

# 8

## Critical Theory

STEVEN C. ROACH

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### Reader's Guide

This chapter introduces the reader to various concepts and ideas of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research or 'Frankfurt school', which first coined the term 'critical theory' in 1937. It critically examines how the Frankfurt school's critiques of authoritarianism and repression inspired and shaped the critical interventions by International Relations (IR) theorists. In doing so, the chapter focuses on two principal strands of critical IR theory: normative theory and the Marxist-based critique of the political economy. The former represents the extended applications and development of social and moral theory in IR, including, most notably, Habermas's communicative action theory, while the latter highlights the use and development of Antonio Gramsci's ideas and concepts to theorize about world order and global civil society. The chapter also frames the parameters of critical reflexivity, arguing that the concept remains the most promising way or method of directing the tensions between these and other critical IR theory strands.

### Introduction

The early critical theory interventions by Robert Cox and Richard Ashley provided crucial starting points for critiquing realism and liberal institutionalism (see **Chapters 3–5**). More important, they marked the start of a growing disenchantment with realism's rigid statism/paradigmatic dominance: notably, its failure to examine the significant transformations occurring in the international system, including the fall of the Soviet Union, the spread of international human rights, and the emergence of global democratic institutions that could address the demands of marginalized individuals and people. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, critical International Relations (IR) theory would encompass a wide array of different theoretical strands—including cosmopolitanism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and critical security studies—reflecting what some would regard as the emancipatory project in IR theory (Rengger and Thirkell-White 2007) (see **Chapters 10, 11, and 12**). Thus,

while the postmodern strand critiqued the repressive effects of fixed sovereign borders (Ashley and Walker 1990), pragmatic and normatively-based critical theories deployed the concepts of discursive ethics, dialogue, and community to map the emerging modes of legitimacy, emancipation, world citizenship, and global governance (Linklater 1998; Diez and Steans 2005).

Nonetheless, such pluralism might suggest that critical IR theory lacks a core set of concepts, themes, and ideas to serve as the basis of a systematic critique of oppression and injustice in international relations. However, to do justice to the plurality of different voices and underrepresented actors, one also needs to see critical theory as embodying or bringing to light the importance of these voices; to realize that its core mission is to expose the many sources of oppression. It is this broad-based mission that underscores the importance of another open-ended idea: that the global institutions and technologies that have emerged to address oppression have themselves become far more complex and intricate, requiring critical theorists to become more imaginative in their efforts to understand not only the shifting empirical dynamics of governance, but also the social genesis of norms and events/crises (Linklater 2008; Roach 2010; Kurki 2011). Indeed, it is precisely this imaginative pull, or need to remain critical in the face of growing threats in world politics, that raises the question of how critical theory can become more pluralistic or open-ended in its approach to understanding these threats and problems.

One way of interpreting this issue would be to say that Frankfurt school critical theory, or the work of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research founded in 1923, is only one historical source of critical IR theory; that critical IR theorists have been shaped and inspired by a wide range of social and moral thinkers of the past (and not just Frankfurt school thinkers such as Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas), notably Immanuel Kant, Georg Friedrich Hegel, and Giambattista Vico (Brincat et al. 2012; Devetak 2018, 2014). Another way of interpreting this issue would be to say that critical IR theory can and should develop the concept of critical reflexivity in both theory and practice, that is, adopt its own systematic, reflexive critique of global phenomena (Roach 2007; Levine 2012; Amoureux and Steele, 2016). Developing this concept would mean developing and addressing what I argue is the productive tension between the practical and abstract requirements of critical theorizing in world politics. By 'productive tension' I am referring to the mutual or offsetting benefits of producing practical and empirical knowledge through an open-ended, dialectical critique of social relations and governance in world politics. The aim of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the parameters of this and other tensions and challenges encountered in critical IR theory, by showing how the Frankfurt school critical theory can provide an important source of reflexive critique.

The first part of this chapter introduces the reader to the legacy of the Frankfurt school. This is followed by a survey of the prevailing normative and historical materialist approaches in IR, which have been directly inspired by Frankfurt school critical theory and Marxist revisionists, respectively. As we shall see, the normative strand has produced lively debates on the practical and empirical relevance of critical international theory, leading to discussion of the practical possibilities of systematizing a normative critique of international relations. The final section frames the basic parameters of critical reflexivity in world politics.

## The Frankfurt school

The origins of critical theory can be traced back to the modern theories of consciousness and dialectics of the Enlightenment and German Idealism. Kant, Hegel, and Marx are the most notable and seminal influences in this regard. After Hegel and Marx and just prior to the emergence of the Frankfurt school, Western Marxists began to critique the orthodoxy of Marxism (Chapter 7). In *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), Georg Lukács theorized that revolutionary movements should never be assumed to be permanent unless the derivative facts of the movement could be revised in relation to changing social and historical circumstances. If, in other words, one did not examine the changing content of his or her social ideas and facts, one also risked isolating this content within the larger, holistic struggle for equality and justice (or holism expressed as social totality). It was precisely this isolation that suppressed the political consciousness of individuals, allowing a fixed and rigid understanding of social and societal relations (as Horkheimer and Adorno called it) to register the regressive and/or authoritarian tendencies of a political regime, that is, the Nazis' use of blood and soil to signify greater German nationalism as a social totality or holistic end in itself.

The first-generation theorists of the Frankfurt school, then, sought not only to revise orthodox (or scientific) Marxism, but also to draw on aesthetics and culture to understand the pervasive tendencies and/or influence of authoritarianism and conformism.<sup>1</sup> Their unorthodox critique of society was based on an intriguing contradiction: that rather than liberating man from oppression, technology, and market forces (e.g. consumerism), the liberal tenets of individual freedom had conspired to suppress the political consciousness of man. Walter Benjamin, considered one of the first-generation members of the Frankfurt school, referred to this phenomenon in terms of the jargon of authenticity, that is, the capacity of the owners of the economic and social means of production to reproduce and streamline the essence of art objects for the sake of consumption (Benjamin 1968). As Benjamin (ibid.: 221) put it:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.

Horkheimer expressed this idea in terms of instrumental reason, or the eclipse of the critical, substantive content of reason by scientific rationality/reasoning. His essay, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' analysed the political and social implications of employing reason to measure and test societal phenomena, such as mass production (Horkheimer 1992). Here he argued that traditional (or scientific) theory's methodological separation between fact and value was based on a (pre-)given, unexamined conception of social reality. Such a conception obscured the social genesis of facts, leading the social scientist to champion a neutrality and objectivity that ignored the social content of facts; including the researcher's self-awareness of his beliefs and values and societal oppression. Scientific theory had not, as many social scientific theorists assumed, liberated man from oppression and deprivation. Rather, it had led to a rigid rationality that limited and suppressed a meaningful engagement with the open-ended possibilities of social and political change.

Horkheimer's critique of scientific reason, then, reflected a deep disenchantment with the Enlightenment principle of rationality. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, he and Theodor Adorno claimed that the new culture industry, or network of advertisers and entertainment figures, marked the emergence of a totalizing capitalist force capable of manipulating one's desire via consumerism (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994). Herbert Marcuse (1964), another first-generation theorist, would build on this idea by arguing that technology had absorbed the radical energies of desire and eliminated the opposition between labour and capital. His and Horkheimer and Adorno's negative critiques of consumerist society helped reveal a growing complacency and conformism in capitalist societies. Unfortunately, however, they failed to provide a systematic and cohesive theory of progressive social action and societal emancipation (Bronner 2002).

If anything, Horkheimer and Adorno's deep scepticism accomplished the opposite goal of revolutionary thinking: the abandonment of the cognitive possibilities for re-steering the Enlightenment project. It was precisely this abandonment that became the starting point of Habermas's attempts to resituate reason in uncoerced dialogue or communicative action (Habermas 1984). And, in time, Habermas would develop the legal and democratic context of the emancipatory project, arguing that the neutrality of democratic procedures constituted an important source of mediation between the facts and norms of law (Habermas 1996). In Habermas's view, the progressive elements of reason could be realized in the struggle to reach mutual understanding, or in deliberations and discussions that required voluntary or uncoerced dialogue among citizens (Habermas 1984). This critical turn in critical theory helps to underscore the important legacy of Habermas's theory for not only third-generation critical theorists, such as Axel Honneth, but also the development of normative critical IR theory.

## Critical IR theory

### The seminal phase

During the Cold War era, as already mentioned, realism and its variant, neorealism, dominated the field of inquiry in IR. Neorealism holds the view that the international system of states is an anarchical realm comprised of competitive states, or 'self-help' units (Waltz 1979). As the leading proponent of neorealism, Kenneth Waltz formulated a reductive scientific framework to analyse the structural constraints placed on state behaviour (see Chapter 3). The purpose of theory, in his view, was to describe reality. However, for early critical IR theorists, the purpose of theory was not simply to describe the reality of the international system, but to interpret reality as an open-ended totality of the changing and unfolding social relations and identities in international relations. The early critical theory interventions in IR that adopted this version of what we might call self-aware theory included the seminal works and articles by Robert Cox, Richard Ashley, and Mark Hoffman. Together these works were predicated on the idea that realism's ontological, scientific approach—which stressed objectivity through the observation of recurring outcomes—had impoverished our understanding of the complex, evolving social and political relations among states and other international actors (Ashley 1981: 205–6).

The central concern for these early critical theorists, then, was an epistemological one: how was the structure of the international system shaped by the ideas and thoughts of its

interactive actors? And how could we know or explain the evolving and differentiated structures of international relations (see Ruggie 1986)? Because realists had treated the anarchical structure as given or naturalized, they also ignored the origins and social content of these structures, that is, the social determinants of states' interests and motives for interaction (Cox 1981). States, in other words, were not merely units or objective entities: they were also subjective agents whose political and social interests were shaped by their interaction with other agents and changing social and historical circumstances.

But the focus on states' political interests presented its own limitation: it ignored arguably the most important agent of the emancipatory project, namely, the individual citizen whose shared values and beliefs had begun to assume more importance within a participatory network of global organizations and nonstate actors. Was it not this emerging fact and its social or sociological genesis that needed to be explained to advance the emancipatory project? Here Mark Hoffman (1987) argued that Ashley had failed to advance our understanding of the nonstatist features of the emancipatory project in IR. 'Realism', as he put it, 'performs an ideological function in legitimising an order in which only certain interests are realised—the technical and practical interests of states and the state system. This leaves it void of emancipatory interests, of the humanist element that is central to critical theory' (ibid.: 238). In drawing on Horkheimer's work, Hoffman claimed that the need for a critical theory of international relations lay precisely in the articulation of this humanistic element: the open-ended totality or global realm of human values and freedom—where countering the oppressive effects of state power, such as exclusion and marginalization, drove the struggle for justice and equality.

To go beyond the interparadigm debate, therefore, was to recognize the growing pluralism in the field. For Yosef Lapid, this meant recognizing the methodological value of pluralism in the IR field, or rather achieving rigorous pluralism under what he championed as the Third Debate (Lapid 1989).<sup>2</sup> But here Lapid failed to explicate what he meant by a so-called 'pluralist rigour'. Did it amount to a postpositivist paradigm that would offer an alternative to the rigorous scientific approaches it critiqued? Or would it provide a constellation of critical theory approaches, a plurality of critical theory methods clustered around principles of justice, identity, difference and (bio-)politics? Suffice it to say, the Third Debate reflected the growing conceptual space in IR for accommodating the different critical interventions that addressed the growing complexity of international relations. By articulating the expanding scope of IR's theoretical focus to the political and social margins, the Third Debate suggested that IR's future intellectual trajectory lay principally in the development of postpositivist and/or epistemological approaches to international relations (see Smith et al. 1996).

Note that postpositivism is a broad term that encompasses a range of interpretivist approaches or systematic critiques of scientific theory in IR. As the most radical, postpositivist approach in IR, poststructuralism dispenses with any moral or ethical foundations of social theory. Rather, it seeks to deconstruct these foundations in an effort to expose the hidden or masked, repressive features of world order and its attendant social and political practices (see Chapter 11). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ashley and R. B. J. Walker attempted to steer critical theory in this radical, discursive direction by focusing on the inherently unstable and arbitrary textual meanings of sovereignty (Ashley 1987; Ashley and Walker 1990).<sup>3</sup>



### Later phase: universal morality and political economy

However, for more pragmatic-minded critical theorists, poststructuralism's antifoundationalism negated the moral, ethical, and even political priorities of transcending and reconstructing the repressive features of international order. By displacing the discursive elements of reason in our critical and normative examination of humane governance—that is, moral reasoning—it ended up subverting the radical possibilities of humane governance reached through open-ended dialogue (Linklater 1992; Devetak 1995; Shapcott 2001). Andrew Linklater's objective in this respect was to position critical theory within IR, by explicating what he called 'modes of exclusion and inclusion' and the evolution of norms and justice into the global realm (of world citizenship). In *The Transformation of Political Community*, Linklater (1998) drew on a diverse array of normative ideas, including Kant's cosmopolitan right and Habermas's communicative action theory and discursive ethics, as well as Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer's communitarianism. Here he formulated three evolving domains of critical IR theory: normative, praxeological, and sociological. The normative domain focused on the dialogical ethics of world citizenship or the individuals, states, and group's transformative moral understanding of and commitments to international justice. The sociological domain, by comparison, encompassed the social determinants of international structures of the international state system, while the praxeological domain involved the actions and tasks of implementing and enforcing the principles of justice, freedom, and equality (Roach 2008: 227). Humane governance in this sense reflected the immanent possibilities of increased representation, accountability, and participation, as well as the concrete opportunities for realizing these possibilities through a growing global network of political and judicial bodies. Linklater's emphasis on dialogue, then, was intended to situate Habermas's discursive ethics within this normative strand of critical IR theory and to probe the social origins and evolution of proscriptive norms and laws against serious harm in international relations (Linklater 2008).

But his emphasis on dialogical ethics also reproduced the conflict between Habermas's ideas and the early critical theorists' embrace of Hegel's theory of self-consciousness. Habermas, to recall, rooted his ideas in cognition and linguistic theory in order to move beyond the metaphysical (traps) theories of consciousness, whose negativity his predecessors had embraced. As such, his communicative action theory displaced important elements of consciousness in Hegel's theory of recognition or identity formation, namely the dialectical struggle for the unity of the self-consciousness, or the progressive conflict associated with the internal recognition of outside events as constituting our own ideas of our finite place in society and the world. Recognition theory in this sense refers to how the struggle for respect, honour, and dignity can affect our interaction with others. It reflects, in other words, how moral conflicts between individuals and their institutions arise from the lack of recognition or nonrecognition. In this respect, the Habermasian-inspired basis of Linklater's normative critical IR theory steered one away from the sources and dynamics of this moral dimension rooted in the struggle for recognition. This, in turn, raised an important question for critical IR scholars: how does the discourse of recognition help to explain the moral and cultural sources of conflicts in international relations? And can these sources of moral conflict help to explain the difficulties of achieving mutual understanding through uncoerced dialogue? Indeed, even if the condition for uncoerced dialogue exists at negotiations or high-level

meetings, the lack of respect accompanying nonrecognition or misrecognition can constitute a moral injury that undermines the willingness to listen and/or be morally persuaded by reason.

This is a problem that lies at the centre of Axel Honneth's theory of the struggle for recognition (note that Honneth is considered a 'third-generation' critical theorist of the Frankfurt school). His theory stresses how societal conflicts between groups arise from moral injuries triggered by the withholding of respect and honour (Honneth 1995). Reaching mutual understanding and consensus is not simply about building empathy through dialogue or the deprivation of social needs, but about how withholding recognition of a person's or group's values and dignity can lead to the distrust that erodes such empathy (as this relates to the laws designed to promote fairness and accountability). The critical IR theorist Jürgen Haacke (2005) argues that Honneth's theory provides a potentially important conceptual roadmap for understanding and explaining the dynamics of global governance and the contested meaning of territorial borders. Still, critics of Honneth's theory of the struggle for recognition argue that Honneth's ideas downplay the changing conditions and determinants of oppression and inequality (Fraser 1997).

One might even argue that it overlooks how the two strands of critical theory continue to diverge (Wyn Jones 2001: 8). Whether or not this is true, it does suggest that the ongoing and underlying challenge of the emancipatory project in IR theory may well lie in the efforts to integrate the political economy and normative/ethical strands of critical theory. Which brings us to the neo-Gramscians, who have grappled with, and applied, Gramsci's ideas of hegemony to understand the changing forces and dynamics of production and global resistance movements (Chapter 7).

Robert Cox (1981, 1983) was the first IR scholar to tackle the international implications of Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, civil society, historical bloc, passive revolution, and organic intellectuals (see Leysens 2008). His aim was to explicate the structural contradictions of international institutions/order and hegemonic state power that structural realists had dismissed (i.e. the relationship between global elites and intellectuals of social movements); for out of these contradictions emerged the dialectical struggle to overcome the social inequalities of the international system. The goal of neo-Gramscianism in this sense was to situate these struggles within the evolution of large-scale capitalist structures and the novel trends of domination and legitimizing tactics in international relations, including the formation of the Tripartite Commission and American hegemony (Gil 1995; Rupert 1995).

But critics of neo-Gramscianism argue that it overextends or misrepresents the meaning of Gramsci's concepts. Randall Germain and Michael Kenny (1998), for instance, contend that Gramsci's concepts were never clearly intended to explain global political and social processes. Moreover, Ann Showstack-Sassoon (2005) argues that rather than extending the meaning of global forms of hegemony and civil society, neo-Gramscianism tends to displace or problematize the meaning of Gramsci's nation-state framework (i.e. Italian state and society) within the global network of nonstate actors (or the global civil society). In addition, some have argued that there are considerable difficulties with applying neo-Gramscianism to the developing world where racism and race remain key sources of oppression and the primary reason for maintaining the status quo laws governing world order (Persaud, 2016). These critiques notwithstanding, neo-Gramscianism does call attention to the ongoing practical challenge facing the role of critical theory in world politics,



namely applying critical theory to explain threats (i.e. humanitarian, environmental, and health), and to think through the responsibility of institutions to mediate and possibly resolve these threats.

### Empirical challenges and institutional norms

Addressing this challenge reflects in part the practical influence and implications of Habermas's discursive ethics and logic. Unlike Linklater's somewhat loose development of Habermas's ideas, we have come to see a more systematic attempt to articulate Habermas's preconditions of uncoerced dialogue and moral argumentation/persuasion for understanding the dynamics of international governance.<sup>4</sup> Here Thomas Risse's (2000) groundbreaking article remains arguably the most influential application of Habermas's discursive ethics. Not only does it involve the formulation of the logic of communication to bridge rationalist and constructivist approaches, but it also develops the discursive elements of communicative action, moral argumentation, and reasoning within the context of the decision-making frameworks of international institutions, including international law, diplomacy, and the balance of power. In this way, Risse is able to conceptualize anarchy as a 'thin lifeworld'; that is, a repository of interests, values, and strategies that offer the social context of state action, and the discursive requirements for arriving at rational consensus in the decision-making processes of international institutions.

Still, Risse's application is not without its problems. Perhaps the most significant is that the lack of enforcement and effective democracy at the global level requires considerable sacrifices and good faith to promote strong global spheres, or sites of the struggle for rights, democracy, and justice (Brunkhorst 2002). In addition, Risse also underestimates the considerable (ontological) constraints and volatility imposed by the anarchical system on the efficacy of norms and argumentation. Jennifer Mitzen (2005), for example, argues that the face-to-face interaction at international forums and meetings cannot prevent the quick devolution of negotiations into violence. Consensus-making in global public spheres also reveals the volatility of norm compliance. Here Nicole Deitelhoff and Harald Müller (2005) draw on Habermas's communicative action theory and Risse's logic of communication to analyse the hindrances to dialogue and norm abidance such as state noncompliance. In their view, norm density at the international level reflects the increasing interaction and number of normative requirements of governance, hence the challenge of studying the shifting dynamics of norm compliance through the efficacy or explanatory influence of persuasion.

Deitelhoff (2009) investigates this challenge in terms of the link between legitimacy and enforcement. Using the International Criminal Court (ICC) as one of her examples, she argues that the ICC constitutes a new institutional mode of building legitimacy through moral persuasion. It is important to note that the ICC—which cannot actively enforce its arrest warrants but must rely on state cooperation via its complementarity principle to bring perpetrators of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes to The Hague—must depend on its impartiality and/or formal independence to convince state officials to surrender perpetrators to the court (Roach 2006). This, of course, places the ICC chief prosecutor in the rather difficult position of persuading states to comply with its requests, especially those states that take issue with the ICC's intervention into their legal affairs. Indeed, if state leaders elect not

to cooperate in a genuine manner with ICC officials, then the ICC may need to adopt strategies (or negotiating tactics) that allow it to balance the need for justice/accountability against peace or regional security (Kaye 2011).

But the fact that ICC intervention has been directly linked with the Western justification of power in Libya (2011) should give one some pause. At the very least it should suggest that the exercise of military power cannot be entirely divorced from the reflexive goals of persuading others to comply with norms. While this may be an inescapable fact in world politics (or promoting a global order), it should not downplay the important tension within critical international theory between being practically oriented and producing abstract knowledge. If critical theory, then, is to develop into a systematic and relevant methodological critique, it will need to treat this tension as productive: by locating ways of producing practical knowledge through open-ended and dialectical critiques of the transformative parameters of world politics.

### Featured book

William E. Scheuerman (2008), *Frankfurt School Perspectives on Globalization, Democracy, and the Law* (London: Routledge).

This book's primary aim is to assess the normative and political relevance of Frankfurt school theory for understanding the challenges posed by globalization. Understanding and rethinking the global vision of cosmopolitan law and democracy remains a central normative priority for many critical theorists. More than anything, however, it requires greater appreciation of the rule of law and its expanding application through various institutions such as the International Criminal Court, the United Nations, and the European Union (EU).

In Scheuerman's view, the writings of Jürgen Habermas and Franz Neumann on the law help us to frame the possibilities for developing this vision of a global rule of law. Scheuerman's central argument in the book is that critical theorists have failed to articulate the conditions of the global rule of law. While he is careful to offer his own caveat—his shortage of in-depth empirical analysis of the central implications of Frankfurt school theory—he does provide the reader with arguably the most detailed and insightful analysis of the theoretical and empirical value of the rule of law for promoting cosmopolitan democracy.

The first part of the book focuses on the first-generation Frankfurt school theorists, in particular, Franz Neumann, whose ideas on democracy and authoritarian politics, as Scheuerman points out, remain overlooked. Yet Neumann's idea of the entrepreneurial class—of being 'replaced by a bureaucratic functionalist regarding monopoly capital'—suggests that private interests or capital can work against the articulation of a clear and flexible institutional basis of the global rule of law (p. 77). As such, Neumann may well have anticipated the growth of neoliberalism and how the powerful states of global institutions can undermine the democratic procedures for fair governance, that is, the World Trade Organization (WTO). This perspective on globalization—which stresses how monopoly capital restricts democratic consensus formations—might explain the unwillingness of WTO officials to expand the scope of the WTO's mandate into the areas of human rights, the environment, and labour.

In the second part, Scheuerman moves on to address Habermas's contribution to globalization, notably his recent body of writings on global democracy and the cosmopolitanization of the law. Here he probes the reformulation of ideas developed in Habermas's first book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and their contribution to the ongoing debates on deliberative democracy and cosmopolitan democracy. He wrestles with, among other things, Habermas's sobering admission of the limits of the global public sphere, by critically examining how his institutional analysis tends to fall short in formulating the preconditions of the global rule of law for democracy. As he points out, this means not simply paying 'homage to (nonstate) governance' insofar as it obscures the indispensable functions

(continued)

existing state and new state institutions will need to perform in achieving novel forms of self-legislation and the rule of law' (p. 133).

In his view, however, Habermas avoids this trap, but fails to explicate the institutional criteria for achieving these novel forms of governance. Hauke Brunkhorst's weak democratic global spheres proves especially instructive for Scheuerman, since it raises the important question of how, amidst democratic deficits that divide at the global level (Security Council veto), we can achieve solidarity and political unity. In effect, globalization challenges this solidarity in a number of ways, including building consensus around issues such as global warming.

But if the EU is any indication, globalization can also be understood as a progressive example. Critical theorists, in his view, will need to shed further light on this progressive development. This will mean formulating the concrete institutional requirements for expanding and maintaining a more flexible global rule of law. Nonetheless, while Scheuerman's analysis may not offer the concrete institutional analysis needed to do justice to this objective, it does provide one of the most lucid and insightful reappraisals of the unmet normative tasks of critical theory in the age of rapid globalization.

### Case study: the Arab Spring

The Arab nation stretches from Iraq to the Maghreb region of North Africa to central Africa. It arose from the rapid and sustained spread of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries, solidifying its control and influence under the Ottoman Empire and the Kalif's institutionalization of Islam (Hourani 1991). For several centuries the rise of Islam mirrored that of the Catholic religion. Yet its trajectory in modern times diverged markedly from the Catholic religion in the West, where Protestantism and secular nationalist movements helped spur the rise of individual human rights and democracy. The Arab world's collective identity remained anchored in a strict, orthodox devotion to Islamic principles or the inseparability of political rule and religion. By the latter part of the twentieth century, some Arab states would experiment unsuccessfully with multiparty democratic elections, such as Algeria and Sudan, giving rise to a passionate debate on the compatibility of democracy/human rights and Islam. But this would hold little sway over the Arab dictators, who continued to suppress dissent and to maintain a tight grip over state affairs; that is, until the winter of 2011 when the Arab people began to rise up against their rulers.

Sparked by a Tunisian street vendor's decision to light himself on fire to protest the government's decision to raise food prices (the vendor spent several days in hospital before finally succumbing to his wounds a few weeks later)—which would lead to the downfall of Tunisia's dictator—the protests would soon spread to other Arab states, including Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. Egypt would be the next authoritarian regime to fall, in February 2011, followed by Libya in June 2011 (and the eventual brutal killing of Moammar Qaddafi in October of that same year). What proved most remarkable in both cases was the sheer brutality of the Arab dictators' attempts to crack down on the peaceful protests. Indeed, the Arab people's embrace of Western democracy seemed to signal the determination to fight a far more intractable common enemy, namely, the Arab rulers. As Gregory Gause (2011: 89) points out, 'The common enemy of the 2011 Arab revolts is not colonialism, U.S. power or Israel, but the Arabs' own rulers'. And yet while some regimes fell, others did not. Saudi Arabia, for instance, immediately pledged nearly \$100 billion in new spending plans in March 2011. In so doing, King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia's leader, could do what the other dictators were unable, and even less willing, to do: to invest in the social welfare of the people.

Nonetheless, the uprisings defied most, if not all, expectations of the stability of authoritarian governments. Many powerful states, including the USA, had embraced these dictators, believing that

their support, which in the case of the USA included nearly \$1 billion of military aid to the Mubarak regime, amounted to the trade-off needed to suppress Arab discontent regarding the plight of the Palestinian people and to bring stability to the region. However, this strategy of containment proved short-lived, which, for our purposes, raises the following question: how can critical IR theory help us to understand the problematic and contradictory factors of the Arab Spring? One answer is that critical theory furnishes us with a reflexive critique of the tension between the Arab Spring's static and transformational political and social forces, a tension that successive Egyptian governments (since 1952) have suppressed through years of authoritarian rule and oppression. Such a critique requires analysis of four political and social dynamics of the Arab Spring: (i) the political identity and political consciousness of the Arab people; (ii) the problematic limits of neoliberal policies; (iii) the political will to rule democratically or in accordance with the rule of law; and (iv) the role of social media.

Prior to the start of the Arab Spring, there were indications that Arab authoritarian regimes were planning to liberalize their political systems. For example, unconfirmed reports had surfaced that Saif al-Islam, Moammar Qaddafi's second oldest son and heir apparent, had intended to reform Libya's economic and political system. Meanwhile Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria, appeared willing to follow the model of neighbouring Turkey, which, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan, had initiated sweeping economic and legal reforms. But the failure of these and other Arab states to liberalize their political systems testified to their rampant corruption, as well as the unwillingness of the growing number of super-wealthy elites to support authoritarian regimes (Gause 2011: 86). Nonetheless, the idea of forging a stronger economic alliance between the new wealthy elite and the state never materialized. For neo-Gramscian thinkers it would be wrong to label this as an isolated or insignificant event. Rather, something much larger was at work, requiring a dialectical, holistic perspective on the changing social forces; more specifically, the failed attempts to enhance and legitimize elite (economic) control and the emergence of a historical bloc of unemployed and marginalized workers and students who sought to counteract elite control.

But few expected the resurgence of the Arab shared identity. Abdul Nasser's Arab nationalism of the 1970s had not in this case dissipated; it had simply manifested itself in a far more passionate desire for political reform, namely in the Arab people's demands for unity and control over their particular political fates. In this way, the collective identity of the Arab people provided a common framework for the solidarity that the dictators had sought to suppress. It had, in other words, been turned against these dictators by the people's demands for new democratic political leaders and the rule of law. The demand for the rule of law returns us to an important theme of normative critical IR theory or Habermas's and Linklater's writings: the discursive power of democratic norms and their role in promoting a global rule of law. For both these thinkers, dialogue and deliberation remain crucial for understanding the role of the people's participation in the legal and political institutions that uphold the rule of law.

Still, it remains unclear how the Arab people's demand for the rule of law will play out—whether through an enlightened executive or multiparty elections that can give voice to the people. Indeed, the recent crackdowns in several countries have exposed either the lawlessness of the political leaders, or the close ties between the political leaders and judiciary. The Egyptian Army assumed political control of the country in January 2011, and police used their power to hold elections won by Mohamed Morsi in 2012. But their coup d'état staged the following year raised concern about the legitimacy of the political system. And not long thereafter, the army, under the control of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, brutally suppressed the protests by Islamists, killing over a thousand protesters in the streets of Cairo in the summer of 2013. Meanwhile, in Syria, with Russian support, Assad has continued to defy international law by committing an endless series of ruthless assaults on the civilian population. One of these attacks involved dropping a chlorine bomb on the civilian population in Damascus in April 2017, which led to thirty-four deaths and triggered the Trump administration's decision to bomb various sites suspected of producing the chlorine bombs. As of November 2018,

(continued)



it is estimated that up to 520,000 persons have been killed, many of whom were innocent civilians. With Assad on the verge of victory and much of Syria in ruins, it is unlikely that any post-civil war arrangement in Syria will include provisions for democracy-building. Instituting the norms of democratic pluralism and deliberation in this and other Arab states will require significant and sustained collective political will, something that may take many years to develop into a force capable of supporting stable and effective democratic institutions.

One of the novel dynamics of building political will has been social media. Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian Google executive who became one of the leaders of the political movement inside Egypt, was one of many young elites who shifted his loyalties from the state to people. Ghonim used social media to unite the people in opposition to the Mubarak regime. Not only did the internet help to expose the Arab people's plight to the outside world, but it also allowed for the instantaneous exchange of ideas and feelings. But in recent years, countries have used social media to spread fake news and to attack democratic institutions, including in the United States. Marcuse (1964), as we saw, argued that technology, rather than helping to liberate people from oppression, had repressed the desire to revolt. Was Marcuse correct? In the Egyptian case, it certainly seemed that Facebook and Twitter had provided an open-ended venue for countless empowered individuals to voice their dissent, despite the government's efforts to shut down public access to the Internet. Indeed, the government's action of shutting down the Internet appeared to produce a counter-productive effect: compelling the people to take to the streets. It was here, after the killings of their fellow protesters, that they learned to overcome their fear of the authoritarian regime, the product of years of repression.

In short, social media showed how technology could play a novel, revolutionary role, by first allowing them to simulate their solidarity before taking to the streets (see Der Derian 2001). However, the virtual-turned-real protests in the Arab world have yet to lead to any significant and sustained social and democratic changes (with the possible exception of Tunisia). It could be argued here that the openness of the Internet remains a far too volatile and nonsustaining democratic force of the collective political will, and that the national government is still quite capable of using its own disciplinary techniques of repressing this collective will. One might also claim that the recent events in Syria and Egypt simply expose the limits and possible end of liberal internationalism; that the lack of international political will and political and social underdevelopment in these countries is a reflection of the inability to overcome the effects of years of deeply entrenched authoritarian rule. What all of this suggests is that if the Arab people are to stand up effectively to such rule, then they will need to develop a more deeply entrenched form of political resistance.

#### Case study questions

1. Of the four political dynamics enumerated above, why is the political will to rule democratically thought to be the most significant in understanding the developments of the Arab Spring?
2. How would a critical theorist explain the limited influence of protests in bringing about social and political change in Arab states?

### Critical reflexivity

As we have seen, Frankfurt school critical theory focuses on the social, historical, and political forces of change. Within the open-ended global realm—fraught with tensions and moral possibilities—these forces help to shape the ideas, actions, and interests of agents. Critical theorists in IR, in attempting to understand the tensions between the growing dynamics of legitimate

authority and social resistance, seek to engage these forces in the following manner: by showing how they shape the content of ideas, international laws, and social facts, as well as the governing institutions that mediate between the moral principles and resistant action(s). Their aim in this sense is to study the reflexive modes or interaction of social forces and thought (Linklater 1992; Neufeld 1993). But as one can see, reflexivity in IR has come to pit an abstract approach stressing the production of transcendent and/or radical discursive knowledge of international relations against what we saw as the more pragmatic attempts to produce practical knowledge of agent behaviour and the role of persuasion in institutional governance.

So, the question that arises at this point is what exactly is critical reflexivity? And what does it mean to speak of the productive tension between these competing (abstract and practical) modes of critical theorizing? Generally speaking, reflexivity refers to a bending and bending-back movement, which, in critical theory, reflects an abstract and dynamic process of self-transformation and self-awareness. A reflexive subject can be conceived as an agent who revises and changes his or her thoughts and practices through his or her awareness of the mutual effects and causes of his or her actions in a societal setting (Lynch 2008). In recent years, the concept of critical reflexivity has been used to critique the state of the IR discipline (and its rigid paradigmatic boundaries) (Levine 2012; Guzzini 2013). Stefano Guzzini (2013), for example, treats reflexivity as a holistic method of linking distinctive modes of theorizing about international relations. Here he argues that all modes of theorizing in IR, whether empirical, normative, or interpretivist, seek to answer similar questions, such as why agents' values and beliefs conflict. The reflexivity challenge, in his view, is one of locating the junctures between meta-theorizing and empirical knowledge, of ultimately recognizing that IR theorizing is an open-ended inquiry into the content of values informing and shaping institutional practices and norms.

With critical reflexivity, therefore, it is important to assume that reality does not always correspond with our assumptions about truth; that there is an ongoing tension with separating values and facts in our inquiry into phenomena and developments in international relations. By this account, fact/value separation becomes an inherently arbitrary method of representing what we know of the international system or relations among state and nonstate actors (Eagleton-Pierce 2011: 806; Hamati-Ataya 2012). Values and facts, in other words, can and should be treated as 'mutually reflective', or as open-ended concepts that form the basis of our critique of the shortcomings of status quo approaches in IR. The aim is thus to show how knowledge and social reality are co-produced through social interaction; and, more importantly, how this interaction can produce practical or empirical knowledge of the changing moral and legal dynamics of prominent global institutions, such as the United Nations and the ICC, as we saw earlier.

In world politics, reflexivity has also become an increasingly important approach for bridging theory and practice by showing how scholars interact with and are shaped by the knowledge they produce of topics or issues in world politics (Amoureux and Steele, 2016). This priority also underscores the practical contribution of critical security studies to critical international relations. Critical security studies seek, among other things, to show how traditional mainstream approaches reify the link between one's identity and the cultural, social, historical, and humanistic elements of security threats (Krause 1998). Whether we are referring to health crises, terrorism, or nuclear proliferations, a security threat remains the amalgamation of many social forces, requiring critical analysis of the social contexts of such threats



(Booth 2005; Fierke 2007). As such, while fear may determine how one responds to threats, it can also fix the meaning of the symbols one uses to define such threats. Theory, of course, needs to do more than simply describe given perceptions of reality; it also must show how individual and collective responses to threats, ranging from the environment to health, are the product of the changing social and political circumstances shaping one's perception of such threats. Towards this end, critical reflexivity shows how the scholar and politician need to realize that their own engagement with threats is also part of their understanding of the nature and source of these threats.

## Conclusion

Critical theory remains relevant in a number of ways. Not only does it provide us with the insights to critique the limitations of positivist approaches, but it also offers alternative understandings and explanations of institutional processes as well as the state of dialectics in world politics (see Brincat, 2014). Perhaps more than any other theorist, Habermas continues to inspire critical international theorists to develop pragmatically oriented discursive approaches that study the shifting dynamics of international institutions, including international law, diplomacy, and war. But overextending critical theory in a policy and/or practical direction, as we saw, can also suggest the increase in tensions between what we identified as radical discursive and pragmatic strands of critical IR theory. If, for instance, we deploy critical theory to understand the political stakes of environmental justice, we might conclude that scientific rationality, or too much deliberation, contains a darker side or contradiction that environmentalists are unwilling to address, namely that scientific rationality and delayed action might actually repress the political consciousness and results needed to promote political unity and justice in an age of globalization.

Critical reflexivity aims to show how these underlying tensions of critique can become self-sustaining and even productive. To understand the importance of this aim is also to realize the dialectical process of world politics: that while globalization allows us to extend the emancipatory struggle beyond the nation-state, it can also challenge the solidarity and political unity that is necessary for promoting deliberation and/or deliberative democracy (Pensky 2005). Indeed, if critical IR theorists are to continue offering alternative and imaginative ways of understanding transformations in international relations, they will also need to continue grappling with these contradictions and issues in an open-ended and reflexive manner. For, in the end, it is the imagination that allows one to connect the social purpose of ideas and creative faculties with the radical desire for social change which reflects how the emancipatory project in IR ultimately remains an open-ended struggle for equality and justice.

## Questions

1. How does Habermas succeed in redirecting the negative critique of the first-generation theorists of the Frankfurt school?
2. What is the meaning and significance of the three domains that Linklater devises to understand the evolving modes of world citizenship?

3. What are two central features of the political economy strand of critical international theory, or neo-Gramscianism?
4. How does Thomas Risse adapt Habermas's logic of communicative action to explain the role and importance of argumentative reasoning and moral persuasion in international relations?
5. How does Honneth's theory of the struggle for recognition complement or work against Habermas's ideas in international relations?
6. How is critical reflexivity an important and relevant methodological approach for producing practical knowledge in world politics?



For additional material and resources, including web links, flashcard glossary, revision guide, and pointers on answering case study questions, please visit the Online Resources [www.woup.com/he/Dunne-Kurki-Smith5](http://www.woup.com/he/Dunne-Kurki-Smith5)

## Further reading

Brincat, S., Lima, L., and Nunes, J. (eds) (2012), *Critical Theory in International Relations and Security Studies: Interviews and Reflections* (London: Routledge).

An important and open-ended reevaluation of the state of critical international theory. The interviews with some of the key critical international theorists reveal important, intriguing insights, while the essays address significant new challenges and issues concerning the direction of critical international theory.

Devetak, Richard (2018), *Critical International Theory: An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

An important history of critical international theory.

Diez, M. and Steans, J. (eds) (2005), 'A Useful Dialogue? Habermas and International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 31/1.

This 'forum' debates the empirical relevance of Habermas's communicative action theory and the prospects for formulating a Habermasian-based critical theory of international relations.

Gill, S. (ed.) (1995), *Gramsci, Historical Materialism, and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

A state-of-the-art collection of essays by leading Marxists and Gramscian-inspired scholars on the methodological, theoretical, and empirical relevance of Gramsci's concepts for international relations.

Levine, D. (2012), *Recovering International Relations: The Promise of Sustainable Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

A wide-ranging and intriguing analysis of the current state of IR theory. It draws principally on the Frankfurt school to question the vocation of IR theory, or its suitability to explain global phenomena and to frame the concept of critical reflexivity in international relations.

Linklater, A. (1998), *The Transformation of Political Community* (London: Polity Press).

A path-breaking book that offers an authoritative and exhaustive examination of the different immanent modes of inclusion and exclusion in international society.

Reniger, N. and Thirkell-White, B. (2007), 'Critical International Theory after 25 Years', *Review of International Studies*, 33 (Special Issue).

This special issue (re-)appraises the progress and evolution of critical international theory, offering high-quality essays that map past and new directions of this theoretical approach.

Roach, S. C. D. (2010), *Critical Theory of International Politics: Complementarity, Justice and Governance* (London: Routledge).

This book investigates the intellectual currents of critical theory, from Kant to Habermas, and the recent works of Robert Cox and Andrew Linklater. It formulates a theory of complementarity that brings together critical theory and critical international theory.

Wyn Jones, R. (2001), *Critical Theory and World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers).

A fine collection of insightful essays from leading critical theorists in IR. This advanced text, aimed primarily at graduate students, addresses key issues that very nicely size up the important role and influence of critical theory in IR.

## Important websites

Institute for Critical Theory at the University of California at Irvine. Features several recent books on critical theory and offers several fellowships. <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/critical/>

Center for the Study of Developing Societies. The Center seeks to offer alternative critical viewpoints. It provides several links to important works regarding critical global studies, as well as audios and videos. <http://csdccu.tripod.com/csdc.html/>

## Notes

1. For an excellent historical analysis of the Frankfurt school's first generation of theorists, see Jay (1971). It should be noted here that there are officially three generations of theorists belonging to the Frankfurt school.
2. This Third Debate, in this context, replaced the third debate referring to the interparadigm debate. However, most IR scholars, it is fair to say, prefer to consider the postpositivist debate as the emerging fourth debate in IR.
3. This would lead to a more concerted engagement with Michel Foucault's genealogical analysis and biopolitics in IR (see Bartelson 1995; Edkins 1999).
4. See Neta Crawford (2001), who offers an excellent dissection of the properties of argumentation, before deploying this analysis to explain the role of discursive reasoning in various issue areas of IR.