

Interview – Darcy Leigh

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr Darcy Leigh is a Lecturer in Law at the University of Sussex, with a background in International Relations. Darcy's research addresses the legacies of European settler colonialism and eugenics for today's international politics of race, gender and sexuality. This includes researching the coloniality, antisemitism and transmisogyny of the resurgent right – as well as Indigenous, Jewish, trans and queer social movements' resistance. Prior to arriving at Sussex, Darcy was a Teaching Fellow and/or Research Assistant at the University of Edinburgh, University of Ottawa and University of Alberta. Darcy's PhD thesis won the 2016 British International Studies Association's 2016 prize for 'best thesis'.

At Sussex Law School, Darcy teaches queer and decolonial approaches to international law, human rights, development, critical theory, security, and research methods. Her teaching is informed by her experiences in social movements, where she learnt the value of as well as methods for participatory and creative pedagogy. Darcy was part of the teams that won the 2019 Advance HE award for 'collaborative teaching excellence', and the 2022 Pearson HE award for 'most innovative approach to supporting student'. She has also been an organiser or facilitator with radical decolonial education projects (e.g. Queer Yeshiva, Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, and the Akitsiraq Law School) and co-runs an autonomous insurrectionary transfeminist press.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

For the last ten years I've been researching the coloniality of the resurgent right, with a focus on its settler colonial, antisemitic and transmisogynist dimensions. Perhaps I should say immediately that I don't see the 'resurgent right' as a break from the liberalism we were all talking about ten years ago, but rather as reconfiguration of that colonial liberal international order – sometimes I get frustrated with being put on 'the far right panel' as if it can or should be separated out. Anyway, at the moment I'm working on a monograph emerging from this research exploring what I call 'free speech nationalism', its contestation, and alternative transnational politics of 'freedom' and 'expression'. I'm also in the early stages of a project about Jewish decolonial, trans and mad international politics, which looks at how Jews have been agents, objects and opponents of British settler colonialism. All of which is to say: my work spans multiple fields and I get to read a lot of exciting research!

In IR, I've been reading scholarship on psychiatry and madness (especially Laura Jung's and Alison Howell's work), transness and queerness (including Béatrice Châteaufort-Gagnon's recent article, Cai Wilkinson's work, and Rahul Rao's book *Out of Time*), and race (not least Nadya Ali's book, *the Violence of Britishness*). Work bringing Stuart Hall into IR, such as Alexander Stoffel and Ida Roland Birkvad's article, has been useful for researching a political field that uses obfuscation and misrepresentation as central strategies, as these bring particular challenges for academic understanding and representation. Hall offers a way to take seriously the realm of ideas and 'discourse' without buying into it – e.g. of understanding the significance of a moral panic about free speech or trans people without reproducing the terms of that moral panic. The Stoffel and Birkvad piece also summarizes an exciting range of Marxist, decolonial and transfeminist literature, if you are looking for more. As I'm dreaming up a Jewish diasporist IR, I've also got my eye on other scholars reimagining IR, especially Faiz Sheikh's *Islam and International Relations* and Robbie Shilliam's work on Rastafari movements.

Beyond IR, as much of my work is historical in one way or another, I read a lot of history. I've recently been reading

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(sometimes overlapping) Jewish and trans history, trying to make the links with European colonialisms. David Sorkin's recent book on Jewish 'emancipation' is on the surface a very long list of legal changes relating to Jews across five centuries. Yet it was quite a thrilling read, telling the story of the establishment of the European international order in a new way. I think I will be returning to this book for a long time. Max Keiser's *Jewish Antifascism and the False Promise of Settler Colonialism* and Santiago Slabodsky's *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* similarly explore the entanglement of Jewish diaspora with antisemitism, colonization and statehood, while the magazine Jewish Currents does this for a more popular/political audience. In terms of trans history, C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides* and Jules Gill Peterson's *Histories of the Transgender Child* have helped me understand how colonial, white supremacist and nationalist politics play out on reproductive, women's and children's bodies. I'm always excited to see what Nat Raha is doing, especially as she is Europe-facing (often UK- or Scotland- facing) when so much of this field is dominated by the US (e.g. her chapter in this collection). Finally, bridging these fields, I really must insist everyone reads Joni Aliza Cohen's incredible piece on the historic and ongoing relationship of antisemitism and transmisogyny.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I've noticed a pattern: I'll spend some years focussed on violence and domination, perhaps with the sense that it is my responsibility to write about the violence and domination with which I am entangled. I'll then become worn down by thinking about those things and shift to focussing on resistance and hope, perhaps deciding this is where we need more work. Then, after some time and recovery, I'll return to the focus on domination, and repeat the pattern again.

As I mentioned before, I'm currently at one of these junctures. I've just finished a series of articles about antisemitism, eugenics, settler colonialism and transmisogyny – and, in some cases, their expression in international free speech politics (two of these are out, two are still in the review process). I've had to read a lot of white supremacist and anti-trans books. And so I'm turning back to resistance, starting to look at how 'freedom' and 'expression' are imagined beyond 'free speech' in trans, Indigenous and Jewish social movements, as well as what a Jewish diasporist IR might look like.

Of course, violence and resistance are not separable. They come together as struggle. I don't want to romanticize all efforts at resistance either. I've been influenced by scholars who manage to somehow capture the dynamics of struggle – the ways that international order is always in motion, shifting, and extant/negotiated in the tiny details of daily life. For me Elizabeth Povinelli's work encapsulates these things, and the book *Economies of Abandonment* has shaped my thinking and writing. Jasbir Puar's work is another good example.

I really hope I am capturing some of these dynamics in the book I'm writing right now: even though 'free speech nationalism' has functioned to control people along lines of race, gender and ability, it is not static. It is contested, and shifts, reconfiguring the nation, state and coloniality as it does. Yet I also recognise that 'freedom' and 'expression' are crucial to transnational social movements and cannot be dismissed easily. Sometimes the efforts of such movements are, as they engage international and domestic law, folded back into an international order characterized by domination. At other times, such movements offer clues to such a politics beyond 'free speech'. Similarly, my early-stages project on Jewish international politics, though motivated by being fed up with writing about antisemitism and need to thinking about Jewish agency, nonetheless looks at both Jewish complicity in and Jewish resistance to British colonialism.

Finally, I should say that I am extremely lucky to have been rich in mentors who have had profound impacts not only on my thinking but my life. I will mention only two here. First, Bal Sokhi-Bulley has shown me how to embrace joy, have integrity, and be my full self at work. She's currently working on a Sikhi approach to human rights which is providing strength and inspiration for my work on Judaism and IR. Second, it's impossible to capture how much I owe to Cynthia Weber: to see someone a bit like me be so successful, rigorous, and committed to the work, while also having fun and being kind, made it all seem possible. To have that that person get stuck into helping me craft ways of thinking, a career, and even life, is a true gift. Both receiving mentorship and providing it have been vital parts of my academic life.

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You argue in your recent journal articles that free speech has been a site of white supremacist settler colonialism. What are the dangers in assuming that free speech is a public good?

Let's take some recent leftist lines of critique which show that, far from being victims of censorship, the "right has concocted a free speech crisis" in a way that elevates already well-platformed speech. Or, closely related, some excellent polemics "against free speech", which show that free speech politics, as they are currently expressed, enact racist exclusion. So there's a clear danger in assuming free speech is a public good.

I agree with both critiques and have made similar arguments myself. However, the absence of a longer-term history of free speech, implies a sense that "good" free speech politics have simply been coopted to "bad" ends. Left-wing free speech politics are left unquestioned. Much of my recent work has been on that longer history of free speech politics. I show that, since the European Enlightenment, free speech politics have functioned to divide 'civilized' from 'uncivilized' in global coloniality as well as domestic politics. Of course, 'civilized' encodes whiteness, masculinity, and rationality/sanity, often in the nation-state. This chronology complicates the sense that there was a good-old-days of free speech politics.

At the same time, however, outright dismissals of free speech politics fail to engage the ways that the politics of freedom of expression *have* been fundamental to resistance and dissent. Right now international Palestinian liberation movements are appealing to free speech as they are being censored and banned in international support for Israeli settler colonialism – can we reduce these to the same thing as Donald Trump's free speech politics? No. But can we fully separate them – straightforwardly embrace one without the other? For me the answer is, again, 'no'. Returning to your question about the 'dangers of free speech as a public good', this means that while we must recognise those dangers, we are also in need of a more nuanced analysis. Such an analysis must, if it rejects 'free speech' as a form of politics, recognise and seek alternative solutions to the necessities of 'freedom' and 'expression'.

How are narratives of "enemies of free speech" deployed? What are the consequences of this?

Here's another centre-left assumption that I encounter regularly in meetings: some freedom of speech is desirable, but this must be tempered with regulation in, for example, the form of hate-speech legislation or institutional codes of conduct. There's a general assumption in the free speech literature, in fact, that freedom and regulation are opposites or in tension. 'Balance' and 'drawing the line' are terms I hear often. Yet if we look at the history of free speech we find that 'freedom' of speech has always been defined against an 'uncivil' outside that should be confined. For John Locke that was Catholic speech, for Mill 'savage' speech, and for Donald Trump it was Black Lives Matter protests. So the task of 'finding a balance' or 'drawing the line' actually has a very long and dubious history which expresses not two opposing forces, but the co-constitution of the 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' within colonial international order. Hate speech legislation, codes of conduct and other multicultural or liberal democratic approaches to free speech – despite accusations of censorship by the far right and well-meaning leftist embrace – are continuous with classic liberal approaches to free speech because they share the balance/line-drawing approach.

What has this got to do with enemies? I'm trying to say that *all* versions of free speech come with an imagined enemy legitimizing control beyond the boundaries of that freedom – that we're not just talking about the far right here. And that this has been the case throughout free speech's history and many complex permutations.

While we're talking about enemies, I also want to note the significance of gender (especially femininity, even more so transfemininity) and madness. This has been overlooked by most of us so far. I did not start off thinking about these things, but was forced to through my encounter with the empirical. Right now, for example, it is impossible to read anything about free speech without also reading about transness. Again, however, that's not new – as I noted above, free speech has always evoked rationality, which has always encoded not just race but gender and ideas about the sane mind too. My article about the enemies of free speech shows that 'censorious sensitive snowflakes' are imagined as hysterical, over-emotional, and weak, i.e. feminized. It also shows that the Black Lives Matter 'mob' is animalized, while the Jewish 'cultural Marxist' is viewed as hyper-rational – both are placed outside of 'normal'

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human rationality, not only racially, but also into types of madness.

Why is a queer curiosity important when studying International Relations?

This is a phrase that has done a lot of work for us and created an explicit space for queer scholars and scholarship in IR where previously there was none. A lot of credit must go to Cindy Weber here and their 2016 book *Queer International Relations*. One thing I like about the word “curiosity” is that it’s a little surprising in an academic context – perhaps even a little queer in its evocation of sensibility, affect and desire. I wonder, though, if it’s a little bit safe and unthreatening. Perhaps that’s what we needed to get a foothold. But I’d love to see it replaced by queer liberation or abolition or even revolution – or perhaps transfeminism!

What recent shifts have you noticed towards incorporating Queer Feminist perspectives in the field of International Relations?

There is a strange time-lag in IR: we’re often just getting to something as the rest of the world is moving on. So, in queer and trans communities, and outside IR, there’s already been a move from queer to trans politics, then to trans Marxism, trans feminism and Black transfeminism: beyond IR, ‘queer’ has become institutionalised and assimilated. Yet in IR we’re still catching up. Work is only just starting to emerge centring transness: I can count all the articles addressing transness on my fingers. I don’t just mean research on trans life, although perhaps this is the most pressing focus. I also mean the much broader ways in which international order is organised around particular principles of gender and sexuality, which govern and/or are disrupted by transsexuality.

In an article that’s currently under review, I explore how transsexuality is imagined, and defended against, as a threat to the reproduction of the nation, state and race. Even a surface engagement with the far right and anti-trans feminism makes clear that these movements are obsessed with the ‘natural’ reproduction of the nation, state and/or race, which for them means the virility and penis size of men and boys as well as the fertility of women and girls. They’re nostalgic for a national past of proper (white) gender roles, and worried about the insecurity of the (white) national future. All of this justifies the denial of care and life for trans people (and indeed anyone or anything deemed reproductively deviant, not least abortion and contraception) in the name of security. This points to one answer to your question about ‘shifts’: because those of us working on transness in IR are looking to transfeminism, and because transfeminism is often also Marxist, we might find more materialist and/or reproduction-based approaches coming into Queer IR. The Alexander Stoffel and Ida Roland Birkvad article I discussed above is evidence that this might be the case.

I find myself wanting to insist on the importance of the *feminism* part of the ‘Queer Feminist’ part of your question, which I know references my article on the possibility of a Queer Feminist IR. I really needed feminism to make sense of the gendered dynamics of the reproductive politics I just described. But I’m also aware that, at a time where anti-trans feminists are partnered with and/or celebrated by white supremacists, this insistence is far from straightforward.

What led you to engage in “DIY” autonomous cultural production and what does it entail?

This is one of the sorts of ‘expression’ I am thinking about when I think about ‘freedom of expression’ beyond ‘free speech’. I co-run an insurrectionary transfeminist press with Harry Josephine Giles. We circulate knowledge – sometimes in the form of zines and/or art – surrounding transness and madness. We collaborate with other ‘DIY’ autonomous cultural workers who do the same. This sort of knowledge production and circulation refuses official channels of recognition and goes under the radar. This protects, for example, the sharing of off-the-books cross-border trans healthcare practices. Unlike in academic publishing, what we write, how it’s produced, who it gets to: these are all things we get to control.

When I was precariously employed, my writing was frozen. I felt like each sentence was about whether I got a job, which was, in turn, about whether I paid my rent. The strict craft of journal article writing felt like yet another area where I couldn’t set the terms of my own life. I had the sense that I couldn’t say anything to ‘rock the boat’ (i.e.

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original) and it didn't help that my research was about topics that are especially fraught right now. Who could write in those conditions? Instead, I wrote zines. I determined everything. I found this very healing and, ironically, it's the way I found my voice, which I brought back to academic writing. I now have a true love for the craft of the journal article.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations and Politics?

Academia and IR are places we can pursue things that are important to us. This might be something as complicated as decolonization or social justice. In that case, I find 'terrain of struggle' a useful framework. But it could also be something much more simple, like an income, or having a say in our schedules, or meaningful relationships. Either way, what's important to us is determined by horizons beyond the academy or discipline. And so my advice would be to embrace people, activities, values, perspectives and politics from beyond the university or IR. It's only through that embrace, and by figuring out what's important to us, that we can figure out how we want to exist as IR scholars. I suspect that will be different for each of us.