

Student Feature – Theory in Action: Critical Theory and Migration

Written by Marcos Farias Ferreira

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This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

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.

What is critical theory?

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.

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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.

Introducing the migration 'crisis'

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.

The Syrian War explained

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.

Discussion: Can we solve the crisis?

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

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solution to this 'crisis' when political actors embrace cosmopolitan criteria that balance the whole range of interests and respect the rights of everyone involved.

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