

# Introducing Queer Theory in International Relations

Written by Markus Thiel

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/07/queer-theory-in-international-relations/>

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Queer theory offers a significant avenue through which to deconstruct and then reconstruct established IR concepts and theories. Stemming from various fields that transcend a narrow view of IR, queer research applies an interdisciplinary outlook to advance new critical perspectives on sexualities, gender and beyond. A single viewpoint in a field as diverse as IR would unnecessarily limit the range of scholarly viewpoints. It would also preclude a nuanced debate about the contents and forms of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) perspectives, queer scholarship and queer scholarly politics in IR. Due to these themes, and because of its diversity, it is difficult to define queer theory precisely. Indeed, a narrow definition of it would not be in line with queer theoretical tenets. Queer theory is not just confined to sexualities or sexual rights. It also questions established social, economic and political power relations – and critically interrogates notions of security.

### **The basics of queer theory**

Queer theory’s origins are in LGBT studies – which focus on sexuality and gender. It soon distanced itself from those approaches due to disagreements with the stable identities that LGBT studies suggest. Queer theory emphasises the fluid and humanly performed nature of sexuality – or better, sexualities. It questions socially established norms and dualistic categories with a special focus on challenging sexual (heterosexual/homosexual), gender (male/female), class (rich/poor), racial (white/non-white) classifications. It goes beyond these so-called ‘binaries’ to contest general political (private/public) as well as international binary orders (democratic/ authoritarian). These are viewed as over-generalising theoretical constructs that produce an either/or mode of analysis that hides more than it clarifies and is unable to detect nuanced differences and contradictions. But queer theory also analyses and critiques societal and political norms in particular as they relate to the experience of sexuality and gender. These are not viewed as private affairs. Just as feminists perceive of gender as a socially constructed public and political affair, so queer theorists argue with regards to sexuality and gender expression.

As the word ‘queer’ was used to describe homosexuals in the nineteenth century, queer theory traces its lineage from the study of sexuality in its private and public forms. A commonplace meaning attributed to the term revolves around being non-conforming in terms of sexuality and gender, thus adding an ambiguous notion to being or acting queer. Hence a queer approach towards sexual equality complicates identity-based LGBT advocacy, as queer thinking expresses a more challenging, fluid perspective. This split has become even more pronounced as the international politics of sexual orientation and gender identity receives an ever-increasing degree of public attention. Some states have implemented substantial equality provisions in order to prove that they are ‘modern’ or ‘Western’ enough, while others have responded with pushback in the form of homophobic legislation and persecution. Sexual orientation and gender identity rights, which themselves are questioned by queer theorists as overly reliant on Western liberal norms of human rights and democracy, have become points of political contention, eliciting domestic culture wars as well.

Consider the debate in the United States over whether transgender individuals should be free to use the toilet of their personal choice. The status of sexuality and gender politics in IR has clearly been elevated via cases such as this which can quickly transcend domestic politics and enter the international realm. In addition, it has also impacted

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apparently unrelated policies such as defence policies, health care and labour market regulations and thus created new avenues for the re-construction of conventional IR concepts. As a result, new perspectives are needed to explain this inherent part of the social and political world. Queer theory does not assume a uniform access to reality, but rather acknowledges that subjective knowledge(s) about sexuality, gender and other social aspects are constructed rather than pre-existent, fluid rather than stable, and not always in line with societal norms. In this sense, queer theory has moved beyond focusing simply on the experience of sexuality and gender.

Sexuality politics and the queer scholarship connected to it arrived late on the theoretical scene in part because sexuality and gender initially were anchored in the private, rather than the public, spheres. Scholars advanced critical and feminist viewpoints emerging from the writings of Michel Foucault (1976), Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) among others. Foucault's groundbreaking linking of sexuality and knowledge to political power, and Butler's rejection of stable sexual orientation and gender identities in favour of everyday performed ones remain foundational notions. Kosofsky Sedgwick's calling attention to the discursive definition of homo/ heterosexuality in society further defined queer thinking. These scholarly statements were hardly accepted in mainstream political science because they rejected objectivity and highlighted the conditional and unstable human nature of social and political orders, including IR questions of security and governance. Hence queer theory evolved largely in literature, philosophy, sociology and queer studies programmes without making substantial inroads into IR theorising.

Despite the distinct emergence of queer theory from these wider origins, some questions remain. One of the major issues is to what extent 'queer' should be adopted as a label for transgressive (socially unacceptable) forms of thinking and acting – as this would in turn create a queer/mainstream binary. This is something that queer scholars argue against. Another issue lies in the vague definition of queer theoretical tenets and terms, leading to uncertainty about how a queer theoretical lens can best be deployed in various disciplines by a wide range of individuals. In its application to IR, queer theory challenges many assumptions about world politics unrelated to sexuality and gender. It aims to deconstruct established simplistic binaries – such as insecurity/security or war/peace – and recognises the inherent instability of political and social orders. Instead, it embraces the fluid, performative and ambiguous aspects of world politics. Hence, it criticises those approaches to politics and society that assume natural and moral hierarchies. It problematises, for instance, the way in which non-traditional sexualities have become normalised according to 'hetero-normative' standards, including the aspiration towards marriage and child rearing. Queer theorists argue that this results in a societal integration of sexual minorities into mainstream consumer society – making them less willing (or able) to contest deeper political inequalities.

Queer theory perceives sexuality and gender as social constructs that shape the way sexual orientation and gender identity are displayed in public – and thereby often reduced to black-and-white issues that can be manipulated or distorted. With regard to more classical IR topics, it critically assesses the assumption that all societies find themselves at different points along a linear path of political and economic development or adhere to a universal set of norms. Hence it embraces ambiguity, failure and conflict as a counterpoint to a dominant progressive thinking evident in many foreign or development policies. As a scholarly undertaking, queer theory research constitutes of 'any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations' (Nash and Browne 2012, 4).

Weber (2014) highlights a lack of attention to queer theory by decrying the closed-mindedness of standard IR theories, arguing that queer scholarship in IR exists but is not recognised. The invisibility of queer theory is slowly changing, with case-study work on state homophobia (Weiss and Bosia 2013) or collective identity politics (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014) and the increasing relevance of transnational LGBT rights discourses for IR scholarship. But if empirical work in this area concentrates mainly on the agency of groups in their surrounding political structure, what is 'queer' about LGBT advocacy perspectives? These works offer comparative case studies from regional, cultural and theoretical peripheries to identify new ways of theorising the political subject by questioning the role of the state as we have come to accept it. They add to IR by broadening the knowledge about previously under-recognised perspectives that critically examine IR's apparently obvious core concepts (or 'myths', as Weber calls them) such as sovereignty, power, security and nationalism. They do so from the vantage point of the outsider and infuse these well-worn IR concepts with critical considerations and interpretations. Importantly, they contest existing dualistic binaries in mainstream IR – such as state/system, modern liberalism/premodern homo-phobia, and West/Rest. Queer IR

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scholars look for the contribution queer analysis can provide for re-imagining the political individual, as well as the international structure in which people are embedded.

Reflecting on the possible futures of queer theory, there are various important aspects to consider. Progress in LGBT politics is mainly limited to the Global West and North and evokes culture wars about how hetero-normative such advocacy should be. And, it elicits international (homo)colonialist contentions about the culturally intrusive manner by which LGBT rights are promoted. This becomes clear when powerful transnational groups, governments or international organisations propose to make foreign aid disbursement conditional on equality reforms in certain countries. At the same time, they do not sufficiently recognise that their explicit LGBT support increases the marginalisation of minorities in certain states. It has to be mentioned though, that many LGBT organisations have a better understanding of local contexts and often act with the cooperation of local activists, though typically in a weaker position than the intergovernmental institutions they are allied with. LGBT politics and queer IR research can inspire and parallel each other as long as sexual advocacy politics does not fall prey to overly liberal, patronising politics. No matter if in the domestic or international arenas a number of problematic issues remain with the alleged progress of LGBT politics: if predominantly gay and lesbian rights such as marriage and adoption equality are aimed for, can one speak of true equality while transgender individuals still lack healthcare access or protection from hate crimes? And if the normalisation of Western LGBT individuals into consuming, depoliticised populations leads to a weakening of solidarity with foreign LGBT activists and appreciation of their difference, what effects does this have on global LGBT emancipation? Queer theory is an important tool for helping to better appreciate the complexity of these debates.

## Queer theory and sexual equality in Europe

Globalisation has equipped queer theorists and activists with an expanded terrain for intervention. With reference to LGBT advocacy politics, the emergence of numerous Western-organised non-governmental organisations but also local LGBT movements with the significant publicity they generate – be it positive or negative – expands transnational politics to a previously unknown degree. Both chip away at the centrality of the state in regulating and protecting its citizens. A key place this can be detected is within debates in the European Union (EU), which is an international organisation with supranational (law-making) powers over its member states.

The inclusion of LGBT individuals not as abject minorities but as human rights carriers with inherent dignity and individual rights of expression may transform the relationship between a marginalised citizenry and governmental authority – both at the state and EU level. But queer theory does not always align comfortably with the predominant political strategies advanced through transnational LGBT rights advocacy in Europe. It disputes many existing socio-political institutions such as neoliberal capitalism or regulatory citizenship that form the bedrocks of European politics. LGBT advocacy is, at times, viewed by queer theory as conforming, heteronormative, stereotyping and even (homo)nationalistic in its particular value-laden Western overtones. This is because it assumes that striving for Western standards of equality and inclusion is universally applicable and leads to liberation and inclusion. These become evident in the pressuring of more conservative European states to adopt certain policies, which often produce counter-productive tensions and expose vulnerable minorities. LGBT advocacy is aimed at inclusion within existing forms of representation rather than the appreciation of difference that queer theory strives at. Thus, LGBT organisations often appear ‘de-queered’ for political purposes to gain approval by the rest of society, which often leads to internal debates about their representation and goals.

Tensions between mainstream advocacy and radical queer approaches signify the need to rethink simplistic IR analytical approaches. Political tensions in the ‘real’ world prompt the queer IR theorist to question generally accepted, established conceptions of international governance. In doing so, queer theorists use existing literature or audio-visual material such as movies or even performances to go beyond the apparently obvious to deconstruct and then reconstruct IR events and processes. They often exhibit a critical perspective towards naturally assumed conditions of space and time that tend to conceal and flatten differences among actors and interpretations of international events. For example, Cynthia Weber (2016) uses Hillary Clinton’s sexual rights speech at the United Nations in 2011 and contrasts it with Conchita Wurst’s winning performance at the Eurovision song contest in 2014 to highlight a ‘queer logic of statecraft’ that contests traditional, gendered and binary approaches to governance.

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Weber highlights how despite transforming the notion of the homosexual from deviant into normal rights-holder in her speech, Clinton still produced an international binary of progressive versus intolerant states. On the other hand, Conchita Wurst – a character created by Thomas Neuwirth – challenged accepted notions of what is considered normal or perverse by performing in drag with a beard. In the course of this, Wurst destabilised racial, sexual, gendered and geo-political notions of what it means to be a European. Taken together, both cases show how seemingly stable ideas in international relations are far from natural. Instead, they are intentionally created, normalised, challenged and reconfigured.

Looking deeper at issues within Europe, the EU's justification of sexual non-discrimination on neoliberal market policies highlights the ambiguous positioning of the EU when it advocates limited equality provisions (Thiel 2015). This anti-discrimination policy is being implemented in the EU's complex multi-level governance system that includes EU institutions as rights 'givers', member states as not always compliant 'takers', and LGBT groups somewhere in the middle. In addition to this potentially problematic setting, the EU's anti-discrimination policy package applies only to employment-related discrimination. But Europe's largest LGBT advocacy group, the International Lesbian, Gay, Trans, Bisexual and Intersex Association (ILGA Europe), together with many other groups has been pressing the case for a broader anti-discrimination law covering all areas of life. This is complicated by the fact that a few powerful states do not want to broaden the existing market-based law and by EU hesitancy to reach beyond its focus on economic rights and freedoms.

It becomes evident that the dominance of neoliberalism as the EU's main rationale limits the rights attainment of LGBT individuals because it restricts alternative critical views. Given the EU's orientation, non-governmental organisations are pressured to prioritise market-principles such as labour participation, while becoming more dependent on governmental or EU funding. At the same time, this increase in non-governmental advocacy coincides with a retreat of governments in social and welfare sectors. This diminishes the potential for contesting existing policies and potentially their legitimacy, as groups have to link anti-discrimination activities with more societal and labour market inclusion if they want to retain funding from the EU. Such reorientation around neoliberal EU objectives produces a hierarchy of rights which risks putting social inclusion and a wider sense of equality at the bottom.

This case study thus questions the cooperation of non-governmental advocacy organisations with a supranational governance system that is at least partly responsible for constraining national welfare policies. Moreover, the EU's valuation of rights is problematic because inalienable rights are being made an object of economic value and output. Yet it cannot be criticised in a system in which EU policy planning is protected by its supposed non-political regulatory, expert-led nature – reminding us of Foucault's knowledge-power linkage. It also implies that a reflection of norms is needed, in the way neoliberal heteronormativity is desired by political actors in the EU policy process and accordingly (re)produced or challenged by gender/sex-based rights groups. The feminist contribution to IR highlights uneven gendered power relations, but a critical political economy perspective that merges concerns about structural injustice with the thoughtful critique of queer theory's view on civil society inclusion adds profound insights into the politics of sexual rights recognition. This is most relevant here when considering queer theory's theoretical tenets such as taking seriously the distinct positions of political actors and the often troubling content of public policy.

## Conclusion

The development of queer theory in IR suggests that more rigorous questions of the impact of LGBT issues in international politics have begun to be successfully answered. It highlights the valuable contribution to analysing IR through until now unrecognised perspectives on sexual and gender expression. Queer theory has also proven to be theoretically inclusive in ways that LGBT and feminist scholarship sometimes has not. A question that remains is whether queer theorists can recognise – and perhaps transcend – their own racial, class and Western-centric orientations. Such broadening would also make it easier to find common cause with other affected minorities – not least to move from a purely critical or deconstructive mode to a more transformative and productive one. Precisely because queer theory is able to transcend the focus on sexuality and gender through general analytical principles, it lends itself to interrogating a wide range of IR phenomena. In a time when IR is often accused of being parochial, queer theory is a necessary corrective to powerful myths and narratives of international orders.

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## About the author:

**Markus Thiel** is assistant professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Florida International University, Miami & research associate at Miami-FIU's EU Center of Excellence. He has published several articles in the Journal of European Integration, International Studies Encyclopedia, Perspectives on European Politics & Society, and others. In addition, his research on the political sociology of the EU produced a monograph, 'The Limits of Transnationalism' (Palgrave, 2011), and 4 co-edited volume on: 'Diversity and the European Union' (Palgrave, 2009), 'Identity Politics in the Age of Globalization' (Lynne Rienner/First Forum Press, 2010), 'European Identity & Culture' (Ashgate, 2012) and 'Sexualities in World Politics' (Picq & Thiel, 2015). Besides his focus on LGBT perspectives in IR, he is currently working on a book on the linkage of European transnational NGOs with the EU Fundamental Rights Agency.