The momentum for LGBT rights worldwide has run into the most symbolizing obstacles and complications present in the larger global human rights movement. Scott Long’s talk explored exactly this phenomenon. Having worked to document and advocate against human rights abuses based on sexuality and gender for decades, Long’s experience with human rights advocacy compelled him to spend the majority of his lecture at the Yale Law School talking about the unexpected intersections complicit in the formation of today’s LGBT rights landscape. He talked about the economic policies, pushed forward by the World Bank, that contributed to the socioeconomic reality which erupted into the Arab Springs. He explained how pre-political movements, based in labor or class-related struggles, that have empowered identity-based rights advocacy much more powerfully than direct-action struggles concentrated on sexual orientation and gender identity rights. Long also talked about how the issue of homosexuality, or deviance in sexuality, becomes an issue of sovereignty in national discourse, seen in examples all over the world. It seems as if the advocacy for LGBT rights has required a confrontation with all the rights issues one could think of. If the relationship and inter-dependence of rights violations is so prominent, so obstructing even, what are the hopes and goals of a movement that aims to stop identity-based discrimination and persecution?

This question has perplexed me greatly in my attempt to mobilize myself in the language and methods of human rights advocacy, especially related to sexuality and gender politics. I am lucky enough to be studying the nexus of sexual orientation, gender identity, and human rights under Graeme Reid this semester. In this seminar, we have struggled with the concepts of the orientalism of homophobia, the nationalism with which homophobia is perpetuated, and the several reactionary and opposing movements generated recently to specifically undo the work of the human rights framework with regards to sexual orientation and gender identity. The “militarized masculinity” that Long talked about, in asserting how the opposition to LGBT liberation is based in ideas of cultural sovereignty, pointed to the age-old conflict that the Human Rights movement faces: is this system working for the ones it is meant to and if not, what are its failings originating from?

Long holds firmly the belief that the human rights framework is reliant on the politics of moral assuaging. This idea is confirmed by the UN tactics of naming-and-shaming countries out of their policy, a methodology that has seldom worked and only in the times where economic inclusion or advancement could be offered as a reward. Seeing how the Human Rights framework concentrates on legal and policy work, which is itself decided by the language of covenants and international declarations drafted first in English, the contemporary human rights movement seems to use as its biggest tool the faculty of knowledge production. Long believes that this process and methodology does not work; Putin, Egypt and China have been impeccably unresponsive to these avenues because of even their economic bravado over international systems. I contest that this tool is not only ineffective but also dangerous, holding enormous potential to muddy the rights movement forever by Western-oriented impositions on private topics such as identity, reality, and even respect.
The realm of identity is complicated. It determines the world around it but is continuously determined by it too. It is guided by media representation, societal belonging and sociocultural and economic status. At the same time, it holds a necessary utility for self-empowerment and resistance. Long introduces the idea that LGBT rights face this conflict first-hand because it is an issue directly determined by physical/mental space and belonging, and by its availability to the public as much as it is a concern in privacy. It confuses me then as to why the human rights movement is so attached to the idea of undoing the bias against deviant sexuality or gender through the rigid protocols of policy and law. It does not help that countries react to these policies as part of a larger neocolonial agenda, which I must say is not a definition the framework escapes in a lot of its impacts, implications and impositions. These understandings, however, inspire me everyday to research about unorthodox and alternative approaches to realizing the mesmerizing and beautiful ideals of the human rights movement. It is refreshing to see personalities like Long or Phelim Kine talk about how the human rights framework is evolving itself towards local and grassroots mobilization efforts or using fact-finding and awareness as the primary tool for raising global consciousness. I would reason that the future of the human rights movement is only bright if each and every single advocate for these rights is reflective on the system, its background, its creation and its relationship to the people it aims to empower. Only with that much self-criticism and adaptability will we be able to champion the white hat of equal respect and dignity for all.