

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #37

ROBERT COX ON WORLD ORDERS, HISTORICAL CHANGE, AND THE PURPOSE OF THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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ROBERT COX ON WORLD ORDERS, HISTORICAL CHANGE, AND THE PURPOSE OF THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



Realism in International Relations (IR) has never been challenged as eloquently as by Robert W. Cox in his seminal article *Social Forces, States, and World Orders*. Ever since, his work has inspired critical students of IR and International Political Economy (IPE) to think beyond the boundaries of conventional theorizing and to investigate the premises that underpin and link international politics and academic reflection on it. Recognized by many as one of the world's most important thinkers in both IR and IPE, Cox assembles impressive and complex thinking stemming from history, philosophy, and geopolitics, to illuminate how politics can never be separated from

economics, how theory is always linked to practice, and how material relations and ideas are inextricably intertwined to co-produce world orders. In this seminal *Talk*, Cox, amongst others, discusses possible futures we now face in terms of world order; reiterates what it means that theory is always for someone and for some purpose; shows how the distinction between critical and problem-solving theory illuminates the problem of climate change.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge or principal debate in current IR/IPE? What is your position or answer to this challenge or in this debate?

I do not have a grand theory of where the world is going. I think in terms of dialectics, that is, contradictions, which may or may not be overcome. We are living in a time of gradual disintegration of a historical structure, which not so long ago seemed to be approaching what Francis Fukuyama once called 'the end of history'.

As a critical theorist, I see two future scenarios. As things are right now, there is a prevailing historical structure, yet there are social forces working towards an alternative historical configuration of forces, a rival historical structure. One is that the relative decline of American power gives way to a more plural world with several centers of world power that would be in continuous negotiation for a constantly adjustable modus vivendi, much akin to the European 19th-century balance of power system, but now on world scale. One common threat would hang over this process of negotiation for the adjustment of power relations, and that is the problem of global warming and the fragility of the biosphere, which puts pressures on all of us to achieve successes in coordinating particular interests towards the common interest of saving the planet.

Another scenario is also emerging: a continuation of the struggle for global domination, I think a prevailing term on the American side is ‘full spectrum dominance’, pitting US led forces against the potential consolidation of Eurasian power. This is the old geopolitical vision of [Halford Mackinder](#): a heartland consisting of Eurasia, the world island, encircled by the now American-led periphery. The war on terror, first started by the Bush administration and now continued by Obama, renews the American imperative for world dominance. This leads logically to a coming together of the continent of Eurasia, to confront what Eurasians perceive as the attempt of the US to achieve world dominance by encirclement. The conflicts that now exist in the Middle East—Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan—are symptomatic of this, including the growing reservations of some European countries to the role of the periphery’s military alliance, NATO. There is an alternative organization, the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#), linking Russia, China, and the Central Asian Republics, which in effect would join together Eurasia as a potential counterbalance to NATO.

I think the biggest challenge is the relative decline of the US in relation to the rest of the world and whether and how America will adjust to a world in which it can no longer presume to lead. I think this is extremely difficult for American society and American politicians. The role of developing this new historical structure, by the actors within it, is to build a context for action which shapes thinking about what is possible for those living through it. This engenders a ‘common sense’ about reality that can endure for a long time, as previous historical structures have shown. This is what Fernand Braudel called the ‘longue durée’. A historical structure in the minds of historical actors may seem fixed, but the historian can subsequently see it as being in mutation, gradually sometimes or more suddenly in others.

So probably the biggest challenge is the challenge to America. The rest of the world is showing some ability to understand and to be party to an adjustment to a new world order—but will America understand? That’s the big problem, because the rest of the world is ready to adapt *provided* the US takes a lead towards understanding its role as that of one great power amongst others. The moment Obama got elected was a moment that represented the possibility of such a change in American society, yet one year later, in terms of international relations, he has appointed all the people associated with the previous administration. So while there is now, because of Obama, a difference in the mode of expression of American power (Obama is much more sympathetic to the rest of the world than the rather aggressively dominant Bush/Cheney presidency), that power is directed in the same way as before. The US still has over seven hundred military bases around the world which seem to the rest of the world as encirclement.

Now compare this to Britain’s position after the Second World War. Britain was no longer able to sustain its position as a world leader and adopted a policy of withdrawal. It could do so because of the idea of a ‘special relationship’ with the US, which effectively meant turning over problems of international security to the United States. So in structural terms, nothing changed much at that moment in terms of dominance in world order, but Britain managed to adopt to its new role. Now back to the present: with Obama, many people expected an international politics of withdrawal: a big part of his support came from the idea that he was the anti-war candidate—he even received the Nobel Peace Prize. But, in accepting his prize, he somewhat apologetically defended fighting his wars. And this straitjacket of war in which Obama finds himself, this seeming determinism regarding the role of the US in the contemporary world order, has major implications for domestic social forces and is called into question by the crisis in the world economy.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I grew up in Canada, and early on I realized that Canada is not just a single entity, but is also an assemblage of communities. I had to come to terms quite early with the fact that states, the homogeneous entities that form the point of departure for thinking about international politics, are in fact made up of combinations of ethnic/religious and social forces, which more often than not have conflicting interests and aspirations. After that, based in Switzerland for 25 years, I traveled the world while working for the International Labor Organization ([ILO](#)). At that time, I was no longer identified primarily as a Canadian but rather as an international civil servant— not as a cosmopolitan in the sense of having overcome local identification, but rather could I identify with many different peoples in distinct places. From this experience, I came to understand that all these different peoples ought to be respected in their differences. I thoroughly rejected the idea that the aim should be that everyone would ultimately be the same: difference is healthy, it is interesting, and it would be awfully boring if everyone were the same. So I discovered that not only Canada, but the rest of the world too, was made up of different and conflicting social and political forces, which functioned in alliances that crossed state borders. I saw shared interests with similar groups across borders as well as solidarities within states.

My thinking is furthermore influenced by my tendency, in earlier years, to think about things in historical terms. And not just history in the sense of what happened in the past, but rather history as a way of understanding processes that go on in the world. I read [R.G. Collingwood](#), usually thought of as an idealist in British philosophy, yet whom I found compatible with my own sense of historical materialism. Collingwood spoke about the ‘inside’ as well as the ‘outside’ of historical events. When the positivist looks at what happens by classifying and collecting events and drawing inferences from them, he sees the outside; Collingwood’s emphasis on the inside of events was to understand the meaning of things in terms of the thought-processes of the people who were acting, and their understanding of the structure of relationships within which they lived. To understand history in those terms is what gives meaning to events.

Although I am not a Marxist, I believe much is to be learned from Marxist thinking. Marxist ideas on the tension between capital and labor, and the attempts to institutionalize these relations on state-level and the international level in order to advance material interests, helped me understand the world in a distinct way. I have identified my approach as ‘historical materialism’, yet I have linked it not so much with Marx as with [Giambattista Vico](#) (download his main work *The New Science* [here](#), pdf), the 18th-century critic of Descartes and the north European Enlightenment who lived in Naples .and later with the 20th century Italian Communist leader [Antonio Gramsci](#).

In Vico’s times, Naples was under the rule of the Spanish inquisition, and while he always proclaimed himself to be a devout Catholic, Vico’s vision of the world was quite an antithesis to the orthodox idea of a unilinear history leading to the Kingdom of God on earth. Vico thought in terms of cycles of rise and decline and the possibility of creative new beginnings. Among the Marxists, Gramsci continued the Vichian tradition. He made a distinction between a deterministic and positivist historical economism and historical materialism, in which the realm of ideas is an autonomous force. He recognized the relative autonomy of cultures and ideas and their intimate relationship with material conditions.

Within his historical context, Vico was what we would call a realist, rejecting the Enlightenment belief in a progressive historical process which echoed the Christian teleology. He took a more pessimistic view than that of Enlightenment thinkers; he thought in terms of the rise and decline of what would be called social systems in the terms we use now.

That linear vision of history characteristic of the Enlightenment is persistent up until our days in American thought, especially American political or historical philosophy—I mentioned Francis Fukuyama, who talked about the *end* of history which we're moving towards, and we're almost there. As if history is a finite process which necessarily has to lead towards a definite goal. Fukuyama, I understand, abandoned that vision, but I think nevertheless that it was consistent with a lot of thinking going on within the powerful group of people who were talking about globalization, basically identifying world history with deterministic economic processes. I think this vision is much less likely to be accepted right now as it has led to the financial crisis and the decline of American world power, not militarily, but as effective power. This seems to me the lesson of Iraq and Afghanistan: extreme military power is really not capable of dominating the world today.

Apart from Vichian thinking, I was influenced by a book I read as an undergraduate, Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. Historians did not think well of the book, but it saw the world in terms of civilizations, each characterized by a unique spirit, civilizations which underwent a rise and decline, and yet were interrelated either as contemporaries or as descendants. That seemed to me a very appropriate way of understanding what the world had become. While I think we should not take Spengler literally, his way of looking at relationships between groups in historical process has had a big influence on my own thinking.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

I don't like to prescribe, and my own intellectual trajectory has been very idiosyncratic. Yet I can indicate that, for me, there is a danger in the reading-list-approach to topics, because it tends to put students in the position wherein they get forced to become members of a particular school of thought, and I think that's a risky thing. Just look at the terminology: different schools of thought or distinct approaches to the same world are called 'disciplines', and that is indeed what they do: they discipline students into seeing the world through only one particular lens—which is more misleading than revealing. You can't understand, for instance, the economy without infusing it with society and all of its problems, or without understanding politics as something that has a kind of organizing and regulating task—you have to take it all together, you can't just take one aspect. Yet doing this is typical of the problem-solving approach: in order to solve a problem, one has to demarcate and define the problem and set other things aside. But by focusing on solving some concrete problems, which I acknowledge is very important, one blinds oneself for other related issues. If you want to ask where the world is going, you have to get out of that way of thinking.

So I would say something which would probably sound quite heretical to contemporary academics, and that is that if a student feels able to be different, to read widely, and to accept different influences rather than just become entrenched in a particular area of study, he should. A good example which I remember is Susan Strange, who came out of journalism into IPE. Against the fragmentation that conditions mainstream scholarship, she never accepted academic divisions and she talked about IPE saying it should be an open field, and I agree with that emphasis. She called me an eccentric, and coming from her, a non-conformist herself, that was a compliment. Yet what I think I have learnt is that being critical does not readily get you financial resources for research, so you have to be committed and go for it.

What I can comment on more clearly is the role of the historian in relation to the historical structures that condition human action. The historian's task is to reconstruct these historical

structures in his or her own mind so as to be able to grasp the meaning of what the actors do, and what the consequences signify. The historian constructs in his or her mind this seemingly solid but nevertheless transitory structure; he must understand how the actors within any given historical structure, may think in terms of a particular understanding peculiar to its time and place. This fact of the mutation of the “common sense” particular to historical structures which are in process of change points the historian towards the contingency of the prevailing order.

History for me is not a sequence of events but a holistic way of thinking about the world. The current academic fashion breaks the world down into politics, economics, anthropology and so forth. A historical outlook means taking things occurring within a historical context all together. Yet this is very demanding, because one person can hardly accomplish such a view. But one person can at least have an approach that says that everything must be understood. Some contemporary scholars such as Kees van der Pijl ([Theory Talk #23](#)) seem to have such an approach to the world.

You have coined the famous distinction between problem-solving and critical theory in your article *Social Forces, States and World Orders*. If problem-solving theory serves the purposes of the prevailing status quo, for whom or for what purpose is critical theory?

I think the two are distinct but not mutually exclusive. I do not argue for critical theory to the exclusion of problem solving theory. Problem solving takes the world as it is and focuses on correcting certain dysfunctions, certain specific problems. Critical theory is concerned with how the world, that is all the conditions that problem solving theory takes as the given framework, may be changing. Because problem solving theory has to take the basic existing power relationships as given, it will be biased towards perpetuating those relationships, thus tending to make the existing order hegemonic.

What critical theory does, is question these very structural conditions that are tacit assumptions for problem-solving theory, to ask whom and which purposes such theory serves. It looks at the facts that problem-solving theory presents from the *inside*, that is, as they are experienced by actors in a context which also consists of power relations. Critical theory thus historicizes world orders by uncovering the purposes problem solving theories within such an order serve to uphold. By uncovering the contingency of an existing world order, one can then proceed to think about different world orders. It is more marginal than problem solving theory since it does not comfortably provide policy recommendations to those in power.

What I meant is that there is no theory for itself; theory is always for someone, for some purpose. There is no neutral theory concerning human affairs, no theory of universal validity. Theory derives from practice and experience, and experience is related to time and place. Theory is a part of history. It addresses the problematic of the world of its time and place. An inquirer has to aim to place himself above the historical circumstances in which a theory is propounded. One has to ask about the aims and purposes of those who construct theories in specific historical situations. Broadly speaking, for any theory, there are two possible purposes to serve. One is for guiding the solving of problems posed within the particular context, the existing structure. This leads to a *problem-solving* form of theory, which takes the existing context as given and seeks to make it work better. The other which I call *critical* theory is more reflective on the processes of change of historical structures, upon the transformation or challenges arising within the complex of forces constituting the existing historical structure, the existing ‘common sense’ of reality. Critical thinking then contemplates the possibility of an alternative.

The strength of problem-solving theory relies in its ability to fix limits or parameters to a problem area, and to reduce the statement of a particular problem to a limited number of variables which are amenable to rather close and clear examination. The *ceteris paribus* assumption, the assumption that other things can be ignored, upon which problem-solving theorizing relies, makes it possible to derive a statement of laws and regularities which appear of general applicability.

Critical theory, as I understand it, is critical in the sense that it stands apart from the prevailing order, and asks how that world came about. It does not just accept it: a world that exists has been made, and in the context of a weakening historical structure it can be made anew. Critical theory, unlike problem-solving theory, does not take institutions and social power relations for granted, but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins, and whether and how they might be in process of changing. It is directed towards an appraisal of the very framework for action, the historical structure, which the problem-solving theory accepts as its parameters. Critical theory is a theory of history, in the sense that it is not just concerned about the politics of the past, but the continuing process of historical change. Problem-solving theory is not historical, it is a-historical, in the sense that it in effect posits a continuing present, It posits the continuity of the institutions of power relations which constitute the rules of the game which are assumed to be stable. The strength of the one is the weakness of the other: problem-solving theory can achieve great precision, when narrowing the scope of inquiry and presuming stability of the rules of the game, but in so doing, it can become an ideology supportive of the status quo. Critical theory sacrifices the precision that is possible with a circumscribed set of variables in order to comprehend a wider range of factors in comprehensive historical change.

Critical theory, in my mind, does not propound remedies or make predictions about the emerging shape of things, world order for example. It attempts rather, by analysis of forces and trends, to discern possible futures and to point to the conflicts and contradictions in the existing world order that could move things towards one or other of the possible futures. In that sense it can be a guide for political choice and action.

How would that distinction apply to a contemporary issue such as, say, climate change?

With the example of climate change, the question is not to choose between problem-solving or critical theory. Problem solving theory is practical and necessary since it tells us how to proceed *given* certain conditions (for instance, the consequences to be expected from carbon generated from certain forms of behavior in terms of damage to the biosphere). Critical theory broadens the scope of inquiry by analyzing the forces favoring or opposing changing patterns of behavior.

In the example of climate change, problem-solving theory asks how to support the big and ever increasing world population by industrial means yet with a kind of energy that is not going to pollute the planet. It requires a lot of innovative thought, has to mobilize huge reluctant and conservative social forces within a slow moving established order with vested interests in the political and industrial complex surrounding existing energy sources. Problem-solving theory gives opportunity to innovate and explore new forms of energy.

Critical theory would take one step further and envisage a world order focused not just on humanity but on the whole of life, taking into account the web of relations in which humanity is only part in our world. Humans have to come to terms what it means to be *part of* the biosphere, and not just the dominant feature. In fact, it is a big problem of Western religion and modernist enlightenment thinking alike that nature is seen to be created in service of humans in the first,

and is a force to be dominated in the second. Both Western religion and modernism have analytically disembedded humans from nature, turning nature into something to be dominated or an abstracted factor of production. To rethink this, to make humans part of nature, implies seeing humans as an entity with a responsibility vis-à-vis the bigger world of which they are a part.

What is the current value of the term ‘hegemony’?

Hegemony as a term used traditionally in international relations meant the supremacy of one major state power over others and perhaps the acceptance of that supremacy by the others. A much more subtle meaning is derived from Gramsci’s thinking bringing culture and ideas alongside material force into the picture. Hegemony in this Gramscian sense means that the great mass of mankind in a particular area or part of the world regard the existing structure of power and authority as established, natural and legitimate. Hegemony is expanded when other people come to accept those conditions as natural. Hegemony is weakened and eroded when the legitimacy of the power structure is called into question and an alternative order seems possible and desirable.

Let’s look at American thinking. It is very much premised on an idea that ultimately, we should all be the same—and the same means, of course, having what America already has, or wanting what Americans want—democratic capitalism, the ‘American way of life’. This can be seen in American efforts at economic and political development abroad and through military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in how the United States has shaped and used international institutions. As I worked for the ILO, I worked closely with an American Director-general, very much a New-Deal thinker, and this meant working for an agenda that effectively tried to extend the same labor standards and regulations that hold in the US to other countries. Now this can all be done in good faith, and believing in the importance of unions and equal labor conditions is important, but it does not take into account the extreme differences in economic conditions and historical background of people in developing countries targeted by these policies. Now my Director-General was a man who could understand the diversity of the world. Rather than put the ILO’s emphasis on expanding the scope of standards, he directed it into development work. It was still carried out in the spirit of American ideas but in a more subtle way. The hegemonic idea was built into the developmental work.

There is the case of contemporary China; if you look at Chinese and especially the middle class, they want to live like Americans, in terms of consumerism and the like. The economic ties that bind China and the US also influence ideas the Chinese hold, and this has very much to do with the hegemony the US has on all these levels—both economically, and in terms of media. Now since that American level of consumption is not sustainable in the long run, and if one billion Chinese, roughly 20% of the world population, were to add to the existing American 5% of consumers and polluters, one can easily predict collapse of the biosphere. We should, then, hope that the decline in American power and the rise in China’s world power would lead to some collective reevaluation of how to live together on the planet.

And, vice versa, how does the rise of China impact on American hegemony?

This is a very interesting question. The Chinese see China as a great power, but, at least for now, with no pretensions to global domination. And the fact that official policy and thinking is now set in that mold may be reassuring. There has been speculation in America about a G2 – China and

America – as the central force in world order. China is the world's biggest creditor and the U.S. the world's biggest debtor, so some Americans see the G2 idea as a means of saving American hegemony. I do not think this idea meets with any degree of acceptance in China. Indeed, much of the legitimacy of the Chinese Party depends on its capacity to keep the current growth sustainable for the ever-increasing middle class. This is also the reason why China will in all likelihood stay peaceful.

On the other hand, you see the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in parts of the US. At the same time, I think the Chinese are very careful about what they say. They prefer to speak of a non-ideological 'peaceful rise' that benefits all and threatens no one. They see themselves as having been very dependent on America as a market, and their industry has grown on the basis of that market, but they're also very aware that they have become over-dependent and they are now working to build up much more of a regionally oriented economy. The success of this regional venture will hinge upon the question whether China and Japan will work together despite their continuous tensions based upon history.

The Russians, too, lay down a line for the US. Their small war with Georgia sent a message: 'do not mess with our near abroad'. And between the two, Russia and China, there is an organization called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, that's very rarely spoken of. Yet as I indicated, I think it is a very important organization since it signals the potential coming together of Eurasia, not as an empire or fusion, but as a kind of regional cooperative group that is counterpoised to US power. And the question now is, how and whether the US can adapt to the idea of working as one great power among several or whether US pretension to global leadership will provoke the consolidation of a Eurasian alliance to counter that pretension. My hope is for a more plural world, but I am rather pessimistic. I am thus a realist in the sense of being realistic both about the limitations of American power and America's capacity to change away from its present course.

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Related links

- Read Cox's seminal article *Social Forces, States, and World Orders* (1986) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Cox's *The 'British School' in the Global Context* (2009, New Political Economy) [here](#) (pdf)