Whatever Happened to the Frankfurt School in International Relations?

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DAVIDE SCHMID, MAR 27 2023

A curious aspect in the development of International Relations theory over the past fifteen years is the slow yet unmistakable disappearance of the Frankfurt School as a key reference and source of theoretical identification within the broad field of critical IR research. In what are often considered the origin years of critical approaches to IR, in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars such as Richard Ashley, Mark Hoffman, Mark Neufeld, Steve Smith and Andrew Linklater, who sadly passed away this year, drew from the Frankfurt School tradition to challenge the positivist assumptions guiding the discipline and to develop a critical theoretical project which would be led by an emancipatory interest. A distinctive Frankfurt School-inspired Critical IR Theory emerged in those years as a 'post-positivist' project which sat alongside Constructivism and Post-structuralism yet distinguished itself from them for its explicit commitment to emancipation and the Enlightenment project. Meanwhile, the so-called Aberystwyth School, associated with Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones, developed an analogous position in the nascent field of Critical Security Studies.

The kind of scholarly intervention which Critical IR Theory produced followed some of the broader disciplinary trends of the time: primarily meta-theoretical in character, it centred on the critique of the objectivism and value-neutrality of 'mainstream' IR and on the definition of an epistemological position which would be guided by more reflexive and consciously normative principles; generally insular and denominational in its approach, it sought to define the internal parameters and conceptual boundaries for a theoretical project which would be self-contained and clearly distinct from other strands of critical thought, most notably Post-structuralism; normative and interpretivist in its practice, it saw its key contribution as residing in the unearthing of the hidden moral resources in international relations which pointed towards the attainment of higher levels of cosmopolitan consciousness and the transcendence of the nation-state. In so doing, Critical IR Theory engaged in an eclectic reading of the Frankfurt School tradition, drawing sometimes from the early Frankfurt School (most notably in the definition of a critical theoretical project opposed to 'traditional' theory), oftentimes from Habermas's second generation thought, for instance in attributing a central role to the emancipatory promise of communication and in the reliance on teleologies of progress. It is this form of Frankfurt School-inspired Critical Theory, which had by the early 2000s established itself as a relatively coherent and generally recognised approach in IR, which has today all but disappeared. What happened to it? Should it be mourned or even revived?

I argue that three distinct dynamics combined to determine the general decline of Critical IR Theory and mark the exhaustion of its contribution to a critique of international politics. The first is linked to the changing disciplinary mood in IR and the conclusion of the period of intense meta-theoretical debate which characterised the 1980s and 1990s. With the settling in of a period of 'theoretical peace' and co-existence between different paradigms of research (Dunne et al., 2013) also came a clear backlash against the sort of higher-order, meta-theoretical intervention which formed much of Critical IR Theory's scholarly production during that time. The more charitable reading of this turn, made recently by Beate Jahn, is that Critical Theory (broadly defined) was a victim of its own success and that it largely succeeded in broadening the epistemological and meta-theoretical boundaries of the discipline; the harsher one, voiced by Nicholas Michelsen, is that the image of Critical IR as an insurgent challenge to the IR 'mainstream' quickly became a self-justificatory delusion – and in the process contributed very little of value to the substantive understanding of international politics. This is also linked to a widespread exasperation with the growing ubiquity –

and attendant vagueness – of the notion of 'criticality' itself. Be that as it may, by the 2010s there was a narrowing interest in programmatic and meta-theoretical contributions of the kind that Frankfurt School IR theorists had specialised in.

The second dynamic relates to a broader predicament of Frankfurt School thought which extends beyond the discipline of IR. It refers to the emergence of a sense of disconnect between the new urgencies of the post-2008 global conjuncture and the focus of the still-dominant framework of Frankfurt School research – the Habermasian, communicative-democratic paradigm. As I argued previously (Schmid, 2018) and explored in my recent book 'The Poverty of Critical Theory in International Relations', what became increasingly evident both inside and outside of IR was the fact that the Habermasian framework of critique – with its emphasis on cosmopolitan evolution and side-lining of the critique of political economy – was increasingly ill-suited to interrogate and provide credible answers to the multifaceted capitalist crises and mounting social conflicts which characterised the global conjuncture after 2008 and have only intensified since. This points to the appearance of a generalised 'crisis of critique' of the prevailing form of Frankfurt School theory, one which has been extensively interrogated outside of IR by thinkers such as Nancy Fraser (2018), Albena Azmanova (2014) and Amy Allen (2016).

The third dynamic is linked to what Philip R. Conway (2021: 26) identified as 'perhaps the outstanding phenomenon of the past 20 years, as regards critical IR', namely 'the belated professional establishment of postcolonial, decolonial, and race-critical scholarship.' The effect of this on Critical IR Theory was to shine a light on both the long-running blind-spots and Eurocentrism of the Frankfurt School tradition as a whole – what Edward Said (1993: 336) famously noted as its 'stunning[…] silen[ce] on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire' – and on the more specific failings of Critical IR Theory itself (see Hobson & Sajed, 2017). Moreover, it offered a more promising path ahead for critical scholarship in IR, involving both a critical reckoning with the discipline's silences and a wealth of substantive analysis into the legacies and contemporary articulations of colonial and racial power in global politics.

It is the difficulty in responding to these three developments, I argue, which lies behind the slow decline of Frankfurt School Critical IR Theory. That is not to say that all life is extinguished in Critical IR Theory and that there are no attempts to renew it. There certainly is newfound interest, in Critical IR as well as beyond it, in early Frankfurt School thinkers such Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin and their interrogation of life under late capitalism. There are also promising engagements with the question of how to 'decolonise Critical Theory', address its Eurocentrism and undo its long running amnesia with regards to questions of colonialism and race. These are encouraging signs, yet what I think should be resisted is any temptation to revive Frankfurt School Critical IR Theory as a self-standing and bounded intellectual project which separates itself from the rest of the field. It is necessary, in that regard, to draw the right lessons from the decline of 1990s Critical IR Theory and reject a view of critical IR scholarship as composed of separate and competing silos. Much more promising, I believe, is the image of a collaborative field which engages in the critique of existing conditions by drawing from and connecting a variety of different critical theoretical resources.

An open and anti-identitarian approach of this kind holds much greater promise. For one, moving away from the attachment to distinctive theoretical strands helps to question the canonical and Eurocentric narrative of Critical IR's origins, thus revealing a richer history and long-ignored voices, in the way Henderson (2014), Hutchings & Owens (2021) and, Conway have done. Moreover, it is essential if Critical Theory is ever to go beyond a merely cosmetic endeavour at 'decolonising' its theoretical and normative assumptions – what Ciccariello-Maher (2016, p. 133) calls a 'decolonisation from within' – and engage seriously with the colonial constitution of modernity and questions of material reparations and epistemological justice (Bhambra, 2021).

In the final instance, then, there is no reason to invest energies and effort in the reconstitution of Frankfurt School Critical IR Theory as a separate body of scholarship. The contributions that the tradition can bring to contemporary critical efforts – residing, for instance, in the reflections on the generalised character of domination under capitalism, or on the negativity of critique – are better realised as ideas and inspirations that can be drawn from, interrogated and criticised from the standpoint of a more open and collaborative critical theoretical endeavour.

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