

Tracing the Threads: Queer IR and Human Rights

Written by Anthony J. Langlois

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ANTHONY J. LANGLOIS, OCT 26 2014

International politics understood as a fabric of the world is shot through with *queer* threads. Relatively few IR theorists look for and recognise these threads; fewer still explicate the forms and patterns such threads constitute, or discuss their varied significance and meanings. These threads are not somehow marginal to the fabric of international politics – like ornamental figures in out of the way corners. Rather, they pattern the day to day matters of the discipline. A project in which I am presently involved (and from which this post is derived) seeks to show that when we are willing to trace these threads, a whole set of new understandings opens out before us (Picq & Thiel, 2015).

This is the queer claim that when we study IR directly through sexuality and gender politics, the conceptual realignments and reinterpretations which follow will have *general* significance for the field; that if we don't analyse in this queer way we will misinterpret the putative subject of the discipline. The study of international sexuality and gender politics is of consequence for IR in general, not just those activists and academics concerned about specific cases of cross border human rights abuse of queers, or the like. Indeed, the always already present nature of these elements applies to both sexuality and gender politics, and human rights: both often get pushed to the margins and are dismissed as specialty interests. Both, however, suffuse the "routine" subject matter of IR as an academic discipline. IR as a discipline however neglects or resists queer theory, and so the analysis takes place elsewhere. A putative concern with the human rights of LGBTQ people – in foreign policy or via human rights programmes – is often as far as IR gets with its concerns for international sexuality politics. But such gestures – however well meant and executed – are tokens; they are indicative of an intellectual failure to grapple with the full strength of the claims made about the centrality of sexuality politics to international relations.

Scholarship on this topic within IR is becoming more prominent. (Readers should keep an eye out for a forthcoming forum on Queer IR in *International Studies Review* (Sjoberg & Weber, 2015)). To this point, the claim has been explored most directly and pointedly for IR *theory* by Cynthia Weber (2014) in a recent article in the *European Journal of International Relations*. Weber engages in a sustained critique of IR scholarship, utilizing a diverse array of resources from queer theory. Let me outline the starting point of her argument against IR.

Weber commences by asking why – after 25 years of queer theory – the discipline of International Relations has not "gone somewhat queer" (Weber, 2014, p. 1). This, she argues, should be a pressing question for IR scholars: queer scholars themselves are well and truly at home on the familiar turf of the IR scholar. The war on terror, immigration, displaced people flows, transnationalism, global capital and labor, violence of various forms, surveillance – all of these and more are central subjects of study in IR; they are all *also* taken up and given masterful treatment by a wide range of queer scholars whom Weber lists. Global Queer Studies scholars contribute to the three core areas of traditional IR scholarship: "war and peace, state and nation formation, and international political economy". These contributions are not somehow marginal, but are top ranked in various disciplinary journals and books series – "But not in the field of IR." (Weber, 2014, p. 2)

Weber, playing on Martin Wight's famous question, "why is there no international theory?" (Wight, 1960), asks: why is there no *queer* international theory? In the end, Weber answers this question by stating that there *is* a lot of queer international theory. Some IR scholars do write on queer themes; there is an expanding body of work, which she cites, although most of this is not published in "IR outlets". This might give rise to the supposition that the work of these scholars is too interdisciplinary to qualify as "proper" IR work. But Weber argues that "the primary foci of most

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queer-themed work published by IR scholars are classic IR themes such as war, security, sovereignty, intervention, hegemony, nationalism, empire, colonialism, and the general practice of foreign policy.” (Weber, 2014, p. 2) Weber continues:

Of particular relevance to IR scholars are investigations that explore how failing hegemonic states perform queerness through their conduct of interventions and wars to solidify their hegemonic status, how states produce themselves and their citizens as pro-LGBT subjects in part to constitute other states, ‘civilizations’ or peoples as national and global threats, how the articulation and circulation of global (economic) value through queer and racialized bodies supports the practices of empires, and more generally how ‘queer’ is mobilized to designate some state practices as progressive and others as non-progressive as a mechanism to divide the world into orderly vs. disorderly (anarchic) spaces. (Weber, 2014, p. 2–3)

Queer international scholarship, then, is abundant; certainly there is a lot of work being done about LGBT persons, their politics, and the discourses on rights they invoke (see also Seckinelgin & Paternotte, forthcoming). Why is it, then, that this work fails to appear in the mainstream IR theoretic context? Or, as Weber puts it, “Why does there *appear* to be no Queer International Theory?” (Weber, 2014, p. 3)

The many scholars that Weber instances write about and engage in queer international politics. Weber’s claim is that, for Disciplinary IR, there is no route from queer international politics to queer international theory: attempts to join the dots here will be stymied by the core intellectual structures of the discipline. For those not schooled in Disciplinary IR, this desire for theoretical reflection may seem to be a natural, even overdue, development – making Weber’s claim seem strange or perhaps implausible. However, it is an important argument which goes to the core of the identity of IR as an academic discipline. At the same time, it displays why Weber places the stress on the *appearance* that there is no queer international theory, rather than there *actually* being none. (Weber, 2014, p. 18).

The question of theorising rights for LGBT people is one that is hard to pick up in the IR theoretic context. Can human rights be theorised in a way which, while retaining a critical edge, articulates a *positive* role for them to play with respect to the international politics of sexuality and LGBT people? This is not as straightforward as some human rights enthusiasts might think. The extension of human rights to sexuality politics means the extension of conceptual, institutional, legal and political frameworks to matters of sexual orientation and gender identity. This process of extension creates normative standards which people are then expected to identify with, assimilate to, support, engage with – or in the ‘marginal cases’, react against. And in so doing, this process further entrenches the existing institutions which govern our lives – institutions which, even when purporting to be emancipatory, often constrain freedoms, generate inequality and entrench injustice. (The same-sex marriage debate being the cause célèbre here. This, among other topics, is covered in the recent special issue of the *Journal of Human Rights* on LGBT norms in international relations. See: (Wilkinson & Langlois, 2014)).

As human rights gains ground globally and becomes more efficacious as a driver of institutional and social change, it risks pushing aside other mechanism and modes of being – including forms of sexual orientation and gender identity and their expression. “With the strong prerogative to define and protect queer populations, the human rights project erases ambiguity by creating and imposing particular epistemologies regarding sex, sexuality, and sexual subjectivity” (Thoreson, 2011, p. 16) – L,G,B,T,I,Q (etc) – as they have come to be identified. The theoretical paradox for a politics which seeks to queer human rights should be clear: human rights are about *establishing* particular normative boundaries; queer, if it is anything, is *anti-normative*. Establishing and policing boundaries is not supposed to be its brief.

The parallels with what happens in international relations theory are very clear. The problem with queer international theory is that it has another story to tell in addition to the story that traditionally justifies or legitimates classification as IR – the story about the survival of the state and its system. Further, it tells its additional story in ways and with means other than those traditionally used by the discipline. This is the same problem that is faced by the story of “human rights as LGBT rights”: the “human rights project” is not in any sense “neutral” or “objective” with respect to social reality and experience. Rather, it is both a way of articulating our moral and political relationships which trades on certain (often naturalized) traditions of understanding; and, it is a way of proposing to *do* politics – indeed, it is a

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politics in itself (Langlois, 2001). Using human rights – the concepts, the discourse, the institutions, the networks – is always to participate in that politics and necessarily (if critically and hesitatingly) to function within its framework.

At the same time, as I argue in the book chapter that this post is drawn from, and as the case studies in that book demonstrate, both human rights and queer theory – and certainly, in general, the study of IR through the lens of sexuality politics – have a destabilizing force. They compel us to view matters in a different light. It is this potential to cut across established norms, expectations and identities that makes sense of the challenge to develop a queer account of human rights within international relations: human rights “as the queer project of rendering the strange familiar and the familiar strange.” (Thoreson, 2011, p. 20) For international relations in general, the challenge is to trace the threads of international sexuality politics. The overwhelming report of those who have done so is that it causes us to understand the discipline and its putative subject matter differently. Doing so de-stabilizes conventional categories and approaches, illuminating a range of practices of the international that often go unremarked.

Notes

Excerpted and adapted from: Anthony J. Langlois, “Human Rights, LGBT rights & International Theory” in Manuela Picq and Markus Thiel (eds) *Sexualities in World Politics: how LGBTQ claims shape International Relations*, Routledge, forthcoming 2015.

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About the author:

Anthony J. Langlois is an associate professor in the School of International Studies at Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia. He was educated at the University of Tasmania and the Australian National University. Langlois is the author of *The Politics of Justice and Human Rights: Southeast Asia and Universalist Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) and co-editor of *Global Democracy and its Difficulties* (Routledge 2009) and *Australian Foreign Policy: Controversies and Debates* (Oxford University Press, 2014). His areas of academic endeavour include human rights, international relations, international political theory, political philosophy, and global ethics.