

## LIBERACIÓN GAY AND ADOPTION POLITICS

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### Abstract

For about a decade beginning in 1987, stories circulated of children in Latin America being kidnapped and murdered for their organs. Children, it was said, were being picked up from Mexico City (or small towns in the Peruvian highlands, or shantytowns in Brazil) in VW beetles (or mini-vans), by U.S. Americans (or Japanese tourists, or criminal gangs) who then would take them to Ciudad Juarez (or Tijuana or California), where their kidneys, heart, lungs, corneas would be removed. Or, alternately, impoverished parents would give up their children for international adoption, dreaming of a better life for them in the United States or Europe, but unscrupulous brokers would sell the children for their organs.

These narratives provoked a variety of reactions. In 1988, the European Parliament passed a resolution denouncing the traffic in children for adoption and organs. Mothers in shantytowns and border communities locked up their children. The U.S. State Department first called it a communist plot to discredit the United States then an urban legend, the work of illiterate people. In 1994, a U.S. newspaper reporter called it "magic realism on acid." <sup>1</sup> Still, the rumor refused to die, perhaps because it was credible to some people, if not the US state department. At a minimum, the story indexes the violence of the ever-increasing flow of children from south to north, as those with money adopt from those without the means to care for their children, a "free trade" in children in which global elites, as usual, benefit at the expense of the global poor. Yet it may also be more than a metaphor. Children are trafficked into prostitution and pornography; street children are seen as a nuisance and a danger, and are sometimes murdered by police or the military. If trafficking and murder of children are well-documented, what makes us believe that the organ traffic stories impossible?

Also in 1987, in Boston, Massachusetts, two openly gay men became foster parents of a pair of brothers (becoming essentially subcontractors for the state, which paid them to care for children whose birth parents had been accused of neglect or abuse). When the Boston Globe ran a front-page story on them, the state's governor, Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, immediately sent social workers to pick the children up at school, not even allowing them to return home to collect their belongings, as if any further contact with their gay foster parents somehow imperiled them. A few months later, a judge in Boston refused to allow a "single woman" and her "roommate" to adopt a Peruvian child who had lived with them for nine months, under suspicion that there was "homosexuality in the home." The little girl was returned to an orphanage in Peru, and adoption agencies shut down any possible routes for gay adoption.

These events set off a political movement among gay and lesbian people for the right to adopt that was ultimately international in scope, stretching from the United States to Spain to Canada to Mexico. It has been joined by political momentum to reduce barriers to legal adoption for other, supposedly undesirable adoptive parents—single people (usually women), working-class people, heterosexual couples where the woman works, non-white people, couples of mixed, or no, religious background. These movements have had some success; in Spain and Canada, there are no legal obstacles to gay and lesbian people adopting. In Mexico and the United States, it varies, state-by-state and judge-by-judge, whether gay and lesbian people will be able to adopt. Barriers for others are falling, and most people who want to adopt these days can adopt, which is a considerable change

from 30 years ago, but one must also be willing to pay considerable sums of money for this "right".

These are both compelling stories to feminists, but suggested opposed political trajectories. In the first, mothers in the popular classes in Latin America are saying that they are afraid that their children are being exploited, hurt, and killed. This narrative calls for action to make the transfer, movement, and adoption of children more difficult, more scrutinized, more regulated by the state and/or international migration authorities. Yet the political movement to liberalize adoption laws and regulations also has strong human rights resonances; feminists have been saying for decades that states need to halt their vicious policing of mothers (think of the Elvira Luz Cruz case), demanding that the state stop treating every mother who is poor or unmarried as if she were guilty of child abuse or worse. The lesbian and gay rights movements have equally been demanding that lesbian, gay, and transgender parents have access to their biological children and to the full spectrum of adoption, infertility "treatment" and other reproductive options.

In this article, I explore the logics and histories that make these divergent narratives make sense together. My argument is this. Although they appear opposed, these two stories are interconnected, two faces of neo-liberalism and globalization. I want to suggest that neoliberalism and globalization are producing two kinds of postmodernities, rationalities, and economies. In one, growing wealth brings with it a more expansive set of "rights" and privileges, including to family and children; this is the world in which belief in rumors of traffic in children's organs sounds like "magic realism on acid," and transnational adoption may or may not bear some relationship to tourists' shopping trips. In the other, children grow more vulnerable as access to work and wages for their parents grows more unreliable; here, transnational adoption sounds like child kidnapping and exploitation.

1. Edward Orlebar, "Child Kidnaping Rumors Fuel Attacks on Americans; Guatemala: Military May Be Fomenting Fear of Foreigners. Hysteria May Invite Hard-Liner Backlash.," Los Angeles Times 1994.