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From Critique to Affirmation in International Relations

POL BARGUÉS-PEDRENY 

This article explores the ongoing shift in IR and beyond, where critical perspectives are increasingly adopting more affirmative dispositions. The starting point is that some successors to critical theories and deconstruction are becoming more appreciative of how entanglements of human and nonhuman populations have creative potential. That is, today critique ceases to be about contesting the inner contradictions or limits of a given order and instead embraces existing multiple assemblages and feedback loops as enabling forces. The article serves as an introduction to the Special Issue 'Critique and Affirmation in IR', in which authors reflect on the unforeseen trajectory of critiques and problematise the risks and shadows of affirmation.

Introduction

'What has become of the critical spirit? Has it run out of steam?', wondered Bruno Latour in 2004, when tired of the de(con)structive mood of social criticism.¹ With his usual masterful generalisation of modes of thinking, the philosopher of science crudely distinguished between the 'factish' and the 'fairy' (anti-fetishist) – or the foundationalist and the anti-foundationalist – positions of critique. The former undermines arguments that rely on conscious and autonomous decisions of humans without giving credit to the objective structures – like capitalism, elite domination, race, colonialism, class struggle or gender – that shape them. The latter destabilizes arguments that rely on mind-independent facts and ignore that reality does not exist outside projections, constructions, assumptions or discourse.² Latour sensed that the former was increasingly unpopular or stripped from the class struggle that gave it meaning in the first place, so his main target in 2004 was the latter. This is a form of critique, he explained, that proves the lack of scientific certainty and moves us away from facts, empiricism and reality. As in conspiracy theories, these critical scholars show a deep distrust of facts and become relentless doubters.³

1. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2004), p. 225.

2. Other scholars have made similar diagnoses of these two forms of critique; for example, see Luc Boltanski, *On Critique. A Sociology of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (Open Humanities Press and Meson Press, 2015), pp. 107–15.

3. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?", pp. 228–30; see, also, Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of Factish Gods* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 81–82.

That in modernity, so to speak, the factish and fairy positions are mobilised together (as if there was no contradiction with this move) in order to denounce facts as fetishes in religious and political arguments, on the one hand, and embrace facts as truths in the natural sciences, on the other, is not relevant here.⁴ What matters is that Latour added a third position, his position, to end up with both destruction and deconstruction at the same time. He reshuffled both tactics, nuanced their weaknesses and instilled optimism into a renovated critical spirit.

As in the factish position, Latour urges us to move closer to reality and facts. And yet he is alert to how facts are constituted by humans and non-human collectives. Facts are contingent and historically produced rather than reflecting permanent and placeless ontological truths. Therefore, as in the fairy position, he admits the lack of firm ground in the construction of facts. And yet he does not use groundlessness to undermine arguments and theories but to show positively how actually existing, real entities are gathered, composed, and explained. In Latour's words:

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between anti-fetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.⁵

This position should not be confused with a third way between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist theories. It is a position that seeks to turn negative forms of argumentation upside down, giving a more affirmative impetus to critique.

In this way, Latour directs us towards a new mode of critique. Rather than understanding it as a sword to strike the adversary or a trick to unmask her language, Latour associates criticism with 'a whole set of new positive metaphors, features, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions, habits of thoughts'.⁶ These positive gestures are intended to 'detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence'.⁷ The key point is that, for Latour, things have not been gathered from the top, following a meticulously calculated plan or a conscious goal; they have not been constructed as intended: 'objects are simply a gathering that has failed—a fact that has not been assembled according to due process'.⁸ Accordingly, critique consists in reconstructing 'the fragility of things'—to borrow Connolly's phrase. In other words, it involves following the unsettled and adrift processes of translations, transformations, disturbances and surprises of humans and objects, 'forever lost in friendships and duels'.⁹

4. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (London: Harvester, 1993).

5. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?", p. 246.

6. Latour, p. 247.

7. Latour, p. 246.

8. Latour, p. 246.

9. Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), p. 21; for a comparable perspective, see how DeLanda employs an approach which is 'as bottom-up as possible', refusing holistic categories like society and focusing instead on the interaction of energy flows and organic and linguistic materials, to revisit one thousand years of a nonlinear and nonequilibrium history of the West; Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1997).

In his push against critical theories, Latour has found no shortage of allies who propound forms of critique devoid of negativity. Some examples of well-known philosophers illustrate the point. Alain Badiou notes that critique has always been moved in the first instance by the negation or opposition to a state, system or law against which, only after naysaying, a new order can be imagined. Hence creativity and the opening of new possibilities in this 'Hegelian framework' are linked to and dependent on the primacy of negation.¹⁰ Badiou wishes to reverse this logic so that 'the affirmation, or the positive proposition, comes before the negation instead of after it'.¹¹ In Badiou's affirmative logic, which draws on his reading of the Apostle Paul, we *first* have to have an 'opening', an 'event', which enables a new possibility or a new subjective body, which has to be affirmed, so that something new is organised.¹² After the affirmation of this new possibility or event, after affirming the affirmation, concrete forms of negation (protests, strikes, revolts ...) may be staged. Thus in his attempt to avoid the trappings and negativity of critique, Badiou does not wish to affirm everything that exists. Rather, he seeks to renegotiate the relation between critique and affirmation so that critique comes in consequence of an initial gesture of affirmation.

Similarly, the philosopher Rosi Braidotti shows disagreement with the generalised 'mood of mourning and melancholia', which she reads to be the product of 'the fatigue and depression of deconstruction'.¹³ Commenting on the risks of rising populisms and reactionary politics in the West, she urges critique to 'move beyond dialectical oppositions, beyond the logic of violent antagonism, to develop an operational politics of affirmation'.¹⁴ She argues that in the epoch of the Anthropocene—which considers the human as a geologic force but also strips her of the power to govern nature—complexities, paradoxes and rich diversities of human and non-human agents surface and must be affirmed in order to defy the fundamentalisms that rip them asunder:

The answer is in the doing, in the praxis of composing alliances, transversal connections and in engaging in difficult conversations on what troubles us ... Resistance to the violence and injustice in the present requires the creation of modes of affirmative relation and of ethical interaction.¹⁵

For Braidotti, critique's aim should neither be to annul pain and overcome trauma, nor to slide into resignation and passivity due to our incapacity to reverse the deficits of contemporary times; rather, it is to assume that pain, disorder and loss are conditions of possibility for sustainable forms of transformation.¹⁶ In other words, that critique must not invest time in imaging a new world, a new universal, or bemoan the impossibility of doing so. In the Anthropocene, the whole implodes,

10. Alain Badiou, "Affirmative Dialectics: from Logic to Anthropology", *The International Journal of Badiou Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2013), p. 2.

11. Badiou, p. 3.

12. Badiou, p. 3

13. Rosi Braidotti and Lisa Regan, "Our Times Are Always Out of Joint: Feminist Relational Ethics in and of the World Today: An Interview with Rosi Braidotti", *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (July 3, 2017), p. 178.

14. Rosi Braidotti, "Don't Agonize, Organize!", *E-Flux Conversations*, 2 November 2016, available: <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/rosi-braidotti-don-t-agonize-organize/5294>.

15. Braidotti.

16. Rosi Braidotti, *Por Una Política Afirmativa* (Barcelona: Editorial Gedisa, 2018), pp. 169–75.

as entities relate and gather in creative ways all the time. Braidotti's adage 'don't agonize, organize!' can be turned into a rallying cry for critique in the Anthropocene.

Speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy have in diverse ways theorised how things-in-themselves exist outside human reach.¹⁷ This position is considered 'pre-critical', as it is different to the negativity of continental philosophy, which tends to deny the existence of a world outside language, but it is also different to the naïve realism of analytic philosophy and dogmatic metaphysics, which suppose that a subject can apprehend the outside.¹⁸ Timothy Morton has translated this scholastic perspective into reflections and commentaries on today's ecological crisis that are popular in the wider public.¹⁹ Morton sets forward an ecological awareness that becomes accustomed to the weirdness and darkness of ecology in the Anthropocene epoch, in which things veer away from themselves, problems are wicked and human initiatives generate weird feedback loops and unexpected consequences.²⁰ For him, 'becoming accustomed' does not imply that ecology becomes less strange; rather, it means to be finally at home with a blind ecology that addresses a reality which is inherently contradictory, where the innermost layer of things cannot be fathomed by human knowledge. 'I am at home in feeling not at home', Morton confesses elsewhere.²¹ Against the nihilism and sorrow of other critiques of environmentalism, which denounce humanity while bewailing the irreversibility of climate change and the impossibility of taking fruitful action, Morton encourages us to take responsibility for our deeds. He celebrates the sweetness and warmth of dark ecology; 'an anarchic, comedic sense of coexistence' with nonhumans.²²

In the philosophical perspectives outlined above, affirmation is invoked as a remedy to the nihilism and negativity of critique, which treats things in the world with loathing. As Gideon Baker explains, affirmation of *this* world is the courageous response taken by Diogenes, the Apostle Paul, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, among others, to 'the problem of the true world' inherited from the metaphysical tradition that fed social critique as much as Western philosophy.²³ The source of this problem resides in the 'will to truth', the longing for the true, timeless, supersensible world, otherwise known as God, which inexorably leads to the belittlement of this world. Thus affirmation presupposes something other than the search for truth, for a divine light that illuminates our paths. Critique does not

17. For some examples, see Rai Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2010); Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman, *The Rise of Realism* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008).

18. Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 5 emphasis in original.

19. See for example these 2018 exhibitions curated by and inspired in Timothy Morton's work: *Hyperobjects* in Ballroom Marfa, San Antonio, Texas, US (www.ballroommarfa.org/archive/event/hyperobjects/); *After the End of the World* in CCCB Barcelona, Spain (<http://www.cccb.org/en/exhibitions/file/after-the-end-of-the-world/224747>).

20. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 5–8, 96–100.

21. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 28.

22. Morton, pp. 160–62.

23. Gideon Baker, *Nihilism and Philosophy: Nothingness, Truth and World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

fade in affirmation but is operationalised differently. 'Affirmative critique', therefore, might be a more apt terminology, as Kathrin Thiele indicates: 'Affirmative critique initiate(s) transformation in the here and now, without the messianic promise or need for a "beyond" – another world supposedly escaping "this mess" we are in "all together."' ²⁴

Admittedly, it may appear reductionist to put these theorists under the same roof, and it should be acknowledged that they only represent a tiny fraction of global philosophy, which is clearly situated in the wealthy side of the Western hemisphere. Yet irrespective of their differences and being conscious of their positionality, these scholars renegotiate the limits and possibilities of critique. They distil an affirmative ethos which is permeating dominant discourses in the discipline of International Relations (IR) and is taken as the starting point for this Special Issue.

Affirmation in International Relations

While Latour and others have openly been weary of the foundationalist and anti-foundationalist critiques at least since the dawn of the new century, it is clear that in the discipline of IR today these forms of critique are increasingly showing fatigue. The theoretical underpinnings of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory or the deconstructive generation led by Jacques Derrida are being reshuffled, if not abandoned. The former gained prominence during the 1980s, confronting a discipline still dominated by nuclear strategists and defence intellectuals, state-centrism, masculinity, rationality and problem-solving theories. ²⁵ Critical theorists turned their analyses towards 'understanding' the ideas and institutions that constituted a given order, so that 'the reconstructive task of creating compelling alternative visions of possible futures' could be undertaken. ²⁶ Yet, from today's viewpoint, as recent studies have noted, critical theory was trapped between the despair and scepticism regarding reason and progress inherited from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, on the one hand, ²⁷ and the influence of Jürgen Habermas, ²⁸ on the other hand, whose quest for cosmopolitanism and moral principles moved critique away from social and economic analyses. ²⁹ The latter, deconstruction-based critiques, also seem to be waning in credibility. They are still appreciated

24. Kathrin Thiele, "Affirmation", in Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser, and Kathrin Thiele (eds.), *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition: A Critical Vocabulary* (Meron Press: Lüneburg, 2017), p. 27.

25. See Nicholas Rengger and Ben Thirkell-White, "Still Critical after All These Years? The Past, Present and Future of Critical Theory in International Relations", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 33, No. S1 (2007), pp. 3–24.

26. Feminist theorists were key to criticise the dominant discourses and institutions that made global power relations, Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals", *Signs*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1987), pp. 717–18; see, also Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989); Jean Bethke Elstain, *Women and War* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987).

27. Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory", *Millennium*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1981), pp. 126–55.

28. Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

29. For two recent analyses which seek to undo critique's estrangement from the world, see Kai Jonas Koddenbrock, "Strategies of Critique in International Relations: From Foucault and Latour towards Marx", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2015), pp. 243–66; Davide Schmid,

for their potential to unveil discourses of power, but become increasingly marginalised when the ambition is to regain confidence, activate political imaginaries and tackle the socio-economic, geological and political problems of today.³⁰

Today, other critical approaches with more affirmative predispositions are stealing the limelight. For example, pragmatist-informed approaches give primacy to practices, narratives and translations in order to study world politics and their transformations.³¹ In so doing, they follow and explain travelling objects and compositions of the world without recurring to absolute foundations and while avoiding the relativist ‘anything goes’ of deconstruction.³² In another body of literature, digital analytics and technologies are used as new methods of social inquiry that are seen to open up epistemic opportunities for resistance and intervention that should be embraced rather than dismissed away.³³ Although critical scholars often maintain a position of hostility towards new technologies’ enhancement of governmental techniques of discipline and biopower,³⁴ the engagement with everyday experiences and new research methods gradually pulls them away from the concerns of earlier critical theorists.³⁵

Of course, there are critical perspectives in international relations that produce socio-economic analyses in order to gain an understanding of the systemic causes of current problems and crises and search for legitimate alternatives, often developed around Foucault’s critique of governmentality,³⁶ or Marxist-informed readings of the violence produced by capitalist

“The Poverty of Critical Theory in International Relations: Habermas, Linklater and the Failings of Cosmopolitan Critique”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2018), pp. 198–220.

30. Benjamin Banta, “Analysing Discourse as a Causal Mechanism”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2013), pp. 379–402; Milja Kurki, “The Limitations of the Critical Edge: Reflections on Critical and Philosophical IR Scholarship Today”, *Millennium*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (July 7, 2011), pp. 129–46.

31. Tobias Berger and Alejandro Esguerra, eds., *World Politics in Translation: Power, Relationality and Difference in Global Cooperation* (London: Routledge, 2018); Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theory: New Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Christian Olsson, “Interventionism as Practice: On ‘Ordinary Transgressions’ and Their Routinization”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 2, 2015), pp. 425–41.

32. Jörg Friedrichs and Friedrich Kratochwil, “On Acting and Knowing: How Pragmatism Can Advance International Relations Research and Methodology”, *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 04 (2009), pp. 701–31; Gunther Hellmann, “Pragmatism and International Relations”, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2009), pp. 638–62.

33. Shannon Mattern, “Mapping’s Intelligent Agents”, in Pol Bargués-Pedreny, David Chandler, and Elena Simon (eds.), *Mapping and Politics in the Digital Age* (London: Routledge, 2018); Patrick Meier, *Digital Humanitarians. How Big Data Is Changing the Face of Humanitarian Response* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2015); see, further, Noortje Marres and Carolin Gerlitz, “Interface Methods: Renegotiating Relations between Digital Social Research, STS and Sociology”, *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (2016), pp. 21–46.

34. Claudia Aradau, “Assembling (Non)Knowledge: Security, Law, and Surveillance in a Digital World”, *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (December 1, 2017), pp. 327–42; Claudia Aradau and Jef Huysmans, “Assembling Credibility: Knowledge, Method and Critique in Times of ‘Post-Truth’”, *Security Dialogue*, September 7, 2018; Debbie Lisle, “Rejuvenating Method”, *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (September 2, 2014), pp. 370–73.

35. Lara Montesinos Coleman and Doerthe Rosenow, “Security (Studies) and the Limits of Critique: Why We Should Think through Struggle”, *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2016), pp. 202–20.

36. For example, see these two Special Issues, Anne-Marie D’Aoust, “Ties That Bind? Engaging Emotions, Governmentality and Neoliberalism: Introduction to the Special Issue”, *Global Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2014), pp. 267–76; Nicholas J. Kiersey and Jason R. Weidner, “Editorial Introduction”, *Global Society*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2009), pp. 353–61.

relations.³⁷ However, an affirmative ethos is seen in studies that have reformulated biopolitics positively, away from mechanical processes that regulate life and death, in order to appreciate the creativity and spontaneity of life and enable novel forms of ethics.³⁸ Also, the shift from critique to affirmation can be noted in approaches that decentre the primacy of science, technology and modernist conceptions of progress to admire and mobilise indigenous or non-modern modes of knowing and thinking.³⁹ As critical voices cry out for new interventions and reinventions, and for creative solutions or strategies of resistance and adaptation, the nihilism of 'old' forms of critique fades away. Rather than averting tragedy, identifying errors and limits, or forecasting the end of humanity, current narratives become post-apocalyptic, responding to the challenge to act ethically *after* the end of international relations.⁴⁰

In the Anthropocene—an age of ecological emergencies, mass extinctions and failed policies, accelerated by capitalism and human hubris—it is experimentation, speculation and resilience practices that enable malleability and survival. Rather than distancing themselves from it, more studies acknowledge the world as embroiled and enmeshed in non-human energies and forces; this gesture is meant to displace the arrogance of human-centred perspectives and to attempt pragmatic ways of being and living with others.⁴¹ In the Anthropocene, critical methods do not point to an outside source of hope, a possible route to escape this world and grasp the heavens, but to a *right here*.⁴² As Stephanie Wakefield observes,

urban dwellers in Jakarta to New Orleans are experimenting with infrastructures for living with rising seas and floods on their own terms ... They are using the experimental audacity of resilience and the "here and now" mentality of ruins thinking to create their own ways of living irreducible to liberal life.⁴³

Amid the rubble of liberal modernity, the mood of scholars and activists is uncannily upbeat, their writings full of affirmation. A political 'manifesto from the end of IR' 'honours the condition of being entangled' and teaches how 'we can dwell in

37. For example, see Greig Charnock and Guido Starosta, "Towards a 'Unified Field Theory' of Uneven Development: Human Productive Subjectivity, Capital and the International", *Global Society*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2018), pp. 324–43; Cemal Burak Tansel, "Geopolitics, Social Forces, and the International: Revisiting the 'Eastern Question'", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2016), pp. 492–512.

38. William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014); Stefanie R. Fishel, *The Microbial State: Global Thriving and the Body Politic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); David Chandler, "Biopolitics 2.0: Reclaiming the Power of Life in the Anthropocene", *Contemporary Political Theory*, September 20, 2018.

39. David Chandler and Julian Reid, "'Being in Being': Contesting the Ontopolitics of Indigeneity", *The European Legacy*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (April 3, 2018), pp. 251–68.

40. Audra Mitchell, "Is IR Going Extinct?", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2017), pp. 3–25.

41. Erika Cudworth, Stephen Hobden, and Emilian Kavalski, eds., *Posthuman Dialogues in International Relations* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018).

42. See further, David Chandler "The death of hope? Affirmation in the Anthropocene", *Globalizations*. available: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14747731.2018.1534466?journalCode=rglo20>

43. Stephanie Wakefield, "Infrastructures of Liberal Life: From Modernity and Progress to Resilience and Ruins", *Geography Compass*, Vol. 12, No. 7 (June 28, 2018), e12377.

this time of failure'.⁴⁴ Another acknowledges 'the tragedy of anthropogenic climate change', while striving for 'innovative forms of action' and creative thinking and attempting 'multiple ways of living with earth others'; this means to adopt a 'reparative rather than purely critical stance toward knowing' to avoid 'the expression of grief and mourning', 'getting stuck on the blame game', or the 'descent into despair'.⁴⁵

This Special Issue explores the ongoing shift in IR and beyond, where critical perspectives are increasingly adopting more affirmative dispositions. The starting point is that some successors to critical theories and deconstruction are becoming more appreciative of how entanglements of human and nonhuman populations, which were previously hidden or neglected sources of agency, have creative potential. That is, critique ceases to be about contesting the inner contradictions or limits of a given order and becomes more susceptible to recognising existing multiple assemblages and feedback loops as enabling forces.

The authors in this Special Issue reflect on the unforeseen trajectory of critiques, as much as they problematise the risks and shadows of affirmation. For example, the promise of affirmation may be that if the world is explored and accepted in a loving, unprejudiced way, new avenues for responsible social interaction, ethical conduct and awareness will become possible. But it can also be the case that affirmation assents to the world as it is, thus reproducing neoliberal logics of precariousness and socio-economic inequality. Although the contributors here prefer to speak of affirmation(s) rather than 'affirmation' (following Ernesto Laclau's exploration of plural visions of emancipation⁴⁶) it is imperative to ask: what kinds of affirmative approaches are articulated? How can affirmation and critique work hand in hand so that affirmation reinvigorates and redirects critique? Can there be affirmation alongside critique? Can affirmation be mobilised after deconstruction? There is little consensus in this collection of articles, only the important insight that affirmative approaches are bringing critical stances closer to facts and empirics, to the world, without implying a return to traditional positivist thinking or reviving stale debates between realists, liberals and social-constructivists in the discipline. Critiques in IR are evolving fast in response to the growing ideological exhaustion of both factual and fairy critiques: this Special Issue is an invitation to consider the political and ethical stakes involved in such a movement.

Affirmation(s) After Critique?

In the first article following this introduction, Gideon Baker draws on Agamben and Nietzsche to argue that critique, as much as government, always finds the world wanting.⁴⁷ This presumed lack is the philosophical problem of 'the true world' in which critique is complicit, and it is an expression of European nihilism. Yet Baker does not align himself with affirmation, accepting the real and refusing critique, as he thinks this position is problematically conservative. Rather, he

44. Anthony Burke et al., "Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR", *Millennium*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (April 7, 2016), pp. 499–523.

45. Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose, and Ruth Fincher, *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene* (New York, NY: Punctum Books, 2015), pp. vii–viii.

46. Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(S)* (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

47. Gideon Baker, "Critique, Use and World in Giorgio Agamben's Genealogy of Government", *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

explores Agamben's concept of 'use' as a possible way out of the false choice between presupposing a deficit in the world and accepting the world as it is passively. In the conclusion, the image of children playing inventively without needing toys from elsewhere opens up the possibility of thinking a zone of indistinction between critique and affirmation.

David Chandler sees contemporary critical approaches as appreciating the meaningful possibilities that already exist in the deeply entangled world, instead of imagining alternative futures.⁴⁸ These critical perspectives operate on the basis of affirming the world as it is found, 'in modernity's ruins', and accepting that there can be no linear progress or happy ending. Therefore, rather than mourning modernity's demise, or bemoaning the condition of precarity and contingency of the Anthropocene, critical approaches find the world emancipatory and joyful. According to Chandler, the evolution of critique away from framings that relied on human reasoning and agency to transform the world has been enabled by the exhaustion of the modernist paradigm: in the Anthropocene, the material experience of defeat of the left makes illusions of human emancipation appear untenable.

Pol Bargaúes-Pedreny and Jessica Schmidt, comparing the writings of Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton with international policy thinking, explore affirmation in contemporary imaginaries of global climate change.⁴⁹ They trace the evolution of climate change governance from a framework of strategic problem-solving and localised intervention to what they call 'whatever action', which has a planetary dimension. This shift is driven by two contradictory observations: on the one hand, there is the realisation that humans are utterly unfit to resolutely solve environmental degradation; on the other hand, global climate change remains an issue requiring urgent responses. In consequence, they argue, rather than retreating from the challenge, new and different horizons of action have arisen. The term 'whatever action' captures the contemporary mood: it neither implies that any undertaking is equally acceptable, nor that action has to be strategic and purposeful. Instead, today's policy initiatives are necessarily more contingent, flexible, innovative, and open-ended, because policymakers accept that little can be done to reverse ecological emergencies. In operating without a telos, what is done matters less than the idea that something is being done and no possibilities are foreclosed.

Kai Koddenbrock and Mario Schmidt take issue with the turn towards affirmation, or what they call the 'presentist persuasion' of contemporary critique.⁵⁰ Daringly comparing Jesuit theology, Friedrich Hayek's neoliberal thought and Timothy Morton's philosophy of hyperobjects, they expose a tendency to assert the entanglements of subjects and objects. Hyperobjects, like God, the market and global warming are portrayed as all-encompassing phenomena which cannot be grasped from the outside because humans are always already part of them. In so

48. David Chandler, "The Transvaluation of Critique in the Anthropocene", *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

49. Pol Bargaúes-Pedreny and Jessica Schmidt, "Learning to Be Postmodern in an All Too Modern World: 'Whatever action' in International Climate Change Imaginaries", *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

50. Kai Koddenbrock and Mario Schmidt "Against Understanding: The Techniques of Shock and Awe in Jesuit Theology, Neoliberal Thought and Timothy Morton's Philosophy of Hyperobjects", *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

doing, these approaches undermine the potential of critical thought to meaningfully explain and transform the world. Rather, the existence of hyperobjects is revealed to us by the enlightened few, be it Jesuit priests, economic experts or philosophers. Hyperobjects are beyond human comprehension and control, while their existence is 'undeniable'. As Koddenbrock and Schmidt point out, once there is no longer any distance between subjects and (hyper-)objects, the key challenge is to make people more aware of their fundamental embeddedness in the world. Critique becomes the domain of experienced seers who help others fully immerse themselves in the world they inhabit.

Doerthe Rosenow relies on decolonial scholars to argue that intellectual projects—like the ontological turn or affirmation, which critique modernist understandings of the world—often disavow how modernity was deeply rooted in the colonial exploitation, control and exclusion of other worlds. Yet, at the same time, she also warns against the tendency of some decolonial literature to focus upon epistemological questions—critiquing Western perspectives and valuing other ways of thinking—rather than situating difference at the level of ontology.⁵¹ Moreover, Rosenow alleges that both 'affirmative' and 'decolonial' approaches of another fault, which runs like a red thread through hegemonic modes of knowledge production: the will to 'generate different knowledges' or 'know radical difference'. As an example, she uses the controversies on genetically modified organisms (GMO) to show how scholars researching anti-GMO activists never refrain from attempting to solve and settle questions and answers, problems and solutions. What emerges in Rosenow's argument is a call to experience concrete encounters with other worlds, rather than attempting to know them through abstraction or providing generic conclusions of any sort. Rosenow cultivates an appreciation of the unsettling and disorienting character of these encounters, in the awareness that knowledge might not be produced, that controversies might not be settled, and other worlds might still be a mystery to us.

In his article, Joe Hoover draws on John Dewey to formulate a consummatory approach to global justice, which stands in contrast to architectonic approaches that see justice in the abstract as 'a harmonious order to be constructed or an end state to be achieved through a process of progressive development'.⁵² Rather, Hoover situates injustice in specific constellations of power and concrete social relations, and sees justice as a responsive, ongoing and contingent process that aspires to alter and remake relationships that have become destructive and exploitative to some. Using the example of London's Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, Hoover makes the case that justice is an emergent quality of social relationships and should be seen as politically situated, reflecting specific circumstances of unequal power relations and their effects. A consummatory approach is understood by Hoover as a step towards a situationist global justice theory, which both affirms the lived experience of those suffering injustice and critiques the power-relationships at play in those experiences.

Peter Finkenbusch's article deals with the way in which the increasingly popular resilience discourse attempts to move beyond the neoliberal critique of universalist

51. Doerthe Rosenow, "Decolonising the decolonisers? Of ontological encounters in the GMO controversy and beyond", *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

52. Joe Hoover, "Developing a Situationist Global Justice Theory: From an Architectonic to a Consummatory Approach", *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

knowledge and top-down governance.⁵³ It draws out how US anti-narcotics policy shifted from a classic rational-choice model centred on law enforcement and interdiction to a neoliberal register geared towards improving the socio-cultural context in order to incentivise better choice-making. Resilience discourse tries to adjust policy as far as possible ‘to what is thought to exist in reality’, affirming the world we live in, rather than purposefully governing it. The advocates of resilience try to avoid the temptation of formulating their own analytical apparatus. Instead, they want to allow local practices and coping strategies to come into the open so that they may be amplified and expanded. As an example, Finkenbusch discusses the smartphone app SWALK, which maps crime in real-time, allowing travellers to adjust their mobility practices to a changing security situation. The promise of resilience is not to enable acceptable liberal outcomes, but to make previously hidden relations and practices visible. While the goal of public security lingers in the background, resilience thinking increasingly affirms the world ‘the way it is’.

The Special Issue is concluded by Suvi Alt, who gives some credit to the positive ‘mood’ of affirmation and its attempts to correct the disengagement with materiality often implied in deconstruction.⁵⁴ Yet she remains basically unconvinced and suspects that the authors who wish to affirm the world have thrown the baby out with the bathwater: critique has been wiped out. For, how these authors conceive the world that they affirm? Alt replies that it appears indeterminate, volatile, and entangled as much as dominated by neoliberal capitalism and submersed in severe and persistent inequality. This last piece is a reminder of how approaches that embrace precarity and vulnerability actually risk reinforcing structural problems. Even more fundamentally, they risk depoliticising critique, wiping out the possibility of analysing and understanding existing power relations and the socio-historical conditions that have made affirmation prevalent.

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53. Peter Finkenbusch, “On the Road to Affirmation: Facilitating Urban Resilience in the Americas”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

54. Suvi Alt, “Conclusion: Critique and the Politics of Affirmation in International Relations”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).