

# Student Feature - Theory in Action: Queer Theory and Sexual Equality

Written by Markus Thiel

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## Student Feature - Theory in Action: Queer Theory and Sexual Equality

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/07/13/student-feature-theory-in-action-queer-theory-and-sexual-equality-in-europe/>

MARKUS THIEL, JUL 13 2019

**This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.**

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.

### *LGBT Advocacy*

<https://www.ilga-europe.org/what-we-do/our-advocacy-work>

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.

### *On the History of Queer Theory*

<http://isj.org.uk/queer-theory-and-politics/>

### *How to Study Queer Theory*

### *Advancing Queer Theory with New Concepts*

<https://www.sas.upenn.edu/gsws/center/media/podcast/apc-podcast-2-janet-jakobsen-whats-left-queer-theory-now>

Tensions between mainstream advocacy and radical queer approaches signify the need to rethink simplistic IR

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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. 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.

### *Weber's Lecture on Queer IR*

Cynthia Weber, Groningen lecture on Queer IR, and symposium at The Disorder of Things

### *Cynthia Weber Explains Queer Theory*

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.

### *What is Neoliberalism?*

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.

### *The Economic Cost of LGBT Discrimination*

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-real-cost-of-lgbt-discrimination/>

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.

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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.

*Queer Research*

<https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-265#acrefore-9780190228637-e-265-bibliem-0072>

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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.