

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #61

PINAR BILGIN ON NON-WESTERN IR, HYBRIDITY, AND THE ONE-TOOTHED MONSTER CALLED CIVILIZATION

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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PINAR BILGIN ON NON-WESTERN IR, HYBRIDITY, AND THE ONE-TOOTHED MONSTER CALLED CIVILIZATION



Questions of civilization underpin much of IR scholarship—whether explicitly (in terms of the construction of non-Western ‘others’) or implicitly (in the assumption that provincial institutions from Europe constitute a universal model of how we ought to relate to one another in international politics). While this topic surfaces frequently in debates about postcolonial international politics, few scholars are able to tackle this conundrum with the same sense of acuteness as Pinar

Bilgin. In this *Talk*, she—amongst others—elaborates on not doing Turkish IR, what postsecular IR comprises, and discusses her own position in regards to that one-toothed monster called civilization.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

What I think is the biggest challenge in current IR is not so much a debate, but the difficulty for students of IR to come up with ways of making sense of the world in a way that appreciates different experiences and sensibilities and others’ contributions and contestations. International Relations as we know it at the moment and as offered in the standard textbooks, portrays a world that they really don’t recognize as the world that they live in. And I should point out that I am not just speaking of Non-Western experiences and sensibilities—there is in any case a growing body of literature on Non-Western IR, and you have spoken to Amitav Acharya (Theory Talk #42), Siba Grovogui (Theory Talk #57) and others—but I am also referring to all those perspectives in which international knowledge are presented and which the textbooks do not usually reflect, including feminist perspectives for instance (such as Ann Tickner, Theory Talk #54), or perspectives from the Global South some of which actually fall into the definition of ‘the West’. So when I speak of ways of making sense of the world in a way that appreciates different experiences and sensibilities, I am referring to the agenda of Critical Theory of IR. I do think we have come a long way since the early 1990s when I was a student of IR and Critical Theory was beginning to make its mark then, but we still have a long way to go. For instance, critical approaches to security have come a long way in terms of considering insecurities of specific social groups that mainstream approaches overlook, but it has a long way to go still in

terms of actually incorporating insecurities as viewed by those people, instead of just explaining them away.

As for the principal debate in IR, the debate that goes on in my mind is how to study IR in a way that appreciates different experiences and sensibilities and acknowledges other contributions as well as contestations. This is not the principal debate in the field, but the field that comes closest is the one that I try and contribute to, and that is the field of non-Western approaches to IR. It is not exactly a debate, of course, in the sense that the very mainstream Western approaches that it targets are not paying any attention. So it's the critics themselves who have their disagreements, and on the one hand there are those who point to other ways of thinking about the international, Stephen Chan comes to mind as the producer of one of the early examples of that. I can think of Robbie Shilliam's more recent book on the subject, thinking about the international from non-Western perspectives. On the other hand are those who survey IR in different parts of the world, to see how it is done, what their concerns and debates are. Ole Wæver, Arlene Tickner and David Blaney's three-volume series 'Worlding Beyond the West' contains materials from both these directions.

My own approach is slightly different in that while acknowledging the limits of our approaches to IR as any critical IR person would, I don't necessarily think that turning to others' 'authentic' perspectives to look for different ways of thinking about the international is the way forward for students of IR. That brings me to back the way I set up the challenge to IR today: it is about incorporating others' perspectives, as well as acknowledging their contributions and contestations. I think I would like to take a more historical approach to this. It's not just about contemporary differences—studies on these are very valuable and I learn a lot from them—but what I've also found very valuable are connections: how much give and take has already taken place over the years, how for instance the roots of human rights can be found in multiple places in our history and in different parts of the world, how the Human Rights Convention was penned by multiple actors, how human rights norms don't go deep enough and how calls for deepening them have in fact emerged from different parts of the world, not just the West. So these contributions can actually point to our history and to different perspectives across the globe, but these are often referred to as non-Western IR, whereas they're actually pointing to our conversations, our communication, the give and take between us. That is what I am mainly interested in at the moment: the multiple authorship of ideas, and pointing to them you actually face the biggest challenge. It builds on Edward Said's legacy, so it's a critical IR project, the way I see it: Said built on multiple beginnings and engaged in contrapuntal reading. I should add that when I am talking about 'sensibilities', I am not necessarily talking about it with reference to other parts of the world, although it may seem this way. The more reflexive approaches to IR have taught us that we are all shaped by and all respond to our contexts—in one way or another.

One interesting result of Arlene Tickner's and Ole Wæver's book, *International Relations Scholarship around the World*, was that IR in different parts of the world is not in fact that different: it is still state-centric, it talks about security in the way that most mainstream textbooks would talk about it, and IR courses are structured in such a way that you would be able to recognize in most parts of the world. Such surveys, therefore, tell us that IR works quite similarly in other parts of the world. Hence the need to look for difference in alternative sources and the need to look beyond

IR—towards anthropology, sociology, linguistics, etc.—there is growing interest in conceptions of the international beyond what IR allows us. This is not confined to looking *beyond* the West, but is equally emerging in Western scholarship: there is now emerging literature on postsecularism and IR, and bringing religion back into the study of IR. However, I am not so much interested in studying differences (without underestimating the significance of such studies) but studying to our conversations, our communication, the give and take between us.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

My journey to this point has been through critical security studies. I studied international relations at Middle East Technical University in Ankara and did a Master's Degree Bilkent University in Ankara where I currently work. I was not entirely comfortable with IR as an undergraduate student, though I could not quite put my finger on the reason why—though I was able to make sense of during my later studies. At the undergraduate level, I received an interdisciplinary training, not so much by design but rather by accident: I picked courses on political theory, economic history and political anthropology, simply because our curriculum allowed such a design. I was lucky to have interesting people teaching interesting courses. And again by sheer coincidence we had a visiting professor who introduced me to philosophy of science and the work of Thomas Kuhn and I began to question the standard IR training I had been receiving. So then I went on to an MA degree at Bilkent University which became consequential for me in two ways: for one, that University has the best IR library in Turkey, so there are no limits to what you can learn even when you are left to your own devices, and secondly, Hollis and Smith's *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (1991) was on our reading list. So when I began reading that against the background of Thomas Kuhn, I began to make sense of IR in a very different way. Mind you, I was still not able to see my future in IR at that time.

Then I began writing my MA dissertation and was also working at Turkey's then very powerful semi-military institution the MGK, the National Security Council, at the General Secretariat: I was hired as a junior researcher and lasted for about four-and-a-half months, and then I went abroad for further studies, but those months were what set me on my path to Critical Security Studies. Working there, I began to appreciate the need for reflexivity, and the difficult role of the researcher, and the relationship between theory and practice. At that point I received a Chevening scholarship from the British Council, and the condition attached was that I could not use it towards PhD studies but had to use it for a one-year degree. I decided to study something that I could not study at home, and came across Ken Booth's work and knew of course Barry Buzan's oeuvre (Theory Talk #35), and found that Aberystwyth University offered a one-year degree in Strategic Studies, which is what I decided to do. That happened to be the first year they offered an Master's degree in Critical Security Studies, and I became one of the first five students to take that course, taught jointly by Ken Booth, Richard Wyn Jones and Nicholas Wheeler. Together with Steve Smith, who was Head of Department at the time, they were committed to giving us an excellent education, so it was a great place to be and I stayed on to do my PhD there as well. It's a small Welsh town with only 13,000 people and the University has about the same number of students. During that time I read important examples of critical IR scholarship, as well as the newly emerging literature on Security Studies, and it was around that time that Michael

Williams joined the Department (*Theory Talk* #39) and he was a great influence on my work, as was of course my dissertation advisor Ken Booth: I learned a lot from him in terms of substance and style.

After receiving my PhD in the year 2000 I joined the IR department at Bilkent University as the only critical theorist there. Bilkent was at the time one of the few universities in Turkey committed to excellence in research—now there are more—and that allowed me the academic freedom to pursue my research interests in Critical Security Studies: I was able to focus on my work without having to spread out into other fields. It helped that I became part of research networks as well: I've already mentioned Arlene Tickner's and Ole Waever's work, their project on geocultural epistemologies in IR and 'Worlding beyond the West'. Ole Waever invited me to join, thus opening up my second research agenda since my PhD, enriched by workshops and conversations with scholars in the group. It is not far removed from my core work, but it is an added dimension. And this helped me over time to overcome my earlier doubts about IR, for I began to see just how multidisciplinary it was. It was only through Critical IR that I learned how parallel perspectives in other disciplines, and alternative ideas could be brought to bear on IR—something you also find nowadays in international political sociology or different aspects of anthropology in constructivism.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

In terms of skills, I think that studying at different institutions if possible, different settings with different academic traditions helps a lot. Institutions vary widely in their emphasis—Bilkent for instance believes that the best teachers are those who do cutting-edge research. Others may disagree and say that small teaching colleges are the best, because they pass on what they specialise in. I think therefore that studying at different institutions is very good for students, whether it be within formal exchange frameworks or acquiring fellowships for study away, not to mention of course fieldwork, which offers new settings: every new environment is an important learning experience, even if the substance is not so useful and what you learn is not necessarily so significant. Secondly, some would suggest learning a different language is important, along with acquiring a foothold in area studies and comparative studies, and I agree with that. Thirdly, Stefano Guzzini talks about IR theory being what a student needs in terms of disposition and skills: he has this piece in the *Journal of International Relations and Development* (2001), where he makes the case specifically for would-be diplomats in Central and Eastern European countries that by learning theory, students would be equipped to communicate across cultural boundaries—it's like learning a new language. They would learn to watch out against ethnocentrism, he argues, and this is one of the pieces I use when I teach IR theory. In this spirit, I think it important to use theory as a new language, as one of the tools that every student should have in their toolkit. And finally, I think I'd follow Cynthia Enloe's recommendation that it's useful to have a foot both in IR theory and in comparative studies (*Theory Talk* #38). I feel that one without the other is less rewarding, though one will not know what one is missing until one goes to explore.

In my PhD work I focused on the Middle East, since then I have looked more in depth at Europe's relationship with the Euro-Mediterranean relations and Turkey-EU relations as empirical points of reference. This has been enriching and has benefited my research. In sum, it is essential to read as broadly as possible, and I give the same advice to my M.A. and to my PhD students. You can't read everything, and it can happen that the more we read the more confused we get, but in this *Theory Talks* is doing a great job by allowing students to learn from the experience of others. Learning happens also at conferences: you may find subjects that are of no interest to you, but that is helpful also, and on the other hand new subjects will broaden horizons. The wealth of cultural references in each part of the world can be baffling and may make it difficult to delve deep. The only way we make sense of the unknown through what we know.

What regional or perhaps even global protagonism can you envisage for IR studies emerging from Turkey? Turkey is often perceived to bridge Europe and the Middle East, Europe and Asia, but we have the problem that Asia itself is a Western idea, then a 'bridge' is in danger of belonging to neither.

As I made clear in what I said above, I don't think of IR in terms of contributions emerging from this part of the world or that part of the world. And although I grew up in Turkey and began my academic career there, I don't consider my own work to be in any way a "Turkish perspective" on IR. What can be said to be Turkish about my perspective is that I have to travel to Aberystwyth and Copenhagen and all those ISA conference locations to discover that I can have (and some say I should) have a Turkish perspective. My undergraduate education was about learning IR as a 'universally undisputed'. I now know the limitations of that universalism, but I cannot offer a specifically located perspective, for it is a complicated picture that emerges in front of us. I am not in favour of replacing one parochialism with another one, in terms of those who speak of X School of IR versus Y School of IR.

Having said that, I consider that my contribution as being comfortable with what Orhan Pamuk has called the 'in-between world', though I prefer to use the term 'hybridity', not in-between-ness. That Turkish policy-makers have always claimed a bridge status for their country, but these ideas are rooted in Turkey's hybridity and *belonging* to multiple worlds (as opposed to being in between multiple worlds). Policy-makers can talk about being a bridge between Europe and Asia, or Europe and the Middle East, because Turkey in fact belongs to all these worlds. So in some ways being at ease with this hybridity does allow me to have a particular perspective in IR that I may not have had if I had come from a different background. But then again, it's difficult to know. I have taken courses in political anthropology, learning about the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey as an imagined community, but all my introductions to geocultural studies and epistemology came from Critical IR settings, so looking for geographically or culturally specific roots simply doesn't work. As Said put it, it is 'beginnings' that we should be looking for, not 'origins.'

When Europeans and North Americans speak of ‘state building’ and ‘development’, Turkey is often taken as a model example of conversion to Western models—largely by its own choice. Should Turkey’s path and modern reality be understood differently?

I am not comfortable with the word ‘model’, but ‘example’ may be a preferable term. So what is Turkey an example of? That has become a particular research question for me and I have written on this—Turkey’s choice to locate itself in the West and what that means. Turkey is interesting for having *decided* to locate itself in the West, and this is where language and culture come in the picture. More often than not, the literature tends to assume that elites in places like Turkey would make the decision to adopt the ‘Western model’, and the rationale for adopting that model is not questioned, but instead taken to be ‘obvious’ from development theory and its teleological outlook: ‘it just happened’. It is those that do *not* adopt the dominant model, those that decide against Westernization, that need explaining. Perhaps I would not have asked myself that question, had I not—and here my biography comes into the picture—been puzzled by references to ‘civilization’ in Turkish texts. If you look into Turkish literature or historical documents you will find references to ‘civilization’ everywhere—the national anthem refers to civilization as a ‘one-toothed monster called civilization’. As a young student, I just couldn’t make sense of this and wondered why is everyone talking about civilization and why is it a good and a difficult thing at the same time?

I began to make sense of this as I was researching Turkey’s choices about secularism in the late 19th and early 20th century, and was looking at some of those documents once again, but this time with insights provided by postcolonial IR. The language commonly used was ‘joining’ the West, and secularisation was a part of the package, but it was not necessarily a question of mere emulation but search for security, being a part of the ‘international society’. These were not easy decisions, so here I look at Turkey’s choice to locate itself in the West within the security context. There was a notion of a ‘standard of civilization’ in Europe and the West more broadly which others were expected to ‘live up to’, and this gives you some sense of the ubiquity of the references to civilization in the discourses of Turkish policy makers at the time. I am not suggesting that this is the whole answer, and I do not reject distinct answers, but I do think it helps understand Turkey’s decision to locate itself in the West in the early 20th century. So this is where my security aspects of my work and Critical IR together. My starting point is to identify the ubiquity of one notion and then locate that within critical IR theory. Turkey becomes an example of postcolonial insecurities. Though never having been colonized it nonetheless exhibits those ‘postcolonial anxieties’ in Sankaran Krishna’s words.

I am keenly aware of the reality that even when we as academics are doing our most theoretical and abstract work, we are never removed from the roles of the ‘real world’, for we are teachers at the same time: by the time we put our ideas to paper we have already disseminated them through our teaching. Some of us are more committed to teaching than others, of course, but some critical theorists see the most important part of their job as being good educators and training the new generation, as opposed to being more public intellectuals and writing op-ed pieces and talking to bigger audiences. We are therefore never far removed from the world of practice and from disseminating our ideas about security and international relations, because we are teachers,

and some of our students will go on to work in the real world institutions, like government or the media.

Beyond that, there is a growing vitality in the literature on the privatisation of security: on private armies and how security is being privatised and fielded out to professionals. The new literature that is emerging on this is more and more interesting, I am thinking for instance of Anna Leander's work here: she talks about privatization of security not only in terms of the involvement of private professionals going off to do what government or other actors tell them to do, but also in terms of the setting up of security agendas and shaping security, determining what threats are, and determining what risks are and quite literally how we should be leading our lives. In this sense theory and critical security studies have become very real for all of us, because no one group of people owns the definitions.

Currently I am working on a manuscript that brings together two of my research interests, conceptions of the international beyond the West and Critical Security Studies. I use the case of Turkey for purposes of illustration but also for insight. I am trying to think of ways of studying security that are attentive to the periphery's conceptions of the international as a source of (non-material) insecurity.

Pınar Bilgin is the author of *Regional Security in the Middle East: a Critical Perspective* (Routledge, 2005) and over 50 papers. She is an Associate Member of the Turkish Academy of Sciences. She received the Young Scientists Incentive Award of the Scientific and Technical Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) in 2009 and 'Young Scientist' (GEBİP) award of Turkish Academy of Sciences (TÜBA, 2008). She served as the President of Central and East European International Studies Association (CEEISA), and chair of International Political Sociology Section of ISA. She is a Member of the Steering Committee of Standing Group on International Relations (SGIR) and an Associate Editor of International Political Sociology.

Related links

- [Faculty Profile](#) at Bilkent University
- Read Bilgin's *Thinking Past 'Western' IR?* (2008) here ([pdf](#))
- Read Bilgin's *The Security of Secularism? The Case of Turkey* (2008) here ([pdf](#))
- Read Bilgin's *Whose 'Middle East'? Geopolitical Inventions and Practices of Security* (2004) here ([pdf](#))
- Read Bilgin's and A.D. Morton's *Historicising representations of 'Failed States': beyond the cold-war annexation of the social sciences?* (2002) here ([pdf](#))