

BY Dr. ALEYA MOUSAMI SULTANA

DEPT. OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, CPBU.

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COURSE 203

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS- THEORIES AND PROBLEMS

UNIT - III

Write a note on the Critical theory in international relations. - 20

Beginning in the 1990s, several prominent international relations (IR) texts and journals have been published. Many of these now contain a range of essays on the intervention of particular critical theory perspectives, such as Marxism, Frankfurt school critical theory, post-structuralism, and feminism. Others, however, focus exclusively on critical theory and/or its principal critical theorists in order to take full(er) stock of the increasing influence and changes in this approach to IR. The same applies to journals, which adopt either an omnibus or a pluralist attitude, or a more context-specific one, by publishing only articles with a critical theory focus.

The Critical international relations theory is a diverse set of schools of thought in **international relations** (IR) that have criticized the theoretical, meta-theoretical and/or political **status quo**, both in IR theory and in international politics more broadly – from **positivist** as well as **post positivist** positions. Positivist critiques include **Marxist** and **neo-Marxist** approaches and certain ("conventional") strands of **social constructivism**. Post positivist critiques include **poststructuralist**, **postcolonial**, "critical" **constructivist**, **critical theory** (in the strict sense used by the **Frankfurt School**), **neo-Gramscian**, most **feminist**, and

some [English School](#) approaches, as well as non-Weberian [historical sociology](#), "[international political sociology](#)", "[critical geopolitics](#)", and the so-called "new materialism".

Max Horkheimer, one of the founders of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research established in 1923, coined the term *critical theory* in 1937. While the school failed to produce what could be called a systematic theory, it drew on, and interweaved, various philosophical strands and prominent themes of political and social thought, including historical materialism (Marxism/Western Marxism), Freudian analysis, cultural disenchantment, Hegelian dialectics, and totality. Yet by the 1940s, many of the first-generation Frankfurt school thinkers sought to counter the emasculation of critical reason, dialectics, and self-conscious theory with a focus on the negativity of dialectics. In the 1980s, Jürgen Habermas's communicative action theory would provide a so-called critical turn in Frankfurt school critical theory by resituating reason and social action in linguistics. It was during this time that international relations (IR) theorists would draw on Habermas's theory and that of other critical theorists to critique the limits of realism, the dominant structural paradigm of international relations at the time.

The first stages of this critical theory intervention in international relations included the seminal works of Robert Cox, Richard Ashley, Mark Hoffman, and Andrew Linklater. Linklater, perhaps more than any other critical IR theorist, was instrumental in repositioning the emancipatory project in IR theory, interweaving various social and normative strands of critical thought. As such, two seemingly divergent critical IR theory approaches emerged: one that would emphasize the role of universal principles, dialogue, and difference; the other focusing

predominantly on the revolutionary transformation of social relations and the state in international political economy (historical materialism). Together, these critical interventions reflected an important “third debate” (or “fourth,” if one counts the earlier inter-paradigm debate) in IR concerning the opposition between epistemology (representation and interpretation) and ontology (science and immutable structures). Perhaps more importantly, they stressed the need to take stock of the growing pluralism in the field and what this meant for understanding and interpreting the growing complexity of global politics (i.e., the rising influence of technology, human rights and democracy, and non state actors). The increasing emphasis on promoting a “rigorous pluralism,” then, would encompass an array of critical investigations into the transformation of social relations, norms, and identities in international relations. These now include, most notably, critical globalization studies, critical security studies, feminism, postmodernism, and post colonialism.

It is important to note that the 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.

CONCLUSION

Of course, neither Marx nor Kant was 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.