

Why Is There No Minor International Theory?

Written by Nicholas Michelsen

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NICHOLAS MICHELSEN, FEB 22 2022

Critical International Relations was always a rum bunch. Marxists and Feminists, Queer Theorists and Decolonialists, Gramscians and Postcolonials, Frankfurt Schoolers and Poststructuralists. What tied all these academics together, and thus justified the use of Critical IR as a term to describe a disparate collection of scholars, was a rhetorical move. This rhetorical move implicitly supposed that minor theoretical positions share an emancipatory status within the discipline. There are, as I suggest in a 2021 article in the *Journal of International Political Theory*, reasons to suspect that this rhetorical move has passed its sell-by date in our current era. Critical IR as a collective term may be doing more harm than good to scholarship concerned with critiquing international issues, and to hopes to forge a better world through academic work.

This grouping of disparate theories first began to hang out together in the 1980s and 1990s, having come to a collective conclusion that the big bad discipline of IR was responsible for most of the nasty things out there in the world, war, exploitation, racism, and generic violence. Being part of Critical IR meant being on the other side. From the Margins, to 'be Critical' was to commit to smashing the discipline, exposing its weaknesses, knocking its treasured assumptions on the head, and mocking its cheap constructions. To be Critical was to fight the minor good fight against the major discipline, and by extension, to push back against Capitalism, Global War and Imperialism, one reification at a time.

Forty years later, anxiety echoes in the halls of Critical scholarship. It's happening everywhere, in every academic discipline, but in the field of International Relations the squirming has reached fever pitch. It's not hard to see why. After forty years of cracking open the reifications of a field of study lamented for being too statist, too focussed on militarism, implicitly capitalist, imperialist and anti-woman, Critical IR has effectively nothing to show for it. Nationalist hyper-masculine militarist states are ascendant. Indeed, they appear to offer the only organised international alternative to the global economic power-relations that still subsist, and the world is gazing into an ecological future that seems to ensure the next forty years will be far worse for the vast majority of people than the preceding forty. Those already suffering will be hit hardest. It is now largely agreed we are witnessing the post-cold war international order of US-led western hegemony unravelling in a disordered manner, with all the violent uncertainties that this entails.

It is time for Critical IR to ask itself some searching questions. Could it be that the practice of academic critique in IR is, in some complex ways, entangled with the international crises we live amongst, simultaneously economic, ecological, geopolitical, ethnonational, dissolving democracy and international order. Could it be that we, the academic forces of 'right side', may have made these crises worse or shaped them in some way? What have we actually been doing, and how is it related to what we think we have been doing since 'Being Critical' went mainstream in IR around two decades ago. For example, we might ask: What choices did we make in selecting our objects of criticism, and what were the effects of the choices we made? What have been the long-term implications of the styles of writing and presentation we have chosen for 'critical' work, and what public voice has that left us?

At the core of the crisis of critique in our discipline is the intellectual aesthetic that rose to dominance within professional scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century, which generically valorised the peripheral hipster, the dissenter and the marginalised outsider. This aesthetic called, implicitly, for Minor Theories as the only critical answer to the evil of the Major Discipline. The subsequent proliferation of self-consciously 'minor' academic

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tribes in IR, as well as in other social scientific disciplines, was supported by material incentives which favoured specialisation and rewarded very abstract language. The result has been an endless cascade of new 'concepts de jour,' tied up with the creation of new 'minor' scholarly subcultures, all competing within the buzzy critical academic market place for the attention of PhD students and Journal Editors, but largely ignoring everyone else. Eventually many of these theoretical subcultures coalesced into stable disciplinary formations or categories, so minor status is often nominal rather than a really existing state. This drove the creation of new avant-guards, theoretical turns which generally had to adopt ever more extreme theoretical positions so as to recapture 'marginal' or 'dissident' academic status.

The rhetorical style that became dominant in Critical IR meant that theorists who self-defined as such often viewed their marginality as a kind of posture for dramatic effect. That posture had unfortunate consequences. It provided a shield from needing to ask searching questions about our own role as scholars, and coldly assessing the role of Critical IR scholarship itself in society. Believing that the label Critical inoculated us from becoming 'mainstream' (read: evil), we failed to notice the process by which Critical Theories became major formations within the discipline. Powerful IR scholars continued to pose as marginalised 'Critical' thinkers, despite their ability to make or break the careers of younger scholars, bathing in the cults of personality that formed around them. 'Critical IR' as a term increasingly precluded serious critique of international issues, in large part because it had concluded that 'international issues' were too mainstream to be of any interest. The pressures of the neoliberal university undoubtedly played a role here, but self-describing 'Critical' academics were active participants. It was better to maintain the label 'Critical' dissolved of meaningful emancipatory content than to question the simplistic binary with an imagined 'Mainstream' it rested upon.

Critical IR' stopped being a minor or marginal theoretical subgroup within disciplinary IR a long time ago. Academic departments in the UK especially are known as leaders in Critical IR. 'Critical' sits on IR job descriptions and journal titles. Self-describing as Critical has been a solid career move for at least two decades. At least it has been for me. The rise to power of 'Critical IR' as an identifying label may have aided theoretical pluralisation within disciplinary IR at first, and opened space for ethically and politically concerned scholarship, but it has also insistently resisted any attempt to recognise that its particular formation might have some structural downsides. The accusation of being 'Mainstream' is an implication which now carries with it a bewildering range of accusations, up to and including being a neoliberal, a homophobe or even a white supremacist. Productive conversations between theoretical perspectives have largely departed academic journals.

The key problem with the minoritarian rationale underwriting the idea of 'Critical IR' as a term is fundamentally a logical one. It is simply not coherent to sustain the idea that there is a generic difference between 'being Critical' and 'being a mainstream problem solver'. All academics seek to find ways of controlling their biases, and often carry hopes to transform or improve the world they inhabit in some way. The desire to make a difference is part of most academics' sense of their vocation. The simple binary between Critical and Mainstream occludes substantial differences between accounts of what Critical thinking entails, and its relationship to a real-world of accelerating horrors.

Some 'Critical' scholars remain committed to emancipation as a core scholarly concern, hoping they might re-orientate the field around a shared disciplinary vocation for fostering a better world. But most Critical IR scholars today think that 'critique' cannot provide an anchor for IR's disciplinary reform. Rather they advocate for an end to IR altogether, and hope that a sacred utopian post-disciplinary space awaits those who enact this escape. To 'forget IR', in this dream, is to become allied for all time with the oppressed and marginalised across the world. Because being Critical means 'being Minor', it necessitates 'going beyond' the Major category of disciplinary IR. This vision of Criticality assumes IR is a coherent thing, existing beyond the loose complex of institutions, people, social groups, texts and economic relations. Ironically, reification of the discipline became the meaning of critique. What mattered was that 'being Good' and 'being Critical' were now indissociable from 'being Minor'.

This left no room for acknowledgment that you could be 'Critical' and 'Minor' end up in any number of political or ethical positions, even after it became obvious that self-describing Critical Scholars diverged radically on what emancipation meant. Critical theories, far from tending towards alliances, are clearly set to contradictory political and

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ethical purposes. The result has been a merciless churn of claimants to Critical IR living amidst a continuous risk of being exposed as insufficiently pure of the (modernist, racist, colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative, positivist, capitalist) traces of 'the evil discipline'. Surrounded by the dead bodies of the Critics that preceded them, it's no surprise that Critical Scholars are consumed by anxiety.

Critical Scholars didn't want to admit that folks may perceive themselves to be oppressed, use Critical Thinking to explain that condition, and advocate for reactionary politics or violence in hope of their emancipation. Critique is politically and ethically ambiguous, both in practice and in its consequences. It always has been. In the last two decades, ugly critics have risen to power in various national states, explicitly claiming that they are overthrowing the hegemonic Liberal mainstream in international relations theory. Our failures of self-reflection here had real world consequences. Critical IR ignored the ways in which 'Critical' approaches to IR increasingly ordered the material, social and institutional conditions for academic work, determined hiring and publishing practices, and organisational leadership. As Critical IR Theories became part of the explicit material conditions which structure the academic setting, this spawned conspiratorial discourses on the Far Right that pointed to our obvious un-criticality as evidence that 'Critical' really meant Hegemonic. In this way, the common-place use of the label 'Critical' to mean 'on our side' put tools directly into the hands of our most committed enemies.

For Critical IR, what could not be admitted is that minor theoretical status is not only transient and contextual; it is not only that minor positions clearly move in radically different directions. The visions of world politics created by scholars 'moving beyond' disciplinary IR can be significantly less attractive than the visions already settled within the discipline. Minor Theories can be cruel, trivial, hateful or murderous in their real-world consequences, and still be Critical. The major or minor status of a theory within academic IR simply did not give us a shortcut to understanding their political, social or cultural consequences, and it certainly told us little or nothing about their objective role in human emancipation, or in the multiple crises that beset us today.

Indeed, in very real ways, the belief that self-defining as 'Critical' provides a kind of moral anchor opens doors to the politics of the worst. Many of the very intellectual tools innovated by Critical IR are now being (brutally and more effectively) mobilised by reactionaries, racists and gender absolutists. Contemporary reactionaries have read their Deleuze, their Gramsci, their Derrida and Foucault, and they too understand the rhetorical power of feeling excluded, having a marginal identity, declaiming the hegemony of modern rationality and economic elites, and claiming to be a member of a uniquely victimised avant-garde representing an indigenous world-view. The challenge facing scholars in IR who hope to help vulnerable groups through their scholarship (for example, migrants with no home to return to, those who feel oppressed by heteronormative gender roles, or the manifold victims of racism), is that their reactionary theoretical interlocutors have borrowed not only the style, but also the content of much of what Critical IR scholars say. They have been reading us for two decades, and have listened to and borrowed all of our best lines. The logic and principles of Critical argument, including the old chestnut of claiming to be a uniquely reflexive critic of hegemonic power relations, expressed via modernist instrumental rationality, are now to be seen working very effectively for those self-described Critical scholars most abhor.

The belief that 'Being Critical' rests in a minor exit from disciplinary IR undermines the prospects of rigorous academic critiques of international relations today, which can be communicated as such to global publics. We need to rebuild a sense of respect and sympathy for scholars who don't choose to define themselves as 'Critical'. To do so, we must take seriously the fact that questioning settled assumptions is part of all good scholarly practice. Adding the word 'Critical' to something doesn't make it so.

Minor theoretical contributions often turn into major approaches, as in Poststructuralist IR, for example. But not all minor theories turn into major theories. Minor status is unstable and ethically ambivalent. 'Critical IR' has been of rhetorical use to scholars manoeuvring for professional advancement and influence, but it has also helped corrode and dissolve a wider community of thought on international issues, and done meaningful harm to academics' capacity to engage with those that we disagree with. Academic discourse has dissolved into competitive wars of purity, increasingly characterised by accusing peers of being racists, homo/transphobic, covert positivists, or crypto-capitalists due to their contamination by major 'disciplinary' baggage.

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Critical IR has been successful as an identity because many academics already share a base-line of values. The label 'Critical' acted as a signal for moral and political virtue within academic communities. This is perhaps the most important problem with the term. Critique requires scepticism or suspicion precisely about settled assumptions or categories. Self-defining as 'Critical' is the exact opposite. It suggests that rejecting assumptions is an identity, that carries a presumption of virtue, and gives rise to a lazy and unreflective romanticism. Self-describing Critical IR theorists have invited their publics to view the exercise of critique as just another ideology.

It is time to let 'Critical IR' go as a term. It gives succour to some of the least admirable of academic professional impulses, and undermines the very conditions for critique. The world is burning, the nationalist state returning. Exploitation is the global norm. No intellectual project has more completely disappointed than Critical IR. It's time to drop the term, and plan next steps. Those steps should begin with asking how 'Critical IR' has taken part in making the world we live in today, warts and all.

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Dr Nicholas Michelsen is Reader in International Relations in the Department of War Studies, King's College London. He wrote his PhD on continental philosophy, focussing on Gilles Deleuze. He is the author of *Politics and Suicide: The Philosophy of Political Self Destruction* (Routledge 2015), and *Pessimism in International Relations: Provocations Possibilities, Politics*, with Tim Stevens (Palgrave 2019). His recent work has looked at Strategic Communications, the history of international thought, the purpose of scholarship, and the reactionary internationalism of the New Right. He has two forthcoming books; *Global Nationalism: Ideas, Movements and Dynamics in the 21st Century* (with Pablo De Orellana), and *Unmapping the 21st Century: Between Networks and the State* (with Neville Bolt).