

“*For Someone and for Some Purpose*”

An Interview with Robert W. Cox

Robert W. Cox is widely regarded as one of the leading critical theorists in the study of world politics. His work, spanning International Relations Theory and International Political Economy, has been hugely influential since the publication of his two articles “Social Forces, States and World Orders” (1981) and “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations” (1983). His work contributed to the normative turn in the discipline and helped establish a range of critical methodologies.

Robert W. Cox was born in 1926 in Montreal, Canada, and completed a Master’s degree in history from McGill University after which he joined the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva, where he became the chief of the Program and Planning Division. Twenty years of service at the ILO provided the inspiration for his first book (co-authored with Harold Jacobson), *The Anatomy of Influence: Decision-Making in International Organisation* (1973) that explored the sources and ways of influence in eight specialised agencies in the United Nations – a work that complemented Cox’s edited volume *The Politics of International Organisation* (1970) that looked to the political role of international economic organisation. Cox then turned to the academia and taught at Columbia University, New York, before taking up a professorship at York University, Toronto, between 1977 and 1992. His two acclaimed articles were followed by the publication of *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (1987) that examined the power relations in production and its affect on the organisation of society and world politics. In 1996, his key works were collected in *Approaches to World Order* (1996). Cox’s most recent book, *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilisation* (2002), with its focus on civilizational encounters and post-hegemonic forms of human community, has signalled a new step in his ever-evolving critical thinking.

This interview was conducted by Shannon Brincat on the 14-16 June 2009, in La Barboleusaz, Switzerland.

Life and influences

You grew up in the Anglophone sector of Montreal, a son of politically conservative parents. Yet, very early in your life you became interested in French Canadian nationalism of the 1930s and 40s – which was radically opposed to the milieu of your family background. Later in your life, expressing your admiration for Edmund Burke’s organic approach to society as a link between conservatism and socialism,

*you argued that this form of conservatism was congenial to democratic socialism*¹
Does your background explain the development of your thought?

Montreal was a very divided city when I grew up. I lived where English-speaking people lived and then – even as a youngster – I became aware that there was a whole different world, not very far from me. I used to take long streetcar rides down into the East end of Montreal, just to see what it was like. I would go to political meetings in the French-speaking areas of town. This was something completely different from, and which hardly existed in, the English-speaking areas - because politics was hardly discussed in public there.

It interested me that there was this other society and that they had radical ideas in different directions from those in my own milieu. There was a strong nationalist movement part of which was channelled through the dominant provincial political party and part in more radical directions and there were fascist ideas that were very current there in the 1930s. The Catholic Church was important there, not just in terms of the dominant orthodox Church Catholicism, but currents within the Church – the Jesuits, for example, introduced the concept of cooperative movements.

I became sympathetic to the idea of more autonomy for French Canada, though the vocabulary in those days was different from today's. When growing up, I used to read *Le Devoir*, which was the intellectual French language paper (you might compare it to *Le Monde* in France). I was more or less in the current of experimental social ideas in French Canada which was only beginning in English Canada. In English speaking Canada there was a movement called the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation which later became the New Democratic Party. It did not have much impact in Montreal, but affected other parts of English speaking Canada. I would say that that these experiences of living in Quebec, with its then tight division between linguistic and ethnic groups and my small personal efforts to bridge those divisions made me more of an “international” person in vocation.

I thought of myself as a conservative, philosophically – but not as a supporter of the Conservative Party. I read Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and from that drew the idea of society as an organic thing in which everyone had responsibility towards everyone else from their position and role in society. I

¹ Robert W. Cox, “Influences and Commitments”, in *Approaches to World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 24.

thought that was the diametrical opposite of the exaggerated individualism that came to be represented much later by the likes of Margaret Thatcher as conservatism, which seemed to me nothing but a doctrinal revival of 19th century free market capitalism. Burke's conservatism, for me, was closer to social democracy as embodied in the radical movements growing up in Quebec in the 1940s like the *Bloc populaire canadien* led by André Laurendeau who became the editor of *Le Devoir*.

And then you started working with the International Labour Organisation (ILO). How did this happen, and what made you leave the ILO and work in the academia?

Yes. It was against this background, just when I was in my graduating year, that the Principal of McGill University, Dr. Cyril James, called me into his office and asked if I would like to be interviewed for a job in the ILO, which was housed by McGill during the war. I really jumped at the offer because it was an opportunity to leave the Anglo-Canadian segment of Montreal – which was almost cut off from the rest of the world – and to go to Geneva and work in an international environment. This was a very important formative experience in developing my thinking. Not that the ILO was an especially radicalising environment, because it was very much part of the newly established world order.

When I was recruited at the end of the war, the ILO was opening up to a wider part of the world. The mass independence movements of the 1960s had yet to come about. The decades immediately following World War II saw considerable innovation in social policy. The ILO had a central role during those post war years. However, by the 1970s, I was beginning to wonder whether that phase of encouraging social initiatives hadn't passed. Bureaucracies never die, but they perpetuate themselves by doing over and over again what they did the last time, and I had a sense that that was happening in the 1970s. So it was a combination of personal frustration and the sense that I also wanted to be free to develop intellectually that led me to think of leaving the ILO.

With the permission of the Director-General, David Morse, for a couple of years I had taken leave from the ILO to teach at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva. I began to enjoy the opportunity of thinking for myself, and I began to write a little. I started off thinking about the structure of power internally – about business, labour and the role of government. I had written a piece about

leadership in international organisations based very largely on my experience working closely with David Morse. I showed it to Harold Jacobson, a close friend and professor of political science at the University of Michigan with whom I had been working on my own critique of international organizations who was in Geneva at the time. He liked it and took it to Hamilton Fish Armstrong, the editor of *Foreign Affairs* in New York, who agreed that it should be published. The problem was that as a serving official with the ILO I was precluded from publishing under my own name, so from my point of view it should be anonymous. Hamilton Fish Armstrong hesitated because *Foreign Affairs* policy was to identify authors; however, ultimately he agreed. The precedent was George Kennan's famous article signed X.² My article was entitled "The Executive Head" and was modelled on Machiavelli's *Il Principe*. So the article appeared with N. M. – for Nicolo Machiavelli – as the author.

Of course, it soon became widely suspected in ILO circles that I had written the article and all hell descended upon me from the authorities! This showed me that if I wanted to be able to express myself, I had better be someplace else.

Your work has been labelled in different ways all over the years. Mark Hoffman, for example, has portrayed you as a critical International Relations theorist, whilst John Adams referred to your work as "watery Marxism." Meanwhile, Anthony Leysen has preferred to highlight your tolerance for diversity and eclecticism.³ Is it useful to try to categorize your work?

I think Susan Strange used the word 'eccentric' – she added 'in the best English sense of the word.'⁴ That's probably what I am: a non-conformist. I don't belong to any school or espouse any doctrine. You can see from the people I quote that they come from different contexts; they are not the ones other people tend to use. How many international relations scholars write about Giambattista Vico, Georges

² George F. Kennan, "The sources of Soviet conduct", *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947.

³ Mark Hoffman, "Critical Theory and the Inter-Paradigm Debate", *Millennium*, 16(2), 1987, 231-249. John Adams, "Review of Cox, Production, Power, and World Order," *Annals of the American Academy*, Vol 501, January 1989, 224-225. Anthony Leysen, *The Critical Theory of Robert W. Cox. Fugitive or Guru?*, New York: Macmillan/Palgrave, 2008.

⁴ Cox is here referring to Strange's back-cover endorsement of Robert. W. Cox, *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilisation*, (with M.G. Schechter), New York: Routledge, 2002.

Sorel or R. G. Collingwood? These are not thinkers that authors in this field today are necessarily familiar with. Since my itinerary or socialisation into the discipline has been different from that of most people in IR theory, I don't know a lot of the things that they know.

For example, take the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. I know about the Frankfurt School, but not much. That is, I have never read the works of scholars associated with it so thoroughly as for it to be part of my intellectual canon. Yet, people often say, 'but if you're a critical theorist you must have had some influence from the Frankfurt School.' I just never came about my work from that direction! I am perfectly agreeable to the idea that the Frankfurt School did a lot of useful things, but they were not part of my intellectual inheritance.

At the same time, you are widely regarded as one of the key neo-Gramscian scholars in IR and IPE.⁵ How did you come across Gramsci, and how did he influence your thought?

I discovered Gramsci after I left Geneva. The first time I remember hearing his name was around 1970 from a graduate student at the University of Toronto, when I was on a kind of sabbatical from Geneva. This young man talked about someone he called 'Gramski' whom he said 'was very interesting.' I'd never heard of him before, so I just made a note of the name in my mind. Then, while I was at Columbia, there was a professor in the Italian department who was interested in Gramsci and with his permission I sat in his undergraduate class on Italian literature.

I found Gramsci congenial to my own way of thinking because he takes an organic view of society and he does make the link between economics and ideas a central theme. One of the first things I wrote about his work was the piece published in *Millennium* on his concept of hegemony.⁶ It seemed to me that Gramsci's idea of hegemony was very different from the current meaning of hegemonic power as the dominant military or economic power. His idea of hegemonic power was a process of thought, whereby people began to see a certain set of power relationships as normal.

⁵ Randall D. Germain, Michael Kenny, "Engaging Gramsci: International Relations Theory and the New Gramscians", *Review of International Studies*, 24(1), 1998, 3-21.

⁶ R.W. Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations", *Millennium*, 12(2), 1983.

This understanding of hegemony seemed to me a far more realistic way of thinking about world politics and world power. I read and thought a lot about Gramsci at that time and people started to call me a neo-Gramscian. I wondered, ‘what was the *neo* for?’

However, I do not take Gramsci’s thought as a package of doctrines to be applied systematically to any problem that I come upon.

Do you consider yourself a pioneer or a ‘field leader,’ as Hoffman has put it?

I have never thought of myself as a ‘field leader.’ I know that I’m fairly widely read, probably more so in Britain and in Europe and other parts of the world than in the United States, where, as Jerry Cohen suggests,⁷ I’m more of an underground author. You may not find me on many of the prescribed graduate reading lists or in bookshops at universities, but you’ll find that I am read by graduate students.

I don’t regard myself as a leader, just as I don’t regard myself as founding a school or being a member of a school. I do my own work as an individual. The fact of having worked in a rather bureaucratic mode for about 25 years in an international organisation like the ILO gave me a certain experience of the way things happen internationally and nationally – particularly as regards the interactions between unions and management and governments. So I am inclined to think in terms of what is the real world today and what are the opportunities for breaking into something new – but not in terms of redesigning the whole picture or bringing it about in accordance with some master plan.

Critical theorising

⁷ Benjamin Jerry Cohen, *International Political Economy: An Intellectual History*, (Princeton University Press, 2008).

If, as you have so famously stated, ‘theory is always for someone and for some purpose,’⁸ what would you say is the purpose of your theory and who is it for?

That statement was an admonition to be critical – a call to get one to find out what any particular theory is for. It was also, if you like, a sceptical or critical reflection on the nature of theory, a reminder that theory is not something which exists in some absolute sphere. Whoever is developing a theory is trying to achieve some goal. Often, that goal is not explicitly stated but it should become evident with some reflection upon the work and the circumstances in which the theory was developed. That phrase was a general encouragement to be critical, to refuse to accept a theory at face value, to look at it and see where it comes from, what it was designed to achieve, the context in which it was developed.

I did not anticipate the impact that the article “*Social Forces, States and World Orders*” would have. I am however pleased that it did have such impact. At the time, the article was not conceived as a breakthrough or a major contribution, but merely as a sketch of the way my own thinking was going. It was Susan Strange who suggested I publish the text. It might have been the most succinct statement of my process of thinking that I have ever published!

In that article, I argued that E.H. Carr was an example of the historical approach and that Hans Morgenthau was much more in the American (positivist) mould, which tried to reason like the physicists and the chemists. I don’t think history is related to that kind of science at all. I still follow the approach laid out in my book *Production, Power and World Order*: we need to look at the material conditions, ideas, institutions, production relations and world orders but not in any systematic form. I hope that my thinking is not fixed in rigid form. I hope that it is continually evolving – at the moment, perhaps more in the realm of ideas and civilisations, rather than in terms of thinking about political structures. I like to think historically and I feel that thinking in this way is more in line with continually evolving thought, rather than with thought that follows rigid parameters to be applied to all circumstances.

So my intention was not to prescribe a method to be followed, but rather a set of ideas that may lead to further ideas. Basically my approach is historical. Theories arise out of historical situations and the problems or dilemmas they create for the

⁸ R.W. Cox, ‘Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory’, *Millennium*, 10(2), 1981, 128, emphasis in the original.

people who are experiencing them. The theoretician is the person who can synthesize all this and propound a way to think about it. I have sketched a number of factors that frame any situation and need to be taken into account in theorising – like the prevailing institutions, the material conditions and the prevalent ideas and ideologies. Purpose is normative, and my aims could be summarized as achievement of greater equity in people's material life, a greater sense of understanding and tolerance of differences in culture and ideas and a means of moderating conflict among peoples. This is no small matter as I see economic crisis leading to more inequality, economic inequalities embittering cultural, religious and ethnic conflict, and the whole becoming very unsettling for global and regional peace.

*But do you still agree with the distinction between 'problem solving theory' and 'critical theory'?*⁹

Yes, I think so. At the time, I thought that people might find it useful. Recently, someone suggested that the distinction was now pretty much *passé*. All I meant to say was that 'problem solving theory' is something useful. It is useful in circumstances where you can bring together all of the constraints bearing on a situation and find a solution within that situation. In other words, it works within the assumption of overall stability.

Critical theory, in my mind, is much more a historical mode of thinking. It recognises that the existing situation is a transitory one and that maybe what one needs to be looking for is not just to solve the problems that are inherent within it, but to look for the openings that are likely to bring about structural change in the future. So I think that critical thinking is directed more towards historical change, whereas problem solving means thinking within the existing historical structure about how to overcome the difficulties that might arise.

In this context, what is the role of the critical theorist?

⁹ R.W. Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory', *Millennium*, 10(2), 1981, 129.

The role of critical theory is to examine current proposals and doctrines and to – I do not know whether the term ‘deconstruct’ is appropriate in this circumstance – to show how they have originated, what are the things that they protect and, if you are hoping for change, what possibilities exist within them. It requires thinking of alternatives. Critical theory is a mode of thought that exposes the common current doctrines as inadequate in dealing with global problems, and that tries to find other elements that could be thought of, either separately or collectively, as an alternative.

Yet it is difficult to foresee how an alternative view arises other than accidentally, that is, provoked by specific events that shock people into rethinking their circumstances. I think that is probably more likely to happen that way than for them to be convinced by sophisticated argument.

The role of the critical theorist, then, is to be aware of forces of opposition to the established order, and to bring them to the light so that others are not only aware of them but can evaluate them in terms of their own thinking – assessing whether there are compatibilities and common aims. I am talking about working from the level of society rather than from a formal institutional structure. We need some sort of feeling at the base of societies, so that people can recognise more common concerns with ‘others.’

This movement will also have to be one that bridges different civilisational groups or national entities that represent civilisations. This is very difficult because at the base of society people are mostly concerned with their survival as individuals and families and cannot afford the luxury of thinking about what is happening in other parts of the world. Yet I think more and more people are becoming accustomed to things that are global or at least regional in scope. Developing a transcivilisational way of thinking will be a long and gradual process; and whether it will be able to save the world is still an open question. But I believe that recognising and accepting difference is a minimal requirement for long term survival – minimal but essential.¹⁰

Do you think that there is the danger that we have become too socialised within existing structures for alternatives and possibilities of change to emerge?

¹⁰ See, in this context, R.W. Cox, “‘The International’ in Evolution”, *Millennium*, 35(3), 2007.

Maybe this is putting me in the optimistic category, but I think that people's sense of where they are in the world is subject to pressures that are global in character. I do not want to use the word globalisation because I think that, like democracy, it has been used in many different ways, mainly supportive of the idea of a gradual convergence towards a global free market economy which would be dominated by the United States. By 'global pressures' I mean those problems that arise in different parts of the world, and which no longer affect just a particular local area, but everybody else.

Now, as people become more and more aware of this process, their mentality is being forced to change by the very things that happen – rather than by preaching and propagation of ideas among people. It may be that feeling the impact of these global pressures will induce people to change and will feed into the support of civil society groups that have been pushing for such changes. But we are speaking in very abstract terms as behoves intellectuals!

Let us be more specific, then. Do you think that there is any global pressure nowadays that can force people to rethink their circumstances?

I would probably put my bet on the environment issue: saving the biosphere. I think there is some evidence to suggest that people have become alive to that in most parts of the world. Even in China, a country bent on economic growth, which is consuming more and more of the oil reserves of the world and is polluting more, there is a real concern – on the part of the government at any rate – for the implications of this growth in terms of climate change and the environment. This is because China is a very vulnerable place in terms of its land surface and what it can produce. It does not have expendable land resources to be able to feed itself with its massive population growth, so it has got to be concerned about the global environmental situation. In various ways, it seems to me that this concern is spreading.

However, when there is an economic crisis, these concerns retreat. We saw that in Canada when Dion's campaign for a green policy was rejected by the

electorate.¹¹ The main chance for Green parties lies in becoming a platform for the expression of ideas that are sometimes picked up by civil society movements. However, developing a sense of collective responsibility about the environment is a very gradual process, and it seems to wither whenever there arises a crisis related to something as immediate as the economy. When confronted with an obstacle in the global economy the problem of the environment is deferred

What about the role of political programmes?

I was reading an article in *Le Monde* a couple of days ago by Edgar Morin, a French sociologist and philosopher, who has broadened the field of sociology into a way of thinking about the world as a whole.¹² This piece focused on to the issue of climate change and the issue of, not just developing policies, but of working towards a fundamental change of people's sense of their relationship to nature. In other words: a kind of long-term reshaping of people's mentality in what concerns the relationship of humanity to nature.

I think he was probably right in suggesting that this will either come about through a series of shocks, or it will not come about at all. But I don't think I can see any existing programme or a set of existing institutions that could make it happen. Certainly, we need to develop and spread ideas that question who we are in relation to nature, that make us think of ourselves as part of nature rather, rather than nature as something to be exploited for the benefit of mankind.

This requires a rather radical change of the way people think about themselves and the world. I do not think there is any programme that you can devise that will make that happen. But it may take place as a result of a whole series of negative circumstances that shock people into questioning the way they think about themselves now.

¹¹ In the Canadian general election of 2008 the leader of the Liberal Party, Stéphane Dion had based his campaign on an environmental programme. The Liberal Party suffered its worst defeat in recent history.

¹² Morin had used the term 'politique de civilisation' from the late 1990s to synthesize his transdisciplinary perspective. See Edgar Morin, *Pour une politique de civilisation*, Arléa, Paris, 2002. The article Cox is referring to is Edgar Morin, "le quantitatif, le qualitatif... et la politique", *Le Monde*, 13th June, 2009..

*In your work, critical theory is connected to history. How do your critical-theoretical concerns reflect in your choice of research methods? In particular, what is the importance of the synchronic and diachronic analysis of historical development? And how does your dialectical methodology work?*¹³

Braudel is very good in synchronic analysis.¹⁴ He wrote about a particular period of world history – exploring the interrelations of different peoples and countries at one particular period. Nonetheless, he was also very sensitive to the development going on within each of those areas. Sometimes the development is synchronically interrelated because what’s developing in one country will have an impact upon other people who are in contact.

One can say therefore that the diachronic and synchronic dimensions go together – especially in the broad landscape of regional or global history. It is not a question of selecting one over the other. Yet most of the social sciences do focus solely on the synchronic dimension, which prevents them from observing patterns of change over time. This is where the idea of critical thinking comes in: its purpose is to examine the synchronic for the elements in it that are breaking down and opening up opportunities for change. It is a question of keeping the two together rather than picking one or the other. But I do think the synchronic is more conducive to problem-solving theory, since its method takes one slice of time and ignores the potential for change.

In regard to dialectics, very simply: there are antagonisms in life and world history, and these antagonisms create change. Yet I don’t think there is any way that you can predict change. Change is going to happen, but you cannot predict what that change is going to be. This takes you back to what Collingwood called the “inside”

¹³ See R.W. Cox, “Civilisations: Encounters and Transformations”, *Studies in Political Economy*, 47, 22, Cox, Robert W. “Civilisations and the twenty-first century: some theoretical considerations”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 1, 2001, 121 and R.W. Cox, “Realism, positivism, and historicism” (1985), in *Approaches to World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 49-59.

¹⁴ Cox’s dialectical method aims at identifying the contradiction that may lead to the system’s transformation. See R.W. Cox, ‘Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory’, *Millennium*, 10(2), 1981, 127. Also R.W. Cox, “Civilisations: Encounters and Transformations”, *Studies in Political Economy*, 47, 13 citing Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilisations*, (R. Mayne trans.), London: Penguin Press, 1994, 8.

and “outside” of history.¹⁵ The outside is what positivism sees, what the observer of events records, what you can measure and quantify. The inside is the thought process that appraises the reality of the outside and introduces the direction of change. History will see both the inside and the outside. Whereas positivism just sees the outside and assumes that the observer is separate from what is being observed, the historian understands that the very act of observing is an act of doing that makes the observer part of the action. This too is the role of the critical theorist. You don’t examine things just to see what they are; you have some intention of improving the situation, of moving it in a direction you find more beneficial for mankind.

Emancipation, progress, and the post-modern critique

The defining feature of critical International Relations theory is said to be its emancipatory interest. While you do advocate greater social equity in the transformation of society, this has always been done within the context of a pessimistic philosophical position. As you stated in “Globalisation, Multilateralism and Democracy”, you have “the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will.” quote.¹⁶ How would you say that your thought relates to the concept of emancipation, given that you never referred to it directly and are pessimistic about its attainment?

Emancipation, to me, means emancipation from slavery. I suppose that in general terms it is probably used to mean making things better or allowing people to express themselves more freely. But I have never found that I could use this word comfortably. This is because I’ve always felt that it might mean more than I meant, or it might not mean what I meant. It’s one of those words that create a question mark in my mind. So I have just avoided it. However, I understand it when other people use it

¹⁵ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*(1946), Revised Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.. See also Robert W. Cox, “Influences and Commitments”, in *Approaches to World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 28.

¹⁶ This is a quote from Gramsci who had borrowed the maxim from Romain Rolland. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1971, 175, footnote 75. See R.W. Cox, “Globalisation, multilateralism, and democracy” (1992), in *Approaches to World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 527, 531.

and I try to interpret exactly what they mean by it. I'm neither for it nor against it, but I don't use it because of how people may read it if I were to use it.

I think the idea of being critical is bound with the concept of emancipation, since, after all, you are criticising the established way of thinking. The established way of thinking is usually something that works to the benefit of an established power or social structure, so that if you are writing critically you are writing with the implication of some kind of change that can be made to that social structure. You are not accepting the world just as it is; you want to see where the existing world can open up, where there are cracks in the existing social establishment of power, and you try to envisage those cracks in such a way as to advance, I would say, *social equity*, meaning less inequality in material circumstances and in life opportunities.¹⁷ This is a very vague concept, it is true, but I feel I can use it a little more easily than emancipation.

You are, however, pessimistic about the achievement of social equity...

I'm thinking of criticism as being in the interest of the improvement of conditions for the general mass of people. However, I am doing so *pessimistically* because, first of all, you have to be aware of all of the constraints that make the present order the way it is, and the resistance to change that it embodies. That's the pessimistic part, if you like – you can call it realism as well – so as not to assume the utopian standpoint, according to which if you think 'nice thoughts' they are something that can necessarily be achieved. For this reason, I have put emphasis on the realities that are being faced in making such attempts, but trying to find a way through those realities in order to move things much more in a socially equitable direction.

But how does this pessimism connect with the optimism that is inherent in every theory that assumes the possibility of change?

¹⁷ Cox refers to this concept in R.W. Cox, "Influences and Commitments", in *Approaches to World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 34-35

I don't think that the two terms are necessarily the negation of each other. I think pessimism is a keen sense of obstacles and not necessarily a rejection of the possibility of change. Pessimism is an appreciation of all the difficulties inherent in making significant change.

Recently, there has been tremendous optimism over Obama's win – and yet when I see that he's appointed Hilary Clinton, that Robert Gates is still there, or that the same team from the Pentagon is still there, then I don't see much evidence of change. What they're doing and intending to do in Afghanistan and Pakistan seems to be a reinvigoration of old policies. It seems evident that there are entrenched institutions and forces. Even if Obama wanted to change them, he couldn't. Maybe there's some hope for health care in the United States, but of course there's a very powerful group of forces aligned there against it, forces that could never accept a single payer system. So you end up with a series of compromises. You promised change to the world but you aren't going to be able to give them much change.

But what you have is the creation of a sense of optimism after the years of George W. Bush, after the negative raw feeling about that regime. They've got a new positive feeling but is there going to be much change? Things will probably be done with a more generous spirit, but by pessimism I mean that I do not expect too much.

What about progress? Is it too optimistic or naïve to think in those terms?

'Progress' is one of those words like 'emancipation.' Perhaps my reaction to emancipation is that it seems to have connotations with the European Enlightenment, and most of the thinkers I have followed have been critics of the Enlightenment. The whole idea of pessimism that I have described goes back to Georges Sorel, whose thought was, like Vico's, a reaction against the Enlightenment. Sorel wrote a book at the end of the 19th century called *Les Illusions du Progrès*,¹⁸ in which he argued that the idea of progress was traceable to the Enlightenment and the idea that mind could create the future. While Sorel identified progress with the Enlightenment, others identified it with the industrial revolution, the imperial expansion of the 19th century and, more recently, in the reasoning behind the neo-conservative expansionists of the

¹⁸ Georges Sorel, *Les illusions du progrès* (1908), *The Illusions of Progress*, (J. Stanley, C. Stanley Trans., Robert A. Nisbet Foreword), Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1969.

George W. Bush administration. Anything that is expanding seems to engender that idea of progress.

So I steered away from the notion of progress because, to me, it can mean everything and nothing much. I prefer to think in terms of concrete forms of change than to think of a general category of progress.

In your work, you quoted Isaiah Berlin's remark that "[t]o realise the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian." You argued that while this offers no philosophical grounding for our commitments, it nevertheless avoids the ethical nihilism of postmodernism.¹⁹ How would you describe your relationship with the post-modern critique of Critical International Relations Theory?

I don't think I ever really understood the post-modern criticisms of critical theory. Yet I would feel that I am immune to such criticisms because I have always called myself a conservative. I don't mean that in the American sense, where conservative means something like a radical 19th century liberal, *laissez-faire*, believing in the free market and in everybody for themselves. Rather, I mean it more in the sense of Burke, who would say that society is an organic structure and that in a healthy society people have to be able to behave towards each other as members of a collectivity.

I remember Margaret Thatcher's statement that 'there's no such thing as society.' To me, that is the absolute negation of what a conservative is. Society is there and it is organic in the sense that people are bound together in some way. It develops, it grows, it changes, and it should be encouraged to change. But you shouldn't have a plan for remaking society, as this would lead to the Soviet problem, where you have a blueprint for a society and are willing to use all sort of dastardly methods to bring it about. That, to me, is a complete negation of an organic society where people are really responsible to each other and can encourage change – but not by killing and reshaping forcibly.

¹⁹ Robert W. Cox, "Influences and Commitments", in *Approaches to World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 22 citing Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.

So I think the ‘Other’ (with a capital O) that post-modernists refer to seems to mean some alien creature to whom various characteristics are ascribed, most of which are the contrary of those that you think of as your own. My whole argument has been to learn how to think empathetically, to be able to get inside the mind of these ‘others’ and to try to understand why they think the way they do.

Thinking about the present: crisis, globalisation and pluralism

If, as you have just remarked, critical theory should seek to engage with concrete circumstances and possibilities of change, what are your most pressing concerns and objectives at the moment?

My central concern is to find a peaceful way out of the neo-conservative dream of the whole world becoming unified in the American idea of democracy and free enterprise capitalism, and the cultural hegemony that accompanies it. The Bush administration made this dream very explicit, and I do not see much change in the Obama administration – just a more effective expression of that hegemonic goal. Obama is less aggressive, and the notion that people can be brought about to adjust to your own concept of world order is more effective through ideas than through force, but I don’t think the outcome differs substantially.

Against that, I’m thinking more and more about the idea of pluralism in the world. This idea of a more plural world entails that one uses empathetic understanding to try to get inside the minds of other cultures and civilisations – to try to see from the inside how they view the world, and then to see what compatibilities or arrangements can be made to carry on in a peaceful way. The secret is in the extent to which people are able – or become able – to insert themselves into the minds of others. I think this is the only way in which one can hope that plurality – meaning different patterns of society and different moral codes – will work out. While different groups may be opposing or supporting different objectives, they may have some things in common. An ability to understand each other’s motives and actions is conducive to becoming aligned to one another for certain goals.

At the same time, the fact of being able to think into the minds of other people changes your own way of thinking. It doesn’t mean you adopt other people’s values

and ideas, but by understanding them for what they are there is a feedback influence on the way you think yourself.

Also, this does not mean necessarily that you will necessarily agree with others when you do understand them. The point is just to understand the connections of thought that make them think and act the way they do. To me that means *overcoming* the concept of the “Other.” That is the primary goal of my critical thinking.

*What consequences do you envisage from the current economic crisis in terms of the neo-liberal ideology, and what you referred to as hyper-liberalism?*²⁰

I would say the global financial crisis has sounded the beginning of the end of the neo-liberal ideology and of the notion of the hyper-liberal state. The very fact that the people whose interests were most identified with neo-liberalism are now the ones asking government to pour massive amounts of money into the stability and maintenance of their industry is both bizarre and inconsistent. According to their own ideology, they should let these industries collapse and develop other ways of production – and yet they’re the ones who are now shouting for protection!

Neo-liberal ideology does not have much of a long-term future. I would move away from the idea that the free market is the basis of freedom and that individual independence is the goal of mankind. My sense is that if there is a goal, it is one of responsible freedom and of the ability to make individual activity compatible with the needs of the broader social groups and communities. So, going back to an organic notion of society, I think individualism is an extremist doctrine. It has value when it is a matter of allowing people to develop their thinking in whatever way they choose. However, when it comes to applying it to society, you have to be more attentive to its implications.

I think that what is likely to come out of this – just as Keynesianism emerged out of the Great Depression – is that some other concept of economic policy may be pieced together. Alternatively, economic policy may just become fragmented

²⁰ Hyperliberalism refers to the weakening and dismantling of government-imposed regulations to protect the public from industrial and market activities. For a discussion of hyperliberalism see R.W. Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Force in the Making of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, 285-298. See also R.W. Cox, “Globalisation, multilateralism, and democracy” (1992), in *Approaches to World Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 528.

as different countries will see themselves as benefiting from a more heterogeneous form of economic theorising. In terms of the effect on international institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, it is still very much of an open question. However, if they do survive, they will survive as different kinds of institutions. This crisis represents a challenge to these institutions to reinvent themselves and to discard the doctrinal views that they have been associated with – the fixed views about what was good for the world and good for everybody. It is interesting that Jeffrey Sachs, the economist who was associated with the rather brutal application of ‘shock therapy,’ consistent with neo-liberal doctrine, has since turned his attention to the problem of poverty and development, climate change and ecological sustainability.²¹

In one of your works you talked about the internationalisation of the state.²² Do you think that this crisis will have an impact at that level of the state?

People who talk about globalisation were too quick to write off the state. In my opinion, the state is still the focal point – especially for people who feel deprived in society and that look for recourse and rectification of their situation. The state is the closest thing able to do something. You cannot ask the United Nations or some sort of global government to act for you, because they are too far away and too remote from effective power. Moreover, with the economic crisis, states have to act to protect their own societies and economies. Therefore, the state will continue to be an important force. The question will be ‘how do you reconcile the potential conflicts among states?’ Here, I do not mean just over territory, but in terms of the kind of economic policy they follow.

Does this mean that the solution is multilateralism between states?

²¹ ‘Shock therapy’ refers to the immediate trade liberalisation of a state, including privatisation, withdrawal of state subsidies, regulation and welfare measures, and the release of price and currency control mechanisms. Sachs has since become an advisor to the United Nations Development Program and an advocate of the increase of aid to developing countries. Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty*, London: Penguin, 2005.

²² The concept of the ‘internationalisation of the state’ refers broadly to the subordination of domestic social pressures to the requirements of the world economy in the post-World War II environment. See R.W. Cox, ‘Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory’, *Millennium*, 10(2), 1981, 144-146.

Multilateralism has been frustrated because of the fact that the United Nations was not in a position to accomplish anything without the consent of the great powers – who could not agree. In these circumstances, the world moved towards forms of organisation that were improvised, and which resulted from the fact that the United Nations was not what it was thought to be. You had the world economy being organised by the G7 – in other words the major capitalist powers – while the Soviet bloc was excluded from being part of it. That arrangement functioned for a while, but some parts of the world that were not represented have become more important – witness, for example, the phenomenon of what they call the ‘BRICs’ – Brazil, Russia, India, China.

It is only in the last few years, with the G20 meeting in London, that there seems to be some general recognition that all of these countries need to be given some voice in the construction of a global economic policy, specifically because of their growing weight in the world economy and the relative weakening of America and Europe. This global economic policy is not going to be dictated by the ideology of neo-liberalism that had seemed to be the consensual form of the G7, and which the latter wanted to impose on the rest of the world. The ideology and the policies will have to be negotiable, and I think we are in that stage of movement. Now, of course it is governments that are represented, not directly people. However, I think the situation is a lot more open now than it has been before and has potentiality for new forms of multilateral engagement.

Overall, this signals a move towards a more plural world, and the recognition that all people do not have to be governed by the same social and economic structures and the same economic policies and doctrines. What constitutes change within those structures and policies is what people and governments within them want to achieve, not something that can be imposed from up high. This constitutes a movement in the direction of plurality.

And what is the role of non-governmental organisations in this process?

There has also been a greater growth of non-governmental organisations. The spread of NGOs from one country to others and the growing linkages within civil

society have been a lot more important as a stimulus for change. This network of organisations is becoming more and more important as part of the multilateral picture. These are growing alongside of, but not within, the United Nations system. The UN itself tried to promote NGOs, giving them consultative status, yet I don't think that has been particularly remarkable because of the fact that consultative status didn't really lead anywhere – insofar as the United Nations was incapable of acting. There wasn't much point in trying to influence the United Nations; it was far more important to build up a set of contacts that could grow independently of those official international bodies. So I see this period as a kind of intermediate stage where NGOs are more important. Of course, they tend to grow in countries that are expanding economically, such as China.

There are people who have reached a certain level – beyond the necessary means of survival but not reaching affluence – and can express themselves collectively and form organisations to try to achieve things. I think this phenomenon is spreading around the world, and that it will probably be as a result of it that the changes may come about – rather than through direct pressure on the United Nations. While the UN does give countries the obligation to meet and the possibility of discussing things together; while it gives states the opportunity to bring forward proposals – the challenge is to try to form collective visions of the future and collective policies.

Envisaging the future: political challenges and directions for Critical Theory

Let us turn then to future challenges – political and theoretical. To begin with, do you think that alternative political visions will take the form of a backlash against globalisation?

Resistance to forms of globalisation has happened before, and it has been accelerated by the global financial crisis. The first signs of this resistance were clear in the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s, when Malaysia, a small state, took a stand against globalisation centred on the attempt of the United States and the so-called “Washington Consensus” to force policies on other countries. There was a surprising initiative in Japan in 1997, at the height of the crisis, to create an Asian monetary fund

separate from the IMF. This was quickly squashed by the IMF and the United States, and resulted in a crisis in which the Asian countries, with the exception of China, lost control over most of their economies. In this context, the application of the “Washington Consensus” meant in practice that the economies were effectively open to being bought out by Western capital.

As a result of this, most of the Asian countries said “no more of that for us.” In a future crisis, as in the present time, most of the Asian countries have come out of it better than the United States and Europe because they kept and maintained their own levers of economic control. They have not become swallowed up by the West. China is a prime example now: the United States, the major predator country, is dependent upon borrowing from China.

These countries now have a better sense of self-control, and they have learned to live without the threat of globalisation determining their future. Therefore, resistance comes more at the level of states – which translates into the level of people. It is hard for the peasant masses of China and India to even have a concept of globalisation, let alone to organize resistance against it. But those who have experienced it and have shown some resistance against it can identify much more with political leaders who have shown how that resistance is possible.

Does this mean that a unified counter-hegemonic bloc – to use Gramsci’s words – is impossible nowadays? What are the privileged oppositional forces in contemporary world politics?

I don’t think that I could prescribe how to build a hegemonic bloc as a counter-society in the world today. It might be easier to do so in a specific situation, in a concrete national case.

In general, I think the class-based thinking of earlier times is no longer very pertinent. There has been a deterioration of purely class-based political parties. Class conflict was a force for change historically, but in the present it does not work so well. Changes in the nature of production are breaking down some of the more institutionalised arrangements that grew up in the era of mass production: the organisation of mass unions, the concentrated power of employers, the role of the state, all of which was characteristic of a certain period. Especially since the digital

revolution – which is empowering all kinds of different people in different ways – you cannot see the structure of society in quite the same rigid forms that they appeared to be in the late 19th, early 20th centuries. One has to be more alive to the way in which technology has reshaped, in a certain sense, the ability of people to work together to form organisations. Even organisation sounds too formal a word – one should talk about networking in order to achieve certain common goals.

One can say that today the working class is a rather strange, amorphous entity. The way economies have developed has led the working class to become so fragmented in terms of the work it does, the authority under which it work, the set of ideas that are common to its members, that the Marxist belief that there is a kind of moral entity to the working class is somewhat defunct now.²³ Contemporary movements do not usually arise out of the organised working class anymore. They come from less structured movements; people who are organising against poverty in cities, people who are organising on ethnic grounds and so on.

Has there been a failure of the Left in providing a source of opposition?

This particular economic crisis has turned people more to the Right, and you might say that is a failure of the Left. Being cut out of a job puts you back in the “clinging to survival” category, where you’re perhaps more likely to cling to elements of the established order that you may find available to you.²⁴ If you have known a situation a little better than just basic survival and are alive to persisting injustices, your mind may be more in tune with expressing collective opposition. It looks as though Europeans have moved to the Right partly because the economic crisis tells them that these parties are more likely to get the economy back on track, and there is no room for the ‘luxury of experimentation’. It is hard to know why, but it does seem the Right is more generally popular and the old socialist movement is in pretty bad shape.

²³ In this respect, see Cox’s comments on the debate between Gorz and Bahro. R.W. Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Force in the Making of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, 3.

²⁴ This resonates Cox’s comments regarding the 1974 crisis in which large-scale unemployment created fears and concerns for personal survival rather than collective protest R.W. Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Force in the Making of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, 282.

It is interesting to speculate why the economic crisis has not been taken advantage of by more radical movements. I think that part of the Left is bankrupt. It abandoned its basic ideology twenty years ago with Tony Blair and others. The “Old Left” has pretty well disappeared and those remaining on the left of the political spectrum have attempted to make movements based on personality, or on specific issues or doctrines. But I can see no example of an overall comprehensive response in society.

So I think that the strength of opposition is questionable now. One sees much more a backing away into a defensive attitude – rather than a sense of solidarity among people. I thought that perhaps an issue like the environment might produce a sense of common struggle, but that seems to be obscured by the present economic crisis. It is as though it is too luxurious to think in the long-term, to plan for the future. You just think about the immediate problem of jobs and income. I do not find much in the way of a strong movement of opposition: there are lots of causes for opposition but nothing that makes it very coherent.

What about critical thinking? What do you think are the future directions for critical theorists?

My preference would be to move in the direction of a more plural concept of world order, and to facilitate the withdrawal of dominant, hegemonic power over the whole world. This would involve providing a plausible retreat for the United States from positions where it is over-extended and where it is a source of conflict. It would mean encouraging situations where peoples are able to think through their own way, and maybe make changes that they consider better in the knowledge that the world is a composite and plural entity.

One has to begin to understand that the concerns of others will thereby cease to be those of an ‘Other,’ and become something that you can understand and relate to. Recently, at a conference in Singapore and in my book *The Political Economy of a Plural World*, I have been developing my reflections in inter-civilisational terms.²⁵

²⁵ See Robert W. Cox, “Historicity and International Relations: A Tribute to Wang Gungwu”, in *China and International Relations: The Chinese View and the Contribution of Wang Gungwu*, (Z. Yongian Ed.), London: Routledge, 2010.

This means thinking about how people can begin to understand other civilisations – not to cease being separate civilisations but to recognise certain regions of compatibility.²⁶

The normative choices would be those basic factors of sustainability or defence of the biosphere, as well as the avoidance of violent conflict amongst nations or peoples. Beyond that, I think, lies the question of different peoples being able to develop their own forms of society and organisation – economic and social organisation and political structures – not by having something forced upon them from the outside, but rather from their spontaneous internal development. This would entail creating forms of organisation that would be good for them, but not necessarily in a uniform pattern. I would not extend the realm of compulsory norms very far, but I think that the norm of tolerance of diversity would, perhaps, be the third norm to stress after defence of the biosphere and avoidance of major conflict.

Does your focus on civilisation run the risk of essentialising civilisations?

I think that Samuel Huntington provoked a useful debate about civilisations, but I think his idea of civilisations was of a series of monoliths.²⁷ A civilisation is an understandable whole, which has a lot of variety and conflict going on within it and which is continually in process of changing. One's own civilisation and other civilisations are changing and going through this process, and each one is different. They may be identified by terms like Western, or Judeo-Christian or Confucian or Islamic or some other characteristic that is assigned to the whole – blanket terms which Huntington can apply and which most people recognise, but which do not signify a fixed entity, or monolith or a tectonic plate, which was his metaphor.

In other words, Huntington overemphasised the synchronic and underemphasised the diachronic. Civilisation is a very mobile diachronic thing. It is changing all the time. There's more change *in* civilisations than *among* civilisations, because most people live within civilisations and are not, all the time, thinking about other civilisations, thinking about their differences. By understanding that

²⁶ On this point see. R.W. Cox, *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflection on Power, Morals and Civilisation*, (with M.G. Schechter), New York: Routledge, 2002.

²⁷ Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilisations?", *Foreign Affairs*, Summer, 1993.

civilisations are changing, dialogue among them becomes possible. You are not dialoguing with monoliths that have a fixed position; you are dialoguing with people who are undergoing a process of change, which might not be similar to the change going on about you. This needs to be taken into account in order to develop some kind of compatibility about global policy.

That would be my position. It always goes back to the question: how do you understand other people? How do you reduce them from a big “Other,” a capital “Other,” to a little small approachable other that is more interesting to inquire about? In this context, civil society can make changes in the way people think about things in their own countries, and can build linkages to people in other countries. This would be helpful in this process of trying to *understand* each other without *becoming* each other.²⁸

A cosmopolitan solution, then?

Cosmopolitanism has to be the basis for any kind of agreement on things broader than specific interests. This brings us back to the central issue of Collingwood’s “inside” of history – the mentality which animates the material forces of institutions, economies, military organisation and so on. We need to discover and develop mentalities that are not uniform, but that understand each other and each other’s difference sufficiently, so that some degree of compatibility becomes possible or at least discussable. Not everybody’s cosmopolitanism is the same of course – just as not everybody adheres to the American form of democracy and free market capitalism.

At the top level, a plural world means that the major centres of political power meet each other in dialogue, hopefully to achieve some common understanding – so that the policies of one are not damaging to the others, and so as to avoid open conflict. There is always conflict, but this need not necessarily be violent. At a different level, a plural world means the development among people of the capacity to put themselves into the minds of others, in order to see why they might be inclined to act in the different ways that they do. This is a very personal level, a cosmopolitanism of gradually expanding your understanding of the difference among people.

²⁸ See, in this respect, R.W. Cox, *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilisation*, (with M.G. Schechter), New York: Routledge, 2002, xx.-xxi