Introduction

Citation for published version (APA):

Published in:
Critical Imaginations in International Relations

Citing this paper
Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester’s Takedown Procedures [http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.
Introduction: Being Critical and Imaginative in International Relations
(published in Critical Imaginations in International Relations (2016: Routledge))

By Aoileann Ní Mhurchú and Reiko Shindo

Critical and Imaginations
The discipline of International Relations (IR) is driven by a desire to be critical and imaginative. Its so-called disciplinary history, if there is one, is fraught with debates between schools of thoughts, some of which have been identified as ‘Great Debates’. Once introduced, concepts and theories are constantly under scrutiny. They are relentlessly re-invented to address the inadequacy of the old ones, to replace them, and, eventually perhaps, to be replaced by others. In this regard, despite many strands of theories and ‘isms’ gracing their work, one of the underlying aspirations shared by IR scholars is arguably to possess and exercise a ‘critical imagination’. As Jim George said, to be critical is ‘the search for thinking space’ where scholars share an enthusiasm for ‘alternative explanations of how we got to the present and why we think the way we do about the contemporary world’ (1989: 273). To be fair, phrases such as ‘critical’ and ‘imaginations’, used by George but not limited to him, are often attached to particular approaches in IR that are identified as ‘alternatives to rationalist theories of international relations’ (Smith 2001: 224). However, given the continuous attempts to explore different ways of thinking and talking about the world, it can also be said that IR scholars share, in a broad sense, a desire to think and act imaginatively and critically. As IR scholars we are encouraged to challenge what appears to be true, what is believed to be unquestionable, and what seems to be taken for granted.

In this book, we use the phrase, critical imagination to explore possibilities of world politics that do not reproduce state-centred politics. The IR discipline witnessed a surge of interest in challenging state centric thinking in the late 1980s and early 1990s, through the notable development of post-modernist/poststructuralist, feminist, and post-colonial approaches in IR (for example, Campbell 1992; DerDerian and Shapiro 1989; Edkins 1999; McClintock, Mufti and Shohat 1989). These approaches attempt to critically examine the state-centred understanding of politics to explore different
possibilities of the international, the political and the relational beyond a necessary focus on the state. They challenge an understanding of the world which is made up of bounded subjects within bounded political communities. The state-centred approach to world politics requires binaries, such as identity/difference, inside/outside, national/international, past/present, and development/underdevelopment as a necessary starting point for thinking about international politics. These binaries are relentlessly questioned and fiercely resisted by poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonial approaches. Such approaches instead focus on key concepts discussed within IR and show how these concepts work through and beyond such binaries. This critical exploration of the world beyond various statist boundaries continues to this day (see, for example, Abrahamsen 2000; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Lundborg 2013; Nyers 2006; Peterson 2003; Sylvester 2009; Vaughan-Williams 2012).

This book situates itself in this on-going attempt to critically interrogate state centrisms. It does so by selecting various key concepts that have been discussed separately across existing studies and bringing them together in a single volume. In doing so, it encourages readers to understand IR as more than a discipline. It is a site where relations between various groups such as nations, states, and political communities, have been imagined and re-imagined. These relations are questioned and contested through key concepts in this edited book. This book unpacks these concepts and explores what possibilities they suggest in forming relations and ways of being in world politics that do not reproduce state centrisms.

To critically examine the state’s ontological and epistemological status in IR does not mean to dispense with it. Rather it is to consider how the state itself is constituted by a set of practices, ideas and imaginaries that articulate particular relations in world politics. In other words, this book offers neither an outline of how we ‘move away’ from the state nor an image of how the world looks once we move away from the state. What lies beyond nation-state-led politics is not the answer that this book intends to offer. Instead, it offers an overview of how various key concepts have been used to imagine and reimagine the conditions of nation-state-led politics. Put simply, it looks at concepts which have been used as toolkits to rethink the possibilities of international

---

1 Our focus here on the state as something which is insufficient yet still hugely important can be linked to Chakrabarty’s argument (2007: 16) about Europe/European thought which he identifies as being ‘both inadequate and indispensable’. We’d like to thank Carolina Moulin for pointing this out.
relations. Thus, this book is not designed as the endpoint of a journey to think about ‘international’ relations in a way which is not dominated by state centrism, but as a companion which inspires us in ongoing attempts to challenge (reimagine) the possibilities of state-based international relations.

This book focuses on sixteen key concepts to think about how state centricity limits our imaginations of political life and how this can be or has been challenged. For this book we chose concepts based on two criteria. Firstly, we selected concepts which have prompted the emergence of new fields of study in thinking about non state-centric worlds in IR. Second, we selected concepts which address underlying themes shared among critical scholarship in its attempt to think beyond a state-sovereign oriented world. The former includes concepts such as borders (critical border studies), citizenship (critical citizenship studies, critical migration studies), globalisation (critical global studies), narrative (auto-biographical and narrative studies), technology (science and technology studies), and law (critical legal studies). The latter group of concepts include community, sovereignty, subjectivity, creativity, knowledge practice, difference, power, resistance, space, theory, and time.

The concepts discussed in the book are not necessarily absent in state-centred approaches to IR. Instead they are made invisible, or ‘silenced’ in Agnew’s term (see Agnew in this book), in different ways. This book investigates the ways in which these concepts are rendered invisible and a specific kind of world view has become more legitimate than others as a result. It also explores how different worlds might look through a renewed engagement with these concepts. If imagination helps us to ‘construct a creative space that is not filled by existing ideas and information’ (Park-Kang 2015: 370), it is through these concepts that this book endeavours to find such a ‘creative space’ in IR.

By focusing on concepts, we put ideas to the forefront of analysis rather than starting with a set of theories or specific theoretical frameworks. Chapters in this book are designed to allow readers to explore and think about what ‘critical’ IR can be in its various conceptual manifestations. Each chapter provides a discussion about how the concept can play a key role for reflecting on state centrism in IR and for envisioning the world through and beyond the state. Furthermore, the chapters draw connections between concepts to address common concerns and challenges in imagining IR. By doing so, the book allows readers to refer to one concept at a time while also linking together different concepts. The chapters not only illuminate key debates around these concepts but also provide thought-provoking insight into the concepts themselves for
the study and scholarship of international relations, especially when discussing their critical potential, which will be of interest to both students and academics (the initiated and uninitiated) alike...

The chapters are written by a wide range of authors, both established and emerging academics located in Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America because we wanted to generate as broad a discussion as possible. Each chapter in the book is written by someone whose own research draws upon the respective concept and illustrations are given in that context. Although there is no uniform structure to the chapters as such, each chapter addresses the following five points:

1. A reflection on why the concept is important and how it acts as a tool for re-thinking international relations.
2. An overview of the core principles, ideas and/or contentions associated with the concept; in particular the way in which the concept has come to be understood in critical thinking such that it challenges a statist starting point.
3. A discussion of the critical potential of the concept to interrogate the limits of state centrism.
4. Connections with key thinkers and other ideas.
5. A list of suggestions for further reading, briefly annotated.

By addressing these points, each chapter aims to reappraise conceptual grounds on which IR theories are based instead of offering another set of facts and data to counter the existing ones. They initiate readers to ‘think rather than reproduce accepted knowledge frames’ and thereby to ‘create the conditions of possibility for imagining alternative worlds (and thus to be able to recognize the political commitments sequestered in every political imaginary)’ (Shapiro 2013: xiv. Emphasis original).

**Critical ‘Versus’ Traditional Approaches?**

By adding the term ‘critical’ before ‘imaginations’, we are aware of the danger of creating two camps within IR arbitrarily, if not unnecessarily. Indeed, this is the concern explicitly addressed by several contributors. For instance, in her chapter on power, Rita Abrahamsen warns that the traditional/critical dichotomy will prevent us from being self-reflexive of our own approaches because we assume the other - in this case, any approach identified as conventional - to be ‘by its very nature unable to be critical’ (Abrahamsen, XX). She goes on to say: ‘[l]ittle is gained by such dichotomies and there
is a need to be alert to the dangers of caricaturing other approaches as somehow stuck in outmoded understandings’. She suggests that ‘in discussing so-called critical approaches, we need to be sufficiently reflexive and attuned to the forms of productive power at work in designating some approaches as “critical” and others as “traditional” or “conventional”’ (Abrahamsen, XX). Abrahamsen’s challenge for nuanced reflection on the traditional/critical dichotomy is taken up throughout this book. For instance, some chapters link contemporary debates and issues to older ones to address the question of continuity. For example, the chapter on knowledge practice by Aoileann Ní Mhurchú considers a neo-Kantian (rather than a post-Kantian) influence on critical engagement with understandings of ‘knowledge as practice’. In their chapter on difference, David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah discuss the influence of thinkers such as Hedley Bull, Karl Polanyi, and Ashis Nandy on their critically engaged understanding of difference; thus mixing so-called traditional and critical writers together to look for imaginative insights. By doing so, these chapters question the idea that critical thinking involves a radical new break with the so-called traditional. They emphasise the ways in which classical and non-classical thinking have become intertwined rather than the latter simply surpassing the former.

Other chapters interrogate the field of ‘critical IR’ to question any neat understanding that it can be contrasted with ‘traditional IR’. For example, in the chapter on creativity, Christine Sylvester expresses her frustration that many of the approaches called ‘critical’ remain largely concerned about theory and meta-theory at the expense of the everyday. Jens Bartelson, Andreja Zevnik, Reiko Shindo and Shiera Malik also express frustration in their chapters about the literature that is supposedly offering a ‘critical’ analysis within postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial or feminist traditions. In his chapter on sovereignty, Bartelson interrogates the critical understanding of sovereignty as contingent and considers the implications and limitations of such an understanding. In Zevnik’s chapter on law, she argues that critical IR scholarship is largely reticent about law other than looking at it as a limitation or a practice of governance which she contrasts with seeing law as a productive force with emancipatory potential. She refers to this as the ‘curious absence’ of law, and points out that a mechanism of repression is in operation in supposedly ‘critical’ works as a result. In her chapter on resistance, Shindo argues that, despite the traditional/critical division, studies on resistance tend to focus on visible forms of resistance that are driven by the will to change the status quo. She argues that to gain a fuller picture of resistance we must also consider unintentional and hidden protests conducted without the will to undermine statecentricity. Malik’s chapter on subjectivity also notably shows how critical IR
scholarship often reifies gendered and ethnic forms of subjectivity by not paying enough attention to macro power relations embedded in subjectivities.

What this draws attention to is how a critically focused interrogation of state-centred politics does not produce a single ‘critical’ alternative approach to world politics which can be clearly demarcated from an approach that is ‘non-critical’. Rather critical interrogation of state-centred politics produces many different, and often competing, ideas about what politics, the international, and the relational can be across traditional and critical, past and present, the national and international, the everyday and meta-theory and so on. In doing so what each chapter highlights is the power of ‘critique’ itself in producing IR; that is, the way in which critique can help us to develop different ways of talking about, evaluating, doing and interrogating the changing nature of politics, relations, and experiences of the international in a globalising world.

The rest of this chapter looks at four key areas of interrogation associated with this commitment to ongoing critique which can be seen throughout the book. These areas are interrogation firstly of the disciplinary boundary of IR; secondly of the division between engaging narrators and objective observers; thirdly of territorial space resulting in its disorientation; and finally of the notion of a necessary form of progressive politics.

Interrogating the disciplinary boundary of IR

The chapters in this book point repeatedly to the need to rethink the disciplinary boundary of IR when examining the tradition/critical distinction. Contributors do this by explicitly addressing the limits of the IR discipline as a sole source of imaginations and call for more inclusive and innovative approaches in thinking about international relations. This is most directly addressed in the chapter by Blaney and Inayatullah. They argue that ‘IR tends to reduce others’ differences to threat without considering encounters with others’ (Inayatullah and Blaney, 3). From this standpoint, Blaney and Inayatullah suggest the need to focus on difference beyond the language of threat and control which has become the norm in IR. Rethinking international relations from such perspective of difference, they argue, helps us to understand IR as ‘heterology’ (Inayatullah and Blaney, 12). In thinking about creativity as ‘a form of making’ (Sylvester, XX), Sylvester similarly suggests the need to go beyond the IR discipline in searching for vocabularies that enable us to be creative. She argues that ‘[c]reativity in our field would seem to require that the IR thinker journey for inspiration beyond the customs, sources, and regulatory mechanisms that constitute the core of the field’ (Sylvester, the third paragraph).
Indeed, rethinking the state-centric view of the world in IR through key concepts in this book, we are invited to question the disciplinary boundary set out as ‘IR’. For example, drawing on science and technology as well as popular film, Benjamin Muller notes in his chapter on technology that ‘traditional notions of space, inside and outside, us and them, (dis)order, security, threat, and so on, are radically reimagined in contemporary global politics, and IR is increasingly challenged, disrupted, motivated, and open to a variety of interdisciplinary influences under these conditions’ (Muller, page X). In selecting the key concepts for this edited book, we, as editors, too, have realised how difficult it is to contain the scope of this book solely within the IR discipline. As noted above, many of the concepts chosen for the book play a central role in developing new fields of study, each of which encompasses different disciplines beyond IR, including geography, sociology, science, philosophy, history, anthropology and economics, which the chapters in this book draw constant attention to.

Challenging the idea of IR scholars as objective observers

The challenge to a traditional/critical distinction also leads contributors in this book to question the assumed sacred line that protects ‘academics’ as detached and aloof observers of the world. This point comes out strongly in Carolina Moulin’s chapter on narrative. Moulin demonstrates various ways in which IR scholars engage with their own subject materials. By looking at several exemplary works, she problematises the objective/subjective distinction assumed in some approaches in IR. She introduces a way of reading IR as a series of narratives which ‘necessarily blur fact and value, authorship and readership, characters and audiences’ and ‘escape claims about mere truth, and about reality, for theirs is the realm of performativity’ (Moulin, page). In similar vein Shindo’s chapter on resistance starts from the recognition that it is difficult and even dangerous to identify particular social movements and incidents as ‘resistance’. She considers how our understanding of ‘resistance’ is not a matter of observation but is embedded in particular political and ethical views upheld by IR scholars. From this standpoint, she raises a series of questions that put the researchers’ embeddedness in their research topics at the forefront of studies on resistance and IR scholarship more generally.

In his chapter on time, Tom Lundborg addresses the involvement of theorists in their analysis of time. By showing how particular assumptions of time and progress inform specific views of history, Lundborg explores the idea of ‘a pluralism of time’ (Lundborg: XX). Drawing, for example, on the work of Kimberly Hutchings, he notes that this idea ‘offers a useful way of questioning the role of the theorist as someone who
occupies a privileged position in a unified present, on the basis of which he or she can act as both “time-traveller and prophet” (Lundborg: XX). The call for ‘a pluralism of time’ is shared by Ching-Chang Chen and Young Chul Cho in their chapter on theory. They argue that IR theories are reflective of the cultural contexts in which IR theorists are living. The state-centric view ‘does not come from a cultural vacuum. Rather, it reflects a particular understanding about territory, statehood and authority derived from Western/European history, philosophy and culture’ (Chen and Cho: XX).

In other words, these contributors question the seemingly innocuous belief in imagination assumed by IR scholars. Considering that any academic theorising is a political act, it is crucial to ask what sorts of politics IR scholars are involved in when they explore alternative possibilities of politics and call for the need to ‘imagine’ the world differently. This is what the chapters in this book draw attention to. The search for alternatives to state centricity requires IR scholarship to question the limit of the imaginable and hence broaden the scope of ‘imagination’. To do so, as Ní Mhurchú argues, is to reflect upon ‘knowledge’ as that which needs to be interrogated in and of itself. She notes that this involves refusing to start with key concepts on the presumption that these can be simply used to explain the world. What must be unpacked and investigated is not the question of what these concepts do but how we ‘practice’ them and the way we come to rely upon particular understandings of key concepts in international politics.

Although imagination is said to be a key intellectual activity in scholarship, the practice of imagination hardly receives any attention on its own with few important exceptions (Mills 1959). Somehow the meaning of imagination is assumed to be evident, apolitical and uncontroversial. By directly identifying IR scholars as providers of specific ways of imagining worlds, the chapters in this book show that challenging the traditional/critical distinction entails politicisation of both IR scholars themselves and their ‘imagination’. To borrow Milja Kurki’s phrase, we need to investigate the ‘epistemological and ontological decisions IR theorists make’ (2011: 133) to envision worlds differently.

Disorienting space
Many contributors specifically highlight the spatial implications of rethinking the traditional/critical division. They argue that thinking critically about international relations necessarily requires re-engagement with a previously-held spatial understanding of the world. In his chapter on space, for example, John Agnew points out that world politics is constituted in and circulated across networks and flows, and
place-making around the world. He notes how a geopolitics of knowledge ‘can help us understand more adequately the paths of contemporary world politics’ (Agnew, page 507). The development of such ‘paths’ is further complicated by Nick Vaughan-Williams’s chapter on borders. This highlights the fluidity of borders and how these are no longer to be found only at traditional entry/exit points, nor are they always ‘territorial’ in a straightforward sense. It is against such an understanding of a growing awareness of fluid borders as part of geopolitics that Muller considers the concept of technology. In his chapter he challenges the idea that technology is used by the powerful in the international arena, and explores instead how IR can be seen as a technology of power itself which sets the limits of possibility for how we conceive of and interpret world politics.

In her chapter on globalisation, Spike Peterson shows further the spatial complexity of the contemporary world by linking globalisation to everyday activities, political and economic controversies and international affairs. According to Peterson, globalisation both unfolds democratic deficits, anglo-centric tendencies and ideological manipulation and presents opportunities for challenging these state oriented structures. She notes that to understand globalisation is to understand the difficulty of ever pinning it down because ‘the contexts in which globalisation has currency are especially diverse in disciplinary, epistemological and ideological/political investments’ (Peterson page). In their chapter on citizenship, Peter Nyers and Zeina Sleiman similarly question any straightforward idea of linking citizenship to a simple idea of globalising Western liberal norms. Instead, they argue that the idea of citizenship is shaped by simultaneous processes of both globalisation and localisation.

**Interrogation of progressive politics**

What underlines the chapters in this book finally is not least a question of how we have come to understand progressive politics. In thinking about the critical potential for different concepts, contributors refuse to provide clear visions as to how they should be thought about. This destabilises the ground on which IR scholars have come to stand. This is a dislocation of the *terra firma* upon which IR scholars have come to expect their explorations may start as well end up. For example, in her chapter on community, Laura Brace disrupts the normal association between community and commonality (inclusion), exploring instead the exclusionary basis of community as common membership (without ever reducing community simply to exclusion). She argues that ‘we cannot assume…communities are unified systems of social cooperation without steadfastly ignoring the ways in which they are structured by property and power, to
exclude outsiders who do not belong’ (Brace, page). From this standpoint, Brace suggests the ways in which we might understand community in terms of (rather than as a bulwark against) relations of dependency, belonging and insecurity. Yet she notes that there are no easy alternatives and refuses to simply dismiss liberal notions of community and in particular its relationship to property and ownership that in large part produces the aforementioned exclusions and insecurities. Along with all of the chapters in this book, Brace’s chapter emphasises the need to unsettle and disturb – rather than simply abandon – how we have come to know and deploy a certain concept in order to imagine politics otherwise. Her chapter suggests that we cannot settle on any one path as a necessarily ‘better’ way of doing politics.

Despite these four ways in which the chapters engage with the critical-traditional relationship, we interpret their engagement as embodying a unified message: critical imagination is to understand world politics in fluid and indefinite terms. It develops myriad ways of talking about, evaluating, and interrogating the changing nature of world politics. In short, to engage in critical imagination is not to give answers but to keep asking. As such what unites the chapters in this book is that of a commitment to critique itself, the activity vital to the process of imagining IR.

In conclusion we hope that people will come back to this volume for many years to come in order to reflect upon ongoing debates about various key concepts within the field of IR. Our intention is that this book will act as a source of inspiration for how these debates are developing, their many twists and turns and the ways in which they open up many possible lines of inquiry into international relations. In other words, this book is not driven by the need to set boundaries around the ‘critical’ so that we can teach, understand or write about the world around us coherently. It is worried even less about encapsulating the social reality of critical imagination in IR. Rather the book is driven by a desire to explore the fluidity of critical imaginations in IR, so as to embrace and give voice to that fluidity, the tensions it comprises, and the imaginative potentials it opens up.
Bibliography:


