

# CRITICAL THEORY

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# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After this lecture you should be able to:

- Understand the key principles of critical theory
- Be able to apply critical theory logics in IR
- Have an understanding of the relevance of critical theory in contemporary IR



# INTRODUCTION

- The Bolshevik revolution and the rise of Soviet Union in the 'East' provided the backdrop for development of 'Western Marxism' –a family of innovative theories which both built upon, and reacted against, aspects of the classical Marxist tradition.
- The Marxist expectation that proletariat revolution, once ignited, would sweep the advanced capitalist world was bitterly disappointed in the early twentieth century.
- The Russian revolution gave birth to socialism in one nation and Marxists in the West were left to ponder the reasons why working-class revolution had failed to materialize in their own countries and, subsequently, why fascism had triumphed in some Western countries.

# INTRODUCTION

- Official Soviet Marxism soon solidified into a rigid Stalinist dogma in the service of a one-party state, stifling rather than enabling critical discourse and social self-determination.
- It is in this historic context that we may understand Western Marxism and critical theory not just in terms of a critique of capitalism but also a corresponding critique of positivism and economic determinism as ways of understanding social life.
- Critical theory has a long intellectual tradition, being a development of Marxist thought dating from at least the 1920s when it developed out of the work of the Frankfurt School.



# CRITICAL THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

- It should be noted that while critical theory has not directly addressed the international level, this in no way implies that international relations is beyond the limits of its concern.
- The writings of Kant and Marx, in particular, have demonstrated that what happens at the international level is of immense significance to the achievement of universal emancipation.
- In explaining world politics, Marxism and critical theory study the structures of global capitalism and the ideologies and agents situated within these structures.
- It emphasises the capital-driven nature of states' actions in the global capitalist system and the need for states to maintain control of oil in order to maintain global capitalism.
- Key critical theorists in International Relations include **Andrew Linklater** and **Robert W. Cox**.



# FRANKFURT SCHOOL

- The ceremony that opened the *Institute of Social Research* in Frankfurt, Germany, on 22 June 1924 marked the official beginning of Frankfurt School critical theory.
- Critical theory has its roots in the work of the Frankfurt School, a group of thinkers as the principal members of School have included the founders of the Institute --Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno--, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Leo Lowenthal, the major 'New Left' theorist of the 1960s; Jürgen Habermas, the foremost critical theorist of recent times; and Axel Honneth.
- Among the key concerns of critical theorists is emancipation, and, in particular, the human capacities and capabilities appealed to in calls for emancipatory action.
- Its members have sought to preserve this conception of social inquiry while breaking with fatal limitations of the paradigm of production.

# FRANKFURT SCHOOL

- Essential to the Frankfurt School's critical theory was a concern to comprehend the central features of contemporary society by understanding its historical and social development, and tracing contradiction in the present which may open up the possibility of transcending contemporary society and its built-in pathologies and forms of domination.
- According to Horkheimer, critical theory intended 'not simply to eliminate one or other abuse', but to analyze the underlying social structures which result in these abuses with the intention of overcoming them.
- This intention to analyze the possibilities of realizing emancipation in the modern entailed critical analyses of both obstructions to, and immanent tendencies towards, 'the rational organization of human activity'.
- Critical theory draws upon various strands of Western social, political and philosophical thought in order to erect a theoretical framework capable of reflecting on the nature and purposes of theory and revealing both obvious and subtle forms of injustice and domination in society.

# FRANKFURT SCHOOL (HORKHEIMER & ADORNO)

- It was plain to Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1930s that the stress on the centrality of production and class conflict could not explain violent nationalism in the Fascist societies, the rise of totalitarian states and outbreak of total war. Their writings displayed increasing pessimism about the prospects for emancipation.
  - To them, the promise of emancipation that had united the members of the Enlightenment (such as Kant) with their successors (such as Marx and Engels) seemed impossible to realize in the modern era in which society is increasingly dominated by pressure to administer the social world more efficiently and more economically.
  - Horkheimer was concerned to change society and he thought that the theories to achieve this could not be developed in the way that natural science develops theories.
  - Social scientists could not be like natural scientists in the sense of being independent from and disinterested in their subject matter; they were part of the society they were studying.
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# FRANKFURT SCHOOL (HORKHEIMER & ADORNO)

- In a major contribution to thinking about the nature of the social sciences, Horkheimer argued that there was a close connection between knowledge and power. He thought that in the social sciences the most important forces for change were social forces, and not some 'independent' logic of the things being explained.
  - At this point, Horkheimer differentiates between 'traditional' and 'critical' theory: traditional theory sees the world as a set of facts waiting to be discovered through the use of science → positivism. He argued that traditional theorists were wrong to argue that the 'fact' waiting to be discovered could be perceived independently of the social framework in which perception occurs.
  - But the situation was worse than that because Horkheimer argued that traditional theory encouraged the increasing manipulation of human lives. It saw the social world as an area for control and domination, just like nature, and therefore was indifferent to the possibilities of human emancipation.
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# FRANKFURT SCHOOL (HORKHEIMER & ADORNO)

- In its place Horkheimer proposed the adoption of critical theory, that did not see facts in the same way as did traditional theory. For critical theorists, facts are the products of specific social and historical frameworks.
- Realizing that theories are embedded in these frameworks allows critical theorists to reflect on the interests served by any particular theory. The explicit aim of critical theory is to advance human emancipation, and this means that theory is openly normative, with a role to play in political debate.
- This of course is the opposite of the view of theory proposed by traditional or positivist theory, in which theory is meant to be neutral and concerned only with uncovering pre-existing facts or regularities in an independent external world.

## FRANKFURT SCHOOL (MARCUSE)

- Later members of the Frankfurt School sought to recover the emancipatory project without relapsing into classical Marxism and without ignoring the dangerous side of modernity.
- Marcuse analyzed how capitalism created 'one dimensional man' caught up in the satisfaction of manufactured material needs, but he believed that the student movement of the 1960s and struggles for national liberation and socialism in the Third World represented major political efforts to create the free society.



# FRANKFURT SCHOOL (HABERMAS)

- Several different understandings of emancipation have emerged from the critical theory tradition. The first generation of the Frankfurt School equated emancipation with a reconciliation with nature. Habermas has argued that emancipatory potential lies in the realm of communication and that radical democracy is the way in which that potential can be unlocked.
- Habermas has focused on how efforts to administer capitalist societies have resulted in the ‘colonization of the life world’ –that is, in the encroachment of administrative rationality on everyday life– but he sees in social movements that promote human security, equality for women and environmental degradation the promise of a new kind of society, which replaces the quest to control nature and administer society with the effort to expand human freedom.
- Habermas regards the European Union as an important new experiment in developing ‘postnational communities’ that are linked by shared commitments to world citizenship and cosmopolitan law. These are political communities in which the state is no longer primarily linked with a dominant nationality or dedicated to promoting selfish interests.

# FRANKFURT SCHOOL (HABERMAS)

- States in the European region are not alone in coming under pressure to create political arrangements that respect the multicultural nature of modern societies.
- The greater mobility of peoples and the growing realization that democracy may have to be established on a world scale if it is to survive. Cosmopolitan democracy must link peoples and cultures that do not have a common language, common symbols or the shared history that have underpinned nation-states for the past two centuries.
- The influence of Kant's ideal of perpetual peace and Marx's internationalism is evident in Habermas's vision of postnational communities –and indeed Habermas has been more concerned than earlier members of the Frankfurt School with commenting on international affairs.

# FRANKFURT SCHOOL (LINKLATER)

- Like Marx, according to Linklater, critical theory international theorists seek to expose and critically analyze the source of inequality and domination that shape global power relations with the intention of eliminating them.
- Since the mid-1990s one of the core themes that has grown out of critical international theory is the need to develop more sophisticated understanding global constraints on humanity's potential for freedom, equality and self-determination.
- His main concern, in Linklater's *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (1990) , there was to trace how modern political thought had constantly differentiated ethical obligations due to co-citizens from those due to the rest of humanity.
- Linklater's *Beyond Realism and Marxism: Critical Theory and International Relations* (1990) had already begun to analyze the interplay of different logics or rationalization processes in the making of modern world politics.
- But in *Transformation of Political Community* (1998), he carries this analysis further by providing a more detailed account of these processes and by linking them more closely to systems of inclusion and exclusion in the development of the modern state.

# FRANKFURT SCHOOL (LINKLATER)

- Andrew Linklater has developed critical theory themes to argue in favor of the expansion of the moral boundaries of the political community, and has pointed to the European Union as an example of a post-Westphalian institution of governance.
- Linklater has used some of the key principles and precepts developed in Habermas's work in order to argue that emancipation in the realm of international relations should be understood in terms of the expansion of the moral boundaries of a political community.
- In other words, he equates emancipation with a process in which borders of the sovereign state lose their ethical and moral significance. At present, state borders denote the furthest extent of our sense of duty and obligation, or at best, the point where our sense of duty and obligation is radically transformed, only proceeding further in a very attenuated form. For critical theorists, this situation is simply indefensible.
- The goal is therefore to move towards a situation in which citizens share the same duties and obligations towards non-citizens as they do towards their fellow citizens.

# GRAMSCIAN

- Drawing upon the work of Antonio Gramsci for inspiration, writers within an 'Italian' school of international relations have made a considerable contribution to thinking about world politics.
- Gramsci shifted the focus of Marxist analysis more towards superstructural phenomena. In particular he explored the processes by which consent for a particular social and political system was produced and reproduced through the operation of hegemony. Hegemony allows the ideas and ideologies of the ruling stratum to become widely dispersed, and widely accepted, throughout society.



# GRAMSCIAN (COX)

- In international theory the first major critical theory contribution was in 1981 by Robert W. Cox –*Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory*.
  - Thinkers such as Cox have attempted to ‘internationalize’ Gramsci’s thought by transposing several of his key concepts, most notably hegemony, to the global context.
  - Cox firmly rejects the label ‘Marxist’, and has merely applied to the study of international relations ideas derived from a selective reading of the *Prison Notebooks*—of which the most important is the concept of hegemony.
  - The neo-Gramscians have helped enlarge the space for Marxist ideas in international analysis but their selective use of Gramsci and their idealist understanding of hegemony mean that they neither accurately represent Gramsci’s Marxism nor convincingly explain the dynamics of the international system.
  - Cox’s article was enormously influential because it was written in part as an attack on the main assumptions of neo-realism, which he criticizes most effectively because of its hidden normative commitment.
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# GRAMSCIAN (COX)

- Rather than being an 'objective' theory, neo-realism is exposed by Cox as having a series of views about what states should pursue in their foreign policies, namely neo-realist rationality. It is also revealed as a partial theory which defines the state in a specific (and non-economic) way, and rules out of its purview a set of other political relations.
- Cox calls it problem-solving theory, which 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organized, as the given framework for action. General aim of problem solving is to make these relationships and institutions work smoothly dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble ... the general pattern of institutions and relationships is not called into question'. The effect then is to reify and legitimize the existing order. Problem solving theory therefore works to make the existing distribution of power seem natural.
- Cox points out that 'theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose'. Theories see the world from specific social and political positions and are not independent. There is, he says, 'no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space. When any theory so represents itself, it is the more important to examine it as ideology, and to lay bare its concealed perspective'

# WESTERN MARXISM

## Frankfurt School Antonio Gramsci theorists

are wary of economic focus of Marxism and they emphasise that all theories are permeated by values and norms and have political implications for the social world.

developed theory of hegemony.  
Hegemony is a form of political power that relies upon consent rather coercion.



# CRITICAL SECURITY STUDIES

- Critical Security Studies is the name given to a trend in the study of security issues that has gained prominence in recent years (in particular through the work of Keith Krause and Mike Williams, Ken Booth, and Richard Wyn Jones).
- Critical Security Studies combines influences from Gramscian and critical theory with aspects of peace research and the so-called ‘alternative defence thinking ‘.
- In contrast to much mainstream security thinking, Critical Security Studies refuses to accept the state as the ‘natural’ object of analysis, arguing that, for much of the world’s population, states are part of the security problem rather than a provider of security. Instead, proponents of Critical Security Studies tend to argue that it is beholden on security analysts to place individual human beings at the centre of their analysis.
- Like Linklater, they regard their work as supporting and nurturing emancipatory tendencies, for it only through emancipation that security can ultimately be assured.

# CONCLUSION

- Critical theory has its roots in Marxism, and developed out of the Frankfurt School in the 1920s. Max Horkheimer distinguished between traditional and critical theory. Its most influential proponent since 1945 has been Habermas.
- Some theorists have been pessimistic about the role of Marxism and critical theory in contemporary world politics but **new social movements** that explicitly connect capitalism with US imperial power remind us of the remaining relevance of Marxism and critical theory in world political explanation.
- Robert W. Cox writes of the difference between problem-solving and critical theory. The former takes the world as given and reifies existing distributions of power. The latter enquires into how the current distribution of power came into existence.
- Critical theory sees social structures as real in their effects, whereas they would not be seen as real by positivism since they can not be directly observed.
- There are many other contributions of critical theory; particularly important are the works of Linklater and of those working in the area of critical security studies, such as Keith Krause and Mike Williams, Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones.

## CASE STUDY

- From a critical theory perspective the War on Terror should be understood in the context of ideology of economic security.
- Iraq War cannot be understood in isolation from capitalism in its historical form: Iraq holds important oil reserves, a key requirement for maintenance of US power and global capitalist order. ●