

KEYNOTE LECTURE

RBJ Walker

University of Victoria

The International and the Critical Imagination

Historical and structural transformations are palpable, and Machiavelli's advice about preparing for the unexpected must be taken more seriously than ever. They shape demands for more imaginative visions of our collective future, and many disappointments when our most cherished understandings of what a better future must be like find little purchase among transformative conditions. Despite considerable bluster, neither our analytical concepts nor our normative ambitions are especially robust in the face of the many challenges that confront us. In this context I discuss why it has been so difficult to sustain a critical stance towards what has come to be called the theory of international relations, especially in relation to claims that we need to think and act beyond forms of politics embodied by the modern state and system of states. Contrary to almost all the literature seeking to be critical of this particular way of understanding the world, I will argue that the core problem with "the international" does not lie in its affirmation of the nationalistic "political realism" supposedly driving state behaviour, or even its role as a legitimating practice of some specific hegemonic states. On the contrary, it lies precisely in its affirmation of a specifically modern vision of free and equal self-determining subjects. If it is the case that historical and structural transformations are palpable and a more imaginative politics is called for, then it is the normative vision expressed by the international that must be challenged. This is a very tall order given that so many of our most "progressive" and "emancipatory" visions effectively aspire to much the same normative vision expressed by the international. I will work through this argument fairly schematically in order to underline what is at stake when we say that the international is increasingly inadequate to contemporary conditions (as I believe it is). I will also make a few concluding comments about what is at stake in various claims that modern forms of international politics affirmed by state and interstate law are being challenged by forms of neoliberal politics affirmed by capitalist markets. The common thread I hope to sustain throughout concerns the need to pay attention to boundaries, borders and limits.

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