Critical Theory Meets Arms Control

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As it might be expected by any form of intellectual inquiry into social theory, scholarly reflections on critical studies overflow with tensions. In philosophy and social science, the concept of Critical Theory bears a twofold meaning. *Stricto sensu*, the term 'Critical Theory' refers to the generation of German social theorists and philosophers (e.g. Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas) that pertain to the Marxist Tradition, also known as the Frankfurt School. According to this first generation of scholars, critical theory differs from traditional theory in terms of its analytical purpose and theoretical assumptions, which draw on methods of scientific scrutiny heirs to Marxist, Freudian, and Kantian culture, and see in ideology the main hindrance to human emancipation. To this end, Critical Theory is conceived as emancipatory thinking capable of 'freeing the people from physical and human constraints' (Booth, 1991, p. 319) to achieve a world that 'satisfies the need and powers' (Horkeimer, 1972, p.246). On the heels of this new methodological approach to social science, various critical 'sub-theories' have started to outspread in the attempt to explore various forms of human beings' domination in modern societies. This new trend gave rise to a plurality of philosophical schools of thought in the field of International Relations, which were characterised by a common critique – from positivist (neo-Marxist, social constructivism) and postpositivist (postcolonialism, poststructuralism, Critical Theory, neo-Gramscianism, feminism, non-Weberian historical sociology, etc. (Hobden & Hobson, 2002) positions – of the theoretical status quo denotative of traditional approaches to IR theories. 'Critical theory' in general terms, is commonly reserved to designate this multitude of new ways of researching social science, whose representatives are often referred to as 'second generation'. Notwithstanding such terminological dichotomy, nonetheless, whether it comes to critical theory in a broad or strict sense, it is possible to detect a connective glue uniting both labels. That is the attempt to endow social science with normative foundations by shifting its research function from a purely descriptive type to an exploratory one, i.e. to investigate possibilities for human action and intervention. In this sense, critical theories aim at combining theory with practice to produce real transformative outcomes. In what follows, capitalised use of the term 'Critical Theory' will be widely adopted as metonymy for the Frankfurt school tradition whilst non-capitalised use is meant to refer to critical theory in its wider sense as well as to those theories developed by the exponents of the Frankfurt School in the broader realm of the discipline.

In Need of a Critical Perspective

The need for a new methodology to approach the study of International Relations has not come out of the blue. On the contrary, it has been a direct result of a series of social, economic, and political circumstances from which has emerged a new urgency of rethinking about security, both in structural and spatial terms. Traditional approaches to the discipline were characterised by a mere state-centric analytical perspective which proved to be of limited value as soon as the Cold War was brought to an end. The unexpected incapacity to fully predict the causes behind the breakup of the bipolar system vividly epitomised such limited modus operandi, which completely neglected the role played by subnational, transnational, and supranational factors. In this respect, 9/11 terrorist attacks represented a prominent landmark in the development of IR studies since they made scholars aware of how the state-centric static approaches favoured until then were no more of practical validity to effectively take account for the new emerging issues. Consequently, reformulations of traditional agendas reflected a new conception of the state as, to borrow from Korkheimer's words (1987), "just a mean to an end". In this vein, much has to be owed to the exponents of the Welsh School (sometimes the Aberystwyth School) Richard Wyn Jones and Ken Booth who, under the influence of the Frankfurt School and Gramscian thinking, spearheaded the new approach in security policy (Floyd, 2007). In addition to providing a new analytical perspective that could address the need of de-centralising the state as referent

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object of inquiry, critical theory proved to be a valuable tool at the service of security studies to satisfy the increasing necessity of a broader research framework. The revisionary proposals for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) put forwards by non-aligned countries were a clear demonstration that a new north-south tension was to be taken into account in policy analysis other than the mere east-west friction of the Cold War years. In this sense, critical theories contributed to transcend that theoretical axiom that throughout the second half of the 20th century narrowed the way of thinking about security to a mere dichotomous rivalry.

The Basics of Critical Theory

Critical Theory embraces a plurality of approaches and theoretical assumptions, at the centre of which lies the concept of 'emancipation' of Kantian and Marxist traditions. Both thinkers became central figures for critical theories in modern times as they matured revolutionary ideas about new ways how the world could be reordered, demonstrating a clear attachment to universalist aspirations fitting the Enlightenment mould. By approaching philosophy from a critical perspective, Immanuel Kant advanced claims about a world characterised by increasing connectivity which paved the way for cosmopolitan and supranational forces. On the other hand, Karl Marx focused the attention of his analysis on the contradictions inherent in the capitalist society and found in the suppression of exploitative practices the solution for a fairer and more just system of global relations. Despite the different focus of research, anyway, either philosophers' practices shared a common postulation, i.e. systemic changes are an indispensable condition for the achievement of human emancipation.

Throughout time, by maintaining such universalist aspiration to change the world for the better, critical theorists condemned social practices and institutions of repressive nature proposing alternative solutions to replace the modern state-centred system with new political arrangements. Marx's idea of communism as a global social and economic system to supplant unjust capitalism and Kant's utopian vision of a federation of free states to achieve a worldwide long-lasting peace was thus employed as a source of inspiration for the advancement of universalist principles of justice. In this way, the possibility of social and political change became the defining feature of critical IR theorists in the last century.

If we want to fully understand how Critical Theory has evolved in the modern discipline of IR, however, our attention should be better turned towards two more recent sources: Antonio Gramsci and Jürgen Habermas as one of the main representatives of the Frankfurt School. Both Gramsci and Habermas extensively contributed to influencing the thoughts of modern scholars belonging to the Critical Theory Paradigm (CTP)[1] within international relations. Notably, their ideas found a strong echo in the minds of two main representatives, Robert Cox and Andrew Linklater and their paradigms of production and communication respectively: the former referring to social and political relationships entailed in economic patterns of production as the most important aspect in the quest for emancipation, the latter calling instead the attention on ethical and identity principles implied in human communication and rational behaviours. Notwithstanding this distinctive feature, however, both paradigms agree to intend offering IR practitioners a new comprehensive understanding of exploitative power structures and eventually suggesting emancipatory alternatives to make positive social change possible.

Specifically, Linklater sustains that cosmopolitan practices should be promoted by drawing not on utopian and moral principles, but on non-instrumental actions aimed to construct multi-level political communities through non-coercive communication and open dialogue. His proposal is exemplified by what he calls 'ideal speech', a process of public discussion whereby those with the capacity of political action put forward claims that are justified by moral principle of universally accepted validity. For its part, Cox's contribution can be seen as an attempt to challenge traditional realist assumptions that advocated for a way of studying IR in isolation from other social factors. In particular, Cox argues that international politics should instead be conceived as a complex network in constant evolution: a sort of game in which state, sub-state, and trans-state forces interplay with each other amongst economic, ideological, and cultural domains. The fixed logic in approaching IR that characterised the realist approach is thus by Cox put into question, as a demonstration of the fact that theories were no longer viewed as promoters of absolute and timeless truth, but as 'always for someone and for some purpose' (Cox 1981, p. 128). If on the one hand, both Cox's and Linklater's rely on the practice of emancipation as a powerful tool to criticise the global order, on the other hand, nonetheless, they also recognise the unfathomability of its potential. Fraser (1995, p. 68-93) referred to this

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contentious grip of awareness as the two main axes of contemporary political struggles.

Uniqueness of the Approach and Its Perceptions: Security, Power, Morality

In view of the foregoing, the uniqueness of the Critical Theory approach in studying International Relations can be represented by its scathing review of traditional approaches (realism and liberalism), which were deemed to have failed in their mission to shed a light on the imbalances and unfairnesses characterising the global order of the time. In this sense, Critical theory ultimately aims at inquiring how global forces are instrumental in creating chaos and insecurity to advance more just forms of global relations through 'equitable political solutions' (Ferreira, 2017, p. 54).

- Security: Critical theory perceives security problems as direct products of the world order. For this reason, it assumes that the security claims of a confined group of people should be of cosmopolitan responsibility, particularly for those having the resources to address them. From a critical perspective, the only true solution to a crisis is thereby when political actors embrace cosmopolitan criteria to fairly balance the interests and rights of everyone, thus creating a system of equal relations between security providers and security seekers.

- Representational and material power: while traditional security studies view technology in neutral terms and consider the production and the use of nuclear weapons as a process which overrides cultural particularity, critical theory recognises their ambivalent nature. In this respect, according to a Critical Theory perspective technology can offer a range of options for the society, which are partly chosen on the configuration of power relationships.

- Moral consequences: For Critical Theory the moral consequences are of utmost importance. For this reason, people are placed at the centre of politics and political arrangements are judged on their capacity to (a) promote emancipation, (b) expand moral confines. In this context, states are seen as actors having the capacity and the moral obligation to protect those in needs.

Critical Theory and Security Studies: The Welsh School Approach

With critical theory, security studies experienced a deepening and widening of the field, of which two main themes can be seen as converging points (Browing & McDonald, 2011): (a) the rejection of ontological and epistemological assumptions of positive realism that aimed at providing objective social analysis by envisaging a particular preference for the State as indispensable referent object and for the military force as main threat; (b) an overall concern about the political and ethical implications of the 'security' discourse. Some scholars tend to use the label 'critical security studies' (CSS) to refer to this wide variety of new approaches that are critical of mainstream realist methodologies. Others instead see CSS as a completely distinct approach in its commitment to emancipatory practices (Williams, 2005). Representers of the latter view are usually referred to as the Welsh School (sometimes the Aberystwyth School), also known as 'emancipatory realism'. In the followings, the term CSS will be used with this second meaning.

Main critiques advanced by CSS are directed towards the traditional 'status-quo oriented' security thinking and the 'business as usual' (Booth, 2005) that characterised realist security practice, a tendency that produced an ethics 'hostile to the human interest' (Booth, 2007) in which inequalities and suffering widely spread. Thanks to its reliance upon Frankfurt, Marxist, and Gramscian thinking (Booth, 2007), the theoretical framework of CSS is considered to have two main advantages. The first one is represented by the deconstructive aspect of its analytical approach: CSS has a heterogeneous and cosmopolitan understanding of the notion of political community, expanded beyond the boundaries foreseen by the traditional Westphalian states-system (*ivi.*) – seen as an important part of insecurity-related problems in today's world politics (Booth, 1997, p. 99). The second is encapsulated by the progressivity of its reconstructive agenda: CSS focuses the centre of the analysis on social reality to detect those 'contradictions which offer the most determinate possibilities for emancipatory change' (Antonio, 1981, p. 332). As Booth (2007) affirms, the key normative task for CSS is the politicisation of security theory and practice through emancipatory aims and means, a process of which the Welsh School can be seen as the main promoter. Given that emancipation is

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considered to be 'the politics of inventing humanity' (Bourne, 2012), the ultimate goal of the theory, therefore, is to be that of identifying those possibilities inherent in concrete solutions and strengthen them (Booth, 2007). In this sense, what Booth advocates for, is a unification between aims and means, a dualism that allows to treats both components as separate rather than mutually constituent units.

Security Studies and Arms Control Linkage

It is commonly assumed that the only important questions that arise in connection with disarmament or arms control concern how it may be brought about. But the question must first be asked, what is it for? Unless there can be some clear conception of what it is that disarmament or arms control is intended to promote, and to what extent and in what ways it is able to do so, no disciplined discussion of this subject can begin. (Hedley Bull, 1961, p. 3.)

Within IR, academic debates about arms control processes have been the object of a recent revitalisation, which resulted in an established consensus on the purpose and challenges facing arms control practices. This notwithstanding, however, there has been much argument about hopes for disarmament and arms control, but still little theoretical reflection per se. Such lack of reflection has been a consequence of the fact that the majority of discussions surrounding arms control were characterised by constant references about the role of technology (material dimension) as well as assertions concerning the static behaviour of states that limited possibilities for political cooperation (social dimension), with little attention being paid to the relations between the two (Cooper & Mutimer, 2011). This narrow focus on material and social dimensions conceived as two separate spheres caused throughout time a tapering of the aim of arms control theory to a mere dualism between politics and technology. In between such dualism, found room two different types of vision – substantivism and instrumentalism – whose promotion has favoured an uneven normative development in arms control arrangements.

- Sustantivism: According to the substantivist perspective, technological innovation is viewed as an autonomous process with limited possibilities of control and, as such, capable of determining social and political relations. In this sense, technology is seen as having autonomous capacity to shape society (Jones 1992, Gray 1992), politics, and economics (Ellul, 2010). Concerning the concept of "power", substantivists theorists claim that harm is something inherent in the weapon itself and for this reason, it can be reduced only through a management mechanism institutionalised at the international level. In arms control theory, various declinations of substantivism are prevalent among scholars when it comes to discussing nuclear weapons. For instance, Waltz claims that nuclear weapons can determine the character of inter-states relations that possess them. Others (Jones) instead reject completely both substantivist and instrumentalist views as given assertions about the nature of the relationship between society and technology. Instead, they claim that this relation should be explored in dialectic term.

- Instrumentalism: Contrary to the substativist point of view, instrumentalism sees technological innovation and diffusion as something amenable to control, on which human political and social behaviours can play an influence. In conformity with this view, weapons do not have an inherent significance. Instead, they have attached meaning as a justification for legitimising and/or de-legitimising how people make use of them. According to such a claim, for example, the reason why some weapons are traditionally considered of non-use while others are capable of indiscriminate cruelty and killing 'lie[s] not simply with the objective and essential characteristics of the weapons themselves but how civilisations and societies have interpreted those characteristics and translated them into political and military forces' (Price, 1997). Concerning the conception of "power", in an instrumentalist view weapons are not harmful in themselves. *Vice versa,* the harm is dependent on the use that people make of weapons and on the context in which such weapons are employed. Possibilities for control thereby depend on how arms and weapons are inter-subjectively understood (Adler, 1997; Garcia, 2006; Price, 1997; Tannenwald, 2007). Instrumentalism thus perceives material and social sphere as two separate identities that can nonetheless be linked together through the inter-subjective attachment of meaning (Adler, 1997, p. 319-63). Within the realm of arms control theory, instrumentalism is best exemplified by Collin Gray and John Muller, in whose perspectives the material aspect per se (e.g. weapons and technological innovation) has no bearing on the social consequences (e.g. violence).

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Even though they are different in terms of theoretical conceptions and practical interpretations, both perspectives agree on asserting the presence of a pre-determined relationship between material and non-material dimensions. By spreading out in traditional arms control theory as well as in the more recent constructivist inclination, such conception has contributed to creating conservative and restricted visions about actual possibilities to achieve arms limitation. As a direct result, nowadays arms control theories tend to rely on the dualism between technology and politics, on which substantivist and instrumental views are often matched with one other to produce different views of possibilities, pace, and scope (stabilisation or deterrence) of arms control governance. The theoretical framework inherited by arms control theory in this sense has thereby jeopardised to a considerable extent the hopes of security theory for producing a more secure world.

Conclusions: Critical Theory in Action

Within Critical Theory, contestations brought about by the dualist approach characterising the arms control's theoretical framework are not negligible, even for those scholars who adopt less pessimistic accounts about the possibility of arms control to build trust and cooperation. Nonetheless, critical theory may prove to be an effective solution for overcoming such contest since its agenda aims at embracing both the instrumental and substantivist perspectives simultaneously, in an attempt to bind them together. This deconstructivist practice, by moving reflections away from considering the weapons and the society as distinctive spheres towards the inter-subjective relationship intervening between them, may thus turn to be a useful instrument to spot potential for emancipatory practices in arms control. Given its axiomatic potential, the real challenge that critical security studies' agendas have to take up will be that of producing a true theoretical discourse capable of identifying and advancing concrete solutions for enfranchisement without falling into the instrumentalist-substantivist dualism trap.

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Note

[1] Within IR, CTPs vary from other mainstream theories in terms of their primary aim: the praxis, meant as the combination of theory and action. Instead of simply attempting to comprehend and explain, or control dominant

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power structures – be they economic, political, or social -, critical theories strive to expose and change them in positive. By combining theory with practice, CTPs, therefore, seek to promote a real social change from theoretical development. In this sense, their ultimate aim is helping to empower those whose ideologies have not found an equal place in social contexts and enact potential transformative practices. Aside from strengths, however, CTPs have their weaknesses as well. Being to a considerable extent dependent on social values, and being social values of very subjective nature, when these conflict CTPs face difficulties in answering the issue of "whose are better". The main areas of inquiry of CTPs include social relationships, language, organisational structures, economics, political, cultural ideologies, and other social movements.

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