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Traditional, Problem-Solving and Critical Theory: An Analysis of Horkheimer and Cox's Setting of the 'Critical' Divide

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ABSTRACT Robert W. Cox's dictum that '(t)heory is for someone and for some purpose' (emphasis in the original) is said to be the most-quoted line in International Relations (IR) theory. Yet whilst this spurred a revolution in critical thinking in IR, it echoed a far older conception of Critical Theory advanced by Max Horkheimer in the 1930s that claimed there is 'no theory of society... that does not contain political motivations'. Both sentiments emphasize the relation between knowledge and human interests, and yet both formulate two distinct—though allied—ways of approaching 'critical' theorizing. In order to understand the similarities and differences in their approaches, this paper draws out three loci of difference between Cox and Horkheimer regarding the question of emancipation: (i) the epistemological relation between 'critical' and 'Problem-Solving' (Cox) or 'Traditional Theory' (Horkheimer); (ii) the emphasis placed on transformation and historical process; and (iii) the importance of intersubjectivity in how each approach emancipation. It is argued that by actively combining critical (dialectical) approaches across the social sciences, broadening human agency through civilizational dialogue, and retaining a commitment to emancipatory (and visionary) political futures based on human association, that Critical International Theory can maintain ongoing relevance in IR.

Keywords: Critical Theory, emancipation, intersubjectivity, civilizational coexistence, Cox, Horkheimer

It's [Critical Theory] goal is man's emancipation from slavery.

(Horkheimer, 1972a, p. 246)

Critical theory allows for a normative choice in favour of a social and political order different from the prevailing order.

(Cox, 1981, p. 128)

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The similarities and differences between the thought of Robert W. Cox and Max Horkheimer, two paragons of critical thought, have as yet to be articulated in IR theory. The young Horkheimer (1972a) distinguished Critical Theory (CT)¹ by virtue of its emancipatory interest and viewed this philosophical current as the theoretical arm of *real* social struggle (p. 245). Even before he had named this approach ‘critical’, Horkheimer anchored it between social philosophy and social science. The tasks of the Institut für Sozialforschung were thoroughly social, that is, its research was to be governed by an overriding concern with the ‘vicissitudes of human fate . . . not as mere individuals, but as members of a community’ (Horkheimer, 1995, p. 1). Developing from Marx, Hegel, and German Idealism, a focus on the cultural life of humanity, the Frankfurt School (FS) came to be defined by its explicit normativity regarding ‘the emancipation of humanity from enslaving conditions’ (Horkheimer, 1972a, p. 245ff). Freedom, so conceived, was a social achievement in which intersubjectivity, social relations, and human association were the focal point for not merely explaining but rationalizing society: to move from the alienating conditions of ‘human fate’ to a ‘rational determination of goals’ (p. 207). From Marcuse’s concern with the liberatory ‘aims’ of humankind, to Habermas’ ‘deep-seated anthropological interest’ in emancipation, to Honneth’s ideal of mutual recognition today, CT has maintained a nascent optimism in this emancipatory project first outlined by Horkheimer.²

Critical International Theory (CIT) shares in this tradition, part by convention and part by association. The work of Robert W. Cox’ has been placed under this umbrella, somewhat problematically, given that he disputes this label, denies that the FS was ever part of his canon, and is uncomfortable with the word ‘emancipation’ even whilst admitting CT is bound to this concept as the critique of that which *is* (Cox, 2012, pp. 18, 23–24). Nevertheless, through a number of closely shared concerns, not the least of which is the fact that their groundbreaking essays share remarkable thematic and argumentative similarities,³ Cox’s articulation of CT parallels Horkheimer’s. They share fundamental concerns, including: the problematization of positivism, the promotion of an historical materialist understanding of social transformation, and the pursuit of normative goals broadly related to an emancipatory politics which they both define as freedom from slavery. And though the question of emancipation is muted in much of Cox’s work, it remains a latent presence detectable in his concern for social equity, cultural tolerance, and transcivilizational dialogue and understanding (pp. 20, 21, 24, 32–33).

These synergies lead to the possibility for an evaluative comparison between Cox and Horkheimer, particularly regarding how they distinguish CT from Problem-Solving (PS) or Traditional Theory (TT), respectively. This paper focuses on the form, aims, and purposes Cox and Horkheimer give to CT, that is, the content of critical theorizing, the tasks they direct this theoretical architecture towards, and the ‘critical’ attitude each takes to the social sciences generally. Rather than pursuing a synopsis of their two essays, the paper draws out three loci of difference regarding this central question of emancipation: (i) the epistemological relation between ‘critical’ and ‘Problem-Solving’ (for Cox) or ‘Traditional Theory’ (for Horkheimer); (ii) the emphasis placed on transformation and historical process; and (iii) the importance of intersubjectivity in how each approach emancipation (which includes questions pertaining to both the agent of emancipation and the addressee of CT). It is argued that by actively combining critical (dialectical) approaches across the social sciences, broadening human agency through civilizational dialogue, and retaining a commitment to emancipatory (and visionary) political futures based on human association, that CIT can maintain ongoing relevance in IR.

Critical Versus PS and TT

In his seminal essay, ‘Social forces, states, and world orders’ (1981), Cox opens with three suggestions for theoretical inquiry in IR: that it should look at the problem of world order as a whole without reifying the world system; that it must not underrate state power but give proper attention to the social forces contributing to the development of states and the world system; and that theory should be based on changing practices and empirical/historical study. Yet, rather than pursuing the construction of this approach, Cox operationalizes it by examining hegemony and imperialism through social forces, forms of state, global political economy, and world orders, all with a view to how these are related and changing. The main presentation of Cox’s version of CT—and the reason for the papers renown—is found only in a few pages under the subheading ‘On Perspective and Purposes’. This opens with what is said to be the most-quoted line in IR that ‘Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose’—a sentiment that expresses Cox’s keen detection for the ideological and normative content within *all* theories. For Cox, all theories have a perspective derived from their position in time and space: a particular *standpoint*. Whilst sophisticated reflexivity may attempt to transcend this condition, the initial perspective is always contained within and must be unconcealed (Cox, 1981, pp. 128–130). If this is the case, then we must ask: *who* is Cox’s theory for? What *purpose* does it serve?

Cox (1980) asserts that theory can serve either of two purposes. The first type, ‘problem-solving theory’, takes the world as it is with the aim to make it ‘work smoothly’ (p. 129ff). It assumes the permanence of the prevailing social and political relations that frame its parameters—the acceptance of which belies not only the ahistoricism of such approaches but also how they remain uniquely ‘value-bound’. The strength of this approach is to fix a problem through limited variables and precise examination, leading to statements of laws and regularities amenable to generality but which *imply* the very ‘institutional and relational parameters *assumed* in the problem-solving approach’ (my emphasis added) (Cox, 1981, p. 129). Yet it remains non-reflexive of its own perspective and the social position it mirrors and serves. The exemplar, for Cox, is neorealism that assumes three basic realities as fundamental and unchanging in world politics: the nature of man (as the Hobbesian restless desire for power); the nature of states (as fixed on the pursuit of national interest); and the nature of the state-system (as placing identical rational constraints on the pursuit of the national interests through the balance of power). Within these basic realities that constitute, for neorealism, the permanence of existing relations and institutions, history is merely a recurrent play in which ‘the future will always be like the past’. The result is the tragedy of a ‘continuing present’ (pp. 131, 129). Such methods however lead only to a fragmentary, one-sided, and partial aspect of the whole. Neorealism is built on a ‘false premise’ because world order is not fixed in the way it assumes, not only because of the relation between all things that eludes this theory, but because all things are also undergoing complex transformations. Neorealism’s ‘fixity’ is exposed not only as the ideological bias of, and for, those ‘comfortable’ with the given order (pp. 127, 129) but a methodological error, and, I would add, an ontological one regarding what there *is* in world politics.

The second purpose theory can serve is named ‘critical theory’: it serves to expose PS as an identifiable ideology with conservative consequences. It questions the very framework assumed by PS, instead calling for theory to ‘stand apart from the prevailing order of the world and ask how that order came about . . . [its] origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing’ (Cox, 1981, p. 129). Cox later ties this emphasis on historicism in CT to Braudel’s (1995) approach to the *longue durée* (the examination of how an existing order came into

being, its contradictions, and how it may be changed) (p. 21). Cox's version of CT presents a continuously changing social world order with theory as a series of interconnected hypothesis of social transformation (Cox, 1981, p. 139). Yet the capacity of the theory to reason on *possible* futures requires a keen analysis on processes of social forces, forms of state, and global political economy (particularly those forces generated by the changes in production), all of which are seen as configurations of material capabilities, ideas, and institutions, that are in relation and impact each other (Cox, 1981, pp. 130, 138, 1987). Rather than separation and fixity, Cox's CT directs itself to the social and political complex as a process of change in which *both* parts and the whole are involved (Cox, 1981, p. 129). Moreover, it does not regard historical structures as determinative but as a pressure on human agency. This structure, Cox insists, should be viewed from the 'bottom' or the 'outside' for it is only this view that allows CT to be open to possibilities of transformation by looking for the emergence of 'rival structures' that express 'alternative possibilities of development' (pp. 135, 137). Whereas conflict is an inherent condition for systemic reproduction in neorealism, for Cox's CT, conflicts are viewed dialectically as 'possible cause[s] of structural change' (p. 134). Accordingly, whilst the existing social order as a 'framework of action' may *seem* durable or permanent, CT's task is to trace their origins and detect their weakening. Just as material power shifts, so do the shared understandings of social relations and the collective images of social order. Amidst these processes, Cox's CT aims for what he calls 'normative choice' in social order and, through its historicist methods, defends this aim as practical in the sense of transcending existing order within the range of what is feasible within existing conditions (pp. 136–137, 130).

We could operationalize this Coxian methodology of critical theorizing through five steps. As action is never free but takes place within a 'framework for action', so we must start with a historical enquiry into human experience of this framework. Theory is also, necessarily, shaped by this 'framework for action' and as it is therefore relative so too must it be reflexive, aim at a broader time-perspective, and always begin anew. As the 'framework of action' itself changes over time, the 'principal goal' of CT is to understand these changes immanently. This 'framework of action' is a historical structure—a combination of thought patterns, material conditions, and human institutions—that does not determine actions mechanistically but provides a context ('habits, pressures, expectations, and constraints') in which action takes place. The 'framework of action' should therefore be analysed through the conflicts within it that open the *possibilities* for social transformation (Cox, 1981, p. 135). As such, the purpose of Cox's CT is to serve our understanding of the historical situation in which the possibilities of human agency for transforming world politics are located—a view that can have strong to weak interpretations regarding the role of theory, the capacities of agency, and the constrictions of structure.

How Cox sets up the 'critical' and PS divide is compelling and continues to challenge orthodox IR. Yet Cox's articulation has also had two unfortunate, if unintended, consequences: firstly, a tendency to bifurcate PS and CT by positing them as a binary, and secondly, towards privileging a critical historicism rather than a reflexive theory of emancipatory transformations. In regard to the former, as Booth describes it, the Coxian framework sought to shift PS *within* the status quo, to a CT with the problem *of* the status quo. That is, whereas PS 'replicates', CT was to 'emancipate'. Yet Cox's articulation played into those who wanted to dismiss CT as something idealist rather than interested in solving real problems (Booth, 2007, p. 242ff). Through Cox's formulation, CT was easily depicted by its detractors as some extraneous moral critique on social order rather than as a philosophical and scientific examination of overcoming the limits (the suffering and injustices) within the status quo.⁴ Without adding in the qualitative dimension to change (i.e. its emancipatory content), Cox's work could lead

to the nonsensical assertion that, for example, liberalism is ‘critical’, given the revolutionary transformations wrought under neoliberalism. Similarly, Jahn has posited that Cox’s conceptualization implied that other approaches were not ‘critical’, or at least not critical in the same way, thus proliferating any number of ‘critical’ subfields and increasing the compartmentalization of IR. More problematic was that it made declaring one’s normative standard an act of placing one’s proverbial ‘flag in the sand’, rather than urging constant reflection (Jahn, 2014). As Booth and Neufeld have argued, as *all* theories are normative, what is unique about CT is not its normativity but how it is reflective upon its commitments—such reflexivity is not a contamination of critical research but constitutive of it (see Booth, 2007, pp. 242–244; Neufeld, 1995, pp. 138, fn 11). As such, Cox’s resistance to engage the question of emancipation seems contradictory to his insistence on reflexivity. It is also at variance with Horkheimer’s insistence that CT is to be, above all, reflective on the social origins and consequences of all knowledge—*especially* its own. The question, for Horkheimer, was how to combine philosophy and science without either dominating the other.

In distinction to Cox, Horkheimer (1995, p. 1, 1972a, p. 210) articulates CT’s emancipatory interest in a way that is to be both practical and wedded to so-called Traditional approaches. For him, the great challenge for CT (and social philosophy generally) was that modern thought had replaced the dialectic of social conflict with the individualist notion of a harmony of individual interests. Whether Kantian philosophy or rational choice theory, today, the rootedness of such approaches in the isolated subject (*Einzelpersönlichkeit*) reified the particular: such approaches see only the individual in society and relations between such individuals. The atomized subject was reflected in the dominant view of scientific method in which the ‘mediation between empirical experience and the consciousness of one’s freedom in the social whole no longer required a philosophy, but simply linear progress in positive science, technology, and industry’. The dilemma for CT was how to speak of its object—the ‘cultural life of humanity’—in ways that did not seem ideological and sectarian to those who only believed in *facts*. For Horkheimer (1995), the point was not to conceive of theory as if it were constructed *beyond* empirical science, but to explore the complicated psychological links between the material and ideational through the ‘dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory *and* specialized scientific praxis’ (my emphasis added) (pp. 8–12). This involved the development of a research programme in which TT and CT were ‘brought together’ in order to pursue ‘larger philosophical questions on the basis of the most precise scientific methods . . . without losing sight of the larger context’ (pp. 9–10). Hence, Horkheimer’s use of statistics, surveys, reports, public agencies, specialists, and various methods serves as the basis for philosophically oriented social inquiry. This was not the blind enlistment of empirics but their sublation through CT by mediating *how* and *what* we observe through a perspective sensitive to the social, historical, and dialectical whole, and guided by an emancipatory interest to reduce human suffering. In this way, the epistemological relation between CT and TT was to be placed in the service of a *practical* interest in emancipation.

Transformation and Emancipation

This relates directly to the second consequence of Cox’s formulation of CT regarding its understated emancipatory content. In his essay, and indeed throughout the middle part of his writing career,⁵ Cox’s emphasis on historicism was directed towards developing a more full account of the changing social totality of IR, and only secondarily with the content of the normative choice within this social transformation. Whilst a more sustained engagement with emancipatory

concerns would resurface in his later civilizational ‘turn’, in his groundbreaking essay, Cox (1980) made it quite clear that the ‘principal goal’ of CT was to *understand change* and explain *historical processes* rather than act as participants in this struggle, though he did suggest it could be a ‘guide’ to such action (pp. 131, 135), and later stated that CT is interested in ‘how change may be influenced or channeled’ (Cox, 1996a, p. 525). So, it is not the emancipatory aims within Cox’s preferred historical materialist tradition that are emphasized but its methodological benefits: the dialectical exposition of contradictions; the vertical dimensions of power (imperialism); the reciprocal relation between state and civil society complex; and the contradictions of production (Cox, 1981, pp. 133–135).

Whilst Cox rarely engages directly with emancipatory themes— notions of freedom, ethics, and normativity—this is not to say they are absent. In fact, their presence pervades his entire work, appearing in notions of social justice (Cox, 1981, p. 128), new democratic (‘consensual’) multilateralism (Cox, 1996a, p. 533), ‘coexistence in diversity’ (Cox, 2007, p. 513), his hopes for a Polanyian ‘double movement’ against hyperliberalism (Cox, 1996b, p. 32), his insistence on a new world order ‘built from the bottom up’ (p. 35), and perhaps most openly in his description of the need for subordinate classes and the periphery to form counter-hegemonic relations in a new historic bloc (Cox, 1983, pp. 162–175, 1977, p. 387). Indeed, it is these emancipatory concerns that animate social transformation because, as he writes, our world is seen from a standpoint that includes ‘hopes and expectations for the future’ (Cox, 1981, p. 128). The point is not the absence of these ethico-normative considerations in Cox’s thought but rather his reticence to discuss these openly that, arguably, restricts the reflexivity of his version of CT. For *if* the purpose of CT is to become aware of its own perspective, then this must involve placing up for contestation its own normative ideals. As Hamati-Ataya (2013) has recently posited, Cox (2012) showed that CT must give an account of its own existence so as to not fall to unconscious ideology (p. 675).

Cox’s reticence is only partly explained by his uncomfotability with the subjective vagaries of the term ‘emancipation’. Another explanation stems from the historicist tradition he draws from. As he has stated on many occasions, rather than the FS, Hegel, or German Idealism, the influences on his work were comprehensively historical: Vico, Sorel, Braudel, Collingwood, Carr, and Gramsci (Cox, 2012, pp. 24–25, 1996b). In this approach, man and its institutions are viewed as genetic, ‘a continuing creation of new forms’, rather than something essentialist or teleological (Cox, 1981, p. 132). So too does it approach the international in an ‘evolutionary way’ (Cox, 2007, pp. 513, 516), that is, examining the sequence of changes within history, how a particular ‘fit’ has come about and comes ‘apart’ (Cox, 1981, pp. 141–142). As argued by Devetak (2014), Cox appeals to a secular political historicism rather than metaphysical and moral philosophies, on the basis of which Devetak argues that this ‘historical mode’ of CT could rival PS theories (p. 417). Despite the advantages of such a reading, it leads us back to the problem of bifurcating ‘critical’ from other theories (discussed above). Moreover, it leaves unanswered the question of how CT could move from mere history (albeit a history with a more detailed understanding of change) to a theory of social transformation that is a guide for ‘normative choice in favour of a social and political order’ that Cox places as the penultimate aim of CT. One cannot just gesture to normativity; it must be confronted with the greatest possible analysis.

Horkheimer’s set-up of the relation between CT and TT provides a means to address such a question. Horkheimer (1995) notes, in a similar refrain to Cox, that all scholarly work is derived from the impulses of one’s own world-views (p. 14). At the same time, whilst theory corresponds to the tasks set by researchers themselves, bringing theoretical hypotheses to bear on the facts is not something done by the researcher but by industry, the needs of capital broadly defined. New

ideas win out due to historical circumstances and social conditions rather than genius or accident, and in the conditions of late capitalism, the sole purpose of knowledge is its instrumentality. It is in this way that science falls to the '[c]onservation and continuous renewal of the existing state of affairs' (Horkheimer, 1972a, p. 196). And yet, at the same time, this real function served by science is *obscured* (p. 198). Horkheimer's (1972a) conception of CT was, in part, intended to overcome the one-sidedness and limited nature of such intellectual processes when detached 'from their matrix in the total activity society' (p. 199). Rather, CT sought a developing picture of society as a whole rather than as a static snapshot of a part abstracted from its context and historical development (p. 240). On this point the historical and dialectical methods of Cox and Horkheimer parallel: All things in the social process, the 'parts' and the 'whole', are seen to be in the process of movement and the strength of CT is its ability to abstract these particulars whilst integrating such analysis back within the totality. This method of immanent critique enables CT to expose the difference between a *reality* and its *potential*—a task accomplished 'by relating social institutions and activities to the values they themselves set forth as their standards and ideals ...' (Horkheimer, 1975, p. 234).

So Horkheimer shares with Cox the exposition of the hidden purposes and aims served by theory. In Horkheimer's (1972a) words: 'There is ... no theory of society ... that does not contain political motivations' (p. 222). Of crucial importance however is that Horkheimer, in distinction to Cox, does not end with this exposition of the knowledge constitutive interests of TT, nor exclude such approaches because of their buttressing of the status quo and fundamental lack of reflexivity. Rather, Horkheimer seeks to *conjoin* CT and TT in order to reveal the 'problem constellation' in the present through not only *facts* (social empirics) but *values* (social philosophy). This combination of facts and values is to overcome the reification (forgetting) of human-made conditions so that the everyday 'humiliation' and 'horror of history', the 'suffering' and 'death', that are taken as the 'ultimate facts in an age that believe[s] naively in facts' that humankind can allegedly do 'nothing about it', can once again be evaluated (Horkheimer, 1995, pp. 5–7). With the deepening of the contradiction between individual happiness and their *real situation* in modernity, this critical task becomes ever more urgent (pp. 7–11).

Within this broad appeal for an emancipatory social science, Horkheimer outlines two forms of knowing: TT, premised on Descartes *Discourse on Method*, and, CT, based on Marx's political economy. The former shares many similarities to Cox's notion of PS: it organizes experience through questions from present-day society, separating theory from science, and leaves unreflected the historical goals, purposes, and tendencies such knowledge serves and is a part of. The other proffers a theory of society that is concerned for the 'reasonable conditions of life' (Horkheimer, 1972a, pp. 198–199). Accordingly it calls for 'the rational organisation of human activity' or the 'rational constitution of society' which Horkheimer (1972a) defines as the fulfillment of humankind 'and all their potentialities' or the 'free development of individuals' (pp. 244–246, 249). In present conditions, this means a through-going critique of the 'cause of wretchedness', namely political economy, and the potential within these deformed conditions for a 'free, self-determining society' (pp. 249, 248). Accordingly, CT takes an active posture to history: not only is humankind the producer of its history and way of life, the necessary conditions for its emancipation from suffering *already* exist (p. 227 Note 20, pp. 244–245). Moreover, it places this actualization of freedom as a social achievement wherein Horkheimer's notion of 'rational' hinges on the conditions of human association. Even though this rational society seems to exist only in fantasy, Horkheimer (1972a) affirms that it 'is really innate in every man', bringing to the fore the intersubjective basis of individual freedom and equally so, the notion of social struggle in which the actualization of this rational society is dependent

on ‘historical conflicts’ (pp. 251, 200). Horkheimer describes the world of capital, the world experienced as a natural process, as a ‘pure’ mechanism, a ‘supra-historical eternal category’, a world that ‘is not [our] own’, a form of ‘deadened existence from which society must emancipate itself’. The suffering inherent to these pathological social conditions may override the co-optation of the oppressed in the cultural and psychological bonds of capital. The oppressed’s ‘despair’ at the void between their individual actualization and their real situation can become a ‘decisive factor’ pushing towards emancipation (p. 212).

Yet such awareness of social injustice does not, of itself, lead to emancipatory change. Horkheimer (1972a) rejects the idea that the working-class (and other oppressed groups, one should add) have some ‘guarantee of correct knowledge’ either of their predicament or their power (pp. 240, 213). What is guaranteed however is a ‘circle of transmitters’ who will necessarily be aroused by ‘prevailing injustice’. But, Horkheimer warns, this guarantees only a contemporary—not a *future*—community of transmitters. We may arrive in conditions where such awareness has become impossible (indeed this is what Horkheimer and Adorno would later presume in the *Dialectic of enlightenment* thesis). But well before his pessimistic turn, Horkheimer, like Cox, gave CT a guiding role to the emancipatory project. Here, echoing Marx, Horkheimer asserts that the ‘social function’ of CT is to form a dynamic unity with the oppressed to become an ‘expression of the concrete historical situation and a force within it to stimulate change’ (p. 215).

Yet this aspirational quality of theory as an active social participant results in an unresolved political tension at the heart of CT. For whilst suffering provides the materialist content for a critical reason (Horkheimer, 1972a, pp. 242–243), the potential for emancipation is reduced to a weak entreatment based on the awareness of one’s suffering *and* the rational understanding of a way out of it. The impetus towards reasonable conditions of life—‘from a blind to a meaningful necessity’ (p. 229)—is deemed to be the self-knowledge of all and, as we have seen, the conditions necessary for this rational, consciously directed form of self-determination are deemed to be already present. And yet, this relies on a type of social individual that possesses an awareness of, and ability to act on, this concern with attaining the ‘reasonable conditions of life’. Against the dominance of ‘traditional’ thinking that Horkheimer (1972a) admits would view such aims as purely subjective, speculative, and useless against a reason thoroughly determined by instrumentality, the ground seems to be taken-out from underneath the emancipatory possibility of CT (pp. 217–219, 233). Against the dominance of such thinking, Horkheimer’s admission that CT has no influence on its side *except* the abolition of injustice seems to lack the social conditions to make it actual. Horkheimer has one way out of this theoretical cul-de-sac, however, something emphasized also by Cox, particularly in his later work. This is the importance attached to human ‘association’, basic forms of intersubjectivity, through which emancipation is re-cast not as some abstract utopia but a real possibility within present conditions and productive forces (pp. 217–219).

Association and Intersubjectivity

As we have seen, in Horkheimer’s conception, CT does not seek merely an increase in knowledge but humankind’s emancipation. The most frequent description of this emancipatory interest centres on the rational construction of society in which self-determination equates to the meaningful direction of individual and social life. The rational society is that which overcomes the accidental, frictive, and blind mechanism of conflicting forces within bourgeois society to instead take into account the ‘life’ of the entire community. The basic exchange relation—alongside

the juridical, political, and cultural aspects of bourgeois society—is regarded as the ‘straitjacket’ inhibiting the further development of human association (Horkheimer, 1972a, pp. 213, 229, 23). However, bringing together CT and the empirical insights of the social sciences leads to understanding how the exchange economy must, necessarily, lead to a heightening of social tensions: restrictions on individual free development, growing inequality, and increasing toil (pp. 226–227). It is humankind’s striving against this restriction under capitalism that generates the constant ‘potential’ for emancipatory transformation of which CT can help guide (see esp. Horkheimer, 1971). Emancipation is defined by this struggle for the ‘general interest’ inclusive of the free development of all individuals, the just allocation of scarcity, and equality in community (Horkheimer, 1972a, p. 246; see Held, 1980, p. 197).

Horkheimer’s ‘rational society’ therefore places intersubjectivity—how *we* associate—at the centre of the emancipatory project, and explains why CT has privileged access into this form of social inquiry. This is because Horkheimer cast CT as part of the philosophical line of thought that sought to overcome the tendency, so pronounced in late modernity, of being rooted in the isolated subject (*Einzelpersönlichkeit*). Instead of an autonomous creature, the Hegelian tradition saw the overarching structures of the socio-historical totality that gives (or conditions) the subject, giving it ‘objective form’ (Horkheimer, 1995, pp. 1–2). The notion of positive and social freedom upheld by the FS was grounded in Hegel’s search for the unification of the universal and particular in ethical community (see Jay, 1996, p. 276). As such, Horkheimer’s CT opposed the illusion of both an individual atomized from society (as in liberalism) and an individual subsumed under a false collectivity (nationalism) but instead sought to focus on the subject as a relation. As Horkheimer describes it, CT deals with the human subject as ‘a definite individual and his real relation to other individuals and groups’, one in conflict with other classes, and one immersed in a ‘web’ of relationships with the social totality and nature (Horkheimer, 1972a, p. 211). In his opening address for the *Institute*, its research programme was said to be directed to explore the relations of intersubjectivity, specifically, between the economic life of society, the psychological development of individuals, and the changes in culture (Horkheimer, 1995, p. 12). Moreover, Horkheimer (1972b) concluded that the attainment of individual happiness is a ‘social achievement’, echoing the Hegelian notion that one cannot be free alone and that the social conditions of happiness can be rendered pathological, given deformations in human association within bourgeois society (p. 252). Though Horkheimer (1972a) regarded the ‘circle of solidarity’ to be narrow for this transition towards emancipation, his musing that even in a gang of thieves may have positive traits of human community both exposes the relational deficiencies of our time and the potentials within it (pp. 241–242).

Horkheimer suggested that education, rather than social position or income, provided the best possibility for developing ‘a wider vision’ regarding human association (p. 221). Yet the limit of Horkheimer’s analysis—and the FS generally—was the myopic focus on the Western subject from which this vision was to emanate. CT was to be guided by a search for the praxis of emancipation, a generalizable interest (*Allgemeinheit*), and yet, despite sporadic references to social struggles in the global periphery and colonially subjugated peoples, it looked only inwardly to the West. Part of this is evident in Horkheimer’s (1995) emphasis on Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* in his foundational comments on CT, made with little problematization of its core tenants. Moreover, he sought to initially apply CT to ‘skilled craftspeople and white collars workers in Germany’, and whilst he intimated an intention to examine other developed European countries, this Eurocentric and modernist narrative came to pollute the entire endeavour (pp. 11–12). Viewed in this light, Horkheimer’s late retreat to theology as the expression of humanity’s longing to establish a free and just community can be seen as a response of his own failure

to engage with global sociology and the possibilities within humanity taken as a whole. As such, it is by broadening the notion of intersubjectivity that the thought of Cox is most effective in overcoming the methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism of CT by giving it new categories.⁶ Indeed, one could borrow from Cox's comments on Spengler that the Copernican Revolution that must take place within CT is that the West is *not* the centre to which all other societies revolve—and that there exist multiple emancipatory currents outside this socio-cultural sphere (Cox, 2001, pp. 105, 108).

Intersubjectivity: Human Association as Civilizational Coexistence

Even in interviews, Cox (1981) has remained guarded on his own normative position regarding the social 'choices' that he considers feasible in the 'range' of alternatives to existing order (p. 130). On the strategic role CT can play in social transformation, Cox (1981) is far more comfortable with using indicative terms such as 'directed towards' or 'leads towards' or 'concerned', consistently emphasizing a more accurate historicism rather than the desired aim or purpose such transformation should be directed towards. Whilst this importance attached to historical process continues throughout his work, in his later conceptual refinements of CT, 'theory' begins to become expressed more actively—he even quotes Marx's dictum favorably that the study of society is made in order to *change* it (Cox, 1996b, p. 28). At this point, a discernable interest in 'how people can participate in creating new forms' becomes of equal concern to the actual process of transformation (Cox, 2007, p. 516)—a point at which we come full-circle to his ideal of 'normative choice' in socio-political orders made in 1981. In particular, a 'new form' of human association becomes a focal point of Cox's hopes—what he refers to broadly as 'civilizational co-existence'—the normative commitments of which offer the most clear illustration of the emancipatory content of Cox's thought. Moreover, it is through this development that Cox contributes towards a massive and necessary shift in the tradition of CT as a whole by emphasizing social relations at the local *and* global levels. This pushes the typical analytical categories of 'intersubjectivity' through what Cox (1992a) calls an 'enlarged conception of global society' (pp. 162–163), which, when coupled with his work on the internationalization of the state and globalization, offers a research programme for CT that overcomes many of the limits of the Western-centric FS. As is well known, Ruggie and Wendt popularized the term 'intersubjectivity' in IR, deploying it as a corrective to positivism in which social facts are said to not be objectively given but agreed upon by subjects. Yet this notion of intersubjectivity does not penetrate below the level of states to human-beings to which the term has been alternatively used in FS, particularly the work of its later generations (see Honneth, 1995: esp. Chapter 5).⁷ The benefit of Cox's account of intersubjectivity is that it reaches into these concrete relations between subjects but also such historical processes and engagements at the civilizational level. Cox's use of Khaldun's historical thought is the key example. This demonstrates the possibility of a non-orthodox IR that deploys a critical method with an 'accent' of historical materialism in such a way that can draw out the *longue durée* of civilizational relations alongside the examination of the constraints on human action to long-term change (Cox, 1995, p. 24 citing Khaldun, 1967).

Following from Khaldun, Sorel, and Collingwood, Cox posits that throughout history peoples collectively confront challenges in which their social practices embrace different rationalities and normative orders. Based on this insight, the central issue for politics is that communities are *formed* by such struggles (Cox, 1996b, p. 28). Here, intersubjective relations between individuals and groups are assumed to be inherent to, and properly formative of, the internal processes of societies *and* of civilizational encounters through the 'recognition of the ontological

equality of other civilisations' (Cox, 2001, p. 109). It is the possibilities contained in this latter form of recognition that interests Cox most and he begins with dimensions of intersubjectivity that frame the understandings of difference between civilizations, their relations, and their transformation (p. 105). Cox inquires into civilizations as complex webs of intersubjectivity, looking for processes that may lead to what he describes as 'mutual and pacific recognition of differences among peoples' (Cox, 1995, p. 11). Consistent with his historicist form of CT, the point of access is in understanding these historical processes. Developing from Braudel and Kuhn, the ideas of the mutual borrowings across civilizations, Cox focuses on those tendencies towards the recognition of difference in community and *amongst* cultures and civilizations (p. 14). Thus, any commitment to universalism is tempered by relativism through the 'mutual recognition of difference in value systems among cultures and civilizations' (Cox, 1996b, p. 22). In this way, recognition functions as a regulative ethic across the global community in that its principles preclude the imposition of particular concepts of emancipation *on* civilizations but not, of course, the possibility of mutual supports *across* civilizations.⁸ As Cox (1995) writes: '[t]he prospects of compatibility in world order depend very largely upon the strengthening of this recognition and the acceptance of difference through internal developments in each civilization' (p. 14).

In what I would describe as an outline framework for an intercivilizational process of recognition, Cox focuses on the 'bonds of solidarity'—the institutions and practices—that he believes could be the basis of 'an alternative vision of society'. Regarding his normative choice of an alternate vision of society, Cox is at his most speculative when he pleads for such a vision of a 'real creative alternative' to come about. What shifts this from a mere longing to a feasible process however, relates to the problem of *asabiya*—the moral quality or sense of group solidarity—that Cox upholds as essential to the creation (or decay) of a community (Cox, 1995, pp. 23–24). Processes contributing towards intercivilizational learning—those leading to the strengthening of a *global asabiya* as a 'new social and political solidarity' (Cox, 2007, p. 35, 1992b)—become of key importance (Cox, 1996b, p. 35, 1992b). The basis for a consciousness towards such a new global order is self-knowledge that relativizes and challenges the commonsensical views of one's own society and is considered an important starting point for a knowledge of others (see Cox, 2007, p. 517).⁹ As such, for civilizational coexistence, 'mutual comprehension' or the 'ability to enter into the mental framework of the Other' is essential for this vision of peaceful coexistence (Cox, 2001, p. 105). Alamuti discusses Cox's argument on the coexistence of civilizations and the problem of mutual comprehension, positing a defense of openness to individual and collective learning as being the key to a just order (Alamuti, 2015, p. 244, note 1). Cox (2001) links this sentiment to Collingwood's notion of 'generating civility' and Bakhtin's notion of the condition of dialogue as the mutual recognition of self-conscious beings (pp. 121–125). Decentration (Habermas) or detachment (Elias) provides similar ideas towards this necessary openness to the Other as fundamental to moral learning.

Whilst Cox seems pessimistic about the prospects for the emergence of such solidarity (much like Horkheimer regarding the future 'circle of transmitters'), we can see in his stated hopes for such a possibility a clear connection to his earliest influences—Burkeian conservatism and socialist ideals—that tether his understanding of society, whether local or global, as organic and solidaristic (Cox, 1996b, p. 20, 2012, p. 16). Here, Cox's (2001) key achievement has been his ability to re-capture the possibilities for *coexistence in the plurality of civilizations* (pp. 108–109), a possibility obscured and lost to those that have depicted civilizational encounters under Americanized (Luce), teleological (Fukuyama), or conflictual (Huntington) models, rather than in dynamic, relational terms. Tehranian takes up such a historical approach, anticipating some of the arguments here, as consistent with a Coxian framework that rejects the false

choice between the end of history or the clash of civilizations that dominate so much thinking in IR (Tehrani, 2016, p. 41). Cox (2007) speculates on the conditions for the mutual recognition of distinct civilizations to emerge—or what he calls the ‘material basis for coexistence in diversity’ (p. 513)—as including: elements of shared consciousness that can bridge the distinct traditions and sources of intersubjective meanings; the maintenance of the biosphere; and the governance of a plural world through social solidarity, equality, restraints on violence, and human rights (see Cox, 2007, p. 523, pp. 526–527, 2001, p. 126). Whilst these conditions are immanent, they remain in contradiction in power, production, and social forces.

Accordingly, it is important to note that Cox does restrict the possibilities in this relational/recognitive process. Specifically, Cox limits such recognition to the enhancement of one’s subjective understanding regarding the different perspectives, understandings, and perceptions of the world of the ‘other’. It functions more as a form of reflexivity on the conditioning of our own thoughts/perspective—a self-awareness of the cultural situatedness of our own mind—and thereby contributing to the possibility of mutual recognition. This downplays the *relational* aspect of intersubjectivity in favour of the *subjective*. For one could contend that intersubjectivity is formative of the very perspectives, understandings, and perceptions of the subject. These are not created by the subject and related outwardly but are intersubjectively mediated all the way down. This means that social relations remain fundamental. Whilst Cox (2001) does give some indication that changes in intersubjectivity emanate from the ‘bottom’, that is, from injustices in civil society and the generation of new social norms through social struggle (p. 125), this does not yet equate to a full theory of intersubjectivity for IR but gestures towards it. Moreover, if such corrective work could be achieved, Cox’s (2001) intercivilizational approach to intersubjectivity (p. 110) would then overlap with the empirical and normative conditions of central concern to more recent developments in the FS, specifically, Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition that looks to the forms of ‘intersubjective understanding’ that make possible politically significant emancipatory practices through domination-free networks of interaction (see Honneth, 1995, pp. 97, 106). Such shared interests could form the basis of a productive research endeavour combining forms of CT in social theory and CIT in IR—a question beyond the scope of this paper to address, however. Whilst Cox’s connection to a fully fleshed recognition theoretic should not be over-played, the remarkable synergies with Honneth lend impetus for further research into recognition in the cosmopolitan or intercivilizational sphere—and support Cox’s ongoing association with the label CT.

Conclusion

Cox’s meaning of ‘critical’ in his own approach has been always *sui generis* and yet bears a number of synergies with Horkheimer. As we have seen, Horkheimer’s set-up of the critical divide actively combined CT with other theoretical and empirical approaches as a means to ground practical, social inquiry into emancipation. He saw freedom as a social achievement, with the liberation of the individual as possible only in a rational society. Yet the application of this radical method was limited by the FS’s myopic focus on the West that curtailed its understanding of the social totality. In distinction, Cox’s set-up of the critical divide tended towards separating CT from other approaches—particularly positivist and neorealist accounts. His work was less normatively driven by emancipation but which, nevertheless, remained a consistent theme, albeit one under-theorized. In particular, Cox’s critical historicism contributed significantly to the opening up of CT towards the emancipatory possibilities located in civilizational coexistence, something that promises the radical extension of intersubjectivity to the human

community taken as a totality. This refined intersubjective ontology promises much for the future of a ‘critical’ theory that holds to an emancipatory interest.

But this reading cuts against many of Cox’s interlocutors. For some, like Persaud, Cox provides first and foremost a theory of domination and resistance. This is patently true in terms of what it primarily addresses: the existing composition of social forces and the forms of domination within this status quo. But to linger here is to risk remaining one-sided. For Cox is above all a dialectician and, as such, we must give equal consideration to the affinity or the ‘other-side’ of this form of domination: emancipation. Of course, the positivity of socio-political order must be our principal concern, given that we as humans experience it as suffering. But resistance is always purposive, it is not intended to preserve domination, but to remove or alter the conditions of suffering. Sublation, or the possibility of sublation, must be given its due lest we fall to the illusion of that which *is*. For others, like Kubalkova, my reading is too much of an attempt to mainstream a ‘critical theory’ of IR as a generic term, much less as a movement, as the differences between Cox and others associated with CIT are too vast.¹⁰ Yet, at its core, and particularly so in his later work that actively seeks the extension of solidarism between civilizations, Cox presents a distinct, normative choice for an alternative vision of the human future that is open, just, and dialogic. Here, his work is less in the ‘philosophical mode’ of CT that is endangered by its own cultural insignificance, towards one concerned in concrete terms with the real, historical world, and the question of how humans can continue to relate with each other, presenting this as problem of *our* moral and social choices on a world-scale. This is Cox’s greatest lesson to us—but it is also a theme shared with the emancipatory commitments of the FS. To separate them would be an artifice based on the intellectual development of a discipline, rather than seeking out shared theoretical and political commitments that are far more important.

And it is on his question of politics that answers why Cox’s work is not read widely in the North American academy. This field prefers the safe *apoliticism* of constructivism that serves the status quo that seeks to explain through elite politics like norms entrepreneurs and cascades, rather than the critical and emancipatory content of Cox’s (and Horkheimer’s) thought that is immersed in real social relations and the possibilities for change contained within them. It is because of the critical content of Cox’s ideas—his implicit emancipatory commitments—that he remains a ‘fugitive’ in the academy (see Leysens, 2008) and which, more than anything else, proves my argument regarding the ‘critical’ content of his thought and the appropriateness of the label accordingly. It is because of this critical content of Cox’s ideas—his implicit emancipatory commitments—that he remains not only a ‘fugitive’ in the academy (see Leysens 2008) or an ‘eccentric’ (this is Susan Strange’s label, see Cox, 2012: 18, 23-24), but why he must be considered a ‘critical’ theorist. For even though the FS did not form a significant part of his canon, Cox shares the content of their concerns as the main purpose to which his theory is to serve. Cox therefore can be seen—as Susan Strange would have said—a ‘Critical Theorist’ in the *best* sense of the term.

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Notes

- 1 In this article I use CT to designate Horkheimer’s approach and the theoretical programme as developed by the Frankfurt School FS. This has become customary in the literature, even though in his essay ‘Traditional and

- Critical Theory' Horkheimer (1972) uses lower cases when expressing this term and frequently describes it not just as a theory but also as an 'attitude' or 'thought'.
- 2 On the FS, see generally Dubiel (1985). On Horkheimer's influence in IR, much less has been explored. For exceptions, see Hoffman (1987) and Brincat (2012).
 - 3 As the article focuses on these two essays and for reasons of length, wider reflections on Cox and Horkheimer's corpus of work are made only to shed light on aspects of how each sets up the 'critical' divide.
 - 4 Nevertheless, despite this 'unhelpful choice of words', Booth (2007) sees in Cox an attempt to infuse theory and practice with the idea of struggling to make a better world, in which CT becomes a tactical and strategic action for emancipatory purposes (pp. 48, 198, 264, 242–244).
 - 5 The period where Cox was primarily concerned with Gramsci, history and globalization. For a periodization of Cox's work, see Cox and Sinclair (1996, pp. 537–544).
 - 6 For an exemplary critique of CIT on the grounds of its Eurocentrism, see Hobson (2007).
 - 7 I thank Vendulka Kubalkova for a discussion on this point.
 - 8 While Cox is discussing gender in this particular reference, the point can also be generalized concerning the respect of difference (see Cox, 1995, p. 14).
 - 9 Note the overlap with Horkheimer's emphasis on the importance of education for developing such a 'vision', explored above.
 - 10 Both Persaud and Kubalkova's readings were based on lively discussions at 'On Robert W. Cox's Contribution to IR, IPE and IS', at the ISA 56th Annual Convention, 19 February 2015, New Orleans.

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