

Review – The European Union's International Promotion of LGBTI Rights

Written by M.J. Bosia

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The European Union's International Promotion of LGBTI Rights: Promises and Pitfalls

By Markus Thiel

Routledge, 2021

Activists and political leaders in the Global North have turned to LGBT rights as a key agenda item in foreign policy as part of the liberal order, both normatively and in the provision of aid. This is despite the lack of cohesive policy or consistent and binding change on LGBT rights in their own jurisdictions. At the same time, scholars have been increasingly critical about these interventions, as have some sexual and gender minority activists in the Global South. In my own work I have documented the preemptive emergence of state homophobia in Uganda and the sociopathic dynamic of sovereign states in general (Bosia 2015) to criticize these foreign policy initiatives. And since the publication of *Development, Sexual Rights, and Global Governance* (Lind 2010), scholars including Rahman (2014), Mason (2018), and Rao (2020) have pioneered critical and decolonizing approaches in the study of global LGBT rights. Referencing this scholarship, *The European Union's International Promotion of LGBTI Rights* offers the first examination of the elaboration and effectiveness of EU foreign policy on LGBT rights, both through EU institutions and those of member states, and particularly hones in on the dynamics that challenge LGBT rights interventions. EU scholar Markus Thiel's innovation includes a thoroughly researched description of international policy processes and initiatives on LGBT rights to examine their implementation, reception, and effectiveness in accession states in Europe, neighboring states not considered available for a direct EU embrace, and states liberated from European colonial empires.

Thiel places the challenge to the EU's foreign policy on LGBT rights within the context of an insufficiently realized European normative power, despite the foundation of the EU in values. He lays out the challenge thus: "In that sense, Normative Power Europe (NPE) is constituted of both the somewhat autonomous common institutions (such as the European Commission or the Parliament) which in a regular manner vocally pronounce normative ideas and expectations ... and the member governments, which may be more or less normatively motivated" (p.35). Within this context of limited sovereign or norms-bounded power at the regional or national levels, Thiel notes that the EU meets a variety of internal and external pressures. These include the "Potemkin" nature of pro-LGBT policies adopted by candidate states, abandoned or outright reversed soon after admission to the EU; the admixture of homophobic and xenophobic policies within the EU that make NPE hectoring at best and neocolonial and racist at worst; and the transformation of once radical sexual and gender minority demands to be consistent with the heteronormative and neoliberal agenda central to EU policy making.

The text is organized across four institutional dimensions. First, Thiel examines the inconsistent embrace of LGBT rights within member states themselves. These differences are most obvious between the "old" democracies of Western Europe who founded the EU and the "new" members in Central and Eastern Europe, but they also divide older Europe along a North-South axis, with Italy and Greece lagging on measures like full marriage equality (not accounted for are the lag in extending marriage in Germany and Northern Ireland). Of particular concern are the opposition of some member states, including Poland and Hungary, to the centrality of LGBT rights to European values. Next, Thiel turns to EU interventions in the arena where Brussels (the EU capital) has been the most

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effective: accession to the union itself. LGBT rights were on the agenda for institutional reform within the mandate to implement democratic decision-making processes prior to admission, with the EU providing expertise and support for these transformations. Consequently, the wave of admissions in the first decade of the 21st century was characterized by the elimination of impediments to citizenship such as criminalization of sexual conduct. Later, however, the effect of these “Potemkin” changes, as Thiel describes them, was reversed in states central to the expanded EU. Hungary and Poland specifically have targeted LGBT+ citizens in rhetoric and policy. The application of such standards also have been variously exploited by candidate states as well as being undermined by the EU’s own geopolitical priorities as other issues associated with accession came to dominate over LGBT inclusion.

Finally, Thiel turns to the EU’s role in the world, focusing on development aid and conditionality in relationship to once colonial states, and on the role of the EU within international institutions such as the UN. Through the former, the text lays out evidence of suboptimal policy making as it arrives through the same colonial ideologies about civilization that the EU is hoping to suppress. From the perspective of sexual and gender minorities, Thiel notes that moves to condition aid on EU normative priorities has been opposed by activists in the Global South, as it included aid in civil society as well. At the same time, some recipient governments have characterized the EU’s approach as colonial domination. Political leaders in the Global South have used opposition to the EU’s agenda to solidify their own standing as leaders of an ongoing struggle for National Liberation from colonial rule, noting the distinctiveness of the national values they are constructing in confrontation with the dangers of Europe’s “decadence”.

We might read the book under review to imply that the EU has been most successful in achieving change at the level of Inter-Governmental Organizations. At the UN in particular, Thiel identifies the key role of the EU and its member states in placing LGBT rights on the institution’s normative agenda, including the appointment of an Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. Thiel, however, also calls our attention to the limitations of the EU approach, including the inconsistent support among EU states and an emerging coalition of hostile states within the EU.

While Thiel provides a clear outline of EU policy making in a way that takes account of sequences and competing perspectives, his analysis of responses to EU policy in his three cases in the Global South – Uganda, Indonesia, Jamaica – are less clear. For example, with regards to Uganda he troubles the consequences of US and Evangelical interventions just after 2000 and their direct participation in networks and extensive financial assistance for AIDS programming. Far from reacting to LGBT activism globally or locally or embracing cultural homophobia, as the text implies, Uganda’s political leadership after 2000 espoused the goals of these US actors to target and marginalize sexual and gender minorities in ways that created a “gay peril” and a homophobia that did not exist prior, spurring local activism and global attention. But shifts in EU and especially US intervention after 2012 also prevented the reintroduction of a draconian anti-LGBT bill and provided more extensive direct financial aid to programs that supported sexual and gender minority organizing.

Thiel’s text is a valuable resource for scholars of LGBT rights generally and the EU normative agenda in particular, and despite the brevity of its three Global South case studies, it provides one of the best researched descriptions of the policy process and challenges faced by the EU as a regional and global actor. For those whose interest in activist strategies and responses is piqued by this text’s focus on EU policy, critical readings of EU and US global interventions on LGBTQI+ rights from Eastern European, migrant, and Global South perspectives, trans, nonbinary, and queer scholars, and women and scholars of color include the collection “Murderous Inclusions,” organized for the *Feminist Journal of International Politics* by Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco (2013); the contributions of Rahman, Grey and Attai, Stevens and Chaudhry, and others in *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics* (2020), as well as Rahman’s 2014 book; Mason’s collection on queer development studies (2018); *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Commonwealth* (Lennox and Waites 2018); *EU Enlargement and Gay Politics* (Slootmaekers, Touquet, and Vermeersch 2016); and the work of Dean Cooper-Cunningham in *Security Dialogue* (2022) and elsewhere that focuses on the activist response to what he calls Putin’s Heteronormative Internationalism.

In conclusion, Thiel’s scholarship points to the importance of sexual and gender identity politics as central to, and not on the margins of, global and international politics. Unique in studying the EU as a global and not just regional

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development actor, Thiel ties together questions of institutional leverage and mixed sovereignty with processes of western domination and decolonization, centering LGBT rights as a complex site of intervention where the liberal order comes undone.

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