Interview - Koen Slootmaeckers

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Dr Koen Slootmaeckers is a Reader in International Politics at City St George's, University of London. He is the EDI officer and trustee for UACES. He has previously held leadership roles in professional associations as co-chair and executive board member of the Council of European Studies' Gender and Sexuality Research Network. As an international political sociologist, Koen's research is broadly focused on the ways in which boundaries, inclusion and exclusion are maintained in society and within international relations. He has done extensive research on the promotion of and resistance to LGBT equality in international politics. Koen has extensively researched the EU accession of Serbia and how this process affects LGBT politics and activism. This research ultimately culminated in his book '*Coming In: Sexual politics and EU accession in Serbia*' (2023, Manchester University Press), for which he was awarded the 2025 EUSA Best Book Prize. His current research focuses on the place of Pride events within the LGBTI movement and engages in several theoretical querying of different politics embedded in Pride. For example, he has published on the geo-temporalities of Pride (with Mike Bosia). Other recent publications include: a piece examining the unexpected politics of ILGA-Europe's rainbow maps (with Francesca Ammaturo), a piece examining the role of LGBT rights within the EU's identity processes, and relational theorisation of the ways in which masculinities and nationalism as intertwined.

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

To be honest, I find this probably the most difficult question one can ask me. One, because it makes me question whether I do belong to a field or whether I even know a field. As a scholar who has moved disciplines over the course of my career and now happily sits within the liminal space of disciplinary boundaries as well as subject matters, I struggle to identify what would be the most exciting research. That being said, I do think there is a political need to highlight some of the work that is being done within the sphere of sex and sexuality at a time when the space for doing this work is increasingly under attack. To me, the excitement comes from the new generation of scholars emerging that remain adamant to query the world and to challenge power by interrogating how gender and sexuality shape our collective and the world. Seeing a new generation question what has been taken for granted to and stay bold in their determination to challenge structures of power to generate something new is what gives me hope and excitement. This is even more meaningful and important, I believe, as we live in a world where issues and sexuality are increasingly put under pressure and come under intense political scrutiny and vicious political attacks – both within our everyday (by the dismantling of Equality Diversity and Inclusion work by Trump, or the banning of Pride by Orban) and the Academy (by the so-called gender critical scholars and those using academic freedom to stifle progressive politics).

But if I were to answer, I would do so by thinking about some of the recent discussions, writings and publications that have stayed with me over the last few years. Amongst those, I think it is incredibly important to query some of the ways in which sexuality is used within international politics. Here, I think about the kind of politics pursued by the anti-gender movement/campaigns who engage in a wider international politics of what Dean Cooper-Cunningham (forthcoming) would call, "heteronormative internationalism", but also the ways in which sexuality is folded into politics of modernity that creates new, and reinforces old, hierarchies. Here, I think about the work that unpacks and showcases the different ways in which the embrace of LGBTQI rights by the EU has been folded into a variety of other politics. For example, the work by Laura Eigenmann who beautifully excavated the evolution and elevation of LGBTQI rights within the EU's identity work, whilst also querying how this process has shaped how the EU imagines

LGBTQI equality within a homonormative project. Or the work by Lucrecia Rubio Grundell, who, in one of the most brilliant pieces of I have read over the years, argued that the inclusion of LGBT rights within the EU project happened on the back of sex workers. With great grace, she demonstrates how the EU's LGBTI policies exclude sex work as a constitutive other so that the neoliberal and homonormative sexual subject of rights and new sexual respectability could be constructed – a subject worthy of protection by the EU.

I am also always super excited to read the excellent work on sexual violence in war time, and particularly the work on conflict related sexual violence against men and boys by Heleen Touquet, Philipp Schulz, Henri Myrtinnen, and others. Their new Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict, and Peacebuilding is a must read, as are their reflection on self-care for scholars working on gender-based violence issues.

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

My thinking has changed a lot over time and there have been many influences that have shaped me – both through encounters in my career as well as the freedom that job security has given me to trust myself and start believing in my own perspectives and path. I see academia and scholarly work as a collective endeavour, where we can each achieve more if we support and learn from each other. As such, I believe my world view is shaped by the incredible encounters I have had over the years, especially those coming from the many fantastic feminist and queer scholars I have met over the years. There are too many to name, but I do want to highlight some, as their influence in my academic career and my thinking are deeply felt. My conversations with Heleen Touquet have always been ones of intellectual cross-fertilisation, but Heleen is the one who, in many ways, not only opened the door for me to the Balkan region (a place in which I found myself) but also made me feel that there is space for my critical thinking. Phillip Ayoub has been a core feature in my work and has been such a kind figure within queer IR and EU studies – he truly embodies what a kind academia can look like, and I try to follow the example set by him. Similarly, Francesca Romana Ammaturo's work on The Pink Agenda has been foundational to my thinking about homonationalism within the EU. Reading her work gave me the words needed to understand my own research and meeting her generated an academic friendship where we flourish together. Moreover, her reminder to allow myself to write my own story into my work has been such a key moment for the way I think. Similarly, the friendship and intense conversations on queer politics with Dean Cooper-Cunningham, as well as his work in general, not only carried me through the times I burned-out, but have also been instrumental in finding my own queer politics.

If I were to describe one foundational moment, I would say it when I discovered the words for my relational ontology. The seeds to my world view were probably embedded as part of my initial training as a sociologist (I think the sociological lens quite lends itself to relational thinking) yet it never really had an active place within my work as I was too wrapped up in dominant (positivist) narratives of what good science would look like – perhaps I was too focused on what I though was required of me. It was not until my PhD examiners, professors Kelly Kollman and Denisa Kostovicova, pointed me towards the practice turn in IR (which led me to relational IR and relational sociology) that I found the words that described how I see the world. The following 'aha'-moment I experienced has been revolutionary for my work and my thinking. Suddenly, all the tensions I experienced made sense, especially as I used the practice turn as a jumping off point to embrace relational approaches to IR. From then onwards, I had found my own intellectual homebase.

Whilst this has been a profound moment in my intellectual journey, I often find new ways of thinking from the most random places – whether it is the clinical work my brother does as a therapist or whether it is through my holiday reading of high fantasy novels. Whereas the first is shaping my current work, the latter, and in particularly Raymond E. Feist's novel Magician's End, has had profound impact on my conceptualisation of time and how time shapes politics – ultimately resulting in a piece I co-wrote on the Geo-Temporalities of Pride.

How are LGBTQ+ politics being used by EU politicians, both on the right and left side of the spectrum, to serve their agendas?

The idea that LGBTQ+ politics have been actively used by EU politicians on both sides of the isle is perhaps a strong

statement. Of course, I do think LGBTQ+ issues have become a key arena in which politics are being created and generated, as we see a clear point of contestation over LGBTQ+ rights. For example, LGBTQ+ rights is one of the areas through which the meaning of so-called European values is contested within the EU structures. I would offer a bit of caution to this sweeping statement, however, because to say that LGBTQ+ issues are used by both type of actors – even though it does happen – would erase the work by those politicians who genuinely seek to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people. Nevertheless, because they are situated within the complex set of relations between those contesting the homonationalist moment and those embracing it, LGBTQ+ politics inevitably (whether intentionally or not) serve the function of demarking boundaries between different groups. While progressive voices' support for LGBTQ+ rights (whether instrumental or genuine) is often voiced through a declarative and constitutive homophobic Other (whether it be Russia, Eastern Europe, or others), anti-gender campaigns and other voices similarly express their support for so-called family values through the opposition of a constitutive 'perverse'/oversexualised Other. What ends up happening is that the lives of LGBTQ+ people become embroiled and captured in bigger political projects (whether they are nationalist and/or racist projects). We are stuck in a period in which seemingly bigger civilisational politics are played out on the bodies of queer people. And I think it is important we develop analytical tools and ways of describing this that do not reproduce these processes – to avoid our academic analysis adds to the structure of violence to which queer people are currently subjected.

Are LGBTQ+ politics currently relevant in the EU's political landscape, or are they being abandoned? Why is this the case?

Because of what I explained above, I think LGBTQ+ politics are very central to the EU's political agenda – at least discursively. This is perhaps best shown by the existing dispute between the European Commission and Hungary over its so-called anti-gay propaganda law. The current court case between the Commission and Hungary over this law is significant, as it is the first that actively uses Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (which defined, albeit vaguely, the EU's values) in an infringement procedure. As I explained elsewhere, the outcome of this case will have significant consequences for LGBTQ+ politics in the EU and the role of values within the EU's architecture. If the EU had hoped this case would dampen Hungary's attack on LGBTQ+ people, it seemed to have been misguided, as Orban has escalated his anti-LGBTQ+ politics by purposefully defying the EU and banning any public assembly that violates the law on the protection of children (and thus effectively banning Pride). This episode clearly demonstrates that LGBTQ+ politics is central within wider EU politics and is the current battle ground to define the future of the EU.

Yet, whilst LGBTQ+ rights have taken up a very symbolic space within the EU, we also witness the downgrading of equality within the new Von Der Leyen Commission. After presiding over a commission that had dubbed the EU as a Union of Equality, the new Commission, at first glance, seems to be less committed to equality than before. No longer is there a Commissioner solely responsible for Equality, as the Von Der Leyen II has combined the Equality portfolio with a portfolio for 'Preparedness and Crisis Management'. Whilst it is yet to be seen what this means for the actual work done by the Commission, what we have already observed is the withdrawal of the so-called horizontal anti-discrimination directive proposal. Although this proposal has been stalled for over 15 years in the Council, its withdrawal may signal that whilst LGBTQ+ rights are increasingly symbolic in EU politics, the window for material and legislative change seems to be closing.

Would you say that conservative anti-LGBTQ+ stances in the EU differ depending on the country, or is it a unified, transnational movement?

As the recent literature on anti-gender campaigns has been demonstrating, we can perhaps think about the opposition to LGBTQ+ and feminist politics as something modular. There are a lot of shared strategies, tactics, discourses, and ways of mobilising, yet countries in their differing national context have their own particularities of how their campaigns unfold and what they target. Whilst I would be reluctant to call them unified (as they all have their own national projects), I do believe we should not underestimate how strong the transnational ties of these campaigns are, not only in terms of how they are organised and how they mobilise, but also in terms of funding and political linkages. Whilst more and more scholars, including one of my PhD students, are actively studying the transnationalisation of these campaigns, I wonder whether we may ever fully know the scope of these links, as these

actors are incredibly difficult to research, and are able to keep researchers out of their core inner workings.

What role does the ideological chasm on LGBTQ+ rights play in relations between conservative countries, such as Meloni's Italy, and more socially liberal countries, such as Macron's France?

This is a difficult question, and I guess the answer would depend on who you would ask. I think many of those clinging on to the notion of a liberal international order would like to believe that these chasms are important factors shaping international politics and bilateral movements. However, such hopes and assumptions rely on the fact that state actors have a strong belief and attachment to LGBTQ+ rights and would act accordingly. Such belief, I am afraid, may be rather naïve. Perhaps I am too sceptical of state actors proclaiming a pro-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, since too often in international relations, I have seen how normative stances are nothing more than a shell, with little meaningful actions being taken. They too are often performative and symbolic, rather than real convictions. As far as I have seen, LGBTQ+ rights are often being sacrificed if other national interests are threatened. So, I am sure that ideological chasm plays a vital role in bilateral relations (especially as international politics is currently deeply shaped through such chasms), but I think they may be less about actual LGBTQ+ rights themselves and more about a deeper function of state power – what that may be exactly depends on the relationship and context of said relationship.

In your book "Coming in" on LGBT rights in Serbia, you explain that the EU promotes LGBTQ+ rights through its enlargement process as a fundamental right for EU candidate-states. Has this process been successful? What more can governments do to ensure these rights are respected?

The EU does indeed seek to promote LGBTQ+ rights as part of the enlargement process. In my work, I argue that we should step away from an EU-centred analysis of the development of LGBT rights and politics in candidate countries. This is particularly important, because assuming that it is the EU that is responsible for the adoption of LGBT rights in candidate countries quickly erases the hard work being done by the country's activists, often having started long before the EU entered the political arena. Yes, of course the EU enlargement process has been key for many activists to gain access to governments and to be able to get important laws on the books. However, solely focussing on the legal developments is limiting, in my view.

In my book, I argue for a relational conceptualisation of the EU enlargement process, so as to emphasise the political nature of the process. I call Europeanisation a process of negotiated transitions. Negotiated, not because the process involves formal negotiations, but rather because through the relationship between the EU and candidate countries, the content and meaning of LGBTQ+ rights/politics are negotiated. This push and pull process, and the different ways in which both the EU and Serbia have engaged with each other when tensions on LGBTQ+ issues arose, have created a political contest in which LGBTQ+ rights and their meaning have become hollowed out and instrumentalised by both parties. This politicisation of LGBTQ+ rights and the way in which the Serbian government engages in double-speak in which it internationally seemingly complies with EU requests, yet domestically ramps up its heteronormative and nationalist political project, has real consequences for LGBTQ+ people in the country. Indeed, in recent years, we have seen a serious increase in violence against the queer community.

As such, in my book, I argue that "as scholars [of political science and IR], we must recentre our attention on the people about whom we write, their experience and their realities, as progress in law without a change in their lived experience remains hypothetical." (p.14)

What were the key factors in the development of the LGBTQ+ movement within the EU?

What movement are we talking about? Are we talking about movements within countries or are we talking about the European level movement? I am not sure I am the right person to pin-point the key factors in the movement, but there are certainly some tensions and issues that are worth thinking about when considering where the movement goes next. The first and most obvious issue is the pervasiveness of anti-gender campaigns and how anti-EDI politics actively seeks to reverse some of the recent gains made. This means that cross-cause solidarity will be a vital issue for most movements, in order to find ways to counter the political attacks on our rights and the increased social

positions. Such solidarity is incredibly important considering the divide and conquer tactics that are being played by those opposing gender issues. For example, the spread of gender critical propaganda and the mainstreaming through which trans* lives are erased from social life under the guise of protecting women is actively creating the notion that there is a zero-sum game to be played in which improvements in the liveability of trans* lives come at costs of women. Of course, we know this is not the case. Anyone paying close attention to anti-trans politics can see that what is really happening is an intense battle trying to define womanhood – not to protect women, but to control women's bodies.

To overcome the divide and conquer tactics being used against us, we need to not only counter them, but also short-circuit the power structures that feed them. We need new politics that see the various power structures of oppression as intertwined and a shared target. We need to see that the way we have made progress in the past has been on the back of others. We can no longer rely on trying to fold people into the protection of an otherwise violent system – instead we must come up with an alternative. In the time we are currently living in, it is time we develop a politics that creates a future in which we all can thrive.

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

With academia being the extractive institution it is (and increasingly more so given the dire state of higher education across many contexts), I think it is important to know for yourself what sacrifices you are willing to make and which ones you are not. I do not say this to be doom and gloomy, but rather because I want to use it as a starting point for advocating for self-care in one's pursuit of scholarship. Because our scholarship is so personal, we often experience rejections as something deeply personal – professional failures or setbacks along the way are easily experienced as an indication of personal worth, as a reflection that we do not belong.

I would advocate for young scholars to find strength in their own work and their thinking. The discipline has its way of creeping in and making you feel that what you are doing may not be IR enough, and there will always be voices that will make you feel that you are not good enough or that what you do is not worth pursuing, particularly if you come from marginalised backgrounds or work on topics related to challenging existing power structures (whether they be racial, gendered, or based on sexuality). And whilst this may be true, there will be at least an equal amount of people who will be championing your work, and show and remind you of your worth. So, my second piece of advice would be to seek your own little community of care and mutual support in academia. Find your bubble where you feel safe, where you can explore and where you can be vulnerable with your ideas. And above all, listen, feel and accept when people are singing your praise. It is easy to focus on the negative, but this is where academia gets us – we must believe in ourselves to generate change.

This brings me to a third bit of advice – do not practice the academia that is (where we are often expected to build our own career by tearing down someone else; or where we believe ideas work within a zero-sum game). Instead, practice the academia that you want it to be. Draw on those feminist or queer practices that are rooted in love and care. Celebrate colleagues' successes, and share in failures and provide support where needed. Together we can stand tall and be a spark of change. I have such hopes for a kind academia, and I believe it all starts with ourselves.

Of course, this advice is perhaps derived from my hopes and aspirations for academia, and I am aware that it may not always be easy to remind ourselves of them. In fact, I struggle with them on an everyday basis. Being on recovery from a burn-out, practicing kindness to myself is a continuous struggle – so is the need to find ways to not reproduce the violences inherently embedded within the academic structure. Kindness is work, and we get it wrong as we inevitably cause harm, even when being well-meaning. Luckily, I have surrounded myself with my academic friends and co-travellers who are willing to point out when I err in my practice, and provide support and security to learn from mistakes. By practicing vulnerability and kindness, I do believe we can make a change.

Thus, trust in yourself (don't let the discipline discipline you), be kind to yourself and others, and above all, find (or build) your community in which you can practice the academy you wish we had, not the one we are currently living in. And whenever you are able to, pay it forward and be a force of good in the academy, and stay humble along the way.