The 'Failure of Critical Theory' as an Ideological Discourse

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Are we witnessing the end of critical IR theory? The rise of nationalism, racism, misogynism, anti-intellectualism, inequality, poverty and power politics – all diametrically opposed to the commitments of critical theory – appears to indicate the political failure of critical theory. Even worse, critical theory is frequently accused of having provided the philosophical basis – antifoundationalism – upon which post-truth politics could thrive. Finally, critical theory does not appear to offer promising resources to address the current political problems (Jahn 2021).

Taking these allegations seriously, critical theorists are trying to identify the roots of the problem and ways to address it. Three different positions have emerged. The first holds that critical theory failed to achieve its political aims because it was tied up in metatheoretical debates – and needs instead to focus on practical solutions to concrete political problems. The second position claims that critical theory is out of touch with the current historical context and needs to update its core categories (Hamati-Ataya 2013). The third argument attributes the failures of critical theory to particular methodological or theoretical approaches (lack of methodological reflection, of systemic analysis, of Enlightenment values) and advocates identifying the 'correct' approach (Aradau and Huysmans 2014; Koddenbrock 2015; Wight 2018).

Yet none of these positions questions their common starting point: the assumption of a failure of critical theory. Investigating this empirical claim reveals that critical theory has been surprisingly successful – both academically and politically. The aim of the first generation of critical theorists in IR was to highlight the intellectual and political limitations of the dominant positivist approach in the discipline and to open up space for alternatives (Ashley 1981; Walker 1987). This has been tremendously successful. Today, a wide (and ever expanding) range of critical approaches – Marxism, Gender Studies, Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism, Queer Theory – is firmly established within the discipline. Critical theorists occupy chairs, publish in core journals, are represented in professional organizations and textbooks, have established their own networks and journals. Over the past 40 years, critical theory has fundamentally transformed the discipline of IR (Jahn 2021).

But this success is not restricted to academia; it has also influenced public debates and social movements. Marxist analyses informed the antiglobalization movement of the 1990s (Krishna 2000); and postcolonialism supports the current struggles over monuments and the naming of public institutions or the Black Lives Matter movement (NYT Editorial 2017). Poststructuralist films won awards (DerDerian) and are published on OpenDemocracy. Gender studies have been instrumental in shaping law and policy: from the recognition of rape as a war crime in the ICC through opening up the US military to women and overturning the 'don't ask, don't tell' policies, to the integration of the Gender Development Index in UNDP programs and policies addressing sexual and gender-based violence into humanitarian policies (Tickner 2011). Critical scholars also regularly serve as experts on governmental committees on human rights and arms trade and their work on the environment is taken up by the UN (Stavrianakis 2015; Newell 2020). In fact, gender equality or gay rights are today cited by governments and international organizations to justify intervention, war, and economic policies (Veit 2018; Rao 2015).

Critical theories, in short, have successfully transformed academia and played a key role in shaping public political discourses, social movements, domestic and international law and policies. How, then, can we make sense of the

discourse of failure? Locating this discourse in its historical context shows that it arises from, and serves the purposes of, neoliberalism.

The pervasive nature of neoliberalism and its globalization at the end of the Cold War gave rise to the feeling that 'there is no alternative' (TINA) to this system (Fisher 2009). In this context, critical theory's original commitment to the transformation of society as a whole appears outdated and the recent focus on particular and everyday forms of the reproduction of power seems better aligned with the current historical context.

Moreover, the commodification of all aspects of society has transformed universities into factories of marketable knowledge – in the form of education, skills, patents and intellectual property rights (Patrick 2013). This downgrades all knowledge that is not readily marketable and thus generates anxieties about the critical commitment to investigate the thinking that frames particular problems and explains the call for 'critical problem solving' (Brown 2002).

Finally, in the neoliberal economy, individual scholars, approaches and institutions are forced to compete over grant income, ranking, citations and student recruitment. This turns academics into knowledge entrepreneurs and individualizes not just success but also failure – giving rise to the excessive self-criticism that locates the responsibility for the rise of populism in particular epistemological, ontological or theoretical commitments and calls for their replacement (Jahn forthcoming).

The pressures of neoliberalism thus generate a discourse that challenges every single one of critical theory's core principles and thus undermines its ability to offer alternatives. The discourse of 'failure' places the responsibility for recent political development in society at large firmly at the feet of critical academics and thus ignores the political and economic perpetrators that actively pursue these policies and benefit from the absence of systemic alternatives (Conway 2021). What is at stake in this debate, therefore, is the very legitimacy of critical theory itself – and with it the means to question hegemonic discourses, to reveal the social and political pressures that enable them, and to keep alive at least the theoretical possibility of a just and humane society.

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