Towards a Critical History of 'Critical IR'

That the practice of critique should find itself embroiled in controversy is nothing either new or remarkable. Indeed, it rather comes with the territory. If we look at the etymology of 'critic,' we find that this term has, for more than two thousand years, been associated with the practice of discerning, distinguishing, and forming evaluative judgements. The negative sense of 'criticism' – as not just evaluating but fault-finding – also has a long history. Amongst philosophers writing in English, it is common to distinguish between *criticism* (as an everyday practice) and *critique* (as a more rarified, philosophical one). However, this distinction doesn't necessarily work in other languages, and even those who make this distinction rarely follow it consistently. Nevertheless, the difference between, for example, criticising an unjust policy and critiquing a philosophical treatise or a system of political economy is an important one. When we speak of critique in this latter sense, we mean it less as a practice of forming evaluative judgements (though that may still be part of it) and more as a practice of thinking about the presuppositions and preconditions of things. In other words, to critique something (in the strict sense) is to determine not just what that thing is or how we should value it, but to determine what else must be the case for that thing to be possible.

When we speak of something like 'critical IR,' however, these finer distinctions tend to disappear. The significance of the adjective 'critical,' in general academic parlance, is not so much denotative (declaring specific, definite meanings) as it is connotative (implying a whole range of meanings, bundled together). What qualities, then, do we tend to associate with the figure of the 'critical scholar'? This is a much larger question than I can answer here. However, the first association that comes to my mind is that a critical scholar sees their work, whatever it is that they study, as political.

The traditional raison d'être of an academic (in terms of self-presentation, at least) has been that of producing 'knowledge for knowledge's sake.' In other words, in this classic conception, an academic simply strives to add another layer, however modest, to the collective repository of universal human knowledge. (Indeed, this is pretty much what the whole notion of a 'university' suggests.) Critical scholars, by contrast, tend to be sceptical about notions of universality, seeing knowledge production as conditioned by historical and cultural circumstances. Moreover, whereas a traditionally-minded scholar may be content to simply put their research out there, on the assumption that a rising tide of truth will necessarily lead to more rational and informed ways of running the world, critical scholars place no trust in this relationship. Indeed, such a scholar may even point to how rational and true knowledge can, within an irrational and oppressive society, lead to worse outcomes rather than better. Thus, a critical scholar sees their work as being intrinsically political, addressing the harmful contradictions of the world in which we live in a way that challenges those contradictions, demonstrating the possibility of change.

And so, whichever definition of 'critique' we take, it is not surprising that critical practice becomes controversial. No one likes being judged! Even film critics or music critics, for example, tend to stoke controversy in forming their opinions. This potential becomes particularly apparent when we are talking about social or political criticism – that is, forming evaluative judgements about how our world is run (and those who run it). In authoritarian societies, expressing open, public, critical judgements may, to greater or lesser degrees, be prohibited. In liberal democratic societies, by contrast, critical expression is generally protected, and even formally encouraged. However, this does not mean that critical expression, in such societies, is truly 'free.' Libel laws in the UK, for example, are notorious for the degree to which they protect the rich and powerful against criticism. And even in countries with more robust free speech protections, such as the US, there are countless ways in which unwanted critical perspectives can be

Towards a Critical History of 'Critical IR'

Written by Philip Conway

quashed and restrained – the ongoing moral panic regarding Critical Race Theory being an excellent example.

However, perhaps the most formidable way of neutralising the political effect of critical judgment, of whatever sort, within societies where it is officially protected, is to co-opt it – that is, to imitate its form while replacing its content with something that serves dominant relations of power, rather than challenging them. There is nothing new in this, either. However, the issue of the co-optation of critique has become particularly pronounced over the past decade or so, with the rise of right-wing populism globally, and the presidency of Donald Trump in particular.

In his recent contribution to *E-International Relations*, Nicholas Michelsen draws some despairing conclusions for critical IR scholars regarding the state of their practice. It is a call, essentially, to abandon ship. Forty years of critical IR and there is 'effectively nothing to show for it.' The very foes we thought we were fighting have 'borrowed all of our best lines,' and the very principles we thought we were fighting for have devolved into 'competitive wars of purity,' maladjusted to our time. Valuable though Michelsen's intervention is as a provocation, its impact is rather reduced by its lack of specificity. He refrains from naming names, preferring to indict operative categories. By marked contrast, also in *E-International Relations,* Beate Jahn comes to the defence of critical IR, pointing to a great number of concrete contributions that such scholars have made to scholarship, to activism, and to policy.

We will never know precisely what impact 'critical' forms of scholarly practice have had on the world. After all, we have no control group – no 'planet B' where everything began from the same conditions, except that no alternatives to traditional forms of scholarship ever emerged. In this, I would tend to side with Jahn. The mere fact that certain of our tropes and concepts have been turned, here and there, to ends that were neither intended nor desired is certainly an important result, and worth taking seriously; however, it cannot tell us what the value of such work has been overall.

That said, as a response to Michelsen's provocative polemic, this is surely unsatisfying. Indeed, while his characterisation of critical IR tends, at times, towards caricature, there is still truth to it. In particular, I very much share the impression that certain 'critical' patterns of thought have become formulaic. This, I would agree, is a crucial problem that the political economy of our industry – because it *is* an industry – disinclines us from taking seriously.

Everything in academia is geared towards the cyclical reproduction of itself. Every year, new students arrive – fresh-faced, inquisitive – and every year, subject to ongoing, incremental modifications, we tell them basically the same things. Every year, students are led from essay to essay, formative stage to formative stage, and then to a dissertation where they must design a research study of their own. These studies are expected, because they are academic, to go beyond merely empirical or opinionated documentation of a subject (we call that 'journalistic'), and to incorporate a significant portion of theoretical analysis. How is this possible, in such numbers, every year? Theoretical frameworks. Contrary to how our profession is generally presented in conservative (and sometimes liberal) media, it is my impression that most academics in the humanities and social sciences don't much care which theoretical framework any given student adopts, only that they learn, on some level, to think theoretically, and that they apply that thought competently to their research question. What matters, in general, is the process, and thought is packaged to meet these requirements.

Everything in our industry, so far as I have observed it, follows such patterns. Thoughts exist to become formulas, in research no less than teaching. That is how the cycle of the semesters keeps turning, how probationary periods become (so-called) permanent contracts, and how professional capital is accumulated, raising the careers of those who excel at it and razing those who don't. Not one thing about being a 'critical' scholar makes any difference in this respect. It is the same game, either way.

Fortunately, time doesn't stand still. Every decade or so, some new generation comes along to declare that the previous generation of critical scholars were not critical enough, or were critical in the wrong way. The previous generation of erstwhile young upstarts have, by this time, found their way to secure jobs and positions of influence (those of them whose careers have prospered, anyway). With each new wave comes a new set of philosophical reference points and normative priorities. In the past few years, issues of race and colonialism have taken up this mantle. No longer one subfield or speciality among others, race-critical and decolonial scholarship has become the

Towards a Critical History of 'Critical IR'

Written by Philip Conway

crucible, above all others, in which critical credentials are evidenced. Those same established scholars who, a decade ago, were demolishing the misanthropy of the Anthropocene, and, a decade before that, dissecting the sprawling monstrosity of the Global War on Terror are, today, eagerly discussing Afropessimism.

This, too, will pass. And none of this, I hasten to add, do I mean to present as a criticism (in the sense of fault-finding). Indeed, this is a wave that is long overdue its entry into the critical mainstream, having been a vibrant field of thought for decades. However, my concern is that if we fail to appreciate the depth of these cyclical, instrumental determinants of our professional practices, our thought patterns will fall into formulae and dogma, as they have in the past. Now, admittedly, in weaving this broad, speculative narrative, I, too, am speaking in generalities, painting with broad brushstrokes, and declining to name names. However, in my published work over the past few years, I have attempted to piece together a more nuanced, equivocal, and constructive account of these developments.

In 'Radicalism, Respectability, and the Colour Line of Critical Thought,' I attempt to weave together a new account of the emergence of critical IR as a sub-discipline, dislocating the common sense assumption that it all began in the early 1980s. I do this in basically two ways. First, I compare the conventional origin story of critical IR with those of several neighbouring fields – in particular, human geography and sociology. Whereas IR scholars trace the development of critical perspectives within their discipline to theoretical developments around the year 1981, for geographers and sociologists, it all began with the student activism and 'new social movements' of the late 1960s. Why did IR not follow this pattern? Because it was, at that time, a much more conservative discipline, more closely allied with state power, and so only found room for dissenting voices much later.

The second method that I use, in the above article, to dislocate the inherited common sense of critical IR is to return to one of its most commonly cited inspirations: Max Horkheimer's 1937 'Traditional and Critical Theory.' This essay was written while Horkheimer and his fellow (mostly German-Jewish) members of the 'Frankfurt School' were in exile in New York. Just down the road from their building on the campus of Columbia University was Harlem—perhaps the major centre for Black American cultural and political thought in the early and mid-twentieth century. Yet, despite many common political and philosophical connections, these communities seem to have remained almost completely separate, as have their traditions of critical thought. This observation then frames the development of critical IR as, first, feminists, and, then, race-critical and decolonial scholars came to gradually transform the purview of what 'critical' means within this field of knowledge.

I originally intended for this narrative to run all the way up to the present day. However, it quickly became apparent that this would be impossible within the length of a single article, and so I curtailed it at around the turn of the century. In 'Critical international politics at an impasse,' I then picked up the thread, dealing with developments and debates in more recent years. Here, I present a less longitudinal and more analytical account. Rather than focusing on the development of critical IR as such (which was, by the 2010s, an impossibly vast topic), I instead investigate the various 'critiques of critique' that have become prevalent in the field, using these different schools of thought to reflect back on conceptions of what critical IR is and what it is for. In the conclusion, I then argue for reinvesting the concept of critique with meaning by being more careful and precise in how we use it, while at the same time continuing to question some of the traditional categorical oppositions that have separated critical from non-critical thought, such as the use of quantitative methods.

In my third contribution towards a critical history of critical IR, I revisited the observation made of IR prior to the 1980s – that it was, compared to its professional neighbours, a rather conservative institution, closed to the dissenting voices of antiwar activism, feminism, civil rights, environmentalism, and so on, that were gaining attention elsewhere. In 'The citadel of scholarship,' I was able to add a caveat to this generalisation, which also opened up the possibility of thinking counterfactually about what sorts of opportunities for critical thought were lost due to the conservatism of IR in the '60s and '70s. It all started when I decided, for research purposes, to read the first issue of *Millennium* (the well-known IR journal edited by graduate students at LSE), which was published in 1971. The contributions were mostly what one would expect for the time and place – empirically-focused qualitative political science, with normative sensibilities strictly constrained by a state-centric worldview. There was, however, one exception to this rule: Vithal Rajan's 'An Epitaph for Detached Scholarship.'

Towards a Critical History of 'Critical IR'

Written by Philip Conway

This almost completely forgotten text is totally out of keeping with anything I know of published in an IR journal at this time, or for years after. It is, on one level, a lyrical, satirical condemnation of the everyday racism and intellectual conservatism of Rajan's institutional milieu. Yet, more than this, it is also a sophisticated plea for a radically democratic, emancipatory approach to social science, more in keeping with calls, around this time, for establishing a 'critical university' than with anything one could have found in any disciplinary periodical. Combining principles of social constructivism with a phenomenological conception of knowledge based upon reflexivity and empathy, Rajan's philosophy of science, in opposition to what he called the 'citadel' of traditional scholarship, anticipated many of the tenets of 'critical IR.' Indeed, it stands out even today as an important, if idiosyncratic, contribution to the field.

Despite making a few enemies from his provocative writings, it seems that Rajan still had a promising academic career ahead of him, and he became a founding member of the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. Nevertheless, the animosity of his colleagues, combined with what he saw as the nascent fascism of Indira Gandhi's emergency government, compelled him to return to India. From the 1980s onwards, he founded and worked with development organisations, focusing on matters of ecology, economy, and local autonomy, while maintaining the profile of an intellectual. His energies in these and other areas earned him further attention from the white, Western, wealthy world, as he was appointed Executive Director of the Right Livelihood Awards in 1984, and in 1990 became the Director of Ethics and Information for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Yet this promising career, too, didn't work out:

I hated it; I joined them [the WWF] under the condition that we will consider tribal and indigenous people as the first guardians of the environment but they had a very elitist view of things. They paid me well and I had a lot of perks but my job was basically to be this brown man who could talk English, wear a dinner jacket, stand with Prince Philip and be nice while the audience of multimillionaires wrote cheques.

Now in his 80s, Rajan continues to write and publish. I was able to get in touch with him via Facebook, and he very graciously gave me some feedback on earlier drafts of my article. Perhaps it was this personal touch, or just the impact of his rough yet remarkable piece of writing from half a century ago, but working on this article made me wonder what IR might have looked like had the likes of Rajan been taken seriously the first time around.

In any case, the significance of Rajan's text for its discipline should, I hope, be clear: Our inherited narratives tell us that 'critical IR' began in the 1980s with the incorporation of Gramscian, Marxian, and Kantian philosophical perspectives, creating a field within a field to which were then added other marginal theoretical and political creeds, eventually adding up to the sub-discipline that we know today. Yet here is a text, although it has been completely forgotten (or even *because* it has been completely forgotten) that tells another story: There, in the early 1970s, there were at least *some* of the conditions necessary for the realisation of what we, later, came to call 'critical IR.' However, for a variety of reasons—including, though not limited to, the racism and closed-mindedness of the profession – it could not take root. This, I hope you will agree, is something very different.

To return to Michelsen's point: Rajan's story cannot refute the impression that the tale of critical IR is, ultimately, one of failure and disappointment. Indeed, if anything, it confirms that. The vaulting ambition of Rajan's '60s-style New Left politics, expressed through his writings for *Millennium*, are as unfulfilled as anything that any of us have dreamt up since. And yet, this story – which is partial and motivated, as all stories must be – nevertheless suggests that we have been exploring, over the past half-century, a radically different matrix of possibilities than that which we thought we were exploring. Thus, it may also suggest that we still have some exploring to do.

Let's just sketch out what we could now say, were we to take this as one point of origin, among others, for our collective practices: Critical IR began with the critique of racism. This was not just superadded in the 2010s, as certain minority subfields gained sufficient cultural capital to sway the interests of the (majority-white) critical mainstream, but was there, albeit forgotten, from the beginning. Moreover, it was always transnational. Rajan himself first emigrated to Canada before travelling to London for his studies, undertaking fieldwork as a peace mediator in Northern Ireland, organising in Bradford, travelling through China, and then returning to India. His networks were principally those of peace research – already a far more heterogeneous bunch than disciplinary IR at that time. Furthermore, there was never, upon this account, any hard line to be drawn between intellectual speculation and

engaged, pragmatic organisation. On the contrary, one of the remarkable things about Rajan's works is the continuity between his student days and what he wrote in relation to his career in development, particularly with respect to social hierarchy and the role of the intellectual as a mediator, not a leader. Finally, we may affirm that critical IR is ecumenical with respect to different sorts of social scientific scholarship, and yet embraces creativity in its modes of expression, stretching all the way from philosophical exposition to satirical polemic to poetic suggestion, even within a single text.

From this high orbit of abstract possibility, let's conclude with something a bit more modest and realistic: Obviously none of that is likely to replace the narrative coordinates that we and our textbooks are already accustomed to, just as most of us must have realised (and didn't we always know?) that the bold, righteous declarations of critical scholarship are rarely much more than cries into the night. And yet… and yet… we have no planet B from which we could judge the consequence of our craft. We are left with more or less educated speculation.

It seems fair to say that Rajan's departure from English academia was English academia's loss, not the other way around. Perhaps I am drawn to his story because it presents the impression of someone who did something with his life – who had bold thoughts, wrote them down, irritated those who needed irritating, and yet still found time to have adventures, to travel the world, and, ultimately, to help people. Who can expect that from an academic career, then or now?

It may be that Jahn, in itemising the achievements of those scholars who name themselves 'critical,' sets the bar for our collective self-evaluation too low. In his lamentation that the things we've been critiquing all these years are still, stubbornly happening, Michelsen surely sets it too high. For my part, rather than focusing on questions of evaluation, we might still permit ourselves another round of exploring this problem-space anew. For all the times that we have been around and around this territory, it seems that we still don't know it all that well.

About the author:

Philip Conway is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Geography at Durham University. You can follow him on Twitter.