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Does Epistemology Matter? The Divide Between Critical and Problem-Solving Theory

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JOÃO TERRENAS, JAN 15 2015

Does Epistemology Matter? The Normative and Praxeological Significance of the Divide Between Critical and Problem-Solving Theorizing

If the political landscape has ‘so many screams [that] have faded away unheard’, as Ken Booth claims^[1] in his seminal *Theory of World Security* (2007: 37), is it not legitimate and urgent to ask what IR theory is for? For whom and what purpose? Exploring this question in what has become one of the most quoted excerpts in IR, Robert Cox claims that “Theory is always *for* someone, and *for* some purpose” (1981: 128), a dictum which marks a crucial distinction for the significance of the social practice of ‘theorizing’. While within the positivist tradition theory, theorists and theorizing were seen as something external to the world of enquiry, meant to depict the object of IR as an unbiased account, Cox argued that social theory always mirrors a perspective from a “specific social and political time and space” (1981: 128).

Assuming that theory is unable to provide a neutral, value-free, and non-normative account of the world, the article of Robert Cox sets up a division of IR theory between critical and problem-solving. At the center of his argument lies the idea that theories should be framed according to their purpose and understanding of the circumstances under which they are conceived and developed. The conception of a theoretical divide between critical and problem-solving IR owes its conceptual framework and background to a split introduced by Max Horkheimer in the context of Frankfurt School theorizing during the late 1930’s.

In his writing “Critical and Traditional Theory”, Horkheimer (2002) argues that human and social sciences colonized the scientific approach of natural sciences and applied their empiricist epistemology and positivist methods to the study of the social world. Therefore, the “phenomenologically oriented sociologist” (2002: 192) relied on the collection of social data as the basis for building theory and unveiling social laws. This had a significant impact on the social sciences since it was underpinned by a unitary conception of science prescribing the inadequacy of subjects such as history or philosophy as theoretical tools for studying the social world. Furthermore, this “scientific model that ... believes to have universal application across theoretical and historical boundaries” (Rush 2004: 25) is the reference against which Horkheimer built the division between Critical and Traditional theory. Much of what links today a broad range of critical theories in IR (transcending what could be labeled more specifically as Critical IR Theory) comes from a fierce opposition to positivism and its unity of science assumption.

Robert Cox (1981) evokes precisely this divide—critical versus problem-solving. According to the author, the purpose of problem-solving theorizing is essentially to help manage specific questions and problems within the existing socio-political order, whilst the purpose of critical theory is to question that order and to serve as a tool for enquiry into the possibility for bringing about alternative ones. At the foundation of this claim lies the idea that the traditional approaches do not question the underlying assumptions of knowledge production. By disregarding their epistemological foundations and conceiving power-relations as ahistorical and fixed, problem-solving theories become complicit with the existing order. Instead of providing a framework for reducing inequality or injustice, they legitimize and reproduce them.

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Underpinning their purpose, problem-solving establishes the need to manage the socio-political order by providing an efficient framework for dealing with specific challenges to dominant structures of power. Problem-solving accounts of the 'political' and the 'international' imply the provision of answers enabling "relationships and institutions to work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble" (Cox and Sinclair 1996: 88). Within this approach, knowledge becomes a tool of the status quo, committed to a conservative project that "serv[es] particular national, sectional, or class interests, which are comfortable within the given order" (Cox 1981: 129).

Contrarily to problem-solving theorizing, critical theory's problematique revolves around the need for political change. In fact, Robert Cox's conception of critical theory as "a guide to strategic action for bringing about an alternative order" (Cox 1981: 129) frames it within a transformative project calling the character of the existing order into question. Instead of working for a smoother management of institutions and power relations, critical theorists ask how these relations and institutions came about. Thus, unveiling power-knowledge relations becomes a primordial concern for critical theory, since it stresses "the role which knowledge can play in the reproduction of problematical social arrangements" (Linklater 1996: 296).

Opposed to the fixed and ahistorical account of the social world produced by problem-solving approaches, critical theory aims to provide an understanding of fluid and transhistorical processes. The assumption of neutrality in knowledge production is called into question since critical theory recognizes that:

All theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space. (...) There is (...) no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space (Cox 1981: 128).

The first step of critical theory is then to have an understanding of itself, to be aware of its social, cultural, and political situatedness through the engagement in self-reflexive reasoning. From a critical standpoint, the theorist acknowledges that theory is itself a social construction that must reflect upon itself and take a normative position on the world. This self-reflexive dimension is what allegedly enables critical theory to produce knowledge without reproducing and reinforcing the inequities of the status quo.

When in 1988 Robert Kehoane delivered his presidential address at the 29th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, he was conscientiously restructuring the discourse of the ongoing debate regarding the positivist versus post-positivist theoretical divide. One of the 'problems' that he addressed, or created, was that reflectivists – as opposed to rationalists – had "failed to develop a coherent research program of their own" (Kehoane 1988: 379). Kehoane suggested the criteria for judging the merits and challenges of a 'reflexivist turn' in IR theory. In order to assess the significance of both critical and problem-solving approaches, this essay will now address the development of both traditions in the light of the problematique underlying Kehoane's presidential address.

As the example presented by his speech introduced, the power of naming the real has a tremendous impact on how we think about IR and theory. In fact, what is the purpose and validity of a theory without an empirical research programme? Both traditions engage with the 'real' world, but while problem-solving aims to function as a tool for managing the existing order, critical theory deploys its project as transformative in its nature and emancipatory^[2] in its purpose. Furthermore, it is "the idea that the study of international relations should be oriented by an emancipatory politics" (Devetak 2005: 137) that which holds together the full range of approaches identified with the 'critical' label. What underlies in Kehoane 'discourse' is not the nature or the purpose of each theoretical project but the validity of the tools used to deploy it. Hence, Kehoane's speech introduced a methodological criterion for assessing critical theories while disregarding the distinctive nature of their epistemological commitments and the subsequent effects in their ontological and methodological claims.

The positivist-informed rationalist tradition, under which most of the problem-solving approaches can be ranged, assumes the world 'as it is', validating its knowledge claims through the empiricist logic of 'truth as correspondence' (Campbell 2013: 227). Positivist epistemology is then supported by the claims of a neutral, non-normative, and value-free production of knowledge. This intellectual project produces its research agenda by perceiving science as an aggregation of regularities that can be discovered, assembled, and generalized. Each 'science' has its specific

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sphere of knowledge production where disciplinary boundaries preclude the overlapping of scientific objects. Within this positivist framework, IR is seen as a 'science' dealing with an object with its distinctive nature, a static perspective of the world made of recurrence. Units and structures are related in a deterministic way that enables theorists to provide explanatory laws with universal application. Human agency is reduced to a minimum degree, whence this intellectual framework is said to be unable to account for political change in international politics.

In fact, this positivist conception of epistemology, ontology, and methodology has dominated IR theorizing for decades. Positivism has disciplined the subject of IR by limiting its object of enquiry. Offering a conceptual framework that limits IR to the problem of recurrence and regularity, positivism subjects the discipline to a theoretical framework always embedded in the problem of managing existing power structures. Positivism's framing of knowledge production is then at the base of what is called 'problem-solving'. Contrarily, critical theory assumes an epistemological commitment to the prospective change of world and not just international politics. The very idea of change as an immanent possibility in the social world lies at the center of critical thought, method, and purpose. In the words of Andrew Linklater, "Critical theory arises in the context of social tensions and ambiguities and turns their progressive dimensions against unnecessary constraints" (Linklater 1998: 5-6).

From the critical assumption of an intrinsic "connection between knowledge and interests" (Hoffman 1987: 232), follows the methodological responsibility "to become clearly aware of the perspective which gives rise to theorizing" (Cox 1981: 130). In what is a basic normative move, critical theorizing brushes away positivist procedures (of data collection, hypothesis formulation, and the establishment of universal laws) and deepens into the realm of philosophy and sociology of knowledge. As Booth puts it, "answers to fundamental questions about politics are not to be found in science, but by ethical reasoning conducted by dialogue" (Booth 2007: 38). Critical theory, however, cannot be reduced to its metatheoretical dimension. As Linklater's critical project discloses, there are three dimensions which can be conceived as the core of critical theory, viz. (i) the normative, underlining the impossibility of a neutral understanding of the social world; (ii) the sociological, asking whom and what purposes is the existing order serving and excluding; and (iii) the praxeological, unveiling immanent possibilities for emancipation. He argues that none of this dimensions can be disregarded since criteria for their evaluation are mutually constitutive and interdependent:

Critical theory is to be judged not only by its contribution to ethics and sociology but by the extent to which it sheds light on existing political possibilities. Deficiencies in its normative and sociological approaches will inevitably be reflected in its praxeological analysis (Linklater 1998: 5).

By addressing IR theory as a social construction and a sociological tool, critical theory provides a framework for understanding how prevailing conceptions of the 'political' and the 'international' came to be; *for* whom and *for* which purposes they were set up. By embracing emancipatory transformation as a critical purpose, it achieves what Keohane (1988) referred to as an efficient account of the process of change in world politics. In addition, the critical method of ethical reasoning from a transhistorical perspective empowers critical theorists to also understand the social forces resisting change as well as the normative and praxeological pressures which render the 'political' and the 'international' as complex playgrounds of interaction.

This essay comes to the conclusion that critical theory establishes a close link between political theory and practice via its praxeological and empirical commitment to emancipatory change. Moreover, this critical purpose is condensed in what Linklater envisions as political community's triple transformation, which perfectly matches Keohane's criteria for a research programme:

Visions of the triple transformation of political community to secure greater respect for cultural differences, stronger commitments to the reduction of material inequalities and significant advances in universality resist pressures to contract the boundaries of community while encouraging societal tendencies which promise to reduce these basic moral deficits (Linklater 1998: 3).

As a consequence, the distinction between critical and problem-solving theorizing relies upon deep differences in purpose and understanding of the social world. These differences are reflected in their basic claims and theoretical referents (epistemology, ontology, and methodology). On the one hand, by conceiving the existing order as the

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framework for theorizing, problem-solving approaches are epistemologically limited to addressing the politics of recurrence and regularity. On the other, critical theory's concern with the redressing of inequities turns it into a privileged method for engaging in social and political playgrounds in the framework of truly global politics. In fact, with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent new stage in the globalization of politics, the distinction between the 'local' and the 'global' and the 'international' and the 'political' have been blurred. Political spaces have been expanded and the subject and concepts of IR have been contested and defied over and over again. The bottom line is that problem-solving theorizing, with its positivist episteme, has little to say about the transformation of political community which has been underway for some time. By revealing the limitations of problem-solving theorizing and exposing the complex normative tensions constituting the 'real', critical theory exposes the deeply political significance of this theoretical divide in that the contestation it encapsulates unveils the praxeological potential of politics here and now, i.e. its immanent possibilities for change.

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[1] Ken Booth quoted one of Rosa Luxemburg's last letters, addressed to Mathilde Wurm, one of her closest friends.

[2] As Andrew Linklater notes, emancipation is not the purpose of every critical theory, but, in fact, "postmodern critical theory (...) displays considerable skepticism towards the emancipatory project associated with Marxism"

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