



Interview with Serafettin Yilmaz:

Critical International Relations Theory and the South China Sea

By Olga Daksueva and Serafettin Yilmaz / *Perspectives*, 2 / 2015

The South China Sea Think Tank interviews Dr. Serafettin Yilmaz about critical IR theory and its relevance to the South China Sea disputes.

Serafettin Yilmaz received his PhD from the International Doctoral Program in Asia-Pacific Studies at National Chengchi University and worked as a researcher at Academia Sinica. His research interests include critical IR theory, China's foreign policy and major power relations, comparative regionalism, and maritime and energy security. His most recent publications have appeared in *Issues and Studies*, *International Journal of China Studies*, and *Journal of Chinese Political Science*.

South China Sea Think Tank: Your last article was related to [critical IR theory and China's foreign policy](#). Can you give us a quick recap of that piece?



Serafettin Yilmaz: The paper was not really the study of China's foreign policy under critical IR theory. The argument was that critical theory can better account for China's foreign policy than other theoretical postulations. I basically argued that the present international context makes it more feasible to study China's foreign policy under the critical paradigm than more traditional IR theories like realism or neoliberalism.

SCSTT: Can you tell us a bit more about critical IR theory itself?

SY: To understand critical IR theory, first, it is necessary to define critical theory itself. The critical method is essentially an alternative way of looking at the world and seeking to understand the risks and opportunities that exist in change. So, I find it to be a more relevant theory when we think of the world we live in. Critical theory aims to be 'territorial' as well as 'historical.' 'Territorial' means the theory is bounded by territory, remains now- and here-oriented. In other words, it deals with the territory it is situated in, first and foremost. So it is very organic, developing, evolving and changing within changes on the ground. And it is 'historical' as well in the sense that it ties the past to the present rather than examine the present in isolation from the underlying historical forces. We can sum



up critical theory as an attempt to understand social change through critical thinking with an emphasis on dialectic.

But critical theory of society is not a unified method but rather an umbrella idea, under which there are many different approaches. The starting point of critical thinking is social life, not national life. However, later thinkers from the 1980s began to think critically and examine the international system. They argued that historical materialism and class theory was inseparable from the international realm that is composed of revolutionary states and blocs that stand in opposition to anti-historical forces. From this effort, a critical theory of IR was born.

Technically speaking, critical theory was born from the works of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. Its leading figures were basically Marxists, but they defined what the critical theory was by improving or building upon the orthodox Marxism. Followers of this school (Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Jurgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse) got ideas from German idealism represented by Hegel, Marx, and Kant. It was Robert Cox who [introduced the ideas of critical theory to IR theory for the first time](#) in his now almost canonical article published in 1981.



Critical theory addressed anything that related to society: aesthetics, technology, modernity, education, international organizations, civil society, and, more recently, the state itself and inter-state interaction. Initially critical theorists stood closer to classical Marxism, but when the Marxist program failed in Europe from the late 1930s and fascist government assumed power, they started questioning whether historical determinism was really enough to explain the situation. Hence their mood shifted from optimism, a deep belief in dialectics and progress to perfect society toward more pessimism. And with that they started to deal with the philosophical ideas of modernity, globalization, technological advancement and post-modernism.

Nevertheless, critical tradition, including critical IR, differs significantly from traditional positivist theories in several important ways. First of all, it rejects the idea that social reality is value-free, universal or unchangeable. On the contrary, it believes that social reality is changeable, local and based on certain values. For [critical IR theorists], theory is always for someone and for some purpose. They think that ideology is behind every theory and it can't be free from values, whether the latter is local, national or international. And for this reason



they also say that this theory is for some purpose and for some end.

SCSTT: How do proponents define the purpose of critical theory?

SY: The purpose of the theory is liberation of human society from any constraints that keep them oppressed. It looks deeply into reasons for oppression and looks for answers. It seeks answers to not only the question of “how” but also the question of “why”. They believe that society is susceptible to change, and theory needs to move with society. If progress doesn’t take place while conditions for change are in place (like in Europe when the conditions were there for the proletariat revolution but it didn’t happen, first fascist then capitalist states were able to control the worker’s movement), then it should be critiqued. This process is called the ‘immanent critique.’

SCSTT: Could you elaborate a bit about the idea of ‘immanent critique’?

SY: ‘Immanent critique’ identifies ideologies and dogmas that shroud contradictions in existing systems. It is, in fact, said that critical theory not only tends to the resolution of the contradictions existing in history, but it is itself the theory of



those contradictions. Immanent criticism in the present context then questions not only how wars happen but also why they happen; what the forces behind them are. That's radically different from traditional theories. Realism, for instance, questions why and how the actors interact with each other, but it doesn't question the forces behind them or the larger system that runs in the background. So critical IR theory seeks to understand what really moves history, not just the result of the movement itself.

Critical IR theorists believe that change for a better state of being is possible if internal contradictions within the existing social reality are objectively revealed. To achieve or to be able to reveal the contradictions, they examine both empirical social reality and understanding that informs those practices—that is, ideology. Once the ideology is uncovered, achieving a better state of social being becomes possible.

Then, to go back to your previous question, the purpose of critical IR is to realize emancipation through immanent critique. Emancipation requires human thinking to be liberated from false convictions and false consciousness. Therefore critical theorists classify traditional theories (or we may call them “utilitarian theories”) as problem-solving theories, arguing that they do not aim to change but actually sustain and



reinforce the existing reality that is not suitable for human liberation. They believe that traditional theories describe social reality with the aim of fixing it but not necessarily changing it. The critical program may sound futuristic in that it tries to uncover not what happened but what should have happened but did not.

However, I must point out here, even though critical IR believes in social progress and a better state of existence, it does not envision some normative utopias. The recommendations made are not for the future but for now, and they are well situated in historical reality.

SCSTT: So, compared to Marxism, then, are they not so deterministic?

SY: Exactly, compared to Marxism, they are not deterministic. This is one of main differences from Marxism. As I said earlier, critical tradition started out as a student of Marxism but later on realized that his ideas did not fully account for historical reality. Marxism's economic determinism and historical progress didn't actually take place in many countries where dialectical change was supposed to happen. So, then they started thinking about other things that might be involved in social change. In this sense, I should add that critical IR theory



draws on various social and normative strands of critical tradition, but it eventually goes beyond them and looks at the state's role in the international political economy as a revolutionary actor.

SCSTT: One of main IR topics is inter-state conflict. How does the critical theory look at this topic?

SY: Critical IR theory doesn't give answers to specific situations but looks at the system. It is a system analysis theory. It doesn't take states as the main actors, but recently, some scholars have attempted to apply critical thinking to the realm of inter-state interaction. I, for that matter, propose that the state is the highest form of polity and, if materially and technologically capable, they can act as independent entities from international organizations and sub-state interest groups. Then, the task of emancipation needs to be consigned to the state itself. Alongside the Marxist tradition, I believe global inequalities and contradictions are of an economic nature.

Hence, emancipatory IR distances itself from political structures of domination, identifies their material and ideological essence, and, finally, offers alternatives. Like other critical traditions, it holds a positive view of progressive change for a higher international order. Here, three basic



premises are made: first, transition to a higher international order should be available in practice. Second, it should be objectively possible, meaning that actors should be capable of driving the change. And third, it should be organic as well, meaning that it should be born from within society.

SCSTT: So does [emancipatory IR] reject international conflicts?

SY: It doesn't aim for destructive change of the international system but peaceful transition. But, one has to accept that any systemic change is potentially disruptive—at least for the order that is to be replaced. In this sense, it is conflictual. But the historical agents the critical IR theory perceives as the initiators of change are not conflict-driven but organic, as I said, and they are possible as well as necessary. They arise from the very contradictions that they attempt to address.

SCSTT: In this regard, how can we make use of critical IR theory to see recent developments in the South China Sea?

SY: Critical IR seeks to find ways to liberate international relations from the conditions of inequality and hegemony. In the case of the South China Sea, it looks at the root causes of the conflict that keeps related parties in a state of contestation



and examine the conditions that prevent them from communicating with each other meaningfully and rationally. For example, Habermas proposes ‘communicative action’, which means that rationality should not be seen as an autonomous subject but in the subjects that interact with each other. Therefore, for a meaningful solution in the South China Sea, a good step would be to set up a negotiation framework to allow parties to communicate with each other to arrive at rational solutions. Presently, the contenting parties mostly refuse to talk to each other on a bilateral basis and seek multilateral settings and multi-party involvement to negotiate. It would be more constructive if the sides were involved in face-to-face bilateral communication to sort out differences—but only with the parties directly involved in the dispute.

Other critical IR perspectives look into the question of how colonial legacy has shaped and continuously influenced contemporary inter-state relations. From the post-colonial perspective, we need to consider the colonial legacy that is in play in current regional conflicts across the world. Certain disagreements in the SCS are a legacy of colonialism, be it French, Japanese or British. We also need to consider previous colonial interests and look at how they are translated into the actions of those states today. This may shed some light on some



questions like, for example, why Japan is interested and wants to get involved in the SCS theater.

Now, the situation in the SCS brings into question whether or not external interference creates the proposed positive externalities for the region. Given the extent of the US military footprint that already exists in East Asia, it is hard to understand how additional deployment of forces would provide greater regional security. It appears to me that the South China Sea has become a theater for great power struggle. Because of this, smaller actors almost instinctively invite outside intervention to reinforce their position vis-à-vis China. This invokes a colonial legacy in a subtle way at the least.

If we looked from the Marxist perspective, we would probably investigate underlying economic interests that move international politics, such as natural resource extraction and other geo-economic interests like the security of trade routes and freedom of navigation. The South China Sea is known to hold significant amounts of mineral and hydrocarbon resources as well as provide livelihood for fishing communities in countries involved in the dispute and beyond. The conflict for that reason cannot be taken in isolation from the existing geo-economic realities.



From the Gramscian perspective, we can take the United States as a hegemon and then look at how it offers both consent-inducing and coercive methods to regulate regional politics in the SCS domain. On the consent side, it provides certain economic benefits, while on the coercive side, it deploys military instruments and initiates punitive policies. Then we can employ some specific Gramscian concepts, such as ‘war of position’ and ‘war of maneuver.’ War of position means that conflict between classes or, as with this case, conflict between states, is decided by direct clashes between actors, whereas war of maneuver means the conflict is much slower and hidden and the actors may seek to gain influence and power through indirect ways. We see that the SCS conflict is shifting from war of maneuver to war of position. That’s why I argue that the SCS crisis will probably be a long one but will not lead to armed conflict between any of the related parties. The window for conflict might have already passed as the last serious armed clash in this region was between China and Vietnam in 1974. What we see now is that parties are building capabilities, maneuvering, reinforcing their position, and even bringing the conflict to the arbitration to seek greater legitimacy but not necessarily to fight.



SCSTT: So, for countries involved, the purpose of this buildup is to reinforce their own capabilities, and despite ongoing tensions, it won't lead to armed conflict, is that right?

SY: Yes, I believe that armed conflict over the contested territories in the South China Sea would be highly unlikely. This is mainly because of the ongoing shift in regional discourse from one of geopolitical contest to development, which is also present in this latest debate over China's island genesis program. For one thing, unlike the previous island reclamation activities of Vietnam, the Philippines or Malaysia, which appear to be largely defense-oriented, Beijing has underlined the scientific and economic nature of its own program. This does not mean there is no defensive intent, but it is accompanied by other less contentious intent. This is a positive thing and, in fact, falls in line with the argument of critical methodology which stresses the growing developmentalist discourse in the region.



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