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Thinking about *Queer Wars*: 'International Polarization' and Beyond

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Dennis Altman and Jonathan Symons' book *Queer Wars* is a useful point of departure for thinking about sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) issues in contemporary international politics. It is motivated by two important empirical questions: 'Why, as homosexuality has become more visible globally, have reactions to sexual and gender diversity become so polarized?' and 'What is to be done?' (2016:3-4) At the heart of these questions is an ethical and practical concern to combat the violence faced by those who are called 'LGBT' (and sometimes 'Q' and/or 'I') people', which should be applauded. It adds much to these discussions, with its careful empirical illustrations and comparative analysis.

What informs these questions is Altman and Symons' view that contemporary sovereign nation-states find themselves in conflict with one another over LGBT issues, as new norms that value LGBT people and particularly LGBT human rights are diffused through the internationalization of Western liberal agendas (see Weiss and Bosia, 2013). These 'queer wars' as Altman and Symons call them have resulted in the 'international polarization' of primarily 'liberal states' vs. 'illiberal states' over LGBT issues (Altman and Symons, 2016:Chapter 5).

The international polarization thesis has several advantages. It makes sense to mainstream International Relations theorists, who have long understood the world in binary terms. It makes sense to global policy practitioners, many of whom have mobilized IR's binary terms to recast global LGBT politics into contests between 'good states' and 'bad states'. And it seems to capture the political realities on the ground, where, for example, 'bad states' like Russia and Uganda actively work against liberal LGBT agendas, while 'good states' like the USA under Obama and the UK actively work for these agenda (Wilkinson, 2014; Rao, 2014).

Yet there are at least three serious limitations to the international polarization thesis. First, it glosses over how norms diffusion functions differently in the same place and time at different scales. Second, it takes Western liberal formulations of LGBT norms as wholly positive benchmarks against which other sovereign nation-states can and should be measured. And third, it unwittingly reifies international polarization in practice by authorizing some of the proposed mechanisms through which LGBT norms are (likely to be) indexed and diffused.

In this short thought piece, I will explain these limitations in more detail by turning to the same core illustration Altman and Symons consider, which is 'gay rights as human rights'. I will use this discussion to think again about the question, 'What is to be done?' or, as I rephrase it, 'Where do we go from here?'

First, the international polarization thesis glosses over how norms diffusion and their relationships to gay rights function differently in the same place and time at different scales. Altman and Symons' scale is generally a comparative politics

scale, which evaluates sovereign nation-states against one another. At this scale, the idea of international polarization is easier to defend, as states taken as whole units do often differ from one another in how they rhetorically (if not always materially) support positive gay rights norms. Yet when we investigate what happens within states, the picture is much more complex.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton captured this complexity in a remark she made during the US Presidential campaign. Speaking of the USA, Clinton said, 'In too many places still, LGBT Americans are singled out for harassment and violence. You can get married on Saturday, post your pictures on Sunday, and get fired on Monday' (Rielly, 2016).

This is quite a powerful statement. What it suggests is that – even the policymaker who is most credited for legitimating 'the LGBT' as a universally normal human being and for legitimating the international diffusion of the 'gay rights as human rights' norm on the back of this move (Clinton, 2011) – recognizes two things. First, understandings of 'the normal LGBT' now sit alongside but do not cancel out long standing ideas about 'the LGBT' as perverse or deviant. Second, where these understandings compete for legitimacy is not only among sovereign nation-states but within personal, local, national and regional institutions. Underscoring the stakes of these complexities, the British Home Office issued a travel advisory to its LGBT citizens in the Spring of 2016, warning them that they may no longer be safe if they visit some US states because of the proliferation of homo-, bi-, and particularly trans*phobic laws in these states (UK Home Office, 2016).

What this means is that descriptions of international politics around 'gay rights as human rights' as internationally polarized are far too simple. What is required is an unpacking of the positive as well as negative ways norms around 'gay rights as human rights' are diffused, while charting the complex interrelationships between positive and negative 'gay rights as human rights' norms. To their credit, Altman and Symons do note some of these multi-scalar complexities, but not to the point that they acknowledge how these complexities throw their international polarization thesis into question.

Second, the international polarization thesis takes the 'gay rights as human rights' norm as a fully positive idea. This is why the international polarization thesis can be used to describe states as 'good' or 'bad', in relation to how well they adhere to this norm. Yet as many scholars and practitioners have pointed out, the gay rights norm itself has some problematic elements built into it.

Thinking critically about 'gay rights as human rights' through their intersection function with racism and imperialism, Jasbir Puar has written about 'the human rights industrial complex' (Puar, 2013), Rahul Rao has analyzed how 'gay rights' get taken up as 'gay conditionality' in public policies (Rao, 2012), and Anna Agathangelou has discussed how gay rights norms rely on anti-blackness (Agathangelou, 2013). Anthony Langois and Cai Wilkinson offer further complexity to the 'gay rights' debate by noting how 'gay rights' can be coopted by a neo-imperialist agenda, without being essentially neo-imperialist in themselves

(Langlois, 2012; Wilkinson and Langlois, 2014). My own analysis of Clinton's speech details the positive *and/or* negative ways in which Clinton proposes and mobilizes 'gay rights as human rights' for specific kinds of geopolitical, racialized, classed, able-bodied, gendered, and sexualized subjects that have specific – if contradictory – international effects (Weber, 2016a; also see Ghosh, 2016).

Whether these scholars reject or refine a gay rights norm, they all explain why 'gay rights as human rights' is not unambiguously positive. For they all take pains to explore how toxic understandings around race, religion, class, ability, and gender are historically intertwined with understandings of particularly 'the perverse homosexual' and sometimes around 'the perverse bisexual' and/or 'the perverse transsexual'. And these scholars demonstrate how these historical understandings make the 'good LGBT' who has the right to have rights possible in contemporary liberal discourses on 'gay rights as human rights' (for elaborates of these points, see Weber, 2016a).

In places, Altman and Symons gesture toward these kinds of concerns. Yet their dominant move is to bracket these concerns and embrace a generally uncritical liberal understanding of rights as the basis of their comparative analysis. This allows them to describe the world through their international polarization thesis. This is a shame, as the careful empirical detail Altman and Symons provide in the book speaks to the complexities on the ground that their theoretical framework excludes.

Finally, the international polarization thesis may unwittingly reify international polarization in practice, by authorizing some of the proposed mechanisms through which LGBT norms are (likely to be) indexed and diffused. For example, the UNDP Team on Gender, Key Populations and LGBTI for HIV, Health and Development Group is developing an LGBTI Inclusion Index (Cortez, 2015). This Index is designed to measure education, health, mechanisms for justice, and on-the-ground policing as they pertain to LGBTI people around the world. If we read this project through Clinton's observation that 'gay rights as human rights' are unevenly embraced and enforced not only across states but within state, then a couple of concerns come to the fore.

One such concern is that this Index may well allow Western liberal states to appear to be 'sufficiently progressive' on the things that the Index does measure so they do not have to do more to protect their LGBTI people on the things the Index does not measure (like access to jobs, housing and healthcare). This may actually narrow the scope of accountability on 'gay rights as human rights' rather than broaden it. It might prevent Western states from thinking further about their 'progress' on 'gay rights as human rights' and from doing more to improve the lives of LGBTI people on the ground. It might also allow particularly Western liberal states to notice only those things they do better than other kinds of states, without acknowledging and fixing those problems they have in common with non-Western liberal states.

Overall, then, the LGBTI Index might inadvertently further stigmatize states that are seen as insufficiently 'progressive' on accepting and implementing norms

around 'gay rights as human rights, *in ways that might fuel rather than challenge 'international polarization'.*

So, where do we go from here?

I am not claiming that there is not *some* international polarization around 'gay rights as human rights' or that charting how international polarizations are constructed and mobilized are not on-going problems. The election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States of America and (at the time of this writing one week after Trump's election) Trump's friendly relationship with Vladimir Putin coupled with the anti-LGBT people Trump is appointing underscore this point (see Weber, 2016b). But as we take seriously some international polarizations and their realignments, we must also bear in mind broader issues about and around 'gay rights as human rights'. By way of conclusion, let me mention two sets of questions we should keep in mind.

First, what does the language of 'gay rights as human rights' actually deliver for LGBTI people? How does it make their lives more *and* less livable? As it is being translated into domestic and international policies, do these policies recognize and address the uneven distribution and implementation of gay rights as human rights not only across states but at other scales, across other issues, and in the complex ways rights function? How can we make policy practitioners take seriously every scale that bears on the lives of LGBT people – intimate, familial, local, national, regional, and international? How can we make them consider the range of rights that matter to LGBT people – not just marriage or military service but work, housing, education, healthcare and freedom of movement? And how can we get them to take into account the complex ways 'gay rights as human rights' are rendered national and international in relation to gender, race, religion, ability, and class, for example? And how can we make policy practitioners do these things in ways that acknowledge *and defy* the international polarization thesis?

Second, what are the limits of human rights language itself? Human rights language can be extremely valuable. But we should also explore other discourses and terms of reference to secure what we understand as human rights for LGBTI people that can be better heard. This is both because some people reject the language of universal human rights as neocolonialist or imperialist, while others refine the language of universal human rights to capture only those rights that are compatible with what some call the 'universal traditional values of mankind', a term that retains pejorative understandings of LGBT sexualities as sinful and criminal (Altman and Symons, 2016:111).

I have no doubt I share these concerns with Altman and Symons. I look forward to thinking with them about these sorts of issues, through and beyond frameworks of international polarization.

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