

Critical Theory of International Relations: Reassessing the Concept of Power

النظرية النقدية للعلاقات الدولية: إعادة تقييم مفهوم القوة

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Received ...8/12/2024

Accepted 16/12/2025

• Abstract:

This article explores how Critical Theory of International Relations contributes to reassessing the concept of 'power'. It argues that power can no longer be understood as a static distribution of capabilities and capacities, exercised by states or other actors in a comparative structure. It insists that attention should be focused on why capability is exercised, by whom and in what way. Discussing the limitations of the orthodox understanding of power, the article emphasizes the need for a dynamic and substantive understanding. It offers benchmarks for research and ideas for subverting global domination. The conclusion summarizes the results and identifies ways for Critical Theory to enhance its persuasive value without imposing specific ethical paradigms. Instead of fixed orders guiding materialization, it aims to reveal exclusionary policies and practices.

Keywords:

Critical Theory, International Relations, Power Dynamics, Hegemony.

الملخص: يستكشف هذا المقال كيف تساهم النظرية النقدية للعلاقات الدولية في إعادة تقييم مفهوم "القوة". ويجادل بأنه لم يعد من الممكن فهم السلطة على أنها توزيع ثابت للقدرات والقدرات، تمارسه الدول أو الجهات الفاعلة الأخرى في هيكل مقارن. ويصر على أن الاهتمام يجب أن يتركز على أسباب ممارسة القدرة ومن يقوم بها وبأي طريقة. وبمناقشة حدود الفهم الأرثوذكسي للسلطة، يؤكد المقال على الحاجة إلى فهم ديناميكي وموضوعي. ويقدم معايير للبحث والأفكار لتقويض الهيمنة العالمية. ويلخص الاستنتاج ويحدد طرق النظرية النقدية لتعزيز قيمتها المقنعة دون فرض نماذج أخلاقية محددة. فبدلاً من الأوامر الثابتة التي توجه عملية التجسيد، فإنها تهدف إلى الكشف عن السياسات والممارسات الإقصائية. الكلمات الرئيسية: النظرية النقدية، العلاقات الدولية، ديناميات القوة، الهيمنة.

• Introduction

There are numerous theories that regard the distribution and its fairness among nations as the paramount aspect in the international system and meticulously explain the myriad of other features of the system in line with this integral view. Such comprehensive theories diligently focus on the intricate relations among power centers and astutely emphasize the profound instrumental value of international norms, regimes, and institutions. However, there exist equally significant theories that ardently argue for a broader and more encompassing definition of international relations that transcends mere power distributions. These expansive theories astutely consider the distribution of power as undeniably important and serve as the foundational basis for intricate explanations of potential international conflicts. However, they also assert with unwavering conviction that the basis of international relations has the inherent potential to evolve and transform over time, subsequently incorporating pivotal elements such as security, ideology, and economic and social conditions into the multifaceted equation. It is evident that relations and patterns of distribution alone do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the international system; other intangible values, ideas, norms, and beliefs play an equally significant role in comprehending the multifarious behaviors exhibited by actors within the international system. Among these various approaches, "critical theory" emerges as a profound and incisive perspective. According to critical theory, relations within the international system should not be simplistically assessed based solely on power distribution patterns.

The discerning disposition of political scientists towards such an approach stems from the complex interplay of social structuring and the idiosyncratic behaviors ingrained within their profession.

This transformative perspective highlights the importance of agency, discourse, and social construction in shaping global politics. It recognizes that power is not simply distributed but actively produced and contested through processes of hegemony, resistance, and negotiation. Critical theorists argue that the study of international relations must go beyond surface-level analysis to uncover the underlying struggles for power and resources. They emphasize the need to question established norms and challenge prevailing ideologies that perpetuate inequality and injustice. By embracing a critical lens, scholars can better understand the complexities of the international system and work towards a more equitable and just world order. Critical theory provides a powerful framework for analyzing and critiquing existing power structures while offering insights into alternative possibilities for global governance. Its multidisciplinary approach draws on various social sciences, including sociology, political science, and philosophy, to unpack the complex dynamics of international relations. Through rigorous examination and reflection, critical theorists seek to challenge conventional wisdom and promote meaningful change in the field of international relations. Ultimately, critical theory serves as a valuable tool for both scholars and practitioners, offering new perspectives and transformative insights into the complexities of the international system.

Research problem :

To what extent can a critical theory approach to the study of world politics define the concept of power and serve the development of both theory and practice?

Hypothesis :

The Critical Theory of IR is influential and offers a new way of understanding social relations and power in international relations. It emphasizes criticizing and questioning existing interpretations to promote inclusivity and dialectical thinking. Essentialist interpretations are rejected as they naturalize prevailing conditions. The concept of power in IR is complex and subject to interpretation. Domination and exploitation play a significant role in power allocation and control.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Critical Theory in International Relations

The theoretical foundations of Critical Theory are numerous and have roots in a wide spectrum of disciplines. However, it is generally accepted that the school of thought emerged in the 1930s as the term Frankfurt School became associated with the work of intellectuals who held highly specialized positions of research within the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt am Main.

The theorists associated with the Frankfurt School were so labeled because they were driven from Germany when Hitler came to power and re-established their research in the United States. Society and labor have been the central concerns of the group. Following Marx, who had in many passages described a society distinguished by its exploitative character, the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School examined not only the possibilities of emancipation but then asked within which structural conditions oppression was possible¹.

According to the authors of the Frankfurt School, the source of all problems was industrial society and it would need a radical critique as a counter-movement to the market society, which in no way mitigated the injustice. Initially, philosophers whose thought laid some of the groundwork that has come to be known as Critical Theory included Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Based on a desire to analyze critically the material and legal foundations of society, Theodor Adorno, especially his young colleagues Jürgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse, engaged in ongoing, interdisciplinary and philosophy-oriented research in the wake of the critique of reason.

Critical Theory involves a distinctive ideal of the philosopher's role and it is this ideal that underwrites its methods. Habermas usually defends a form of cognitivist social theory according to which the goal of the social sciences is the value-free perspective for the sake of which the methods of the empirical-analytical sciences were perfected. For Habermas, it is possible that historical materialism began an assimilation with positivism and then, modified by this qualification, became transformed into an adequate, radical theory of society².

¹ Jordan McKenzie, Critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Routledge handbook of social and cultural theory, 2020, pp. 20-21.

² Robert Cluley & Martin Parker, Critical theory in use: Organizing the Frankfurt School, in Human Relations, -v 76- n 11- 2023, p 1693.

2. Historical Development of the Concept of Power in International Relations

The concept of power holds a central position in every theory of international relations. Indeed, the essence of the state and of international relations is power. Irrespective of how the concept is defined and applied, however, its different meanings express the variety in the theoretical perspectives of the schools of thought in the discipline of international relations. Power has been associated with military capabilities, and it has been used in empirical statistical studies, especially in the field of international relations. At the same time, a generation of more critical studies has not hesitated to challenge the conventional wisdom that reducing the number of nuclear weapons, ending the arms race, and achieving mutual assured destruction would lead to peace in Europe. Theses connected to such research include the nuclear revolution thesis, the causation thesis, deterrence, and so on³.

Nowhere is power more essential than in international relations. The very fact that society, as we know, operates not solely within national boundaries but in an international context as well lends credence to the view that power should be synonymous with the power of the state. In reality, power extends beyond the concept of national power. In reality, power extends as far as formulating ideas, developing networks, and utilizing those elements in the most advantageous way. Many students of international relations have applied other conceptual models to the phenomenon of international political behavior. Yet power remains the central focus of the field, irrespective of whether it is discussed in terms of conflict, strategy, or any other dimension. International relations and power⁴.

3. Key Concepts in Reassessing Power: Hegemony, Discourse, and Resistance

I argue that the critical theory of International Relations (IR) needs to reassess power as domination and productivity through the revision of key concepts of hegemony, (counter)discourse, and resistance. Key contributions of critical thinking often invoke the concept of hegemony pronounced in Western Marxist cultural and critical theory.

It can productively incorporate reflections on the ideological state apparatus into IR scholarship to examine the processes of socio-political situations and political culture at the inter (both high and low), intra (between state and civil society), and transnational levels, as well as the production of popular consent and hegemonic ideologies and intellectuals. Critical theorists of International Relations (IR) inherit a tradition of power as structural, coercion, and human subject subordination from realist, behaviorist, and structuralist writings that overlook the works of classic and contemporary European social, political, and economic thinkers⁵.

³ Robert O. Keohane, *International institutions and state power: Essays in international relations theory*- Routledge- 1989, p.36-39.

⁴ Amelia Hadfield & Nicholas Wright, *The impact of Brexit on EU and UK foreign affairs*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2021.

⁵ Flor Avelino, *Theories of power and social change. Power contestations and their implications for research on social change and innovation* –in *Journal of Political Power* – v 14 – n 03- 2021, pp. 428-429.

Foucault-inspired feminists reaffirm the core assumption in both poststructuralism and postmodernism that it is constructive to challenge the sole focus on hegemony and division in the concept of power, as well as the emphasis on resistance as creative freedom from dominant control to advance the ethic of care, personal empowerment, democratic public sphere, civil society, cumulative perspectives of gender, market structure, and post-sovereign communication in global capitalism, citizenship, governance, and the overall betterment of societal structures and norms that foster inclusivity and resilience.

In order to fully comprehend the complexity and nuances of power dynamics in International Relations, it is crucial to explore alternative narratives and theoretical frameworks that incorporate multifaceted approaches to the understanding of power relations, such as intersectionality, postcolonialism, indigenous perspectives, and non-Western philosophies.

By broadening the scope of analysis and incorporating diverse perspectives, critical theory in IR can enhance its ability to challenge dominant discourses, foster social justice, and encourage transformative political action. Through this recalibration of conceptual frameworks and an expanded focus on power dynamics and resistance, critical theory in International Relations can contribute to the construction of more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable global systems that prioritize human rights, social welfare, and environmental stewardship⁶.

4. Case Studies in Applying Critical Theory to Power Dynamics

Building on the insights outlined in previous sections, we can now proceed to illustrate the insights that the critical theory of international relations offers as an analytical framework for the study of power and power dynamics. In the case studies that will be reviewed here, the focus is invariably on the structure and organization of the international political economy as a major determinant of the distribution of power among states in the contemporary post-Cold War world, and on the objective limits that this structure and organization impose on the capacity of states to realize their policy preferences and objectives.

It is a principal objective of the authors of these essays to show that contests of power among states matter, necessarily so, yet undercurrents of global systemic dynamics are so strong as to render increasingly irrelevant the tools of traditional power analysis in the same time-honored sense that these have been employed historically and to this date in the study of international relations and international politics⁷.

In one of these case studies, the objectives of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic highlighted the paradoxical nature of power in the contemporary international system. This paradox lies in the tension that inevitably arises between constitutionalism and moralism in international politics and the social organization of sovereignty.

⁶ Janet M. Conway & Anabel Paulos, *Feminism, Food Sovereignty and Cross-Movement Mobilisation Against Neoliberal Globalisation in Latin America: Intertwined Genealogies* – in *Moving the Social* – v 63- 2020, pp. 27-28.

⁷ Theodore H. Cohn & Anil Hira, *The Global Political Economy*, 8th ed., 2021, in : <https://spia.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Barber-4230-fa23.pdf>

On the one hand, human consciousness of international commonwealths requires collective pursuit of common purposes, for it inspires a moralism in the argument that aims at just and enduring outcomes of the process of jointly constructing common futures. In such an ideal world, the powerful will be those who can identify with and encourage the moral sense of such purposes both within sovereign domestic polities and in the context of relationships conceived as a new global covenant.

On the other hand, human reflection on social process and power in relationships of unequal power distribution necessarily leads to the conclusion that equity must ground political power and authority within the multiplicity of sovereign states by investing them with the constitutional legitimacy necessary to empower commands for international peace, order, and justice. Therefore, the emphasis should be placed on recognizing the interconnectedness of power dynamics and the importance of ethical considerations in shaping and maintaining a just and balanced international system⁸.

By analyzing various case studies and understanding the complexities of power relations, scholars can shed light on the interplay between constitutionalism, moralism, and the distribution of power among states. It becomes imperative to acknowledge that power is not solely determined by traditional means such as military capabilities or economic resources but also by the ability to foster cooperative relationships and adhere to moral principles. In this sense, the critical theory of international relations offers a nuanced lens through which one can unravel the intricate dynamics of power and its impact on the global stage.

As we delve deeper into the analysis, it becomes evident that the traditional understanding of power in international relations is inadequate in capturing the complexity of the contemporary world. This realization necessitates a reevaluation of our analytical frameworks and calls for the integration of critical perspectives that consider the role of ideology, discourse, and structural inequalities in shaping power dynamics. Only by embracing a comprehensive approach can we fully comprehend the multifaceted nature of power and its consequences for states and societies worldwide⁹.

In conclusion, the critical theory of international relations provides invaluable insights into the study of power and power dynamics. By recognizing the interplay between constitutionalism, moralism, and the distribution of power, scholars can better grasp the complexities of the contemporary international system. This expanded understanding allows for a more holistic analysis of power relations and reinforces the importance of ethical considerations in shaping a just and balanced global order. Through continued examination and advancement of critical perspectives, we can strive towards a more inclusive and equitable international community..

⁸ Uros Ugarkovic, What is Parliamentarism to Populists? The Populist Redefinition of the Concept of Parliamentarism in Parliamentary Debates in Post-Milošević Serbia – v 26 – issue 02 – 2023, in : https://journal-redescriptions.org/articles/10.33134/rds.403?_rsc=ltuy6

⁹ Neil Walker, The sovereignty surplus – in International Journal of Constitutional Law – v 18 – n 02- pp. 74-77.

In this context, it becomes essential to delve further into the sociological aspects of power dynamics and their influence on the structure and functioning of the international political system. By examining various case studies, we can gain a deeper understanding of how power operates in the contemporary world, particularly in relation to the international political economy. These case studies shed light on the intricate interplay between state actors, highlighting the ways in which their policy preferences and objectives are both shaped and constrained by the prevailing economic order.

A central theme that emerges from this analysis is the paradoxical nature of power within the global arena. While there is a moral imperative for nations to work together towards common purposes, fostering a sense of collective responsibility and shared values, there is also an inherent tension between this noble ideal and the realities of power differentials. The distribution of power among states is inherently unequal, leading to questions of fairness and equity in the exercise of authority. It is crucial to strike a balance between the pursuit of moral principles and the acknowledgment of the political realities that govern international relationships¹⁰.

Examining the case study of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, we encounter a vivid illustration of this paradox. Milosevic's objectives and actions serve as a testament to the complex dynamics of power. On one hand, his pursuit of certain goals aligned with a moral vision of justice and enduring outcomes. He tapped into the collective consciousness of international commonwealths, aiming to construct a future that would be based on shared values. This underscores the transformative potential of moralism in international politics, emphasizing the importance of fostering a moral sense of purpose within domestic and global contexts.

However, as we delve deeper into the analysis, we encounter the other facet of power dynamics – the reality of unequal power distribution and the need for equitable political authority. Reflection on social processes within the international system reveals that true equity must underpin political power and confer constitutional legitimacy on sovereign states. It is through this legitimacy that commands for international peace, order, and justice can be effectively empowered. By acknowledging the multiplicity of sovereign states and investing them with constitutional authority, we can strive towards a system that upholds fairness and addresses power imbalances¹¹.

In conclusion, the critical theory of international relations offers valuable insights into the study of power and power dynamics within the global arena. By examining case studies and analyzing the interplay between moralism and constitutionalism, we gain a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding power in international politics. Acknowledging the inherent tension between collective pursuit of common purposes and the realities of unequal power distribution, we can strive towards a more equitable and just international order. Through constitutional legitimacy

¹⁰ Natascha van Bommel & Johanna I. Höffken, Energy justice within, between and beyond European community energy initiatives: A review – in *Energy Research & Social Science* – v 79- 2021, in : <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214629621002504>

¹¹ Harris Mylonas, Balance of Power, System Polarity and Irredentism - in *Journal of Global Security Studies* – v 10- n 01- 2025, pp. 7-9.

and the empowerment of commands for peace and justice, we can navigate the paradoxes and challenges of power, fostering a world that embraces both moral values and political realities.

• Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the study's findings and analysis, it can be firmly asserted that critical theory offers valuable insights and alternative perspectives on the concept of power within traditional realism and its application to international relations. Contrary to initial assumptions, critical theory does not completely fail in reassessing power dynamics but rather illuminates several crucial aspects of power within the global society. It highlights the emergence of a global community and governance structure that has been gradually taking shape.

However, it is important to acknowledge that critical theory has not completely abandoned the traditional understanding of power in international relations. Instead, it tends to mask this understanding, drawing from the dichotomy of power introduced by the Marxian model of base and superstructure. Though it has undergone some modifications, this dichotomy remains valid in a less sophisticated form, with empirical applications being the major point of change. This realization underscores the fact that critical theory in international relations still reflects the predominance of Western thinking.

Looking forward, it is imperative for future developments in international relations theory to incorporate China's perception of power as a relational term or a social whole. China, being an emerging major world power, must also acknowledge that its ascent will necessitate active engagement on both the global and regional levels. By doing so, it would allow for the potential establishment of a global governance structure and the realization of a global community where various separate social wholes become interconnected. This alignment with China's own ideals of harmony, rooted in Confucian philosophy, will lead to the peaceful evolution of a world society.

In this context, it becomes essential to foster the theoretical framework of the critical transformational international relations model, influencing China's perspectives as a rising power in a more comprehensive and inclusive manner. By embracing this approach, China can actively contribute to shaping the discourse on power dynamics, while also working towards a more harmonious global order. Thus, it is evident that critical theory possesses great potential to further enrich the understanding of power in international relations, and its influence should be acknowledged and harnessed in the pursuit of a more just and equitable world.

Suggestions:

- 1) Introduction. In constructing the Critical Theory of International Relations, it is increasingly recognized that a reassessment of the scope and implications of the concept of power needs to be worked through. In the history of political theory, power has always been a central concept. Power represents the realized "ability" of an individual or a collective agent to realize its goals in social and political life, namely, to maintain, change, replace, or even abolish the existence or the content of any "social relationship".

Power is, then, both relational and an attribute of an agent. For that reason, so much of the concern of International Relations has been with the quest for a "grand theory" of power. Power is a toolbox where fundamental concepts such as the balance of power, deterrence, and compellence, along with broader concepts—such as a detailed examination of the power of the powerful states—are used to interpret international events. For Critical Theory, the relationship between human interests and power has always been understood as an interanimated one.

- 2) From the viewpoint of Critical Theory, the distribution of power in the international system is a complex set of relations. Here, it is emphasized that the factors shaping power and power-based behavior in the international system are rooted in the domestic structures of states and their social and economic systems. In this work, much of what has been interpreted as behavior grounded in power politics may be readily attributed to the needs of the state as an entity to ensure its security in a largely competitive world that lacks an overarching authority.

The inability of states to create a domestic rule of law designed to inhibit the application of coercive power helps to define the anarchical system—an unstable condition in the absence of tried and tested mechanisms for conflict resolution. At one level, such approaches endeavor to begin to build upon the parallels between ideas about class relations in the national state and the intranational aspects of state power in the international system.

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