

## THE STATE OF “QUEER IR”

**Rahul Rao, Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS  
University of London**

*Queer Wars: The New Global Polarization over Gay Rights*

Dennis Altman and Jonathan Symons

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. viii + 178 pp.

*Sexualities in World Politics: How LGBTQ claims shape International Relations*

Manuela Lavinias Picq and Markus Thiel (editors)

Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. xvi + 178 pp.

*Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*

Meredith L. Weiss and Michael J. Bosia (editors)

Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013. 267 pp.

*Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge*

Cynthia Weber

New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xiii + 247 pp.

In September 2016, *Vice* published an interview with Viktor Zimmerman, executive officer of the Gay Homeland Foundation (GHF), an organization

dedicated to the establishment of a “self-administered territory for GLBT people.” Zimmerman spoke of wanting to create a “gay city-state” that would provide safe haven, as a matter of right, to gay people fleeing persecution (Chester 2016). More significantly for Zimmerman, the gay homeland promised to forge community by gathering together the “six-percent minority population [currently] dispersed in an unaccommodating cultural environment.” Indeed the website of the Cologne-based GHF describes “gay and lesbian people” as a “‘folk’ with its own cultural identity and traditions, a Gay nation.”<sup>1</sup> Zimmerman envisages a three-step process towards the creation of the gay homeland: first, activists would establish a non-territorial sovereign entity to resettle gay refugees and provide assistance with housing and employment; second, they would seek political recognition from other states, citing the precedent of the Order of Malta, a Roman Catholic lay religious order based in Rome that provides medical assistance to victims of natural disasters, epidemics and war, and is recognized as a sovereign subject of international law; third, they would lease territory within an existing state to establish “settlements on conditions of extraterritoriality” that would be administered in accordance with their own law. Asked where he envisaged this happening, Zimmerman expressed a preference for land that was cheap, habitable, warm, and by the sea: “There is plenty of suitable land in South America, and its political circumstances seem favourable. A friendly Buddhist country in southeast Asia might be a strategically good choice, too.” The GHF’s website hopes that “the government of a large and thinly-populated nation will agree to sell us a span of uninhabited land in their domain.” Like all self-respecting states, the GHF promises to maintain a strict

admissions policy: while gay people would have a right of immigration, heterosexuals would be restricted, and they would not be in charge. To describe its vision as the Zionist solution to the homosexual question would not be a stretch: the GHF claims inspiration from Theodor Herzl and emphatically endorses Israel's right to existence and self-defense, while nonetheless committing to pursuing its aims peacefully.<sup>2</sup> In this queer version of settler colonialism, the violence of its historical precursors is sublimated into the neoliberal mode of commercial land acquisition.

Queer separatism has a rich and frequently radical history (see for example Berlant & Freeman 1992). But it is only relatively recently that it has, in manifestations like the GHF, come to be sutured so firmly to the aspiration for sovereign statehood. Founded in 2005, the GHF cites the efforts of Australian gay activists to claim sovereignty over a group of reportedly uninhabited islands in the Coral Sea the previous year, in protest against the Australian government's refusal to recognize same-sex marriage, as the first instance of a gay claim to territory. Eccentric and marginal, these initiatives are nonetheless symptomatic of a time in which it has become commonplace, indeed mandatory, for *states* to adopt positions—affirmative of or antithetical to—LGBT rights, and for those positions to function as a measure of their “stateness” as well as their standing and positioning within the global order.<sup>3</sup>

In its evident willingness to work within the constraints of actually existing international relations rather than in opposition to them, the GHF offers a fascinating—if extreme—example of what “homonormativity” (Duggan 2003: 50) at the intergovernmental level might look like. While the authors of the

books under review would likely balk at much of its vision for precisely this reason, in exploring the many ways in which claims related to gender and sexuality collide with the international states system, their works might nonetheless be situated on the same intellectual terrain—one that has, for better or worse, come to be described as “queer IR.” As with many emerging fields, there is as yet little consensus on what its boundaries encompass. For many, queer IR entails investigating the ways in which rights claims in respect of sexual orientation and gender identity are articulated, contested, realized and thwarted in international politics. For others, queer IR enables the use of concepts from queer theory to illuminate aspects of international politics not immediately related to gender and sexuality (see for example Sjoberg 2012). Cumulatively, the books under review embrace both dimensions of this agenda, offering a representative view of both the state of the field and, importantly, new conceptualizations of the state generated by the field.

In *Queer Wars*, Dennis Altman and Jonathan Symons track, and attempt to account for, a growing global polarization over “gay rights.” Pitched as a primer for the lay reader, the book provides a useful overview of the emergence of a global advocacy movement around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, its use of human rights as tools of mobilization, and the conservative “backlash” that this has provoked, before offering a set of modest recommendations for policy and activism. The book is admirable for the considerable ground that it covers with brevity and clarity. Yet these achievements come at a cost. A central thesis of the book is the observation that “societies that are accepting of sexual and gender diversity will also be those

with greater equality between women and men; with a clear division between the religious and political spheres; with some version of a liberal-democratic political system; reasonably affluent; and likely to accept ethnic and racial pluralism” (72). The problem isn’t so much that each of these correlations is contestable—a point that the authors concede but also dismiss (“there will always be outliers”). Rather, it is that despite an evident reluctance to suggest a linear progressive narrative, their claim that “gay identity and community are both a product of and a marker of a certain sort of modernity” (72) effectively advances a queer variant of modernization theory in which the contemporary West is thought to mark the telos of queer struggles everywhere. This is in large part a consequence of the casual elision of the specific ontologies of “gay identity” and other modes in which “sexual and gender diversity” might be performed (on the latter, there is now a considerable ethnographic literature; see Reddy 2005 and Hamzić 2015 for illustrative examples from South Asia). It is one thing to suggest that *LGBT* identities are a function of “a certain sort of modernity”; quite another to imply that the acceptance of sexual and gender diversity *per se* is contingent on the pursuit of a particular developmental trajectory. The former claim, while valid, seems disinterested in queer life outside the frame of *LGBT* identity politics; the latter claim is reminiscent of a colonial civilizing mission in its suggestion of a singular path to queer liberation.

The inadequacies of this path become evident when Altman and Symons turn their attention more specifically to the question of rights. Here the authors correctly attribute the advent of *LGBT* rights to the deployment of a cultural “politics of recognition” rather than one of material “redistribution” (91). This

crucial observation evokes no further discussion in the book, leaving this reader uncertain as to whether the authors considered it a problem at all. In this regard, the book seems oblivious to queer claims that have a strong material dimension, typically because they are advanced from intersections of marginality on account of not only gender and sexuality but also race, class, caste, ability, nationality and other dimensions of subjectivity. Queer left thought (Butler 1997; Duggan 2003; Rao 2015) has been strenuously critical of the tendency on the part of the LGBT mainstream to hive off a politics of recognition from struggles for redistribution and to subordinate the latter to the former. In neglecting to reflect on the redistributive dimension (or lack thereof) of contemporary international LGBT politics, Altman and Symons miss an opportunity to interrogate the ways in which the liberal premises of both mainstream LGBT movements and the international relations within which they are situated preclude a more radical socialist politics of redistribution.

If Altman and Symons leave us with an image of a singular path to queer modernity, this is productively destabilized by a number of the contributors to *Sexualities in World Politics* edited by Manuela Picq and Markus Thiel—particularly those dealing with “peripheral” sexualities. Picq’s chapter in this volume offers an astonishing account of queer life in Benjamin Constant, a municipality in the Brazilian state of Amazonas, near the border with Peru and Colombia. Picq evokes a thriving indigenous queer lifeworld featuring pride parades, gay football clubs, drag queen contests and pink commerce that exists in tension with the more brutal quotidian realities of violence against sex and gender deviants. In doing so, she contests the notion that sexual and gender

diversity are a function of Western modernity, as well as conceptualizations of the Amazon as a space outside modernity (indeed, anticipating the reactions that her account is likely to elicit, she observes that to be surprised by the queer modernity of the Amazon is to betray prior assumptions about its “backwardness”). The very remoteness of her field location from state institutions seems to dislodge conventional associations of political modernity with stateness itself (116).

Focusing on “Muslim homosexualities” and “Muslim homophobia,” Momin Rahman’s contribution to this volume also pushes back against reductionist understandings of sexual and gender diversity as concomitants of Western modernity. On the one hand, Rahman demonstrates that far from simply being derivative of Western homosexualities, “Muslim homosexualities” are the products of complex processes of adaptation and translation that both borrow from and repudiate Western identities. Moreover, they are forged under conditions that are different from those in which Western identities have sedimented—namely, a changed international context in which powerful states and international organizations sponsor political expressions of “homosexuality” and in which communications technologies enable the imagination of global solidarities. At the same time, Rahman worries that the attribution of “Muslim homosexualities” to the diffusion of Western modernity effectively casts “Muslim homophobia” as an attachment to tradition. Instead, he insists that Muslim reactions to novel sexual and gender performances are also responses to the Islamophobic geopolitical contexts in which they unfold, making them contemporaneous with the identities to which they are antipathetic.

The modernity and salience of homophobia as a tool of statecraft is a central theme in *Global Homophobia*. The editors of this volume, Meredith Weiss and Michael Bosia, are primarily concerned with the phenomenon of “political homophobia,” which they theorize as “purposeful, especially as practiced by state actors; as embedded in the scapegoating of an ‘other’ that drives processes of state building and retrenchment; as the product of transnational influence peddling and alliances; and as integrated into questions of collective identity and the complicated legacies of colonialism” (2). Significantly, they describe political homophobia as “modular”, deployed as it is in the remarkably consistent rhetoric of threats to tradition/family across widely differing cultural contexts. Weiss in particular calls into question the temporality of the “backlash” thesis (which casts homophobia as a reaction to mobilization around gender and sexuality), arguing that political homophobia in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines has been “anticipatory” in leveraging transnational discourses and alliances to mobilize pre-emptively against the anticipated but as yet unmade claims of local activists (149). A number of the chapters in this valuable collection unpack the motivations underpinning political homophobia in different states, enabling an analytical appreciation of its usefulness to states in alleviating crises of legitimation and capacity.

Nonetheless, two limits to the overall argument of the book are evident. First, a modularity of form need not imply a modularity of content. Kapya Kaoma hints at this in his exploration of the complex transnational assemblage implicating US conservative evangelical Christians and Ugandan politicians and clergy responsible for the now defunct Anti Homosexuality Act, observing that



“when Americans and Africans oppose homosexuality, they do so with different worldviews” (80). “Homophobia” can look and sound the same in different places while being driven by distinct forms of animus. Second, with partial exceptions (chapters by Kaoma and Conor O’Dwyer), the relentlessly state-centered nature of the analysis begs questions about when and why political homophobia acquires populist resonance. In their work on “moral panics” (a concept now widely deployed to theorize homophobia) Stuart Hall et al. (1978: 56) suggest that the crucial question “is not why or how unscrupulous men [*sic*] work...but why audiences respond.” Bosia shuts down consideration of this question when he insists in his chapter that “We should not target our research on deeply held social values or preconceptions, but on the politics of repression that produces and reproduces historical patterns and tradition, through processes of diffusion or adaption and in response to the rise of new challenges and crises” (51). This seems to reify state/society and public/private distinctions, analytically privileging the prior term in these dichotomies. Part of the problem here is that if “homophobia” is itself premised on the intelligibility of a relatively novel ontology of “sexuality” (khanna 2007), then it does not provide an expansive enough sign under which to consider all forms of anti-queer animus (Thoreson 2014). A focus on the state may be sufficient in enabling an appreciation of “homophobia” properly so called, but it cannot fully account for the complicated ways in which it becomes articulated with and sustained by queerphobias that do not share its ontological premises. We might think of this as the flip side of the problematic reduction of “sexual and gender diversity” to LGBT identities.

In *Queer International Relations*, Cynthia Weber takes a step back from ongoing mobilizations and countermobilizations around gender and sexuality to think about the ways in which discourses of sovereignty and sexuality have always been intertwined in heretofore unappreciated ways that profoundly shape the core concerns of IR including state and nation formation, war and peace, and international political economy. Drawing substantially on queer theory, Weber builds on poststructuralist IR scholar Richard Ashley's insight that state sovereignty rests on figurations of "sovereign man" whose fears, projected onto international anarchy, provide the foil against which practices and institutions of foreign policy and international relations are constructed. In a stunningly ambitious revisionist take on IR theory, Weber argues that although IR scholars have consistently ignored how a certain will to knowledge about sexualities has infused international power games, figurations of "normal" and "perverse" sexualities have always already haunted discourses of sovereignty. Much of the book is an account of the sexualized nature of these figurations: on the side of anarchy, Weber tracks the perverse sexualities of the figures of the "underdeveloped", the "undevelopable", the "unwanted im/migrant" and the "terrorist"; on the side of order, she tracks the normalized sexualities of the "gay rights holder" and the "gay patriot" newly admitted into the imagination of sovereign man. Building on Roland Barthes' theorization of "either/or" and "both/and" hermeneutic strategies, Weber argues that the figure of the "homosexual" appears in discourses of sovereignty in three ways—as "perverse," as "normal," and as simultaneously normal and/or perverse. By way of illustration of this last possibility, Weber offers a fascinating reading of the

intersections of sex, gender, sexuality, race, nationality and civilizational identity in the person of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest winner Tom Neuwirth/Conchita Wurst—who also, incidentally, supplies the cover illustration of *Queer Wars*—and of the wildly divergent discourses that circulated around this figure in Europe in the wake of their Eurovision victory. In doing so, Weber demonstrates both the possibility and the unintelligibility of political community founded on pluralized conceptions of sovereignty. The contemporary stakes of the argument could not be higher: one way of reading the recent Brexit referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU would be as a contest between a “Leave” campaign that successfully tapped into anxieties about globalization and immigration which it sought to alleviate with a fantasy of “return” to a Bodinian conception of absolutist sovereignty (“take back control”), and a “Remain” campaign that struggled to articulate the virtues of pluralized, dispersed and shared sovereignty.

Weber writes with a strong consciousness of disciplinary boundaries, even if only to take pleasure in transgressing them. Her book is staged as a conversation between queer studies and IR scholarship whose mutual neglect of one another she blames for the undertheorization of the relationship between sovereignty and sexuality (2). At times the distinctions between disciplinary subfields appear overdrawn, as when she contrasts “transnational/global queer studies” and “queer IR” (5, 113) which, judging by the topics and authors cited, seem to share an interest in the same questions and methods. Moreover, Weber’s characterizations of “transnational/global queer studies” sometimes have the effect of “disciplining” what is in fact a highly interdisciplinary field. Thus, on a

methodological register, I have mixed feelings about the encounter that she stages.

On the one hand, I share Weber's interest in bringing queer perspectives to IR to understand both the politicization of sexuality and the sexualization of international politics (Weber 1999 is the pioneering work in this latter respect). This remains a necessary project despite the increasing take-up of queer perspectives and methodologies in IR, given the ambivalence with which queer theory continues to be received in IR even by scholars working on gender and sexuality. For example Picq and Thiel cite Matthew Waites and Kelly Kollmann as suggesting that while queer approaches are useful in deconstructing essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality, "law, policy and states appear to need identifiable categories to combat discrimination" (5-6). As they see it, this makes queer approaches less useful politically, "although their views are intellectually enriching." This seems to me to be a condescension founded on misunderstanding. I have long been struck by Judith Butler's acknowledgement, in the preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble* (1999: xvii-xviii), that being a board member of what was then called the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (now OutRight International) had given her an appreciation of the strategic utility of universalist categories so long as they were understood in non-substantial and open-ended ways, leaving them amenable to expansion through the claims of those who were not yet included within them. This cautious deployment of universalism resonates with Gayatri Spivak's (1993) recognition of human rights as entitlements "we cannot not want." Thus, the most influential work in queer poststructuralism has never begrudged us the

prerogative of seizing the tools of empowerment and emancipation available to us, imperfect as they may be, even as it has drawn attention to the dangerousness of things we “cannot not” use. Dismissals of queer theory on grounds of political ineffectiveness misread its account of politics as tragedy, as a disavowal of engagement with the state altogether.

I am less persuaded by Weber’s claims about what “transnational/global queer studies” might learn from IR. Part of the problem here is that Weber’s identification of what “transnational/global queer studies” misses oscillates between the claim that its work is too situated in *specific* historical and geographical settings to take account of the broader discourses of sovereignty and security in which they are also embedded (12) and the counterclaim that several of its key concepts such as homonormativity and homonationalism, vital as they are, have been reified and *overgeneralized* to the point where they no longer admit the possibility of contradiction and resistance (116-121). Even conceding the force of both critiques, it is not clear why queer studies needs IR to remedy these problems.

The conjunction of “queer” and “IR” is also troubling insofar as the conservatism of the latter threatens to evacuate the radical potential of the former. The strange case of the GHF offers a salutary caution in this respect. Outlandish as it seems, its project is also utterly banal in its attempt to mimic conventional movements for territorial self-determination. In this sense, the GHF only exemplifies the logical extremities of the visions of liberation that the international state system incentivizes and sometimes rewards. Its success would simply add a new player to the game of IR-as-usual. I worry that the

project of “queer IR” may be insufficient to disrupt this game, bestowing as it might an adjectival gloss on a stable noun, like capitalism with its human face. Weber is acutely alive to this danger. In an article entitled “Why is there no Queer International Theory?”, she offers a sobering chronicle of the “gentrification” of critical theory in the IR academy: “A generalized international political economy was offered as a replacement for Marxism, the ‘gender variable’ for feminism, constructivism for poststructuralism, ‘the clash of civilizations’ for critical race and postcolonial studies, and ‘soft power’ in the service of state power for cultural critique” [citations omitted] (Weber 2014:17). What might queer theory become once it is admitted into the citadels of IR? One possibility is that refracted through the lens of the state system, queer utopias begin to look dystopian and queer theory becomes liberal modernization, losing their potency as wellsprings of defiantly outrageous proposals for the annihilation of that system.

If we took the threat of gentrification seriously, rather than thinking about how “queer” and “IR” might cohabit, we might conspire to use queer thought to introduce irresolvable tensions in IR. Some of the most interesting arguments in these books arise when the authors appear to do just this. In his contribution to the Picq and Thiel volume, Anthony Langlois (27) reflects at length on the paradoxes of rights, which, in the very moment that they extend entitlements to queer subjects, also entrench institutions that constrain freedom. Underscoring the costs of *both* exclusion and inclusion, Langlois calls on us “to refuse the seduction and embrace of the state at that point when the state seems to come on side” (35). For Bosia, writing in the same volume, this paradoxical

stance is necessitated by the psychopathic nature of the state itself which, Janus-like, loves and loathes with equal indifference, acting always and only in its own interest, but—like a true psychopath—retaining its attractiveness as the hegemonic form of political community (42, 46). As I've suggested, the Brexit referendum result and the discourses of racism and xenophobia that accompanied it appear to suggest the unintelligibility, for now at least, of Weber's conceptualization and Neuwirth/Wurst's exemplification of political community founded on a pluralized notion of sovereignty. In moments such as these, the authors under review appear to explicate the impossibility of "queer international relations." Rather than merging distinct fields, their deployment of queer insights disrupts IR-as-usual in a necessary prelude to the imagination of alternative worlds.

## References

Berlant, Lauren & Freeman, Elizabeth. 1992. "Queer Nationality." *boundary 2* vol. 19, no. 1: 149-80.

Butler, Judith. 1997. "Merely Cultural." *Social Text*, nos. 52/53: 265-77.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1999. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.

Chester, Nick. 2016. "We Spoke to the Man Who Really Wants a Separate Country for Gay People." *Vice*, September 10. [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/gay-homeland-foundation-separatist-state](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/gay-homeland-foundation-separatist-state).

Duggan, Lisa. 2003. *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hall, Stuart, Brian Roberts, John Clarke, Tony Jefferson, and Chas Critcher. 1978. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Hamzić, Vanja. 2015. *Sexual and Gender Diversity in the Muslim World: History, Law and Vernacular Knowledge*. London: I. B. Tauris.

khanna, akshay. 2007. "Us 'Sexuality Types': A Critical Engagement with the Postcoloniality of Sexuality." In *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, edited by Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya, 159-200. London: Seagull Books.

Rao, Rahul. 2015. "Global Homocapitalism." *Radical Philosophy*, no. 194: 38-49.

Reddy, Gayatri. 2005. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sjoberg, Laura. 2012. "Toward Trans-gendering International Relations?" *International Political Sociology* vol. 6, no. 4: 337-354.



Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1993. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. London: Routledge.

Thoreson, Ryan Richard. 2014. "Troubling the waters of a 'wave of homophobia': Political economies of anti-queer animus in sub-Saharan Africa." *Sexualities* vol. 17, nos. 1/2: 23-42.

Weber, Cynthia. 1999. *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a "Post-Phallic" Era*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2014. "Why is there no Queer International Theory?" *European Journal of International Relations*, DOI: 10.1177/1354066114524236: 1-25.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gay Homeland Foundation. <http://gayhomeland.org/> (accessed November 6, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Gay Homeland Foundation. "Gay Nationalism." <http://gayhomeland.org/gay-nationalism.html> (accessed November 6, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Calls for new "homoprotectionist" states in light of the perceived failures of actually existing ones become intelligible only in a context in which the protection of LGBT rights by the state is taken for granted as an appropriate mandate for the state.