

## Interview – Andrew Delatolla

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview – Andrew Delatolla

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**This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.**

Dr Andrew Delatolla is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Middle Eastern Studies in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Previously, he was Assistant Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at the American University in Cairo. His research focuses on issues of race, gender, and sexuality in relation to statehood and state formation in the Middle East and North Africa. His recent publications include *Civilization and the Making of the State in Lebanon and Syria* (Palgrave, 2021) and *Sexuality as a Standard of Civilization* (ISQ, 2020).

**What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?**

I have had an incredible journey through academia. I started off in Fine Arts at OCAD University in Ontario. As an 18 year old starting university, I did not realize how much of a privilege it was to be in that kind of a space, to be in such a creative environment, and to be engaging with authors, thinkers and theorists like Donna Haraway, Susan Bordo, bell hooks, Michel Foucault, Jeanette Winterson, Audre Lorde, and more. I thought that was standard across the board reading for university level. I took it for granted as I was more focused on the politics of, or political discourses within, art or art history, and was more interested in human rights issues in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Because of this interest, I decided to pursue a degree in Political Science, and it was there that I realized how lucky I was to engage with feminist, queer, and critical scholarship of that caliber and in that kind of space. In Political Science we covered the standard 'isms' but any time I wanted to bring in something more critical, it was usually met with a quizzical look.

In this degree, I had to learn a whole new language of "proper science" but then unlearned all of this during my PhD. I started to reflect on my days in art school and think about not just the intellectual engagement that was happening in the classroom but also the lived experience of art school where it was normal to have trans\* colleagues, to be out and gay, to talk about gender and issues of binaries, the experiences of being queer, which was not necessarily the case when I went into Political Science, or even War Studies after that, where there seemed to be a lot of epistemological blind spots.

Unlearning was not something I did on my own. I think a lot of the reflection that happened in my PhD is owed to my particular cohort, Ida Danewid, Evelyn Pauls, Joanne Yao, Kiran Phull, Anissa Hadadi, Sophie Haspeslagh and many more. Without knowing it, they kind of pushed me out of the "real science" comfort zone and forced me to rethink all of this. It was not explicit and a lot of it was just reading their work and engaging with them in discussion. But they were generous and kind with their own thinking and with what they had read themselves. I owe a great deal to them and, later, to the queer community in IR.

In the queer community in IR, there are so many amazing scholars who have not just paved the way for the ability to

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be queer in academia, to study sexuality, and queer theory, and kind of centre queer theory as a theoretical paradigm in IR itself, but they have also been incredibly generous, thoughtful, kind, and honest. That has really allowed me to explore questions that I would not have otherwise explored. Growing up queer, you are expected to fit into these kinds of heteronormative moulds, to be perceived as “normal”, and do “normal work” but there is an awkwardness to that. Without those queer scholars, without those people I was able to engage with, I would probably not love the academic work as much as I do now and would be trying to put myself into a mould that just does not fit. A lot is owed to Jaz Dawson, Michael Bosia, Momin Rahman, Melanie Richter-Montpetit, Alison Howell, Koen Sloomaeckers – the list is endless and I am forgetting so many people who have influenced me, reached their hand out to me, and helped me along my journey – I would not be where I am today without them. It shows that there is a strong community of queer scholars that are helping each other out and that is so important. It can otherwise be a lonely and uncomfortable place.

### **How is the contemporary governance of sexuality in the West, and the attached notions of progress, challenged by trans and queer responses and activism in West Asia and North Africa?**

There is a false image of Western progress, on the one hand, and in dialogue with that is the image of South West Asian and North African barbarity and uncivilized engagement, on the other. Following from Edward Said's Orientalism, there is a necessary mirror that develops as to how the West sees itself progressing in relation to the rest and how the rest responds to that. This is not to discount the kinds of rights that have been won by LGBTQ people and communities in the West, but those rights do not formulate an end point. They are by no means the end of history for LGBTQ communities in the West, despite what some may think. For example, there is this notion that gay marriage is the epitome of what is being asked for in relation and now that it has been won, the struggle is over, but there are many individuals in the West who are left out and marriage isn't necessarily liberatory or emancipatory. When we engage in LGBTQ activism, we need to center the bodies and voices that are left out and continue to be. There is no progress without them. Pride would not have been a 'thing' without trans\* women of color, queer people of color, Black queers, people who have been marginalized because of their race, gender identity, and sexuality. We need to take those histories seriously and explore and understand them. In relation to that we need to understand the whiteness of civility that is bound to state-based rights, like marriage. When we think about Western notions of “progress”, there is a kind of civility that is enshrined in it—be it in the form of homonationalism or homonormativity. We need to be aware of how those politics of civility can be silencing for a lot of people, especially Black, Indigenous, people of color, trans\*, and gender non-conforming.

Because of this premise of civility, the West paints a picture of barbarity using queer communities in the majority world; highlighting violence against LGBTQ communities, but when similar kinds of violence take place in the West, it gets ignored. For example, the kinds of violence that is perpetuated on Western borders or in the context of Israeli occupation of Palestine. We need to listen to critiques that disassemble homonormative and homonationalist structures that are very much based on heteronormative and heteronationalist foundations. The problem is that we tend to center heteronormative and heteronationalist structures and institutions, which are scaled up versions of household relations, as being 'right' or 'good'.

When discussing household relations or governance, I am thinking about Fredrich Engels here and his arguments about the household, the emergence of capitalism, and how the state becomes a scaled-up version of the household. We see this focus on the family and the household in heteronormative and heteronationalist discussions, its production in the state, and how this allows the state to count bodies as productive units. Because rights are so state-centric, if we think about cultural battles of LGBTQ rights, whether they are happening in Eastern Europe or in the Middle East and North Africa and elsewhere, a lot of it is centered on the “traditional family” and “household” values. One way that we can begin to rethink how the family is tied to the state and rights, and the kinds of violence that produces, is to critique the state, state governance that is tied up in social and national values and that are layered into ideas of the family looking a particular way. This has been at the center of so much activist work and thinking by Black, Indigenous, people of color – a fantastic and recent book that gets to heart of the state's relationship with Black queer communities is Ger Shun Avilez's 2020 book *Black Queer Freedom: Spaces of Injury and Paths of Desire*.

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That being said, when our research and ideas travel to include voices of these activists, we also need to tread carefully by understanding our privilege, and sometimes the privilege of those who are able to engage in activist work, as well as the sacrifices that are made despite the privilege. We also need to consider that while concepts travel, their meanings don't. For example, in thinking about LGBTQ as a label, there can be a reproduction of the LGBTQ label among the urban middle and upper middle-class communities that does not necessarily exist in the same conceptual framing in rural or working class communities in Cairo and Beirut. In these spaces, while it may be in the same state or city even, there is a politic and economy of the reproduction of the LGBTQ label and a politic and economy to its non-use. This disrupts our understanding of the sexuality and gender identity because the politics of labeling that have framed Western "progress" does not necessarily translate neatly into these spaces or communities. That does not mean that these identities don't exist or that there is an imperialism to these labels or identities and should, therefore, be rejected, but that care needs to be taken in understanding the social, political, and economic underpinnings of how these labels and identities are mobilized (or not mobilized) from different places.

### **What does indigenous knowledge about Western imperialist sexual governance offer Queer IR?**

I am not an expert on indigenous knowledge but I have thoroughly enjoyed reading and speaking to Manuela Picq. Her work and those of many others helps us break away from the constraints of LGBTQ labels, gender binaries, and it is truly a process of queering in so many ways, because those labels and binaries may not necessarily translate to various geographies, cultures, class-based societies, and communities across the world. I find work on indigenous knowledge and sexuality so rich and well-developed in its understanding of the world, social context, and politics. It makes one realize how limited and limiting a lot of Western labels are. This kind of self-imposed conceptual limitation needs to be broken. I think there's a politics to labelling, and with regards to sexuality, that politics relates to Western ideas of progress, which invokes narratives regarding culture wars, questions of imperialism, the 'gay international', etc. that are problematic, contemporary, and developed from places of privilege. We have to contextualize and problematize these ideas of progress. I think doing that in relation to indigenous knowledge production, with regards to sexuality, and what that meant historically, is one way to do it, and speaks a lot as to where queer IR is headed.

### **What is homocolonialism and how does your conceptualization contribute to existing understandings? How do you think homocolonialism has operated to intensify marginalization along lines of race, gender and class during the pandemic?**

I try to trace a historical understanding of homocolonialism in terms of how labels, paradigms and the politics of sexuality emerge in Western imperial histories with anti-homosexuality laws and anti-buggery acts. These laws were exported and helped structure the state and society in a manner that is heterocolonialist. What this means is that in these histories, we see an attempt to export a particular set of binary gender relations that are constitutive of how we imagine the family and gendered labor within the household. These policies were justified as part of the civilizing projects of imperialism and colonialism and intersected with racial hierarchies.

What happens is we move from a heterocolonialism to a homocolonialism, where a particular framework of how to be 'gay' is constrained by heterosexual norms, structures, and institutions. It is a continuation of the civilizing project that displaces the radical politics of the queer liberation movement and instead locates gay acceptance in capitalist engagement and the state. As homocoloniality is reinforced on a global stage, homosexuality becomes a battleground, where rights – according to Western governments – look a certain way, and where homosexuality – according to governments in the majority world – is considered foreign and neo-imperial. It is the queer community, and the Black, Indigenous, and queer people of color that are often ignored and end up paying the price.

My intellectual departing point in thinking about how the state is gendered and productive of gender and sexuality begins with Swati Parashar, J. Ann Tickner, and Jacqui True's edited volume entitled *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations*. I am also tying this into discussions of social reproduction – thinking about Spike V. Peterson – related to the state and sexuality; how gendered roles are necessary for social reproduction and capital accumulation; and how that positions state structures and institutions as necessarily reliant on heterosexual relations. Without understanding the historical and sociological foundations of homocolonialism, we can't do justice to understanding how homocolonialism is the heir of other imperialist forms of governance that

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attempt to civilize bodies in particular ways. This helps contextualize and cut through many debates on international rights regimes, culture wars, debates on ‘tradition’, religion and differences in religion.

The pandemic itself has very much changed the way we have come to expect to live, restricting freedom of mobility for so many people. But individuals who are racialized and gendered in particular ways have had to deal with these restrictions, even before the pandemic, and I worry that it will have a knock-on effect for these individuals; further restricting their mobility. Especially with borders closing, vaccine passports, the hierarchy of vaccines, some communities in the world will now be further displaced and marginalized, with even less mobility following the pandemic. I haven’t yet thought about how homocolonialism plays a larger role in these dynamics, to be honest.

### **How might the study of sex and sexuality in IR, specifically Queer IR, change due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the implications of the governance of sexuality in the West?**

The pandemic is having an impact on funding, department structures and what managers in knowledge production in universities see as “good research”. In the UK we are seeing mandatory redundancies and cuts in government funding which have ended a number of Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects and international research project hubs. In the UK, a lot of this is pandemic-related but could also be related to Brexit. But it is not just the UK, there are funding cuts at universities almost everywhere and this is going to have a huge impact on research on public health. While some may think that this area will be priority, research on public health needs to be talking to researchers who study race, gender, and sexuality, it needs to revision what business management is, and develop new solutions. We can’t have new solutions without critical research.

The pandemic also came at a time when we were seeing the rise of nationalism and populism, particularly the populist right. We are seeing that play out in debates on critical race theory – various politicians in the US, UK, and France, are essentially denouncing critical race theory without even knowing what it is and then turning around and claiming to be anti-racist. It baffles the mind, but it is very much based in the context of (white) nationalism where the already present language of security has been made stronger with the pandemic. This coupled with dehumanizing discussions regarding gender queer and trans\* individuals, it is really worrying where we are headed.

With funding cuts and attacks on critical race theory, BLM, gender queer and trans\* individuals, it is necessary now more than ever to present a strong front to the discipline of International Relations. We need to make it known that our research is important, that it is not a peripheral discussion, that it shouldn’t be relegated to the last week of teaching. It should be the departing point of everything we teach. For example, can we better understand the logics of realist theories of international relations by first discussing white-masculinity? I think the next few years are going to be extremely charged, having to make a case for ourselves and our research, as we always have to, but also making a case for our colleagues. If there is a union at your university, please join it. It will make our labor and work stronger.

### **What are you currently working on?**

I am working on a number of things. I am working with the fabulous Jamie Hagen and Samuel Ritholtz on an edited volume on Queer Methodologies – hopefully, that will come to fruition in the next two years. We have managed to speak to a number of researchers and there is a lot of interest, so that will be nice to pull together. I am also working with Ahmad Qais Munhazim on a book. We are at the beginning stages and we are in dialogue with each other about the idea of civilization and sexuality and the histories and politics of it. Over the summer it will hopefully take a more concrete shape and form. I am excited about these projects and it is such a privilege to be working with such fantastic, supportive and generous colleagues.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars, especially queer IR scholars?**

Queer spaces in IR are very welcoming—just reach out to people. It was something that surprised me as a PhD student. I would never have gotten involved with the LGBTQ Caucus of the International Studies Association (ISA) had it not been for a friend and colleague, Jaz Dawson, who essentially grabbed my hand at one ISA conference and pulled me to a workshop where I got to meet other queer scholars, discuss research, and our experiences. I was not

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working on queer IR or sexuality at the time but being with people I could be myself around was nice. All that to say, find and engage with your community, whoever they might be, and do not ever think of yourself as a burden—that kind of thinking limits you. Most of the time people will be very happy to read your work and give comments. It is okay to be scared and intimidated, but do not hesitate to reach out to someone because of it. They will likely see that it is coming from a good place and they will very much appreciate it. There is a discomfort as a queer scholar to be in hetero spaces and having to play certain kinds of gender(ed) roles. A lot of that is conditioned. It takes time to remove those barriers and take out each brick one by one. And once you start the process, it becomes very freeing. Also, interacting with your PhD cohort as much as possible is really important. Without the sense of community, I had when I started my PhD, I do not think I would have been challenged in the ways that I was, and developed my thinking in the way I did. You won't realize it right away, but you are making friendships, and those friendships are long lasting and supportive.