

Interview - Anthony J. Langlois

Written by E-International Relations

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E-IR has partnered with the journal *Politics* to bring a series of interviews with authors of a special section of its November 2016 edition titled 'Resurrecting IR Theory'. In this interview, Dr Anthony J. Langlois discusses his research on the relationship between International Relations Theory and Global Sexuality Politics. He is currently Associate Professor of International Relations at Flinders University.

You can find the full article by the author here (requires login / access).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in IR Theory?

Well, lots of wonderful people are doing terrific things! Being excited by something is a very individual and subjective state – but that suits me fine in this context, as I have often found myself less interested in the things one is “supposed to” focus on as an IR person, and more interested in other matters. Much that is in the article in question attests to this – sex, gender, queers, LGBTQ rights – even human rights per se, do not rate as “mainstream excitement” for most IR types. Human rights are central to my academic work, and they provide a touch stone for many very interesting debates in many ways. What is it to be human? What is a right – what is it to *be* right? I have always argued that human rights is fascinating because it poses complex questions of philosophy that connect directly with complex questions of policy, via both politics and law.

More broadly, I am very interested in a series of debates that touch on the following list of topics, some of which have really got traction in IR specifically, and perhaps some haven't: environmental change and its consequences; race in IR theory, information and post-capitalism; post-colonialism; and in human rights more specifically, questions (political and philosophical) that arise out of a range of critical theoretical approaches. Oh, and science fiction....

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

I will only give you the precis here.... I was brought up in a deeply pious, conservative, Christian environment. It was an environment that valued education however, and it had the great virtue of being outward-facing. A good education and international travel made me think about the world, but it took a long time for me to really understand how to ask and work through the consequences of critical questions.

By the time I did, I was in the final throes of a PhD on human rights in an International Relations Department. My reaction against the conservative communitarian theology of my intellectual formation till then saw me buddy up closely with the liberal mainstream of rights theory. But before long I found that rather asphyxiating, not to mention dull and complaisant. Since then I have turned into a critical human rights theorist and have found common cause with all those who critically affirm human rights, but who also see it as deeply political, who see all the unresolved philosophical questions and recognize the way in which they can have deeply problematic outcomes as they find application in our lives and institutions.

The analysis of critical theories such as queer theory and global sexuality politics identifies their value as resting in their ability to 'enrich' IR theory. Is the value of such perspectives, however, limited to

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enriching *theory* (i.e. through providing a different lens) or can these alternate lenses move beyond theory to have a notable impact in 'practice' as it were?

Certainly I think that IR theory can be enriched in this way, and for the purpose of the article, that was indeed, if you like, the brief I gave myself – my way of adopting the call for papers that was issued by the editors of the special section. At the same time, it is a very limited way of thinking about what these critical theories are about. Their goal, I am sure, is to do a lot more than enrich certain sclerotic academic disciplines; perhaps the analogy is with multiculturalism-lite. Over here in Australia we often debate multiculturalism, and there is inevitably this line, usually offered critically, of how multiculturalism is seen to be good because of the diverse range of food and cuisine it brings.... So this is my fear about what happens to an article like the one I have written here: it becomes useful for those who need to teach a week on IR and Queer in their survey course, and then that is that. Enrichment done. A bit of diversity has been shown, but basically, IR stays the way it was – although one rainbow coloured bauble gets added to the tree. The lens or glasses metaphor, for all its inadequacy, at least wants to push further and get us to see *everything* differently!

So, I think the purpose of critical approaches and their appearance in IR is not best understood through an “enriching IR” agenda, any more than the value and complexity of a multicultural society is really understood by the enhanced range of offerings at your local gastro-pub.

Is there room, and/or is it even possible for critical theories such as queer and sexual global politics to synergise with traditional IR theory (particularly when working from vastly different epistemological and/or ontological positions)? How do we ensure not 'talking past each other' in IR theory? Is such synergy desirable?

We use theory to do different things, and so any discussion of whether synergies may or may not be desirable, it seems to me, is going to depend on what you are trying to do. From this point of the view, the category “traditional IR theory” probably doesn't help us that much. If the purpose of traditional IR theory, say, is to ensure the security of a hegemonic state, to enable it to understand and pursue its interests, then perhaps there is not going to be much room for or purpose in trying to synergize – if your politics is antithetical to that view of the world. In this kind of scenario, perhaps talking past each other is, at some level, the only thing *to* do. This relates to your earlier question, in that our theorizing is already a politics and is already a practice.

On the other hand, tactically and strategically there are often good reasons for scholars with very different understandings of and approaches to IR to work together – even when they have irreconcilable differences on certain points or at a general theoretical level. If synergy means something much more fundamental than a tactical alliance for a time and a shared purpose though, then it may be out of the question. Does this have to mean talking past each other? In my view, if there is a mutual willingness to seek understanding, then people will understand, even when they cannot alter their positions as a matter of principle or constitution. The sad thing is that we often seem to lack the generosity to seek such understandings.

Global sexuality politics is argued as providing or creating conceptual and theoretical tools that can 're-write IR' (p.10), but how does this 're-writing' take place when traditional power structures often belie more salient conceptualizations? e. if 're-writing' is persistently relegated to the margins of IR scholarship how do we create the space to integrate these perspectives into conventional frameworks so as to 're-write' IR theory?

I don't have any great answers here. It seems to me that there are spaces that one can utilize when you stumble across them – for me, this article is such a case. I think the discipline has changed over time and can do so; but traditional power structures in academe as in most places change slowly. They are not the only structures however; press the advantage whenever and wherever you find you have it! Moreover, if other structures – conceptual and institutional – prove more germane, more salient, give you more traction or engage the world in better ways, perhaps you should run with them. Let IR be mired in its traditions if that is what it insists on, and move on to work with those who face the future.

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We should also consider how we regard the “margins” in such a discussion. If it is true that the re-writing is persistently relegated to the margins, then they will be vital places to be to try and understand the world. Institutionally they may be denigrated, but they may save your mind. So stay with them, and bring them with you as you get to occupy the more conventional spaces in whatever odd and peculiar ways you can. The alleged margins may turn out to be more mainstream than one imagines from the vantage point of the traditional institutional academe.

Queer theory amongst many other critical perspectives is often merged with activism (i.e. human rights activism) wherein the line between scholarship and activism blur. With this in mind is there room for understanding that which cannot be confined to the “lens of dominant liberal progress narratives” (p.10) and/or normativity?

I think there are lots of productive ways of understanding critical perspectives and activist perspectives, which don't line up with dominant liberal progress narratives. Since you mention human rights, let me use it as the example. The spread of human rights is often told as a linear progress narrative. I must confess to loving the confusion I see on my students' faces when I first flag that it's time to talk about how human rights are a bad thing. How can they possibly be a bad thing?

But they tend to get it quite quickly when we start thinking about what human rights are in our world. As a moral idea they raise the flag of emancipation and equality and freedom. As a set of institutional practices, they often mean a range of other things. The discussion in my article of Hilary Clinton and gay rights as human rights is just one example of how human rights never stand by themselves as an idea. They are always being used in some way, and that way may have both good and bad consequences; it may be being advanced in good faith or in bad faith – on its own terms or purely instrumentally. Do trade pacts with human rights conditionality advance the cause of human rights or degrade the norm? There are many other kinds of examples that we could use, most of which include dynamics of power, and should be (but often remain not) related to discourses of colonialism and to how levers are pulled and by whom in the international economy. Human rights are fundamentally an economic concern, which is something that seems somehow counterintuitive to a lot of people.

Often-times queer theory and/or global sexuality politics departs from Western ontological reasoning (liberal rationalist assumptions), how do we overcome these power dynamics *within* critical thought that often characterise alternative ontologies from differing cultural values (i.e. Confucian/African humanism etc) as illegitimate? Is alternative critical thought ever able to claim ‘legitimacy’ vis-à-vis the traditional core and moreover, how is this ‘power’/monopoly of the traditional core dismantled? To refer to the article, and specifically Picq and Thiel (2015), how can the ‘non-core’ be taken seriously?

I think absolutely central to this, as Picq and Thiel themselves argue, is being in the international and doing work there. Using what happens in the “non-core” as your theory building site. If you are doing work on sexual rights, for example, don't assume that things are going to play out the same way in Jakarta or Beijing as they do in New York or Sydney. Be international in a very direct sense by going from where you are and seeing how it is different somewhere else (or perhaps, sometimes, the same!), and theorize from there. Even more fundamentally, start with the theory making that is done by your colleagues and peers in the places they inhabit around the world, particularly the parts of the world that seem to not rate for the mainstream. The international is different, internationally. Fundamentally, don't wait for a critical idea to gain traction and legitimacy before trying it on or giving it a spin. Take it seriously, work with it, and *show* a different way of looking at the world.

Of course this applies a lot more broadly than to the topic of sexuality politics. It should apply to all topics in IR! At one level, the only way alternative critical thought is going to get runs on the board vis-à-vis the mainstream is by doing the work and *showing* the difference. Will it be noticed? Will it get legitimacy – indeed, should it want to claim that kind of legitimacy? These questions are multilayered and range from very practical issues like getting your supervisor on board for a project or getting published, through to the big picture questions of changing the discussion in the discipline. These questions really need to be teased out in quite some detail, and everyone will have a different take on it.

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

First, if you want to be an academic, make sure you know just how tough it is going to be. The work is immensely rewarding, but the environment in which most of us work is under incredible strain. For young, insecure workers, coming in as junior scholars, I fail to see how it can be experienced as anything other than a nightmare. Make sure you know what you are getting into, and if you are still mad enough to love academe, make sure you do what you can to surround yourself with support structures and kind people. And then: follow the good ideas where they lead. Don't be cowed and hemmed in by disciplinary boundaries or other considerations. You need to know your stuff, that goes without saying. But be open to new things, and follow those leads. Finally, talk to people. Share your ideas, your hopes for them and your fears about them!

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This interview was conducted by Stacey Links. Stacey is a Commissioning Editor at E-IR.