

Do We Need to be "Critical" When Studying International Relations?

Written by Sara Ormes-Ganarin

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SARA ORMES-GANARIN, MAR 27 2014

The question whether we need to be critical when studying International Relations is essentially both a question about theory itself, and a question about theory and the world. On the one hand, it prompts to reflect on whether there is a need for critical theories within academia, and – if yes – why. On the other hand, we are challenged to think about whether there is an argument to be made in terms of an impact on international relations practise. This essay argues that these two questions are interlinked, and are in effect questions about challenging power structures.

Utilising Robert Cox's (1981, p. 128) divide between problem-solving and critical theories, a critical approach can essentially be described as a critique of the problem-solving approach that "takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action". Generally, therefore, the problematisation of existing power structures is pivotal in critical work, as Hutchings (2007, cited in McCormack, 2010, p.3) argues: "Although critical theory takes many different forms, it always distinguishes itself from other forms of theorising in terms of its orientation towards change and the possibility of futures that do not reproduce the patterns of hegemonic power of the present."

In a first part, this essay examines the contributions of critical theories to a disciplinary critique of International Relations, supporting the argument that the challenge of the hegemony of positivism within International Relations theory by critical approaches has important implications for both academia and international practise. In a second part, drawing particularly on critical theories with emancipatory intent (CTEI)[1], this essay argues that we have a normative commitment to be critical when studying International Relations. Problem-solving theories fail to acknowledge the ideological quality of their own assumptions and therefore reproduce an international system claimed to be 'natural' or 'realistic', but which is instead constructed to serve the interests of a certain group of people.

Finally, this essay does not claim to give a comprehensive overview/analysis of the wealth of critical theory but rather attempts to demonstrate how critical theories in general, and CTEI in particular, make a valuable, arguably necessary, contribution to IR theory.

Disciplinary Critique

Up until the emergence of 'critical' IR theories[2], largely within the framework of the third great debate, IR theory was essentially positivist in its nature (Smith, 1996, p. 12). As described by Neufeld (1993, p.55-56) "positivism stipulates that theoretical explanations will be true to the extent that they accurately reflect empirical reality." From a positivist perspective, IR theory is considered to be a politically and normatively neutral form of scientific inquiry about 'the world out there'. By contrast, critical theories take a largely different stance, characterised largely by their meta-theoretical reflexivity. They not only recognise the relationship between 'facts' and 'values' and the political and social agenda of theory, but also introduce an attitude open to discuss the benefits of competing paradigms (Neufeld, 1993). This way, critical theories contribute a different perspective on international relations per se, and attempt to promote a different view of the nature and role of IR theory. I am referring to it as an attempt as critical IR theory is still a contested approach, which I can be ascribed to the hegemonic nature of positivist IR theory.

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This is illustrated by a response of Robert Keohane who, when referring to the emergence of critical approaches to IR theory, “spoke of the need to evaluate the rival research paradigms of rationalist and reflectivist ... [critical] approaches in terms of their ‘testable theories’, without which ‘they will remain on the margins of the field... [since]... it will be impossible to evaluate their research program’” (Keohane, 1989, pp. 173-4 cited in Smith, 1996, p. 12). Essentially, positivism itself becomes the issue as it requests to see positivist evidence within critical theories in order for them to be acknowledged. Thus, positivist theories not only dominate the academic field, but also set the standards against which IR theories are evaluated in order to be accepted as such. This contradictory dynamic becomes even more problematic when considering the interconnection between IR theory and practise. As Smith (1996, p. 13) illustrates: “International theory underpins and informs international practise ... [and] once established as common sense, theories become incredibly powerful since they delineate not simply what can be known but also what is sensible to talk about or suggest”. By (willingly) ignoring the ideological quality of their own assumptions, such as – in the case of structural realism – the anarchic nature of the state system as the organising principle of international relations, positivist theories reproduce the status quo with all its power structures; this way, positivist theory continually produces reality and reality in turn reaffirms the theory.

Within this framework, Marx’s comment that whilst previous philosophers have only interpreted the world, “the point is to change it” (Marx, 1886, p. 15) gains new meaning, as mere impartial description appears to be impossible – there is always an ideological and productive quality to theorizing. Robert Cox (1981, p. 128) later took the same stance famously stating that “theory is always *for* someone and *for* a purpose”. Therefore, it appears, theories either reproduce the existing structures, or attempt to change them: “Theories do not simply explain or predict, they tell us what possibilities exist for human action and intervention; they define not merely our explanatory possibilities but also our ethical and practical horizons” (Smith, 1996, p. 13). Ultimately, there is a moral dimension to this argument: It confronts the scholar (or in Marx’s case the philosopher) with the world, challenges them to reflect on the values inherent to their own theories and asks them to make a decision about which kind of world they want to see.

The Ideology of the State

As established in the previous section, critical thinking essentially rejects the notion of the current international structure as being fixed. Rather, it views these structures as socially constructed and is further concerned with how these structures have been established and continue to be recreated (Devetak, 2009). Robert Cox described this mode of thinking as historical, as one that “recognises that the existing situation is a transitory one and that maybe what one needs to be looking for is not just to solve the problems that are inherent within it, but to look for the openings that are likely to bring about structural change in the future” (Brincat et al., 2012, p. 20). Practically, CTEI “take issue with the assumption that International Relations is a discipline about states and for states” (Linklater et al., 1995, p. 10) and thus make the current state system an object of inquiry.

Adopting a “hermeneutic approach” (Devetak 2009, p. 172), both Cox and Linklater examine how states have come into existence and become the dominating form of political and social organisation in today’s world. Utilising this historical lens and building on both Marx and Gramsci, Cox describes the current world order as a form of political organisation that is essentially “socially constructed”, and therefore, changeable (Devetak, 2009, p. 174). Albeit dominant, the current state system only reflects one possible form of political order and can be understood as “configurations of material capabilities, ideas and institutions” (Cox, 1981, p. 141).

CTEI not only identifies the nature of the state as constructed, but also the moral deficits associated with the current system (Devetak, 2009). This reaches back to Karl Marx’s theory on the relation between the state and capitalism. Devetak (2009, p. 169) states that, from a Marxist perspective, the combination “of the political system of sovereign states and the economic system of market capitalism are a form of exclusion where particular class interests parade themselves as universal”. In other words, the dominant theories on international relations, namely structural realism and liberalism who take the current system as absolute and claim to describe an independently existing ‘world out there’, act to reproduce (arguably unwillingly) a system of inequality, injustice, and violent conflict, whilst promoting only the interests of a certain section of society (Linklater et al., 1995, p. 8). The forced separation between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, argues Linklater (1981), creates a sort of moral duality where states’ behaviour varies significantly between the domestic and the international realm. Making an argument building on our human

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obligations to each other, he calls for a radical rethinking of how the world is organised. This point is further illustrated by Devetak (2009, p. 176) referring to the still ongoing 'war on terror' waged by the US and its allies: "Implicit in Linklater, and explicit in the writing of others, is the argument that the greatest threat to world order may not be the terrorists who perpetrated such inexcusable harm, but the reaction by the United States. By placing itself outside the rules, norms and institutions of international society in its prosecution of its war on terrorism, the United States is not only diminishing the prospects of a peaceful and just world order, but undermining the very 'civilising' principles and practices on which it was founded (Habermas 2003, 2006; Devetak 2005)".

An emancipated society

CTEI is not the only approach that recognises "structures of inequality and the violence and injustice they perpetuate in the world" (Pasha 2012, p.105). However, it is its aspiration for change and transformation that distinguishes it from approaches such as structural realism and, liberalism that rather seek to solve the problems of the already existing structures and therefore preserve the status quo (Pasha 2012). This transformative intent, however, requires a certain engagement with the current power structures. Critical thinkers, such as Ken Booth, Andrew Linklater and K M Fierke acknowledge the necessity of "engaging with the contemporary context and power relations" in order to make a contribution to policy (McCormack 2010, p.11). This goes hand in hand with Gunning's (2007, p.387) reading of Cox (1981), stating that "for, unless a 'critical' field seeks to be policy relevant, which, as Cox rightly observes, means combining 'critical' and 'problem-solving' approaches, it does not fulfil its 'emancipatory' potential". Buzan (1996, p. 54) in a defence of realism, however, claimed that the "tension between the need to study what is, and the danger of reproducing it by doing so, is unresolvable."

However, the principle of immanent critique, central to CTEI, overcomes this dilemma, which Antonio (1981, p. 332) describes as "a means of detecting the societal contradictions which offer the most determinate possibilities for emancipatory social change." Stahl (2013, p. 1-2) describes immanent critique as the process of demonstrating that the standards of the theorists "are in some way *internal* to those practices they criticize. Only then, it is argued, do these standards lead to more than to a condemnation that merely shows that these practices do not live up to *our* conception of the good and the right, but to an argument that establishes that our society fails also on its *own terms*". This notion is also supported by Horkheimer (1974, cited in Antonio, 1981, p. 338) who argues that "immanent critique describes the dialectic in history which is driven by the contradictions between ideology and reality". Immanent critique, therefore, bridges the gap between critical theorizing and policy relevance, opening up the possibility for the Critical Theorist to pursue an emancipatory purpose.

Referring back to Cox's statement that "theory is always for someone and for a purpose" (Cox 1981, p. 128), the emancipatory purpose is of central importance to critical thought. Wyn Jones (2012, cited in Brincat et al., 2012, 96) emphasises this by arguing that "there are two reason why we should be concerned about the question of emancipation. It is a matter of ethical responsibility and, in the case of anyone who views themselves as producing work that is in any way critical, it is also a matter of internal coherence." However, just as CTEI itself a rather heterogeneous body of thought, there are a variety of ideas of and approaches to the concept of emancipation. For Max Horkheimer (1972, cited in Shapcott 2009, p. 1) emancipation consists in the establishment of a good society "in which the individual could realize his or her potential for autonomy." For Linklater (1990, cited in Shapcott, p. 1) emancipation carries a wider meaning and involves "the prospects for realising higher levels of human freedom across the world society as a whole".

The rather elusive nature of the idea of emancipation leaves it open to several criticisms. Firstly, there is no consensus as to how identity should be bound and organised in an emancipated society. The cosmopolitan/communitarian debate highlights this problem, as from a cosmopolitan view states are normatively irrelevant, while Communitarians acknowledge the possibility of a moral state where individuals can reach full autonomy (Cochran, 1995). Secondly, it can be argued that the promotion of increased freedom and autonomy in the tradition of the Enlightenment is essentially a Eurocentric idea and could therefore be used by liberal internationalist agendas. However, considering the dialectic of immanent critique, and the denunciation of an existing 'truth' separated from values (Neufeld 1993), emancipation has to remain a fluctuating concept and should maybe rather be defined as an attitude of questioning in the interest of the (marginalised, oppressed) individual, than a set of fixed

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principles.[3] In the light of the persisting sharp inequalities across the globe, with 1.2 billion people still living in extreme poverty for example (UNDP, 2005), I argue that the notion of emancipation remains a project worth pursuing.

Conclusion

Critical reflections on theory itself expose the hegemonic nature of the main positivist IR theory who fail to acknowledge the ideological quality of their own assumptions and therefore, whilst claiming to study the world as it is, contribute to reproduce the current power structures. Critical theory encourage meta-theoretical reflections and demonstrate how "theory is always *for* some and *for* a purpose" (Cox 1981, p. 128). It therefore forces us to be transparent about our own ideologies and values when thinking about International Relations.

In terms of practise CTIE, immanent principles as initially established by Marx, forms a useful tool "in the struggle for progressive social change, because they provide a basis for critique within historical reality" (Antonio, 1981, p. 333). The elusive and relative nature of the concept of emancipation, which is always subject to and object of immanent critique, provides a certain protection against the establishment of imperialist values and acts as a guideline for scholarly work and IR practise. Considering both the continuing inequality and injustice around the world and the nature of the current state system that continually enforces a separation between 'us' and 'them', I argue that the pursuit of social change, often referred to as a project of emancipation, remains a worthy endeavour.

Do we need to be critical when studying International Relations? Essentially, critical thought – when taken seriously – leaves us no choice but to think about the morality of our theories and practises, and although we might not *need* to be critical, I argue that we certainly *ought* to.

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[1] Some scholars refer to this approach as Marxist-inspired Critical Theory, as opposed to postmodern critical theory that "displays considerable scepticism towards the emancipatory project associated with Marxism" (Linklater, 2007, chapter 3). However, some scholars, namely Robert Cox, reject the association with Marxism and the Frankfurt School (Brincat, 2012). Thus I will use the term 'critical theories with emancipatory intent'.

[2] In this section, with 'critical' I broadly refer to the work of postmodernists, feminist theorists, poststructuralists and Critical Theorists (Smith, 1996, p. 12).

[3] This practise has been employed by McDonald in relation to Critical Terrorism Studies. See Mcdonald, M., 2007. Emancipation and Critical Terrorism Studies. *European Political Science*, [e-journal] 6(3), pp.252–259.

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