

# Immanent Critiques in International Relations

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**How do the concepts of Critical Theory and Marxism apply to International Relations? Describe the concept of immanent critique and how it relates to understanding the organization of the state, civil society, production, and International Relations.**

Immanent critiques in International Relations identify the positive features of the prevailing social and political world order and open up intellectual space to challenge this order's "immanent contradictions" for the purpose of empowering a wider range of societal actors.[1] This method of analysis offers three major implications for the study of IR. First, it questions the foundations of positivist epistemology.[2] Second, it implies that the normative goal of IR should be to change the existing order rather than merely interpret it.[3] Third, the employment of immanent critique in Marxist thought and critical theory reveals that such change is the confluence of complex interactions between the state, civil society, production, and international relations. As a result, Marxism and critical theory allow for a broader academic discussion of contemporary issues such as the historical origins of political norms, the capacity for human agency within a global system that prioritizes ostensibly immutable state interests, and the extent to which a constructed world order can be changed systemically.

Immanent critique seeks out alternative ways of organizing states, production, and international relations because it maintains that the present order is historically contingent and that interpreting it through IR theory actively helps to shape it.[4] This method of critiquing the existing world order is, by definition, immanent rather than transcendent. According to critical theory, transcendent analyses that construe the present order as invariable or unalterable necessarily limit possibilities for change in global politics and therefore bolster existing power configurations, which may impose unjust, hegemonic rule within the present world order.[5]

So-called "orthodox" theories such as neorealism and neoliberalism consider their underlying assumptions about the nature of the global political system to be immutable. Waltz's theory of neorealism, for instance, takes the state as a uniform constant: the histories and diversities of various states matters only to the extent that it affects the most important level of analysis, the distribution of power within that state-centric system.[6] For Waltz, the nature of the international system leaves room for change *within* the system, but never change *of* the system.[7] The critical theorist Richard Ashley uses immanent critique to reject the realist epistemology. By conceiving of an immutable system, realism "performs an ideological function" in legitimizing a particular world order in which the military capabilities and political interests of states are the only interests at play.[8]

The relevance of this ideological function is best understood through Slavoj Žižek's schema of ideology and reality. Ideology can be doctrinal ideas, including theories, beliefs, and modes of argumentation; it can be an external entity, such as social, political, or legal institutions; and it can be the heart of one's social reality.[9] Immanent critique seeks to reflexively question the first, problematize the second, and normatively transform the third. As a result, immanent critique emphasizes the political and social basis of all knowledge in IR scholarship, constituting a direct challenge to orthodox epistemology and ontology.

Whereas transcendent critiques are positivist and decontextualized, immanent critique is dialectical in that it evaluates any situation, concept, or theory "on its own terms," exposing contradictions between ideology and socially constructed reality.[10] In Marxism and critical theory, agents are bound by their relationships to others and to the

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overall structures they exist within. According to critical theory, historical forces that politically, economically, and culturally empower certain actors have produced a complex system of social identities, states, and world orders.[11] To the extent that immanent critique has a level of analysis, it is fluid and relational one that recognizes the agency of societal actors in shaping processes of global change.

A reflexive, critical understanding of International Relations recognizes that “theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose.”[12] Critical theorist Robert W. Cox contends that every theory implies a perspective on world politics and social relations that is derived from a particular “social and political time and space.”[13] In order to develop generalizable conclusions, theory must not only explain and understand the world; it also must identify its own limitations, be aware of its tendencies towards making the current order seem universal and ahistorical, and explore the potential for an alternative order.[14] Nonetheless, critical theory is not a general theory of IR in and of itself: it is a method of analysis based on the post-positivist epistemology that allows for immanent critique.[15]

Alternatively, most IR theories fall under the category of positivist problem-solving theories, which seek to resolve issues by working within the existing organization of social relations and institutions of power.[16] In the process of *explaining* the purportedly immutable aspects of the social order instead of normatively *critiquing* them, problem-solving theories accept and, by extension, legitimize the status quo.[17] This is because the process of critique is considered to be an inherently ethical action. After all, in critical theory, facts and values are not entirely discrete concepts, as values color and distort facts. Consequently, if an IR theorist can critique the prevailing order with the idea of an alternative system in mind, then he or she may have the capacity to help bring about that change, depending on social or historical constraints.[18]

Critical theory maintains lofty, utopian goals for normatively changing the social-political order. In International Relations especially, the application of immanent critique has been tied to the concept of emancipation, an ambiguous term that generally refers to the empowerment of societal actors, either by mastering nature or by overcoming barriers to political, economic, cultural, and social participation.[19] Opportunities to emancipate such actors can be exploited by analyzing the immanent contradictions between hegemonic ideologies and the realities of the present order. Yet historical processes are not easily overcome, and existing forces of hegemony can constrain possibilities for systemic change and emancipation: despite its “utopian vitality” for emancipation, critical theory is also rooted in an awareness of the lasting power of societal reality to maintain the contemporary world order in the interests of those who benefit most from its immanent contradictions.[20]

In classical Marxist analysis, emancipation can be achieved by the proletariat, which acts as the agent of historical change, in overcoming class domination.[21] Applying his critical concept of historical materialism, Marx’s immanent critique of capitalism argues that, in direct contradiction to bourgeois values, the capitalist political-economic order fails to provide freedom, equality, and general welfare.[22] The crucial point, however, is that he sought to understand capitalism in order to critique its immanent problems, discover the means to overthrow it, and subsequently replace it with a communist system of social relations, in the process emancipating societal actors oppressed within an exploitative system of production.[23] Frankfurt School theorists such as Friedrich Pollock and Max Horkheimer later critiqued Marx’s analysis of structures as critical units of analysis in international politics, arguing that capitalism in the early twentieth century was undergoing a shift from market dominance and towards state control over the defining features of social life.[24]

In terms of domestic societal pressures, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci offered the strongest critique of Marx’s narrative. Marxian theory stresses the coercive capabilities of the state in reinforcing class struggle but does not explain why developed societies in the West seem to enjoy the consent of the oppressed.[25] Gramsci’s critique concentrates on how the hegemony of the ruling class, operating through networks and institutions within civil society, can make that class’s values the widespread standard for morality, culture, and politics.[26] These values go beyond Marx’s analysis of economic relationships in explaining why even people disadvantaged by the present order may consent: the immanent critiques of Gramscianism and critical theory argue that there is no longer a clear separation between civil society and the state.[27]

Cox’s outline of critical theory is an expansion of Gramsci’s concept of domestic hegemony. Even when the interests

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of the international order disadvantage certain actors, according to Cox, global hegemony can nevertheless foster consent by promoting international norms.[28] For example, free trade policies benefit the “ruling class” of Western states because those states are among the most competitive producers in the global economy, but these policies have gained widespread acceptance even in developing markets where they arguably hinder economic growth.[29] Cox challenges Marxist and neorealist conceptions of capitalist production as an implicit feature of state interest. For him, long-term historical structures explain modes and relations of production, and as a result, “state power ceases to be the sole explanatory factor and becomes part of what is to be explained”. [30]

Andrew Linklater views emancipation in a different fashion from Kant, Marx, or Jürgen Habermas, the Frankfurt School thinker who maintained that highly participatory democracy is the best route towards emancipation.[31] For Linklater, the key to emancipation is in the expansion of a moral community that extends beyond state borders, including the development of Habermas’s “post-national citizenship”. [32] Critical theory critiques the role of the state and civil society in determining moral boundaries separating communities through processes of war and production.[33] Through an immanent critique of civil society and global politics, Linklater argues that increasingly transnational issues such as human rights and technological progress necessitate states’ citizens to increasingly identify with communities apart from the traditional nation-state.[34] In this sense, critical theory attempts to solve issues in IR by problematizing the social and political systems around them.

Whether one subscribes in principle to Marx’s theory of production via class domination, Gramsci’s hegemony by consent within civil society, Cox’s world order critique of state interests, or Linklater’s crisis of international identification, the question remains as to whether immanent critiques of the existing system provide a practical method for achieving emancipation. Critical theory has certainly changed the character of IR scholarship, making it far more self-reflective and interdisciplinary.[35] The boundaries between history, politics, anthropology, sociology, and International Relations seem somewhat indistinct. On the other hand, critical theory has only hinted at the possibility for political and social change.

Although Marxism and critical theory have successfully deconstructed International Relations, they have so far failed to reconstruct it.[36] Immanent critique has refocused the epistemological assumptions of orthodox theories and has provided greater scope for Marxism and critical theory to broaden academic analysis at the systemic level. These theories have contributed to mainstream scholarship by demonstrating that states, civil society, production, and international relations have been organized through historically contingent confluences of social relations and world orders. More broadly, however, immanent critique has opened up the normative potential, if not necessarily a practical method, for emancipating social actors and developing change in the conduct and character of international relations.

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[2] Ibid.

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[7] Ibid, 38-39.

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[13] Ibid, 128-129.

[14] Hoffman, 36.

[15] Antonio, 330.

[16] Cox, 128-129.

[17] Hobden and Wyn Jones, 138-139.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Hoffman, 36-37.

[20] el-Ojeili and Hayden, 12.

[21] Hoffman, 32.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Hobden and Wyn Jones, 134-135.

[24] Moishe Postone, "Critique, state, and economy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 166-169.

[25] Hobden and Wyn Jones, 137-138.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Hoffman, 35.

[28] Cox, 138-144.

[29] Hobden and Wyn Jones, 139-140.

[30] Robert W. Cox, quoted in Rupert, 168.

[31] Hobden and Wyn Jones, 141.

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[34] Ibid, 42.

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