13.1: 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 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 preexistent, 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 homophobia, and West/Rest. Queer IR 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.