



Critical Theory in International Relations and Security Studies

Interviews and reflections

EDITED BY

Shannon Brincat, Laura Lima and João Nunes

CRITICAL THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SECURITY STUDIES

This book provides an assessment of the legacy, challenges and future directions of Critical Theory in the fields of International Relations and Security Studies.

It provides 'first-hand' interviews with some of the pioneers of Critical Theory in the fields of International Relations Theory and Security Studies. The interviews are combined innovatively with reflective essays to create an engaging and accessible discussion of the legacy and challenges of critical thinking. A unique forum that combines first-person discussion and secondary commentary on a variety of theoretical positions, the book explores in detail the interaction between different theories and approaches, including postcolonialism, feminism and poststructuralism. Scholars from a variety of theoretical backgrounds reflect on the strengths and problems of critical theory, recasting the theoretical discussion about critical theory in the study of world politics and examining the future of the discipline.

Both an introduction and an advanced engagement with theoretical developments over the past three decades, *Critical Theory in International Relations and Security Studies* will be of interest to students and scholars of international politics, security studies and philosophy.

Shannon Brincat is a University of Queensland Postdoctoral Research Fellow.

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*Edited by Shannon Brincat, Laura Lima
and João Nunes*

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1

INTRODUCTION

Shannon Brincat, Laura Lima and João Nunes

The idea for this volume came out of a desire to assess the trajectory of critical thinking in the study of world politics. We saw critical theory as having reached an impasse, after the highly successful period in which its popularity surged – almost to the point of becoming ‘mainstream’ or common sense in some parts of the academic world. We the editors are part of a generation of researchers for whom the word ‘critical’ has become, to a great extent, a household name. The proliferation of ‘critical approaches’ led us to ask a number of questions. Does it still make sense to use the ‘critical’ label to designate an approach or methodology? Is there an emerging ‘critical orthodoxy’? What has the critical literature achieved? Where has it failed or remained silent? What are its limits and challenges? How can critical thinking be pushed forward? Finally, what has happened to ‘traditional’ (‘uncritical’) thinking? We set out to provide a fresh perspective upon the ‘critical turn’ in International Relations and Security Studies – one that would revisit its origins, celebrate its eclecticism, consider its limitations and open doors to future developments.

Critical theory in world politics has been surveyed and assessed on a few occasions.¹ The perspective adopted in this book is different in three important ways. To begin with, our starting point was the strand of critical theory reaching back to Kant, Hegel, Marx and the Frankfurt School. This choice is justified by our own intellectual background – when this project was firstly discussed, we had ongoing research projects that applied insights from this strand of critical thinking – and also by the fact that we had been working in proximity with authors who made important contributions to the fields of International Relations and Security Studies by drawing on this form of critical theory. Importantly, however, and while this lineage would remain a reference point throughout the project, we did not envision a ‘balance-sheet’ of a specific body of work or a theoretical tradition. Rather, we used this understanding of critical theory as an entry-point

into a broader discussion about the different meanings of critical thinking. We started with critical theory as a range of authors and texts, and sought to explore the ways in which critical thinking can be seen as a broader attitude of thought, a disposition towards the world, a lens through which to grapple with the diversity of social life. On another level, we started within a ‘circle of proximity’ – shared research interests among us editors, a number of authors we were familiar with – and set out to explore the limits of what we knew by confronting the familiar with some difficult questions, by probing into its shortcomings, by opening up this body of work to scrutiny and criticism.

The second way in which this volume differs from its predecessors is closely interlinked with these intellectual motivations. The format we chose for the book was determined by the objective of exploring the breadth and reach of critique by taking the standpoint of a particular strand of critical thinking. Relying once again on our ‘circle of proximity’, we interviewed four scholars who we saw as important figures in the use of critical theory in the study of world politics. We considered that the work and life of these four scholars could prompt different kinds of reflections. We thus asked a number of scholars from diverse critical persuasions to comment on these interviews. Our selection of interviewees and commentators was not driven by a desire to follow or establish a canon, but by the objective of promoting self-reflection and a dialogue that was as open as possible. This volume does not claim to provide a definitive account of what critical theory is or a truthful narrative of its origins and development. We are well aware that the way in which this volume has been organized, and its participants selected, is in itself a particular narrative – which necessarily entails drawing certain boundaries and even some exclusions. Different ways of addressing the critical turn in world politics would yield different results.² Those are the necessary limitations of a project of this nature – but we have sought to minimize any bias by opening the discussion to contributors from a broad range of backgrounds and critical orientations.

We have refrained from establishing a common understanding of ‘critical theory’ and even from imposing a common designation. As the reader will immediately notice, our contributors have different things in mind when they write ‘critical theory’: some prefer to stick to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, others to its broader Marxist meaning, and still others use critical theory to denote a variety of critical approaches, including post-colonialism, feminism and post-structuralism. Although the format of the book was conceived as dialogical, the conversation we envisaged never aspired to a consensus or a common denominator between the authors; rather, the objective was to showcase the variety of ways in which critique has been pursued in the study of world politics, and to open the floor to a discussion about some of its most important themes and challenges. At the same time, however, we endeavoured to prevent the discussion from turning into a cacophony – in this context, having the interviews as reference points proved immensely useful.

Ultimately, the dialogical format followed in this book reflects more adequately what ‘doing critique’ is: to be open to the world, to engage with others and to confront the limits of one’s own thinking. The format breathed life into what is

often seen as a dry, abstract and impersonal process. As has been shown elsewhere, interviews can provide valuable opportunities for illuminating the human dimension of scholarship.³ At the same time, interviews are windows that reveal how intellectual work is at once personal, social and political – thereby requiring different kinds of negotiations between the three. This is particularly important in the case of critical thinking, which has always emphasized the way in which knowledge is socially embedded and driven by interests. In this context, doing critique means also exploring the ways in which personal experiences, ways of seeing the world and ways of acting in the world are interconnected. The interviews and reflections in this volume show that critical enquiry is not merely an intellectual process of reason alone. Rather, critique is a lived experience, which feeds on the cross-fertilization between different areas of activity, academic and non-academic (as the interview with Robert Cox illustrates). At the same time, critique often involves complex negotiations between the ethical, the political and the historical (Andrew Linklater); or between the academic and the personal (Ken Booth). It may involve the interplay of academic work and political activism and struggle (Richard Wyn Jones). The idea of critique as a lived experience is present, in different ways, in some of the responses to the interviews: for Jacqui True, for example, the congruence between the way in which critique is ‘preached’ and ‘practiced’ is central when assessing the merits of a work that claims to be critical; as Mark Neufeld suggests, critical thinking must be given new life through the reinjection of a passionate commitment; Kimberly Hutchings speaks of the necessity of ‘turning towards the world’. In sum, this volume shows that critique must be lived as well as theorized.

The third way in which this volume is distinctive is its dual focus on International Relations and Security Studies. Although we consider both fields to fall under the general rubric of world politics, we found it important to specify them. To begin with, a great number of the contributors to this volume have been important figures on both fields. Secondly, the field of Security Studies has recently witnessed extremely dynamic theoretical debates, to the extent that it is no longer possible to talk of it as a subfield of International Relations. Rather, we think that the birth of Critical Security Studies and the growing popularity of critical approaches to security have altered the traditional relationship between the two fields of study.⁴ Instead of Security Studies being subsidiary of International Relations, we are now witnessing a more intensive cross-fertilization between the two – and, very often, the field of security leading the way in terms of theoretical innovation. This volume displays some of the synergies that can be created by bringing together these two areas of enquiry.

How the volume is organized

The volume is divided into two parts. The first (Part I), features four interviews conducted with Robert W. Cox, Andrew Linklater, Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones. Our objective as interviewers was to provide the opportunity for these scholars to reflect about the development of critical theory in their work, to gauge

their views on the impact of their work and to discuss the challenges and possible directions for future research. While taking into account differences in research interests, methods and subject-fields between the four interviewees, we organized our questions around five common areas of enquiry:

1. their initial engagement with critical theorizing;
2. the importance of a commitment to emancipatory change in their work;
3. the impact of their work on the discipline(s);
4. the practical implications of their work and of critical thinking more generally; and
5. their thoughts on the challenges and future developments of critical thinking.

The interviews were mostly conducted through various face-to-face meetings (with the exception of Wyn Jones's, which resulted from electronic exchanges), and were digitally recorded. The interviewees were involved in editing the transcripts of the interviews, and thus had the opportunity to change and elaborate their views.

The second half of the volume (Parts II–IV) includes commentaries on these interviews, penned by a number of scholars from various theoretical, normative and interpretive backgrounds – united by their engagement with critical thinking in International Relations and/or Security Studies. Here, our objective was to provide a forum in which different debates surrounding critical thinking could be developed, and in which a diverse range of voices could be heard. The commentators were asked to use the interviews in Part I as a starting point for reflections on the legacy, shortcomings and future of critical theory. The degree of engagement with the interview material varies, but, all of the reflections can be seen as responses to the interviews in Part I or as broader responses to critical thinking as a whole. We have divided these ten commentaries in three parts – Origins (Part II), Limits (Part III) and Future Directions (Part IV). This division is merely an indication of what we considered the most important theme of each chapter. In fact, most (if not all) of the chapters can be seen as addressing these three themes, or at least as having important implications for each of them.

We have deliberately steered away from adding a concluding chapter. Although some of the main themes coming out of this dialogue will be highlighted below, and even though we will go so far as to venture some ideas as to what this might mean for critical thinking, we are very reluctant to engage in the exercise of closure that a conclusion would imply. It is best to let the contributions speak for themselves and to allow the readers to draw their own conclusions. We believe that the primary contribution of this volume is the way it shows the extraordinary diversity of critical theorizing as applied to the study of world politics and, more importantly, the way it seeks to strengthen the critical field as a site of permanent contestation, questioning and self-reflection. We believe that the critical spirit is stifled when one attempts to encapsulate it into formulas or common denominators; in contrast, it thrives when one seeks to learn instead from its example of permanent unrest.

Origins ... and departures

Thinking about origins is important when assessing a theoretical approach. This project began with a particular narrative of the origins of critical theory in the study of world politics: we observed that 2011 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Robert Cox's 'Social Forces, States, and World Orders – Beyond IR Theory' (1981) and of Richard Ashley's 'Political Realism and Human Interests' (1981). These two articles are indeed significant in that they signalled the moment in which insights from critical theory were self-consciously applied to the study of world politics. These two articles were not scattered efforts; in fact, they reflected a broader movement in the discipline. At about the same time, Andrew Linklater's book *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (1982) contributed to setting the agenda of a critical-theoretical approach to International Relations theory; not long afterwards, Ken Booth's (1991) 'Security and Emancipation' showed how critical thinking could be used to radically rethink understandings and transform practices of international security.

In these works, one can witness the formation of a critical approach to IR theory. But that is not the same thing as saying that critical theory in the study of world politics originated with these works – or that a line of intellectual influence can be drawn from the thought of Kant, Marx, the Frankfurt School, up to the contributions of these authors. Whilst conducting the interviews and observing the debate that they sparked, we realized that our initial assumptions regarding the 'intellectual tradition' of critical theory in world politics were somewhat misplaced – or at least that they needed to take into account a broader perspective. The reality of intellectual life is messier than we originally thought, and critique – as an attitude of thought and a lived experience – cannot be neatly summarized into a coherent narrative.

For example, it was particularly illuminating to learn that Robert Cox was heavily influenced by the thought of Edmund Burke, one of the founding figures of modern conservatism, and that he does not see the Frankfurt School as being part of his intellectual inheritance. Andrew Linklater, on the other hand, while explicitly drawing on the Frankfurt School, cannot be considered a 'follower' in that he has used in creative ways the historical sociology of Norbert Elias – who, as Linklater suggests, can be seen as one of the 'flag-bearers' of the critical tradition. Ken Booth reveals how he encountered 'critical theory' almost by chance, and how it helped him bring together a series of notions about world politics he had developed through other means.⁵

The responses to the interviews go even further in complicating the narrative about the origins of critical theory. Mustapha Pasha's analysis of the subject of critical international theory explores the origins of critical thinking within a particular Protestant cosmology, and shows how the 'logic of Western Reason' underlies the emancipatory commitment. In his contribution, Richard Devetak provides an in-depth investigation of the intellectual heritages of Cox and Linklater. Focusing on how these two authors have mobilized the views of history of Vico

and Kant, respectively, Devetak's chapter is a prime example of how revisiting the origins can give cause for re-evaluating the trajectory and future possibilities of critical theory. Yet another example of the usefulness of taking a fresh perspective on origins is the chapter by Michael C. Williams. Williams writes about the context of the Frankfurt School in exile in the United States, and argues that the strict separation between the School and American positivist political science is both erroneous and detrimental to the critical purposes.

Limits ...

As mentioned above, this volume sets out to provide a forum in which the shortcomings of, and challenges to, critical theory in the study of world politics could be discussed in a lively and constructive way. In this respect, this book can be seen as an exercise in self-reflection – an indispensable feature of any intellectual endeavour that purports to be critical. Once again, the format of the volume proved its usefulness: the interviews constituted moments of introspection, in which the authors reflected about the development of their thinking, their hesitations and changes of opinion. Linklater provides a fascinating overview of thirty years of work, in which he constantly struggled with the shortcomings of some of the founding fathers of the critical tradition. Although demonstrating important lines of continuity – such as the interest in the expansion of the horizons of moral community – his intellectual journey is also animated by acknowledging the limits of Kant, Marx and Habermas, which he has sought to overcome by engaging with theorists outside the 'canon' of critical theory.

Booth has shown in his work that he takes seriously the feminist injunction to see the personal as political, by reflecting in a candid way about his own intellectual trajectory and the way he came to recognize earlier mistakes.⁶ He goes further by exploring the shortcomings of pure thought when confronted with events in the political world – he admits, for example, the difficulty in sustaining a pacifist position in the messy realm of political affairs; at the same time, however, he reveals his own hesitations about the merits of intervention. Wyn Jones is also very forthright in confronting the limits of his own thinking: he shows, for instance, how his recent work on Welsh politics has impacted upon his views of critique and contributed to changing his opinion about the role of quantitative Political Science. Also, looking back at his earlier works, he admits to having been mistaken when equating security with emancipation.

Unsurprisingly, the responses to the interviews engage in depth with various limitations of critical theory. In fact, as Brooke Ackerly argues in her chapter, the recognition of limits must be in-built into the very act of thinking critically about the world. Thus, she frames critique within a broader disposition characterized by both skepticism and humility: the former leads critical thinking to revisit and challenge accepted meanings, while the latter renders its approach collaborative and permanently open to questioning. Even though Ackerly identifies elements of skepticism and humility in the words of the four interviewees, she still finds many

problematic elements in the version of critical theory they uphold. One of her main concerns is the concept of emancipation, a ‘totalizing’ term which, in her opinion, sidelines concrete claims for empowerment and rights.⁷

Other commentators use a variety of strategies to engage with the limits of critical theory. Jacqui True, for example, examines the interviews against a set of criteria: engagement with other theories and theorists; self-reflexivity about the interviewees’ own work; and the identification and practice of emancipatory possibilities. Deploying these criteria, she detects blind spots in the critical theory presented in the interviews (and in the questions that we, the interviewers, failed to ask). As a result, she argues that the version of critique put forward by the interviewees ultimately fails to live up to its own claims. John Hobson’s contribution also seeks to turn the critical gaze on critical International Relations theory itself. He appraises the trajectory of critical theory from the standpoint of subaltern and Eastern agency, and argues that critical theory has fulfilled only half of its mandate: while it has revealed structures of power in the world, it has not yet analysed the agency of subaltern and non-Western actors in global politics and economics.

On a different note, Martin Weber asks critical theory to reflect on the nature of its engagement with other theoretical approaches. Seeking to ‘make uncomfortable’ this theoretical tradition, he observes that all too often different critical approaches talk past each other, preferring to remain at the level of what he terms an ‘external’ form of critique, which usually dispenses with appreciative engagement. An obvious conclusion from Weber’s reflection is that critical theory needs to take theoretical dialogue more seriously. While Weber gives most of his attention to dialogue between different critical approaches, Williams’ reflection about the ‘American-positivist-realist other’ of critical theory also serves as a cautionary note against overplaying the difference between ‘critical’ and ‘traditional’ theory. Booth and Wyn Jones also comment on the pitfalls of building ‘straw-men’ for justifying one’s own position, arguing that realism is actually much more complex – and closer to critical thinking – than the picture normally provided by critical theorists.

Amidst all the criticisms, a dissonant voice is introduced by Pinar Bilgin’s defence of Critical Security Studies against accusations of Eurocentrism. For Bilgin, the way in which critical theory has been used by authors like Booth and Wyn Jones has considerably broadened the scope and reach of Security Studies. Her reflection is particularly interesting in the context of the debate carried out in this volume, in that she argues that accusations of Eurocentrism must be turned against those who accuse critical theory of being Eurocentric. In sum, the contributions to this volume depict an immensely rich picture of the multiple challenges facing critical theory today and the vibrant debates surrounding it.

... and opportunities

Lest the reader think that the book does not have anything positive to say about the future of critical theory in the study of world politics, we hasten to add that all contributions offer important clues as to how critical thinking – and critical

practice – can be developed. This is true even for the more pessimistic views: Ackerly, for example, suggests that the version of critical theory put forward by the four interviewees is exhausted; nonetheless, she argues for another version of critical theorizing, one that is predicated upon the methodologies of feminist theory (True also places emphasis on the importance of feminist methods for doing critique).

This book thus contains a number of future directions for critical theory: more attention to historical change and difference, more openness to dialogue and a more sustained engagement with the complexities of world politics. Cox wishes critical theory to develop as an ‘historical mode of thinking’ (this volume, 20). Theories arise out of historical situations, experiences and dilemmas, and the role of critique is to examine the historical elements that are likely to bring about structural change. As a result, critical theory must strengthen its historical methodologies. Echoing Cox’s remarks about the crucial importance of historical thinking, Linklater’s work shows how critical theory can benefit from an engagement with historical sociology – to help critical theorists adopt a long-term view of complex historical processes in world politics.

In addition to strengthening the historical awareness of critical theory, the contributions to this volume overwhelmingly point towards the necessity of developing a sensibility to difference. These calls should be taken in conjunction with Devetak’s genealogy of the thought of Cox and Linklater, and with Pasha’s analysis of the cosmological assumptions underlying critical theory – given that, after all, the engagement with difference cannot be dissociated from self-reflexivity. In what concerns the ways in which critical theory can engage with complexity and multivocality, Hobson makes the case for a critical theory that not only offers a critique of power and social inequality, but also paints a picture of subaltern agency and resistance. This vision can be seen as an important rejoinder to Cox’s idea of a cosmopolitanism predicated upon transcivilizational dialogue and upon the recognition of fluidity and difference. An important contribution in this context – and a promising direction for critical theory – is Neufeld’s analysis of Edward Said’s ‘contrapuntal reading’, which, he argues, allows for dissonant voices to be considered without the compulsion to establish a unified meaning or a harmonious whole. Contrapuntality can thus become an important critical method for the analysis of difference and pluralism. The calls for more pluralism are echoed by Hutchings, who argues for a more sustained engagement with feminist, post-colonial and green arguments in what she terms a ‘democratization of critique’ (this volume, 213). The desire for more pluralism also underlies Williams’ engagement with what has often been seen as the ‘other’ of critical theory.

As Ackerly shows in her contribution, openness towards difference is an important step in a more sustained engagement with world politics. In this context, she stresses the importance of feminist methodologies, which in her view must be central components of any form of theory that claims to be critical. In the field of Security Studies, the approach to security put forward by Booth and Wyn Jones has distinguished itself from most of its critical counterparts by arguing for a more comprehensive engagement with the real conditions of insecurity experienced by

‘real people in real places’ (in the words of Wyn Jones). In their interviews, they emphasize this point once again, with Wyn Jones going so far as to argue that the ability to engage with the world of practice is the ultimate test for the validity of a critical theory. For Wyn Jones, this means, among other things, that critical theory must go beyond anti-statism and engage with state practices and with the functioning of political institutions.⁸ Neufeld’s contribution is also important in this regard, in that he argues for the necessity of ‘transformative intellectuals’ to engage with politics and praxis in specific historical communities. For Hutchings, the question of practice means that critique must ‘run towards the world’. Downplaying the importance of arguments about, for example, the philosophical foundations of critique, she claims that the ‘authority’ of critique must be transferred towards the world in its complexity and in its multiple temporalities.

In sum, the contributions to this volume show how critical thinking can be developed through the deepening of its historical awareness, the broadening of its scope so as to account for plurality and difference, and the reinforcement of its engagement with the subject matter of world politics. These contributions identify gaps and opportunities, putting forward concrete measures for pushing critical theory beyond its current limitations.

The life of critique

The contributions to this volume provide important insights as to the origins, current state, challenges and future directions of critical thinking in world politics. Engaging in a dialogic and self-reflective exercise, they showcase the vibrancy of intellectual exchanges within the critical field. While demonstrating the importance of preserving theoretical heterogeneity, the contributions also show that there are common concerns, that conversations can take place, that disagreement is almost always fruitful for the critical enterprise and that areas of convergence can be found.

In addition to demonstrating the vitality of the critical field, the voices in this volume illuminate different aspects of the ‘life of critique’. To begin with, they provide important clues for a reassessment of its origins and genealogy. Critical thinking cannot be circumscribed to the works of philosophers – or contained in edited volumes such as this one – because its development is supported by the interplay of deeply ingrained ideas (as Pasha shows) and intimately connected with struggles that occur daily on a multiplicity of sites. Critique must thus be seen as an organic phenomenon, always in motion and always restless – as Cox states in his interview, it must be fluid and ‘non-scholastic’. The contributions also show that critique must see itself as an intervention within an ever-evolving social and political life – Hutchings refers to this as the ‘turn towards the world’. They show that critique is more than just a theory: it is a lived experience, an attitude, a form of practice – in Booth’s words, a ‘way of life’.

Finally, this volume demonstrates the crucial importance of critique for living and acting in the world. On the one hand, the ideas and methods that fall under the critical banner – historical, sociological, feminist, subaltern, among others –

are important tools for thinking about, and addressing, the multiple situations of exclusion and oppression in the world today. On the other hand, critical theory offers important clues as to how we might live in order to minimize the reproduction of these forms of exclusion and oppression. As Cox argues in this volume, critique implies a change in the way we think about ourselves and about our relationship to the world. In times of global interconnectedness, global injustices and global dangers, the first and foremost lesson of critical theory may just be an injunction to personal transformation.

Notes

- 1 The trajectory of the critical literature in International Relations can be accompanied in Hoffman (1987), Linklater (1996), as well as in the contributions to Wyn Jones (2001) and Rengger and Thirkell-White (2007). The intersection between critical thinking and post-positivism is one of the common themes of the contributions to Booth, Smith and Zaleski (1996). A useful reader is Roach (2007).
- 2 A different take into this question was provided in Edkins and Vaughan-Williams (2009).
- 3 See in this regard Munck and Snyder (2007).
- 4 The seminal volume of Critical Security Studies is Krause and Williams (1997). Recent surveys of the different critical approaches to security are C.A.S.E. collective (2006) and Peoples and Vaughan-Williams (2010). Also useful are Booth (2005) and Fierke (2007).
- 5 In his recent book *Theory of World Security*, Booth explains in detail his theoretical influences and his own approach to theory-building as ‘pearl-fishing’ from several sources – see Booth (2007: 37–91). This approach resonates with Cox’s remarks about being a ‘non-conformist’ who does not belong to a school or doctrine (this volume, 17).
- 6 See Booth (1997).
- 7 Interestingly, in his interview Cox also reveals some dissatisfaction with concepts such as ‘emancipation’ and ‘progress’.
- 8 The challenge of engaging with the world of political institutions from a critical-theoretical perspective has recently been taken up in Roach (2010).

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PART I

Interviews

2

FOR SOMEONE AND FOR SOME PURPOSE

An interview with Robert W. Cox

Robert W. Cox is widely regarded as one of the leading critical theorists in the study of world politics. Spanning International Relations Theory and International Political Economy, his work has been hugely influential since the publication of his two articles ‘Social Forces, States and World Orders’ (1981) and ‘Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations’ (1983). Cox was born in 1926 in Montreal, Canada, and worked for 20 years at the International Labour Organization – an experience that inspired his first book (co-authored with Harold Jacobson), *The Anatomy of Influence: Decision-Making in International Organization* (1974). He then turned to the academia and taught at Columbia University and York University, Toronto. His most recent book, co-authored with Michael Schecheter, *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilization* (2002), with its focus on civilizational encounters and post-hegemonic forms of human community, has signalled a new step in his ever-evolving critical thinking.

This interview was conducted between 14 and 16 June 2009 in La Barboleusaz, Switzerland.

Life and influences

You grew up in the Anglophone sector of Montreal, a son of politically conservative parents. Yet, very early in your life you became interested in French Canadian nationalism of the 1930s and 40s – which was radically opposed to the milieu of your family background. Later in your life, expressing your admiration for Edmund Burke’s organic approach to society as a link between conservatism and socialism, you argued (Cox 1996b: 24) that this form of conservatism was congenial to democratic socialism. Does your background explain the development of your thought?

Montreal was a very divided city when I grew up. I lived where English-speaking people lived and then – even as a youngster – I became aware that there was a whole different world, not very far from me. I used to take long streetcar rides down into the East end of Montreal, just to see what it was like. I would go to political meetings in the French-speaking areas of town. This was something completely different from, and which hardly existed in, the English-speaking areas – because politics was hardly discussed in public there.

It interested me that there was this other society and that they had radical ideas in different directions from those in my own milieu. There was a strong nationalist movement, part of which was channelled through the dominant provincial political party and part in more radical directions, and also fascist ideas were very current there in the 1930s. The Catholic Church was important there, not just in terms of the dominant orthodox Church Catholicism, but also because of the currents within it – the Jesuits, for example, introduced the concept of cooperative movements.

I became sympathetic to the idea of more autonomy for French Canada, although the vocabulary in those days was different from today's. When growing up, I used to read *Le Devoir*, which was the intellectual French language paper (you might compare it to *Le Monde* in France). I was more or less in the current of experimental social ideas in French Canada, which was only beginning in English Canada. In English-speaking Canada there was a movement called the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, which later became the New Democratic Party. It did not have much impact in Montreal, but affected other parts of English-speaking Canada. I would say that these experiences of living in Quebec, with its then tight division between linguistic and ethnic groups and my small personal efforts to bridge those divisions made me more of an 'international' person in vocation.

I thought of myself as a conservative, philosophically – but not as a supporter of the Conservative Party. I read Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1999) and from that drew the idea of society as an organic thing in which everyone had responsibility towards everyone else from their position and role in society. I thought that was the diametrical opposite of the exaggerated individualism that came to be represented much later by the likes of Margaret Thatcher as conservatism, which seemed to me nothing but a doctrinal revival of nineteenth century free market capitalism. Burke's conservatism, for me, was closer to social democracy as embodied in the radical movements growing up in Quebec in the 1940s – like the *Bloc Populaire Canadien* led by André Laurendeau, who became the editor of *Le Devoir*.

And then you started working with the International Labour Organization (ILO). How did this happen, and what made you leave the ILO and work in the academia?

Yes. It was against this background, just when I was in my graduating year, that the Principal of McGill University, Dr. Cyril James, called me into his office and asked if I would like to be interviewed for a job in the ILO, which was housed by McGill during the war. I really jumped at the offer because it was an opportunity to leave the Anglo-Canadian segment of Montreal – which was almost cut off from the rest