Review

Virtual Activism: Sexuality, the Internet, and a Social Movement in Singapore

Robert Phillips (2020)
University of Toronto Press, 180 pp.

Reviewed by Christian Go

Robert Phillips’ (2020) Virtual Activism is a volume that takes an anthropological approach to LGBT activism in Singapore from 1993 to 2019. Phillips offers snapshots of both small-scale and landmark moments in the history of Singapore’s LGBT movement that led to the mainstreaming of nonnormative sexuality in public discourse. At the heart of this movement lies the emergence of the internet, and Phillips investigates how the formation of online communities helped LGBT individuals organise and create spaces within the city-state. He details the ways in which LGBT activists negotiated their position as sexual minorities vis-à-vis an authoritarian state and Singaporean society’s conservatism, and thereby contributes to existing literature on language, sexuality and social activism.

The book traces the development of Singaporean LGBT activism offline and online amidst notions of neoliberalism and pragmatism that circulate in the country. Chapter 1 contextualises LGBT activism in Singapore through its engagement of illiberal pragmatics (i.e. the state’s ambivalent and contradictory treatment of LGBT people), neoliberal homonormativity (i.e. the alignment of LGBT people with Singaporean discourses of power through family values) and tongzhi discourse (i.e. sexual politics based on social harmony rather than a hetero/homo binarism). These concepts

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facilitate ‘virtual’ activism, which refers to the digital aspect of LGBT activism and the liminal state of recognition for LGBT Singaporeans. Chapter 2 focuses on mainstream and ingroup representations of LGBT individuals in state-regulated Singaporean media. Phillips investigates the negative depictions of LGBT people in mainstream publications as well as self-representations in local newsletters and magazines subject to state censorship. Chapter 3 presents case studies of three websites (SiGNeL, Fridae and RedQuEEEn) to explore how the emergence of the internet allowed LGBT Singaporeans to position and reimagine themselves as part of Singaporean society. Chapter 4 follows the impact of online activities in opening discussions in the offline public sphere. Phillips cites a blog post of an elementary school teacher, Otto Fong, and the subsequent conversations and debates about citizenship and belonging that the post generated. Chapter 5 analyses key instances of Singapore LGBT activism. The chapter explores tensions surrounding a Western-style gay rights movement in the mid-2000s that met resistance from authorities, religious groups and LGBT Singaporeans by examining parliamentary debates concerning Section 377a of the Singapore Penal Code, which criminalised sex between two male persons. Finally, Chapter 6 examines activism informed by illiberal pragmatism, particularly the PinkDot movement. Phillips notes the movement exemplifies the shift from a rights-based discourse to a selective appropriation of discourses that mobilise homonormativity as a strategic enactment of resistance.

*Virtual Activism* provides detailed illustrations and discussions of the peculiarities of the LGBT movement in Singapore. As Phillips shows, the relative freedom afforded by digital infrastructures has aided LGBT Singaporeans in connecting to each other, forming networks and making sense of their positionality as sexual minorities. Such attempts to build communities online were in part prompted by their erasure from state media and the nation's narrative. Phillips contributes to earlier works on movements and LGBT culture that emphasise the role of the internet as alternative media by exploring the mutually constitutive role of offline and online spaces in shaping and limiting advancements in LGBT activism. Sexuality and social movement scholars may find the book's discussion of illiberal pragmatics and its interface with homonormativity in Singapore helpful in understanding activism in conservative or authoritarian settings. The operationalisation of illiberal pragmatics in the book adds nuance to how forms of resistance which may appear ineffective from a Western queer theoretical perspective can be viewed instead as incremental contributions that may lead to larger social change. As a case study of an LGBT movement in Southeast Asia, the book contributes to understanding agency and resistance in ways that draw from local knowledge rather
than predetermined Western epistemologies. While many contemporary social movements organised around sexuality in the West have adopted dominant frameworks (e.g. human rights) to articulate demands for social, cultural and legal recognition, Phillips shows that this strategy becomes troubled in illiberal contexts. In foregrounding Singapore’s case of experimentation and ingenuity to speak to local sensibilities, the book underscores alternative logics for LGBT activism, such as those manifested in PinkDot. Phillips situates his analysis across longer stretches of time that depict how Singapore’s current LGBT movement is crafted to address the shortcomings of previous efforts by LGBT groups. For instance, negative public opinion towards Western Pride movements (e.g. IndigNation) among Singaporeans informs the tactics of PinkDot that emphasise community and family values. Such insights are invaluable as they not only return the focus to local actors’ capacity to create alternative forms of mobilisation, but also bring attention to the generative possibilities of local epistemologies and knowledge.

However, there are some questions that *Virtual Activism* does not cover, which may have implications for future studies concerning sexuality and activism. In Chapter 6, Phillips provides glimpses of divisions within Singapore’s LGBT movement, such as how organisers of IndigNation alienated some of its participants after taking a confrontational stance, or how PinkDot’s use of Mandarin aligned with the Singaporean conservative majority known as ‘heartlanders’. The actions of networked actors are for the most part viewed from the coalitional label of LGBT. Further, Phillips notes tensions between privileged organisers and less privileged participants, but does not pursue this line of inquiry further. An analysis of this conflict would have helped explain how these provisional collectives are sustained amidst inequalities. Another aspect that the book could have further explored is the role of religion and its challenges against the LGBT movement, which is only briefly mentioned in Chapter 6. Christian and Muslim groups represent culturally significant countermovements that alter the sociopolitical environment for Singapore’s LGBT activists. A discussion of the role of religion could expand the ways in which LGBT activists concretise illiberal pragmatics to address conflicts that do not directly involve the state. These minor critiques nevertheless do not diminish the concrete contributions of Phillips’ volume to the study of LGBT activism.