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**Critical Theory and Post-positivism:  
IR and the significance of Philosophy**

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# Critical Theory and Post-positivism: IR and the significance of Philosophy

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The comparison of philosophical traditions and their alleged unfolding on particular sciences could lead us to conclude, with a scent of irony, that the disciplinary matrixes are made of redescription as well as of incomprehension. The case of the so-called Critical Theory of Society and its destiny in IR is paradigmatic and paradoxical. It is paradigmatic as it illustrates the tortuous path that Philosophy must endure on its way to scientific practice; and it is paradoxical as this path also exposes the dilemmas that this very philosophical tradition had to overcome in order to produce a valuable frame of reference. The analysis of the original post-positivist stance of Critical Theory of Society should compel us to redefine what we understand as “Critical Theories of IR”, as it shows that the ascribing of “post-positivism” to many of these must be taken *cum grano salis*.

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## **The international relations: debate and discipline**

International relations and the theories which look for an understanding of them have affinities that may be traced back to their first steps: if genealogies were to be made, both would show their foundations in confrontation. Particularly in what regards IR theories, any preliminary discussion about what is at stake, as it can be found in manuals and introductory courses, inevitably goes through the presentation of what is called “debate”. Whether they may have been three (Lapid, 1989), four (Vasquez, 1995; Waeber, 1997), or many (Walt, 1998; Kratochwil, 2006), there seems to be no doubt about the fact that the consolidation of the discipline of International Relations would find in these debates not only their landmarks, but as well, and to a good extent, its sense. In other words, for an observer looking for not too much involvement, IR realm would show itself as a contemporary edition of those *disputatio de quodlibet*

which, in the medieval times would unite adversaries eager to indefinitely discuss anything that deserved academic attention. Leaving aside the unquestionable passion for dispute which still makes the wheel of the world turn, and so it would at least for that reason deserve some attention, the dilemma this activity produces – when it takes the risk to define IR field – is double fold. Firstly, if the discipline is more than a series of disputes, thus something from the idea of discipline, absolutely necessary to science, has not been consolidated yet. In order to use two adversaries which nonetheless agree on this point, let's say it happens either because the paradigm which allows for the esoteric nature of a normal science is not yet widely accepted (Kuhn, 1970), or because the negative and positive heuristic approach which allow for a method for research programmes have not been yet defined (Lakatos, 1970), bearing in mind the fact that, in the case, the programmes do not choose adversaries and find them in their own trenches. Secondly, if the dispute uses up a great deal of the International Relations scholars' time, the gap between what is made inside and outside the walls of the universities becomes larger, to the point of generating a fair, though perverse, need: the production of theoretical texts which advocate the importance of producing theoretical texts (Guzzini, 2001).

The problem this text proposes to face is placed in the context of what has been above presented, and is retrospectively orientated: it treats the historical series of debates starting from the present, that is, starting from the contemporary “meta-theoretical debate”, at times also called “inter-paradigmatic” or “post-positivist debate” (such oscillation evidently accentuates the ambiguity observed in IR field). The first question to be faced, taking into account the name given at the present moment, refers to the term “debate” itself. To what extent can we state that this term describes, or has ever described, the relation between the main characters of the discipline? And, if it

is possible to say it, what exactly are the debates about? What is under dispute? The theories, the methods, the objects? Or maybe the debate itself in the sense of overvaluing, of rhetoric flavor, of the eristic activity?

In order to advance these issues, it is necessary to go back, even if only in a few words, to the historical series of debates, which have provided the most enduring self-images of the discipline (Smith, 1995). Nevertheless, there are two possibilities at this point: either going through the debates from a historiographic point-of-view, looking for the determination of authors, schools and topics at play at each moment, which would turn into another reason for dispute; or we may choose a genuinely analytical strategy: rather than supposing that authors dispute around theories, methods or objects, positions may be taken from their assumptions, and thus the very existence of their counter-position is challenged. In this case we would abandon the typical controversies in International Relations, such as questions about the International System structure, about the relations between States, about their range of preferences, about the order of their interests, about power balance efficacy, about the scope of their institutions, about the relations between domestic and international levels, about the configuration of International Society, the efficacy of the regimes, about the multilateral organizations' functions, etc. Instead, a much less controversial series of questions would be adopted: what are these positions commitments? Are they representationalists? Anti-representationalists? The field, or the debate, has a functionalist purpose? Are there genuinely pragmatic positions? Are they conventionalists? Are there non-instrumentalist positions? What theories of truth rule the discipline? As we can see there are not few questions to be made. However, in contrast with the historiographic strategy, which unfolds in innumerable thematic discussions, in this case – if it is possible to find the traces in this meta-theoretical stance – we can clearly say whether there is or there is not counter position in the debate.

And also it is possible to say if there is coherence and if there are argument exchanges.

Mistakenly, one could infer that what is proposed is the suspension of the emphasis on the ontology of International Relations and the focus on its epistemology. However it must be noticed that the preliminary result of this strategy shows us that, rather than what we could expect, the field of international relations does not lack efforts towards its epistemology. What it does lack is the continued reproduction of its theoretical and practical research assumptions: in truth, it is the continued attack to its foundation that must be overcome. However, in order to make this take place, the primary step is to clarify the senses of disputes by showing its epistemological commitments, which, let's say, are already aporetic in their original place, that is, in Philosophy. Thus, the attention must fall not so much on the varied answers to a certain problem, but rather on the posing of the problem and to the conditions for the possibility of its answer. This inversion of priority is symptomatically the most characteristic sign of the so-called "meta-theoretical debate". As a few authors state it, the contemporary moment of the International Relations may be defined from the emergence of a self-image which highlights epistemological problems, such as the distinction between foundationalist and non-foundationalist theories (Brown, 1994; Cochran, 1999), between explicative and comprehensive theories (Hollis and Smith, 1990; Wight, 2002), the hermeneutic issue (Rogers, 1996) and the meaning of post-positivist (Lapid, 1989; Vasquez, 1995; Smith, 1996), critical (Hoffman, 1987; Linklater, 1992, 1996; Brown, 1994) or pragmatic theories (Cochran, 1999; Rytövuori-Apunen, 2005). It is at the very event of these new readings – philosophically oriented – that we can build up, retrospectively, the analytical picture which confers sense to the theoretical debate of the field of International Relations.

In addition to that, the epistemological framing of the debates in International Relations allows us to address another issue, above mentioned: what is the reason for the consolidation of the discipline to take place through reference to debates, even in the classrooms? If we allow for the idea that only recently – starting from the “paradigmatic debate”, according to some, or from the “meta-theoretical debate”, according to others – have real debates occurred between the protagonists, and if we allow for the idea that until then the debates were a *post-factum* exchange conducted by epigones, thus it is possible to question the efficacy of the reference to the series of “debates”, above all as a pedagogic resource. And we can think of a hypothesis: the strict counter position between theoretical currents of International Relations may be understood if we take the figure of antilogy, which in sophists or in skeptical schools has served for varied rhetoric-argumentative functions. In the case of the International Relations theories, both self-refuting statements and also the principle that states that, opposed to any argument, there is another one with the same strength, have allowed for the consolidation of its disciplinary matrix, when that is taken as a curious golden rule of the field. That is because in the same way as in the “third debate” the thesis of incommensurability served to support the being born paradigms since it acted as a safeguard from the persistent attack of each theory to their opponent assumptions (Waeber, 1996), the figure of antilogy would provide in this sense the space for the development – as a continuous re-building – of all theoretical discourses of IR field and the formation of its historical stock of self-images. And as a corollary: from the moment the space for a debate beyond theories is open, not only the re-description of these is made possible but also the debate about its assumptions and commitments. In other words, the emergence of the “meta-theoretical debate” suspends the rule of antilogy and allows for setting up the field of International Relations.

The hypothesis above exposed would be verified through the combination of two efforts: first of all, it must search for the epistemological commitments of the discourses and, thus, be ruled by the most precise determination of categories possible, which serve as the touchstone for the consistency of International Relations theories; secondly, in order to provide the demarcation for the contemporary theories, starting from the “meta-theoretical” debate, it must generate an analytical scheme which cross the categories which describe the epistemological positions in their originary state and the assumptions of the theories under debate. Thus, its working line is double: to define the main epistemological positions and categories – truth, validity, objectivity, relativism, instrumentalism, representationalism – and relate them to the main positions of the International Relations theories – realism, idealism, liberalism, institutionalism, functionalism, constructivism, etc. It is clear that the second step is the one which, in accordance to the argument that only the “meta-theoretical debate” brings to the forestage the issue of the theories’ internal coherence, will demonstrate that the historical series of debates is much more marked by antilogy and by mutual misunderstanding than by argument exchange. In other words, the epistemological prolegomena allows for the recognition of similarities which survive to the constitutive differences between the positions. If this hypothesis is fruitful, than the “meta-theoretical debate” will reveal itself as the landmark which supports the methodological and ontological inflection in the field of International Relations.

In the second part of this essay, the fecundity of this approach will be illustrated through the dissection of the issue which involve the allegedly “positivist” and “critical” traditions of International Relations. Starting from the preliminary re-building of these philosophical traditions, and by contrasting these with the meanings they assume on the field, it will be possible to notice the specific role of antilogy in the consolidation of the currents.

## Positivism, Critical Theory; positivisms, critical theories

Among all theoretical traditions which International Relations have seen emerging, the one that has invariably been regarded as canonical is associated with the term “positivism”. Despite the power any act of naming brings to the one who names, that is to say, the capacity of attribution by negation or the possibility of taking up the opposite position, the mark of theoretical maturity originates from the understanding of what there is in common between opposing opinions, beyond the obvious discrepancies which make the main characters as opponents. In this case, the understanding of the sense of “positivism” in its brief history in the International Relations may lead to finding out among these supposedly opponents more similarities than differences. For that, it is worth checking, firstly, the meaning of the term in its cradle, that is, philosophy itself.

It must be understood that it is not simple to define “positivism”, not even if we go back to the decades of turmoil which are extended from mid-XVII Century to the beginnings of this century. Leaving aside its historical circumstances which, as always, are very important, “positivism” became a cornucopia for positions so diverging that it is not much to say that it corresponds to our “controversy on the universals”, the “gray cat” of contemporary philosophy. Anyway, it is possible to get closer to the scope which is common to the varied positions, provided that two steps are taken. First of all, we may consider as vaguely positivists all theories that are placed in the *confluence of phenomenalism*, understood as the position which abandons the search for the cause and adopts the search for the laws which explain the objective relations between the phenomena, taking them, thus, as discrete; *verificationism*, understood as the strategy which attribute truth to the situation in which the sense of propositions is verified starting from their conditions of

observation, which implies the adoption of a *theory of truth by correspondence*, and presumes a neutral position in what regards observation, associated to what is commonly called *objectivism* ; and finally, *reductivism*, understood as the procedure which establishes that an element in a class of objects can, without any loss, be taken in terms of another class, particularly, that processes can be reduced to events, which make possible the adoption of the *deductive-nomologic model* and confers to the theoretical terms, given the *phenomenalist* position, an *instrumentalist* inflection (Comte, 1842; Schlick, 1932; Popper, 1963; Giddens, 1995; Neufeld, 1995; Wight, 2002). Secondly, in spite of innumerable turnovers during its reign, which is extended from the Comteam project to the last meetings of the Vienna Circle, the extremely reducing judgment which is made of “positivism” – in a nutshell, naturalist or monist views of scientific activity are understood as “positivist” – has its historical landmark in the so-called “Positivism Controversy”, which brings into this text another character, the “critical theory”.

In the same way as “positivism”, “critical theory” is a gathering of diverging opinions, which obliges us to clarify it. However, given its bonds to the given sense of “positivism”, it is possible to clarify it in one single movement: at the same time we can both make explicit the original sense of the critical theory and its relation to positivism and understand its broader sense – that is – its relation with the so-called “post-positivist” positions, particularly in International Relations.

Though the most common reference of the attack made by critical theory against positivism has only become explicit in the minute of the German Society of Sociology Congress in 1961, published in 1969, its meaning can be already clearly seen in a seminal essay by Horkheimer (1937), who defines the idea of critical theory, and in a study by Adorno (1957), which is about the relation between sociological theory and empirical research. The issues which punctuate

this long debate cannot be easily summarized, but they may be understood starting from two questions: what criticizes critical theory? And also: What is the sense of theory in critical theory?

The first question must be referred back to the cited Horkheimer's essay (1937), that is, *"Traditional Theory and Critical Theory"*. The idea which embodies the problem can be thus formulated: the confluence of phenomenism, verificationism and reductivism, which are traces that, as we have seen, set up the "place" of positivism, have contributed to consolidate a conception of theory called "traditional", which requires the postulation of neutrality as a clause for scientific activity. May we notice that, in this sense, according to Horkheimer, it is rather a statement than the result of theoretical activity. Further pushing the same argument: the daily life of traditional theory, which is the core of positivism, to the extent that it requires that the scientist behaves in relation to the object by considering it as no more than a discrete element of a causal chain, also requires an strict distinction between that which belongs to the science domain – the knowledge of phenomenal world – and that which belongs to the domain of the scientist – human action, the space of interests, choices and values. For Horkheimer, the traditional scientific method aims to answer this problem by tacitly postulating value neutrality. Thus, critical theory challenges a conception of theory that requires scientific activity to be a space of non-action. The case of social science is decisive, since there the requirement of value neutrality implies that the scientist, as a social agent, has to be separated from the conditionings which, curiously enough, consecrate his position, determine his activity and provide his object. When following such requirement, the scientist sees as a result of the method that which is in fact postulated by the theory. This is the criticism made by Critical Theory.

The second question must be referred back to the answer given to the first one and to the essay of Adorno (1957), *"Sociology and Empiric Research"*. If

the method should not be seen as an stance which, detached from any and every space-time conditioning, guarantees value neutrality; and if science must be seen as a productive activity, thus critical theory cannot be seen as split from practice. More specifically, it must be seen both as the expression of historical constraints and as the building up of any new condition for human action. In other words, as theory, in the critical sense, is seen as a logic-conceptual apparatus which picks up its objects as it constitutes them, thus its relative position in the realm of "social" production confers to it a privileged status: as we understand human space as a place of social realization of human being's emancipation, which is presupposed by the concept of society itself, thus theoretical activity not only makes this space explicit but it also serves as its counter light. Thus, critical theory, taken as an activity, is normative: it is not simply one element more in society, it is not a description as other social plays but, as the theory makes explicit in the concept of society both whatever it promises and does not fulfill and whatever it realizes and is not in its project, it is embedded in the social issue and normatively takes over the role of imposing society change. Thus the activity of empirical research should not be seen as a methodological step or a testing stance of theory, but as something that comes closer to the gap between theory and practice, or between that which theoretical discourse takes as its pretence for validation and that which it effectively realizes as a social practice. These deep divergences in relation to the constitutive traces of positivism make of critical theory a radically post-positivist position. And such is, in a nutshell, the sense – turned towards practice – of theory in critical theory.

One may ask: "Is that the meaning of critical theory of International Relations?" And the answer: most of the times, no. "Critical theory" is a word which assumes different meanings: all positions and impostures which get close

to the critical arch in what it is most fragile, its opposition to an indefinite “positivism”.

The development of the theories of International Relations, especially in the last two decades, has given reason to a movement which predicates the building up of a “critical” perspective of international relations and of the so-called “traditional theories”. According to the summary of Price and Reus-Smit (1998), the critical perspective then developed would have four main orientations: (i) from the epistemological standpoint, the rejection of positivism; (ii) methodologically, the defense of a plurality of forms of knowledge production, specially interpretative strategies; (iii) ontologically, the defense of the assumption of the social building up of actors; and (iv) normatively, the denunciation of the pretence for value neutrality of theoretical statements. Taking these orientations into account, the search for the filiation of varied approaches to a single and the same critical perspective is rather usual. From this point-of-view, the complexity of the debates which have marked Social and Human Sciences in the last two decades, is subsumed to a supposed programmatic unit which can only be supported by the refusal of the premises of the so-called “traditional theory”. However, such programmatic unity seems to unite approaches not only very different– as neomarxism, structurationism, post-structuralism, feminism and cosmopolitanism – but also incommensurable (Hoffman, 1991; Linklater, 1992; Waever, 1997). Besides the obvious problem of the debate clearness, the critical perspective itself is lost in this case. Indeed, when facing critical theory as it was formulated by the varied constellations that marked the history of the “Frankfurt School”, the critical pretence of the International Relations “critical theories” is reduced to the critique of traditional theories of International Relations. And thus, on their turn, they see themselves reduced to a sense at least very strange, of “positivism”: all theories contrary to the one that is advocated by the one who is accusing are called “positivist”.

From the above established marks, it is possible to show not only that a few of these allegedly post-positivist positions are not really so (Wight, 2002), but also how we cannot always find clearness in the programme of those which really are positivists (Vasquez, 1995; Rytövuori-Apunen, 2005). In the same way it is possible to show that, most of the times, International Relations critical theories do not make up to more than one commitment: the exploration of a distinctive problem in the field of international relations, a problem related not to its epistemology, but to its ontology, that is, the problem of the systems of inclusion/exclusion in world politics (Linklater, 1992, 1997). That is a commitment which in varied ways also orientates neomarxist positions (Cox, 1995) and post-structural positions (Walker, 1993; Bartelson, 1995).

For the purposes of this short presentation, we must highlight that both among the “positivists” and the “critical theoreticians” the resource to epistemology, though legitimate, is nothing but a preamble. If the key concepts are referred to their original positions, as it has been done here, what is revealed is very representative of the contradictions and imputations which also apply to the one that emits them. That is precisely the realm of antilogy, creating strong contentions by defining boundaries and crafting hefty conflicting stimulation. So to speak, a private philosophical war, or theory as a political play: the space of conflict.

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