Critical Theories Challenge the Normative Bases of Contemporary Global Economical Governance and Help to Imagine Progressive Alternatives

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Abstract

This research explores how critical theory challenges the normative foundations of contemporary global economical governance, offering alternative visions for modern economy, democracy, and human rights. By exposing the hidden assumptions and power structures inherent in neoliberalism, realism, and cosmopolitanism, critical theory critiques the dominant paradigms that shape global politics and economy. It argues for a transformation towards more inclusive, pluralistic, and democratic forms of governance. Through a detailed examination of global institutions like the WTO, UN, and the Paris Agreement, the essay illustrates how these entities reflect and perpetuate global inequalities. Finally, it proposes alternative models that prioritise social and environmental sustainability, citizen participation, and respect for cultural diversity, aiming to inspire transformative change in global governance.

Keywords: critical theory, global governance, world economy, neoliberalism, normative bases

1. Introduction

Critical theory is a philosophical approach that aims to expose and challenge the hidden assumptions and power structures that shape social reality (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010). It questions the dominant narratives and ideologies that justify the status quo and marginalize alternative perspectives (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006). This essay will demonstrate how critical theory challenges the normative bases of contemporary global governance and helps to imagine progressive alternatives. The normative bases are the ethical principles and values that underpin and guide global governance. These influence how global actors define their interests, goals, and responsibilities, as well as how they interact and cooperate with each other. The essay will first explain what critical theory is and how it differs from other approaches to global politics. Then, it will discuss how critical theory critiques the normative bases of neoliberalism, realism, and cosmopolitanism, which are three prominent paradigms in global politics. Finally, it will explore how critical theory offers alternative visions of global justice, democracy, and human rights that can inspire

transformative change.

2. Defining Critical Theory

Critical Theory is a philosophical approach that aims to critique and change society by finding underlying assumptions that prevent people from participating in a true democracy (Bohman, 2016). According to Horkheimer's conception, a critical theory is adequately one only if it meets three criteria: it must be normative, practical and explanatory (Bohman, 2016). The approach seeks to bridge empirical and interpretive social sciences with a philosophy to understand normative claims of truth, morality, and justice in current historical contexts (Ritzer, 2008).

Critical theorists use immanent critique to criticise embodiments of reason and morality using internal criteria, and they rejected the relativist stance of the emerging sociology of knowledge (Ferreira, 2018). Critical theory, in general, is any kind of social philosophy that examines society and culture in order to reveal, critique, and challenge power structures (Ferreira, 2018). It seeks to identify the fundamental presumptions in social life that prevent people from fully understanding how the universe works (Kozlarek, 2001). Habermas continued the tradition by focusing on the invasion of political and economic institutions into public life, preventing people from participating in a real democracy (Roderick, 1986). The critical legal theory developed later, leading to branches such as critical race and critical gender theory (Parker & Roberts, 2005). The development of the critical theory is reactionary to criticisms of its foundational and structural foundations in their philosophical underpinnings. For instance, one criticism of the Frankfurt school, where critical theory originated and formatively developed, is that it lacked a solid appreciation and grounding in social reality (Gartman, 2012). However, alternatives have been suggested in modern critical theory research to the extent of fronting multiple perspectives on how society functions and how it can be changed to improve democracy and social justice (Garlitz & Zompetti, 2023).

3. Normative Bases and Global Governance

Normative bases refer to the moral, ethical, and political principles that underpin global governance (Breslin, 2020). These principles provide the normative framework for international law, institutions, and policies.

Normative bases can be explicit or implicit, universal or particularistic, and contested or consensual (Brassett & Tsingou, 2011). These bases reflect the values, interests, and power relations of different actors in global politics, such as states, international organisations, civil society, and corporations (Biersteker, 2009). A critical analysis of normative bases would examine how they are constructed, justified, and challenged by various actors and discourses (Linsenmaier et al., 2021). It would also explore how they shape and are shaped by the practices and outcomes of global governance.

In view of these factors, the sources and criteria of normative legitimacy in global governance vary according to the different perspectives and interests of actors and groups involved (Väyrynen, 2023). As Breslin (2020) argues, normative bases influence the representation and participation of different actors and groups in global decision-making by shaping their expectations, preferences, and strategies. In this regard, normative bases enable or constrain the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy, and justice in global affairs by defining the standards, goals, and mechanisms of global governance.

Global governance is the system of rules, norms, and institutions that regulate transnational relations and address global problems (Gilpin, 2001). It includes a wide range of issues, such as security, trade, environment, human rights, development, and health (Ramphal, 2003). Global governance is characterised by multiple actors, levels, and domains, which make it complex, fragmented, and contested (Ramphal, 2003). Global governance faces various challenges, such as power asymmetries, legitimacy deficits, normative diversity, and policy coherence. A critical analysis of global governance would examine how it is influenced by the interests and agendas of dominant actors and structures. It would also explore how it affects the rights and responsibilities of different actors and groups in a global society.

There are examples of global governance that inculcate normative bases and are critiqued by critical theory. These include the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations (UN) and the Paris Agreement. WTO is an international organization that regulates trade and settles disputes among its member states (Acharya, 2017). It aims to promote free and fair trade, reduce trade barriers, and ensure a level

playing field for all (Hoekman, 2002). However, the WTO has been criticised for being biased towards developed countries, undermining national sovereignty and democracy, and neglecting social and environmental issues (Smith, 2004).

Similarly, the UN is an international organisation that was founded in 1945 to maintain international peace and security, cooperate in solving global problems, and promote human rights and cooperation (Bayeh, 2014). However, the UN has also faced challenges such as lack of representation and accountability, veto power abuse by permanent members of the Security Council, bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption, and failure to prevent or resolve conflicts (Rasche, 2009). Another example is the Paris Agreement which is an international treaty that was adopted in 2015 by 197 parties to combat climate change and its impacts (Segger, 2016). It aims to limit the global average temperature rise to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5°C (Segger, 2016). However, it has also been criticized for being insufficiently ambitious, legally binding, or enforceable; relying on voluntary pledges; lacking financial support for developing countries; and ignoring issues such as loss and damage or human rights (Seo, 2017).

Given these examples, it is plausible to deduce that global governance reflects and reproduces the inequalities and hierarchies of the global order by privileging the interests and agendas of powerful states and actors over those of weaker and poorer ones (Lake, 2010). Global governance responds to the demands and expectations of marginalised and vulnerable populations by creating mechanisms and institutions that aim to address their needs and rights, but often fall short of delivering effective and inclusive solutions (Kennedy, 2008). Global governance balances the need for cooperation and coordination with respect for diversity and autonomy in global politics by fostering dialogue and negotiation among diverse actors and perspectives but also faces challenges of legitimacy and accountability in its decision-making processes (Rai, 2004). These established aspects of global governance represent normative bases.

4. Normative Bases Critiqued by Critical Theory

Critical theory challenges the normative bases of contemporary global governance by exposing their ideological and hegemonic character (Devetak, 2013). Critical theory argues that normative bases are not neutral or objective, but reflect the interests and values of dominant groups in society (Davies, 2011). Critical theory also argues that normative bases are not fixed or universal, but vary across time, space, and culture (Bieler & Morton, 2004). Critical theory further argues that normative bases are not consensual or legitimate, but subject to contestation and struggle (Pugh, 2004). Some of the more common normative bases include neoliberalism, realism and cosmopolitanism (Gallarotti, 2010).

4.1 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a normative base that emphasises the market as the main mechanism for allocating resources, promoting efficiency, and generating wealth (Gowan, 2001). Neoliberalism advocates for deregulation, privatization, liberalization, and globalization. Neoliberalism assumes that individuals are rational, self-interested, and utility-maximising and that the state should have a minimal role in the economy and society. Neoliberalism has been criticised by critical theory for neglecting social justice, environmental sustainability, cultural diversity, and democratic participation. Critical theory argues that neoliberalism creates winners and losers, exacerbates inequalities, commodifies nature and culture, and undermines democratic accountability (Gowan, 2001.

4.2 Realism

Realism is a normative base that emphasises the state as the main actor in global politics, and its pursuit of national interests, power, and security (Beck, 2004). Realism assumes that the international system is anarchic and that states are in a constant struggle for survival and dominance. Realism advocates for a balance of power, deterrence, alliances, and military force (Crag, 2004). Realism has been criticised by critical theory for neglecting human rights, global justice, and transnational cooperation (Orend, 2006). Critical theory argues that realism perpetuates the logic of war, violence, and domination, and ignores the systemic causes of global problems.

4.3 Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is a normative base that

emphasises the individual as the main unit of moral concern, and the need for global citizenship, solidarity, and responsibility (Gowan, 2001). Cosmopolitanism assumes that all human beings have equal moral worth, and that they should respect each other's rights and dignity. Cosmopolitanism advocates for human rights, democracy, and global governance (Beck, 2004). Cosmopolitanism has been criticised by critical theory for neglecting social and economic inequality, cultural diversity, and historical injustice. Critical theory argues that cosmopolitanism reproduces the Western-centric and Eurocentric biases of global governance, and ignores the power relations and struggles that shape global politics (Gowan, 2001).

5. Alternative Visions of Critical Theory for Global Governance

Critical theory offers alternative visions of global justice, democracy, and human rights that can inspire transformative change in global governance (Langman, 2005). These visions are based on the principles of social and environmental justice, democratic participation, and cultural diversity. In principle, visions challenge the dominant paradigms of neoliberalism, realism, and cosmopolitanism, and propose alternative normative bases that are more inclusive, pluralistic, and transformative (Pugh, 2004).

For instance, a critical theory of world society, as developed by Malte Frøslee Ibsen (2022), draws on the Frankfurt School tradition to reconstruct four paradigms of critical theory that engage with global problems and the postcolonial condition. Ibsen (2022) contends that a critical theory of global society requires integrating a Kantian constructivist approach to global injustice critique, as defended by Rainer Forst, with a reflexive evaluation of a conscience-problematising critique of its blind spots and suppositions about the postcolonial condition, as defended by Amy Allen. This approach aims to overcome the limitations of Rawls's Law of Peoples and Habermas's discourse theory of cosmopolitanism and to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced account of global justice that respects cultural diversity and ecological sustainability (Nuti, 2019).

5.1 Global Justice

Global justice requires a radical transformation of the current global economic system, which is based on unequal power relations, exploitation, and ecological destruction (Risse, 2004). Critical theory proposes a new economic model that prioritises social and environmental sustainability and that is based on egalitarian and participatory principles (Wijsman & Berbes-Blazquez, 2022). This model includes measures such as fair trade, social protection, ecological taxes, and democratic control over production and consumption (Wijsman & Berbes-Blazquez, 2022).

One example in this regard is the critique of capitalism and consumerism, which are seen as sources of alienation, exploitation, and ecological crisis (Borim-de-Souza et al., 2015). Critical theorists argue that capitalism creates a false consciousness among the masses, who are manipulated by the culture industry and mass media to accept the status quo and consume more than they need (Hohendahl & Silberman, 1979). These theorists also point out the negative effects of capitalism on the environment, such as pollution, resource depletion, and climate change (Borim-de-Souza et al., 2015). Critical theorists propose a new economic system that is based on human needs rather than profit, and that respects the natural limits of the planet (Dresner, 2008). This system would involve a more democratic and participatory decision-making process regarding production and consumption, as well as measures such as fair trade, social protection, ecological taxes, and redistribution of wealth (Dresner, 2008).

Another example of critical theory is the critique of globalisation and neoliberalism, which are seen as forms of imperialism and domination by powerful countries and corporations over the weaker ones (Coronil, 2000). Critical theorists argue that globalisation and neoliberalism erode the sovereignty and autonomy of nation-states, especially in the Global South, and impose a homogenous and hegemonic culture that undermines local identities and values (Barrow & Keck, 2017). These theorists also highlight the social and economic inequalities that result from these processes, such as poverty, unemployment, migration, and human rights violations (Borim-de-Souza et al., 2015). Critical theorists propose a new model of globalisation that is based on social and environmental justice, and that respects the diversity and autonomy of different cultures and peoples (Martell, 2007). This model would involve more egalitarian and cooperative relations among nations, as well as measures

such as fair trade, debt cancellation, aid reform, and human rights protection (McEwan & Mawdsley, 2012).

5.2 Global Democracy

Further, global democracy requires a radical transformation of the current global political system, which is based on unequal representation, exclusion, and domination (Forst, 2014). Critical theory proposes a new political model that prioritises citizen participation, deliberative democracy, and global citizenship (Martin, 2003). This model includes measures such as participatory budgeting, citizen diplomacy, global referenda, and transnational social movements (Brunkhorst, 2014).

Examples in this regard include participatory budgeting as a process in which citizens directly decide how to allocate public funds in their communities (Sintomer et al., 2008). This can enhance transparency, accountability, and social justice. For instance, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, participatory budgeting has been implemented since 1989 and has improved public services, reduced corruption, and increased civic engagement (Goldfrank, 2007). Citizen diplomacy is also an alternative governance form featuring grassroots activism in which ordinary people engage in dialogue and cooperation with people from other countries or regions (Naples & Desai, 2004). This can foster mutual understanding, respect, and solidarity. For example, the Peace Boat is a Japanese NGO that organises global voyages for peace education and cultural exchange (Chan, 2008).

5.3 Global Human Rights

Global human rights require a radical transformation of the current global legal system, which is based on unequal application, enforcement, and interpretation (Cook, 2012). Critical theory proposes a new legal model that prioritises human dignity, cultural diversity, and historical justice (Pereira, 2013). This model includes measures such as cultural rights, collective reparations, truth commissions, and transitional justice (Pereira, 2013).

The statement implies that the current global legal system fails to protect and promote human rights for all people, especially those who are marginalised, oppressed, or discriminated against by dominant powers (Cook, 2012). Critical theory challenges this system by exposing its ideological biases, structural inequalities, and historical injustices (Pereira,

2013). It also offers an alternative vision of a global legal system that respects and values human diversity, dignity, and agency (Pereira, 2013). Some examples of how critical theory informs human rights practice are cultural rights, collective reparations, truth commissions and transitional justice among others.

Cultural rights are rights that recognise and protect the cultural identity, expression, and participation of different groups and individuals (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2021). These rights aim to promote intercultural dialogue, respect for diversity, and pluralism. For instance, critical theory supports the rights of indigenous peoples to preserve and develop their languages, traditions, and lands (Camargo & Vázquez-Maguirre, 2021). Collective reparations are measures that seek to compensate and restore the dignity of groups that have suffered from systematic human rights violations, such as genocide, slavery, or colonialism (Lambourne, 2009). These may include monetary compensation, public apologies, official recognition or symbolic gestures. For example, critical theory advocates for reparations for the descendants of African slaves in the Americas (Rensmann, 2017). Truth commissions are bodies that investigate and document past human rights abuses and their causes and consequences (MacDowell, 2014). These commissions aim to establish an accurate and comprehensive historical record, acknowledge the victims' suffering, and prevent future violations (Franzki & Olarte, 2013). For instance, critical theory supports the work of truth commissions in countries that have experienced authoritarian regimes or civil wars. Transitional justice is a field that deals with how societies address legacies of human rights violations after periods of conflict or repression (Bickford, 2004). It involves judicial and non-judicial mechanisms that ensure accountability, justice, reconciliation, and peace-building (Bickford, 2004). For example, critical theory endorses transitional justice initiatives that involve victims' participation, gender sensitivity, and social transformation.

6. Criticisms Against the Critical Theory

Some of the criticisms levelled against the critical theory as a tool that challenges the normative bases of contemporary global governance and helps to imagine progressive alternatives are that it is incoherent, illegitimate, and reactionary (Tyson, 2023). Critics argue that

critical theory fails to address the fundamental question of political agency and accountability in a fragmented and diverse world, where citizens have limited access to and influence over transnational institutions and processes (Tyson, 2023). Moreover, critics contend that critical theory is vulnerable to appropriation and distortion by radical conservative forces that seek to undermine the universal values of human rights and democracy. By relying on abstract and idealised notions of critique and emancipation, the critical theory may inadvertently reinforce the very structures of power and domination that it aims to transform (Owen, 2002).

7. Conclusion

Critical theory challenges the normative bases of contemporary global governance and helps to imagine progressive alternatives. It critiques the dominant paradigms of neoliberalism, realism, and cosmopolitanism, and proposes alternative visions of global justice, democracy, and human rights that are more inclusive, pluralistic, and transformative. Critical theory invites the questioning of hidden assumptions and power structures that shape social reality, and to engage in critical and creative thinking about the future of global governance.

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