31. Critical international political economy and the critique from liberalism

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INTRODUCTION

The overarching contribution of critical sociological approaches in international relations is to outline the connection between culture and political economy, with historical materialism as a dominant thesis outlining the social context of production and exchange relations (Best and Paterson, 2010). The foremost approach is 'critical theory,' but cultural perspectives can be located in many international relations paradigms, including the English School of realism and classical political economy that informs liberalism. This chapter primarily analyzes critical theory, but also provides a counter-critique of critical theory's rebukes of liberalism and capitalism. Critical approaches situated in culture are not limited to critical theory.

Culture can be understood as intersubjectively shared habits that can sustain ideologies of both solidarity and domination at the deepest psychological level. Cultural continuities and discontinuities can be subtle and invisible, thus rendering them difficult to 'observe' or validate easily through scientific methodologies. For example, the connection between private cognition and public reason overriding religious beliefs heralded the beginnings of a cultural transformation during the European Enlightenment. A fundamental contribution of critical theory, utilizing hermeneutic techniques, is to show how nation-states developed in the modern world at the behest of (or in conjunction with) capitalism, and the ways that cultural ideologies, including intellectual ideas, assisted in the creation and sustenance of a world order predicated around state and capitalism that was exclusionary and exploitative (Cox, 1996). Dominant strands of critical theory resurrect the emancipatory project of Enlightenment to spell out normative possibilities of a world order that arises from the ashes of both the nation-state and capitalism (Shapcott, 2019). The theory criticizes the 'status-quo' positivist explanations in social science that are unable to explain social transformations: admittedly standard techniques such as regression are better at explaining units and variables that maintain a consistent operational definition through time. However, liberal critical perspectives do situate the emergence of bourgeois ideologies through commercial and industrial revolutions that led to emancipatory possibilities, which are foreclosed in the radical/Marxian antecedents of critical theory (McCloskey, 2010).

This chapter has important implications for our current politics, where cultural domination and anxiety can be posited as intricately connected with the sustenance of political units and capitalism (Jahn, 2021). One need not look farther than Trump-supporting Christian White Americans claiming that athletes who kneel for the national anthem are unpatriotic and undeserving of American citizenship(other allegedly unpatriotic Americans have included several types of immigrants and Muslims). The spectacle of American sports rides above billions of dollars tied intimately to both the nation-state and capitalism (Giulianotti, 2015). Critical theorists can argue that symbolic acts urging black or white athletes to stand up when the

national anthem is played are part of an ideology of patriotism that sustains a reactionary capital-driven political order in the United States, which survived several challenges from the Civil War in the nineteenth century or uprisings for civil rights from the mid-twentieth century onwards. The far-right Evangelical church, itself a product of mega-dollars, is now complicit in the cultural ideology of White Supremacy (Butler, 2021). But neither the presence of moral or religious hypocrisy among Trump supporters, nor the presence of deeply held Christian beliefs, can alone explain the psychologically sanctioned conservative ideology whose ultimate purpose may be to sustain capitalism and the nation-state. While critical theory explains the social conditions that enable reactionary politics, there is, nevertheless, a counter-narrative situated in liberal politics: the kneeling athletes, the many corporations that support them, and social solidarity and protests, question any iron-clad ideology of capitalist domination.

Critical theory with roots in Marxian and radical traditions is discussed first in this essay. Reflexivity of the researcher and the social relations of production are two core suppositions in critical theory. In Robert Cox's famous words: 'Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose' (Cox, 1981, 128). The chapter questions the suppositions from within critical theory first: critical theory offers grand narratives that cannot be sustained through hermeneutics, the chief method of interpretation among critical theorists. Next, critical theory's critique of liberalism highlights its own under-specification of alternative political economies and the problem of incentives in production. The chapter also notes critical theory's borrowings from liberalism on political institutions that, despite historical materialism, are indistinguishable from liberal thought. Nevertheless, the chapter advocates increasing engagement with the reflexive and consciousness-awakening traditions of liberal and critical political thought, which include Habermas' notions of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991). Only a critical, conscious, and reflexive liberalism can survive as an intellectual paradigm and political practice.

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL THEORY

The phrase critical theory, coined in the 1937 (Horkheimer, 1972), began to be used from the 1980s onwards in international relations. Horkheimer distinguished between critical theory, which evaluated the context of knowledge, and traditional theory, which problem-solved incremental suppositions. In international relations, critical theory initially referred to Marxian and radical theories and, subsequently, to a few post-structuralist/post-modern perspectives. Like other paradigms in the twentieth-century discipline of international relations that reflect prior intellectual legacies, critical theory traces its genealogy to the political thought of Marx, Kant, and Aristotle. Critical theory also follows the discipline's paradigmatic ambitions: it is a meta-construct that explains a number of patterns including the effects of international production and exchange, historical contexts of ideas, the development of social relations, the persistence of global orders, the manufacture of cultural ideologies, disconnects between epistemology and ontology, and prospects for human emancipation. Its proponents eagerly reference the third inter-paradigmatic debate in international relations on the future of the discipline in which they feature themselves prominently (Lapid, 1989). A more recent essay notes: 'the prefix "critical" in the study of the global economy has probably never before been so much *en vogue* as it is today' (Wigger 2022, 189). Spoiler alert: constructivism won in the United States, but critical theory retains a substantive following in other Anglo-Saxon countries.

All critical theorists pick up on Marx's enduring contribution to understanding dialectical materialism, in which the dominant material mode of production (feudalism or capitalism) influences social relations. The dialectics refer to the tensions between the material modes and social relations, which lead to new syntheses or transformations. However, while classical Marxists stayed close to situating their claims in production and the division of labor, international relations has largely furthered theses that at one time were derogatively termed 'under-consumption' (Brewer, 1980). The oft-cited Lenin thesis on imperialism, touted among critical theorists for bringing international relations to Marx's 'domestic' theories, located capitalist dynamics in surplus product in search of consumers. The thesis was termed underconsumptionist in the 1920s by those who located the dynamic in international finance capital in search of surplus value. Classical Marxist theory continued to emphasize production and an international division of labor. Many of these contributions were post-colonial Marxist theorists (Arrighi, 1994; Frank, 1967).[1]

The immediate predecessors to critical theory in international relations were global production theorization and its extension to core-periphery relations. Dependency theory arose out of Latin America and located the core production mechanisms in a bourgeoisie or elite from industrialized countries that continued exploitation through connecting with peripheral elites, mostly in the global south. Dependency is a theory of capitalist exchange rather than production relations and perhaps exercised the greatest influence on the discipline of international relations in the 1970s and 1980s, when core international relations and international political economy syllabi featured *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979). Wallerstein's world system theory went further than dependency theory in spelling out the historical logic of global social and political economy relations that explained the division of the world into core, semi-periphery, and periphery (Wallerstein, 1974). Both dependency and world system theories also tracked the development of political institutions. Like Marx, the state was viewed largely as a committee for the management of the interests of the bourgeoisie, but world system theory provided a fuller account of the capitalist world system that enabled the shift from feudalism to a nation-state-centric world capitalist order. In doing so, these analyses provided more autonomy to the state than Marx posited.

Marx famously wrote in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in 1852: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.' The Frankfurt School, associated with the Institute for Social Research founded in 1923, carried this historical logic further: the propagation of ideology, through cultural industries such as media and films, became the chief instrument for false consciousness among workers. Writing about the commodification of culture, rather than the development of critical consciousness through art, Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) wrote the following in the chapter titled 'Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception': 'Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work.' The Frankfurt School coined and emphasized critical rather than traditional instrumental reason, and a historical and sociological reflexivity to understand the mechanisms through which capitalism sustains itself.

Sustenance of the capitalist mode of production was a primary occupation among Marxian and radical theorists: The inevitable tragedy of capitalism was in avarice as capitalists replaced workers with machines, but surplus value could only be extracted from workers. Therefore, Marx located the demise of capitalism in his labor theory of value and the tendency of the average rate of profit to fall. The reserve army of workers ('left behinds' in

current parlance) would join the revolution to overthrow capitalism. Instead, in Germany, they joined Hitler. In current times, they support leaders who feature proto-fascist tendencies such as Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, and Donald Trump. Along with Hegel-Marx dialectics, Horkheimer and Adorno brought in ideology and psycho-analysis to show how workers were deceived through cultural industries into believing false ideologies. Hitler employed media to propagate fascist ideologies. The Frankfurt School's powerful insights on cultural industries endure through communication and cultural studies, but prominent critical theorists in international relations have largely ignored them. The so-called 'aesthetic turn' in international relations has taken these arguments further, distinguishing aesthetics of art from mimetics of representation in cultural industries (Bleiker, 2001).

The Frankfurt School carried forward Hegelian-Marxist dialectical thinking and synthesized insights from psychoanalysis, sociology, and German philosophy. It also presented a pessimistic view of the world. While Enlightenment philosophy had celebrated reason and rationality, the Frankfurt School critiqued traditional or instrumental reason and its apotheosis in science and technology as the human need to control and dominate. The school's critique of 'traditional theory' viewed the positivist method as not just representing the world 'as-is' but being biased toward presenting unchanging facts, when in practice such theory created those facts. This classical fact-value distinction in political economy, starting with David Hume, notes that facts as they 'are' in society depend on human values about what they 'ought' to be.[2] For critical theory, scientific and technological advances were grafted onto means of production with institutions that enabled exploitation and control. The propagation of ideology or false ideas would convince people about the liberal bias toward positing such domination as progress. The emphasis on historical and sociological context made the Frankfurt School theorization reflexive: human beings made the social conditions in which they lived.

The pessimism from the Frankfurt School underwent considerable revision with German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whose social theory introduced additional elements of communication and critical political argumentation in the post-war era, which he termed the public sphere, to resurrect emancipatory possibilities (Habermas, 1991, 1979). The public sphere offers a space for civil society to deliberate issues and arrive at outcomes that were previously unavailable. In other words, inclusive discursive acts and participation enable transformations that are distant from instrumental domination. Social orders arise from shared understandings through 'speech-acts,' which forward three different types of claims to validity in politics: claims to truth, rightness, and truthfulness. A simple speech-act such as 'cars can drive fast' depends on its validity. In a healthy public sphere, speech-acts can be contested, and meanings arise from interpersonal deliberation. Habermas' theory of communicative action is central to the establishment or contestation of validity and depends on the inclusion of all participants who have an opportunity to speak. Communicative action and speech-acts, therefore, reintroduce emancipatory possibilities into the Frankfurt School's pessimistic closure that reflected the power of cultural industries and ideology. At the turn of the last century, Habermas began to outline conditions of constitutionality to ensure that participants have an opportunity to be included and to speak without coercion in the public sphere.

International relations has not paid much attention to radical theories of communication and the role of cultural industries until very recently (Risse, 2000; Bleiker, 2001). Without much (self-confessed) knowledge of the Frankfurt School, Robert Cox, a major Marxian proponent of critical theory, developed a theory of world order that, unlike dependency and world system theorists, placed ideology as a centerpiece (Cox, 1981). For ideology, Cox turned to

Gramsci (Gill and Mittelman, 1997). Many working in the Coxian tradition have nevertheless connected his analysis to the Frankfurt School's contributions (Comor, 2001). Intellectual histories of critical theory sometimes marginalize these contributions to point out Cox's lack of engagement with the suppositions from the Frankfurt School.

While Robert Cox can be seen as a direct descendant of Marxian/radical thinking in international relations,[3] Andrew Linklater, through a lifetime of monumental work, mostly situated in international political thought, connects the political economy of Marx and the Frankfurt school to global political orders, in which Habermas's communicative action provides the discourse ethics for inclusion in a political community. Linklater picks up on E.H. Carr and English School realism that points to the possibility of an international society of states (Linklater, 1990; Linklater and Suganami, 2006). Next, he turns to Immanuel Kant for his ideal of a world community. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant argued that a 'world republic' could emerge from a federation of states agreeing to co-exist under the rule of law. The foundation of this federalism, following Frankfurt School traditions, is critical human reason. For Linklater, communicative action provides the deliberative capacity to strive toward a world 'political community' (Linklater, 1998). This normative conception revisits the English school tradition to provide a 'thin' solidarist basis for the political community. Shapcott (2001) shows how thin cosmopolitan citizenship develops from critical reasoning and engagement. Earlier, Crawford (1994) had shown that a security regime, which can be characterized as Kantian, existed among five democratic Iroquois nations after 1450 and resulted in peace for 375 years among them. In another important work, Crawford (2002) showed how deliberation and argumentation over a sustained period of time resulted in the elimination of slavery in Europe. Habermas's discourse ethics open emancipatory possibilities at a global level; the normative and the emancipatory elements arise in Linklater through consensual dialogue, including developing norms against harm to citizens and foreigners in political communities.

Another strand of critical theory arose out of post-structuralist thought about the non-fixity of meaning and, by extension, the inability of theory to represent social structures without noting historical contexts (Rosenau, 1991). Structuralism – arising from linguistics, anthropology, and humanities – had understood interrelationships between parts to posit patterns and meanings. Post-structuralism rejects the notion of uncovering structures through understanding the interconnection of parts. The subject of modernist research – the homo economicus of political economy or class in the radical version – is coherent and appears as rational since Enlightenment thought, or can be rational if not manipulated through false ideologies. This subject can make decisions in the market or, with consciousness join revolutions to transform society. Post-structuralists fight against such coherent and linear meanings of the subject. Instead, the subject must be deconstructed (Derrida, 2001) or understood through 'political management' and 'governmentality' that can be excavated in the various sites of meaning (Foucault, 1982). In semiotics the relationship between the signifier (say a word) and the signified (the meaning) is never straightforward (Chandler, 2007). While sharing the hermeneutical methodologies of the Frankfurt School, post-structuralists argue that interpretation can ascribe multiple meanings through deconstruction or discourse analysis.

The emphasis on reflexivity among post-structuralists serves both as a point of convergence and a critique of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School and historical materialist theories questioned the idea of progress but suggested alternative theories and emancipatory possibilities. Post-structuralists question progress but shy away from outlining emancipatory or normative possibilities. Beginning with Derrida and Lyotard, post-structuralists question

the 'grand narratives' of modernity, such as the progress of liberalism, and even the ontological worldviews of Cox and Linklater appear to be grand narratives (Derrida, 1972; Lyotard, 1984). Post-structuralist international relations scholars have pointed out that if human beings are part of the history they understand and make, then they can only be understood through sites of meaning in which they are embedded (Ashley and Walker, 1990). Universalist and emancipatory projects proposed through critical and liberal theorists are futile.

Universalist projects embedded within critical theory have also been questioned from gender studies and post-colonial scholarship. Gender studies scholars have pointed out that systems of property ownership, political development, and collective meaning-formation, including those of security, have been masculinist, resulting both gender exclusion and forms of violence (Peterson, 1992; Tickner et al., 1992; Enloe, 2004). The inability of critical theory to notice this in the past meant that even when purporting to be emancipatory and reflexive, critical theory suffered from its own masculinist biases. Critical gender studies have now had a broad influence in international relations and current scholarship, which is unlikely to employ an exclusively masculinist lens, except for a few orthodox adherents within its paradigms. For critical feminists, emancipatory potential must recognize both a transformation of collective meaning formation that includes gendered discourses of violence and domination. Post-structuralist and gender studies scholars have called attention to sites of meaning that intersect with other forms of violence, such as racism (Doty, 1993; Peterson, 2021).

International relations has not overcome its blind spots entirely either.[4] One of the latest blind spots to be discussed across international relations (and social sciences) is the issue of race, decolonization, and post-colonialism. Critical theory scholarship here connects racism with intersectional claims in gender studies but particularly with unequal exchange and labor across colonizer-colonized sites, including North-South relations (Chowdhry and Nair, 2003; Persaud, 2014; Shilliam, 2015). From a post-structuralist perspective, Edward Said's *Orientalism* is seminal for the genealogy of Western colonial discourse analysis that ascribed a position of inferiority to the 'Orient' and thereby justified colonial missions of 'civilization' from the occident (Said, 1978).

THE CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

Critical theorists have points of convergence, as noted above, with English School realism, constructivism, and post-structuralist scholarships. However, critical theory's historical materialist approach provides strident, even polemical, critiques of capitalism and liberalism. Following critical theory's tenet on theory serving interests, liberal thought is mostly cast as a political apologist for capital. This section evaluates critical theory's opposition to capitalism, liberal political thought, and 'neo-liberalism,' which is a catch-all term for late- or twenty-first-century capitalism. The section points out the contradictions and dissonances and highlights the critical roots, or possibilities thereof, in the current practices of liberalism and capitalism.

First, some context on liberalism: modern-era liberalism in Western Europe arose from a critical consciousness and departures in political theory from bestowing privileges of governance to theocracy and the divine rights of rulers. Machiavelli's *Prince* written around 1513, situated the right to govern as much (or more) in learned *virtu*` as it did in *fortuna* or the favorable circumstances of birth. The 'virtuous' rights began to convey to systems of property

ownership as commercial classes expanded: ownership of property would no longer be based on inheritance or fortune. In fact, Immanuel Kant and, later, Hegel went further and understood the system of private ownership as a natural right vested in the freedom of an individual, while property rights were a protection of that right from states. There were externalities from these rights. Until the seventeenth century, the prevalent thinking in Western Europe was that only the prosperous classes were capable of real freedom as they were not beholden to another for material needs. Their material 'independence' implied freedom of thought. Therefore, the right to vote was initially only granted to the propertied classes [this would constitute "system maintenance" or privilege for critical theorists]. Education also remained the privilege of a few, but the birth of the public university, not associated with the church, was a major accomplishment not just for liberal arts but for the notion of a secular education and the delivery of public goods. Liberal arts, implying freedom to think, meant that thinking and thought could be disengaged from status or fortune. The free-trade political economist Adam Smith reserved few areas of provision exclusively for the state: education, creation of currency, and provision of security were on that list. In Scotland, Smith had witnessed tremendous growth in public universities in Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and St. Andrews.[5]

The tenets of liberal political economy, as pointed out earlier, were situated in moral and social habits. Knowledge reflected social and historical context. The rise of empirical traditions meant that evidence rather than pure reason was the basis of knowledge. Social life could only be understood through observing human action. Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* in 1713, which later inspired Adam Smith to write about the division of labor, was denounced by the church as immoral for rejecting divine design in favor of self-interest. In political economy, the notion of value became part of the moral economy, studied as a social rather than divine phenomenon. Marx would later borrow from classical political economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo to further expound on the labor theory of value. The Scottish Enlightenment led to the widespread acceptance (and fights with the church) to situate understandings of human action in morality rather than divine sanction. David Hume's empiricism informed his skepticism toward phenomena that were unobservable, including Hume's own atheism (Phillipson, 1989).

Immanuel Kant is credited in critical theory for reflexivity, positioning the researcher and knowledge in an 'empirical' social context much like David Hume, but his recourse to tradition or reason is downplayed in international relations variants. Kant argues both for and against Humean skeptic empiricism: while human action is validated through empirical observation, Kant also recalls the classical rationalist tradition, against which Hume rebelled, to note that reason depends on a priori beliefs or what Kant called the transcendental self. In critical theory, while Kant's reflexivity is duly noted, his recourse to a priori reason to support morality as a categorical imperative is not problematized. Unlike Hume, the intuitions of morality for Kant are presuppositions and cannot be empirically investigated. This becomes problematic in critical theory whose normativity rests in the empirical evolution of a solidarist conception of global society rooted in morality, and therefore critical theory's notion of 'reflexivity' lacks a historical-intuitive-transcendental compass. Linklater (1998, 37) acknowledges that Marx had rejected categorical morality in favor of a dialectic process for the evolution of society, but Kantian and Marxian views are otherwise conflated: it is unclear whether the moral basis of a solidarist society lies in reason, dialectics, or empirical observation. Linklater's emphasis on sociological processes, investigated chiefly through an investigation of political thought and some history, seems to suggest moral conventions against harm may have natural law,

dialectic (conventions for and against harm), and empirical bases, but this slippery specification leaves open the question of the validity of Linklater's analysis (Linklater, 2011, 2017).

There is also a need to question the historical materialist assertions in several critical theory traditions. In general, the historical materialist tradition in critical theory has never departed from positing capitalism as exploitation and liberal political thought as a supplicant. Neither has this tradition ever given up on Marx's original supposition that capitalism is prone to crises with fluctuations in the tendency of the average rate of profit to fall. Critical theory's understandings of neoliberalism have extended Marxian theory to show how cultural ideologies sustain capitalism (Frankfurt School), how neoliberalism diminishes the regulative or welfare state since the 1980s (Harvey, 2007; Best, 2020), or how new technologies allow capitalism to expand in the twenty-first century (Fluck, 2016). There has always been industry in pointing out failures of capitalism past and present: journals such as *Review of International Studies* and *New Left Review* have been central to these concerns. However, Fraser and Jaeggi (2018, 10) start their volume on capitalism with the following statement: "What is remarkable is how rapidly the critique of capitalism has come back into vogue. It was not long ago at all that the word 'capitalism' was still in virtual disrepute, both in the academy and in the public sphere." The authors clarify that identity and recognition issues became dominant in critical theory and that the financial crises of 2008 and current liberal political crises have brought focus back on capitalism. The authors then produce a critique of capitalism that is much like earlier critical theory albeit with new points of reference. It is also a self-referential agenda: most of us had not noticed that critical theory had stopped engaging with critiques of capitalism.

At a grand level, critical theory's political economy is a critique of the capitalist mode of production with an underspecification of praxis that would provide an emancipatory materialist agenda. The best-known analyses include an authoritative allocation of resources. In practice, such allocations produce insufficient material means for the collective, but abundant means for authorities to grow more despotic.[6] A committee for the collective management of the interests of the proletariat, it turns out, might be even worse than one managing the interests of the bourgeoisie. In the meantime, liberal political economy has not disregarded crises of capitalism. The citation list would take encyclopedias. But there's a more fundamental point to be explored about means that make production possible: both historical materialism and liberal capitalism share a fundamental concern – the material lives of people. Liberal political economy starts with incentives for production and exchange that can produce wealth but can also lead to extreme inequality and exploitation. Liberal political economy's solutions at domestic and global levels have included regulatory supervision, state-led production and interventions, and legal institutions (anti-trust and the like). Social movements are equally examined when formal institutions fail. In short, liberal political economy's investigation of the problems of capitalism has produced varying narratives that specify incentives and disincentives for production and exploitation. Critical theory's monolithic critique of capitalism and liberal thought, with or without punctuations from questions of identity and recognition, sounds more like a prop for dogmatically continuing critical theory's intellectual tradition rather than specifying an intellectual alternative. Tropes such as neoliberalism are often reified without quite specifying how everything about capitalism fits into their grab-all nature.

There's a grievous neglect in the materialist bases of critical theory. While Coxian historical materialism offers a detailed critique of capitalism, the Linklater variant reifies the references to historical materialism to rush toward the specification of cosmopolitanism, global conventions against harm, and alternative political communities. The historical materialism

of the alternative political community being proposed is hardly specified. Despite the interdisciplinarity and historical breadth of the paradigm, critical theory lacks the materialist praxis of its emancipatory agenda. How will a Kantian political community, as refracted through the critical theory lens, provide for its material needs? How will a global political community reproduce its material means of production? Is Kant's global republic compatible with the communist mode of production? The grand level of emancipation envisioned in critical theory lacks its own historical materialist roots.

Critique of Political Institutions

The critique of capitalism and liberal political institutions abetting capital's interests go together in critical theory. However, we have just seen that critical theory, unlike Marx, does not specify the praxis of alternatives to capitalism. To then propose emancipatory political communities, without specifying the role of pre-existing capital or the materialist productive order, leaves critical theory oddly dissonant at this juncture. Theorists such as Linklater make passing references to the need for a redistribution of wealth (Linklater, 1998, 6) but that is hardly an alternative political economy. Further, unhinged from its historical materialist roots, the political order being suggested is indistinguishable from progressive versions of liberal political communities. In fact, Kant's global republic was part of liberal Enlightenment thought. Its post-World War II incarnations often invoked Kant.

The political community that Linklater imagines, to put it bluntly, has been both imagined and fully specified in liberal political thought. The notion of the public sphere rooted in deliberation is central to liberal thought and goes beyond Habermas. Critical theorists such as Shapcott (2008) also acknowledge that liberal theories of political institutions are far more developed than in critical theory. Liberal theorists contend that the sort of inclusion and constitutionality that Habermas imagines cannot be fulfilled in practice. Instead, Mackie (2006) has spoken of deliberation in a processual sense as giving of public reasons, Dryzek and Niemeyer (2008) writes of discursive representation for all points of view rather than inclusion of all participants, Benhabib (2002) of the inclusion of 'others' and minorities that are often overlooked.[7] Whether critical theorists choose to recognize it or not, deliberation is a highly developed field in liberal political theory and, to the extent that it problematizes its own limits, its use of critical reason may be more honest than critical theory finding instrumental reason in other paradigms and critical in its own. In the English School tradition of critical theory, the references to historical materialism, or its origin in Marxian thought, have become so tame or marginal that the emancipatory agenda being proposed is hardly different from progressive liberal thought. Critical theorist Richard Devetak (2005) himself suggests the similarity with perspectives from economists such as Amartya Sen. Linklater (1998) cites liberal philosophers such as Charles Taylor on the politics of recognition, Seyla Benhabib on otherness, and William Kymlicka on multiculturalism to forward his case on norms of inclusion and exclusion in his proposed political community.

The theory of civil society and global contestation of norms is also far more developed in liberal and overlapping constructivist perspectives. The charge from critical perspectives is that liberal theories do not support contestation and confrontation among civil society actors, and thereby the cooperation and harmony envisioned in an international political order is invalid and misrepresentative (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). For example, neither the contestations of North-South trade relations in general nor their logic inherent in two-level games in

trade or other issues would support the strawman of harmony that critical theory sets up. The argument is not that liberal political leaders want no 'unrest' but that critical theory ignores liberal international political orders that depend on active and contested participation from actors. This critique could go further to note that ideas of thin or thick cosmopolitanism or global federation of republics are transplants from liberal political thought into critical theory. For example, Alexander Wendt (1999) in describing the Kantian paradigm, cites liberal Karl Deutsch's work as essential to understanding the notion of 'friends' inherent to the realization of a political community. Methodologically, critical theory has a lot of catching up to do. Norris et al. (2009) have provided perhaps the most comprehensive evidence-based studies on cosmopolitanism. The connections with behavioral psychology and neurosciences in liberal political thought have opened up further avenues for documenting the thinness and thickness of cosmopolitanism. Sharon Krause (2020) combines Humean perspective with a study of positive neurological impulses toward cooperation to chart out a basis for collective actions, for example in the arena of the environment. Bai et al. (2021) document cosmopolitanism from behavioral, psychological, and political perspectives to provide multi-method evidence for thin cosmopolitanism.

Habermasian ideas of the 'public sphere' are now highly integrated and expanded within liberal political thought: certainly, Habermas' own conversations with Rorty have moved in this direction. In other words, the notion of a public sphere is not tied to critical theory. An editorial in the *Financial Times*, a liberal economic news source, builds on notions of the public sphere to note that the European public sphere is not 'always driven by privileged classes with a vested interest in legitimizing the institutions in which they work. The most profound exchange of ideas recently has been about what European identity means for Europeans with roots in places that suffered European colonialism. Writers such as Johnny Pitts and Hans Kundnani are widening our understanding in ways that are critical, provocative and a source of a much richer pan-European fellow-feeling in the future' (Sandhbu, 2022).

The implicit defense above of liberal international thought, nevertheless, falls short from a critical theory perspective. 'Can a liberal order be saved?' is the existential question for liberal theory today – and one that a critical theorist might ask non-existentially. Without going into the efficacy of different arguments, one can readily agree that the topic is being heavily contested and debated in liberal political thought. Nevertheless, unlike its classical roots, liberalism has not been open to hard questions of reflexivity and critical reflection. Questions of race, sexuality, gender, class, and politics of recognition have existed in liberal political thought, but none of the international relations paradigms, except for critical theory, have taken these issues seriously. Most quantitative methodologies also do not examine the historical or sociological context of institutions, although the quantitative narrative turn has begun to do so (Singh et al., 2025). A critical liberalism would be the way forward and would start with pedagogies and methods [explained later].

Pedagogies and Method

Critical theory in all its variants – with roots in Marx, structuralism, or post-structuralism – has made a powerful case for situating the production of knowledge in social material contexts and theorist reflexivity. Liberal theory can point to its roots in reflexive reasoning, but it would be hard to claim that its epistemologies make it easy to acknowledge the connection between theorists and knowledge in everyday research. Nevertheless, it is useful to address

a few antecedents often cited in international relations. Apart from Enlightenment philosophy, epistemologists such as Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn have located both the limits and methods of knowledge in some shared sociology of knowledge. Popper's critique of Marx in *Poverty of Historicism* turned Marx's dictums about the social context of knowledge on its head by noting that as researchers influence the world they create, they cannot forecast grand historical structures for the future. Popper called it the Oedipus effect: 'a prediction is a social happening which may interact with other social happenings, and among them with the one which it predicts' (Popper, 1957, 13). Kuhn's notion of paradigms within which researchers work to advance knowledge is the predominant epistemology in international relations (Kuhn, 1996). Imre Lakatos' famous essay on political science extended Popper and Kuhnian insights to political science to speak of propositions that are questioned or not questioned within its sociology of knowledge (Lakatos, 1970).

International relations is a vibrant field with its diversity of perspectives and paradigms, therefore seemingly open and permeable, but its permissiveness includes hard boundaries within paradigms and access to policy-making that leaves the discipline open to critical theory's charge of complicity with forces of domination and oppression. For example, post-war realists catered to a world imagined as power politics (Hoffmann, 1977). Similarly, liberal education catered to the coffers of international organizations that are often exclusionary and act at the behest of great power interests (Singh, 2024). The connection between the propagation of ideas to explain political outcomes (or continue the status quo) is also explained by liberal political theorists themselves (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993).

Given the reflexivities within realism and liberalism, is critical theory's claim against them for forwarding instrumental reason invalid? Unfortunately, even with a self-awareness of the sociology of knowledge, 'dominant' paradigms in international relations only admit a particular set of questions and dissuade others on the basis of methodological or ontological claims. Both realism and liberalism foreclose asking questions about race, class, and gender through their units of analysis, methods, and hypotheses derived from a worldview in which race, class, and gender really did not exist. These questions are neither about the need to acknowledge diversity nor 'normative,' a term understood in international relations sometimes as wishful thinking. Regarding questions of post-colonialism and race, the negative consequences of the liberal world order for the developing world is an empirical task and needs imagination to go beyond the specification of 'status-quo' hypotheses (Singh, 2017).

As liberalism undergoes soul-searching at both domestic and international levels and acknowledges structures of patriarchy, race, and class (among others), it is not sufficient to turn them into variables and hypotheses and accommodate them within existing paradigms or equations thereof. It may mean revisiting the cultural 'narrative' context within which all variables are operationalized. There are also hard questions to be asked about the disciplining boundaries within paradigms that extend far beyond researchers' agency to formulate hypotheses. Disciplining and boundary-making processes include the choice of journals, peer review processes, grant-making institutions, and tenure and promotion reviews. Many female and minority researchers have paid hard dues (such as the denial of tenure and promotion) for defecting from disciplinary norms about the kinds of questions, methods, evidence, and journals that are permissible.

The 'disciplining' mechanisms and methods within critical theory do not fare much better at admitting internal dissonances or external challenges. Critical theory as practiced in IR has reified historical materialism: the critiques of capitalism offer nothing new in terms of

theoretical advance; in some variants, the obeisance to historical materialism is not needed for the emancipatory ideals that are advanced. More importantly, the obsession with critiquing capitalism has not led to the specification of alternatives: the underspecified materialist ideals lack praxis, strategies, and methods.

Critical theory's grand level of abstraction also needs some reckoning with the methods used for making the case against liberal political theory. First, there is the debate about the role of tradition underlying the hermeneutics in critical theory (Hoy, 1978; Palmer, 1969). Tradition in this case means recourse to past and present reason. As noted earlier, having rejected both empiricism and pure reason as bases for knowledge, critical theorists leave open the question of how to assay their claims to validity. Relatedly, having argued against empiricist methods, critical theory often locks itself into a box: unable to acknowledge the evidence provided in other paradigms and lacking a methodological strategy to provide its own. Marx-inspired critical theorists eschew the language of variability and tentativeness. A cautious word here on behalf of post-structuralists on methods such as deconstruction, semiotics, and discourse analysis: the conclusions on the non-fixity of meaning, death of the subject, and critiques of grand narratives could be interesting to other critical theorists (as well as liberal scholars who would perhaps have less of a hard time accepting the tentativeness of meaning). Second, the high level of abstraction and grand theorization in critical theory often makes it difficult to locate the inherent hermeneutics of the claims being made. Most hermeneutics in critical theory is philosophical rather than linguistic hermeneutics. Both traditions are permissible in hermeneutics and frequently combined. Although Edward Said does not reference hermeneutics, *Orientalism* provides a close textual reading of the intellectual discourses that 'othered' the Orient. Nevertheless, critical theory often leaps around from one text to another without paying close attention to interpretation within texts or those suggested from intertextuality. The philosopher Robert Brandom notes that hermeneutics is the interpretation of existing texts, not one that makes new ones: 'The thought behind it is that the meanings of texts should be found and not made by interpreters' (Brandom, 2004, 4). Brandom's hermeneutics relies both on *de dicto* claims that an author or text can be reasonably inferred to have made, and on *de re* contextual claims that can be attributed to the text. Therefore, this chapter has been critical of the way historical materialism has been reified in many critical theory traditions: the claims reference traditions, but critical reason would specify the *de dicto* and the *de re* reasons for making the claims. The validity of claims is questionable. On the other hand, the borrowing from realists E.H. Carr and Martin Wight in Linklater's thought certainly shows the kinds of meaning in (sentence) context and intertextuality that hermeneutical reasoning would recognize.

CONCLUSION

Critical theory, at its core is a critique of liberalism, pointing out that the use of traditional, instrumental, or problem-solving reason serves the status quo of capitalist domination and exploitation. Its explanation of false consciousness through the propagation of ideology is especially useful for current times: Horkheimer and Adorno – drawing from insights in historical materialism, sociology, and psychoanalysis – make a forceful case for explaining the turn to fascist ideologies during the 1930s (Adorno, 2019, 2020; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). This is even more relevant today as the world turns to authoritarian and populist leaders

in liberal states such as the United States, India, Italy, and Turkey – or for explaining the high popularity of strongmen in authoritarian states such as Russia and China. The integration of discursive ethics in the Frankfurt School has provided both an ethics and a processual politics for moving forward with an alternative political order. Andrew Linklater's program synthesizing Kant, Marx, Habermas, Carr, and Wight to suggest a global political federation is the most detailed on emancipatory positions for the future.

The critique of liberalism in many variants of critical theory sounds like liberalism's own internal debates, where the enunciation of historical materialism and its connection to emancipatory possibilities is missing or underspecified. This seems to be the case in most variants of critical theory in international relations, except for those tightly connected with Marx's version of production relations, such as world systems theory and Robert Cox's historical materialism. This chapter suggests that references to production relations in critical theory are reified and not subjected to any form of critical reason. The emancipatory possibilities seldom point out what sort of production relations will emerge in the future, other than passing references to redistribution.

To develop critical consciousness, a researcher must turn to the historical and material bases of production and social relations and ask what else could have happened, providing evidence through the specification of variables and alternative outcomes or through counterfactual reasoning. The rise of critical theory in the 1930s grappled with the way workers formed a solidarity with fascism rather than overthrowing capitalism. Seen from within, it is unclear how discursive ethics by itself, without a serious reconsideration of material factors, can offer viable emancipatory possibilities. This question has not been ignored in liberal theory, where discursive politics and deliberation offer several political economy possibilities for the future [for example, see Dryzek et al. (2019)]. Critical theory's one-sided critique of capitalism and liberalism ignores the emancipatory possibilities that liberalism explores.

Methodologically, hermeneutics has tied the hands of critical theory in ways that are neither valid for the development of hermeneutics nor critical theory. To put it bluntly, the type of philosophical hermeneutics practiced in critical theory allows researchers to take liberties in ascribing meanings across texts and call it intertextuality, rather than finding meanings that may be internally consistent or not dissonant. Post-structuralists critique the hermeneutics of grand theories that enable linear and cohesive theorization and specification of emancipatory agendas for the future. Critical quantitative techniques, including computational social science, are well-suited for critical thought, but proponents of critical theory continue to pound on 'positivist methods' (Wigger, 2022).

There are two ways forward for critical theory. One would be to give up on its laborious critique of the connections between liberalism and capitalism and begin to acknowledge the points of convergence (and borrowings) from liberal political thought. Especially in specifying discursive ethics, the possibilities are expansive and explored by philosophers such as Habermas themselves. On political action, Amartya Sen and Richard Rorty specify alternatives in detail. The second path forward is probably the preferable path for critical theory, given that this is already taken up by its adherents outside of international relations, and because ideologically a connection with liberalism would be a hard 'pill to swallow' for critical theorists. This path would explain how the historical materialist logic of twenty-first-century capitalism is fully integrated into specifying a logic for the future. The Frankfurt School in the 1930s, for all its strengths, was unable to spell out possibilities for emancipation and remained pessimistic about the future. Habermas' theory of communicative action and the

public sphere reintroduced emancipatory scenarios. The current obsession with debating the characteristics of twenty-first-century capitalism is isomorphic of past critiques and unable to show the material underpinnings of future emancipatory politics. This invitation to critical theory to explain its politics of action and praxis has been made before (Kratochwil, 2007).

A third possibility undergirds the prior two and is explored in liberal and post-structuralist thought, namely the possibility of being less grandiose and more evidentiary in claims being made. Liberal internationalist thought moves forward with incremental hypotheses in specifying its claims. Post-structuralist thought critiques both the coherence of the claims and the subject-object position made within these claims. Unfortunately, the charge of grandiosity, overreach, or failure to explain internal contradictions has not produced much 'soul-searching' within critical theory: the scholarship flourishes with grand repartees unhinged from method and evidence. Critical theory's ascription of critical reason to itself and instrumental reason to those of others is one example.

This chapter's strongest recommendation is for liberal traditions to pause to reconsider the 'moral sentiments' that inform the suppositions taken for granted (Singh, 2020). Having largely abandoned the social, historical, moral, and ethical context of liberal political thought, liberal internationalism is left to cheer incentives, exchanges, reciprocity, and stable institutions even when they are absent in past or current global interactions. In the current political period, when fascism and populism are once again, like the 1930s, front and center in global politics, a reflexive liberalism would allow for imaginations around politics that are less encumbered with liberalism's current disciplines of methods, social customs, and ontologies.

NOTES

1. However, Marxists who questioned the racial basis of imperialism are hardly ever cited in these literatures, except for some lip service to Frantz Fanon.
2. The Scottish Enlightenment philosophers called them 'moral sentiments'.
3. See Devetak (2005) who also traces Cox to humanism.
4. See the 2021 double-issue from *New Political Economy* (Volume 26:2) and the *Review of International Political Economy* (Volume 28:2) on blindspots.
5. Critical theory's stance is that liberal education was ideological and that even social mobility and cultural taste disguised reactionary motives.
6. There were early conservative critiques from Karl Popper and Friedrich Hayek, and progressive ones from Robert Michels and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The tradition continues.
7. Unlike critical theory's Kapoor (2004), or liberal internationalist Keohane (2001), I have argued that the WTO is a far more deliberative institution than UNESCO, the latter often posited as a 'progressive' institution with its reflexivity explicitly situated in culture (Singh, 2015).

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