

# Critical Theory

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# Outline

- Critical theory: assumptions
- Critical theory in IR
- Security as emancipation

# Critical theory: assumptions

- Not an IR theory but **social theory** emphasizing importance of social and cultural structures
- The social world primarily consists of **socioeconomic structures** which are legitimized by **dominant ideology** (Marxist moment)
- These **structures are objective** (researcher-independent)
- Social actors are **rational and capable to transform** their environment (Kantian moment)
- **Critical theory:** what are these structures? How can these be removed?

# Traditional vs. critical theory

- Max Horkheimer: **Traditional vs. Critical Theory** (1937)
- **Traditional theories:** explain and control certain phenomena (naturalism and value-neutrality)
- **Critical theories:** (1) explain certain phenomena from systemic perspective, (2) state a clear social goal, and (3) propose a practical solution
- Critical theory in IR: **problem-solving vs. critical theories** (Robert Cox 1981)



# Knowledge and emancipation

*„...theory is always for someone and for some purpose“ (Cox 1981)*

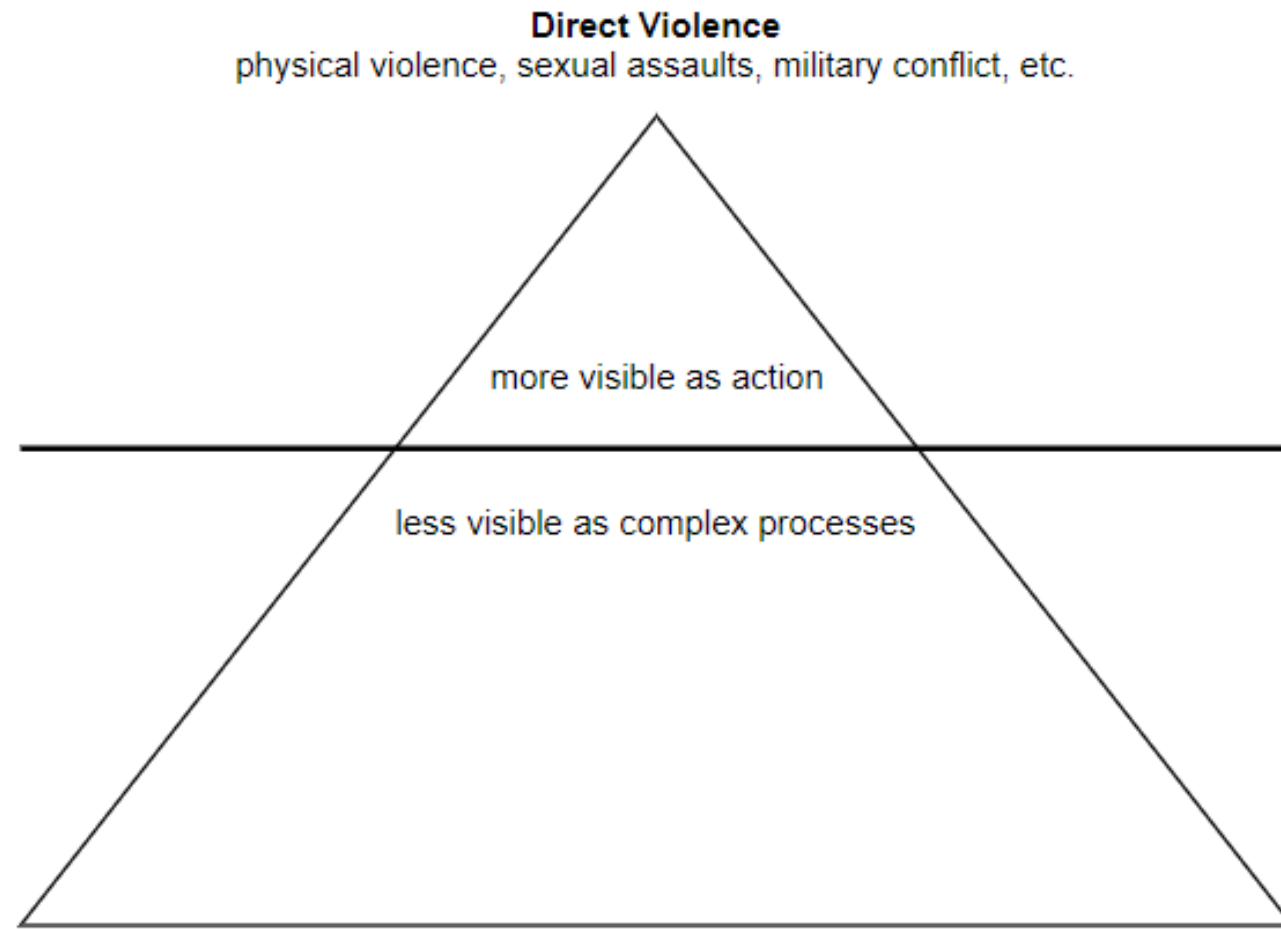


- Habermas's (1968) argues that **scientific knowledge** is a “social question” and reflects underlying **social interests** → three epistemological modes:
- **Empirical-analytical** (~ explanation-based): goal is to control
- **Hermeneutic** (~ interpretation-based): goal is to understand
- **Critical** (emancipatory): integrates both → goal is to distinguish which social regularities are invariant and which are not

→ CT goes beyond nomological EA inquiry with ambition to reveal *“ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed”* (Habermas 1968)

# Critical theory in IR

- **General formula** (Spegele 2002): *I study international relations to emancipate [X] from structure or condition [Y] in order to achieve [Z]*
- **E.g.:** I study IR to emancipate workers in coal mines [X] from exploitative work conditions [Y] in order to achieve more just society [Z]
- Link (Deadly fashion): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SCHfV97D7I>
- Link (Source): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Buo8CNKOBME>



**Cultural Violence**

**Triangle of Violence**

**Structural Violence**

Dominant discourses ("trickle down" liberalism, "natural order", etc.)  
Hegemonic ideologies (Washington consensus, religious doctrines, etc.)  
Embedded practices (tribalism, gun culture, etc.)

Environmental degradation  
Socioeconomic inequalities  
Unequal access to resources and opportunities (education, health, etc.)  
Institutionalized discrimination (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.)



Based on Galtung 1990

# Critical security studies (CSS)

- CSS established at the University of Aberystwyth around authors such as Ken Booth, Richard W. Jones, and Andrew Linklater
- Four dimensions of CSS (Jones 1999: 5):
  - **Broadening:** inclusion of **non-military issues**
  - **Deepening:** philosophical and political **assumptions are reflected**
  - **Extending:** non-state actors are included (esp. **human beings**)
  - **Focusing:** a clear normative objective (**emancipation**)



# Security as derivative concept (deepening)

- *Questions about security cannot be separated from the most basic questions of political theory (Walker 1997)*
- Security is **an epiphenomenon of political theory** (Booth 2007)
- There is no common substantive definition of security → it should be seen and used **instrumentally** → as an **emancipatory tool**

# Security as emancipation



- The “**real security**” is provided by **emancipation**
- **Emancipation** (Booth 1991: 319): *the freeing of people from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do*
- The Critical theory is needed to (Booth 2007):
  - Respond empirical curiosity
  - Pursue moral politics
  - Rise to the challenges of the time
- It calls for action (Booth’s **emancipatory realism**)

# Emancipatory realism

*We can begin or continue pursuing emancipation in what we research, in how we teach, in what we put on conference agendas, in how much we support Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Oxfam and other groups identifying with a global community, and in how we deal with each other and with students. And in pursuing emancipation, the bases of real security are being established. (Booth 1991: 326)*

# Summary

- **Assumption:** there are oppressive structures that produce power inequalities that endanger particular social groups
- **The objective:** politicization of the debate / transformation (removal of oppressive structures) through emancipation
- **Security = emancipation**
- **Active/activist role of the research:** researcher should give a voice to marginalized social groups