

Interview – Frances Cruz

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Frances Cruz is an Assistant Professor at the College of Arts and Letters, University of the Philippines, Diliman, and co-convenor of the Decolonial Studies Program at the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies. She is the current President of the Philippine International Studies Organization, Vice President of the European Studies Association of the Philippines, At-Large South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Representative of the Global South Caucus (ISA), and a board member of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society. Her latest book, *International Studies in the Philippines: Mapping New Frontiers in Theory and Practice*, is co-edited with Nassef Manabilang Adiong and was published by Routledge in April 2020.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

It's difficult to recall a specific event, reading, or person that encouraged me to pursue my areas of research. More broadly, I'd say my research is informed by my academic and personal background. I received education in the Humanities, Linguistics, and International Studies, and this prompted me to find some common ground between the three. In addition, a lot of my thematic interests are informed by having to move between and amongst several regions, from my childhood in the Middle East to my education in the Philippines and Europe.

The Decolonial Studies Program where you are co-convenor is the latest research program of the University of the Philippines' Center for Integrative and Development Studies. What sets it apart from other research disciplines? How is global discourse and scholarship on international relations accommodating or challenging this decolonial approach?

Due to a number of events in the last few decades such as the demand for less Eurocentric curricula and canons, calls for decolonization within the academe and across societies more broadly, and the examination of race in structuring relations between peoples and states, there has been a great interest in ensuring that Eurocentric paradigms do not result in inappropriate or inaccurate narratives, practices, policies, and analytical framings of events that occur elsewhere. These topics have long been a tradition in scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, drawing from anti-colonial critique, critical theory, post-colonialism and so on. Yet, we see that even after decades of calls for more pluralism in knowledge production, the canons have remained largely unchanged. As many academic disciplines were established in response to issues and realms of studies that responded to events from the past, the complexity of today's world requires significantly more local nuances, transversal approaches, and interdisciplinary collaboration and synthesis. In this sense, the program aims to make known and address systemic and normalized practices and attitudes that are carryovers from the colonial era, and promote reflection about a coloniality which is unjust, implemented unreflectively, incompatible with local needs and contexts or simply unsuitable for present issues.

I would hesitate to say that perspectives critical of both colonialism and its lingering effects in politics and society

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have been necessarily neglected in International Relations. The critique is that as with other critical or reflexive theories, decoloniality and postcolonial perspectives are a challenge to mainstream approaches and methods, engage with empirical data, and contribute more concretely to policies. Nevertheless, there has been a wealth of scholarship since at least the 1970s that has actively challenged Eurocentrism and espoused various forms of conceptual and theoretical views from the non-West and Global South. There have been many recommendations as to how colonialism, its critique, and non-Western approaches can be incorporated more concretely in syllabi. The degree to which these are actively incorporated into pedagogy, however, varies considerably from institution to institution and from region to region.

Are decolonial perspectives and decolonizing initiatives challenging traditional IR to the point of rendering traditional perspectives obsolete? What are the foreign policy implications of a decolonial perspective in international relations?

Here we have to be careful, as there are many approaches that claim to decolonize, and there is the tendency to view decolonization as synonymous to the decolonial option, associated with the Latin American school, but that is a different topic entirely. It's unclear that decolonial perspectives necessarily foster a collective aspiration to render 'traditional perspectives' 'obsolete' per se, and this kind of zero-sum framing tends to hinder meaningful dialogue. Rather, it is more known for subjecting Eurocentric aspects of such perspectives and their implications in practice (as this often has significant global, regional, and domestic repercussions) to greater scrutiny.

Some scholars seeking to decolonize IR, for instance, advocate for a greater plurality in sources of knowledge, while some are proponents of reflexive and critical theories that encourage us to re-think concepts and experiences. Drawing from other disciplines and fields of inquiry, sociologist Syed Farid Alatas, for instance, has promoted knowledge production that attempts to be autonomous from ideological and political centrism, while initiatives from groups such as Inter-Asia Cultural Studies promote learning and knowledge production between societies and peoples in Asia. These are just some examples of lessons that can be brought in from other disciplines to study the international.

Even for those who associate the process of decolonization with more radical upheavals throughout society – and this could involve massive institutional transformations – there is nevertheless value in intermediary processes such as digressing from canon, diversifying syllabi, and de-centering knowledge, among others, as suggested by Nayantara Appleton. This is not to say that there are not, or will never be, theories that attempt to create new hegemonies under the pretenses of decolonization, which is another matter. At the minimum, the spirit of decolonization should, on one hand, encourage scholars to incorporate reflexive thinking about knowledge production – such as in which context knowledge was produced, and the circumstances that surrounded knowledge production – while on the other hand, recognize commonalities amongst theories that are not the patrimony of one particular culture or civilization, as Sally Matthews suggests. As the prefix *de-* suggests, decoloniality, decolonization, and related initiatives contain an explicit aspiration to make themselves obsolete through societal change.

I find it interesting that the foreign policy implications of a decolonial perspective in IR is frequently asked of critical theories in particular, and on one hand, I understand that this is because there is this desire for IR to be immediately realizable in practice. On the other hand, it is more than just a question of pragmatic solutions when a major goal is to re-think approaches, which is where a lot of critical theories come into play. One example is the Nelson Mandela lecture delivered by Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the UN, in which he speaks of a new social contract. Re-thinking a social contract has implications that exceed foreign policy and requires fundamental changes in institutional mandates, priority-setting, practices, governance, and so on. Furthermore, it is sometimes in the myopia of pragmatism that bigger questions are left out of the picture – focusing on managing political reactions and restrictions on refugees, for instance, leaves out the larger narrative of why there are refugees to begin with. These root causes and assumptions are things that projects of decoloniality want to interrogate. This is not to say that decolonial perspectives do not have a foreign policy application, rather that policies that do tie into the general spirit of decolonization or that may create a potent platform for it may not always be as explicit as the Bandung Conference in 1955. Policies that encourage solidarities, knowledge sharing and different practices between indigenous peoples for instance, may possibly be characterized as decolonial, but there are also policies that use the vocabulary of

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decoloniality while merely appropriating the idea for neo-imperialist or status-quo preserving policies. It is an important feature of critical scholarship to identify precisely when and how such a thing happens – the co-optation of a narrative to preserve an ideological status quo or to introduce new centrism or hegemonies. In our book, for example, we have tried to look at how relations between states in the South can be optimized, while also looking at how non-state actors can be empowered in the practice of international relations. This may not go so far as to cause upheavals in current relations, but it does look at different ways in which groups that are overlooked can negotiate, contest and express their own power.

Your latest book maps new horizons of non-Western approaches in Philippine experiences of International Relations. Can you tell us more about this book and its relevance in the wider context of Southeast Asia?

In this book, we talk a bit about the limitations of dominant paradigms, Euro- or Western-centric framing in the Philippines, while focusing on local and regional perspectives in International Studies. The book presents a glimpse at efforts towards homegrown conceptualization in International Studies and possible linkages between International Studies and Area Studies, as well as aspects of the international that tend to be overshadowed in the extant literature here. In the first section of the book, for instance, Gamas writes on the mandala as a form of international order in pre-colonial southeast Asia, before nation-states as we know them today existed. Chong on the other hand, attempts to draw from the lessons found in the writings of José Rizal, a Filipino intellectual who grappled with the paths of accommodation and revolutionary change in his various writings. The theme of extrapolating concepts and socio-political thought relevant to IR is similarly taken up in Calata's chapter on Renato Constantino, a historian who wrote on the miseducation of the Filipino. Lopez's and Elumbre's chapters use language and the re-imagining of the curriculum respectively, to connect local and regional concepts and histories with the unfolding of globalization as well as transnational exchanges and movements. The exercise may present inroads to projects in other parts of Southeast Asia that wish to achieve similar goals concerning the International Studies curriculum and interdisciplinary collaboration with IR – one example that comes to mind is the 2019 book, *International Relations as a Discipline in Thailand: Theory and Subfields*, edited by Chanintira na Thalang, Soravis Jayanama, and Jittipat Poonkham.

Having a background in languages and linguistics, would you say that these play a role in the homegrown theorizing of IR?

I'll try to connect the two in such a way that there are lessons for IR. In 2015, Wigen forwarded the concept of 'conceptual entanglement' in an article about how the translation and adoption of the word and concept of 'civilisation' from the French during the Ottoman Empire became operationalized. Chen and Hsu (2018) have published work on how the concept of human rights has been articulated in China, while the literature on norm diffusion has suggested forms of localization and interpretation of 'global' practices, assigning more agency to the grassroots. As languages are a way of classifying and naming objects and states, similar to taxonomy, then they are crucial in finding a vocabulary for concepts that lie outside of the dominant languages and their associated philosophies and theories. This is of course not a new undertaking. English, a dominant academic language, has itself borrowed many words and concepts from other languages, and this means that there is leeway for the generation and propagation of new concepts through a serious engagement with language.

What are you currently working on?

I'm currently working on using text mining and interpretative methods to explore the securitization of Muslim identities in traditional and social media in the Philippines. The first half of the project involves interrogating how minorities in the Philippines were represented in colonial-era policies and newspapers and to what degree this demarcation of identity ties into the construction of the Philippine nation, while also setting the tone for the expectations regarding ontological security. I then look into continuities and discontinuities between these historical narratives and policies and recent developments in the nexus between identity and International Politics, such as the relationship between the Global War on Terror and incidents in the Southern Philippines, such as the Mamasapano clash and the Marawi Siege.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

At the risk of sounding simplistic, we could start with the premise that IR has long been associated with levels of analysis, particularly with regard to systemic behavior. While acknowledging that this is a simplistic characterization of IR, it is nevertheless hard to imagine an IR program that does not reference this at one point or another. At the same time, appreciating international relations – that is, the practice of it and not necessarily the discipline – while requiring a deep appreciation of system-level forces, also demands paying attention to historical and ontological aspects of nation-states and civilizations. The concept of the international thus requires one to go deep, not only into the literature, but into one's self, one's context, one's needs, and what informs one's position in the world. My advice for the youth in IR will always be to read beyond your discipline with empathy, understanding, and a spirit of collaboration and knowledge transfer. It will not only make you a more well-rounded scholar, but also hopefully make you a more well-rounded member of humanity.