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LGBT Politics, Queer Theory, and International Relations

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MARKUS THIEL, OCT 31 2014

The politics surrounding what is generally described as ‘sexual orientation and gender identity’ (SOGI) have received an astounding degree of public and international attention in recent years. Countries across the globe have implemented substantial equality provisions in order to prove that they are ‘modern’ or ‘Western’ enough, while others responded with pushback in the form of homophobic legislation and persecution. To complicate matters further, much of the homophobia in those states was institutionally embedded by the same colonizing powers that now lead the way in LGBT rights promotion. Sexual rights have become points of contention, eliciting domestic culture wars and international diplomatic rows. The status of sexuality politics in international relations (IR) has not only been elevated, but also impacted apparently SOGI-unrelated policies (such as foreign policy, health care, or labor markets) and thus created new avenues for looking at the construction of conventional IR concepts. A forthcoming volume on the impact of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) claims [1] on IR (Picq & Thiel 2015) argues that such perspectives are not only an inherent part of world politics, but can also influence IR theory-making. In what follows, I provide a short justification and overview of queer thinking in IR, and connect the politics of LGBT human rights with a theoretical rethinking of IR premises more generally.

Queer Theory as a Challenge to IR

Sexuality politics and the queer scholarship connected to it arrived late on the theoretical scene in part because sexuality and gender initially were anchored in the private, rather than the public, realm. In academia, LGBTQ studies and Queer Theory advanced post-structuralist and postmodern critical viewpoints emerging from the writings of Foucault and Butler, among others, which were hardly accepted in mainstream political science. Hence, those theories evolved largely in literature, philosophy, sociology departments, and queer studies programs without making substantial inroads into IR (theory). However, IR theoretical schools of the critical persuasion, such as feminism, post-colonialism, or critical theory, expressed queer thinking early on and were essential to the incipient queer theoretical progress in IR. The feminist emphasis on positionality and intersectionality as subjective signifiers, post-colonial assumptions about structural marginalization, and critical theories contesting the normativity of political ideologies all are fundamental concepts of queer theory, no matter if in IR or other disciplinary fields. Queer Theory itself emphasizes the fluidity of sexuality – or better, sexualities – and questions established norms, categories, and statuses with a special focus on challenging sexual (hetero/homo), gender (male/female), class (rich/poor), and racial (white/non-white) categories, and international binary orders (liberal-democratic/premodern authoritarian). As a scholarly undertaking, queer theory constitutes of “any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations” (Nash & Browne, 2012: 4). Yet, based on its substantive SOGI focus and its transgressive approach towards conventional academic knowledge, queer IR scholarship is now more strongly emerging in IR (Thiel 2014).

Weber (2014) highlighted a lack of attention to queer theory by decrying the parochialism of standard international theories, arguing that queer scholarly IR work exists but is not recognized as such in the field. And Sjöberg (2012) argued that we can learn from the in-between spaces of (trans)gender, as they point to issues that are overly, or not at all, visible in IR. That invisibility is slowly changing with empirical case-study work on homophobia (Weiss & Bosia 2013) or collective identities (Ayoub & Paternotte 2014), and the increasing relevance of trans/international political

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discourses for LGBTQ rights globally. But if empirical work in this area concentrates mainly on conflictive agency-structure relations, what is 'queer' about LGBTQ perspectives? These volumes, including ours, offer comparative case-studies from regional, cultural, and theoretical peripheries to identify new ways of theorizing and practicing IR. They add to critical theory by broadening the knowledge about previously under-recognized distinct perspectives through questioning IR's obvious and established core concepts. Being aware of Weber's preoccupation with the de-queering, disciplining nature of theory establishment in the social sciences, scholars that utilize LGBT perspectives and Queer Theory critically reconsider IR concepts such as the state, security, and the role of the economy from a particular vantage point and infuse them with queer thinking. They contest prevalent dualistic binaries in mainstream IR, such as state/system, modern liberalism/premodern homophobia, West/Rest, etc. Considering the relative dearth of contemporary mainstream IR-theorizing in its traditional realist or liberal manifestations, scholars ask what contribution LGBT politics as well as queer analysis can provide for theorizing the political subject, as well as the international structure in which human rights are embedded.

LGBT Politics as a Heuristic Tool for Queer Theory

In reference to the practice of LGBT politics, the emergence of numerous Western-organized NGOs, but also locally hybridized LGBT movements with the significant publicity they generate – be it positive or negative – pluralizes transnational politics to a previously unknown degree, and chips away at the centrality of the state in regulating and protecting its citizens. In the same vein, the inclusion of LGBT individuals not as abject minorities, but as human rights carriers with inherent dignity and individual rights of expression, may transform the relationship between a minoritized citizenry and governmental authority. But queer theory, which contests many extant socio-political institutions such as mainstream liberalism, neoliberal capitalism, or regulatory citizenship, does not always align comfortably with the predominant political strategies advanced in transnational LGBT rights advocacy. The latter are viewed as conforming, heteronormative, stereotyping, and even (homo)nationalistic in their particular value-laden Western overtones. While queer tactics subvert assimilationist heteronormative policies, LGBT advocacy is aimed at inclusion within existing forms of representation, rather than the appreciation of difference, and thus often appears 'de-queered' for political purposes:

the anti-assimilationist character of queer activism and its breaking down of pre-existing categories would present a perhaps insurmountable challenge to human rights discourse, which requires stable categories and, given opposition to anything perceived as a claim for 'special rights', an emphasis on the similarities between people regardless of their sexuality and the 'normality' of LGBT people (Sheill 2009, 56).

Tensions between assimilationist-inclusive and transgressive queer approaches in the international policy domain should, however, not be suppressed, as they reflect a pluralist social reality and signify the need to rethink simplistic IR epistemologies and analytical approaches. Political tensions in the 'real world' should prompt the queer IR theorist to question established conceptions of governance. To illustrate, in my own work I use the EU's justification of sexual non-discrimination on neoliberal market policies to highlight the ambiguous positioning of the EU when advocating limited equality provisions in its complex multi-level governance system (Thiel, in Picq & Thiel 2015). I argue that the dominance of neoliberalism as the EU's *raison d'être* limits the rights attainment of LGBT individuals because it restricts alternative critical views contending that rights are accorded only partially in the absence of universal social justice and broader human and social rights. It also problematizes the implicit cooptation of NGO's by the EU when accepting funds and cooperating with a supranational system that is at least partially responsible for the retrenchment of national welfare policies – and this is based on supposed technocratic policies that are shielded from political accountability. Such commodification of rights in itself is problematic, yet cannot be politicized in a system in which socio-economic policy is protected by its supposed non-political regulatory nature reminiscent of Foucault's power-knowledge linkage. The feminist contribution to IR highlights uneven gendered power relations, but a critical IPE that merges concerns with structural injustice with the thoughtful critique of Queer Theory's view on state-economy relations and civil society adds profound insights. And this is not only in the application of critical theory, but also of queer theoretical tenets such as taking seriously the distinct positionality of actors, the inherent normative content of supposed technocratic politics, and the ambiguous outcomes of political action.

Possible Futures for LGBT Perspectives and Queer IR Scholarship

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The recent increase in IR scholarship infused with queer thinking evidences that more rigorous interrogations of the impact of LGBT issues in international politics have begun to be successfully answered. Reflecting on the possible futures of LGBT advocacy and queer research, there are various critical aspects to consider: the progress of such strategic politics is mainly limited to the West, and evokes domestic hetero- and homonormative and international (homo)colonialist contentions. This becomes particularly apparent when powerful transnational NGOs, such as the International Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) or international organizations such as the UN, the World Bank, and the EU, advocate reforms in countries while not realizing that their explicit LGBT support accentuates the politicization of those minorities. LGBT politics and queer IR research can inspire and parallel each other as long as sexual advocacy politics does not fall prey to overly assimilationist or patronizing politics. If predominantly gay and lesbian rights such as marriage and adoption equality are aimed for, while transgender individuals are still lacking healthcare access or protection from hate-crimes, can one speak of true equality? And if the 'normalization' of sexualities into consuming, depoliticized constituencies leads to a weakening of alternative, critical models of socio-political coexistence and appreciation of difference, what effects does this have on LGBT emancipation?

Queer scholarship in IR is not confined to sexualities or sexual rights but functions to question established power relations more generally, as the works focusing on misguided nationalisms and counter-terrorism (Puar 2007), securitized governing regimes (Amar 2013), or antagonistic binaries such as cosmopolitanism/nationalism (Rao 2012) show. Queer theory-inspired research is a collaborative yet, at the same, time dialectical effort. Stemming from various fields that transcend a myopic view of IR, such research combines an inter-disciplinary epistemology to advance new critical perspectives on sexualities and beyond. A single viewpoint in a field as diverse and amorphous would unnecessarily limit the range of scholarly viewpoints. It would also preclude a nuanced debate about the contents and forms of LGBT perspectives, queer scholarship, and queer scholarly politics in IR, the latter having to confront the disciplinary and disciplining pressures found within the IR academy. Yet the burgeoning wealth of new literature undoubtedly aids in the revitalization of the field.

Notes

[1] For a more differentiated discussion of the problematic categorization of individuals according to categories, orientations or identities, see Picq & Thiel, 2015.

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LGBT Politics, Queer Theory, and International Relations

Written by Markus Thiel

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