

Encounter, Critique, and Postcritique: A Play in Two Acts

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Abstract

What's at stake in debates over critique and postcritique in International Relations (IR)? To subvert that question, this article is written in the format of a theatre play that stages a repeated encounter between scholars who are invested, or not, in that debate. At the centre of the conversations that take place are questions linked to academic responsibility, the nature of reflexivity, and the possibility of different political futures. The play and its characters are fictions, though they are hoped to reflect the 'narcissism of small differences' that often pervades academia. In doing so, we seek to (1) foreground how small changes in context (here, from an academic to a practitioner conference) force radical changes on how intellectual controversies are debated, (2) emphasize that the true stakes of debates such as those between critique and postcritique are often obscured by the combative nature of academic discourse, and (3) advocate for a refusal of, or active withdrawal from, the arbitrary classification of scholars into particular intellectual camps or positions. This process of fixing identities, the false idea that we are simply our academic personas, very rarely reflects either our personal-political realities nor the complex, polyphonic, and sometimes happily contradictory qualities of our evolving intellectual lives.

Keywords

critique, postcritique, encounter

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Résumé

Quel est l'enjeu des débats sur la critique et la postcritique dans les relations internationales (RI) ? Pour renverser cette question, cet article est écrit sous la forme d'une pièce de théâtre qui met en scène une rencontre répétée entre des chercheurs qui sont investis, ou non, dans ce débat. Au centre des conversations se trouvent des questions liées à la responsabilité académique, à la nature de la réflexivité et à la possibilité de différents avènements politiques. La pièce et ses personnages relèvent de la fiction, mais l'on espère qu'ils reflètent le « narcissisme des petites différences » qui imprègne souvent le monde de la recherche. Ce faisant, nous cherchons à :1) souligner comment de petits changements de contexte (ici, d'une conférence scientifique à une conférence de praticiens) entraînent des changements radicaux dans la manière dont les controverses intellectuelles sont débattues ; 2) souligner que les véritables enjeux de débats tels que ceux existant entre la critique et la postcritique sont souvent obscurcis par la nature belliqueuse du discours universitaire ; et 3) plaider pour un refus ou un retrait actif de la classification arbitraire des chercheurs dans des camps ou des positions intellectuelles particulières. Ce processus de fixation des identités, la notion erronée selon laquelle nous nous réduisons à nos personnalités académiques, ne reflète que très rarement nos réalités personnelles et politiques, ainsi que les qualités complexes, polyphoniques et parfois heureusement contradictoires de nos vies intellectuelles en évolution.

Mots-clés

critique, postcritique, rencontre

Resumen

¿Qué está en juego en los debates sobre la crítica y la poscrítica en las Relaciones Internacionales (RR. II.)? Con el fin de subvertir esa pregunta, este trabajo se ha redactado a modo de obra de teatro, en la que se pone en escena un encuentro repetido entre académicos implicados, o no, en ese debate. Las conversaciones resultantes se centran en cuestiones relacionadas con la responsabilidad académica, la naturaleza de la reflexividad y la posibilidad de distintos futuros políticos. Si bien la obra y sus personajes son ficticios, se busca reflejar el «narcisismo de las pequeñas diferencias» que a menudo impera en el mundo académico. De este modo, se pretende: 1) destacar cómo los pequeños cambios de contexto (en este caso, de una conferencia académica a otra profesional) fuerzan cambios radicales en la forma de debatir sobre las controversias intelectuales; 2) resaltar el hecho de que los verdaderos intereses de debates como los que oponen a la crítica y la poscrítica se ven a menudo oscurecidos por la naturaleza combativa del discurso académico, y 3) abogar por el rechazo o la retirada activa de la clasificación arbitraria de los académicos en determinados campos o posiciones intelectuales. Este proceso de fijación de las identidades, esa falsa idea de que solo somos nuestras identidades académicas, rara vez refleja nuestras realidades personales y políticas o las cualidades complejas, polifónicas y a veces felizmente contradictorias de nuestras vidas intelectuales en constante evolución.

Palabras clave

crítica, poscrítica, encuentro

Characters

<i>Critical Theorist:</i>	A postdoctoral scholar of International Relations (IR) based in London.
<i>Postcritical Theorist:</i>	Another postdoctoral scholar of IR based in France.
<i>Undefined Theorist:</i>	A near-to-be-finished PhD candidate of IR, who has moved too many times to be based anywhere. They have known both the critical and postcritical theorist for some time, as all three of them undertook their doctoral studies at the same institution.
<i>Friend of the Undefined Theorist:</i>	Newly minted PhD, on a Visiting Lecturer temporary contract based in London
Footnotes:	<i>A series of voices echoing in the drama.¹</i>

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1. Above the line across this text, we lay out a series of fictional encounters between different scholars of international relations in disagreement. In doing so, we wish to argue that the context, form, and style of academic dialogue is frequently not conducive to clarifying the intellectual stakes of such debates, in this case as they pertain to distinctions between critique and postcritique. In one respect, this is then a meditation on the narcissism of small differences that pervades much scholarly interaction, as a reviewer helpfully clarified for us. On the other hand, we wish to explore how shuffling the contexts of our encounters – disorientating our sensibilities – can offer greater intellectual clarity on the world. This is not a complex argument. Instead, our hope is that making this argument through the fictional medium of theatre, itself a disorientation of our usual scholarly contexts, will place that argument into sharper light (see the *postscript*).

But why a theatre play?

In her *The Politics of Exile* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), Elizabeth Dauphinee reflects on reaching a point where ‘no theory I know of could help’ (p. 168) her to understand the grounded and embodied dilemmas of research. As such, she turned to narrative as a mode of scholarly inquiry. Later, in ‘Narrative and the Possibilities for Scholarship’, *International Political Sociology* 12 no. 2 (2018), she and Paulo Ravecca reflected on the narrative turn in IR and the idea that tendencies toward fetishizing concepts through ‘ritualistic and automatic referencing – the *doxa* of particular critical approaches’ can be ‘challenged by the concrete demands of an encounter’ (p. 129). And narrative, naturally, is premised on an ‘encounter between the reader and the text’ (p. 135), something that sees ‘our scripts dashed by the plurality that the experience of these encounters brings about’ (p. 134). In what follows, we follow this logic, but through the medium of the theatre play, which seems to us to mirror the logocentric nature of academic discussion: we *speak* (and so *think*), most often in dialogue. Nonetheless, the medium of theatre places limits on narrative that we are forced to grapple with here. As Keller Easterling has argued, in ‘dialogue as a form. . . the text is only the trace of an action’ (Amelia Stein’s interview, ‘Keller Easterling: Playing Spaces’, *Guernica*, 15 May 2015. Available at: <https://www.guernicamag.com/playing-spaces/>). A play – like conversation – is a medium that is open to endless interpretation/reinterpretation, refusing fixity because it is rather under-contextualized. This allows for an almost infinite number of encounters across difference but also, therein, produces a relative thinness in analytical depth that is both a virtue and a problem. As such, these footnotes also constitute a character in our two-act play. They allow us, in the vein of Annemarie Mol’s *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), to tell a different story. That story certainly sees us retreat behind Dauphinee’s ‘ritualistic automatic referencing’ but, also, works in tandem with the dialogue of the play to further its message.

Act One

[The action takes place in a pub in London, after the *Millennium* Symposium on Critique and Non-Hierarchical Futures, October 2023. A critical theorist, a postcritical theorist, and another (undefined) theorist are standing by the bar chatting. Others from the workshop are seated at a table to their side. It's early evening.]

Critical Theorist: So. . . why were *you* here?

Postcritical Theorist: I was. . . invited.²

Critical Theorist: We need to be doubling-down on critical theory today, not going 'post'-critical.

Postcritical Theorist: Don't get all paranoid. I'm all for doubling down on critique. I enjoyed your article, everyone did—

Undefined Theorist: Yes! It was super! I wanted to ask—

Postcritical Theorist: —I've felt something similar about the opening of subjectivities in contexts of extreme oppression. Those fractures that intersectional entanglements pry open. Critique brings these to the fore, exposes the ambivalences and possibilities of violence and power. But my question is always the same, where do we go from there?

Critical Theorist: Critique is not what you think it is! Or what some of the others at the symposium today think it is. Critique was always already postcritique. You know, in more than one way, critique is always about going somewhere else. It's not old white guys revealing Kantian, Marxist or whatever 'truths'. All critique, from Adorno and Horkheimer to trans Black Feminism,³ wants to go beyond

2. In Michel Serres' *The Parasite* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), he conceptualizes the figure of the parasite in different ways, but one (from the French language) interpretation of that figure is its representation of static or noise. Serres draws an analogy between such static and the notion of an 'uninvited guest' who adds noise to a dinner table. In one reading, this is a positive thing because, in the end, 'the parasite invents something new', see here Jonathan Luke Austin, 'A Parasitic Critique for International Relations', *International Political Sociology* 13, no. 2 (2019): 215–31. But in academic settings, this kind of parasitic static noise leads to conversations such as this – surprise at the arrival of the outsider (*viz* Georg Simmel's classic essay 'The Stranger'), suspicion, and concern. This, to be clear, and despite certain readings of Serres, has nothing to do with the critical/post-critical debate herein, and more the social dynamics of the 'camp' structure of academia. See Christine Sylvester, 'Experiencing the End and Afterlives of International Relations/Theory', *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013): 609–626.

3. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997); Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

modernity, reductionism. . . deconstructing subjects to open up new imaginaries, new alterities. . . You know things that do, have always, done things and taken us somewhere else.⁴

Postcritical Theorist: But isn't there something very. . . liberal. . . even neoliberal about this? Relentless innovation of our theoretical presuppositions to 'innovate' in the world. To shuffle our subjectivities! To become the new! I don't see anything changing, any emancipation.

Critical Theorist: Neoliberal? Without critique, emancipation is an empty dream. Look at what's going on now, in solidarity with Palestine. Mixing protests in the streets with BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) tactics – challenging the logics of colonial modernity at every level.

Undefined Theorist: So critique is nothing like it used to be, no Adorno calling the police on his own students, no Hannah Arendt's judgemental 'Reflections on Little Rock'?⁵

Critical Theorist: [*Looking away from the undefined theorist toward the post-critical theorist*]
It seems sometimes that people who talk about postcritique stopped reading critical theory in the 1980s. There's

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4. This point is reflected in a series of important articles by Beate Jahn in defence of critical theorizing broadly conceived. In one, Jahn reflects on how the 'metatheory' of critique actually achieves political relevance in a symmetrical manner to all forms of modern science: through abstraction that, though it may, at first glance, seem 'distant' from the world, actually opens up imaginaries that have the capacity to transform worlds, something she demonstrates through the sustained political impact of – in particular – feminist theory, see 'Theorizing the Political Relevance of International Relations Theory', *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (2017): 64–77. Similar arguments have been made vis-à-vis postcolonial, decolonial, queer, and other theory, see Philip R. Conway, 'Radicalism, Respectability, and the Colour Line of Critical Thought: An Interdisciplinary History of Critical International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 49, no. 2 (2021): 337–67; Daniele Lorenzini and Martina Tazzioli, 'Critique Without Ontology: Genealogy, Collective Subjects and the Deadlocks of Evidence', *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 7 (2020): 27–39. Jahn has connected this claim to a defence of critical theorizing, stressing that despite these abstractions it has always been involved in political debate and action, 'Critical Theory in Crisis? A Reconsideration', *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 4 (2021): 1274–99. We return to this point in the postscript.
 5. See Achille Mbembe, 'Theodor Adorno vs Herbert Marcuse on Student Protests, Violence and Democracy', *Daily Maverick*, 19 January 2016. Available at: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-01-19-theodor-adorno-vs-herbert-marcuse-on-student-protests-violence-and-democracy/>; Hannah Arendt, 'Reflections on Little Rock', in *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2003), 193–213, where she defends segregation in the public school system and, for a commentary and broader discussion, see Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 65–139.

nothing male, pale or stale about critique today at all, if it ever was.⁶

Postcritical Theorist: Sure, but what do you think postcritique is?

Critical Theorist: Neoliberalism, impact, exactly.

Postcritical Theorist: [Sighs]

Postcritique is nothing to do with all that. It begins as something anti-elitist; you know – critique now is really beyond the Frankfurt school, sure, but it still seems so. . . hierarchical. . . whether queer, black, feminist. . . it’s still Eurocentric, it’s still ‘separate’ from the world. Still likes the moral high ground and an ethical elitism. Critique is no longer, sure, about Marxist teleology but all the talk of generosity and welcoming different worlds just retains this intellectualism, this scholasticism.⁷ For many people today, critique just

6. See Elizabeth S. Anker, ‘Beyond Ambiguity and Ambivalence: Rethinking the Tools of Critique’, *On Education: Journal for Research and Debate* 3, no. 9 (2020): 1–7. This point is important. Critique has radically expanded beyond provincial references to the Frankfurt School, coming to be traced back instead – for example – to figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois’ and his ideas of ‘double-consciousness’, *The Souls of Black Folk* (London: Amazon, 1903), 2, working through Sylvia Wynter’s understandings of the need for new ‘genres’ of the human ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument’, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, up to Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute, 2007), Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Animals* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020) and Vanessa Machado de Oliveira’s *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity’s Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

7. This postcritical argument has many variants. But it stems from a desire to de-center intellectual thought from its privileged social position. In its more contemporary variants, such a movement has undoubtedly been indebted to the focus of science and technology studies, as well as pragmatist sociological variants, on seeing the world in ‘symmetrical’ ontological terms. This not only levels difference between actors in agentic terms (e.g. human/non-human) but also questions any authoritative difference between knowledge systems. In IR, this is reflected in the work of Austin, Bellanova, and Kaufmann on ‘companionship’ in research; the idea that all knowledge is mediated through encounters with a litany of actors/actants who must be welcomed for their knowledge, rather than arbitrarily categorized as more or less valuable than other forms of knowledge (production), Jonathan Luke Austin, Rocco Bellanova and Mareile Kaufmann, ‘Doing and Mediating Critique: An Invitation to Practice Companionship’, *Security Dialogue* 50, no. 1 (2019): 3–19. Ultimately, the goal of this postcritical move is to question why a transcendental subject still appears to be at the centre of critique, even where critique seeks to invent/imagine a different ‘genre’ of the human. In one sense, this is a paradoxical postcritical critique of the discipline implied in the injunction to continue to ‘work on ourselves’ in ways that are productive for the ‘undoing’ of our identities. For examples of what is being explored here see Jairus Victor Grove, ‘Must We Persist to Continue? William Connolly’s Critical Responsiveness Beyond the Limits of the Human Species’, in *Democracy and Pluralism: The Political Thought of William E. Connolly*, ed. Alan Finlayson (London: Routledge, 2009), 183–202; Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro and Andrea Smith, eds., *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

seems too much like those management awareness-training exercises. Box-ticking.

Undefined Theorist:

[Looking perplexed]

Ok but what is postcritique? I'm still not sure how you understand it? Isn't it just from Sedgwick at the beginning? When she was exploring simply what knowledge does in a wider and—⁸

Postcritical Theorist:

—Yes! But it's more! It is not about unmaking the subject or finding different ones but about making in/with the world. Less paranoia, less suspicion,⁹ and more affirmation.—

Critical Theorist:

[Smirking]—So nice. . .

Postcritical Theorist:

[Smiling]

If I was being honest, I would say that this debate is a bit. . . wrong. I don't think there are really very many critical theorists left today. Everyone has seen the writing on the wall. Take Giorgio Agamben. Once a real critical theorist. Sometimes too much! Remember COVID?¹⁰ Always suspicious: bare life, states of exception, biopolitics. . .¹¹ But did you read his most recent books? Like the one on bodies. That's a work of postcritique.¹² 'Bios' has been swapped for 'zoe' and bare life is now enabling. . . affirmative, no longer in the realm of the negative.¹³ The book is not about the

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8. The undefined theorist's reference here is to the gender, queer, and critical theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in Michèle Aina Barale et al., ed., *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51. This text is foundational for postcritical thinking, teasing out the earlier insights of Ricoeur and others to dwell – in reference to the HIV AIDS crisis – on whether critical suspicion always provides useful knowledge to transform the political world. That being said, the question of what postcritique constitutes is fraught. For some, it represents a coherent intellectual position, fed through figures such as Ricoeur, Polanyi, and Latour. But, for others, those figures and others who deploy the label do so largely rhetorically – adapting, for instance, the life histories and intellectual positions of figures like Michel Foucault – to tease out the internal contradictions of critical theory and the need for something to come after but with critique.
 9. Rita Felski, 'Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion', *Media/Culture Journal* 15, no. 1 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.431>.
 10. See Adam Kotsko, 'What Happened to Giorgio Agamben?' *Slate Magazine*, 20 February 2022. Available at: <https://slate.com/human-interest/2022/02/giorgio-agamben-covid-holocaust-comparison-right-wing-protest.html>.
 11. See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998) and *State of Exception* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
 12. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).
 13. Ibid.

critique of pseudo-fascist states reducing civic or ‘human’ life to ‘natural’ life but the opposite; how ‘natural’ life enables a modal or relational ontology of creativity, repurposing, and ‘destitutive’ power. Whereas critique seeks to negate, Agamben’s destitutive power is a constantly creative affirmative process of opening up to grounded potentialities.

Undefined Theorist: OK. . . [Frowning slightly]

Critical Theorist: [Sarcastically]

Making in/with the world. Affirming relational. . . modal. . . powers of destitution. Becoming-other, becoming-planet, becoming-world.¹⁴ Everything is about composing some kind of joy.¹⁵ Isn’t postcritique so presumptuous in imagining multi-species harmonies, with its theorists at the centre – the end of the world as something to embrace? It all seems so privileged.¹⁶ All this focus on relation, on connectivity, immanence, on the creative powers of life. You said critique had become neoliberal, but what is neoliberal if not all that? Just a coping mechanism, resilience for hibernating at the margins of survivance?¹⁷

Undefined Theorist: Sorry, I’m still lost. This symposium is about critique and non-hierarchical futures. But both of you seem to want to impose some kind of hierarchy here. An. . . elitism of theory? I don’t care about critique/postcritique. Just about our responsibility, how can we do critique in ways that do not isolate us from the real struggles that are going on around us? That’s the question.

14. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011).

15. For discussions of the notion of composing, composting, or related concepts and their relation to postcritique see Bruno Latour, ‘An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto”’, *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 471–90; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); and Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); and for a critique, Dixia Ramírez-D’Oleo, *This Will Not Be Generative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

16. We assume the critical theorist is referencing authors such as Axelle Karera, ‘Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics’, *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 32–56; and Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction*, Vol. 1 (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2014).

17. David Chandler and Julian Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

- Critical Theorist:** [Pause] . . . Sorry I'm just going to the toilets, back in a second.
- Postcritical Theorist:** Yes, I'll get another drink, see you back in a second.
[The critical and postcritical theorists leave the stage momentarily. Left alone, the undefined theorist turns to a table of other participants at the Millennium symposium, sitting just to the side.]
- Friend of the Undefined Theorist:** [Smiling at the undefined theorist]
- Undefined Theorist:** What are you all talking about?
- Undefined Theorist:** No idea. I'm not. . . they won't let me say much but those two [gestures backwards] seem upset with each other. Not sure why. Either they [critical theorist] seem to think that nobody was being critical enough in the discussion today or that [postcritical theorist] critique is all over anyhow. But they don't seem to know why, or at least I don't understand them.
- Friend of the Undefined Theorist:** Hmmm.
- Undefined Theorist:** Yeah. . . But they both seem disappointed. That critique is not critical enough, that what we do on the intersectional, the non-Eurocentric, is not critical enough—
- Friend of the Undefined Theorist:** [Laughs]
- Undefined Theorist:** And the other one is just focused on critique as some dead-end, like deconstruction, leaving us isolated from meaningfully engaging with the catastrophes of the world.¹⁸ I get it. . . critique can be too easy, too distant. . . But is that in opposition to postcritique?
- Friend of the Undefined Theorist:** I wouldn't take it too seriously. Some people take these things too seriously. . . We do what we can – Categorizing is often a defence mechanism more than something grounded in what people really think. . .¹⁹

18. Here, the reference is largely to what one of the original theorists to coin 'postcritical', Michael Polanyi, termed 'the self-immolation of the modern mind'. The notion, simply put, that never-ending suspicion or scepticism, a refusal to commit, results in paralysis. See Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

19. As Richard Sennett once wrote, 'Narcissism is a search for gratification of the self which at the same time prevents that gratification from occurring. . . [and] narcissism may be encouraged by cultural developments and can vary in expression from era to era', *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1977.

[The critical and postcritical theorist return, and the undefined theorist walks back over to them, more curious about how things will turn than thinking they'll have an impact on the conversation]

- Critical Theorist:** [Looking toward the undefined theorist]
So, what do *you* think is to be done? Tell me how we can balance the needs of critique and engagement.
- Undefined Theorist:** [Somewhat surprised to be addressed]
Well, a good first step would be to get out of—²⁰
- Postcritical Theorist:** — What we need is something reparative. Not resistance, not romanticism. Your article was talking about migration, hostile environments, FRONTEX, and all the entanglements between capital and power. I'm with you. But. . . look around you. We are sitting in a pub, our backs turned to everyone, discussing this among the academic islands of London. I agree, migration politics is bad. And yes, radicalism can emerge from subaltern figures. But what about *us*? Where are we in that mix? Observers from the outside?
- Undefined Theorist:** [In their head]
When was the last time you got outside?
- Critical Theorist:** It's not my job to say. Critique must resist closure, remain groundless. Resist the seeming emergency calls for always to be acting now. All the action in the world is not going to help if it reproduces dominant framings and disavows problems at the systemic, the structural, levels. We need to unmake the human, unmake modernity, break free – not waste time with desperate measures to save what exists. Without critique we are throwing gasoline, not water, on the fire. We need to desubjectify ourselves.²¹

20. Our undefined theorist keeps getting interrupted. In this case, to return to our earlier discussion of Serres, they have now become the parasite – a little bit too irritating in the static they are bringing to the ritual rhythms of intellectual disagreement. Nonetheless, they will return to their point later.

21. This focus on the desubjectifying qualities of critique is crucial. It represents an elaboration of the notion of unmaking that stresses, instead, an affirmative transformation of the self. In an important discussion (and critique of postcritique), Lorenzini and Tazzioli, 'Critique Without Ontology', foreground – through Foucault – the vital importance of this aspect of critique. For a problematization of these assumptions, see Rei Terada, *Metaracial: Hegel, Antiracism, and Political Identity* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press).

- Postcritical Theorist:** Systemic critique is a starting point. A vanishing point. You need it to have any strategic vision. But it's the old debate. Critique is practice, yes, but *strategic* practice. It's the map on the wall. A panorama.²² I agree, critique is vital! It desubjectifies, sure. But on the ground, you need tactics. You need to take a leap of faith into some form of closure. To go with the flows and folds of the world.²³
- Undefined Theorist:** [Raising their voice]
Look, I'm really lost. Sure, critique is abstract. Sure. Sometimes it is romanticized. Sure. Sure. Sometimes it seems scholastic. Sure. Sometimes it offers only negativity. Sure. Sure! But give me an example, just one. I'm curious.
- Postcritical Theorist:** So, going back to your [gesturing at the critical theorist] article again. The argument is that fishermen across the Mediterranean saving migrants in distress represents subjectivities mobilising transversally. And that this transforms the horizon of the possible. But you don't mention the closures both forced-upon and actively chosen by those engaging in those transversal practices. Their struggles do not emerge from an abstract struggle against the limits of modernity, they evolve and mutate through impure relations. They are not – they do not want to be! – critical.²⁴ But embracing that impurity, that dirty political struggle, seems to be refused by critique today. That's what I mean by tactics.
- Undefined Theorist:** OK, sure, but that's someone else again, what about us?
- Postcritical Theorist:** OK, technology. Or let's say decolonial technological projects. Outside IR, they do this differently. Have you read any of Yuk Hui's work? He talks about 'cosmotronics' and how we are enframed by one colonial technological cosmology, and that we must undo this historically, metaphysically, ontologically.²⁵ By, yes, undoing – critiquing – modernity. But

22. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 183–4.

23. The reference here is to a classical argument in pragmatist readings of the social, which inform many varieties of postcritique. It refers to the need for a 'provisional closure' of critique/reflexivity in order to open the possibility of experimenting/testing the world. See Monica Prasad, 'Pragmatism as Problem Solving', *Socius* 7 (2021): 237802312199399.

24. See, the analytical framework forwarded by Jef Huysmans and João P. Nogueira, 'Against "Resistance"? Towards a Conception of Differential Politics in International Political Sociology', *European Journal of International Relations* 30 (2024): 359–81.

25. Yuk Hui, 'On Cosmotronics: For a Renewed Relation Between Technology and Nature in the Anthropocene', *Techne: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 21, no. 2/3 (2017): 1–23; Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotronics* (London: Urbanomic Media, 2016).

what is this translated in to? Suspension? Waiting for the moment of epistemic liberation? No, he doesn't say this is a pure project and recognizes the need to reappropriate modernity. What comes next is thus not critique. We go to the ground. In Brazil, they take Freire seriously. Grassroots engineers ally with workers to develop technical interventions to improve the fate of self-managed initiatives and corporations: empowering the disempowered by parasiting-upon modernist technology, and threading decolonial radicalism through that work in the real world.²⁶

Undefined Theorist: Yes, so then you both agree? Critique *and* postcritique? The old postcolonial radicalism, Che Guevara: 'technology is a weapon'?²⁷

Postcritical Theorist: Maybe. . . maybe not. . . I guess it's the hierarchies in critique that still worry me the most. Critique must come first, what we do is above compromise, we are the only reflexive ones. The irony that critique is the most enlightenment of notions but wants to deconstruct modernity.²⁸ Critique is fanatically faithful to modernity, decomposing subjectivities just like a particle accelerator decomposes physical reality.

Critical Theorist: I don't agree, obviously. Postcritique is also presumptive, not very humble despite all the gesturing at care and responsibility.²⁹ Why would I claim to know what political tactics serve emancipatory strategic ends?

Undefined Theorist: –You guys keep talking about it but what do you mean when you say emancipat³⁰

26. Cristiano Cordeiro Cruz, 'Brazilian Grassroots Engineering: A Decolonial Approach', *European Journal of Engineering Education* 46, no. 5 (2021): 690–706.

27. Che Guevara, *Che Guevara Talks to Young People* (New York, NY: Pathfinder, 2000), 100.

28. Consider this in comparison to our discussion of Jahn in Footnote 4. See also Dale Cannon, 'Beyond Post-Modernism via Polanyi's Post-Critical Philosophy', *Political Science Reviewer* 37, no. 1 (2008): 68–95.

29. One refrain across many postcritical approaches is indeed the notion of embracing 'care' or 'concern' rather than critique. In turn, this has created (internal to postcritique!) controversy about the hierarchies involved in care. See, for example, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2017).

30. Across these dialogues, the notion of emancipation lurks in relation to critique/postcritique. Indeed, it is perhaps the crux of the disagreement: emancipation *through what?* Nonetheless, emancipation is itself – in contexts like these – often a floating signifier. We will therefore only return to considering it fully in the postscript where we are forced to 'ground' these malentendus more fully.

- Critical Theorist:** That would assume something about the world, homogenizing it. One world, one politics. Why does postcritique become so. . . liberal, a kind of cosmopolitan liberalism? You questioned the connection of critique to radicality and emancipation, but postcritique offers nothing of the sort itself. Worse, it just seems irresponsible. We can expose systemic structures and place focus on the practices that subvert them, but to claim ‘we’ – yes, sitting in this pub – have some special role to play is arrogant, and most likely dangerous.³¹
- Undefined Theorist:** [In their head]
They are stuck on liberalism/neoliberalism again.
- Postcritical Theorist:** Look, we’re talking past each other. I agree with what you said, that the earlier critique *was* always/already postcritique. To me it’s not about ‘going postcritical’ but maybe attending to certain aspects of critique that seem to me to have disappeared quite some time ago. There was a time when critique wasn’t only written about, where it was genuinely minor, subversive.³² [Everyone pauses slightly]
- Postcritical Theorist:** So. . . depending on how you see it, there’s not much difference between what some people call ‘postcritique’ and the radical political theory and praxis of, say, Indigenous thought or Queer theory. Affirmative speculation, reparative engagement, and looking forward to radically different futures. My interest is only on how to make those sentiments stronger in pubs like this: to return to the roots of ‘postcritique’ if you like, to a time before critique was a business and so entangled with the world and the contamination that imposes.³³ Postcritique can be neoliberal, cosmopolitan, and depoliticized – sure – but so can critical theory of all kinds. The challenge is. . . what kind of politics we embrace.
- Critical Theorist:** Yes, we’re talking past each other.
- Undefined Theorist:** Can I say something?
- Critical Theorist and Postcritical Theorist:** [The two nod warily]

31. A reference to Michel Foucault’s well-known statement that ‘it’s not that everything is bad, it’s that everything is dangerous’, *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980), 62.

32. Nicholas Michelsen, ‘What Is a Minor International Theory? On the Limits of “Critical International Relations”’, *Journal of International Political Theory* 17, no. 3 (2021): 488–511.

33. Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’.

- Undefined Theorist:** I was going to say this earlier when you were talking about the relation between ‘critique’ and any politics of emancipation. We can debate like this until the cows come home. . . you need to encounter something different. Tomorrow, I’ll send you an invitation to something that my supervisor got some funding for. Think about coming, you might find it interesting. It might take you back to some of the debates we had when we were all together.³⁴
- Critical Theorist:** OK sure. . .
- Postcritical Theorist:** Sounds good. [Looks toward the critical theorist]. Let’s head to dinner now.
[The critical and postcritical theorist leave, to have dinner together. The undefined theorist walks back over to the table with friends from earlier]
- Friend of the** [Smiling sceptically]
Any progress with those two?
- Undefined Theorist:**
- Undefined Theorist:** None at all. They are going in circles. There’s very little at stake. They both think the other is a (neo)liberal – they keep repeating that – both think the other is being arrogant, etc. There are a few interesting points, you know they are both right on some things. But it’s still all very unclear to me. Or, maybe, rather abstract. It’s all reflexive on both sides, but abstract in the reflexivity. . .
- Friend of the**
- Undefined Theorist:** They should get out more.
- Undefined Theorist:** I’ve already told them that. But I think they know it anyway. But something annoys me about the whole thing. This is really not the place to talk about these things. Are you coming to that NATO conference?
- Friend of the**
- Undefined Theorist:** Hell no. That’s your thing.
- Undefined Theorist:** Bah, OK, one day I’ll convince you that work involves hanging out with the enemy on occasion. I’m going to invite those two though. . .
- Friend of the** [Laughs for some time and gets up to head with the undefined
- Undefined Theorist:** theorist and others to go to dinner]

34. The undefined theorist here refers to the fact that each received their doctorate from the same – here unspecified – higher education institution.

[The next morning, the undefined theorist wakes up and tends to emails. First though, they write, as promised:

Dear both,

It was nice to see you in London! I copy below the event I was talking about in the pub. I'm sure funding is still possible. You should come. You might not have experienced something like this before!

Undefined Theorist

FWD:

NATO PLANNING AND OPERATIONS CENTRE Email

From: Science & Technology Organization Collaboration Support Office BP 25, F-92201, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France

To: NATO OR&A Programme Committee

Bcc: SAS Panel (Associate) Members, STO National Coordinators, STO/CSO OCO, SAS-176, NATO OR&A Programme Committee members, NATO OR&A distro list

Dear all,

HQ Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (HQ SACT) and NATO Science and Technology Organization (STO) cordially invites you to participate in the 17th NATO Operations Research and Analysis (OR&A) Conference from 30 October 2023 to 02 November 2023. The Conference will be open to representatives from all NATO Nations, NATO Bodies, NATO Agencies, Australia, Austria, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden and Switzerland. As part of the continuous development of the NATO OR&A Community of Interest, the OR&A Conference will bring together analysts from NATO commands and agencies, national defense analysis and research organizations, centers of excellence, academia, and industry to experience an exciting program with plenty of opportunities for discussion and debate.

This year's conference theme is 'Changing character of defence and deterrence: the power of analysis'. The programme on Monday and Tuesday will be built around multiple streams on Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning, Command and Control, Decision Analysis, Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance, Problem Structuring, Strategic Analysis, and Wargaming. On Wednesday and Thursday (AM only) the STO Research Technical Course (SAS-176) titled 'Taking FATE on the road' will be provided by experts from Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and United States. The FATE or Futures Assessed alongside socio-Technical Evolutions method enables a 'futuring' process, and allows for a better understanding of impacts on the wider socio-technical systems for diffusion and adoption of technologies.

Don't hesitate to contact the SAS Panel Office or NATO OR&A Programme Committee if you encounter any issues during the registration process.

Best regards,

Act Two

[The action returns after the 18th NATO Operations Research and Analysis (OR&A) Conference, November 2023, in a wine bar in Laurel, Maryland. It's again early evening

and both our critical and postcritical theorists have decided to attend. More, each decided to take part in different panels at the conference, just a few weeks after the *Millennium* symposium – with the facilitation of the undefined theorist. At this point, however, neither realizes that they have both accepted the invitation. They meet each other, surprised, at the wine bar.]

Postcritical Theorist: Oh wow, you came. Why? I don't think they meant for *you* to come?

Critical Theorist: They [the undefined theorist] invited me too. Why wouldn't I come?

Postcritical Theorist: We're supposed to be talking about things pragmatically today, not exposing NATO's many. . . issues. But I was really surprised to see so many presentations by critical theorists. Practically all the discussions were about 'unknowing', 'unlearning', 'unsettling', etc., there was much less focus than I imagined upon what I would consider postcritique.

Critical Theorist: You see! And you said just a few weeks ago that there were no critical theorists left anymore!

Postcritical Theorist: Yeah. . . I was very surprised how well the peacebuilding panel's presentations went down. It actually seemed that no one agreed that peace could be a policy goal and that all settlements were just precursors to further conflict.³⁵ Even at *Millennium* no one argued that constant conflicts and crises were necessary to keep open. . . the possibility of social peace. Everything was so counterintuitive.

Critical Theorist: Why do you think critique isn't pragmatic? Doesn't speak to the real world? As far as I could see, my article on 'futuring' went down rather well. And fitted with everything else being said. What great presentations on Complexity, Situational Awareness, and Counterintelligence.³⁶ Everyone is so open to the need to focus on the unseen and unexpected.

35. We imagine that some of the material referenced at this panel may have included, for example, Jan Pospisil, *Peace in Political Unsettling: Beyond Solving Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Elisa Randazzo and Ignasi Torrent, 'Reframing Agency in Complexity-Sensitive Peacebuilding', *Security Dialogue* 52, no. 1 (2021): 3–20; Thania Paffenholz, 'Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 3 (2021): 367–85.

36. We could imagine that presenters may have been drawing upon the work of Chiara Libiseller, on shifting discourses of military understanding, focusing upon hybridity, nonlinearity, processual understandings, contexts, and relations, 'Hybrid war as an academic fashion', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46, no. 4 (2023): 858–80; or the developing work on situational awareness as a futural imaginary, for example, Susanne Krasmann and Christine Hentschel, 'Situational Awareness: Rethinking Security in Times of Urban Terrorism', *Security Dialogue* 50, no. 2 (2019): 181–97.

[The undefined theorist enters the wine bar, spots our two theorists and comes over to join. There are hugs all round.]

Critical Theorist:

Hey, hey. I was just saying, getting back to the *Millennium* symposium. . . futuring really fits the post-hierarchical theme because it seeks to shift the emphasis from the subject to the object, from external agency – or, in this case, military power – to the context, and the social, economic, technical, and political relations on the ground. Futuring is about sensitising actors to nonlinear and immanent understandings –

Postcritical Theorist:

–The abstraction returns!

Critical Theorist:

[smiling]–really inverting traditional understandings of the hierarchical projection of power. Oh, there was a great article on DARPA’s doctrine of ‘Mosaic Warfare’, where complexity and uncertainty are integrated into decision-making in a continual process of opening out to the unexpected.³⁷ The shift from thinking about NATO as a controlling actor to the focus on thinking outside the box really left the room buzzing!³⁸

Postcritical Theorist

True. But postcritique was here too. I took part in the course – ‘Taking FATE on the road’. FATE – or Futures Assessed alongside socio-technical evolutions. The methods were posthierarchical, a collective method of working pragmatically. Unlike the critical work you love so much, there is no individual guru³⁹ and no specific skills required.

Undefined Theorist:

I’m pleased you both put in for the conference, even though it was really last minute. Different, eh?

37. This may refer to Simone Tholens’ work on the US Department of Defence’s doctrine of ‘Mosaic Warfare’, continually reworking the boundary between the known and the unknown, ‘For the Peace Yet to Come: Boundaries of Knowing/Unknowing’ (Paper Presented at the European Workshops in International Studies (EWIS), Amsterdam, 12–14 June 2023).

38. See, for example, Claes Tāngh Wrangel, ‘Securing the Hopeful Subject? The Militarisation of Complexity Science and the Limits of Decolonial Critique’, in *Hope in the Anthropocene: Agency, Governance and Negation*, eds. Valerie Waldow, Pol Bargaúes, and David Chandler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024). 119–134.

39. William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 148–75; Jairus Victor Grove, *Savage Ecology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 253.

Postcritical Theorist: Yes! The FATE approach is a ‘futuring’ process, yes, but is not purely speculative but very much focused on ‘preserving functional complexity’, focusing on emergent powers of interaction and avoiding reductionist assumptions about entities and essences.⁴⁰

Critical Theorist: Whose getting abstract now?

Postcritical Theorist: [Nods]

The exercises really worked on our capacities for collective thinking, great opportunities for exploring pragmatism, for appreciating the power of network connections – relation – in a changing and unpredictable world. I didn’t realise that Joshua Ramo’s *The Seventh Sense*⁴¹ was on the suggested reading lists for military planners.⁴² That explains a lot. Ramo – did you know he was a life-long friend of Henry Kissinger?⁴³ – really appreciates how the military are in the frontline of networked threats and problems.⁴⁴ I re-read the book recently, it’s not often you read someone with the capacity to translate Nietzsche, Latour, Sloterdijk, and Virilio, for such a broad and diverse audience.

Critical Theorist: Yes, exactly. But don’t you see the irony? Critique is doing all the legwork. Preparing the ground. You were right: NATO research mostly opens up possibilities for critique. There was no one suggesting that the first requirement was the need for more activity, more impact, doing more things and the requirement for more resources. There’s a clear consensus that NATO does not lack resources but rather an adequate conceptual framework for acting in today’s complex and entangled world.

Undefined Theorist: Yep, just like last year’s conference, the focus is always on dealing with complexity.

Critical Theorist: Yes. How to move beyond a modern ontology. So, yes, speculative work is important, to think beyond ideology, beyond habitual modes of thinking. But the hermeneutics of suspicion

40. See, for example, NATO Science and Technology Organisation (STO) Technical Report, *Futures Assessed alongside socio-Technical Evolutions (FATE): Final report of the SAS-123 Research Task Group (AC/323(SAS-123)TP/1001)* (Neuilly-Sur-Seine: NATO, 2021), 10.

41. Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Seventh Sense: Power, Fortune, and Survival in the Age of Networks* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2016).

42. F. Gregory Hayden, ‘Military Planning in a Context of Complex Systems and Climate Change’, *Journal of Economic Issues* 52, no. 2 (2018): 349–57. We’d like to thank Claes Tångh Wrangel for the reference.

43. Ramo, *The Seventh Sense*, 310.

44. *Ibid.*, 62

is seen positively here! It's a vital starting point to avoid repeating the policy errors of the past. . . This has really been a provocation for me.

Postcritical Theorist: [Looking confused] Why? Everything you write is suspicious about everything!

Critical Theorist: Well, we argue a lot yes, but like I was saying at dinner after *Millennium*, it's not like I've never had my own doubts about where critique is going. But here – it's in the highest esteem! And not just here. I also read an ODI policy book recently on lessons learned in postconflict development. The message was exactly the same.⁴⁵ Working within a modern ontology is bad, missing the complexity. Villages may all look rather similar, but they may respond very differently to crises.⁴⁶ It's Alexander Galloway: the world becomes a series of black boxes.⁴⁷

Postcritical Theorist: Precisely. I agree with you about the centrality of critique. For me, postcritique is not a critique of critique.⁴⁸ It's the next stage of critique! After deconstruction! Or, more to the point, preventing deconstruction from being a process of critique eating itself.⁴⁹ Critique has done its work, the metrics are gone. Yes, we live in a 'black box world'. The responsibility for critical academics is to then take up the baton, take responsibility for the implications. What exactly does it mean to live in a 'black box world'? That's the question.

Undefined Theorist: But how does a black box world – which is – yeah? – inaccessible – lend itself to either critique or postcritique?

Postcritical Theorist: That's where NATO could do better. It's all good to unsettle and disrupt essentialisms, reductionisms. But then? We should focus on what's in front of our faces. The conference has been a revelation for me too. Postcritique is not just about affirmative, positive, stories of survivance, micro possibilities, seeing agency, creativity, everywhere. Postcritique is not just about

45. Mareike Schomerus, *Lives Amid Violence: Transforming Development in the Wake of Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

46. *Ibid.*, 183.

47. Alexander R. Galloway, *Uncomputable: Play and Politics in the Long Digital Age* (London: Verso, 2021).

48. We return here to the ambiguity of the term postcritique, which has shapeshifted over time. In one discussion, for instance, Austin explores postcritique as a floating signifier, claiming that 'there's no such thing as postcritique'. See Jonathan Luke Austin, 'The Public, Its Problems, and Post-Critique', *International Politics Reviews* 10, no. 1 (2022): 92–101.

49. Pol Bargañés-Pedreny, *Deferring Peace in International Statebuilding: Difference, Resilience and Critique* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

affirming what already exists, it is about how to experiment; how to put the 'black box world' to work if you will. An inverse example to the decolonial Brazilian engineers I was talking about in London.

Undefined Theorist: [Just as during the conversation in London, the undefined theorist begins to feel a bit uneasy, a little lost by the direction the conversation is taking.]

Critical Theorist: Yes, it's strange. Just a couple of weeks ago, we were going around in circles. Agreeing to disagree. Today, we both love critique *and* postcritique!

Undefined Theorist: [In their head: *This is indeed very strange. . . Why are they friends again?*]

Critical Theorist: I think that what you were saying about the 'black box' world is key to seeing how critique and postcritique come together. I have to admit that I have tended to rather think that 'black boxing' was the goal in itself. To get policymakers to see that universal metrics and one-size-fit-all understandings cannot cope with the complexity of the world. I see now that it's true that I thought that deconstruction was all that was necessary. . .

Postcritical Theorist: I don't think I ever said you thought that!

Critical Theorist: Yes, yes, you did! [Laughs] But – now I'm thinking – there's another problem. The reason why I thought deconstruction was enough is that at the back of my mind I sort of assumed that critique was really about revealing some 'truth', even if it was the 'truth' that there can be no grounds to claims made by international policy actors. Coming here, seeing all these high-up generals and policy wonks all starting from the same position of deconstruction makes it really clear to me that deconstruction, in itself, cannot challenge power.

Postcritical Theorist: If you are having second thoughts, me too: about postcritique. I'm worried about the whole emphasis on critique and postcritique, not just on the basis of my experience here but also in reflecting on *Millennium* too. It seems to me that today it's really difficult to hold on to any distinction between critique and postcritique. NATO easily assimilates both, along with our 'real world' colleagues working in peace, development, and other policy spheres. If, as critical theorists say, 'unlearning is the new learning' and 'undoing is the new doing' then it is surely not possible for there to be a difference between critique and affirmation.

Undefined Theorist: Say, we buy into your point about experimenting in a black box world. What does this really imply? If every village is different,

then, no matter how much we experiment with inputs and outputs there can be no knowledge generalised from what is learnt. All we get is experimenting, monitoring, surveillance, prodding and testing and to what end? I wonder if NATO is even interested in knowledge to be gained rather than the process of experimentation itself? What's at stake in exchanging truths for experiments?

Postcritical Theorist: Yes. . . learning and doing cannot be separated. This is a problem. All our postcritical, relational, processual, whatever-al, ontologies seem like a trap. There can be no outside. Wouldn't we just be trapped in our assemblages, our ecologies, our cartographies, our ethologies; however, you want to describe the context of interaction and entanglement?⁵⁰

Critical Theorist: That's a side of postcritique that's never worried me. If there was an outside, there would be some kind of essence, an eternal truth, something to grasp.⁵¹ I guess that's why they invite us here. The guys here, they don't seem to know exactly what they are doing, they have a similar aversion to singular truths.

Undefined Theorist: Yes exactly, that's why I invited you. I've been coming to these things for ages. My dissertation drew on it. Especially on Palestine. Have you guys never noticed that it is the military folks, whether the Americans or even the Israelis, who are most critical about their government positions on Palestine? They are the exact opposite of activists – their politics is *terrible* – but they don't think there's one truth, they are not fanatics, at least not all of them.

Critical Theorist: I think you are becoming a bit too much of a critical theorist now! What's interesting for me is how they put their critical insights to work and experimentation. There's a lot of play, a ludic sensibility.⁵² We need to learn from this. I love *Millennium*, but when we are there, we are just. . . speaking.

Undefined Theorist: Isn't that what we're doing now?

Critical Theorist: Yes! But we're not trying to classify each other. Trying to pin things down. Recognizing or not recognizing. Here, there's movement, incomprehensible diagrams, side-events, something going forward. And less perfection. This is the first time

50. On this issue in such postcritical/relational perspectives, see Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009).

51. Stanford Howdysell, 'The Essences of Objects', *Open Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2020): 1–10.

52. See also, Ian Bogost, *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016).

I've attended anything like this. I thought it would be ordered and straightforward: religiously functionalist. But there seems to be an embrace here of rationality and irrationality, functionality, and dysfunctionality.⁵³ Critique and postcritique. But it's all deadly serious. They gather us here, push us together, ply us with wine, *good* wine.

Postcritical Theorist: [Tries to refill everyone's glasses, the undefined theorist declines]

And they are interested in the 'truths' people like me can offer, but they don't really categorize them. They like the noise they bring to the rooms. In these kinds of encounters, they work as parasites that want to capture, to steal, the truths we each have.⁵⁴

Critical Theorist: Right. And they *really* don't care what those truths are! It's only us who get trapped in our assemblages and ecologies, fixing them structurally or following them mindlessly, rather than seeing their fluctuating movement. We categorize and try to recognize. Its why things always seem so tense to me at academic events.

Undefined Theorist: [In their head: that's exactly what I was trying to say at Millennium. . .]

Postcritical Theorist: Even when we are all good critical theorists, eschewing truth, *our* truth must be fought-for. It's always a battle for whose denial of the truth is truer. But here, there's no real battle. They simply invite more and more people into the crowd. Assimilate and capture. It's their day-job after all. And for all our prejudices those in uniforms are often remarkably more open people than the individualized social scientist, and polite. All the rituals of events like these are smooth in their smiles and nods, their inability to disagree – at least on the surface. You might say its hypocrisy. But it draws us in. That's not to say it's good. There is something blatantly violent about all this, of course. We are being forced to express ourselves, not repressed from speaking. They want us to speak.⁵⁵ They invite, but an invitation is like a gift. Something is taken in return.

[The critical theorist starts looking over his shoulder and nudging the postcritical theorist to do the same, staring toward a man in uniform.]

53. Michel Serres, *Genesis* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

54. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (London: Continuum, 1977).

55. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 129.

- Critical Theorist:** You are right about the troubling aspect of this. When encounters like this happen, we are drawn in. . . a ‘lure’ sets itself in motion.⁵⁶ That’s what people most worry about with the post-critical injunctions, I think. It’s not so much the theory, but the consequence of mingling in wine bars like this one. The guy over there, he’s a friend from when I started my PhD. An amazing project on militarization in the Middle East. Deleuze. Mignolo and Escobar. Foucault. Now he works here. No judgement.
- Undefined Theorist:** It sounds like you’re judging!
- Critical Theorist:** No really, not. But I am worried. I get the feeling that in a few years, not so long from now, there will be better critical theorists employed by the military, governments, and corporations than in universities. Then what will become of theory? It might be hard to separate the critical and the postcritical nowadays, but in the future?
- Postcritical Theorist:** I get it. But I’m not so worried, and there are always other examples. It need not all be so bourgeois. Have you seen that photo of Che Guevara with Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in Havana? The famous one? [*Pulls out their phone*].⁵⁷ To me this captures the division we were so stuck on when we were in London. You have the Cubans who invite the leading existentialist and feminist theorists of the day. Serve them wine and cigars. Play to their egos. But they want something from them. They are not quite sure what. But they get something in the end. And de Beauvoir apparently said something about finally seeing happiness attained by violence. Fanon in action. The *real* revolution. Until they realized what was really happening, though there were hints even during that first visit. That’s one thing I agree about what you were saying in London. Postcritique can be ‘too nice’. Too naïve. But this photo to me is a form of critical-postcritical harmony. The hard Marxist suspicion, and its necessary paranoia. But the tactical move to encounter and capture others. The French are the best critical (postcritical?) theorists? Invite them over! Encounters need not be nice, generous. They can be exploitative. And collaboration has more than one meaning.
- Critical Theorist:** Yes, too nice. But that also seems to me to have become a problem with critique. It’s founded on contestation, sure, but the images that critical theorists are obsessed with these days are

56. Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers, ‘The Insistence of Possibles: Towards a Speculative Pragmatism’, *PARSE* 7 (2017): 13–9.

57. Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Ouragan sur le sucre’, *Les Temps Modernes* 649 (2008): 5–155.

so friendly, it's not just the postcritical theorists who seem so nice. If we think back to *Millennium*, the challenge was to link critique (or postcritique, does it matter at this point?) back to emancipation. How did they put it? Non-hierarchical futures. But since when has emancipation been a clean process? A harmonious process?

Undefined Theorist: Yes, emancipation. I wanted to ask about that in *Millennium*. What do you mean by it?

Postcritical Theorist: I'm not sure. Isn't it something we all think about, but can't pin down?

Undefined Theorist [Looking suspicious]

That's not good enough for me. Don't you think you are both getting a bit *too* comfortable here? You were talking about tactics in London! These guys know tactics, but they don't care about emancipation. That's why they are only critical/postcritical in an abstract sense. You need to tell me what emancipation is, for you.

Critical Theorist: [Ignoring the question]

OK, I'll get back to that. But on my point: let's think about Haraway. Both a critical and postcritical theorist, perhaps we can agree? [Nods from the postcritical theorist] For me, her work seems to have become 'purer' in its politics.⁵⁸ Well, maybe not purer, but more clean, more proper. Even the Pope is citing her now.⁵⁹ All the metaphors are nice: string figures, response-ability, becomings. But what happened to all the monstrous cyborgs?⁶⁰ To taking the offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism and turning them against their masters.⁶¹ To, in that sense, doing exactly what NATO is doing here today, but against them?

Postcritical Theorist: Yes, Haraway is a good example. Though we don't need to stay just with her. Much as I cite him, take Escobar. Someone who

58. Compare, for example, Donna J. Haraway and Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve, 'FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™: Mice into Wormholes: A Technoscience Fugue in Two Parts', in *Modest_Witness@_Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 46–118 and Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

59. Luke Coppen. "'Laudate Deum': A Brief Guide for Busy Readers", *The Pillar*, 4 October 2023.

60. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: An Ironic Dream of a Common Language for Women in the Integrated Circuit', in *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix*, eds. Susan Stryker and Dylan McCarthy Blackston (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 429–43.

61. *Ibid.*

also cuts across the divide. There is a growing purity and positivity: community, autonomy, commoning, sustainment, and a turn to positive biological metaphors.⁶² Here and there he mentions ‘globalized environments’ but never addresses how to ‘couple’ with those environments successfully. Because that would mean talking about dirty things, the impure. In this sanitized version of the decolonial, the legacy of revolutionary violence is erased, rendered palatable. Few people want to mention *guerrillas* anymore, especially academics, except after a few too many drinks. There’s a continued valorisation of the democratic, and liberal, even within decolonial thought. And the university continues to be a bastion of this mode of being. There’s a ‘grand siege of peace’ – a pacified political theory.⁶³

Undefined Theorist: So, emancipation is revolutionary violence? Maybe! But then each of you are again still far too abstract. You know that Said hated this abstraction of theory? Never called himself postcolonial!⁶⁴

Critical Theorist: Well, sure, if we are talking about emancipation, why not focus on those who are *really* involved in emancipatory projects? They erase very little about the tensions of what they do. How could they? For them, decolonisation happens in the real world,⁶⁵ and as anything in the real world, it’s about mixture. About communities that straddle difference. They might think outside the constraints of modernity, but they co-mingle with it.⁶⁶ There’s always a much more faithful understanding of ontologies of mixture and flow, where pluriversal means co-constitution in a literal sense. This is not about erasing modernity/destroying alternatives, it is mutation. Again, it’s about different encounters, as Anzaldúa famously put it, going against categories that keep us from growing.⁶⁷

62. Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

63. Desirée Poets, ‘Pacification as a Key Problem of Politics in International Political Thought’, *Global Policy* 14 (2023): 761–7; Ramírez-D’Oleo similarly argues that US academia is undergoing an ‘anti-critical’ moment, *This Will Not be Generative*, 5.

64. Robert J. C. Young, ‘Edward Said: Opponent of Postcolonial Theory’, in *Edward Said’s Translocations* (London: Routledge, 2012). Tobias Doring, Mark U Stein: 23–44.

65. Ajay Parasram, ‘Pluriversal Sovereignty and the State of IR’, *Review of International Studies* 49, no. 3 (2023): 356–67.

66. As Zibechi puts it, the reference here appears to be the fact that ‘sometimes reality is hard and not as we imagine when we write or think’. See Raúl Zibechi, *Territories in Resistance* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012), 331.

67. Debbie Blake and Carmen Abrego, ‘An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa’, *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (1995): 12–21.

Undefined Theorist: How can you shift from revolutionary violence back to such abstractions? Don't you see what the guys here are doing?

Critical Theorist: [Again ignoring the undefined theorist]

Going back to your question at *Millennium*, I suppose that's what my article was about. A kind of meditation on the generative potential of the depressive state that can sometimes follow the paranoia/suspicion of injustice. Talking about postcritical texts, I think this is where Sedgwick was most productive. She's explicit: the problem is not paranoia, the hermeneutics of suspicion, but what comes after. The depression. Of realizing the profound limits of 'knowing' something. And fearing it. And so, requiring reassembling something into a different whole. An affirmative nihilism.⁶⁸

Undefined Theorist You have a very strange reading of Sedgwick! An affirmative nihilism? What does that mean? What NATO requires? Deconstruction and then affirmation of a world of difference requiring a regime of permanent testing and experimentation to check for self-organising powers of resilience?

Postcritical Theorist [Still missing the undefined theorist's point]

Maybe this? These guys around us here. Their job is to kill. And yet that do it so affirmatively indeed! Look how nicely we are being taken care of. What's this wine? Château Margaux. Ridiculous. But nice. How can we not be polite in return? That's today's Haraway. Drawing us in. Collaborative-affirmative metaphors. A feeling of being cared-for. But the old Haraway is still here. Since the military has been around, people like us have been here, parasited-upon, made-unfaithful to our seeming purposes. Turned against ourselves. You are right about the dangers of postcritique. We can't *only* come to places like these. But whether it's NATO, the Cuban revolutionaries, or the ever-growing radicalism of decolonial activism, the logic is the same: encounter as much as possible, mix, and take a leap of faith that something emerges. The challenge to me is to bring this back to places like the LSE. Not so much intellectually. After all, we all already discuss this abstractly. But with a certain sensual credibility to what we do and discuss.⁶⁹ Academics are often bad at this logic. In that photo from Havana, the French intellectuals wanted something from Guevara and Fidel, but they got nothing. They regretted it. And the photos tell us something about

68. David Chandler, 'The Politics of the Unseen: Speculative, Pragmatic and Nihilist Hope in the Anthropocene', *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 25, no. 1 (2024): 1–18.

69. Kluge Alexander and Oskar Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience* (London: Verso, 2016).

why: their eyes are downcast; they are being taken for fools. . . .
 Anyway, let's have another glass of wine.

Undefined Theorist: [Becoming Exasperated]

Can I take you back to our conversation in London. What is to be done? Black box worlds? Affirmative nihilism? Expose/open ourselves to the world but without expecting anything in return, apart from disillusionment? The bubble of critique/postcritique, of meta reflectivity where everything is tainted, where participating in the world becomes a matter of lures and traps no matter what the world or the planet 'is telling us',⁷⁰ that we need to become saviours or that nothing can be done. And, Jesus! All the time putting yourselves at the centre, being parasited upon! I'm beginning to think this is just narcissism, never mind the narcissism of minor differences.

[The undefined theorist walks away, as the others continue to chat, smiling, and thinks to themselves that this invitation was a mistake]

Postscript

Something relatively simple becomes clear from our play and its fictional encounters. Namely, that the world can often seem to be more enabling of anti-hierarchical futures than academia.⁷¹ But that – equally – this is not necessarily a good thing. Becoming more engaged with 'reality' is only as good as the 'reality' itself, one might say. It took a disorientating shift in context for our interlocutors to come around to what might be at stake in their own reification of differences across the academic canon. It was only when what they understood to be critique and postcritique were presented in a different context that questions and difficulties arose of a different nature to those performatively discussed in a more traditional academic setting. Indeed, our dialogue attempts to illustrate how relatively minor contextual differences may transform intellectual debate. At the same time, the interesting thing about the post-NATO conference debate is that it can be read in very different ways. So, while we have no wish to close down discussion about what might 'really' be at stake in divides between critique and postcritique, we offer now three such distinct possible readings of these encounters by way of concluding our fictional experiment.

First, for a postcritical theorist, the 'real world' of the NATO conference might be seen to reduce what is at stake in critique by bringing our interlocutors back 'Down to Earth'.⁷² The argument would run like this: when we are pushed outside our comfort zones, we become human beings rather than ciphers for distinct – often esoteric

70. Anthony Burke et al., 'Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2016): 499–523.

71. We are aware that academic symposiums are no less 'in the world' than NATO conferences, the point is phenomenological, about the experience of less familiar contexts.

72. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

– intellectual perspectives to be performed. As such, academic symposiums aren't *always* the best places to clarify arguments, as they depend on imaginaries of closure rather than openness, functionalism over dysfunction, discipline over experimentation, contestation over collaboration, and purity over impurity. Put differently, the academic habitus cultivates intensely hierarchical imaginaries of the subject and the world, given the scientific field depends upon classifying the intellectual other, generating a conflict of critiques.⁷³ And so, a 'narcissism of small differences' is seen to emerge as a product of the way the academic environment is structured, cut-off from the world of enablement. It was therefore only when our two key interlocutors felt a similar unease at being confronted with the messiness of the outside world that their presumptions were challenged and they were able to more fully reflect upon their positions. Being faced with a discomfiting encounter with a world capable of assimilating the entirety of their critical or postcritical worlds without hesitation, without contradiction, they began to question whether any differences really existed between them. And, more, that though differences do exist between critique and postcritique, those differences are minor and not mutually obstructive.

Second, for a critical theorist, a different interpretation of the NATO conference would invert the postcritical reading by emphasizing instead that academia is more 'real' in that it forces us to engage in deep conceptual clarification.⁷⁴ Indeed, it is largely the undefined theorist who reflects this desire to maintain a division between academia and policymaking, understanding that critique needs to be kept apart from this world and that NATO is the 'enemy' that we should be on guard against. Despite the fact that it was the undefined theorist who invited the other scholars to the NATO event, it is they who become most frustrated at how easily seduced our other characters were by the event. A critical theorist might thus argue that the NATO event was simply a kind of neoliberal marketing stunt, without much real concern for deep or reflexive knowledge. In that reading, distinctions between critique and postcritique remain crucial and especially vis-à-vis preserving space for higher-level reflexive 'metatheoretical' discussion.⁷⁵

A third position, neither critical nor postcritical, does exist, however. One that, while not denying the *historical* importance of the distinctions at stake, might seek to 'provincialize' or set to one side the debate in the contemporary context.⁷⁶ Indeed, it is possible that a historical sensitivity to Horkheimer's 'traditional' and 'critical' theory binary, or Cox's reworking of that binary as between 'problem-solving' and 'critical' approaches, would reveal its dependency on a modernist set of separations between the subject and the world.⁷⁷ From that position, the undefined theorist is exhausted by the critical/

73. See Loïc J. D. Wacquant, 'For a Socio-Analysis of Intellectuals: On Homo Academicus', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 34 (1989): 1–29.

74. See Jahn, 'Theorizing the Political Relevance of International Relations Theory'.

75. Jahn, 'Critical Theory in Crisis?', 1287–8.

76. This, in a different context, is done admirably by Philip R. Conway, 'Radicalism, Respectability, and the Colour Line of Critical Thought'.

77. Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1975), 188–243; Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126–55.

postcritical divide not merely because it's too abstract and divorced from the pressures and lures of the real world but, more importantly, because the distinction at the heart of this binary no longer makes historical sense. The importance of the NATO conference, then, is not that it offers an alternative space that is less contested or performative but that it allowed our interlocutors to experience the hollowing out of distinctions between critique and problem-solving. This hollowing out is not simply a matter of a blurring of the divide between the 'real world' of policy and separate sphere of the academy, a concern of Jahn's.⁷⁸ Rather it could be read as a product of a shift from linear or rationalist approaches to relational and processual understandings of the world.

Processual approaches blur the line between critique and problem-solving, between emancipating ourselves from cognitive constraints and engaging the world through experimentation and play.⁷⁹ For example, Jahn argues that what is at stake in the separation of critical theory from the world of political and policy practice is the need to safeguard 'the space for political imagination'.⁸⁰ But this binary divide between the futural openness of 'metatheoretical' critique and the closures and limits of practical policy makes much less sense in a world in which policymakers themselves work iteratively and recursively. Moreover, it is not only policymakers who seek to keep 'political imaginations' alive. Even intensely practical-political struggles, such as the student encampments that have sprung up globally today, hold the broader (metatheoretical) goal of freeing our minds from settler-colonial logics. The task of emancipation – like that of policymaking – is increasingly a processual one of continually challenging closures of imagination as much as it is about pragmatic or practical gains.⁸¹

While the desire to separate the 'openings' of critique from the assumed 'closures' of political practice harks back to a romanticized vision of our political past, it is clear, at the same time, that the undefined theorist is not postcritical, rejecting equally the scholasticism with which that debate has emerged, and the solipsistic nature of the debates evidenced in our conversations above. It is the undefined theorist, for instance, who invites the other scholars to NATO but who also refuses to be seduced by NATO. There is little in NATO's opening up to play and experimentation that appeals to the undefined theorist who seems to feel that postcritical approaches that dwell in the presentness of the present, as it were, hoping to find creative and enabling opportunities, at best simply provide a privileged imaginary of escape and perhaps, at worst, facilitate new regimes of ordering and surveillance. The undefined theorist participates but takes a distance from

78. See Jahn, 'Theorizing the Political Relevance of International Relations Theory' and 'Critical Theory in Crisis?'

79. Processual approaches suspend any finality of goals or solutions. An early example could be the work of Amartya Sen. See, for example, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Such approaches to policymaking have become ubiquitous, linked strongly to discourses of resilience and adaptation, understanding that problems and crises cannot be 'solved' but rather need to be integrated productively in processes of growth and development.

80. Jahn, 'Critical Theory in Crisis? A Reconsideration', 1291

81. See Ida Danewid, *Resisting Racial Capitalism: An Antipolitical Theory of Refusal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).



Figure 1. Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre with Che Guevara in Havana, Cuba.
Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain Image, Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdek7fnn>.

the NATO environment as much as from the *Millennium* one; ironically our (critical and postcritical) theorists appear to lack this level of reflexivity (as the undefined theorist states in the play, they are ‘abstract in their reflexivity’).

Put differently, the undefined theorist refuses to be seduced by any particular encounter. They refuse the lure, for instance, of the critical and postcritical theorists’ discussion of the photograph of Che Guevara engaging the leading French intellectuals of the time (Figure 1). While that photograph captures what at first glance appears a radical – emancipatory – encounter, the undefined theorist rejects the idea that it represents any kind of ‘critical-postcritical harmony’. Instead, the undefined theorist is the figure most concerned with grappling with a contemporary (processual) understanding of what emancipation might mean, rather than an imaginary of past emancipatory praxis that was always fraught. Indeed, Frantz Fanon’s wife eventually came to remove Sartre’s preface from *The Wretched of the Earth* ‘whatever Sartre’s contribution may have been in the past, the fact that he did not understand the Palestinian problem reversed his past political positions’.⁸² The undefined theorist seems acutely wary of such a risk of being seduced by the surface of any position – intellectual or practical – but also, at the same time, most committed to pushing for alternatives, despite not finding any resolution in our fictional dialogue. Instead of seeking harmony, practical or intellectual, something that might see them seduced by such a picture-perfect depiction of criticality, post-criticality, and its potential for radical emancipation in the here-and-now, the undefined theorist embraces a logic of the encounter that refuses recognition or categorization for ‘recognizing is the opposite of the encounter’.⁸³

82. Christian Filostrat, ‘Interview with Josie Fanon, Frantz Fanon’s Widow’, in *Negritude Agonistes* (Cherry Hill, NJ: African Homestead Legacy Publishers, 2008), 160–1.

83. Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 8.

This ambivalent status of the undefined theorist takes us to the final point we think our fictional dialogue foregrounds. Across our text, the undefined theorist was ignored, again reflecting how easily it is for binary framings to marginalize other voices and possibilities. Typically, approaches that cannot be classified are effectively silenced.⁸⁴ They become Serres' static noise – just about bearable, but best ignored. Part of the unclassifiability of the undefined theorist, however, related not to their intellectual commitments, but to their positionality. This refers both to the 'character of the character' that we have deliberately left ambiguous and – more – their desire to engage with but at the same time their 'refusal' to entirely buy-in to either *Millennium*, NATO, or any other such institutionalized setting. But we should also stress that this aspect of refusal or withdrawal is not something we see as exceptional to the undefined theorist. We are none of us merely our academic personas yet that is how we are perceived and how we perform unless we try to experiment a little outside the 'ritualistic and automatic referencing' of academia.⁸⁵

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84. This power of exclusion is central to Thomas Kuhn's argument about the centrality of paradigms to scientific knowledge, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

85. Dauphinee and Ravecca, 'Narrative and the Possibilities for Scholarship', 129.