



Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping @ 20: New Provocations in Critical World Order Studies

MAURO J. CARACCIOLI 

INTRODUCTION

VIRGINIA TECH
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

In this Introduction, I discuss the motivations underlying this Special Issue in honor of the 20th Anniversary of François Debrix's *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology*. Highlighting the contextual relevance of the text, I discuss the role Debrix's work has played in the broader interrogation of disciplinary logics within the field of International Relations and beyond, as discussed by the accompanying essays. Specifically, I point to the book's critique of economic moralism, the simulation of order, and ever-increasing virtuality of politics in the context of U.S. higher education's transformations during the Covid-19 pandemic.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Mauro J. Caraccioli

Virginia Tech, US

mauroj@vt.edu

KEYWORDS:

World Order Studies; Critical IR; disciplinary individualism; economic moralism; higher education; COVID-19

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Caraccioli, Mauro J.

"Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping @ 20: New Provocations in Critical World Order Studies."

SPECTRA 8, no. 1 (2021):

pp. 7–13. DOI: [https://doi.](https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v8i1.173)

[org/10.21061/spectra.v8i1.173](https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v8i1.173)

Published in 1999, François Debrix's *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* heralded a broad movement in Critical IR scholarship to examine the ideological foundations of what was once dubbed the international system. Alongside cognate developments in political theory, critical geopolitics, and political anthropology, scholars of global politics embarked on a "critical analysis of today's world order" and its place in "the ever-growing capitalist market."¹ While identifying this precise moment took up significant ink and energy at the time, many of us today have become accustomed to calling this condition *disciplinary neoliberalism*. Yet as Debrix first pointed out then, the growing prevalence of economistic conceptions of neoliberalism, while generally "on target," have often failed to examine how "it is the 'disciplinary' part of disciplinary neoliberalism that matters... It is discipline that anchors modern and postmodern ideologies. It is the regime of disciplinarity in general (in which capitalist practices are no doubt embedded) that fashions ideology."² That the world today lives under an unexamined late-capitalist hegemony is thus not the scandal of contemporary scholarship, but rather how in the name of economic stability and perpetual growth we live oblivious to a globe "radiant with triumphant calamity."³ On the 20th anniversary of *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping's* publication, this Special Issue examines the afterlives of critical world order studies, taking stock of the intersecting and intertextual logics of a neoliberal world in disarray.

Over the last ten years, Critical IR scholars have targeted neoliberal order by various means: interrogating the normative underpinnings of American foreign policy; the institutional power grabs behind humanitarian discourses of responsibility; and the aesthetic deployment of neoliberal subjectivity by way of multiculturalist ideals, among other themes.⁴ In that same spirit, contributors to this forum have been invited to reflect on the influence of Debrix's text on their work, as well as how distinct facets of neoliberal ideology operate within the study of global politics. For some of the interventions, Debrix's work helped to create a space for broader examinations of how scholarly and political discipline was/is disseminated across borders. In particular, the essays by Alexander Barder, Francine Rossone de Paula, and Brent Steele tackle questions such as: what kind of critical work did *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* make possible — for us as a group of scholars, but also more generally?⁵ For whom (and to what end) did critical world order studies matter? What opportunities were missed during this moment of interdisciplinary work and where has that left Critical IR today?

Conversely, the essays by Caroline Alphin, Linea Cutter, and Şengül Yıldız-Alanbay show how although the battles that contextualized the publication of *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* have seemingly passed, the book's impact remains with us given increased attention to the power of neoliberal discourses over crucial facets of global politics and global governance.⁶ From peacekeeping and military interventions to the broader political economy and sociology of scholarly (re)production, critiques of neoliberalism explain much, but also leave more questions than answers about how we as scholars should position ourselves and our work. Their pieces consider the following: how do the arguments of *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* speak to contemporary interests and concerns in IR? What role does global ideology play in a post-9/11 world? Is or was there ever any political alternative to take? Put more simply, how have the book's aims matured? Following these essays, François Debrix's response reflects on the

1 François Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 23.

2 Ibid.

3 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

4 Ty Solomon, *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Catherine Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press); Elif Kalaycioglu, "Aesthetic Elisions: The Ruins of Palmyra and the 'Good Life' of Liberal Multiculturalism," in *International Political Sociology* 14(3) (2020): 286–303. For a broader history of these efforts, see also: Mauro J. Caraccioli, "Early (Modern) Empires: The Political Ideology of Conceptual Domination," in Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa Lopez, and Halvard Leira (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 419–431.

5 Alexander D. Barder. "The West and its Radical Others" *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 14–17.; Francine Rossone de Paula. "The (Dis)Order of Things and the Perception of History." *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 23–27. Brent Steele. "Racial Hierarchy, and Critical World Order Studies." *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 41–45.

6 Caroline Alphin. "Disciplinary Neoliberalism and the Simulation of Freedom." *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 18–22.; Linea Cutter. "Chasing Giants: Simulation and the United Nations' Trompe l'oeil Games." *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 28–34.; Şengül Yıldız-Alanbay. "The Politics of Virtual Security." *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 35–40.

questions raised by their provocations and issues a challenge to re-think the bases on which death and destruction continue to color our world.⁷ The Special Issue concludes with book reviews by Jessica Auchter and Susanne Swingel on new works that complement the broader project of Critical World Order Studies and go further.

Before turning to the essays, I want to frame our discussion by highlighting some of the continued challenges posed by disciplinary logics of scholarly production on Critical IR in a time of neoliberalism. Specifically, how does the continued tenacity of disciplinarity on the scholarly imagination remain a symptom of what Debrix describes as a “visual reconditioning of appearances,” best captured by his use of Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulation.⁸ As the underside of strategies of visual and textual representation, simulation, for Debrix, is “a strategy aimed at recuperating the real of representation in its absence...[simulation] eradicates the gap between reality and the imaginary by providing an alternate mode of experience that can look like the imaginary (what could only be thought but is suddenly materialized) and yet can be just as convincing and true-to-life as empirical reality.”⁹ At the dawn of the new millennium, a central locus of global simulation was the United Nations (UN), particularly as it moved to occupy the space left by the alleged demise of imperialism and an emergent New World Order. As Debrix notes, however, the UN quickly and evidently became a hollowed-out version of its original self and not accidently. Today that empty edifice – both literally and figuratively – has extended into the so-called Ivory Tower. Once (and perhaps still) the envy of the world, higher education in the United States (U.S.) convulses alongside other public sectors. Initially deployed as the ideological lance point of American imperial power abroad, universities today have become the internal target of financial austerity, corporate takeovers, and ultra-conservative/reactionary attacks on intellectuals and public science in general.¹⁰ No longer safe from the tribulations (if they ever were) of uneven development, white supremacy, and the experience of non-simultaneity generated by populist demagoguery, their status as bastions of liberal multiculturalism is today emblematic of an economic moralism that blinds them to the underside of American exceptionalism. The onslaught of a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic has only further revealed the precarity of these spaces and how inaccessible for most the clearinghouse function they play within U.S. society truly is.

Yet much like in the case of the United Nations, the university is “not simply an empty spot where self-referential plays of images take place.”¹¹ Quite the contrary: the university, the research institute, the whole landscape of public education that serves as a means of training imperial bureaucrats, technocrats, and critical fellow-travelers alike is the site where the simulation of the ideological battles of the culture wars are stand-ins for other more perverse modes of burnout, militarization, and dehumanization.¹² What kinds of critical scholarship emerge under such duress?

On the one hand, scholarly attention to racism, domination, extractivism, empire, diversity, justice, equity, and (dis)empowerment has perhaps known no greater heights. Indeed, new generations of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have no lack of exposure to the tools of critical theory, postcolonialism, and feminism, with neologisms and cognate programs in decolonial thought, diasporic studies, and transdisciplinary academies burgeoning before our very eyes. Within the university itself, the boom of certificates, workshops, and accompanying requirements for equity, diversity, and inclusion outcomes within curricular and professional development metrics is also a testament to the mobilization of social justice across disciplinary silos. The image, then, of the Western university is one of vibrant, transformative scholarship;

7 François Debrix. “Morituri Te Salutant,” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 46–51.

8 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 9.

9 *Ibid.*, 13.

10 See: Isaac Kamola, *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); see also: Emma Pettit, “‘Anti-American,’ Pushing ‘Marxism,’ and More: Do You Recognize Your College Here?,” in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 5, 2021. Online: <http://www.chronicle.com/article/anti-american-pushing-marxism-and-more-do-you-recognize-your-college-here>.

11 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 22.

12 See: Mauro J. Caraccioli and Aida A. Hozic, “Reflexivity at Disney-U: 11 Theses on Living in IR,” in Jack Amoureux and Brent J. Steele (eds.), *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, Practice, and Critique*, 142–159. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015; Alison Howell, “Forget ‘militarization’: race, disability and the ‘martial politics’ of the police and of the university,” in *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20(2) (2018): 117–136.

a wealth of philosophical insights at the cusp of social engagement. Yet more often than not, these well-meaning openings and invitations fail to meet the ‘bottom-line’ expectations of administrators, trustees, and legislators.¹³ The problem is not the initiatives themselves (despite what conservative critics will hold), but rather the assumption that such efforts are self-sustaining and will ‘pay’ for their own means and end goals. The same exuberance behind a more open university is accompanied by a decline in state funding, not just of university education more broadly, but of graduate programs in the humanities in particular.¹⁴ While Critical IR as a disposition was arguably never a favorite of the American Social Science of International Relations, the number of academic programs that even recall the aims it once represented is today even smaller.¹⁵

So what do we make of the innumerable number of works attending to these same goals, albeit in fields often outside global politics and political science? For one, we should not dismiss the production and dissemination of critical theory outside the self-contained study of ‘politics’ as wonton or marginal to global order and power; quite the contrary, there is still much for IR scholars to learn from work in Food Studies, Queer Studies, Africana Studies, and Colonial Studies (to name but a few), precisely about the logics of intellectual domination and dispossession. Just the same, traditional departments of Sociology, History, and English have finally turned their attention to the local repercussions of globalist ideologies like neoliberalism and its attendant disciplining measures. Yet as Debrix warned us in 1999: “Strategies of simulation are never innocent. They may never be completely self-referential either. Just as representation was a capable mode of production of political/ideological meaning, so is simulation.”¹⁶ Hence it is simply not enough to be critically minded anymore. Not only has it become fashionable to be critical in scholarly circles, critical theorizing too has become coopted by academic capitalism.¹⁷ Simulation today colors both the form and content of scholarly knowledge production, particularly as academic employment dwindles.

Why then does it matter to rethink the aims of critical world order studies in this rather dismal context? Should we really seek to revive a phase of IR scholarship that does not seem welcome in the Corporate University – especially if it never was? Frankly, the answer in my view is a resounding yes. For one, the space in which critical academic work takes place today, in spite of the many challenges listed above, remains vibrant and full of opportunities for intellectual and political disruption, if only we knew where to look. While the research university remains a contentious haven for young scholars to study and develop their insights, they are no longer the only sites of critical inquiry into the ills of our times. Indeed, many universities have been the first to sacrifice humanistic and critical inquiry during the present pandemic crisis, even as the hostility of the former Trump Administration subsided in light of COVID-19’s slow burn throughout the country’s derelict health infrastructure. Ironically, for some, it has been programs and institutes on the margins of the charmed circle of higher education that continue to recruit, support, and (albeit precariously) populate educational centers across forgotten corners of the U.S. landscape. On a related note, as the present global pandemic and subsequent political economic crises across the Global North have fully-revealed the precarity of multiple late-capitalist institutions and norms, more scholars and scholarship has turned to the work of demystifying and debunking the Ivory Tower’s many myths. From healthcare and care-work to service labor and commodity shipping, the late-capitalist logics of public dispossession, exploitation, and mental alienation have been dramatically accentuated across the globe, but especially so in the United States. More than generating instability, however, the long lack of

13 Geoff Shullenberger, “Social Justice, Austerity, and the Humanities Death Spiral,” in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 2, 2021. Online: <http://www.chronicle.com/article/social-justice-austerity-and-the-humanities-death-spiral>.

14 Lee Gardner, “The Great Contraction,” in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 2021. Online: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-great-contraction>.

15 See: Peter Marcus Kristensen, “Revisiting the ‘American Social Science’— Mapping the Geography of International Relations,” in *International Studies Perspectives* 16(3) (2015): 246–269; Ido Oren, “Schools of international affairs in the United States: A Historical Sketch,” in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2020). Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2020.1855630>.

16 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 22.

17 See: Len Gutkin, “‘If We Don’t Adapt, We Will Wither Away,’” in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 19, 2021. Online: <http://www.chronicle.com/article/if-we-dont-adapt-we-will-wither-away>. See also: Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

a concerted response to the onslaught of COVID-19 within the U.S. – indeed, the very political crisis of the last two decades of which the pandemic was the crown jewel – have fully exposed the power of representational and symbolic means of population control. Their failing power at that. The question at hand thus becomes not who we are as scholars or thinkers of world (dis) order, but rather who is it that we think we speak for?

At stake in this Special Issue are therefore the politics of disciplinary individualism in the study of global politics itself. More specifically, the following interventions aim to re-consider the ways that IR scholars can position themselves in relation to the intellectual and political transformations wrought by neoliberal ideology on the field, but also a field positioned within an unraveling world. As each contribution reveals, the critical study of representations, simulations, humanitarian discourses and operations, as well as the evolving ethical demands for international order in a landscape of great disorder form part of a broad effort to challenge the imposition of a reality that is allegedly already a given. Taken together, then, the interventions aim to evaluate the future uses (and need) of critical world order studies as a reflexive and normative project. Yet aiming beyond the analysis of global moralizing discourses, our contributors' overall goal is to examine the very processes that make Critical IR today possible and desirable.

To begin, Alexander Barder's essay, "The West and Its Radical Others," kicks off the discussion by focusing on the so-called 'end of history' moment that Debrix's book steps into. Describing what he sees as "the loss of an alterity to the West that comes out of the very possibility of violence,"¹⁸ Barder uses Debrix to make sense of the continued afterlives of Western violence on the rest, both virtually and ideologically. In her text, "Disciplinary Neoliberalism and the Simulation of Freedom," Caroline Alphin focuses on techniques of subjectivation and the simulation of individualism in contemporary neoliberal subject formation. Honing in on what she sees as "the ways in which neoliberal subjects do the work of neoliberalism,"¹⁹ Alphin uses Debrix's work as a lens through which simulation and neoliberal freedom function as co-productive discourses. Francine Rossone de Paula's intervention, "The (Dis)Order of Things and the Perception of History," highlights the various reinventions of historical reasoning that today "haunt us in its different forms and appearances...[offering] us an opportunity to challenge our linear perceptions of temporality."²⁰ By drawing on Debrix's analysis of the UN's ideological projection of peacekeeping rationalities, Rossone de Paula thinks with Debrix to further "[question] the grounds upon which we are able to make affirmations about continuities and discontinuities and about the course of history and visions of global order."²¹ In her piece, "Chasing Giants: Simulation and the United Nations' Trompe l'oeil Games," Linea Cutter interrogates the ideology of disciplinary liberalism as deployed globally via so-called humanitarian interventions. Simultaneously reading Debrix as a political theorist and political geographer, she finds in his analysis of peace and order operations a "play of appearances...not solely driven by the instrumental economic and political aims of any one country or group," but rather, "visual projections that are completely self-referential."²² In Şengül Yıldız-Alanbay's case, "The Politics of Virtual Security," she examines the effects of virtual security within contemporary analyses of local/global peacekeeping in International Relations scholarship. She finds in Debrix's expansion of the virtual a transgressive critique of "the ongoing divide/debate between positivist and post-positivist approaches to reality in IR and security studies."²³ Looking towards a world where ongoing violence poses no certain meaning, she concludes that the post-Cold War condition is one that "requires the subjects of international politics to govern themselves and to be autonomous but responsible actors in order to strengthen, sustain, and reproduce the conditions of disciplinary (neo)liberalism."²⁴ In his overview, Brent Steele's "Images, Racial Hierarchy, and Critical World Order Studies" surveys the origins of IR's methodological (and often racial) purism via an analysis of the Trump Administration's moralizing disorder. Drawing on Debrix's juxtaposition of images and order, Steele outlines a five-part roadmap for future

18 Barder, "The West and Its Radical Others," 15.

19 Alphin, "Disciplinary Neoliberalism and the Simulation of Freedom," 19.

20 Rossone de Paula, "The (Dis)Order of Things and the Perception of History," 24.

21 Ibid., 26.

22 Cutter, "Chasing Giants: Simulation and the United Nations' Trompe l'oeil Games," 32.

23 Yıldız-Alanbay, "The Politics of Virtual Security," 37.

24 Ibid., 38.

Critical World Order efforts to follow, not only as “a *struggle* against the oppressive structures of racial hierarchical ordering,” but also a part of the “festive hauntings...to cultivate an agency and strength previously determined by our cynical exhaustion and low expectations to be unthinkable.”²⁵ Lastly, François Debrix’s response, “Morituri Te Salutant,” reviews the salient provocations of the above essays and invites us into the literal and figurative ‘no man’s land’ of the parasitic, sacrificial, and fascistic state of contemporary global violence. His conclusion is not a happy one, but as he tells us, neither is the state of the world which gave rise to the illusions we harbor, a world where “ultimate sacrifice [ritualizes]...complete surrender.”²⁶

With all that said, the spirit of criticism necessary to face the inversion of contemporary academic politics and its limits in tackling the changing landscape of world (and increasingly planetary) politics nevertheless remains alive and well. As the Cover Art and Statement by Emma Gilfix remind us, the paradoxes we currently live through are part of larger cycles that have “brought the world together while necessitating distance and reclusiveness.”²⁷ The imperial tensions between order and disorder that gave rise to the UN opened spaces for internationalism at risk of being erased from learned circles within the former imperial core. IR isolates itself from the world as the field ignores its parochialist ethos. This is true not just of the West’s attitude towards the pandemic, but also towards climate change, surveillance, and migrant bodies. Indeed, a calamitous (post)modernity writ large. What seems still in need (and which the present issue seeks to reinject into public discourse) is the “healthy dose of uncertainty, instability and, more important, irreverence,” that such efforts demand.²⁸ *Amor fati*, perhaps, but one attentive to dystopian times.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the lead editors of SPECTRA, Sarah Plummer and Shaun Respass, for the opportunity to share our work here. I’m incredibly grateful to Linea Cutter and Şengül Yıldız-Alanbay, who as co-editors of the Special Issue displayed great insight, creativity, and camaraderie in the trying times of the COVID-19 pandemic and most recent crisis of American Empire. Additional thanks to Ty Solomon, Laura Zanotti, and Cara Daggett, who commented on the early directions of the issue and who continue to lend their support over the years. Our colleagues at ISA-NE – many whom attended the original roundtable in 2019 – were also a great source of motivation. And lastly, of course, many thanks to François Debrix for his friendship and exemplary scholarship.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Mauro J. Caraccioli  orcid.org/0000-0002-6583-6242
Virginia Tech, US

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25 Steele, “Images, Racial Hierarchy, and Critical World Order Studies,” 44.

26 Debrix, “Morituri Te Salutant,” 47.

27 Emma Gilfix. “It Starts with a Seed.” *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 2.

28 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 221.

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Submitted: 27 April 2021

Accepted: 27 April 2021

Published: 14 June 2021

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