

Review - Sexualities in World Politics

Written by Federica Caso

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FEDERICA CASO, APR 5 2015

Sexualities in World Politics: How LGBTQ Claims Shape International Relations

Edited by: Manuela Lavinás Picq and Markus Thiel

London: Routledge, 2015

Partaking in the effort to make sexual politics visible in the discipline of international relations (IR), *Sexualities in World Politics* offers ten essays edited by Manuela Lavinás Picq and Markus Thiel addressing how LGBTQ perspectives impact IR as a discipline, practice, and disciplinary practice. While the main title of the book – *Sexualities in World Politics* – might invite expectations about the breadth of sexualities discussed, the subtitle – *How LGBTQ Claims Shape International Relations* – constitutes the real focus of this edited volume. As the editors point out in their introductory chapter, the book focuses on LGBT rights, thus meaning that “heterosexual, gender, or other sexual rights policies are largely left aside, although they serve as analytical counterpoints in this survey of the field” (p. 6). Moreover, the contributors do not engage in debating sexual and gender identities and orientations, which are mostly assumed for the sake of granting analytical space to how LGBTQ practices redefine conventional and/or normative concepts in IR. While advancing critical theory, the book also attempts to engage mainstream IR. Rather than talking past mainstream IR by engaging in debates ‘foreign’ to the discipline such as what makes a gender identity so, or rejecting core disciplinary concepts, *Sexualities in World Politics* looks at IR practices and concepts through LGBT lenses in view of re-evaluating them.

The reader should therefore not expect to find a queer international theory(ies) (Weber, 2014), but will be able to enjoy breadth and depth of analysis of LGBT(Q?) perspectives and experiences in the range of case studies and theoretical approaches that the volume offers. I put the Q in brackets and followed by a question mark because while queer thinking and theorising is certainly not the primary concern of the book, the editors rightly note that the demarcation line between inclusion and transgression is often thinner than imagined, especially if the end goal is not only the subversion of rigid sexual and gender dimorphism in favour of more fluid approaches, but also legal recognition and protection thereof. In fact, inclusion in a system of protection necessarily requires transgression of existing values and expectations.

The leading thread that connects the essays in the collection is LGBT rights, which is tackled from a range of different perspectives. Anthony Langlois questions whether LGBT rights can be queered, and presents the paradox of queer being an inherently anti-normative concept, and rights an inexorably normative one. Francine D’Amico and Markus Thiel take an institutional approach and explore respectively the difficulties of including LGBTIQ advocacy groups, and therefore LGBTIQ rights, in the UN system, and how the inclusion of LGBT rights in the EU is predicated upon the creation and consolidation of the neo-liberal market. Momin Rahman, Manuela Picq and Mehmet Sinan Birdal look at LGBT rights and issues respectively in the Muslim context, the Amazon, and Turkey to restore agency of LGBT communities and identities in these spaces often constructed as periphery in opposition to the European and North American core. They also affirm ‘glocalism’, rather than globalisation and post-colonialism, as the socio-political historical process that led to LGBT claims outside of Europe and North America. Michael J. Bosia and Sandra McEvoy raise interesting questions about LGBT issues and rights and the state in respectively Uganda and post-conflict Ireland. They ask what the role of the state is in producing ‘homosexualisation’ (Bosia), constructing homosexuality as a security issue and/or threat, and protecting LGBT identities in post-conflict scenarios (McEnvoy). Laura Sjoberg eloquently wraps up the edited volume, highlights the challenges of bringing LGBT rights and

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perspectives to IR, and proposes an 'integrative approach' between 'LGBT/queer/feminist/critical/postcolonial/mainstream IR' for the future of LGBTQ/queer IR (p. 169).

The extent to which this last suggestion by Sjoberg is naïve or best practice is up to the reader to judge. And in fact, these approaches might seem bad bedfellow at times, as for instance Anthony Langlois suggests in the case of queer and LGBT approaches, whereby one seeks subversion of and the other inclusion in existing norms. Similarly, Rahman points out that the postcolonial thesis positing homosexuality in former colonies as merely the result of Western colonisation is partial and tends to neglect agency and identification in sexual desire of post-colonial populations. Moreover, mainstream IR state-centrism is in itself a challenge to both queer and LGBT rights approaches. The tension between queer theorising, LGTB rights, and state-centrism becomes evident when considering, as Bosia does, that the state constructs the non-normative sexual subject as deviant. He argues that modernity is saturated with "state homophobia that gives life to the very notion of homosexuality it seeks to abort" (p. 41). In his view the state benefits from imperialism, capitalism, globalisation, and decolonisation at the expenses of non-normative sexualities to the extent that he defines the state a 'psychopath' because it "has no other interests than its own, [is] devoid of empathy or truthfulness, but at the same time [is] attractive and even charming" (p. 46).

His argument is supported by other contributors to the volume. In his chapter on the EU Thiel demonstrates how the modern western state capitalises on alternative sexualities. He argues that equality provisions in EU members are granted on and evaluated in market-based terms, as demonstrated by the fact that while in 2000 the EU passed an employment-based anti-discrimination law that, inter alia, encompasses sexual orientation, it is struggling to ratify the 2008 provision that goes beyond employment anti-discrimination. Thus, while the employment-based anti-discriminatory legislation ensures that LGBTIQ individuals are employed for the maximisation of capitalist efficiency, these same individuals are denied the protection of their social rights such as housing, education, and access to services on the basis of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation, an issue that becomes particularly relevant in those eight EU member states which are resisting the 2008 antidiscrimination provision, and where homophobia enjoys state' endorsement.

The book raises important questions not only about the tension between state-centrism and queer and LGBT politics, but also about the coexistence of universalism and particularism. D'Amico points at this in her contribution on the United Nations. Noting that, to date, there is no global instrument to protect the rights of LGBTIQ individuals, she delves into the naming and shaming of UN members who did not endorse the 2008 and 2011 UNGA SOGI Declaration and the 2006 Yogyakarta Principles. This contribution, though, provides no historical context that explains why some members endorse these provisions and others do not, thus representing a living example of the need of an 'integrative approach' between post-colonial and LGBT – if not also queer – approaches. D'Amico contribution makes another important point, namely, that LGBTIQ NGOs face incredible challenges to be granted consultative status to participate in UN meetings, and those which are allowed in are usually from Europe or North America, thus showing once again a predominant state- and western-centric approach to LGBTIQ rights. Bottom-up approaches are often curbed by the state-centric system, but they are crucial centres of resistance, as Birdal's contribution on how LGBT groups in Turkey forging alliances with other social groups in the 2013 Gezi protests have challenged the AKP ruling party demonstrates.

As Sjoberg notes in her concluding chapter, one of the major contribution of this edited volume is to bring LGBT perspectives outside of poststructuralism and towards empirical case studies which show how LGBT people's lives and experiences impact global politics. In particular the book is effective in providing case studies for theory-building. Picq's contribution on LGBT experiences in the Amazon, a space considered to be at the margin of modernity and a challenge to state borders, forces us to reimagine modernity, but also to consider how certain trans(gressive) spaces contest the state system. McEvoy's case study on post-conflict Ireland offers critical reflections on researcher's positionality. Embodying Enloe's famous statement that the personal is political and international, McEvoy personal experience as a lesbian researcher doing research in a post-conflict environment where gender roles are made more rigid, and within the conservative group of the Loyalist, reflects on the construction of dangerous bodies and the construction of security threats. Her research sheds light on the way LGBT and queer approaches can enrich critical security studies, and wishes for dialogue to be built with mainstream security studies too.

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Being an edited collection on such a hot topic as LGBT rights and issues, it is difficult to do justice to the many themes, sub-themes and nuances that the contributors have to offer. Unsurprisingly the reader should expect to find perspectives that can be at odd with each other. The book is an invaluable resource for IR scholars interested in sexualities and the (dis)connection between feminist, LGBT, and queer perspectives, critical and postcolonial scholars interested in sexuality, IR scholars who want to challenge and rethink disciplinary canons, norms and concepts, and for whoever is interested in going beyond the voices of LGBT individuals in Europe and North America.

Finally, those of us who are particularly bothered with terminology as well as material injustice might find 'queer' as noun and verb used in potentially disappointing ways, but we should bear in mind that terminological contestation is intrinsic to LGBT and queer fields of study. This is a timely collection that reflects the contemporary zeitgeist of LGBT politics, raises important disciplinary questions, and promises to open a dialogue not only with critical approaches, but with mainstream IR too.

References

Weber, C. (2015) Why is there no Queer International Theory? *European Journal of International Relations*. Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 27 – 51

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Federica Caso is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland where she is completing a thesis on the body and the militarisation of western post-conscription societies. She is co-editor of *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (E-International Relations, 2015), and her work features in *The Journal of Critical Military Studies* and more recently in the edited volume *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline* (ed. by Saunders and Strukov, Routledge, 2018). You can follow her on Twitter @Federica_Caso.