Anthropologica

Anthropologica

Phillips, Robert. *Virtual Activism: Sexuality, the Internet, and a Social Movement in Singapore,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020, 168 pages

Pavan Mano

Volume 63, Number 1, 2021

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078624ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021342

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)
2292-3586 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Mano, P. (2021). Review of [Phillips, Robert. *Virtual Activism: Sexuality, the Internet, and a Social Movement in Singapore,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020, 168 pages]. *Anthropologica*, *63*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021342

Book Review

Phillips, Robert. *Virtual Activism: Sexuality, the Internet, and a Social Movement in Singapore,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020, 168 pages.

Pavan Mano
King's College London

Virtual Activism is the result of Robert Phillips' fieldwork in Singapore between 2004 and 2007. It aims to understand how LGBT activists in Singapore "took advantage of new and emerging technologies to empower, and create better lives for, themselves" (6). He is interested in demonstrating how activists mobilized the Internet—and the attendant new possibilities of organizing and activism that it opened up—to make gains in a country that criminalizes homosexuality and is decidedly heteronormative. Through a sensitive and wide-ranging ethnographic analysis that spans interactions on online LGBT discussion forums and chatrooms, blogs, commentaries, newspapers, as well as face-to-face interviews, Phillips assembles an account of how the LGBT movement in Singapore has developed over 15 years from 1993 to 2008. Of particular value is how he situates his findings within Singapore's political context and expressly takes care to interpret them through this particular context.

Phillips begins by setting out his theoretical perspective, which brings together the two broad concepts of illiberal pragmatism and homonormativity. Illiberal pragmatism is a term coined by the cultural theorist Audrey Yue to describe the particular style of government in Singapore "where interventions and implementations are potentially always neo-liberal and non-liberal, rational and irrational" and thus always carry a certain ambivalence about them (Yue, 2007, 150–151). Consequently, LGBT activism in Singapore is based less "on the Western post-Stonewall emancipation discourse of rights, but through the illiberal pragmatics of survival" (ibid., 151). Phillips largely agrees with this and combines it productively with Lisa Duggan's concept of neoliberal homonormativity (2003). It is defined as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them,

while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan, 2003, 50). However, Phillips points out that the "unevenness of 1990s neoliberalism and the resulting lack of ideological homogeneity produced neither ideal citizens nor a monolithic neoliberal subject" (10). Thus, whilst from the outset, Phillips acknowledges that the discourses that emerge from his research are "neoliberal, homonormative and assimilationist LGBT discourses produced through transnational capitalism and global capital flows that have arrived in Singapore via the Internet" (20) he adds that that this "logic of strategic engagement [is] the only logic possible when operating under illiberal pragmatism" (21).

The analysis begins by examining dominant representations of LGBT Singaporeans in mainstream media from 1993 to 2008. State-controlled media in particular is identified as a strategy that the state uses "to sway public opinion on contentious issues including homosexuality ... through the promotion of heterosexuality and the demonization of homosexuality" where homosexuality was framed as disruptive to the larger project of nation-building that centred on values of social harmony and the importance of the heterosexual nuclear family (24). Phillips also highlights how, on occasion, inconsistencies in the portrayal of the LGBT community emerge. For example, despite the fact that "sex between consenting adult men is illegal, and the legal code proscribes the "promotion" of homosexuality, a state-run newspaper [*The Straits Times*] nonetheless named a book detailing the lives of LGBT individuals as the number one non-fiction book of 2006" (39). Phillips reconciles this by returning to the logics of illiberal pragmatism and suggesting that it was because the book in question "positively reinforce[d] the nation-building mandate of the Singaporean government" by gesturing towards the importance of social harmony and the community (40).

Phillips then provides a detailed account of how the Internet provided LGBT Singaporeans with a way "to reimagine themselves as part of the national narrative" (42). He argues that where LGBT Singaporeans are concerned, their positive portrayal "has been left out or intentionally removed from the narrative assembled by the nation's founders" (43). The Internet, according to Phillips, provided a way for them to (partially) mitigate that as well as organize more effectively as a community. It served as a conduit for information, creating a "virtual public sphere" that "empowered many LGBT Singaporeans to shift interactions from the private (or semi-private) areas of cyberspace and into the larger physical and public sphere" (49–50). One such example Phillips gives is

the organization of *In the Pink*. This was a picnic at the Singapore Botanical Gardens for the LGBT community and allies to simply hang out together; but its organization was largely made possible only because it could be conceptualized and disseminated through online sites. Phillips does not simply conceive of the Internet as a distinct, discrete, space separate from the physical world and face-to-face interactions; instead, he reads the Internet and the virtual as a staging ground for the physical world. Focussing on three major local LGBT sites, *SiGNeL*, *Fridae*, and *RedQuEEn*, he shows how these spaces functioned as virtual sites of resistance. He does not romanticize them and is clear that that they are "not a substitute for the physical world" but he shows how they "served as complementary sites that allowed members to first interact in cyberspace and then to take those relationships further into the physical world" (65).

All of this is brought together in the final chapter where he shows how the Internet, neoliberal homonormativity, and illiberal pragmatics work together in producing Singapore's largest and most well-known event in support of the LGBT community to date: Pink Dot. He explains how organizers consciously wanted to avoid a "Western-style LGBT pride celebration complete with the formulaic elements" and preferred something that was "situated in the local" (116). Thus, instead of framing it as a protest, organizers "framed it as one that promoted the freedom of all Singaporeans, including LGBT Singaporeans, to choose whom to love" drawing on stories of LGBT individuals integrating harmoniously into their family units (116). Much of these stories and the publicity surrounding the event were carried out online through videos published on their YouTube channel as well as other social media. The emphasis on acceptance and assimilation for Phillips is indicative of "a very specific form of soft, complicit activism that demonstrates the illiberal pragmatics of governance and the ongoing effects of neoliberalism paired with homonormativity" (123). But, again, he is quick to caution a rush to imposing a value judgment by asking readers to consider what the "frame of reference" is before urging them to understand the Singaporean LGBT movement on its own terms produced within its own context (128-129). *Virtual Activism* is a rich and detailed study that captures the intricacies of the genealogy of the LGBT movement in the country by situating it in its specific socio-political context. It shows the change that the movement has achieved is a function of the possibilities that were available at a particular point in time. At a time when the narratives presented in mainstream media were tightly controlled, the Internet opened a new set of communicative potentials for activists to coalesce and organize. Phillips shows how they exploited these

potentials and possibilities to build on the work they had already done to gain some ground for themselves; importantly, he contextualizes this without flattening the complexities and tensions that frame the choices that activists have had to make.

Virtual Activism is an engaging and accessible book that is suitable for a wide audience. It will interest scholars working in media and communication studies, queer activism, social movements as well as anthropologists interested in Singapore more generally.

References

Duggan, Lisa. 2003. *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Yue, Audrey. 2007. "Creative Queer Singapore: The Illiberal Pragmatics of Cultural Production." *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review* 3(3): 149–160. https://doi.org/10.1068/a44282