

Professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies and Reader in Religious Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University, England, Dr. Burkhard is the founder of the Queering Paradigms (QP) project, a series of conferences that travel from continent to continent and a book series published by Peter Lang. Between July 25 and 28, 2012, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro will host the fourth international Queering Paradigms conference, which will receive about 400 participants from all over the world in their



campuses at Praia Vermelha, Rio de Janeiro. The Brazilian Association of Applied Linguistics (ALAB) supports the project since we believe that interdisciplinarity is crucial for us to achieve social changes. Interviewed by ALAB, prof. Scherer talks about QP's objectives, explains his view of what Queer Theory can do in society and describes his expectations for the first QP conference in Latin America.

ALAB: When was the Queering Paradigms series created? What motivated its creation? What are the main objectives of this conference and book series?

Burkhard Scherer: *Queering Paradigms* (QP) is the result of an act of academic activism and defiance. In 2007-2008, my university - Canterbury Christ Church University, an Anglican foundation - attracted national attention by banning the same-sex Civil Partnership ceremonies from being held at its main wedding premises, St. Martin's Priory at the Canterbury Campus. This move was an outrageous breach of the university's own existing equality policies and created much outcry among LGBTIQ identified staff and students. In time, the ban was condemned by the University's then Equal Opportunities Committee and has since been revoked (moreover, ever since, the University has made tremendous progress and became for a much LGBTIQ-friendlier space).

During that time I was a vocal member of the Equal Opportunities Committee, delegate for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. As a queer identified academic and Buddhist, I decided to voice my dismay not only in meetings, but to respond to institutional homophobia by organising a first interdepartmental Queer Studies research colloquium for LGBT history month 2008. In this way I tried to increase queer visibility through academic means. The success of this initial colloquium 'Que(e)r(y)ing Culture' led me to the idea for a large, international Queer Studies conference. With the support of inclusively thinking Senior Managers and the dedicated new Equality and Diversity manager, Moira Mitchell, the first Queering Paradigms conference took place in February 2009; I edited the first *Queering Paradigms* book that same year. Ever since QP has become an annual conference series, a book series and a network of scholars from multiple disciplines committed to the queering impulse.

*Queering Paradigms* can be understood as an Applied Queer Studies project, dedicated to examining the current state and future challenges of queer studies from a broad trans-disciplinary and polythetic perspective, and by interrogating numerous social, political, cultural and academic agendas. 'Paradigms' relates to the diverse, though taken-for-granted, methodological and philosophical frames of scholarship within diverging and converging academic disciplines, and which provide the research and knowledge agendas within these disciplines.

Queering a paradigm means to challenge the heteronormative and gender binarist - as well as homonormative - assumptions of any given academic or social discourse.

The QP conferences themselves are queering academic practice, designed to be genial spaces of genuine academic exchange where emerging, marginalised and established voices are heard and listened to; current and cutting-edge scholarship is debated; and a sense of a supportive community of academic practitioners is generated. Recently one participant gave as the greatest compliment a conference organiser can get "The QP conference has restored my belief in academia". That's what it is about: a challenge to the academic politics of vanities. If we take 'queer' serious, we have to queer our academic habitus as well.

ALAB: In a nutshell, what does Queer Theory do?

BS: I understand 'queer' as a critical perspective, a disposition and an impulse to challenge normativities. Queer is not a label or a category, not just another name for LGBTIQ identified people. Queer Theory disturbs social, intellectual, political, and cultural discourses by challenging the assumptions, which underpin them – assumptions primarily related to gender and sexuality, but also, and more broadly, the normativities regulating any of the multi-faceted and intersecting aspects and expressions of identity and bodily representation. However, for me, queering cannot simply be an activity of deconstruction, without social import. Queer Theory is social justice activism. It should achieve tangible results.

ALAB: What kind of social transformation can Queer Theory provoke?

BS: 'Queer' as a nagging disposition urges us to transform our societies obsessed with essential dualisms and binaries. Hence, Queer Theory aims further than simply calling for the social acceptance of sexual and gender 'variance'. Heterosexual maleness is just one of the default positions challenged by queering. Identity expressions overlap and intersect in multiple ways: being able-bodied, white, middle-classed, Global-Northern etc. are other default positions or normalising impulses in societal discourses. They are disturbed by queering, too. Hence, queering is directed to

any area of social injustice. Queer Theory de-centres privileged normativities and power structures; it de-marginalises identitarian expressions and performances. It celebrates the realization that we are all different.

ALAB: How do you see Queer Theory along the North-South knowledge-making axis? In your opinion, what can the global South add to Queer Theory?

BS: The multiple voices of the Global South add manifold aspects of identitarian intersectionality; 'queering' means something else in Latin-America than in the UK. Queer as a disposition expresses itself in social activism – but this activism needs to have local agency. While the theory is iconoclastic, its expressions sometimes need to be pragmatic. Queer works in concrete contexts, and the 'Global North' needs to take great care not to impose a new 'queer normativity' on the 'South' in neo-colonialist fashion. 'Northerners' will benefit greatly by being confronted with the hidden normativities and binarist hegemonies in their own thinking. But ultimately we should not make the North-South axis into yet another binarism; queer activism hinges upon the will of individuals to listen to each other and to keep questioning both their own identitarian essentialisms and any hegemonic discourse in society.

ALAB: As we know, Queer Theory is a product of the Anglo-Saxon first world, more specifically the USA. In your opinion, what are the advantages and the dangers of importing a theory and model of activism produced in the first world to the global South? Can this importation substantially change the queer agenda, if there is such a thing?

BS: Surely, there cannot be a 'queer agenda'! Queering being a method, a troubling, any agenda would be questioned immediately. But of course there is Human Rights and Social Justice Activism informed by Queer Theory. *Queering Paradigms* was set up with the specific aim to empower 'Southern' perspectives. The vocal claims for agency in the Global South are vital to the queering project lest queering becomes a form of activist posing and/or a form of what could be called 'conscience-masturbation'. It troubles me to see this happening too often in NGO work and development politics. This is why the QP conferences travel from continent to continent so it can be exposed to and impact on ever new contexts and cultural conditions; it is a journey of listening and learning. At the same time, the organisation and the concrete expression of the conference always lies in the responsibility of the local academics and supporters. Every QP conference has a clear local ownership, without any imposed 'global agenda.'

ALAB: What expectations does the event in Brazil hold?

BS: I hope QP4 will become a trailblazing event for Latin-American academia; it will provide an important grass-root impulse for trans-disciplinary academic solidarity and activism with local agency. Rodrigo Borba, Elizabeth Sara Lewis and the whole QP4 team are doing an incredible job! Personally, I am looking forward to listen and to learn a lot! While I have spent much time in Asia, this will be my first time in South America – how exciting! It will be wonderful to meet old and new friends, to share and be inspired; to encounter new paths of approaching queerness; and to break out of the hegemonic Anglo-Saxon context. As first of the QP series, QP4 also queers the linguistic hegemony of English by being so multilingual. I am working to maintain this feature for the QP book series. Most of all, I see QP4 as an academic celebration of diversity and a political statement of anti-hegemonic defiance.

ALAB: How relevant is it to the QP series to hold a conference in Brazil? Which contributions may Queering Paradigms 4, to be held in Rio de Janeiro, bring to the international scenario of queer theory and activism?

BS: The Brazilian and, more general, the Latin-American voices definitely deserve more weight in the queering enterprise; at the same time, the genial ethos of Queering Paradigms may give impulses to regional academic culture. Foremost, I am confident that the conference and the resulting publications will contribute to de-marginalising non-Anglo-Saxon voices in academic discourses; it will open up many new venues for research and activism! On a local and regional level it will hopefully inspire and empower people to translate their queering impulse into sustainable, personal and social change.

Entrevista feita por Rodrigo Borba, Professor pesquisador da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro e um dos organizadores do Queering Paridigms IV.