

# *Theory Talks*

*Presents*

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THEORY TALK #73

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KIMBERLY HUTCHINGS ON QUIET AS A  
RESEARCH STRATEGY, THE ESSENCE OF  
CRITIQUE, AND THE NARCISSISM OF MINOR  
DIFFERENCES

## Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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# KIMBERLY HUTCHINGS ON QUIET AS A RESEARCH STRATEGY, THE ESSENCE OF CRITIQUE, AND THE NARCISSISM OF MINOR DIFFERENCES



As a job, International Relations requires carving out one's position by being vocal. Being vocal entails making oneself heard, forwarding identifiable 'contributions'. But what if the biggest contribution one might make would actually consist of quieting down?

In a provocative and wide-ranging *Talk*, Kimberly Hutchings—amongst others—challenges us to take postcolonialism seriously as an invitation to hush, and provides compelling suggestions as to what critique means in a time of proliferating criticality.

**What is (or should be), according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current International Relations? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?**

In my view, the main challenge for IR right now is to deal with postcolonialism and decoloniality, which would entail a kind of decentering of the standpoint of judgment within the study of international politics. Essentially, we should move away from the kind of common-sense starting points of Western theory, Western history and all the rest of it. To be sure, this does not necessarily mean disregarding them. Instead, we should avoid always seeing them as the authoritative, and find a way to keep them at a distance in order to make space for the inclusion of other voices. Practicing this inclusion, answering 'what would you do about it', or 'where do you stand' I find more difficult; I have discussed questions of decoloniality and postcolonialism with my colleagues and we all find it very tough to do something different or to suggest alternatives. Especially since we are—or at least I am—educated and structured within a particular (eg. Western) realm of understanding. Because it is so difficult for 'us' to do so, our starting point should therefore exactly be to start from the empirical and theoretical engagement of the political actors on the periphery. By doing so we can begin to decenter our work and the debates. There is an enormous amount of really brilliant decolonial and postcolonial work out there. Here, I think the work of people like Arlene Tickner has been great in attempting to do carve out this space. This goes to prove that scholars *are* suggesting alternative ways and that it *can* be done differently.

So perhaps paradoxically, I would summarize my central contribution as a hush—scholars like I have to dampen down our voices in order to allow other voices to be heard. Keeping this in mind can prove to be a really important lesson for theorists. At least I attempt to do so within my particular subfields of theory.

## How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about International Relations?

During my route through academia I have been inspired by a number of theorists, books and historical events and I continue to be. However, there are two or three specific points of inspiration that I can draw out; some more philosophical or theoretical ones and others almost accidental to how my thinking has progressed.

Largely, I have arrived at where I am today because I started my PhD on the philosophies of Kant and Hegel. This has set up certain parameters for my way of thinking; for thinking about ethics and about critique, and this has influenced my way of thinking and ultimately my work ever since. Another factor was my time as a young scholar working at the Wolverhampton Polytechnic where I met [Steve Gill](#). He suggested I attended the BISA conference to present a paper on war in relation to Kant and Hegel. He knew this was my field of interest and in the end I accepted. The first panel I attended was okay, though only two people participated. The second panel was far more interesting and featured amongst others [Rob Walker](#). Walker talked about bringing Foucault's insights and ideas about critique to bear on thinking about international politics. This made me realize that my purely philosophical way of thinking in relation to Kantian critique and the problems of Kantian critique were already being worked through within the domain of International Relations as a field of study. It spurred my initial interest as I came to think of IR as a kind of case study of applied political philosophy more generally. In some ways, you could say that the questions I was asking from a political philosophy perspective were being addressed more progressively in IR. Certainly, I caught on to IR when they were being very consciously addressed. The timing and shift in IR spoke directly to me and, in my view, pushed me to think about questions of judgment and argument shifts. Here, one should attempt to genuinely relate to an international or global frame of reference rather than simply taking for granted a kind of methodological nationalism, which, I suspect, up till then had been. In this sense IR pushed my thinking.

It is interesting how it often is the texts you read early on that shape you as a scholar. To me it was the texts I read in the late 1980s, early 1990s, when critical IR was really getting off the ground, which were formative for me. Initially, it has been Kant's political thought and Hegel's philosophy of rights. Additionally, there has been a range of theorists within critical writing; retrospectively the work of Hannah Arendt and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in particular. Moreover, Foucault has also been essential to my work; particularly *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* have been really crucial in terms of me looking at a kind of 'fate of critique', if you like, in Western thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Within IR Andrew Linklater's work is really important, especially his book on *Men and Citizens*, and afterwards his postcolonial community book from the late 1990s. They are important as a sort of interlocutors, which I in fact reacting against, because I saw them as carrying through this very Habermasian line of thought, with which I did not agree. Obviously also the work of feminists scholars amongst others Cynthia Enloe ([TheoryTalk #48](#)) and Christine Sylvester, whose books were very important to me. Again, they enabled me to widen my scope and see how broader themes of feminist philosophy were being addressed in IR.

## What would a student need to become a specialist in International Relations or understand the world in a global way?

In order to become a specialist in IR a student's main qualities should be intellectual curiosity, openness, and willingness to engage with ideas. However, it is importing not to insist on 'you must know your Foucault backwards' or 'you must know your Hegel backwards'. To me this is not essential; instead, the focus should be on one's interests and curiosity, and to locate yourself in

terms of where you are ‘thinking from’. In this way, you are able to relate your ideas and arguments to a specific problematique—perhaps one concerning the political contexts you derived from yourself, and maybe because of the particular intellectual trajectory that you have taken.

Then again, knowing your classic theorists as Foucault and Hegel is definitely beneficial when engaging with IR. When I entered the field of IR, it meant I was already loaded with a set of intellectual parameters, interests and political commitments. Ultimately, this enabled my participation and outcome of conversations with different trajectories within IR. Therefore, what are most important to me are intellectual curiosity, openness, willingness to listen, and a sense of where you are coming from to the conversation. Yet, the great thing about IR is that you do not have to be trained in IR, in any straightforward way. In my view IR is a cross-disciplinary field, where many disciplines and arguments merge; students from law, political science, sociology, who all can have lots to say to IR, and IR can in return have lots to say to you.

The key to combining academia with your own starting point lies to me in education; if you get a good education, there should be space for the individual engagement. Particularly if you are interested in antiracism or in feminism, I would assume, an IR scholar speaking to those areas would encourage you to make space for independent thought. However, all academic work is at the same time a *discipline*, which at times can be painful to adjust to and actually take on board. Academia is not for everyone; to some it ends up being a waste of time and they long for something different, which is completely fine as well. But in my view it is sign of a poor university education if it closes things down to an extent where you cannot find the space to articulate your views or relate them to the things that you are learning. And that is a fault of the education, not of the student.

### **You fall squarely among ‘critical’ IR scholarship. What does it mean, for you, to be critical?**

First of all, the term ‘critical’ is highly contested and in a way it can become a useless label. In my view one of the problems with critical IR is you tend to get into the sort of narcissism of minor differences, which also involves getting into a kind of competition for philosophical antecedence, in which scholars argue either through Marx, through Heidegger or through Foucault. The second problem of critical IR, which I have discussed in my work at various points, is the suspension of judgment forever. Since you can never find the ground, the sort of desire to find the authority in some sense ends up paralyzing judgments. I would argue that when there is a kind of risk that comes with people’s willingness to make claims that it can ultimately suspend judgment. Yet, there is still dynamism, and the fact that your claim-making can be precisely deconstructed as in fact a reinforcement of what you are trying to undermine is part of the excitement and the interest of doing critique. The neverendingness of it is challenging in itself. In a sense we would like to be sort of God and in a sense we say ‘well, I know that this is right and it just is’. Critique stops you doing it. That is why it is healthy, even though it at the same time can be quite frustrating.

My own personal understanding of what ‘critique’ and ‘critical’ means, comes out of my engagement with ideas of Kantian critique. The Kantian critique represent a foundational moment in the sense that both Marxist critique and post-Marxist critique refer back to Kant. In this way, the Kantian critique becomes a very rich starting point, as it has been able to branch out in all kinds of directions, from the sort of Hegelian/Marxist direction to other very different ones. The sort of typical critique is about questioning the assumptions or the authoritative basis of any kinds of claims. In doing so, critique is largely about disturbing the conditions or possibility of a claim that is made, and this is basically what Kant’s transcendental move is about. This means that critique can go in lots of directions, some of them more helpful than others. Critique can also end up as a claim to a new authority and in my view, certain forms of post-Kantian critique have done that. I

would also argue that there are aspects of Kant's work, where he did the same; in particular in how he moves from one possible ground to another to attempt to underpin some kind of authority for his claims. This might be contentious, but this is my reading of Kant, whereas others probably would argue he construes the space of critique very openly. Put simply, my reading of Kant is in line with Foucault's: critique is the admission that you are always in a tentative position in which any claim to authority is going to be questionable. Within any argument, you are always going to be holding something steady in order to question other parts, which mean you cannot ever escape from having to claim some sort of authority in the arguments you make. However, this does not mean that arguments become an overweening or foundational kind of ground. In a sense it is about keeping things moving, and I quite like the Foucauldian expression of it being an ethos, an attitude, a way of being, rather than a set of techniques or a claim to a moral high ground, which then enables you to show how everybody else is wrong. That is how I think of the concept of 'critical'.

**Classical theory plays a big part in your work. If bygone thinkers spoke to the issues they saw in their times, then what do the minds of bygone eras have to say to contemporary issues?**

I am never quite sure what the answer to that is. There is a tradition of thinking about canonic thought in the UK, Quentin Skinner is one of them, that is really dubious about talking about Kant or Heidegger in relation to contemporary problems or trying to suggest you can have a philosophical conversation across time and space. I have spent some time on this argument and in my view they are to a great extent right, at least if you think of a conversation with the 'real Hobbes' or someone else. However, there is a sense in which I start from a position in which there is no 'real' whoever. Instead, it should be viewed as a text with arguments and ideas, which you read and interpret in the light both of your time and place, but also the course of a whole set of secondary engagements with that. When reading such texts you are dealing with two hundred years of interpretation of Kant and Hegel. In this sense one must note that the voices of those philosophers as highly mediated in many different ways. If you can still engage with them and find useful insights, then sort of 'why not' seems reasonable. A second argument in terms of philosophers as Kant and Hegel is, the time they wrote in was obviously radically different. Meanwhile, it also had features in terms of the shape the state were taking, the beginnings of what we would now recognize as the modern capitalist market state. They were there, they were before that, and they were looking at the beginnings. They were around during the Napoleonic wars, mostly Hegel but also Kant was at point when the European colonialism or imperialism took off in particular ways. Here, a lot of the categories of race, culture etc. took shape under their noses. In this sense we are still within a frame that they were a part of, rather than excluded from. If you look at Machiavelli, he was speaking in a radically different time and space. There is an argument there about occupying a world that in some sense we still recognize or perhaps of Kant and Hegel trying to construct ways of understanding and judging a world that still has links to the world we inhabit today. That is another reason why they are still useful today. We all get our ideas from somewhere; as long as we do not argue that referring to Kant, Hegel, Foucault or Arendt makes it right. Instead, use ideas as they come and mix and match them, it is reasonable to be eclectic, depending on what kinds of claims you are making. If you attempt to do a solid reading of Kant, then you must know both the texts and the context, but if you wish to discuss critique in IR you can, in my view, take some elements of Kant or the post-Kantian legacy and use them to illuminate a contemporary debate.

**The encounter between the West and the non-West is an important theme running through your work, and you liberally engage with post-colonial theory. So how does that work in practice?**

The problem to someone who is trying to critique Eurocentrism or get away from it is that you cannot do it in an isolated way. One of the ways in which people try to think about the inclusion of other voices was in terms of the notion of dialogue. This was actually why I ended up writing about dialogue. My problem here was that some of the ways of thinking about dialogue seemed to me to simply confirm the centrality of the West and the position of the non-West as other. The big question is then how do you articulate the non-West? In my view the thing is that you simply do not; instead one must think constructively about how you quiet down, how you moderate dominant voices and create spaces for others. Sometimes it may just be a question of just being quiet, it may be about encouraging other work, it may be about encouraging theoretical investment in other places.

I am talking to you now, but in some sense what I am doing is enforcing the position of the privileged white, Western, middle-class woman. In my position talking about Eurocentrism and critique is merely by the fact of doing it, I am reinforcing a certain privilege and a certain sense of it. And this is not to say that you therefore you do not do it. Sometimes it is not useful to have someone like me on a panel; it is a much better thing to have somebody else, somebody younger or somebody from a different part of the world. To me this is what you have to think about, and as a scholar you have think about how you can contribute to creating spaces within which other voices can be included. To be honest, I do not think I have done a very good job of doing that. To quiet yourself down is really difficult; especially since there is so many institutional and other incentives for you to try and occupy the center stage. In my view it is something that maybe feminist scholarship has been better at.

In this sense it relates to a much bigger set of issues that social science is about; social sciences were and are kind of an imperialist project in their foundation. Whether or not you can ever make them to anything else, I doubt. It might be that you cannot, in which case the move to aesthetics, for example, which you see in some bits of IR, is understandable. It is difficult in the sense that we cannot do what we want to do by staying within the vocabularies of social science. We have to move to another kind of discourse in order to do what we think we need to do.

**So here we navigate the space between scholarship and activism. I remember this picture of you delivering a lecture on a road blocking an arms convoy.**

Yes, my very minor piece of activism, except it was the people that were being handcuffed on the road who were the real activists, not me. I think it is really important to be clear that doing critical theory as an IR scholar does not make you a political activist, and I think it is important, because it can sometimes feel really good to make a gesture of whatever, you know, 'being critical'. And that's all great, but actually it's all within an incredibly privileged forum and you're not really making any difference to anything. So, I'm a bit I think Hegelian in the sense that I think that philosophy or academic work is about understanding more, trying to understand and to think, and it may well generate frameworks and ideas that make it useful in various ways, and it may well not, but if you want to have revolution, go out and start organizing. You know, don't think that you can somehow do it by being on ISA panels. Marx was a political activist, he didn't just sit around writing, he was part of the movement, part of an organization, and that's the only way you really can help bring fundamental change, and quite often it'll go wrong. Being a political activist is much more scary and difficult than being a critical IR thinker.

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to Kantian and Hegelian philosophy, international and global ethics, Feminist theory and philosophy, and politics and violence. Her work is influenced by the scholarly tradition that produced the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory. She is the author of *Kant, Critique and Politics*, *International Political Theory: rethinking ethics in a global era*, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy* and *Time and World Politics: thinking the present*. Her current focus is on the areas of global ethics, assumptions about time and history in theories of international relations, and the conceptual relationship between politics and violence in Western political thought.