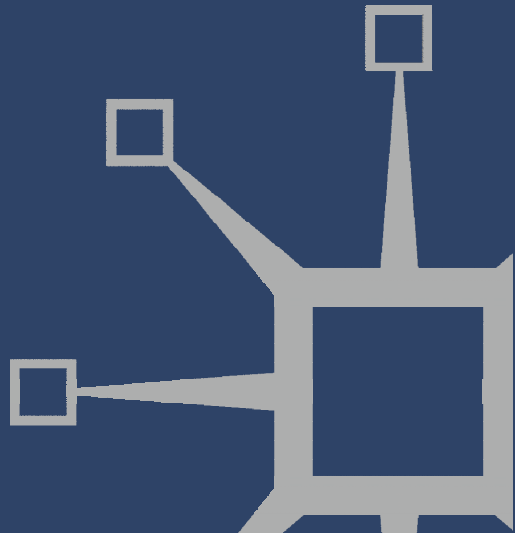


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Critical International Political Economy

Dialogue, Debate and Dissensus

Edited by
Stuart Shields
Ian Bruff
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To Jola, Laura and Raquel

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Introduction: 'Critical' and 'International Political Economy'

Stuart Shields, Ian Bruff and Huw Macartney

Since the late 1970s, International Political Economy (IPE) has tended to be divided into those scholars who focus primarily upon empirical research questions in order to understand the dynamics of actors within the international system, and those who prefer to focus upon an ontological enquiry into its historical evolution. In recent developments this division has been extended into the 'British' and 'American' schools, or more vividly into the division of the 'orthodox/heterodox' or the 'positivist' and the 'critical' (Murphy and Nelson, 2001, 2002; Cohen, 2008a), which in turn has led to concerns that such divisions might be overplayed (Higgott and Watson, 2008). The development of critical perspectives in IPE has brought with it interpretations that have drawn from Marx, Gramsci, Polanyi, Schumpeter and from poststructuralism (especially Foucault), and have been applied to a wide variety of cases. Yet, for all the work done in developing this critical ontology, precisely what binds the diversity of approaches remains confusing, as core analytical categories are too often assumed to be self-evident (for example, the critical method, methodological eclecticism, and a multidisciplinary approach).

Indeed, this could be the reason why, for example, Geoffrey Underhill (2009) views critical IPE as engaged in 'template theorizing' which embodies a selective approach to the real world in order to preserve the purity of the conceptual construct. At the same time, however, it would seem that critical perspectives do, as argued forcefully by Palan (2009) in the same issue of *New Political Economy* on the 'British' school, have something to say – not least because more mainstream scholars did not anticipate the current economic crisis, even in the minimal sense that trouble was brewing through the 2000s. Indeed, the intense self-scrutiny engendered by debates on the state of the discipline is a curious

phenomenon given that they are – Palan's contribution excepted – only weakly connected to the economic crisis that so few in IPE anticipated. As such, the timing – in terms of academic debates and empirical events – for a volume dedicated to critical IPE perspectives is more than appropriate.

The challenge posed by and to contributors to this volume is to assess the development of so-called critical IPE and interrogate whether the theoretical innovations that its foundations have been built upon have reached their potential. The most important contribution to the genesis of such an approach was undoubtedly Robert Cox's seminal articles in the early 1980s (Cox, 1981, 1983) and his subsequent monograph (Cox, 1987), and 'Coxians' have sought to develop such an ontology through engaging with 'world order' theory via Gramsci, Polanyi and others (for example, Gill, 2008). In addition, this work has reminded us that the purpose of critical theory differs from that of 'problem-solving theory' inherent within orthodoxy, in that its main aim is to stand back and look at how social interactions have formed historically. However, despite this significant contribution there is a tendency to accept the universality of many of these earlier openings as self-evident, and a reluctance to expand the capacity of ontological enquiries in the manner that other social sciences have often done (including International Relations itself, despite its continued state-centrism: see Jackson, 2008; Lawson and Shilliam, 2010).

The contributions to this book take up these challenges in a number of different ways, but all share a concern that critical IPE has often been less eager when looking to move beyond, for example, Coxian models of analysis, especially when faced with questions such as globalization, hegemony, gender, class and the role of the state. In addition, they are keen to stress that critical IPE remains contested. In discussing the current state of 'critical approaches' to IPE, the contributors aim to bring a number of points to wider discussion, reassessing the purpose of critical approaches and seeking to make a number of contributions to these debates in IPE. Moreover, we follow questions already noted concerning the nature of 'critique', and whether adopting a critical position places certain normative commitments towards the analysis of knowledge and emancipatory research that is all too often underplayed within IPE (Farrands and Worth, 2005).

Such debates also bring us to question why certain theorists (Gramsci, Polanyi, etc.) have been favoured as a point of departure, while others – particularly the Frankfurt School, feminists and geographers (and, of course, there are more) – have largely been ignored. This is not to imply

a complete dearth of wider theoretical innovation, but that critical IPE risks closing down opportunities for dialogue, or, as Mark Blyth might frame it, reproducing unquestioned answers that build upon existing bodies of work as opposed to opening up new avenues. Finally, and in light of recent debates on the validity of the ‘transnational divide’ within the wider IPE community (Ravenhill, 2008), we aim to demonstrate through these contributions that the distinction between the ‘critical’ and the ‘orthodox’ is only significant if the ‘critical’ is geared towards a larger, more substantial body of critical social enquiry and engages with what it means to conduct such enquiry. That is, disputes about methodology presuppose ontological reflection, and to neglect this utterly essential aspect of research – as the *Review of International Political Economy (RIPE)* and *New Political Economy (NPE)* debates on the ‘American’ and ‘British’ schools tended to do – makes volumes such as this not just desirable but necessary.

Therefore, an attempt should be made to revisit the notion of the ‘critical’. The contributors here all self-consciously situate themselves within critical ‘traditions’ – note the emphasis on the plural – and approach these studies as scholars outside what is often perceived as orthodox IPE. Indeed, the contributions to this edited volume seek to address the suspicion that the ‘transatlantic’ debate is serving to prevent dissensus and to put critical thinking in its place – in a closed black box – since it has thus far excluded (intentionally or not) a range of perspectives that offer a more holistic framework than questions of academic nationalism can address (cf. Leander, 2009). For these reasons, the book will provoke further debate on the nature of critical enquiry in IPE and the nature of IPE itself.

In summary, this volume seeks to:

- provide an overview of the contributions made by ‘critical’ IPE and also its shortcomings;
- suggest a variety of theoretical openings for critical enquiries to develop;
- place the development of the meaning of critique in IPE within the wider context of social science enquiry.

The structure of the book

One of the key aims of the book is to capture the different elements of critique that are, arguably, present in any self-consciously critical work. In the first part on ‘Dialogue’, the chapters aim to open up IPE’s

remit – critical or otherwise – in order to (1) consider issues that increase our conceptual reflexivity and thus (2) enrich our understanding of the world. Ashworth begins with the argument that IPE is not a new discipline, even if the label ‘IPE’ is a recent ‘invention’. In particular, he argues that the recovery of a largely forgotten IPE, which was often critical of the western liberal global order at a time when that order was emerging from the ideological conflicts of the early twentieth century, was actually central to the study of international politics at this time. In turn, this is instructive for how we view IPE as a discipline, for it destabilizes some of the assumptions inherent to recent debates. Next, Macartney and Shields provide a contemporary example of how such disciplining processes have hindered a potentially rich dialogue with geographers on the politics and production of space. This suggests an alternative to disputes so often associated with notions of globalization, which in effect leads us to an either/or stance with regard to the continued relevance of the national state. A scalar-relational perspective helps us attain a more sophisticated understanding of these processes. Finally, Griffin’s chapter addresses the criticisms often levelled at poststructuralist IPE via an interrogation of the current crisis, arguing that this is an indispensable approach which can make a theoretically and empirically valuable contribution to dialogues on critical IPE. In particular, she focuses on how, in its postcolonial and gendered forms, poststructuralism gives us a historicity to relations of exploitation, domination and force.

The rest of the book progresses to more pointed arguments, thus revealing other aspects of critical scholarship which have, intentionally or not, been excluded or marginalized. The second part on ‘Debate’ therefore contains chapters whose authors call attention to what they see as unwarranted silences within IPE. Germain argues that IPE falls short because of the way in which it has neglected the issue of subjectivity. This entails taking much more seriously two cardinal aspects of political economy that have been largely absent from discussion: law, or legal frameworks, and culture. However, it goes beyond this, for it also necessitates, as Germain shows through a critical discussion of what he terms the ‘new Marxism’, an engagement with the eclectic sources of inspiration for Cox’s work – particularly Collingwood and Vico – which have not been present elsewhere in critical IPE. Through a focus on another silence, the implicit acceptance across IPE – critical or otherwise – of the state/market dichotomy, Bruff makes a similar argument with recourse to some of Gramsci’s writings which are considerably more prevalent in other disciplines. Bruff argues that a truly

holistic approach to the international political economy (not IPE – see below for more) would entail a rejection of frameworks that separate out different aspects of the world in which we live into isolated parts, with their own autonomous, intrinsic properties. Consequently, the ability of International Political Economy to study effectively the international political economy is an open question. Finally, Elias reminds us that much IPE, including self-professed critical works, frequently adheres to a gender-neutral approach to world order and the inequalities that pervade it. Therefore, discussions in critical IPE of hegemony are too restrictive, ignoring as they do both the irreducibly masculine nature of hegemony within the global political economy and the inherently multidisciplinary nature of feminist political economy.

The final part, 'Dissensus', moves to the most critical chapters, for – in contrast to the first two sections' emphases on dialogue and unwarranted silences – they assert that a transformed means of understanding the world in which we live is necessary. Otherwise, the notion of 'critical' scholarship will wax and wane in accordance with how it is received elsewhere, rather than through its own dynamics and development. First, Worth claims that the radical impulses of Cox's 1981 *Millennium* article have dissipated through the gradual construction of an 'orthodox' heterodoxy. In particular, the construction of a 'British' school – which places Cox alongside the undoubtedly less critical Susan Strange – sanitizes matters to such an extent that the notion of critique is lost. As stated earlier, this is a foundational aspect of critical theory, for it places normative commitments at the centre of our research. Through this discussion Worth invokes the Frankfurt School, which is at the core of Fischer and Tepe's chapter on critical IPE and feminism. They argue that critical theory has tended to adhere to a 'public' notion of production which privatizes the crucial issues of social reproduction and systemic gender inequalities. This requires us to be much more assertive about the constitutive and non-supplementary role played by profoundly unequal gender relations through a consideration of social reproduction, in order to make the case for a more holistic mode of enquiry. The final chapter goes further, for Cammack seeks to undermine the notion of 'critical IPE' itself, arguing that if one is to be critical then a complete break with IPE is necessary. This is accomplished through a thorough and detailed interrogation of Cohen's (2008a) monograph on IPE, which Cammack argues is built on sand, intellectually speaking, but is a powerful text in terms of institutional power and gatekeeping within the discipline. This means that IPE cannot identify, let alone address, the questions posed by global economic

interdependence. Moreover, although IPE proposes 'international political economy' as its object of enquiry, it shies away from what would be required were that to be the case – an analysis of global capitalism at a systemic level.

It may seem odd that a book about 'critical IPE' ends with such a chapter, but critical scholarship is nothing if it is not reflexive, seeking as it does to engage with an irreducibly complex, ever-evolving world (cf. van Apeldoorn et al., 2010), and Cammack's chapter reminds us of the importance of the need to never rest on our laurels. Therefore, this volume will not only serve as an important reminder of the narrower, more mainstream approaches of the scholarship that are neglected in journals and curricula, but it will also destabilize some of the 'orthodox' heterodoxies that have developed over recent years. By giving each section a particular spirit and mode of engagement – dialogue, debate, dissensus – we hope the volume will make a significant contribution to the evolution of International Political Economy and the study of the international political economy.

Part I

Dialogue