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Introducing Critical Theory in International Relations

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Critical theory incorporates a wide range of approaches all focused on the idea of freeing people from the modern state and economic system – a concept known to critical theorists as emancipation. The idea originates from the work of authors such as Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx who, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, advanced different revolutionary ideas of how the world could be reordered and transformed. Both Kant and Marx held a strong attachment to the Enlightenment theme of universalism – the view that there are social and political principles that are apparent to all people, everywhere. In the modern era, both authors became foundational figures for theorists seeking to replace the modern state system by promoting more just global political arrangements such as a federation of free states living in perpetual peace (Kant) or communism as a global social and economic system to replace the unequal capitalist order (Marx). Critical theory sets out to critique repressive social practices and institutions in today's world and advance emancipation by supporting ideas and practices that meet the universalist principles of justice. This kind of critique has a transformative dimension in the sense that it aims at changing national societies, international relations and the emerging global society, starting from alternative ideas and practices lingering in the background of the historical process.

The basics of critical theory

Although critical theory reworks and, in some ways, supersedes Kantian and Marxian themes, both authors remain at the base of the theory's lineage. Through critical philosophy, Kant discussed the conditions in which we make claims about the world and asserted that the increasing interconnectedness of his time opened the door for more cosmopolitan (i.e. supranational) political communities. Marx's critical mode of inquiry was grounded on the will to understand social developments in industrialised societies, including the contradictions inherent in capitalism that would lead to its collapse, the suppression of labour exploitation and the setting up of a more just system of global social relations. This way, the writings of Kant and Marx converge to demonstrate that what happens at the level of international relations is crucial to the achievement of human emancipation and global freedom. Consequently, the tracing of tangible social and political possibilities or change (those stemming from within existing practices and institutions) became a defining feature of the strand of critical thought entering IR via authors reworking Marxian and Kantian themes during the twentieth century.

Of course, neither Marx nor Kant were IR theorists in the contemporary sense. Both were philosophers. We must therefore identify two more recent sources for how critical theory developed within the modern discipline of IR. The first is Antonio Gramsci and his influence over Robert Cox and the paradigm of *production* (economic patterns involved in the production of goods and the social and political relationships they entail). The second is the Frankfurt school – Jürgen Habermas in particular – and the influence of Habermas over Andrew Linklater and the paradigm of *communication* (patterns of rationality involved in human communication and the ethical principles they entail). There are two themes uniting these approaches that show the connective glue within the critical theorist family. First, they both use emancipation as a principle to critique, or assess, society and the global political order. Second, they both detect the potential for emancipation developing within the historical process, but consider that it may not be inevitable. The paradigms of redistribution and recognition relate to what Nancy Fraser (1995) has called the two

main axes of contemporary political struggle. While redistribution struggles refer directly to the Marxist themes of class struggles and social emancipation, recognition struggles have to do with aspirations to freedom and justice connected to gender, sexuality, race and national recognition. Therefore, while Cox focuses on contemporary redistribution struggles, Linklater turns to questions of identity and community as more significant than economic relations in today's quest for emancipation.

Cox sets out to challenge realism's assumptions, namely the study of interstate relations in isolation from other social forces. He stresses the need to see global politics as a collective construction evolving through the complex interplay of state, sub-state and trans-state forces in economic, cultural and ideological spheres. His purpose is to pay attention to the whole range of spheres where change is needed in contemporary global politics. For example, when realism focuses only on great powers and strategic stability, it ends up reinforcing a set of unjust global relations stemming from power and coercion. For this reason, Cox challenges the idea that 'truth' is absolute – as in realism's assertion that there is a timeless logic to international relations, or liberalism's assertion that the pursuit of global capitalism is positive. Instead, he asserts that 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose' (Cox 1981, 128). Drawing on Gramsci, Cox comes up with a picture of the world political system brought into being by the hegemony and hierarchies of power manufactured in the economic arena. Therefore, power is understood in the context of a set of globalised relations of production demanding the transformation of the nation-state, and depends on the combination of material elements and ideas for acquiring legitimacy (Cox and Jacobsen 1977). Cox explores the economic contradictions spurring change in power relations and guiding transitions towards a fairer world order, even if acknowledging that emancipation is not inevitable.

As Hutchings (2001) points out, the critical project connecting Linklater to Cox sets out to uncover all sorts of hegemonic interests feeding the world order as a first step to overcome global systems of exclusion and inequality. Linklater's critical project aims at reconstructing cosmopolitanism, drawing not from some abstract or utopian moral principle but from non-instrumental action and ideal speech (open and non-coercive communication) assumptions developed by Habermas. Ideal speech is the critical tool used in the reconstruction of political communities (from local to global levels) through open dialogue and non-coercive communication, a process whereby all affected by political decisions put forward their claims and justify them on the basis of rational and universally accepted principles of validity. This method poses questions of the 'good life' (what a society ought to be like) and questions of justice (fairness in the way members of a society choose what their society ought to be like).

Thus, emancipation is conceived not with reference to an abstract universal idea but based on a process of open discussion about who can be excluded legitimately from specific political arrangements and what kinds of particularities (gender, race, language) entitle people to special sets of rights. For Linklater, the historical development of citizenship attests to both the potential and the limitations of such a process of open discussion about rights – who is entitled to what in the context of the state system. Citizenship has been the critical concept and set of practices permitting the enjoyment of universal rights inside a community (freedom of conscience, freedom of movement, freedom of association), but also the protection of vulnerable minorities by granting them particular rights in order to avoid or mitigate the effects of discrimination. On the other hand, however, citizenship has divided humanity into national groupings and has therefore been a barrier to the universal fulfilment of human freedom.

According to Linklater then, emancipation demands global interactions guided by open, inclusive and non-coercive dialogue about the ties that bind communities together. This also extends to our obligations to strangers and how fair it is to restrict outsiders from the enjoyment of rights granted to insiders. For Linklater, the answer lies in the potential for a more universal concept of citizenship, refashioned through open dialogue among those affected by the global processes that are changing the world. These processes are issues like non-state forms of violence (such as sexual violence and terrorism), forced migration, climate change and resource depletion. Therefore, critical theory can be seen as an instrument of the powerless to advance more equitable types of global relations. More importantly for us, within IR theory it combats the traditional approaches, mainly liberalism and realism, and shines a light on how they feed the imbalances of an unjust global order by failing to question (or critique) their foundational claims. Linklater's work is marked by the awareness that modernity is an unfinished project in its potential for accomplishing human freedom, namely through the transformation of the competitive system of separate states into a global community.

By admitting that immediate security needs press humans to set up bounded communities and to act according to national loyalties, Linklater recognises the limits to cosmopolitan politics. At the same time however, he underlines that there is a growing awareness that global interconnectedness and vulnerabilities impose their consequences on how communities define themselves and live side by side with others. Proximity with strangers prompts, for instance, a heightened sense of sharing a finite planet and finite resources and leads individuals to question exclusive obligations to the state in favour of a degree of cosmopolitan responsibility towards those who do not belong to one's national community.

Accordingly, Linklater explores the moral tensions emerging between humanity and citizenship ('humans' and 'citizens') in order to devise practical possibilities for creating more inclusive communities, with a civilising effect upon the conduct of international relations. Linklater does not underestimate the historical movement towards the creation of bounded moral communities (nation-states) but also sees potential within the historical process to enhance the expansion of rights and duties beyond the state. The fact that it has been possible for states in the modern international system to agree upon the protection of human rights and the political relevance of avoiding human wrongs is a sign of the relevance of these ideas.

What unites critical theorists like Cox, Linklater and others, then, is a political inquiry with an explicit emancipatory purpose. It aims at uncovering the potential for a fairer system of global relations resulting from already existing principles, practices and communities that expands human rights and prevents harm to strangers.

Critical theory and the European migrant 'crisis'

Haman stares at the long night behind him when I surprise his absent gaze on the deck of the Blue Star ferry carrying us to the Greek port of Piraeus. Departing from Rhodes, the ferry had made its first stop at the island of Kos where dozens of refugees from the Syrian war lined up patiently for hours and eventually got a place on board. Haman was one of them. After talking for hours about the war and his expectations for the future, it was clear to me that ferry on the Aegean Sea was a metaphor of a global community plagued with obstacles to human freedom but holding the resources for its fulfilment. After Kos though, I could not really tell anymore who was a tourist and who was a refugee, who was Greek or Athenian and who was neither – and it occurred to me why these categories had to matter at all. The common human condition aboard the ferry would stand for the night, but the following morning tourists would continue their tranquil journey home while refugees would have to improvise their way across Europe, begging for hospitality. At the port of Piraeus, on that early morning of August 2015, I said goodbye to Haman and wished him luck for the journey. It is Friday and he knows he must reach the Hungarian border before Tuesday or risk being trapped by the fence erected hastily in the previous days to block migrants on the Serbian side. 'It'll be cold' he says, in a premonition of what lay ahead for those like him seeking refuge in Europe. That was the last I heard from Haman. I stayed there for a while, looking at him blending into the crowd conveyed throughout Europe as a crisis of refugees and illegal migrants.

This brief encounter with Haman and his story is a trigger for recalling how in recent years increasing numbers of people escaping persecution, war and famine have tried to reach safe havens like Europe. While this has been approached mostly as a 'crisis' affecting Europe and the national communities composing it, some voices have underlined how the history of humanity has always been a history of migration, peaceful or otherwise, and that today more people than at any time since the Second World War are being displaced from their homes. A critical perspective assumes that the security claims of refugees fleeing war-torn countries constitute a cosmopolitan responsibility for the whole of humankind, especially for those with the resources to address them. It proceeds by critiquing security arrangements pleading exclusive loyalty to a bounded community and refusing refugees a number of cosmopolitan rights (hospitality and refuge). The point is not simply to understand how the world is constituted by moral tensions opposing nationals to strangers, but to contribute to more equitable political solutions to the current refugee 'crisis' by taking to the negotiating table the most vulnerable and their legitimate security concerns. Contrary to more traditional theories, critical theory does not see refugees as apart from the violence and inequality that produce them. In fact, it sets out to locate current waves of forced migration in the context of deeper economic and geopolitical structures producing harm and exclusion in a globalising world. Along the Cox/Linklater axis, current migration must be seen as forced upon individuals and the by-product of the current world order. The state of these

relations excludes the potential for human understanding and mutual recognition, as it has come about through the harmful globalisation of production and connected dynamics of nation-building, war and environmental degradation. Therefore, a critical perspective inquires deeper into how global economic forces, and related hierarchies of power, become complicit in creating the chaos and insecurity forcing people to leave their homes in different parts of the world. This entails looking in particular to how the dynamics of global capitalism are producing failed states throughout Africa and the Middle East, not just as an unintended misfortune but as part of how power itself works.

The main challenge for critical theory then is to connect theory to practice, to be able to set up a theoretical lens that results in a real-world transformative outcome. It is not enough to understand and trace the origins of harm and displacement in the world; it is crucial to use that understanding to reach fairer security arrangements that do not neglect refugees' claims to basic rights. Someone wanting to pursue a critical line of inquiry about the refugee 'crisis' might want to start with Haman and his journey from Syria to Europe as a mirror image of the current plight of so many people in the Global South. For critical theory today, politics, knowledge and global orders are for people like Haman and should serve the purpose of freeing them from unnecessary harm and unfair or unbalanced globalised interactions. Institutions like the state must be assessed in terms of how they fare in overcoming various types of exclusion vis-à-vis insiders and outsiders. Critical theory, more than other approaches, promises to go deeper in understanding why refugees have to leave their homes. This entails producing knowledge about direct reasons (war in Syria or elsewhere) but also about global structures of power and harm as well as the agents complicit in it (broader geopolitical interests, the workings of the global economy, climate change and its effects over the lives of communities). Moreover, critical theory examines the moral consequences (what must be done) of Haman's journey and what kind of responsibility others might bear for Haman's plight.

Cosmopolitan in character, critical theory refuses to see states as bounded moral communities by nature and instead finds in them the potential to protect strangers in need and include them in a broader notion of national interest. In the context of the current refugee 'crisis', critique is directed to the different norms and practices approved by states vis-à-vis incoming refugees. A basic move is to distinguish which ones are and which are not compatible with cosmopolitan duties already enshrined in international law and upheld by many people and organisations in different societies. A second move is to promote civic initiatives capable of consolidating fairer and more balanced relations (solutions to the 'crisis') between those who seek refuge from harm and those who are in a position to guarantee protection from harm. Solutions must be sought in open dialogue, resorting to rational arguments that take into consideration everyone's concerns and interests. Leaving solutions to national governments alone is not an option due to their rather strict position on national interests. On the contrary, a more balanced position would result from the active involvement of civil society, local authorities, European authorities and refugees themselves. After all, Europe is a pertinent case here as it is the home of the European Union – a project that united the bulk of European states in a supranational, and relatively open-bordered, union in which all citizens are legally free to work and live wherever they please within the Union. Clearly, there is an existing framework within European politics to work with to reach a more just solution to the migration 'crisis' than the one advanced by those nations who closed their borders. The reward for someone following a critical line of inquiry is therefore to understand to the full that theory is always implicated in practice and that the way we conceive the refugee 'crisis' shapes the kind of solution we envisage for it. From a critical perspective, then, there is only a true solution to this 'crisis' when political actors embrace cosmopolitan criteria that balance the whole range of interests and respect the rights of everyone involved.

Conclusion

Recognising that there are very different strands of thought within critical theory, this chapter has narrowed its approach to introduce critical theory as a specific line of inquiry seeking to advance emancipation, or human freedom, in the conduct of global affairs. A relevant critique seeks to trace forms of exclusion that instigate both redistribution and recognition struggles and then identify the potential for progressive change inspired by immanent ideas, norms and practices. From a critical perspective, then, people – not states – must be put at the centre of politics, global or otherwise. Additionally, political arrangements should be judged, or critiqued, according to their capacity to advance emancipation and the broadening of moral boundaries. Critical theory assumes an active role in the betterment of human affairs according to the potential for freedom inherent in modernity and the identification of political alternatives at hand in the globalising society and the historical process bringing it into being.

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