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Homophobia, Human Rights and Diplomacy

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2017 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Contesting Disability and LGBTQI Rights

Presenter: Douglas Janoff, Carleton University

Title: Homophobia, Human Rights and Diplomacy

Abstract:

Multilateral human rights diplomacy is a product of the triad relationship between intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and states. This paper examines the emergence of LGBT rights within the context of the UN human rights system. Recently, the global debates around LGBT rights have become much more public and increasingly complex: Ministers, leaders, and even the UN Secretary-General routinely call on states to do more to protect sexual minorities. Countries such as Uganda and Russia are labeled “homophobic” — not just by human rights activists, but by other states. These “accusations” are delivered both bilaterally and in multilateral forums, such as the UN Human Rights Council.

This paper considers the techniques used by diplomats to both strengthen and weaken LGBT rights. In my role as a Canadian foreign service officer, I gained access to diplomatic networks in Geneva and New York. My doctoral research was gleaned from participant observation and interviews with diplomats, CSO representatives, human rights experts, and the staff of IGOs. My interview subjects take the reader inside the world of meeting halls, committee rooms, diplomatic receptions, and social activities where LGBT rights are the subject of intense struggle. Broad themes emerged from my research: the strengths and weaknesses of the UN human rights system; the extreme polarization of member states with regard to human rights; and global shifts in regional power and cultural dynamics. Interview subjects described how they managed to assert LGBT rights despite the best efforts of unfriendly states to shut down debate and muzzle the engagement of CSO actors. Subjects enumerate best practices, reflect on the obstacles preventing their progress, and argue that high-level global human rights processes are, to some extent, having an impact on the lives of LGBT persons at the grassroots level.

About the presenter:

Douglas Janoff is a Canadian Foreign Service officer, based in Ottawa. He is a senior policy advisor in human rights and indigenous policy at Global Affairs Canada. He was a human rights negotiator in Washington, D.C., at the Permanent Mission of Canada to the Organization of American States. He is also a doctoral candidate at the School of Canadian Studies at Carleton University. In his dissertation, he argues that the UN human rights system has become a laboratory for the production and global diffusion of LGBT human rights discourse. He is an expert on queer social movements in Canada and the author of *Pink Blood: Homophobic Violence in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2005).