



## Tara McCormack

*Critique, Security and Power: The political limits to emancipatory approaches*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2009, 166 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-48540-1, £75 hb.)

Security conceptualization and comprehension in International Relations has tremendously changed with the demise of the Cold War. In the new era, state-centric understanding of the policy-making has been replaced mainly by the critical perspectives. Whilst the critical security theorists are championing the more human focused understanding of (international) security, they are criticized for highlighting just a small part of the picture (power relations) and ignoring the political rest (the use of force). McCormack's work of *Critique, Security and Power: The political limits to emancipatory approaches* should be regarded as one of those which raises challenging scientific critiques to and unearth theoretical and political lacks of the post-Cold War critical security theory.

In spite of the fact that traditional security perspective has been replaced by a more civic one, the *specters* (signs) of the Cold War security understanding<sup>1</sup> are still dominating contemporary security policies. In terms of the *specters*, McCormack initially uses the Yugoslav case to show how the Cold War security commitments have been maintained by international community; and how the critical and emancipatory approaches of the post-Cold War have failed to challenge the power imbalances and the use of power by dominant states (chapters 4-5-6). To do her analysis McCormack designates a critical and an emancipatory front consisting of a collection of academics including Andrew Linklater, Mary Kaldor, R.J.B. Walker, Robert Cox, Richard Ashley, Richard Wynn Jones, Ken Booth, David Campbell, Michael Dillon, J. Ann Tickner etc.<sup>2</sup> Conceding the fact that these academics clearly stand on the critical side of the political and theoretical analysis, McCormack believes that "critical security theorists do not seem to be very critical" to the post-Cold War security framework (p.133). In fact, the main motivation of the book lies in an attempt to prove this statement as the following endeavours to show.

### a. Theoretical limits

McCormack's theoretical evaluation begins with the *critical* analysis of Robert Cox, whose studies are regarded as the pioneering pieces for critical and emancipatory theory. McCormack explicitly denounces Cox's emphasis upon normative notion and moral dimension of critical theory. According to McCormack, predominantly the latter but also the former perspectives have given rise to some disputes on whether the neutrality of a theorist is possible or not. In fact, there is to some extent an authenticity in McCormack's critiques since Cox's well-known statement 'theory is always for

- 1 The main premises of the Cold War (traditional and/or Westphalian) security understanding are those: self-defence, non-intervention, state immunity, equal state sovereignty, state as the primary actor, and national interest (McCormack, p.22). For a comprehensive analysis of the traditional security studies see. Buzan, Barry (1991) *People, States and Fear: An Agenda For International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd Edition. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- 2 For the shared elements of critical and emancipatory theorists see McCormack, pp. 2-18. Whilst locating critical internationalist theorists with liberals under the umbrella of critical and emancipatory theorists McCormack argues that critical theory in general needs to be put apart from liberal interventionist positioning the implications of which favouring the powerful states against fragile structured ones (Ibid, p.17).



someone and for some purpose' implies that, because they are 'socially situated', theorists can never be neutral/objective (p. 49).

Carrying on the dispute of neutrality, McCormack observes a clear methodological distance between positivism and critical theory (p. 52). As positivism features 'value-free and independent knowledge', McCormack notices that critical theorists are dismissing the positivist notion by assuming values and facts are overlapped. Hence objectivity of a theorist is almost impossible.<sup>3</sup> McCormack argues that, as quoted from Wynn<sup>4</sup>, critical theorists designate emancipation as their basic value and they are pursuing it with adhering to their good-will. By doing so a moral dimension appears in the critical theory the implications of which depict an embedded but *unrealised idealism*. In this scope, albeit critical theorists complain about the *spectres* of Cold War in contemporary security policies, their *unrealised idealism* prevents critical theorists from tackling with so-called spectres in political sphere (I will touch on this below). It was the reason why *unrealised idealism*<sup>5</sup> has risen by McCormack as the basic limiting factor of critical and emancipatory approaches. To transcend this limit McCormack highlights the vitality of recognizing the separateness of values and facts. This is meant to be an offer of methodological adjustment in favour of positivism as she argues, 'values cannot be a methodology for critical engagement with social reality' (p. 60).

In terms of the methodological critique, I would argue that McCormack is ignoring the postmodernism (basically the relativity arguments) and its role in critical theorising. Additionally, she is expecting compatibility between post-modern inspired approaches of critical theory and truly modern conceptualisation of positivism.

### **b. Political limits**

From her point of view, critical theorists are reluctant to explore the *modus operandi*<sup>6</sup> of contemporary international security framework. This is due to the (above mentioned) *unrealised idealism* that lacks critical theorists' analyses in political content. Critical theorists are consistent in exploring the *power inequalities*, whereas they show a clear inadequacy in investigating the *modus operandi* of power practices in the post-Cold War era because of the absence of a political agency.

Therefore, in practice, this reflects that the critical and emancipatory approaches are *unconsciously* favouring the post-Cold War security policies of international community; they are primarily championing the interventionist policies. Hence they do not 'challenge to the status quo' (p. 134) but securing the theoretical path for more power inequalities. This is a kind of dilemma: while fighting against power inequalities,

3 One of the leading critical security theorists Ken Booth regards the scientific objectivism (positivist premise) as one of the three tyrannies which are constraining the individuals' lives. He put forward the emancipation thesis for freeing the individuals. See Booth, Ken (1999) "Three Tyrannies" in Dunne, Tim and Wheeler, Nicholas J. (eds.) *Human Rights in Global Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 31-70.

4 The value/fact overlapping can clearly be seen in the following quotation from Wynn Jones: "if all theory is for someone and for some purpose, the critical security theory is for voiceless, the unrepresented, the powerless and its purpose is their emancipation." Cited by McCormack (p. 57) from Wynn Jones, Richard (1999) *Critical Theory, Security and Strategy*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, p. 159.

5 The idealism emerges because critical theorists reject positivism, admit their own values, and refuse the value/fact dichotomy.

6 A Latin word means; method of operation or manner of action.



they are also adopting the presumptions of post-Cold War security order.<sup>7</sup> To resolve this dilemma and to challenge the status quo critical and emancipatory theorists, as McCormack argue that they should give up normative and idealistic depoliticising but adopt a political content to *emancipation* arguments.

Throughout her book, McCormack evidently shows theoretical and political limits of the critical approaches and endeavours to find the way to transcend those limits. However, it is not clear that when critical and emancipatory theorists methodologically employ positivism will their emancipationist arguments become more political or will it lead to a formation of a political agency?

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7 Presumptions of the post-Cold War security order are assumed by McCormack as the basic source of inequality.