

Interview - Dean Cooper-Cunningham

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Dean Cooper-Cunningham is a PhD Fellow at the University of Copenhagen working at the intersections of visual politics, critical security studies, and feminist and queer theories. He currently researches international responses to Russian political queerphobia and is interested in questions about the visibility of resistance and (in)security. His most recent work, published in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, analyses *Ms. Marvel* comics and the ways that they destabilize and contest the racialized-gendered-sexualized discourses used to justify post-9/11 US-American security politics. His article in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* raises questions about seeing (in)security and theorizes the interrelation of text/words, images, and the body. Dean also held various editorial positions with E-IR between 2015-2018.

What (or who) promoted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

The more I thought about this question, the more answers I had. I try to emulate Sara Ahmed's "living a feminist life" mantra so I want to acknowledge the phenomenal teachers I had at the University of St Andrews where I studied IR. Faye Donnelly, Caron Gentry, and Karin Fierke (re)shaped the way I think about the world and international politics. Caron taught the final week of my second-year course on IR Theory and I remember seeing the week on 'Gender and IR' and making a snide comment that makes me cringe today. On reflection, this was both the product of two years of 'mainstream' IR and being at a very white and particularly classed university. Caron's lecture blew my mind. I left that hour-long lecture inspired, eager, and craving feminist scholarship. I started to see gender and other power structures everywhere. I rethought my language. I rethought the classic analytic levels. And I rethought methods and theory. I studied variously with Caron, Faye, and Karin during my honours years. Each showed me the potential of critical approaches to (international) politics, the questions that are possible, and helped shape the scholar I am today. It was from various conversations at the IR Department in St Andrews that the idea and first drafts of my *IFJP* article emerged.

Two pivotal readings for me were Caron and Laura Sjöberg's *Mothers, Monsters, Whores* and Lene Hansen's *The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma*. These are foundational to inspiring the ways that I approach international politics. Lene's mentorship has also given me much needed space to do and think IR differently. These two works sparked my interest in feminist security studies and seeing where and how security problems emerge and are articulated. But, I'm also cautious of some feminisms and their exclusions. This is one of the reasons I am so interested in the visual: it offers space for 'seeing' political acts of resistance and articulations of (in)security where it is otherwise may be overlooked.

What can visual methods offer to the study of International Relations that other "conventional" methods can't?

There are many methodological opportunities that the visual offers. I cannot do them justice here so I will speak

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specifically about how I use visual methodologies to understand and study international politics. For me, the visual, like text and words, is part of discourse. That is to say, when we do a discourse analysis it is epistemologically flawed and too narrow to only look at words, be they textual or vocalised. This is inspired by my own empirical work and Lene's 'Little Mermaid' argument that security problems often go unnoticed because they are not and/or cannot be textually or vocally articulated. This has particularly gendered and racialised consequences.

I suggest a three-pronged approach in Seeing (in)security. To be fully across the issues we are dealing with, a text-image-body approach is necessary because there is not only one method of communicating or 'doing'. Texts, images, and practices interact and communicate together: we cannot decipher or interpret one without the others. One needs to pay attention to the words discursively constituting international political events (be they war, pandemics, or protests) but also the embodied actions and visuals. I arrived at this theorisation of the visual and the "tripartite" methodological approach to studying international politics empirically: when studying the British women's suffrage movement, I was struck by their use of posters as means of communicating their (in)security in a politically powerful way that worked and landed differently to the words they used (and that were largely ignored). This was reinforced when I was reading *Ms. Marvel* and saw how comics were destabilising the gendered-racialised-sexualised justifications for US-American security politics post-9/11.

Images function as outlets for voices that have been marginalized, silenced and/or ignored. The visual, as a representational practice, is often used to counter silencing and/or illustrate embodied resistance by actors marginalised because of their sex/gender, race, sexuality, and/or class. So, for me, looking at text-image-body is a way of negotiating the power of epistemological predilections in academia that may, even if unwittingly, reinforce gendered-sexualised-racialised power structures (they seek to dismantle). It's important and valuable to look at strategies of resistance that extend beyond the written or verbal. This could not be more true than in my research on responses to Russian political queerphobia, which are overwhelmingly visual and embodied. Just waving the rainbow flag in Russia or holding hands with a same sex partner (very visual and embodied actions) contravene the Gay Propaganda Law—this is a puzzle I'm now studying.

Using a visual approach, your PhD thesis looks at the international response to the domestic persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals in the Russian Federation. How have Queer bodies been constructed as dangers to society/politics and what are the implications of this?

The Russian political elite construct non-heterosexual practices and non-cis-gender performances as deviant, non-traditional, foreign, and thus, dangerous to the fabric of Russian society. Russia is not the only country with queerphobic foreign and domestic policies or views, but there is something particularly interesting about the Russian case. The most palpable instantiation of Russian political queerphobia, for non-Russians at least, is the 2013 'Gay Propaganda Law'. This "anti-gay" law is justified through a discourse constituting non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender—queer—individuals as (Western, foreign) threats to the 'traditional Christian values' underpinning Russian and 'true European' societal order. Queerness is constituted as existentially threatening to Mother Russia, to national security.

The increasingly tolerant Europe, which has been branded 'Gayropa' in Russian (geo)political discourse, is viewed as decadent and morally corrupt by many Russian politicians and the Orthodox Church. Both the Russian government and the Church constructed Europe's increasing tolerance of queerness—enshrined in International Human Rights Law prohibiting discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity—as infecting and corrupting the moral foundations of Europe and, thus, threatening Russian citizens (particularly children) with abnormal and morally reprehensible views on sexual relations and gender norms.

To quell this non-/anti-Russian queer threat and to end Russia's queer peril, the homopropaganda law prohibits the 'promotion' or 'propagandising' of so-called 'non-traditional' sexual relations and gender performances to minors. This is fundamentally about the persecution of those whose sexualities and/or gender cannot be labelled, read, made to signify as heterosexual and/or cisgender. It is, in other words, about the persecution of queers; those whose gender performances deviate from "the hypermasculine and hyperfeminine gender roles demanded by 'traditional family values'" (Wilkinson 2018, 108).

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How can text, images and practices also be used to dispute or resist constructions of difference as being dangerous?

In *Seeing (in)security* I explored the case of the British women's suffrage movement and the way that they used posters as a means of resisting the hegemonic discourse of the British government and societal elite that women were naturally apolitical, irrational, emotional, and incapable of politics (conceived then very narrowly as electing a government). Their posters were used as a method for showing the experiences of suffragettes at the hands of the government (e.g., their force-feeding in prison) and for questioning gendered assumptions (e.g., women belong in the household not the public sphere).

One of the things I am working on currently is exploring how visual memes of President Putin against a rainbow background ('Gay Clown Putin' memes) are used as a way of resisting the discourse of queer threat in Russia. While the various images in the 'Gay Clown Putin' meme are complex, polysemous, and I would argue verge on homophobic, they might be understood as visual acts of resistance (successful or failed) against the 'gay propaganda law'. They circulate online and offline and have frequently been photographed at Pride events all over the world and into-the-streets protests; some outside Russian embassies.

What's important here in terms of thinking about how they resist state-sponsored queerphobia and how they dispute queerness as dangerousness is that they actively challenge the homopropaganda law by putting a rainbow into the public sphere. As we all know, the Rainbow Flag is associated with LGBTQ+ politics and to publish this visual motif and wield it politically against Putin's image might be a means of pushing back against the government's desire to invisibilise queerness from the face of Russia's (public) sphere. Then again, it might not be successful and actually reproduces the structures it seeks to deconstruct: using the rainbow flag, given its origins in the USA, might just reinforce the government's argument that queerness is 'western,' and portraying Putin as queer as a way of attacking him may read as homophobic. These are questions I'm grappling with at the moment.

How can we dial back or overcome these constructions of 'dangerous difference'?

This is a difficult question. One has to be careful of cultural imperialism and must be aware of each country's unique relationship with (queer) sexualities and gender expressions. In the case of Russia, there is a history of dealing with transgressive sexualities by forcing them to conform with gender norms. This translated as a policy of 'fixing' queer desires (e.g., male-male desire) by having those bodies become 'heterosexual' through sex reassignment or simply by sending them to prison or labour camps. This history has underpinned Russia's current moment of political queerphobia.

In terms of dialling back constructions of dangerous difference, I believe it is my responsibility to communicate a feminist and queer theoretical understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality as socially constituted, fluid, malleable, and always in flux to students who take my courses, peers, and to engage in public fora to speak about these issues. Caron Gentry's course on gender helped me speak to my family and friends about the power of language in enabling certain actions and how gendered, racialised, and sexualised language allowed certain policies to be justified and made acceptable.

Above all else, despite being called anti-Russian and critiqued for reproducing East-West dichotomies, I maintain that it is of the utmost importance to call out discriminatory politics whenever and wherever you can see it. I refuse to *not* call out the Russian government for its queerphobic policies. It is crucial to point out what constructions of particular groups enable, who benefits from these constructions, and how 'false' they actually are. Who benefits from negative constructions of certain bodies and people as dangerous? Open and frank discussion and debates about why and how people are being scapegoated and what this is masking are key.

What are you currently working on?

Last October I spent 4 weeks in the New York Public Library working in the Gender and Sexuality Archives. Now, I've written up a visual genealogy that traces the evolution and internationalisation of 'queer symbols' from the pink

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triangle and rainbow flag to the lambda symbol. That was a hugely interesting process, working in the archive, and it showed so many stories and unexpected visual turns. Writing this visual genealogy has been a crucial starting point for my project because the symbols I found and genealogised have particular contextual meanings and their subsequent uses in protest, resistance, and other visual material is historically rooted in those original uses, whether that is acknowledged or not. One of the most exciting and controversial points I make in this chapter is that the Rainbow Flag has a radical, resistive, and *queer* politics that we ought to reclaim before writing it off as a symbol of the neoliberal capitalist (LGBTQ+) moment, a symbol that is now so distant from its origins it must be banished. I'm also in the middle of writing a chapter about the 'Gay Clown Putin' memes. Here, I'm trying to work through a theorisation of visual practices of resistance and how memes function and are used to resist Russian political queerphobia by various international actors.

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

First of all, I am definitely still a young, very junior scholar so I take this question with a big pinch of salt and don't want to come across too big for my boots. If I interpret this question to be what advice do I have for students interested in IR or future PhDs, my advice would be to experiment, take leaps of faith, and to do the work that gets you excited, angry, fired up, and that you're passionate about. More importantly: read the feminist literature. Especially before you make grand claims that "this hasn't been done before."

One of the biggest pleasures of my Ph.D. has been teaching my own course 'Intersectional Relations: Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in International Politics'. I always advise students to find something they are excited and passionate about when they are writing their assignments. And that's the advice I'd give anyone. More importantly, I'd tell people to do it their way, to be themselves, to take breaks, to have that night out dancing, to talk to colleagues, collaborate, and speak to everyone and anyone at conferences. I've made some amazing friends by overcoming the fear of talking to people. Find your people and keep them close: a good community will help you more than anything.