
The restructuring of International Relations theory

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Introduction

International politics being but a specific instance of a general political theory, the main task is to understand the requirements and problems of such a theory. For if this assumption is correct, the key to a theory of international politics will not be found in the specific subject matter of international politics but in the requirements and problems of a general political theory.

Hans J. Morgenthau¹

Maybe there are periods when one can get along without theory, but at present its deficiency denigrates people and renders them helpless against violence. The fact that theory may evaporate into a hollow and bloodless idealism or sink into a tiresome and empty rehashing of phrases, does not mean that these forms are its true forms. (As far as tedium and banality are concerned, philosophy more than finds its equal in the so-called investigation of facts.) In any case, today the whole historical dynamic has placed philosophy at the centre of social actuality, and social actuality at the centre of philosophy.

Max Horkheimer²

This book is concerned with providing an answer to a very specific question: why is it that theory oriented toward human emancipation remains poorly developed within the discipline of International Relations? The answer offered is one rooted in an analysis and critique of the predominant approach to the study of world politics – that of positivism. It is argued that it is the internal logic of positivism – the positivist ‘logic of investigation’ – that accounts for International Relations theory’s lack of emancipatory content. Consequently, International Relations theory needs to be ‘restructured’ in a non-positivist direction; it must be reconstituted as a form of ‘critical’ theory if it is

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to make a meaningful contribution to human emancipation. Finally, it is argued that the beginnings of such a meta-theoretical 'restructuring' process are already visible in contemporary theorizing about world politics.

This, in a nutshell, is the central argument being offered. The argument itself will, no doubt, prove sufficiently controversial. What may prove nearly as unsettling, however, is the orientation of the book as a whole. For this is an exercise in international meta-theory. As the notion of 'international meta-theory' may be unfamiliar to the target audience of this work – International Relations scholars – it is important to be clear about the meaning of the term and, by extension, the significance of this type of exercise.

Perhaps the best way to clarify the meaning of meta-theory is by way of analogy. Consider, for instance, the discipline's treatment of empirical evidence. While International Relations is concerned with incorporating facts into explanatory accounts, it has generally not subscribed to what some have labelled the position of 'barefoot empiricism'. That is to say, International Relations scholars have generally not succumbed to the empiricist temptation of assuming that 'facts speak for themselves'. On the contrary, it is generally held to be the case that facts require interpretation in order to have meaning – interpretation which is the product of the application of theory to facts. In short, the meaning of facts is not a factual question, but a theoretical one. Consequently, given that explanation is one's goal, 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory'.

The insufficiency of this widely held position is that it leaves unanswered a very important question: 'what constitutes good theory?' And just as answering the question 'what do these facts mean?' requires a move to a higher level of abstraction than that of the empirical – namely, the theoretical – so also does the question 'what constitutes good theory?'. In short, just as the meaning of facts is not a factual question, but a theoretical one, so the nature of good theory is not a theoretical question but a *meta*-theoretical one.

International meta-theory, then, seeks an answer to the question: 'what constitutes good theory with regard to world politics?' As such, it is a vital part of the quest for explanatory accounts of the subject matter of the discipline. Indeed, if it is true that facts are dependent upon theory for their meaning, and that theory, in turn, is dependent on meta-theoretical reflection to ensure its adequacy, then the general assessment of the place of meta-theory may be in need of significant

revision. Meta-theory is not a diversion from the 'real substance' of the discipline, theoretically informed analysis of empirical evidence. Rather, meta-theory is the indispensable foundation of competent scholarly activity and the basis of the adequacy of the explanatory accounts which are developed. Consequently, it can be argued that the relative neglect of meta-theoretical questions in the discipline of International Relations accounts for a good many of the serious limitations to which contemporary theorizing about world politics is presently subject.

As an exercise in international meta-theory, this book must, virtually by definition, attempt to straddle the line between two distinct subfields of social science: 'social and political theory' and 'International Relations theory'. In so doing, it seeks to apply the insights generated within the field of social and political theory to theorizing about world politics.

Of course, this straddling effort is itself rather atypical of a discipline which has for a good part of its existence understood itself to be, in some sense, *sui generis*. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that the claim that 'International Relations is a discrete area of action and discourse, separate from social and political theory',³ can no longer be sustained. It can no longer be sustained because today International Relations is confronted with theoretical challenges it seems incapable of meeting on its own. These include:

- (i) calls for ways to promote meaningful discussion and debate in a discipline increasingly marked by paradigmatic pluralism;
- (ii) calls for theory which is as competent and comfortable in theorizing change in the world order as it is in analysing continuity;
- (iii) calls for theory to guide practice which can address normative concerns as well as questions of practical efficacy.

Grappling with these kinds of issues is at the very core of the field of social and political theory. Hence the insights afforded by social and political theory are now more relevant than ever for the discipline of International Relations.

With these introductory remarks in place, this chapter has four specific objectives remaining: (i) to clarify the research strategy that is adopted; (ii) to draw attention to the nature of the methodology employed; (iii) to note briefly the politico-philosophical specificity of

the approach adopted; and (iv) to sketch a general outline of the book as a whole.

Research Strategy

As was noted above, the research strategy adopted is that of applying the insights of social and political theory to the discipline of International Relations. This strategy – and, indeed, a good part of the argument being advanced here – is rooted in Richard Bernstein's path-breaking study of the mid-1970s: *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*.⁴ Drawing on the efforts of philosophers of science, phenomenologists and hermeneuticists, as well as theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, Bernstein argued that the social sciences were undergoing a 'dialectical movement' of restructuring at a (meta-)theoretical level. The restructuring process posited by Bernstein involved a shift away from a positivist approach to the study of the social world to one which – while not neglecting empirical analysis – incorporates (i) a concern with achieving an interpretive understanding of the intersubjective meanings which constitute that world, as well as (ii) an interest in criticizing that world as part of the effort to change it in a way consistent with the goal of human emancipation.

Bernstein's discussion of a (meta-)theoretical restructuring process taking social science in a critically interpretive, post-positivist direction led me to wonder if his thesis might not also have relevance for the discipline of International Relations. As I began to explore this possibility, I became convinced of three things: first, that a restructuring of International Relations theory in a non-positivist direction is necessary; secondly, that evidence for a restructuring process similar to that outlined by Bernstein already exists in contemporary theorizing about international politics;⁵ and thirdly, that the outcome of that restructuring process will have profound consequences both in terms of the discipline's ability to meet adequately the theoretical challenges noted above, as well as in terms of the larger issue of making a meaningful contribution to human emancipation.

As I worked to assemble arguments in support of these conclusions, I benefited greatly from the work of earlier critics of positivism in International Relations theory.⁶ Though some of them now advocate a postmodernism of which I remain wary, my indebtedness to this

group of thinkers is quite profound. At pivotal junctures encounters with the ideas of individuals such as Ashley, Cox, George, Frost, Linklater, and Walker helped provide answers, not only to specific queries about positivism, but also to larger questions about what form critical thinking could take in a discipline not noted for its openness to such an enterprise.

A final point needs to be made concerning the research strategy being adopted here. As already noted, this is a study in meta-theory. That is, this book concerns itself with the background of philosophical tenets and assumptions that provide rules for the construction of particular theories and a framework for the analysis of particular issues. As such, the focus of attention is the presuppositions of a critical International Relations theory rather than the details of its structure. Consequently, specific analyses of concrete issues in international politics will not be offered. Indeed, as will be noted in the concluding chapter, the translation of the meta-theoretical gains of the restructuring process into advances in the analysis of specific topics in international politics remains to be effected.

Methodology

Beyond the issue of research strategy, the methodology adopted in this study also bears noting. What will be undertaken here, in the effort to explore the issue of a (meta-)theoretical restructuring of International Relations theory, is what is referred to in the tradition of critical theory as an 'immanent critique' of the discipline. The method of 'immanent critique', which is central to the work of Hegel, and advocated by members of the Frankfurt School such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno,

starts with the conceptual principles and standards of an object, and unfolds their implications and consequences. Then it re-examines and reassesses the object ... in light of these implications and consequences. Critique proceeds, so to speak, 'from within'.⁷

It is the methodology of 'immanent critique' which is responsible for the focus of this study on positivist epistemology. It is a common observation that International Relations has traditionally been pre-occupied with epistemological questions (how best to study world politics), often to the neglect of ontological ones (assumptions about the nature of the world). Accordingly, in keeping with the notion that

critique is most effective when it proceeds 'from within', epistemology is the principal focus here. In this way, it is hoped that the analysis offered here is less likely to be rejected with the charge that 'its concepts impose irrelevant criteria of evaluation'.⁸

At the same time, it must be stressed that adopting the method of 'immanent critique' has implications not just for what issues are taken as the focus of discussion, but also for how those issues are treated. In simplest terms, the *telos* of immanent critique is positive: it leads to a reassessment of the object in question with an eye toward its transformation. If carried out properly,

a new understanding of the object is generated – a new comprehension of contradictions and possibilities ... The object's view of itself is contradicted by its effective actuality. Through reflection and critique, it can become aware of its own limitations; that is, that it fails by its own standards. Through this awareness it develops and becomes open to radical change.⁹

In terms of International Relations theory, then, an immanent critique of positivist epistemology leads well beyond conventional conclusions about the need to refine techniques of information gathering and processing. In raising questions about issues such as the status of norms, of the human subject, and of reason/truth, it directs our attention to the imperative for a fundamental rethinking of all of the assumptions upon which the discipline rests: ontological as well as epistemological.

Politico-philosophical specificity of the study at hand

Before moving to an overview of chapter content, it is important to draw attention to the specificity of this study, particularly as regards its politico-philosophical orientation.

It is one of the core arguments of this work that the 'view from nowhere', which serves as a regulative ideal for much of mainstream International Relations scholarship, is not only not attainable but a dangerous illusion; that all theoretical efforts proceed from and embody a perspective. This holds equally for the study at hand. Specifically, the argument regarding a 'restructuring' of International Relations theory which is advanced here is framed in the terms of the

tradition of Western Marxism (including Gramsci), and in particular the variant known as the 'Frankfurt School'.

Other critically oriented traditions exist within the discipline, of course, and they cannot be overlooked. Two in particular – those of postmodern International Relations theory and feminist International Relations theory – are considered in terms of their contribution to the emancipatory restructuring process identified in contemporary theorizing.¹⁰ For despite suffering from important limitations – and I will argue this holds especially true for postmodern International Relations theory¹¹ – it must also be recognized that the rise of these traditions over the last decade is some of the strongest evidence for the critical restructuring of International Relations theory.

Chapter outline

On the basis of this brief discussion of research strategy, methodology, and specificity, I will now outline the course this book will follow. In chapter one, the inadequacy of contemporary theorizing in International Relations will be discussed. Specifically, it will be argued that in its failure to place the issue of human emancipation at the centre of theorizing, International Relations is missing an historic opportunity to contribute to the betterment – if not the very survival – of the human species. It is argued that if International Relations theory is to make a meaningful contribution to human emancipation, it will need to be fundamentally 'restructured' so as to incorporate the elements necessary for theorizing in terms of the goal of human emancipation. Drawing on the tradition of 'critical theory', three such elements are identified.

In chapter two, and as part of the effort to account for the absence of the elements which characterize 'critical theory' from theorizing about international relations, an examination of the dominant approach to the study of international politics – that of 'positivism' – is undertaken. Specifically, the central tenets and underlying assumptions of 'positivism' as an approach to the study of human society are identified.

In the three chapters which follow, each of the three elements which characterize critical theory is discussed in relation to contemporary theorizing about International Relations. In each case, the absence of the critical element is explained in terms of the predomi-

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nance of the positivist approach. As a consequence, it is argued that part of the process of 'restructuring' International Relations theory in a critical fashion must involve a challenge to positivism itself.

However, the study goes beyond simply indicating the elements which must be integrated if International Relations is to be reconstituted as a critical discipline. Rather, in each case it is argued that the process of challenging positivism and of restructuring International Relations theory is already underway. Indeed, it is the central contention of this study that contemporary developments in the discipline which seem at first glance to be unrelated – if significant – challenges to positivist orthodoxy are, in fact, evidence of a profound process of theoretical 'restructuring': a 'restructuring' which is already taking International Relations theory in a more critical direction.