

Societally engaged, critical international business research: a programmatic view on the role and contribution of *cpoib*

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Introduction

In 2020 *critical perspectives on international business (cpoib)* will be marking its 15th birthday. The journal was launched in 2005 and joined the group of international business (IB) journals, many of which have a far longer history – *Thunderbird International Business Review* (launched in 1959), *Management International Review* (1960), *Journal of World Business* (1965, at that time called the *Columbia Journal of World Business*), *Journal of International Business Studies* (1970), *International Studies of Management and Organization* (1971), *International Business Review* (1992) and *Journal of International Management* (1995). Since its launch, *cpoib* has handled submissions by authors from more than 70 countries and has published 290 articles. In 2010, five years after inception, *cpoib* received Emerald's best new journal award.

More important than numbers (and rankings[1]), the journal became home for research devoted to phenomena of utmost importance not only to scholars but also other stakeholders. Issues that were discussed include ignorant and impatient globalization, globalization's structural violence, global (financial) crises, global value chains, tax havens and corruption. The Journal also posed and answered research questions related to culture, language, communication and translation. It problematized topics such as cross-border talent management, gender and diversity, as well as power and politics in the multinational, expatriation, corporate social responsibility, IB in authoritarian regimes, the downsides of digital platform internationalization and many more. The geographical coverage was equally varied – *cpoib* has published critical perspectives on IB in Africa, Brazil, Russia and other relatively underexplored regions and countries. Some contributions examined in great detail specific industries, be that education, retail, fast fashion, minerals or banking, providing a critical view on how they operate and the consequences of those operations. Other articles told critical IB stories anchored in single companies such as Starbucks, Toyota, a world-class university and non-governmental organizations. The contributions borrowed and brought into the IB space insights from disciplines such as sociology, economic geography, linguistics, management, development studies, economics, finance and several others. The published articles used different theories (postcolonialism, institutional theory, stakeholder theories and many others) and varied between being viewpoints, conceptual pieces and empirical studies. The ambition behind all was to be critical, reflective and challenge orthodoxy in the IB field and, where appropriate, question widely held assumptions and counter existing prevalent or dominant imperatives. This is not easy to achieve and it is likely that the outcome of such ambitions is often not easy to accept either. But it is needed.

A more systematic account of the contributions in *cpoib* (see Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard in this issue) reveals that they so far are clustered around five themes. Given the novelty of an IB approach with a politically critical mission, a substantial number of early *cpoib* articles aimed at positioning critical IB research within the overall IB discipline. A second cluster of papers took an explicit postcolonial lens when studying IB matters, giving full credit to the situated realities of those in the periphery of the global south. A third group of contributions was explicitly concerned with the effects IB



activities have at various levels, ranging from countries to particularly vulnerable stakeholder groups, to individuals carrying IB activities, such as expatriates. The two last clusters of papers were on financialization and the global financial crisis, as well as on “Black IB” (i.e. morally or legally dubious IB activity) and corporate social responsibility.

Even though the papers published in *cpoib* in the past 15 years addressed a number of issues that have been largely omitted in mainstream IB research and its outlets, we are far from convinced that the agenda for critical IB is running out of steam. On the contrary, a lot is going on and there remains much to be done. This is evinced by a number of themes already broached in articles published in *cpoib*, and in themes relatively new to the Journal, of which six are included in this Programmatic Issue. Hence, this issue is much needed and we will try to substantiate and further justify that claim in this introduction. While this surely helps readers and potential future authors to understand what critical IB means, in the next section we explicitly elaborate on critical IB research by commenting on criticality as such and explaining what contributions is *cpoib* after.

On critical international business research (again)

Very briefly: on criticality. Let us start with a few remarks related to the very notion of criticality. “Critical” is used and often over-used in various contexts and it has become part of our everyday language. While this is not necessarily problematic, this usage may contribute to the deflation of the true meaning of the term. Jump on your university’s website and see how long it takes to find “critical”, most probably as an adjective associated with “thinking”, “pedagogy” or “citizens” when the university describes what it strives towards. If the term does not immediately appear there, have a look at the links to the MBA, DBA and/or the PhD programs’ descriptions – you will certainly find it there.

There is no way we can do justice to the very rich history of the notion of criticality in just a few short paragraphs. As [Michailova and Wright \(2015\)](#) have observed, initial efforts to unpack criticality often appear daunting. It is worth remembering, however, that it is more than 2,500 years since Socrates induced the spirit of reflective questioning as a discussion style in purposeful conversations ([Cookson, 2009](#)). And that was not even the beginning. The pre-Socratic philosophers from the ancient Greek city of Miletus, the Milesians, under the leadership of Thales, are reputed to be the pioneers of “critical method” ([O’Grady, 2004](#)), a method characterized by continual questioning, criticism and debate. It is a style that goes beyond mere disagreement with others’ views.

It needs to be acknowledged that “critical” as an adjective (and its derivatives and associated terms), such as many other notions and terms, differs across geographical and cultural contexts. A brief look at how two dictionaries on the two sides of the Atlantic define “critical” is more than telling ([Michailova and Wright, 2015](#)): while the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (2002) emphasizes the acts of judging/making a judgment, the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary opts for “disapproval”, “fault-finding” and “problem-finding”. Along very similar lines [Mintzberg \(2004\)](#) observes, when referring to the Random House Dictionary, that “critical” has two meanings: “inclined to find fault” and the “act of judging the quality”. He notes that while many academics are certainly inclined to find fault, this only extends beyond negativism “when it is combined with the art of judging quality: to see beneath, above and beyond the obvious, to the deeper and higher meaning of important things” ([Mintzberg, 2004](#), p. 270). It is not the negativism that *cpoib* is after, it is seeing

beneath, above and beyond the obvious, to the deeper and higher meaning of IB phenomena. We elaborate on this next.

What does critical perspectives on international business want (to publish)?

As co-editors-in-chief, we screen and discuss all submissions to *cpoib* before we assign them to one of our associate editors or ourselves to handle the review process. We find it frustrating to desk-reject so many submitted manuscripts for one simple reason: authors do not further the mission of the Journal. Writing desk-rejection letters is a tedious when we have to explain time and time again that the submission is either: not positioned in, and does not contribute to advancing knowledge in, the IB discipline; or it does not offer any critical angle/perspective on the IB phenomenon under investigation. These are two relatively simple criteria for us to decide whether the submission should receive further consideration to be published in *cpoib*. They are well articulated on the Journal's website and reading them prior to submitting (or rather prior to deciding at all to target *cpoib*) is not difficult; it is a must.

You might wonder why we put forward the first criterion. The answer is: because some of the submissions we receive are from General Management, Organizational Behavior, Finance, Economics, Law, Geography, Political Science and other (sub)fields and (sub)disciplines, with no (or only a nominal) link made to IB as an academic discipline. To be clear: we warmly welcome papers anchored in disciplines outside IB – after all, the IB field prizes itself for being multi-disciplinary – but this does not imply that IB should disappear entirely from the authors' radar! After all, by submitting to any academic journal, we engage in a scholarly conversation with its specific audience. *cpoib* is no exception.

Then there is another group of submissions – those that are well-crafted IB pieces of research, but that do not make any attempt to offer a critical view on the issue/topic/theme they handle. In other words, they are mainstream IB papers whose target should be one of the several mainstream IB journals.

At the risk of over-simplifying, *cpoib* can be viewed as positioned at the intersection of IB research and Critical Studies. Here, a few quotes help clarify the nature and objectives of *cpoib*. According to the Journal's website[2]:

[It] promotes dialogue and new thinking and encourages authors to creatively and critically questioning the hegemony of transnational corporations, managerial orthodoxy and the dominant academic discourse.

[It] exclusively supports critically reflexive discussion of the nature and impact of international business activity around the globe from a number of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives.

[It] publishes high quality research that critically engages with the broad field of international business including but not restricted to, issues of globalization, international business strategies, corporate social responsibility as well as power relations both within multinational firms and between multinational firms and civil society actors.

So far *cpoib* has cemented its position as a preferred outlet for the community of critical IB scholars. Community here is understood as a group of scholars “who identify themselves as such and who interact and are familiar with each other's work” (Cole, 1983, p. 130). While some IB critical scholars identify more with the broader IB scholarly community, others prefer to see themselves as part of and contributing to critical studies. This is a stark distinction that may not always be applicable, but, regardless, the community of IB critical

scholars pursues an agenda shared with *cpoib*, to continue to bring issues to light and contribute to solving IB problems that matter.

What has motivated this programmatic issue?

In 2018, the premier IB journal, the *Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS)*, issued a call for papers for a special issue entitled “How international business research is changing the world” to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the journal in 2019 (*JIBS*, 2018). What initially seems like as an invitation to openly question and debate the relevance of IB research turns out to be rather limited: the call lays out that “[E]ach paper will showcase how the research presented has made a difference to changing the world in a tangible fashion (retrospective work) or could do so in the foreseeable future (prospective work)” (*JIBS*, 2018, p. 1). A critical assessment that IB research has not contributed or has only made a small contribution to changing the world and its endemic problems is seemingly beyond consideration. This is puzzling as the call makes explicit reference to societies’ grand challenges and to better outcomes for a variety of stakeholders. To add further to the puzzle, there have been a number of dedicated concerns about the relevance of extant IB research. Since the late 1990s, a steady and increasing number of contributions both from scholars from within mainstream literature and from scholars who associate themselves with critical studies have argued that IB research is missing relevance, omitting crucial topics and following a narrow vision (Sullivan, 1998; Toyne and Nigh, 1997).

More recent contributions (Buckley *et al.*, 2017; Delios, 2017; Doh, 2017; Michailova, 2011; Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2012, 2014, 2016) have suggested topics for future IB research and directions it should follow to gain relevance. In many cases these attempts have resulted in not much more than wish lists for a more inclusive, societally engaged IB scholarship, derived from the most urgent global problems, including but not restricted to global climate change, global inequality and poverty, to mention but just a few. Yet, it seems to us that there are more articles issuing the calls for such research than those that actually offer conducted research in that space! When it comes to published content-related research on such topics, we can only conclude that IB scholarship is still largely silent about topics of utmost (we dare to say urgent) relevance to the societies we live in. We still seem to operate within our established rather narrow, far too strictly academic boundaries rather than pushing them. Grand challenges are seldom addressed from within existing boundaries.

We have labelled the present issue of *cpoib* a Programmatic Issue rather than a special or focused issue. This Programmatic Issue links up to the more recent contributions that call for a different future of IB research, but it goes one step further by picking and more deeply exploring themes considered as particularly pressing. The ultimate aim of the theme-centred contributions to this Programmatic Issue is to develop specific research agendas by which IB research may help to address the problem in question.

Altogether six themes for a societally engaged IB research are addressed in-depth: cross-border crime, modern slavery, global health, corporate environmental (rather than social) responsibility, humanitarian crises and action and luxury and inequality. Next, to these theme-centred contributions, two other contributions discuss the way forward for a critically engaged IB research: one of the papers investigates the relationship between critical and mainstream IB research and discusses forward looking strategies to make critical IB and its main outlet, *cpoib*, an integral part of a societally engaged IB discipline. The final article is a

manifesto directed at the individual IB researcher calling for mindfulness in IB research. We introduce the eight articles in greater detail below.

The contributions to the programmatic issue: addressing societally important phenomena that have so far remained under international business scholars' radar

The Programmatic Issue opens with Enderwick's article entitled "Understanding cross-border crime: The value of International Business research". The article addresses the illicit economy comprising a vast array of cross-border criminal transactions such as smuggling drugs, trafficking migrants, cybercrime and counterfeit products. Estimates suggest that the annual value of cross-border crime equals to roughly 4 per cent of the global economy ([Global Financial Integrity, 2017](#)), let alone the enormous economic, social and personal costs associated with these activities. Focusing on cross-border criminal organizations, Enderwick identifies ways and areas in which IB research can be of value for a better understanding and fighting, of the operations of cross-border criminal organizations. Discussing the characteristics of legitimate and illegitimate IB activity, he concludes that the firm-centric focus of IB research is well-positioned to provide valuable insights that complement the policy-oriented approach of criminology, a discipline that has addressed cross-border crime for a long time. These insights might relate to the motives and processes of internationalizing criminal activities, to the location of illicit business activity and to the management and organization of cross-border criminal organizations. The article also discusses ways out of inevitable access problems associated with the investigation of cross-border criminal organizations.

The second article zooms in on a specific aspect of cross-border crime, modern slavery. Following recent statistics of the International Labour Organization, for every 1,000 people in the world, there are 5.4 victims of modern slavery, with children and women disproportionately affected ([ILO, 2017](#)). The article by Burmester, Michailova and Stringer entitled "Modern slavery and International Business scholarship: The governance nexus" starts out with the assessment that MNCs are often contributors to the persistence of modern slavery due to their insufficient oversight of their global supply chains. Conceptualizing modern slavery as a multilevel governance challenge, the authors argue that MNCs have failed to use their capacities as governors within the multilevel transnational labor governance system. They further emphasize that this goes hand in hand with an underestimation and oversimplification in the incumbent IB literature of the role MNCs might play in deterring modern slavery. Looking forward, the article calls for IB research that, aligning with sister disciplines such as international relations, analyzes the underexplored role of MNCs acting independently and in concert with other MNCs, to influence the international normative agenda on modern slavery.

In his paper entitled "Global health and international business: New frontiers of International Business research" Ahen explores the structure and nature of the nexus between international business and global health. Based on a historical account of the link between global health and IB, the paper elaborates on how IB activities create or sustain global health problems through environmental degradation, the lack of research and development for diseases of the poor and the excessive supply of highly processed food. The paper also argues that these global health problems not only have a negative impact on IB activities but also that pandemics or widespread antibiotic resistance might develop into global catastrophes. Following Ahen, current compartmentalized IB research is not able to adequately deal with the wicked problems

of global health. Consequently, he calls for IB scholars to overcome their academic fault lines and to sincerely engage in interdisciplinary approaches that match the relevance and urgency of global health problems.

"MNCs" corporate environmental responsibility in emerging and developing economies: Towards an action research approach' is the topic of the article by Becker-Ritterspach, Simbeck and El Ebrashi. This piece of research is especially concerned with the transfer of products, processes and business models from developed to developing countries. These often exhibit negative externalities, such as pollution or excessive resource extraction due to institutional voids in the environmental protection regulation of the receiving developing countries. The article suggests a portfolio of strategies for MNCs to mitigate or avoid negative externalities associated with their activities in developing countries. For example, drawing on or building MNC internal capabilities can help compensate for voids and build institutions in developing countries, thus, mitigating negative externalities. To make these strategies operational, the article lays out a detailed action research agenda that involves a wide range of stakeholders for developing practical solutions to tame negative externalities of MNC activity in developing countries.

The article by Hotho and Girschik entitled "Corporate engagement in humanitarian action: Concepts, challenges and areas for international business research" is concerned with domestic firms' and multinationals' engagement in humanitarian crises through the delivery of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Voluntary or not, MNCs see themselves increasingly involved in humanitarian crises, no matter whether these are man-made through, for example, civil war or of natural origin as in the case of earthquakes. Addressing a broad gap in the IB literature, the paper systematically explores the characteristics of different modes of companies' engagement in humanitarian crises and distinguishes between for profit and non-profit, direct and indirect and voluntary and involuntary engagement. The paper then elaborates on the challenges associated with MNC engagement in humanitarian action before proposing an agenda for scholarly IB research. This research agenda is mainly centred on operational, learning and legitimacy issues associated with an increasingly proactive and constructive engagement of MNCs in humanitarian crises.

The past theme-centred article in the Programmatic Issue "Luxury international business: A critical review and agenda for research" is by Roberts on the international luxury business as one of the most visible expressions of inequality. This piece of research elaborates on the meaning of luxury, its place in contemporary society and the international nature of the luxury business as well as on its benefits and dark sides. A key finding of the paper is that the costs associated with luxury business stem largely from the inequality on which the demand for luxury depends. Given the fact that the luxury sector is growing in particular at the lower end of the rich (such as the upper middle class, more research is needed to deeper appreciate the link between luxury and inequality. The paper further brings up a number of specific IB related research questions. These encompass, for instance, international marketing questions such as what makes up the aura of a luxury product in the international context or how does the country of origin labelling work for international luxury brands when one takes into account the cross-border fragmentation of the value chain. Research questions with a greater societal importance suggest looking at the role of international luxury businesses in the field of innovation, sustainability and social responsibility.

The Programmatic Issue closes with two contributions that take a more general programmatic perspective. The paper by Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard "Critical and mainstream International Business research: Making critical IB an integral part of a

societally engaged International Business discipline” empirically maps critical IB scholarship. Analyzing the more than 250 academic articles published in *cpoib* between 2005-2017, the authors identify five main topical clusters: positioning critical IB research, postcolonial IB studies, effects of IB activities, financialization and the global financial crisis, as well as “Black IB” and corporate social responsibility. A subsequent citation analysis of the *cpoib* articles reveals that critical IB research has been so far rarely recognized in mainstream IB outlets. The article discusses how critical IB can be made an integral part of a societally engaged IB discipline, arguing for critical IB to align with the more critical voices within mainstream IB. Moreover, the authors highlight that critical IB research should put a strong emphasis on developing progressive alternatives to urgent real-world problems.

The past article in this Programmatic Issue is written by George Cairns, one of the co-founders of *cpoib*. In his contribution entitled “Critical engagement in International Business: Creating meaning for a broad constituency”, he offers a personal reflection on his engagement with the field of IB over the past two decades. Plotting an e-mail conversation with two younger IB scholars who also contribute to this Programmatic Issue, reveals that IB as a field is still characterized by many rigidities regarding both topics and ways of approaching them. The article poses a set of critically reflective questions on the nature of IB and it closes with a program directed to the individual IB scholar. In an abbreviated way the manifesto reads as follows: Embrace complexity and ambiguity – do not seek reduction and certainty; Adopt an holistic view of IB – as an activity that involves and impacts every part of this world; Research IB in context, not in isolation; Look for what is missing – do not merely focus on what exists and can be observed; Consider multiple futures – do not look to replicate the past or present.

Concluding remarks

The articles included in the Programmatic Issue are eight pieces of research that demonstrate what *cpoib* is after. They critically tackle IB phenomena that are of utmost societal relevance and that have not been addressed thoroughly in IB research, or, if they have, not through a critical lens. We emphasize that the articles deal not just with scholarly topics; they deal with themes and pose research questions that point to human and social problems and challenges. Cross-border crime, modern slavery, global health, corporate environmental responsibility, humanitarian crises and luxury-global inequality interfaces are not merely IB phenomena; they are human and social ones.

As the articles in the Programmatic Issue reveal, other disciplines have addressed for years, if not decades, parts and dimensions of the phenomena the articles tackle. There is no reason why IB scholarship should not play its serious part in offering in-depth and thoughtful analyses. Not only are we, as IB scholars, well-equipped to position and analyze the themes included here (and many other themes). We can also develop insights that we can contribute back to disciplines we borrow from. A critical lens would be a particularly generative way to do that as it opens for the explicit element of reflexivity we alerted to in this introduction.

As *cpoib* co-editors-in-chief and guest co-editors of this Programmatic Issue, we have insisted that the authors not only take a critical stance to the phenomena they investigate but also propose fertile avenues for future critical IB research based on the insights they offer. All articles have done so and we hope that this combination offers actionable research agendas for critically thinking IB scholars and examples of potential future contributions to *cpoib*.

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Notes

1. If rankings are important to you and/or your institution, *cpoib* is ranked as B in the 2016 Australian ABDC list (A*-C); 2 in the 2018 ABS list of the UK (4*-1) and 1 in the 2017 Danish list (2-1). In France *cpoib* was ranked 2 in the 2016 Fnege list (1*-4); 4 in the 2018 Cnrs list (1*-4) and C in the 2018 Hceres list (A-C) (Harzing, 2019).
2. Available at: www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/products/journals/journals.htm?id=cpoib

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Further reading

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