

# 40 Years of Critical Theory on International Relations

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In 1981, in a theoretical context dominated by positivist approaches in International Relations (IR), Robert W. Cox and Richard Ashley published two seminal articles which departed from distinct (meta)theoretical starting points. Robert Cox's 'Social Forces, States and World Orders' (1981) published in *Millennium* and Richard Ashley's 'Political Realism and Human Interests' (1981) published in *International Studies Quarterly* presented variants of Critical Theory to understand international relations processes at the time, such as the emergence of neoliberalism and changes related to Cold War dynamics. Cox in particular also incorporates a Gramscian interpretation of world politics in order to analyse how patterns of production relations embed mechanisms of hegemony (Cox 1987) – discussions on the nature of hegemony that were already present in his reflections in the late 1970s concerning the role of United States in the world order and how labour issues and actors related to it (Cox 1977). Both Ashley and Cox presented a robust critique of positivism and structuralism predominant in IR by highlighting the role that culture, ideology, and agency played in world affairs – in opposition to, for example, Realism, some variants of Liberalism and World Systems Theory.

Since then, many other social theories began to inspire critical IR thinking, helping it 'to critique the structural forces of power, authority, and norms in world politics' (Roach 2020: 1). Some of them were in close dialogue with the critical approach of Cox and Ashley and others struggling with it: for example, Neo-Gramscianism, feminism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, critical constructivism, to name a few. All of them tended to some extent towards bringing back ideational and agential aspects into IR. Forty years

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on, IR theory has passed through important transformations: metatheoretical and normative discussions as well as debates over the pertinence of IR theorization have emerged (Dunne, Hansen and Wight 2013), pointing to new challenges faced by IR theory. Theory has also developed in a number of different areas within IR, often without much dialogue between them. This has been particularly seen with the different developments of critical theory in the areas of security studies and in International Political Economy, which have had both ontologically and thematically contrasting departure points (Wyn Jones 2000; Devetak 2018).

In this context, important questions emerge: is critical theory relevant after all these years? What are the possibilities for contemporary critical thinking in IR? Fifteen years ago, such scholarship provided important insights (Rengger and Thirkell-White 2007). Now, forty years after Cox's and Ashley's articles it is a good time to take a closer look on the impact of critical theory in IR and the fresh problems and challenges it must cope with. This is the aim of this dossier, and the contributors look to address these concerns. The collection also reflects the different dimensions and subject areas that have emerged under the guises of 'critical IR'.

The first three pieces of the issue discuss mainly theoretical issues. In the first place, Rafael Alexandre Mello proposes a theoretical dialogue between two critical approaches to international political economy/international relations: the Marxist version of Latin American Dependency Theory and Robert Cox's neo-Gramscian Critical Theory. In his article 'Building Bridges between Dependency Theory and Neo-Gramscian Critical Theory: The Agency-Structure Relation as a Starting Point,' Mello argues that a relevant starting point to such dialogue is the onto-methodological debate around the agency-structure relation. From such a point, it would be possible to identify (in)compatibilities between them, contributing towards the enrichment of debate within critical IR.

The second article engages with the Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School, particularly with Andrew Linklater's theoretical contribution. In 'Bringing the Critical Thinking back in: A Critique of Andrew Linklater's Theoretical Contributions to International Relations,' Fabiana Sander and Matheus Souza pay attention to Linklater's recent research that has been influenced mostly by the English School and the sociology of Norbert Elias. They argue that this has produced limits, when considering the particularities, pitfalls and side-effects of allegedly beneficial processes of violence restriction. According to the authors, such limits could be overcome with an engagement with Linklater's initial critical agenda, which is explicitly much closer to the Frankfurt School.

Following such critical consideration of theoretical views on IR, Natália Félix de Souza engages with Daniel Levine's claim that international relations theory has a special vocation for critique. In the article 'Is Critique Still Possible in International Relations Theory? A Critical Engagement with IR's Vocation,' she problematizes Levine's political, ethical and epistemological approach to sustainable critique, arguing that international relations theory has been particularly engaged with Western modes of subjectivity when thinking about politics and history. As an alternative, the article suggests an approach to critical international relations theory that starts used politics of colonialism as a departure point.

Such a 'condition of coloniality' is a crucial one, since Critical IR Theory has influenced scholars in the North as well as in the Global South (Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al. 2016). In this sense the fourth article, 'How Does Gramsci Travel in Latin America? Before and after Critical International Relations Theory,' presents a theoretical question, but with a regional focus. Diana Tussie and Leonardo Ramos discuss some aspects of the relationship between Gramsci's social theory and Latin America. Starting from the fact that Gramsci was widely read in Latin America long before Robert W. Cox and even before IR was constituted as a discipline in its own right, they present possible contributions of the (neo)Gramscian approaches to the understanding of Latin America region, establishing a dialectical relationship between critical international relations theory and some aspects of how Gramscian thought has travelled in Latin America.

The last two pieces engage with more empirical questions and ask how critical theory could contribute to understand them. Sol Mora, in the article 'Land Grabbing and International Political Economy: Towards a Critical Neo-Gramscian Theoretical Model of Land Governance in Latin America,' engages with the debate on global land grabbing using Robert Cox's historical structures approach. In this sense, the article provides a critical theoretical model of land governance in order to understand the causes of land grabbing in Latin American countries. She suggests that Robert Cox's critical theory would be relevant because it renders visible the articulation of the local and global processes driving land grabbing as it foregrounds power relations at multiple scales that shape decisions on land access, use and control, as well as the conflicts inherent to them.

The final piece deals with sustainable finance and hegemonic strategies over the natural and environmental resources. In 'International Political Economy and Sustainable Finance: Assessing the EU's Green Deal and UNCTAD's Green New Deal,' Johannes Jäger discusses policy proposals at the level of the EU and UNCTAD's green new deal, specifically referring to the field of sustainable finance. Providing a critical political economy framework, the author unveils the limits of such hegemonic strategies to cope with environment, nature and finance.

By exploring metatheoretical and methodological debates, ethical questions, discussions on the geography of knowledge as well as empirical analyses starting from innovative theoretical frameworks, the articles in this dossier contribute, we hope, even in a small way to the relevance of critical theory in IR and, even more, to the imperative of a critical way of thinking the IR realm.

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