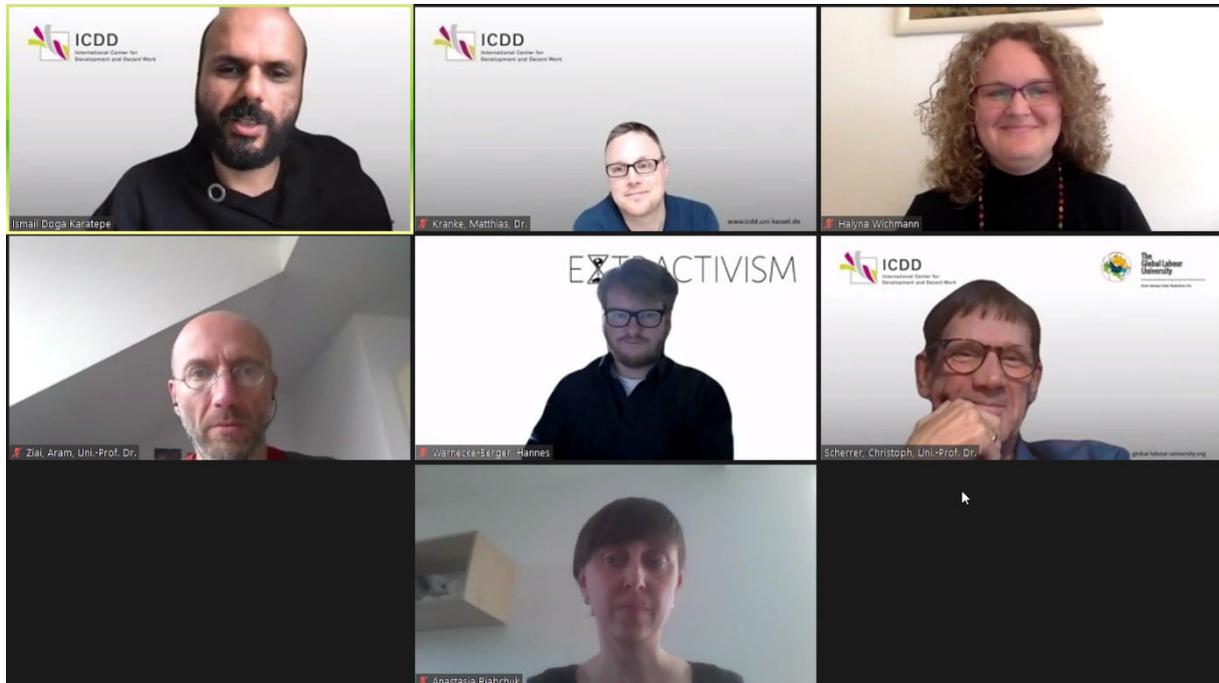


ICDD Public Talk:

War in Ukraine - Impact on People - Impact on Theory



14 April 2022 – The ICDD organised the Public Talk “War in Ukraine - Impact on People - Impact on Theory”. The event addressed the two main questions: “What is the impact on People?” and “Do we need to revise our theories of international relations/ international political economy?” Accounts of the current humanitarian crisis were provided alongside consideration related to potential revisions of mainstream theoretical approaches.

Humanitarian Accounts: Victims and Heroes of the War

Anastasia Ryabchuk, Associate Professor in Sociology at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, who currently is a refugee in Paris, opened by remarking that the Ukrainian War is a “dramatic humanitarian situation” and that it has been ongoing since 2014 but was until 2022 more limited to regions of Donetsk and Lugansk. “I do not understand why we call this “War in Ukraine” or “Ukrainian War”. This suggests that the conflict is between Ukrainian people and that is not the case. The agent of this humanitarian disaster must be named: This is a Russian War in Ukraine, a Russian invasion”.

Ryabchuk then focused on detailing who the most vulnerable groups affected by the conflict are, stating that more than 3 million people have crossed the border of the EU, while 6.5 million have been internally displaced and around 50% of families remain separated. The majority of them are women and children and elderly people, while many civilians still continue to be trapped in occupied territory and regions in which there is fighting, and to make the situation worse, they lack essential resource such as food, medicine, and drinking water.

She highlighted the heroes of this conflict as well- frontline workers, journalists, volunteers, and transportation workers, particularly those in the railway sector. She observed that the society “has mobilized from the bottom up, showing that there is a vibrant civil sector in Ukraine”. The level of trust in state institutions is rising and “the role of state is important and should not be

underestimated. The situation is much worse in areas where the state is weak “, Ryabchuk concluded.

Refuge Crisis and Response of EU/Germany

Halyna Wichmann, an ICDD PhD Alumna that is currently working at the Federal Employment Agency of Germany to support Ukrainian refugees, emphasised that the number of refugees is even higher than reported by the media, estimating it at 4.6 million people. She described the demographic profile of those seeking refuge in Germany: “Most of the refugees are women coming with their children. There are also kids who come alone or with other families”. The majority of refugees prefer big cities, where they may be able to find a job later and many live in asylum-type collective accommodation. Wichmann outlined their most essential needs, which include financial, psychological, medical, and administrative aid, as well as transport, translation, and accommodation.

Furthermore, she explained how the EU is legally treating refugees. The European Council recognised the mass influx of displaced people and “activated Temporary Protection Directive, which was translated to national legislations”. This change indicates that in countries like Germany, the legal treatment differs from the situation in 2015, when the refugees were recognised as asylum seekers. As a result, they now have right to employment and access to social benefits and healthcare and can apply for language courses. The biggest challenge in Germany, however “is to accommodate children into the school system. Schools have to organize teachers and in bigger cities they even invite Ukrainian teachers to teach. “

Wichmann concluded that it is necessary to revise international relations theories due to lack of research on Eastern Europe and Ukraine in particular, and the fact that if and when the country is analysed, this is done from a Russian-centered standpoint. “Ukraine is not viewed as a subject, but object of history and international relations”, and what is lacking is the analysis of the post-colonial dimension of the post-Soviet sphere, she added.

The Social and Ecological Catastrophe

Matthias Kranke stressed the necessity for revising mainstream theories, not just because of the Russian war in Ukraine, but also multiplying social and ecological catastrophes that humanity faces right now. He argued that the theoretical debates and practical accounts of what is happening on the ground should go hand in hand.

Kranke also asserted that political realism explains just one part of the story, failing to explain “how the enemy is constructed and how Putin in particular has portrayed Ukrainian politicians, because to enable war you first have to construct a threat that is immediate for your polity”.

He pointed out to one of the overlooked aspects of the conflict in theoretical debates, which is the ecological disaster, the destruction of an already stressed ecosystem. “Homicide and ecocide in Ukraine are intertwined. We have to think what the long-term effects of this sustained human suffering and ecosystem damage, even when the war is over, as we see some cities like Mariupol being erased.”

In addition, the destruction of agricultural infrastructure creates hunger in the country and elsewhere, especially in countries that are dependent on imports such as wheat. Lastly, one should also not overlook negative energy sector implications of the conflict. Germany decided to address energy security issues, possibly going for a stronger shift toward renewables, or return to nuclear or fracking and other problematic sources of energy. This could fuel global warming, warned Kranke.

Lockean Heartland and Contender States; NATO and Russia

Christoph Scherrer investigated the role of the Kees van der Pijl’s Lockean Heartland Theory and the concept of Hobbesian Contender States. He underlined that heartland involves advanced capitalist

societies, but that “they are not necessarily peace-loving countries. Otherwise, they would not be so strong”. In fact, they have established hegemony over large parts of the globe and as dominant forces, they can be more liberal internally than externally. The other group, Hobbesian contender states, are those who want to catch up to the first group economically, militarily, and technologically. “They cannot do so without collective action and strong state, and they tend to be authoritarian and follow more of a territorial logic”.

If they are successful in this pursuit, it gives rise to a military-industrial complex under authoritarian rule, which externalises societal conflicts. If we apply that to Russia, Scherrer said, it is clear that after USSR disintegration, Putin has aimed to build a powerful state that would reclaim its status as a world power. The base of their power currently is to a large extent extractivism, and Russia as a contender state, continues to attempt to extend its territory, which drives conflict.

“Every more liberal state nearby is seen as a threat by Russia. If any big neighbour like Ukraine turns to liberal capitalist democracy, this is seen as a major threat, much more so than NATO, because from a strategic standpoint, intercontinental missiles don’t need buffer states. Why does a country with the biggest land mass and nuclear arsenal in the world need buffer states?” concluded Scherrer.

Relinking Political and Economic Theory

Hannes Warnecke-Berger stated that the war on Ukraine is the “current end of the structural shift in the world system and economy”. Since the Financial Crisis of 2008, there have been different conflicts and crises such as the war in Syria. “Core capitalist states turn out to be too weak to guarantee peace and stability to the entire system”, and this is quite similar to the situation in 1914, at the eve of the First World War.

Warnecke-Berger remarked that the key question is how the economic system interacts with the political one, and what position countries occupy in the global division of labour. According to him, there are five groups of countries: core capitalist countries, catching-up countries looking to escape middle-income trap (China and India), raw material export countries, labour-exporting countries, and those who are stuck in between these categories. “I think we never tackled this international division of labour and that is the problem”, he noticed.

The two prevailing theoretical approaches, European constructivism and some branches of institutionalism, prove to be ill-equipped to explain the crisis tendencies within the world system and also to relate economic and political systems, including the division of power within them. In Germany, the elite realised that coexistence within the system is possible but predicated on the balance of power between nuclear states. “It is important to also realise that this balance is dependent of economic power and how states are able to change their position in the world economy”, said Warnecke-Berger. Finally, he highlighted that one other crucial point of future theory development is tied to the ability of the system to guarantee peace and stability on the international level, as well as to boost the capacity for domestic social forces to change the society. Over these two points, both constructivism and institutionalism went bankrupt, he concluded.

Critical and Post-Colonial Perspectives

Aram Ziai affirmed that there are multiple ways to respond to the crisis and that Germany has responded by massively building up military resources, which is worrisome. To the question of whether we should change theoretical approaches, he responded with “if we are talking about critical theories that we teach here at the University of Kassel, I do not see why we should”. On the other hand, a significant part of the peace movement has turned a blind eye to what Russia has been doing, he cautioned, as they “remain stuck in anti-American and anti-imperial outlooks, failing to see there are other forms of imperialism”.

In the context of the post-colonial theory, he observed that “there have been scholars using post-colonial perspective on Eastern Europe and Soviet Union, but they have been rarely in the centre of attention and were largely marginalised”. It is worth noting that Soviet imperialism differs significantly from what European colonisers have done to other states, including slave trade, racism, and genocide.

“The danger I see now is return of realism and power politics. I would not subscribe to the idea that other approaches are somewhat bankrupt because war in Ukraine proves the validity of realpolitik.” The main reason he specified is that according to realpolitik, war and conflict are inevitable between states. But, from a critical standpoint, this is only how particular states act in some situations, depending on power relations, and construction of identity, as well as perceptions of external and internal threats. This is why realist perspective “does not apply to all states. Conflict is not inevitable, and we need to point to alternatives, and that is being lost at the moment.”

Critical theories are vital because they examine class interest and intersectionalities, and not national interest, rejecting hegemonism as a primary focal point. “And if we break this black box of the state, we find not only different classes, but also genders...and the rise of nationalism and militarism has gone hand in hand with the rise of domestic violence.” Inequalities are to be found within these states and these inequalities determine the level of exclusion one experiences, concluded Ziai.

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