive. As an index of this and whilst some may argue that there has not been a great rush up the aisle to date, there were over 18,000 civil partnership registrations in the first year between December 2005 when the Civil Partnership Act (2004) came into effect, and the end of December 2006. These developments have led to wide-ranging discussions over whether this represents a huge sea change, or whether a more cautious note should be struck.

Academic research in this field has been critically engaged with these issues for some time. The initial wave of scholarship from the early 1990s

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through to the early 2000s tended to generate and take as its focus debates framed around two key overlapping themes. Put simply, these key themes centred on the ways and extent to which official recognition of same-sex relationships could be regarded as a positive gain or not, and by extension, whether it represents a radical as opposed to a conservative move. As well as taking up particular themes, these debates also mapped the unfolding terrain, charting the local, national and international contexts in which same-sex partnership regulation was taking its specific forms during this time. Contributors to these debates largely constituted the terrain as ad hoc, polarized and contested, with many people positioning themselves, or being positioned, as pro- or anti-gay marriage. Before proceeding then, it is important to note that the debates identified here are not only of academic and political interest, but also have personal ramifications.

So what form did these two key themes take? First, and predating the introduction of legislation in many countries, there were vigorous debates about the (un)likelihood and (un)desirability of same-sex relationships becoming sanctioned in law. The strategies for achieving or challenging this were aired in the light of developments in local, national and international contexts during this period, thereby producing a sense of struggles fought, victories gained and battles lost (Cabaj and Purcell, 1998; Eskridge, 1999). Related to this, the tracing of changes in the law, especially at an international level, was subject to critical analysis (Bell, 2004; Wintemute and Andenæs, 2001). Since for many in LGBT communities in different states, current and future plans hung on whether or not same-sex relationships were granted legal recognition, this was an agonizing and difficult time.

Second, there were heated debates about the extent to which same-sex relationship recognition, in whatever guise it came, was radical, transgressive and destabilizing of heteronormativity. This stand was contrasted with the extent to which relationship recognition was held to normalize and assimilate 'dangerous queers' into the mainstream. Some of the writings on this theme are now classic contributions to this particular debate (Baird and Rosenbaum, 1997; Eskridge, 1996), and the ongoing arguments over transgression versus assimilation continue to be fraught, complex and contentious (Norris, 2000). From the early days then, academic scholarship that took as its focus same-sex relationship recognition, reflected and gave rise to lively, painful and robust debates. It should also be noted that for those of us who recall even earlier political and academic debates from the 1970s and 1980s, centred around a radical sexual politics and including much feminist input, the speed of the developments that took place in this discursive landscape during the 1990s are striking, though the tone and tenor of some of those initial debates

on same-sex partnerships, and especially on marriage, tended to sound disconcertingly familiar.

In the last few years however, the tide has begun to turn and academic research in this field now appears to be less concerned with what could be seen as some of the oppositional and even defensive debates just identified, and is instead more open to constructive dialoguing across the political spectrum. One aspect of this turn is a tendency in some of the recent literature to approach same-sex relationship recognition as a macro, even global, issue. This scholarship comprises theoretical analyses of the regulatory frameworks operating in and across different contexts, and the multiple drivers underpinning them (Lind, 2004; Stychin, 2003). To an extent, such work is in contrast to but also at times incorporated with more empirically grounded 'in situ' research, which approaches same-sex relationship recognition as a micro issue. This scholarship comprises critical analyses drawing upon narrative accounts that contextualize the various meanings that recognition, commitment and ritual has for those whose lives are touched by existing and emergent laws (Lewin, 1998, 2001; Shipman and Smart, 2007; Weeks et al., 2001). Academic contributions are now marked by a growing confidence, and the steady trickle of bold and assertive writing on same-sex relationships (Stacey, 2002) has now turned into a flood, particularly at the interface between different disciplines. One turning point was the publication in 2004 of a special issue of *Feminism & Psychology* which brought together the different approaches of established feminist academics, interweaving their lived experience with theoretical and political analyses (Clarke and Finlay, 2004). The guest editors for this special issue of *Sexualities*, Elizabeth Peel and Rosie Harding, were also featured in that 2004 volume, marking the beginning of a lively and interdisciplinary dialogue which looks set to continue for several years yet (Peel and Harding, 2004).

In recent academic debates then, there has been a shift towards the production of more highly nuanced academic scholarship on same-sex relationship recognition, of which this special issue of *Sexualities* is indicative. Central to this later wave has been research which drills down into the often contradictory workings of both the legal frameworks and their impact upon lived experiences. In addition, research has more recently incorporated the complex constellations of class, race, welfare, income, wealth and poverty, family and citizenship – to mention but a few of the interstices of belonging and othering that merit attention – in current analyses of same-sex partnership recognition/regulation. As witness to this move, see the contributions in this issue by Cristina Johnston and Priya Kandaswamy. The debates have now moved beyond the two key themes indicative of writings in the 1990s. My own ongoing research in this area, which seeks to critically interrogate the impact of legislative

change upon service providers in registration authorities, local campaigning organizations, local businesses and the LGBT community in Wales, is indebted to this growing legacy of high quality scholarship. No longer are same-sex sexualities seen as a 'hidden' phenomenon or simply the preserve of a 'minority', there is now growing recognition of the rich and diverse terrain that constitutes same-sex relationships, whether they are conjugal, sexual, companionate, civil partnership, marital unions or a hybrid of any or none of these.

Critical illumination of the views and experiences of the LGBT community also remains central to current research endeavours, as highlighted by the contributions from Rosie Harding and Carol Smart, exploring the various meanings attached to same-sex couple relationships in the wake of the passing of the Civil Partnership Act (2004) in the UK. It has also become apparent as the first decade of the present century nears to a close, that same-sex relationships have long, substantial and complex histories, as Elsje Bonthuys' article illustrates. Crucially, the debates are no longer focused upon the revisiting of old themes, and this has allowed for a welcome expansion into a wealth of sparkling and stimulating scholarship. In terms of where academic research now appears to be heading then, the terrain is less characterized by old wine in new bottles, and is more like the breaking open of some of the best champagne around.

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