

THE ANALYSIS OF ROBERT COX'S CRITICAL THEORY: THE INHERENT SUBJECTIVITY AND PURPOSEFUL NATURE OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

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Abstrak: Pernyataan Robert Cox bahwa “teori selalu untuk seseorang dan untuk suatu tujuan” merupakan prinsip dasar ilmu politik dan hubungan internasional, yang menekankan sifat subjektif dan tujuan yang melekat pada kerangka kerja teoritis. Penelitian ini secara kritis mengkaji kontribusi Cox terhadap Hubungan Internasional (HI) melalui teori kritis. Penelitian ini didasarkan pada pendekatan penelitian kualitatif dan menggunakan tinjauan literatur yang ekstensif untuk mengumpulkan informasi yang relevan, analisis menyeluruh terhadap jurnal dan buku-buku yang ada, memberikan pemahaman yang komprehensif mengenai teori kritis Cox dan dampaknya terhadap bidang HI. Temuan penelitian ini menyoroti perlunya evaluasi berkelanjutan terhadap teori IR populer Cox dan penerapan dasar-dasar teori Cox untuk memperdalam pemahaman tentang dunia. Teori kritis Cox membawa perspektif baru dan memberikan kontribusi yang signifikan terhadap keragaman kerangka kerja teoritis dalam HI. Penelitian ini menyoroti dampak transformatif dari pendekatan kritis Cox dan relevansinya dalam membentuk perdebatan kontemporer dalam hubungan internasional.

Kata Kunci: Teori Kritis, Robert Cox, Hubungan Internasional, Kerangka Teori

Abstract: Robert Cox's assertion that “theory is always for someone and for and some purpose” is a fundamental tenet of political science and international relations, emphasizing the inherent subjective and purposeful nature of theoretical frameworks. This study critically examines Cox's contribution to International Relations (IR) through critical theory. This study is based on a qualitative research approach and uses an extensive literature review to gather relevant information, thorough analysis of existing journals and books, providing a comprehensive understanding of Cox's critical theory and its impact on the field of IR. The finding of this study highlights the need for continued evaluation of Cox popular IR theory and the application of Cox's theoretical foundations to deepen understanding of the world. Cox's critical theory brings new perspectives and contributes significantly to the diversity of theoretical frameworks in IR. This study highlights the transformative impact of Cox's critical approach and its relevance to shaping contemporary debates in the international relations.

Keywords: Critical Theory, Robert Cox, International Relations, Theoretical Framework

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INTRODUCTION

In his article published in 1981, Robert W. Cox wrote the infamous expression, "Theory is always for someone and some purpose",¹ a crucial invitation into the critical theory of international relations. Robert Cox's critical theory, especially outlined in works like "Social Forces, States, and World Orders," focuses on the relationship between power, states, and the global political economy. Robert Cox's Critical Theory has been a cornerstone in the field of International Relations (IR), significantly influencing how scholars and practitioners perceive and engage with global political dynamics. This study finds that Cox's theory significantly influenced international relations but is equally challenging.

A theory is often used as a reference goal to assess a phenomenon and lead to a deeper understanding. According to Drezner, theory must have a function to "guide cognitive in a complex world", the theory is also assessed based on explanation and ability in empirical hypothesis testing.² Since a theory occurs after going through some empirical evidence, a theory can be used as proof or explanation of a phenomenon, event, and everything else.

The critical theory emerged from the research at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Although the critical theory has been introduced by many theorists before, many people consider Robert W. Cox as main figure of the IR critical theory.³ The critical theory first emerged in 1937 with a concept, methodology of approach, and interests different from existing theories. Critical theory also tries to apply universal liberties and remove unimportant boundaries set by previous IR theories. Cox said that the correct theory is one that society considers true, and to know and understand how the world works, we must see and understand it as it really is.

¹ Cox, Robert W. "Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory." *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126-155.

² Drezner, Daniel W. *Theories of international politics and zombies*: Revived edition. Princeton University Press, 2015

³ Moolakkattu, John S. "Robert W. Cox and critical theory of international relations." *International Studies* 46, no. 4 (2009): 439-456.

The critical theory of international relations put forward by Cox challenged the most established theories in IR in his era, theories that he referred to as the 'problem-solving' theory. He directed his criticisms at other scholars associated with the realist school, particularly Morgenthau and Waltz. Cox proposed that problem-solving theories adopt a perspective that only reflects the world in its current state. This perspective should consider the dynamics of power, social relationships, and governing institutions. These theories have the goal of making institutions and interactions work well and effectively against potential sources of problems. These theories function by the assumptions of *ceteris paribus* (with all things being equal), that the world is a system of anarchy and that every state acts upon its interests, making it possible to reduce the law, which only works within the established framework.⁴ Cox could not accept the *ceteris paribus* assumption followed by the level of abstraction of these theories, especially realism.

METHOD

The author of this study used a qualitative research framework that involves the integration of relevant information to analyze the results. This qualitative methodology lacks quantitative components, allowing for a thorough and detailed examination of occurrences, rather than a wide-ranging and extensive investigation. This is consistent with Miles and Huberman's viewpoint, the qualitative method utilized entails a dynamic procedure that includes phases such as gathering data, presenting findings, and formulating conclusions.⁵ Meanwhile, Creswell emphasizes that qualitative research, as stated in this study, differs from relying solely on statistical procedures or other quantitative methods to produce conclusions.⁶

⁴ Cox, "Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory", 128.

⁵ Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman. *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. (sage, 1994).

⁶ Creswell, John W. "Mapping the field of mixed methods research." *Journal of mixed methods research* 3, no. 2 (2009): 95-108.

This study utilizes a literature review methodology to achieve its objectives. This strategy is designed to help the author analyze and understand the given subject more easily, enabling them to concentrate on specific themes. The research draws upon academic sources and includes secondary data from journals, books, papers, and relevant internet platforms pertaining to the analyzed case studies. This method is in line with the suggestion of researchers such as Boote and Beile, who stress the importance of literature reviews in shaping the theoretical framework and providing context for research questions.⁷ The gathered data will undergo a comprehensive analysis, utilizing appropriate analytical frameworks to answer the research discourse and draw significant implications from the study's discoveries.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Differentiating between critical theory and problem-solving theory is an important contribution of Robert Cox. According to Cox, theories that aim to solve problems take the current international system's structures and institutions for granted and work to make them better. On the other hand, critical theories investigate the origins of these systems, the people whose interests they serve, and potential alternatives to them. He urges scholars to be mindful of the normative assumptions that underpin their theories in order to promote a more reflective and self-aware approach to studying international relations.

To the international relations theoretical framework, Cox proposes a different approach, one that addresses the problem of world order without perpetuating it; one that also considers social forces and processes without overlooking state power; and not taking it from other theories but developing with the time.⁸ The goal of this "critical theory" would be to examine and question the methods used in theory development. Therefore, "critical theory does not take any order for granted"; rather, it evaluates and

⁷ Boote, David N., and Penny Beile. "Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation." *Educational researcher* 34, no. 6 (2005): 3-15.

⁸ Cox, "Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory", 128.

surpasses existing frameworks. The “ideological bias” of problem-solving theories is demonstrated by his assertion that critical theory can incorporate problem-solving theories to support a certain domestic, sectional, or class goal.⁹

Power, development, and global governance are three topics that have been greatly impacted by Cox's critical theory. The impact of social forces and historical circumstances on the international system is something he stresses. By highlighting the capacity of non-state actors to act and the possibility of revolutionary transformation, Cox's urges scholars to investigate power and resistance relations.¹⁰

Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony serves as an influence for Cox as he expands on the Marxist tradition. He calls the current state of thinking the "hegemonic discourse," and he claims that the powerful use it to further their own agendas. This has important implications for international relations, as dominant ideas tend to mirror the viewpoints of influential states and organizations, which in turn serves to uphold the current order. In order to make room for other viewpoints and underrepresented voices, Cox aims to expose and question these dominant discourses.

Cox proposes that Marxism is a critical theory. He established that historical materialism fit the fundamental requirements for a critical theory to prove this. He argued that historical materialism, like realism, considers conflict not as a recurrence within an existing structure but as a result of structural change; how it takes into account power dynamics influenced by the specific mode of production and the process of production, the nature of the relationship between the state and society, as well as the dynamics between the core and periphery.¹¹ However, it is not without contradiction when Cox explained his critical theory with Marxism. On one side, he criticized problem-solving theories, especially realism, for their great reliance on a set of assumptions. While on the other side, it was no different when he favored Marxism for critical theory, a theory based on solid

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cox, "Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory", 129

assumptions of the idea of class and class struggle throughout history. Cox's use of Marxism tried to move from prejudices but did not remove the bias.

His critical theory, which is sometimes called the Gramscian or neo-Gramscian approach, questions the dominant worldviews that see the global system as an impartial and unbiased stage. Cox counters by saying that ideas are inherently biased because they are based on the author's own social, political, and historical views. To prove that his theory could solve problems, Cox had to come up with a concept that could give the solution like other established theories by introducing an alternative concept like the Gramscian superstructure.¹² Gramscian superstructure proposed that the superstructure divided into two parts – civil and political society. Cox, citing Gramsci, emphasizes the mutual relation between superstructure (ethno-political) and structure (economic) that goes beyond national borders because the capitalist class works together for common interests and makes it the interest of the state. Providing this concept as part of his theory then made his theory appealed to and accepted by other scholars, especially in North America at that time.

As a foundation for critical theory, Cox challenged realist theory in his writings. Cox argues that realist theories are theoretically grounded rather than grounded in empirical reality, and that this is due to the fact that realist theories rely on antiquated ideas about the separation of state and civil society that date back to the 17th and 18th centuries. In many circumstances and realities in IR, Cox stated that theory is frequently constructed by someone for the sake of its purpose. As a result, there is no way for a theory to be completely objective. Any theory will always imply something specific to serve one's purpose. Although he agreed that theorists need to choose their perspective precisely, he disagreed on how much it takes to understand the world order. Cox considers that realism failed to see civil society and governments as complex objects of international relations. For him, the assumption from realists that the state is the only actor in IR is wrong. Cox also stated that a theory in IR was often built in a current situation, where certain phenomena are still occurring. There are parts

¹² Moolakkattu, John S. "Robert W. Cox and critical theory of international relations." *International Studies* 46, no. 4 (2009): 439-456.

designed for those who need them, which are made to serve the purpose. Ultimately, Cox argued that a theory should not be influenced by the theorist's personal experience or historical circumstances. He believed theory should be an original and new thought that includes many aspects; thus, theories can objectively explain and describe world phenomena for people to understand them.

Robert Cox's challenges the traditional view of theories as objective tools, highlighting that they are constructed with specific interests, perspectives, and goals in mind. When analyzing global economic governance and trade, theories like neoliberalism and dependency theory demonstrate how various viewpoints impact policy decisions.¹³ Neoliberalism, which promotes unrestricted markets and minimal government interference, has influenced institutions like the WTO (World Trade Organization), which align with the economic objectives of powerful governments.¹⁴ On the other hand, the dependency theory, which focuses on the exploitative characteristics of global economic systems, has influenced criticisms of these organizations by asserting that they sustain inequality.¹⁵

Within the field of international security and conflict, the use of realist or liberal theories to comprehend geopolitical tensions and conflicts demonstrates the diverse interests and policy goals of states.¹⁶ The Russia-Ukraine conflict can be examined using realist perspectives that highlight power dynamics and national interests, or liberal perspectives that prioritize international collaboration.¹⁷

¹³ Keohane, Robert, and Joseph S. Nye Jr. "Between centralization and fragmentation: The club model of multilateral cooperation and problems of democratic legitimacy." *Available at SSRN* 262175(2001).

¹⁴ mbusch, Peter, and Ralf Zoll, eds. *Friedens-und Konfliktforschung: Eine Einführung*. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006).

¹⁵ Cardoso, Fernando Henrique, and Enzo Faletto. *Dependency and development in Latin America*. (Univ of California Press, 1979).

¹⁶ Doyle, Michael W. "Liberalism and world politics." *American political science review* 80, no. 4 (1986): 1151-1169.

¹⁷ Mearsheimer, John J. *The tragedy of great power politics*. (WW Norton & Company, 2001).

When it comes to global environmental governance, ideologies such as ecological modernization and political ecology provide distinct viewpoints on how to tackle environmental issues.¹⁸ Ecological modernization, which prioritizes technical innovation and market mechanisms, is in line with the interests of specific governments and enterprises.¹⁹ Political ecology emphasizes the socio-political origins of environmental problems, drawing attention to matters of inequality and justice.²⁰

The examples provided highlight how the choice of theory reflects the interests and policy objectives of specific actors, underscoring the dynamic and context-dependent nature of theoretical frameworks in international relations. Thus, the application of different theories shapes narratives and policies, illustrating the influence of theoretical perspectives on global affairs.

In later years, Cox realized that his theory was more focused on criticizing the existing theories; thus, it was not providing something valuable or solving a problem. Cox's thought that theory is always taken from a particular perspective was not new. Mills has already stated this in his book "The sociological imagination," which also considered the problem of bias and the theorizing process that should include a historical perspective.²¹ Cox claimed in his writings that "the more sophisticated a theory is; the more it reflects upon and transcends its own perspective; but the initial perspective is always contained within a theory".²² However, instead of reflecting on to own idea, he used this statement to criticize other

¹⁸ Mol, Arthur PJ, and Gert Spaargaren. "Ecological modernisation theory in debate: A review." *Environmental politics* 9, no. 1 (2000): 17-49.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Bryant, Raymond L., and Sinead Bailey. *Third world political ecology*. (Psychology Press, 1997).

²¹ Mills, C. W. *The sociological imagination*. (Oxford University Press, Oxford England, New York. [1959] 2000)

²² Cox, "Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory"

theories like realism. Like every other theorist, Cox tried to "market a specific idea".²³

Kenneth Waltz, one of the figures of realism theory, had different ideas about theory that contrast with Cox's arguments. Waltz claimed that a theory does not need to discuss the entirety of a phenomenon, and while theories can explain, not all explanations are theories.²⁴ It is enough to reflect it and includes many aspects of its matter. Hence, Waltz considers it legitimate to use and create theories from what currently exists in IR. This opinion is also shared by other academics, such as Smith in 2013, who said that too much focus and discussion on a theory would make IR submerge into the concentration of other sciences such as economics, sociology, social psychology, and other disciplines.

Cox's theory opens up the diversity to a wider discipline and since it is not possible to combine various "lenses" international relations has in its repository in one place,²⁵ this put IR in a "diversity dilemma". That brought meta-theory debates where they should have advanced and developed compelling arguments for real theories. Waltz tackles this diversity dilemma with an unequivocal refutation of the idea that a theory should be contemplative and comprehensive of as many features as necessary. Waltz also explains that the most important thing about a theory is to talk about something, and it does not have to talk about everything. Amid the diversity of opinions about theory in IR, many researchers and theorists agreed that theory must create understanding and simplify meaningful empirical study.²⁶

²³ Kurki, Milja, and Colin Wight. "International relations and social science." *International relations theories: Discipline and diversity* (2013): 14-35.

²⁴ Halliday, Fred, and Justin Rosenberg. "Interview with Ken Waltz conducted by Fred Halliday and Justin Rosenberg." *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 3 (1998): 371-386.

²⁵ Smith, Steve. "Introduction: diversity and disciplinarity in international relations theory." *International relations theories: Discipline and diversity* (2007): 1-12.

²⁶ Jahn, Beate. *The cultural construction of international relations: the invention of the state of nature*. Springer, 2016.

Waltz claimed that until someone can come up with the all-inclusive IR theory applicable for both national and international, he believed for its valued contributions, a theory has to be abstract for us to understand the world better. Furthermore, theory means to be biased or signify a certain perspective; that is how it should be,²⁷ Waltz also believed it is essential to distinguish which one is interpretation and application and which one is a theory. Unlike Cox, Waltz argued it is unnecessary to critique the formulation of theory concept in IR since a particular theorist's perspective or bias does not really matter. Although he admitted with his approach that he might omit significant aspects of international relations, it was necessary to abstract 'international political law' by examining the features of the international system.²⁸ Meanwhile, Cox accepts that theorists should choose a perspective, but he takes issues with the level of abstraction necessary to comprehend world order.

The other critique that Cox mentioned was that a theory should not be biased by own perspective and background of the theorists. One can argue that this will be difficult to avoid during the theorizing process. Let us look at Waltz, for example; his approaches to theoretical perspective are different from Cox's because Waltz was a war veteran with a great interest in political philosophy. Waltz's theory emerged during the Cold War, and it was a time when the balance of power seemed stable according to realist views.²⁹ On the other hand, Cox comes from international labor organization background where the economic turmoil caused by the Oil crisis in the 1970s might contribute to his approach.³⁰ He was also motivated by his understanding of the Marxist theory. These differences in their background will naturally influence these two theorists' perspectives in creating their theories. Not only for them, these actually will happen to any theorists in general.

²⁷ Deitelhoff, Nicole, and Michael Zürn. *Lehrbuch der Internationalen Beziehungen: Per Anhalter durch die IB-Galaxis*. Vol. 6101. CH Beck, (2016).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Moolakkattu, "Robert W.Cox and critical theory of international relations", 450.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

What is important to remember, even though Waltz and Cox's arguments for their theories are in contrast with each other, we can all agree that the presence of these two theories is very important for IR today. With his realism theory, Waltz has made considerable contributions to IR. Moreover, without a problem-solving theory like realism, it is possible that Cox could not come up with the ideas to search for what is missing and what should be improved from IR theories. His critical theory will not be valid if there are no existing theories such as realism and liberalism to be criticized. However, it is undeniable that there is also an urgency to continue evaluating existing theories in IR, using Cox's theoretical foundation to continue trying to understand the world even further.

Ultimately, Cox successfully did his works to initiate the development of IR subjects by moving it from a discipline that has long been dominated by realism and liberalism to become a diverse discipline with many theories today. Critical theories have become an essential alternative to many IR theories recognized by scholars and academics today. As an evidence, well respected IR academics today such as Burchill et al. (2001) they identify critical theory as the ten relevant IR theories³¹ to study, and it also reflected by Dunne et al. (2013) who identify critical theory as the 13 most influential IR theories.³² Many authors constructed their introductions to IR theories around 'enduring questions' that portray the most relevant topics. These are generally defined by how it is recurrent, unresolved, and consequential. However, because every scholar prioritizes it differently, this made a great variety of theories in IR.

CONCLUSION

In conducting analysis of Cox's Critical Theory, it is crucial to delve into the core tenets that underpin this perspective. Cox emphasizes

³¹ Burchill, S. *Theories of international relations, 2nd ed.* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2001).

³² Dunne, T., Kurki, M. & Smith, S. (eds.) *International relations theories: Discipline and diversity, Third edition.* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013)

the subjective nature of theories, arguing that they are not mere academic exercises but are constructed with specific interests and purposes in mind. This critical perspective prompts scholars to consider the power dynamics and normative commitments inherent in theoretical frameworks, urging a reflexive approach to the study and practice of IR.

Furthermore, Cox's Critical Theory has left a lasting concept on the examination of global governance, economic relations, and power structures. By scrutinizing the asymmetries embedded in international systems, Cox advocates for a more inclusive and critical understanding of the forces shaping the world order. This analysis draws on Cox's influential work in which he critiques existing theories for their often-tacit alignment with dominant power structures and calls for a reevaluation of the assumptions and values that underlie IR discourse.³³ In essence, a comprehensive analysis of Robert Cox's Critical Theory reveals not only a critique of existing paradigms but also a call for scholars and policymakers to engage in a more conscious and politically aware exploration of the complexities within the global arena.

In conclusion, with his critical theory, Cox gives a new color and immense contribution to IR, bringing more diversity. Even though his theory was considered the opposite of Waltz's, both contributed their best mind on many aspects of IR theory and the theorizing process. In making the theory, Cox made an inconsistent and problematic approach to his method in the beginning. However, in later years, he realized it and improved his critical theory to be the coherent theory we understand today. Overall, it is fair to say that theory is always for someone and some purpose, as a theory always presents different things to different audiences. Likewise, the theory functions to understand the world order thoroughly by paying attention to various aspects of international relations in terms of the application of its abstractions and cannot be separated from the references as well as the background of the author.

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