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## The Reason, We Should be “Critical”: Critical Reflections on Positivist International Relations Theories, Focusing and Critical Theory

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### *Abstract*

*The purpose of this study is to critique the positivist international political theories distinguished as mainstream international political theories and to explore the potential of critical theory as an alternative international political theory. To this end, this paper examines the positivism of mainstream international politics and its problems and critically analyzes the significance of the ontological shift in international political theory. Furthermore, it discusses the direction of international political theory through the relevance of critical theory as a value-laden theory. International politics, as the term suggests, encompasses inter-state relations, signifying the manifestation of sociality. The absence of contemplation on essence leads to the neglect of inherent identity and history. The sociality and capitalist order that constitute states create the possibility of a grand theory. In this respect, this study focuses on critical theory. This study is significant in that it examines the potential of critical theory in international political theory, moving away from mainstream international political theories. The attempt to find potential in critical theory, which has been neglected in the field of international political studies, holds significant meaning. Additionally, this study holds academic relevance as it is a meta-theoretical approach rather than a study of current issues.*

**Keywords:** Positivism, Critical Theory, International Relations Theory, Meta-Theoretical Approach, Reflectionist.

### Introduction

The history of international politics is often seen as the history of theory (Banks 1985; Lapid 1989; Smith 1995; Vasquez 1995). The topics and methods of research in the discipline of political science have been evolving, thanks to a series of “grand debates.” However, much of these debate have taken place under the overarching framework of positivism. The debates, in other words, reflect a larger conflict among different worldviews, but these world views are based upon a consensus on the validity of positivist ontology and epistemology (Kurki and Wight 2007: 17; Ruggie 2002; Smith et al. 1996: 149). With neo-liberals accept the realists’ main assumptions, there is no longer a clear line of distinction between the two mainstream theories, except for the differences of their convictions for the international regime (Keohane 1993: 291; Waever 1996: 166). The only line of difference remaining between them is the subtle concept of nuance (Smith 1995: 22). With all the mainstream theories converging upon realism, positivism now effectively defines international politics.

However, the positivist-influenced theories began to reveal their inherent short comings in the late 1980s as the gap between reality and the traditional theoretical paradigm became glaring.

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Numerous theorists subsequently set out to establish a new paradigm on international relations under the influences of critical theory, constructivism, deconstructivism, and post-modernism (Cox 1987; Hobson 2013; Strange 1970; Wendt 1999). These theorists harshly criticized the mainstream theories from an epistemological perspective and emphasized the importance of diversity in methodology (Lapid 1989). The long-awaited post-, anti-, and non-positivist challenges to positivism that has been the dominant epistemology and methodology of international relations since the discipline's birth amounted to challenges to the entire system of Western metaphysics. In addition, it considerably broadened the theoretical horizon of international relations. This study focuses on the criticisms of the mainstream theories from the perspective of critical theory, with a view to evaluating critical theory's contributions to international relations. This study argues that critical theory's main contributions consist of the criticism of epistemological superiority, as well as the attempt to restore ontology and related theories to the discipline of international relations in their true values. Therefore, the first section of this study focuses on how critical theory's attempt to restore ontology has helped us redefine the concept of the state and reconstruct the international regime in ways that are different from those of the mainstream theories. In the second section, this study examines the mainstream theories' claims to value-neutrality, and how critical theory's attempt to return values to the discipline has improved international relations.

### **Examining Positivist International Relations Theories**

First, before reviewing post-positivist approaches to international politics, it is essential to examine the representative positivist theories, namely realism and liberalism. These theories are distinguished as mainstream approaches and are characterized as positivist theories centered on power.

Over the last century, positivism has reigned as the absolute regime of norms over international relations as a discipline, serving as the main yardstick that divides the sciences from non-sciences and academic inquiries from nonacademic ones (Keohane 1989: 173-174; King et al. 1994). Positivism consists of naturalism that insists upon the essential identity of the society and nature, as well as upon the value of studying the society using the same method for studying nature (Neufeld 1995: 38; Smith 1996: 16); the conviction that regularity is found in society as in nature (Durkheim 1960: 4; King et al. 1994; Popper 1957; Smelser 2013: 56); and an empiricism that insists that scientific knowledge comes from empirical verification and falsification (Halfpenny 2014: 57; Turner et al. 2011: 44). In other words, we can reduce positivism to a conviction in the discoverability of the truth based on the regularity in social phenomena, which is discovered through observations and an empirical epistemology.

Much theoretical discord has characterized the discipline of international relations until now (Halliday 1994: 23). Unlike in other disciplines of social science, the discord is not a controversy of either a theoretical or methodological nature. Rather, the discord reflected the absence of secure meta-theoretical grounds in international relations, forced reduction to methodologism, and amounted to compromise with positivism. The problem is apparent in the growing skepticism over the meaning and value of theoretical discourses on international politics, perhaps most poignantly in the debates over the alleged "ends" of international political theory worldwide. Triggered by the emphasis of methodology at the expense of theory or the supremacy of methodology over theory, the debates indicate the death of the post-positivist and meta-theoretical approach to international problems. Those who announce the death of the theoretical discourse espouse anti-metatheory or bracketing metatheory altogether (Reus-Smit 2013: 591-

592). Their logic of arguments emphasizes the science and objectivity of theory and an empirical epistemology. In other words, they draw their conclusion from positivist grounds.

Their logic is relatively simple. Meta-theory, as a theory of theories, is based upon philosophical thinking that encompasses ontological, epistemological and methodological considerations (Hollis 1995). No amount of debate can ever sufficiently resolve questions of meta-theoretical nature therefore. It is impossible to find the most scientific and rational solution to a given international problem by taking any of the diverse meta-theoretical perspectives (Lake 2011: 465). Meta-theory gives rise to exhaustive debates from which no one can emerge as a clear victor (Monteiro, 2009). Likening debates on meta-theoretical issues to controversies among academic sects divided by religious beliefs or even the Crusades, these theorists advocate the complete banishment of philosophical debates from international relations theory (Lake 2011: 573; Moravcsik 2003; Jackson and Nexon 2013: 522). They insist that meta-theoretical discourses contribute either very little or non at all to the process of arriving at any substantial policy implications. Because these discourses rather undermine the endeavor of accumulating scientific knowledge through positivist and empirical research, these anti-meta theorists demand that debates of all meta-theories, including methodologies, be brought to a close. The realization of methodological pluralism as advocated by meta-theorists would only attest to the immaturity of international relations as an academic discipline (Moravcsik 2003: 135-136). Accordingly, meta-theoretical debates are "evil" and backward-looking. These anti-Meta theorists thus assert that mathematics provides the only key to turning a theory into a science, and that all scientific research can proceed only by the logic of inference (Bueno de Mesquita 2010: xv). If we could invest the energy we are wasting on meta-theoretical debates into empirical research, we will achieve great progresses in this discipline, raising its stature on a par with those of natural sciences. The key to this detour lies in the democratic peace theory and the political science of open economies.

Proponents of the positivism-influenced mainstream theories of international relations view their discipline as a science and their role as formulating theories that reflect or explain the universal and objective rules of international politics that transcend space and time and are amenable to the inquiries of human reason (Morgenthau, 1993: 3). The scientific method advocated by these positivists is boiled down to the scientific—that is, causal—explanation of social phenomena, just like natural ones, as having definite causes (King et al. 1994: 81-82). To these mainstream theorists, a theory is a series of principles that they have identified through inferences from cognizable facts, as well as a tool that supports predictions of how real-world phenomena will develop and change in accordance with the process and logic of such inferences. Thus, the mainstream theorists are intent upon observing actual forces at play in reality and uncovering their mechanisms. As a theory can only be discovered by finding rules or regularity in the observed facts, turning facts into rules becomes the central premise of theorization and a necessary condition for the truth (Waltz 1979: 6). These theorists believe that the world is governed by a series of objective rules, which develop and evolve based on the twins, rationalism, and empiricism (Morgenthau 1993:4-15).

Accordingly, these theorists focus on finding out the factors that determine international relations, and how these factors interact and work (Morgenthau 1993: 18; Waltz 1979: 1-10). This leads them to resort to positivist and rationalist processes of problematization, personifying states into collective social entities capable of rational facilities as humans (Gilpin 1987; Keohane and Nye 1977; Krasner 1976; Waltz 1979). Thus, these theorists view state reason as a rationality that is keen on self-interests in the competition over scarce resources around the world

(Morgenthau 1993: 97; Waltz 1979: 111). Moreover, they insist that such rationality is the basic and central principle of state behavior. These theorists theorize about international relations, believing that state behavior occurs in a manner that reveals a series of rules that govern their interactions in the invisible reality of international anarchy (Waltz 2009: 17-49; Waltz 1979: 102-128). This is how the positivist theories of international relations have come in a full circle.

The logic of their arguments, however, ultimately demands the exclusion of theorization from international relations and belies the methodological danger. They hold that obsession with methodology blur the correlation between the researcher's hypotheses and overall efforts with the misleading conclusion that methodology, rather than the researcher's own orientation, decides the form of knowledge to be obtained in the end (Guzzini 2013; Morgan & Smircich 1980: 499). Methodologists may explain the workings of the world with a more sophisticated language but lack a profound insight into actual world politics. Ironically, they may have a methodology down, but have little else to talk about (Mead 2010: 454). Yet their methodology is only an outdated *technique* that will soon disappear behind the evolving technical wizardry of Big Data and other such innovative ideas.

In demanding the "end" of theory in international relations, anti-metatheorists demand a stop not to theory per se, but to the "ends" of theory (Reus-Smit 2013: 590). A method can itself be a sufficient research objective based on theoretical relations (Marsh & Stoker 2010). Yet anti-metatheorists confine methodology to a mere instrumental role of aiding research, thus denying that methodology itself could ever serve as a research objective. The purpose of positivism, which forms the meta-theoretical grounds of these anti-metatheorists, is to form and verify empirically testable hypotheses. Anti-metatheorists, however, deny that their own methodology has any of its own purpose and mechanically applies to the verification of hypotheses only, thus undermining their own meta-theoretical grounds and turning empirical epistemology into a dogma. Anti-metatheorists' demand for the end of metatheory in international relations shows the poverty of *the Grand Theory* in the discipline. A grand theory is one with implications that transcend disciplinary boundaries. By denying meta-theory of international relations, these critics ultimately reduce the discipline of international relations into a mere consumer of theories established outside their discipline. In reality, however, even neo-realism, one of the core doctrines in which these anti-metatheorists believe, does not appear to exert influences outside the boundaries of international politics (Brown 2013: 590). These critics' crusade for the end of theory therefore amounts to the neglect of their duty as researchers to explore the true essence of international politics.

In response to the proclamations of the ends of theory in international relations, some have proposed analytic eclecticism as an alternative. Instead of demanding the bracketing or doing away with meta-theory altogether, these pragmatists argue for bringing together important independent variables of various mainstream theories, such as realism, liberalism and constructivism, so as to better coordinate and mobilize knowledge resources toward solving actual problems of international politics (Sil & Katzenstein 2010; Sil 2000). Those who view meta-theoretical debates as manifestations of discord among academic sects have responded to the rise of analytic eclecticism with favor, proposing their own alternatives, such as mid-level theories (Lake 2011: 465-466). The eclectic and pragmatic alternatives to meta-theory have thus become a major presence in the discipline of international relations now (Dunne et al. 2013: 406-407).

This alternative brand of eclecticism, however, draws upon anti-metatheory, and does not differ

significantly from the methodological integration advocated by Robert Keohane in the past (King et al. 1994). Eclecticism, in other words, seeks to bring meta-theories under the umbrella of positivism. Such eclecticism may be far-reaching and convergence-oriented in scope and approach, but can work only to the extent to which the different meta-theories share non-exclusive or similar grounds (Dunne et al. 2013: 406-407). Analytic eclecticism thus betrays the absence of serious ontological and philosophical considerations in the proponents (Lake 2013: 465-466). Different theories and methodologies have distinct philosophical bases and carry different political assumptions and implications. Without careful considerations of these distinctions, eclecticists argue for bringing these different theories together, as if mixing water and oil, out of their own positivist impatience. The convergence of distinct theories on the basis of positivist grounds will likely fall into the trap of dogmatism, and ultimately exclude pluralist and meta-theoretical approaches from international relations. The particular historic and geographic characteristics of East Asia already reveal the limits of these positivist approaches.

Anti-metatheorists reduce the real problems of international politics to mere problems of methodology, thus betraying their failure to understand the essence of international relations as a discipline. Their attempt underlies fundamental confusion of essential theories for methodological problems. That confusion reflects the methodological monoculture of international relations. In this culture, demand for theoretical innovations is taken as a sign of the decline of the involved theories, causing advocates of each theory to focus on defending their theory and achieving methodological innovations when what are truly required are theoretical innovations (Jackson & Nexon 2013: 544). Eclecticism-oriented theoretical convergences merely cover up, rather than address and overcome, the ontological and epistemological limits of positivism. This avoidance to deal with the true and fundamental limits of a given theory ultimately leads to the biases and distortions in interpretations of that theory. The status-quo-favoring attributes of positivism provide a good example (Habermas 1988; Horkheimer 1982; Marcuse 2002). In any theoretical design, one cannot avoid confronting and acknowledging the role of meta-theory.

Those who advocate the end of theory in international relations, from the positivist epistemology camp, end up privileging and upholding the current dominant and hegemonic methodology in effect, whether willingly or not (van der Ree 2013: 25). Their unflinching belief in the value of science and objectivity supports the hierarchy of theories they presume (Wight 2006). International relations as a discipline, however, has room for a far wider range of theories other than positivism (Dunne et al. 2013: 406). The inductive approach to theorization favored in the mainstream is not the only possible or even best methodology for theorization in this field. The mainstream positivist epistemology, in fact, may sustain the suffocating monoculture of the discipline. Anti-metatheorists take rather simple approaches to research techniques and statistics, which, in fact, have little to do with how the human reason and thinking work (Sartori 2004: 785). Meta-theoretical theorization, however, has much utility for understanding the core issues of international politics today. It provides the material and basis for all theories used in the discipline and enables the researcher to approach the essences of given problems by directing his or her attention to the central phenomenon that constitutes the ontological arena for exploration. There is no reason all researchers of international relations must confine themselves to positivism only with its glaring meta-theoretical shortcomings.

## Shift from Epistemology to Ontology

Notwithstanding the mainstream theorists' conviction, the real world of international relations lacks a consistent system of axioms comparable to that in the natural sciences (Nageland Newman 2001: 3-7). The system of axioms in international relations remains incomplete at its best. The truth may be out there, but we may never prove it. Our experience with the in capturability of the truth leads even the natural sciences to innovate and find new ways to prove the truth over and beyond their reliance on a series of axioms (Nageland Newman 2001: 25-28). Therefore, it is impossible to apply the methodology of the natural science and human cognition in capturing the full range of phenomena and the truth in human society. Insisting upon this methodology belies the lack of serious considerations of the fundamental and real nature of phenomena in international relations, motivated by complacency with the century-long supremacy of epistemology over ontology in the mainstream theories. Critical theory thus criticizes this streak of positivism and brings back to life the ontological basis in international relations. Critical theory asks how political actors construct their political worlds and how they imagine achieving their goals. This is how critical theory reconstructs the anarchic international regime, an axiom held dear by the mainstream positivist theorists (Linklater and MacMillan 1998: 10). In doing so, however, critical theory demolishes the monolith of international relations theories and returns plurality to them, while reconceptualizing phenomena, which have been marginalized and peripheralized so far, as well as endowing major issues in international relations with new academic significance. Thus, real world events are conceptualized and put back into context for clearer and better interpretations. This is by far the most important contribution that critical theory has made to international relations. By converting the starting point of international relations from an epistemological question to an ontological one, critical theory has dramatically broadened the horizon of possible theories. This shift, in turn, allows us to reconstruct the major premises and assumptions about the state system and the behavior of states as the main actors in international relations.

The major shift of paradigm ushered by critical theory into international relations involves their conceptualization of the objectified state. Mainstream theories based upon the epistemological supremacy of positivism have insisted upon objectifying the state as the central target of their observation. They reduce the ontological center of the modern subject to a personified state that—as a collective entity—continues to make rational choices in the given reality of international anarchy (Odysseos 2010: 23). Critical theory, however, criticizes this watertight subject–object dichotomy and the division between the knowing subject and the world as a mere object to be absorbed into the subject's cognition structure. In turn, critical theory reconciles the two through history. Critical theory stresses that society, even as we prefer to think of human beings as natural facts like any other, is in fact a historical construct inseparable from human behavior, and that our cognitive structure is itself a historical product of such society (Horkheimer 1982: 230). Thus, critical theory reveals a multiple of other dimensions of relations pertaining to the state that has been treated as a single-dimensional entity in the mainstream theories. In other words, critical theory reveals the aspect of social relations inherent to the state, defying the conventional view of the state as a single and rational decision-maker. Critical theory also insists that human beings should be viewed as totalities of social relations, situated in the social relations of production that arise and are shaped by the particular events of history (Horkheimer 1982). A totality of social relations is subjected to not only the relation of dominance–subjugation based on the Marxian economic analysis, but also to popular culture that arise under the capitalist regime and other problems that occur in the technical and

instrumental civilization (Horkheimer 1982). Therefore, a society is not a mere aggregation of individuals and units. Rather, it consists of totalities of social relations, subjected to the very complex influences of cultures, customs, ethics, production, and desires that are unseen in the natural world (Deleuze 2000; Marx 1998: 570). Human beings and societies show that human convictions and behavior are shaped by society, while society is also shaped—in turn—by human being. Also, individuals, groups, and states develop quite different identities in the process. Thus, critical theory abolishes the subject–object dichotomy and stresses the fact that society, being borne of the constant interaction between humans and society, keeps changing. The image of the single-dimensional state as a rational decision-maker is thus shattered, as the social and productive relations that the state embodies, along with ideologies, are revealed. Thus, critical theory redefines the state as a nation–society complex that consists of the interactions among social relations, the given type of regime, and the social order. The subject–object reconciliation made in critical theory thus invites us to reconceptualize the nature and functions of the state as the main actor in the international regime.

The reconceptualization of the state leads critical theory to reconceptualize international relations as well, from a realm of relations among states as rational actors into a realm of historically conditioned relations among state-society complexes. This reconceptualization of international relations into a world order as a historical structure, shaped by such nondeterministic factors as ideologies, institutions, and material capabilities, breaks away from the mainstream naturalistic perspective on international relations (Bieler and Morton 2006: 11-12; Cox 1981: 136). It creates a completely new paradigm that emphasizes the changeability of the international regime. The production relations of a given society form the base for that society's class structure, while the social relations inherent to production give rise to certain social groups, which render support for movements of power within, outside, and between states in the international order (Cox 1987: 1-9, 17). Therefore, the current international order reflects the particular evolution of social relations at a particular moment of time but is never an absolute and immutable structure. Thus, critical theory views the international regime and its anarchic nature from the perspective of relational ontology, viewing the states and the regime as historical products of interactions among human beings, societies, and states. The current international structure is thus redefined as a product of collective human behavior. That is how the international regime becomes the international order. Thus, critical theory has a denaturalizing effect on the anarchic nature of the international regime and the rationality of states (Neufeld 1995: 14). Moreover, it paves the ground upon which we can identify the issues with the current international order itself, leading us to envision a new and better order by causing changes to the existing one. That is why, to critical theorists, "knowing the world and changing it are inseparable" (Jackson 2011: 160). Then, this leads us to a renewed understanding of the fact-value dichotomy.

Critical theory is distinct from structuralist Marxian historicism. Critical theory rather overcomes the structuralist shortcomings of the world regime theory that has been thought of as a major alternative to the mainstream theories so far. Structuralist Marxian functionalism, championed by Luis Althusser, may have revealed the functional effect of capitalist ideology on the reproduction of the capitalist production structure (Althusser and Balibar 1979). The ahistorical nature of Althusser's theory of ideologies, however, implies a picture of human beings as mere recipients of the governing ideology who conform to, rather than resist and actively change, it. Therefore, structuralist Marxism betrays a refusal to understand history, posits an immutable structure of reality, and fails to explain how humans and societies actively

achieve desired changes. World regime theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi similarly posit an immutable world structure made up of the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery (Arrighi 1994; Wallerstein 1996). Their insistence on the unchanging structure renders them unable to explain changes that take place in international relations. In addition, it leads them to overemphasize international variables above domestic ones such as social and cultural considerations.

Critical theory offers a new approach to international relations that has more room for post-structuralism and post-modernism. The post-structuralist tendency of critical theory stems from critical theory's distrust of theoretical approaches that assume the universal truth (Smith 1996: 18-25). Thus, critical theory is critical of reason and experience, which form the bases of rationalism and empiricism. Critical theory relativizes the subject and the base of history, similar to post-structuralism, which sees the attempts to reach diverse interpretations of diverse worlds as not only inevitable, but also laudable (George and Campbell 1990). Yet, this post-structuralist tendency directly contradicts critical theory's aspirations toward liberation based upon the absolute and universal values. The increased autonomy of the liberalized individuals, as post-modernist theorists argue, may be a result of liberation, but such increased individual autonomy itself requires the transformation of social structures and the roles of collective subjects.

In sum, critical theory places theories of international relations under history, notwithstanding their claims to the scientific approach and rational choice (Shepsle and Bonchek 1997), and thereby liberates them from the positivist epistemology trapped in the categories of circulation and repetition (Martin Wight 1960). Thus, critical theory reveals the possibility of overcoming the positivist and structuralist elements of international relations based on the historicity and reconciliation of the subjects and the objects. Based on the dialectics of production, power, and the world order, states, societies, and human beings are redefined in terms of the social relations of production. The redefined relations among states then reveal the historic particularity of the current international order. Critical theory, in other words, enables us to understand structures in international politics from the perspective of movement rather than of management (Gill 1993a: 25; Gill 1993b: 8-10, 16-17). Thus, international order takes on the possibility of change, which, in turn, opens our eyes to the values and ideals of international regimes.

### **A Turn to Values in International Relations**

Critical theory rejects the value-neutrality of positivism and emphasizes liberation as the supreme value and purpose of theorizing. In contrast to positivists who believe in the separability of the researcher and the object of research and who thus insist on systematizing and quantifying value-neutral analyses, critical theorists argue that researchers and theories cannot be value-neutral and that theories should be used rather actively to prompt social change (Devetak 2014: 137-138). Critical theory thus offers a value-inherent theory of international relations, providing the escape from the reign of realism, which has ruled international relations since the days of the first grand debate at the expense of moralism and by prioritizing national interests above all else (Kennan 1984; Morgenthau 1993; Niebuhr 2011).

As we have seen, the underlying premises of positivism are the ontological-methodological identification of nature and society, as well as the insistence on the subject-object dichotomy, which is crucial to the endeavor of humans as rational beings to find and establish regularity in society through their cognitive powers (Neufeld 1995; Smith 1996: 16). Thus, positivists emphasize objective observations as the key to finding the objective truth and its rules and as the core of scientificity (Durkheim 1960: 3). This desire for scientific objectivity underlies the

belief that facts and values can be distinguished and that facts can be value-neutral (Durkheim 1960: 3; Neufeld 1995: 38; Smith 1996: 16). The desire to keep pure facts from contamination through value judgments stem from the Newtonian assumption that physical sciences have achieved the complete separation of facts from values (Trigg 1985).

The fact-value neutrality thesis views objects of observation as single detached entities, and the concepts and judgments that observers reach as independent and separable components of reality (Horkheimer 1982: 208-209). To this, critical theorists respond that the scientific knowledge or the knowledge that has passed the empirical test, as required by positivism, is single-dimensional and exclusive, as well as excessively confines the scope of possible knowledge by insisting on value neutrality. Critical theory renders theories of international relations as political themselves, thereby giving them a new ontology and epistemology (Habermas 1988: 17-18; Horkheimer 1982). The fact that theories of international relations themselves are political implies that theorists are an inseparable part of the reality of international politics (Hutchings 1999: 69). Thus, critical theorists offer a new approach to power. Of course, the mainstream and conventional theories, while they solve problems on the surface, are ultimately theories about power (Cox 1981: 128; Horkheimer 1982: 216-217). The concept of power in critical theory, however, leads critical theory to be more concerned with what sustains the status quo and the powers that govern it, with an eye of finding better alternatives. This emphasis on the political nature of theories and the possibility of change marks another major contribution from critical theory.

As the empirical/analytical knowledge generated by positivist observations and tests are rooted in controlling (regularizing) the social (natural) phenomena they target, positivist knowledge cannot be value-neutral (Habermas 1988; Horkheimer 1982). Critical theory sees positivism's claim to value neutrality as amounting to the cessation of the critical function of autonomous reason with regard to society and reality, and it exposes such claim as a mere declaration of the generalization of formalized reason based on the autonomy of science (Horkheimer 1982; Marcuse 2002: 152). Mainstream theorists of international relations—such as neo-realists and neo-liberals—indeed employ their theories so that these theories would work inside the given international order rather than problematizing and changing the order (Keohane 1984; Waltz 1979: 96, 111). Thus, Keohane remarked that the purpose of neo-liberalism is “to facilitate the smooth operation” of the complex international politico-economic regime (Keohane 1984: 63). That purpose is the purpose of positivism as applied to the international domain. Neo-realists, moreover, claim that a major hegemonic conflict—such as another world war—may befall us once the hegemony-centered system collapses. Thus, their theory serves to sanction the emergence of revisionist states and unabashedly endorses the hegemony-centered unipolar or bipolar world order as the only key to stable peace. Thus, the positivist claim to value neutrality becomes a philosophy of positivity, i.e., accepting and obeying the status quo because it is familiar and peaceful (Horkheimer 1982: 188-243; Marcuse 1955: 328-388). All values—whether predictability and controllability, practical understanding, freedom or liberation—is bound to shape and guide the process in which we form and produce knowledge. Scientific theories themselves reflect the particular historical and cultural contexts in which they are born such as the particular state of relations among the given social groups or classes (Horkheimer 1982: 202). The same holds for the domain of natural and pure sciences. As such, critical theory exposes the stabilizing effect that positivism necessarily (albeit unwittingly) has on the status quo, and problematizes that effect so as to liberate international relations from its grip (Marcuse 1955: vii). Thus, critical theory introduces the philosophy of negation into international relations, reflecting upon the social and historic conditions that shape our reality rather than accepting

them as givens.

The problem of international relations that critical theory seeks to solve is not the problem of power, as understood, as relations of material capabilities. Rather, it is the problem of knowledge–power or the interdependency of knowledge and power as noted by Foucault (Foucault 1980). Critical theory responds to this problem by restoring theoretical reflexivity to the discipline of international relations (Cox and Sinclair 1996; Hamati-Ataya 2012). Theoretical reflexivity consists of the theorist's own awareness of the historic time-space and the status quo that he/she inhabits and in which he/she generates knowledge, which leads to the critical review and reflection upon the position and structural role of his/her own theory in the given historical context or world. The purpose of this theoretical reflection is to remain resistant to the hegemonic order that privileges the same interests and groups and thereby to maintain openness to a better and fairer order. Mainstream constructivism holds that the functions and roles of the modern state (i.e., exclusive authority over the legitimate use of violence, collection of taxes, and representation of the given people to the international community) and the antagonistic competitive–cooperative attributes of the international order are constructs that have developed in interactions with the surrounding social relations throughout history (Wendt 1999). However, mainstream constructivism never asks whether and how the socio-historic conditions of such constructs should be transformed. Normative research may be an important topic of constructivist theories, but these theories still treat norms as independent variables, focusing on the relations between these independent variables and the dependent variables of social behavior, without questioning the legitimacy of the norms themselves. Out of fear of being placed under the influence of a normative agenda, these theories thus lock themselves up instead in the so-called scientific values of positivism (Adler 1997: 333; Hopf 1998: 183). This situation attests to the central importance of reflexivity in theorizing about international relations.

Thus, critical theory maintains that without serious reflections, we will never begin to solve the imbalance of power, domination-subjugation, inequality, and other problems of power that result from the unfair distribution of material capabilities around the world. As such, the subject and the community emerge as major alternatives to states in critical theory-inspired theories of international relations. In these theories, reflection serves to expose the oppression, discrimination, and exclusivity inherent to the current international order so as to liberate these main actors from such injustices by increasing autonomy, openness, and communality (Shapcott 2010). Liberation from the international order refers to the cessation of domination over otherness and the establishment of a post-sovereign political community. A post-sovereign political community refers to the international cosmopolitan society based upon cosmopolitan rights (Adorno 2007; Adorno and Horkheimer 2002; Habermas 2006). Such a community is only possible when international relations are completely democratized, i.e., liberated from problems of power (Habermas 2006; Linklater 1996: 284-285). Therefore, theory should reach over and beyond its current role of observing, amassing data, and finding rules of the status quo. Rather, the proper role of theory should be expanding imagination with regard to the ideal or ideals toward which international politics should aspire.

Critical theory helps us overcome the subject–object, observation–theory, and theorist–theory dichotomies in international relations. In addition, it endows our theorizing with values and purposes. In doing so, critical theory expands upon and specifies the concept of power as used in international relations. The restored reflexivity in theorizing then allows us theorists to expand and grow upon our theories, thus helping us find and formulate a grand theory for our discipline.

## Conclusion

Rationalism and empiricism have long been regarded as the unshakable and given bases of international relations as a discipline. Philosophy was shunned as a proper topic of debate, and this has led to the gross philosophical underdevelopment of the theories of international relations today (George 1994; Colin Wight 2002: 26-28). The Newtonian physics of international relations, which lack considerations of philosophy and meta-theories, has thus turned the discipline into a social science that fails to consider common values, norms, and progresses that matter centrally to society. As such, critical theory endows international relations with a new philosophical basis. More specifically, critical theory restores relational ontology and values to international relations, thus broadening the horizon of possible theories in the discipline. Most importantly, critical theory enables us to view theorizing as an instrument for envisioning and achieving desired changes in international relations, steering us into looking for a distinct grand theory for our discipline.

Proper understanding of the meta-theoretical—epistemological and ontological—grounds of international relations, aided by critical theory, will open our eyes to the problems that were never raised in the conventional theoretical framework. Moreover, it also invites us to raise problems in search for a new, alternative, and fairer international order. On the academic level, it will also broaden our scope of research to include not only experience, but also political philosophy, thus enabling us to generate greater and better knowledge.

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