

# Against Mystification, or What Went Wrong with Critical IR

Written by Alexander Stoffel and Ida Roland Birkvad

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ALEXANDER STOFFEL AND IDA ROLAND BIRKVAD, AUG 25 2023

There is a recurring anxiety among International Relations (IR) scholars about the discipline's estrangement from the political and social communities it claims to represent. One striking example of this presented itself when the feminist scholar Cara Daggett published her 2015 article 'Drone Disorientations.' The article declared that 'killing with drones produces queer moments of disorientation.' What does the subjection of racialized communities to the bombardment campaigns of Western states have to do with queerness? To those unfamiliar with the particularities of feminist military studies, it will be unclear what is going on here. Indeed, a few years later a Twitter user shared Daggett's article, declaring queer theory to be 'canceled.' The viral tweet caught people's attention with screenshots of passages from the article, such as 'drones are "genderqueer" bodies' or 'unmanned weapons queer the experience of killing.'

Daggett's main argument was that drone warfare departs from familiar modes of killing in war. Why? Because drone warfare does not conform to distinctions between home and combat, and between distance and intimacy, that have long defined warfare. The article called upon queer theory to deconstruct these assumed binaries in war and warfare. But does queerness need to be invoked for this argument to work? Does it make sense to refer to the deconstruction of war binaries as 'queer?' And who benefits from these theoretical flourishes? We, the authors of this article, started to wonder if something had gone terribly wrong in critical IR...

Daggett's article helps us understand how the practices of killing in modern warfare have been transformed through the introduction of unmanned autonomous weapons. But it does not tell us much about the lived conditions of racialized victims of state-sponsored mass killing — or, for that matter, of queer people. Instead, it fetishizes the experiences of queerness and gender anxiety for the purposes of academic theorizing about war and violence.

What do we mean by the fetishization of queerness? In this article, queerness appears as endowed with particular qualities of disorientation and deconstruction. These are treated as the essential, universal attributes of queerness. This fetishization occludes, or mystifies, the real set of historical and social relations from which queerness arises. In other words, the fetishistic use of 'queerness' as a tool for academic theorizing produces an inversion: queerness appears as a thing with a life of its own, rather than as the product of social relations.

For its contribution to the study of gender and war, Daggett's article was awarded the 2014 Enloe Award by the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. This contribution, however, was not immediately recognized outside of its disciplinary context. Instead, social media users uncharitably accused Daggett of appropriating queer theory in an attempt to make her research appear current and happening. The tweet was followed by a characteristic blend of pile-ons, hyperbole, and a streak of anti-intellectualism. But although the online backlash was unconstructive, it did also firmly indicate how alienated certain strands of critical IR research are from those outside its quarters. As far as we are aware, there were no formal responses from IR scholars in the field of critical military/war studies. But it is hard to imagine that those who followed the debacle were not unsettled by what was, at the very least, a damning demonstration of our discipline's growing insularity and tone-deafness. This warrants our attention.

A related discipline has had a more public reckoning with these sorts of fetishizing moves: trans studies. In 2019, the

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polemicist Andrea Long Chu made a daring indictment of trans studies in the pages of its leading journal, *Trans Studies Quarterly*:

Trans studies is over. If it isn't, it should be. Thus far, trans studies has largely failed to establish a robust, compelling set of theories, methods, and concepts that would distinguish itself from gender studies or queer studies. ... *Queer* has, from the get-go, described both gender and sexual deviance, and what's more, gender as sexual deviance and sexuality as gender deviance. From this perspective, trans studies is just an embarrassing redundancy — junk DNA.

She went on to describe the basic thrust of trans studies:

The basic idea is that transgender people, as a narrow identity group, can be a methodological stepping-stone for thinking more expansively about boundary crossings of all sorts: not just trans-gender, but also transnational, transracial, transspecies — you get the picture.

Her point is straight-forward: 'trans' is not a metaphor. If trans studies scholars are to say anything meaningful or truthful about trans people's lives, they will have to stop treating them as stand-ins for general theories about deviance and anti-normativity. The merits of such a sweeping, virulent assessment of an entire field of study, especially one already under systematic attack within and beyond the academy, can certainly be debated. But Andrea Long Chu was not the only one to express concern about how trans people are used in academic scholarship.

As we were going through the last lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in London, we found ourselves preoccupied with these debates. At the time, we turned to Emma Heaney's captivating book *The New Woman* for a careful, historically grounded study of this tendency. Her book traces a long history of the allegorization of trans feminine life — from 19th-century sexological writings to modern queer theory — and shows how it works to reinscribe cis ideology. We invited her to do an online event with us to discuss her argument and think through its implications for International Relations scholarship.

In her conversation with us, Heaney explained how academics conscript trans people into a very particular service: trans women are made to mean something other than themselves. They become representative of experiences that IR scholars are interested in: displacement, migration, border crossing, you name it.

Just as trans scholars like Emma Heaney have warned against the mystification of queer and trans lives by queer and trans theory, so have postcolonial subjects alerted us to the limits of postcolonial theory. Indeed, while 'trans' and 'queer' points to historical subject positions and political struggle, the designation of 'the subaltern' is one which has been largely invented for academic theorizing. Originally conceived of by Antonio Gramsci for the purposes of specific theoretical and political analysis, the figure of the subaltern, especially in the scholarship of postcolonial theory emanating from South Asia from the 1990s onwards, came to stand in for generalized critiques of a broad range of colonial logics. Here, the subaltern came to denote both the limits of representation (recall Gayatri Spivak's seminal questioning of the voiceless subaltern) as well as a prism through which the violence of colonial Europe could be apprehended.

The historic experience of colonial subjugation perpetrated by the British in South Asia constitutes the focal point for important Subaltern School project thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. And yet, their scholarship has made little inroads into Indian university campuses.

Theorisation preoccupied with understanding dynamics of oppression and inequality, including the history and legacies of British colonialism, has in Indian universities been largely dominated by Marxism, as well as the work coming out of Dalit and anti-caste scholarship. The fact that scholarship that is often perceived to be definitional for understanding 'the South' holds only marginal relevance for the people it claims to center should give pause to us as critical scholars.

One of the most generative critiques of this move of abstraction in postcolonial theory — from the situated struggles

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of subjugated peoples to generalized critiques of reigning epistemological and ontological assumptions — have come from Dalit and anti-caste scholars. In fact, their indictment extends beyond charges of intellectual arrogance and carelessness which we can glean from the debates already discussed above. Taking inspiration from Dalit and other oppressed caste scholars such as B. R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule, these thinkers maintain that postcolonial theory's overdetermined focus on the colonial relationship and the all-pervasive binary of colonizer-native constitutes a political project of mystification in the service of upper-caste interests.

In the words of Dwivedi et al (2020)., the focus on 'white colonizers' has enabled upper-caste academics to 'caste themselves as subaltern voices:'

Caste divisions and oppressions vanished into the category of the native with its moral superiority within the postcolonialist dyad. In the writings of postcolonial theorists, the upper caste' lamentations about colonial humiliation alone appear before the international audience, obliterating the discursive space for lower-caste people's historical interventions and political desires.

Herein lies the move of mystification perpetrated by postcolonial scholars: caste and class interests masked as intellectual and political critique. Despite these interventions, the figure of the subaltern remains an important organizing figure for scholarship in postcolonial IR. From its deployment as a plea to extend the geographical scope of neorealism's theorization beyond Euro-America through the approach of subaltern realism (Ayoob 2002) to illuminations of critical security studies' 'silence problem' via an assertion that the subaltern 'cannot securitize' (Bertrand 2018), IR scholarship largely reproduce the fetishizing moves of the Subaltern School project.

Our 2023 article 'Abstractions in International Relations' in the *European Journal of International Relations* is an attempt to expose this tendency to fetishize the experiences of racialized, sexualized, and gendered subjection. Why does this occur, what are its effects, and how can it be corrected? In the article, we argue that critical theory's founding promise was actually to counter fetishization by revealing that subject positions are the result of concrete social processes. One of Marxism's most powerful insights was that the very category of 'the individual' emerged from the historical development of capitalism. The notion of a rights-bearing, individual subject, 'freed' from the means of production and forced to compete with others on the market, reflected the newly formed capitalist social relations of the eighteenth century.

Feminist and anti-racist scholarship echoes this insight. As feminist social reproduction theorists tell us, for instance, the figure of the postwar housewife arose from a particular set of historical forces: the relegation of white, bourgeois women to the domestic sphere where they were forced, through economic dependence and vulnerability to direct violence, to carry out reproductive work for free. And anti-racist scholars like Stuart Hall teach us that racialization must similarly be studied in relation to the differential structuring of workers vis-à-vis capital. Indeed, 'the individual,' Stuart Hall (2021, 21) writes, 'cannot be the point of departure, but only the result.'

The point of such critical work is to demystify. It asks: How does a subject position come about historically? What set of social relations does it reflect? Why does it appear to us as natural or transhistorical? It therefore stands in direct opposition to the tendencies we find across critical strands of IR. A project of demystification would reorient critical IR scholars away from the fetishization of oppressed groups as vectors for abstract theorizing. Instead, it would ask: What does it mean to study the global relations of violence, dispossession, and exploitation that organize the lives of oppressed classes? How do border regimes, transnational logics of racialization, geopolitical conflicts, global financial crises, international development projects, nationalist ideologies, and other transnational processes separate, hierarchize, and subjugate people the world over?

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