**Critical Theory in International Relations**

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**Critical Theory in International Relations**

*“Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it”.*

Karl Marx.

**Definition**

Critical Theory is a theory that seeks emancipation and change in a dominant social order

**Introduction**

* Development of Marxist thought and can be described as neo-Marxism
* Developed by a small group of German scholars living in United States, known as ‘the Frankfurt School’
* The theory is closely linked to Marxist IPE (International Political Economy)
* Robert Cox and Andrew Linklater are the leading IR critical theorists
* Contemporary critical theorists have increasingly turned their attention to the media and other forms of entertainment in their examination of modern culture

**ASSUMPTIONS OF CRITICAL THEORY**

1. Critical theory assumes the reject of three core postulates of positivism:
2. An objective external reality;
3. The subject/object distinction; and
4. Value free social science.
5. It assumes that knowledge of all IR theories is not and cannot be neutral or non-political as it reflects the interest of the observer who cannot be detached from the subject matter, thus, biased; According to Robert Cox, “Theory is always for someone and for some purpose”.
6. It assumes that no world politics/economics which operates vis-à-vis immutable social laws exists.
7. Critical theory holds that the social world is a construction of time and place, and by the most powerful states, thus, it is changeable and evidently historical.
8. It assumes a revolutionary human emancipation from global social structures which have privileged a relatively small minority of the world’s population at the expense of the majority.
9. It holds IR been openly political in its knowledge claims, thus, theoretical debates are basically political debates.

**Primary Features of Critical Theory**

* A critical theory provides the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms

**Evaluating Value-Free Science**

* The primary purpose of critical theory is to challenge the idea of a value-free science. Science is about power like anything else.
* Western science, while creative of many positive things, also made it possible for the few to dominate the many.
* Putting this differently, there is no theory about the world that does not serve a master. All theory is about something and for something.
* In the modern case, science can be reduced to the justification for imperialism and extolling the "advanced" nations over the "primitive" ones, thereby creating an automatic hierarchy of power.

**Merging Knowledge with practice**

* There are a variety of critical approaches in IR, but almost all "critical theorists" hold to the belief that all theories are for someone and for some purpose.
* Critical theorists, therefore, try to merge or connect knowledge and practice (called praxis), fact and value, and the knower and the known.
* Such epistemological contributions are not only an alternative to traditional positivist methods of problem solving, but reflect a commitment to emancipation, peace, freedom, and cooperation as core concepts and/or variables of interest.

**Unmasking Power Relations**

* The primary features of Critical Theory revolve around the concept of "unmasking."
* While modern science is about masking power relations critical theorists unmask International relations as a game where the dominant powers have written the rules of trade to benefit themselves
* Critical Theory seeks to take this type of research and show to what extent it serves the powerful and justifies their authority.
* In particular, this approach seeks to unmask modern, capitalist economics e.g. the global domination of the rich North over the poor South.
* According to critical theorists, capitalist economics is not value-free, it is about the control of the few who own capital over the many who do not, and must serve it as a result.
* In international relations as per the opinions of critical theorists, the hierarchy exists from the states that control most advanced, technical capital, down to those states that are much poorer, and hence become dependent on the wealthy.
* Therefore, critical theory focuses more widely on power and domination in the world generally

**Analysis**

1. Critical theorists are openly political as they are judgmental rather than objective

* Their political tendencies are underscored by their advocacy and promotion of their progressive (usually socialist) ideology of emancipation believing that conservative scholars and liberal scholars are defending and promoting their political values
* Their goal is inherently political because it challenges existing ways of organizing the social world and the people and institutions that exercise power

1. Critical Theorists conceive theoretical debates as essentially political debates

* According to critical theory, what is real, what is knowable, in the social world is the product of the interaction between structure (the social world's rules, norms, and beliefs) and agency (how humans behave and interact in that world)
* Reality, then, to critical theorists, is constantly being shaped and reshaped by the dialectic (the ongoing struggle or debate) between the two.

1. That social sciences and social scientist are instruments of power

* Critical theory's epistemology argues that knowledge is advanced only when it serves to free people and communities from the influence of those more powerful than themselves.
* To Horkheimer-a critical theorist- traditional theories picture the theorist at a remove from the object of analysis by separating the subject from the object, thus, to qualify as theory it must be value free; devoid of the ideological beliefs, values or opinions of the subject which would invalidate the inquiry.

1. Critical theorists are openly revolutionary and they want to overthrow existing world political and economic system

* They start from the assumption that some aspects of the social world are deeply flawed and in need of transformation.
* Their aim is to gain knowledge of social world so they can change it.
* It assumes that by reorganizing society, we can give priority to the most important human values. Critical theorists study inequality and oppression.
* Their theories do more than observe, describe, or interpret; they criticize.
* Critical theories view 'media as sites of (and weapons in) struggles over social, economic, symbolic, and political power (as well as struggles over control of, and access to, the media themselves)

**Criticism**

* Critical theory reproduces idealist (utopian) positions
* It seriously challenges independence and integrity of scholars and researchers
* Critical theory shows undue concern about philosophical and theoretical problems
* If International Relations is completely political then there is no neutral way to decide which is the best academically
* The claim of critical theorists that all knowledge is biased or political actually raises serious question about impartiality of critical theory.
* Critical theory is its preoccupation with negativity
* While examining a variety of events, critical theorists do not pay much attention to their historical and comparative contexts

**Conclusion**

* Critical theory primarily concerns itself with power relations.
* Economics and politics are not essentially about production or justice, but about power and how power justifies itself, especially to those who do not have it. In terms of international relations, the same approach applies.
* The globe is an arena where those with money and social status have their voices heard far louder than those who do not.
* But we cannot forget that it is still debatable whether critical theory has made significant contributions to the field other than to make it more introspective.