

Vico contra Kant: The Competing Critical Theories of Cox and Linklater

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Introduction

This chapter juxtaposes the work of Robert W. Cox and Andrew Linklater. Both are regarded as leading critical theorists of international relations, as this edited collection attests, but both offer very different accounts of what such a critical international theory might entail. This is largely a result of their contrasting intellectual heritages. Despite sharing a common inheritance from Karl Marx, Linklater and Cox draw upon vastly different literatures. Rather than survey and analyse the full range of similarities and differences in the critical theory programmes elaborated by Linklater and Cox, I shall focus on one aspect: their approach to history. Unlike many other critical international theorists – who tend to limit their temporal horizons to the very recent past, the present, and quite often, distant speculative futures – Linklater and Cox both engage seriously with history. However, as we shall see, they adopt very different approaches. Linklater's approach to history is informed and guided primarily by the philosopher of Königsberg, Immanuel Kant, Cox by the Neapolitan professor of rhetoric, Giambattista Vico. The rival understandings of history offered by these two eighteenth-century thinkers lead our twenty-first century thinkers to develop divergent critical theories.

Reflecting on his identity in the context of IR as a discipline, Robert W. Cox, in the interview published in this volume, recalls Susan Strange's description of him as an eccentric. Among the reasons Cox concurs with Strange's judgment, is that in International Relations he is almost alone in writing about 'Vico, Sorel or Collingwood'. This is undoubtedly true when considering the work that currently passes under the banner of 'critical theory'. Unfashionably, Cox fails to engage with the intellectuals of Paris and Frankfurt who have dominated various strains of 'critical theory' in

International Relations. Engagement with the writings of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Emmanuel Levinas are entirely absent.

Still more surprisingly, Cox neglects to engage even with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory – there is no mention of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, or Herbert Marcuse, not even Jürgen Habermas. Indeed, the only times Cox seems to mention Frankfurt School thinkers is to explain that he has never read them, and that his work developed independently, and in ignorance, of the work carried out at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt. So although Cox has used the term ‘critical theory’, and is often aligned with the Frankfurt School, there is little substance to the alignment, a point recently emphasized by Anthony Leysens (2008). This accounts for Cox’s apparent eccentricity when placed alongside Linklater, Mark Hoffman and Richard K. Ashley, all of whom paid large intellectual debts to the Frankfurt School. To gain a better understanding of the divergence within critical theory represented by Cox on one side and Linklater on the other, it will be instructive to reflect on the thinkers upon whom they draw, and the kinds of conceptual and historiographical resources they supply. But before attending to the divergent intellectual histories, it is necessary first to outline the conventional understanding of critical theory’s sources.

Conventional Narratives of the Origins of Critical International Theory

Critical Theory finds its origins in the Institute of Social Research, which was established under the Directorship of Max Horkheimer in 1923 (Jay 1973). Critical Theory’s research program, to summarise, was concerned with understanding and critically analysing the central features of the modern social condition. In addition to highlighting the pathological features of modernity, Critical Theorists were also at pains to identify and recover sources of potential social change. Through a method of immanent critique, Critical Theory conducted philosophical and sociological enquiries guided by an interest in emancipation, or to put it differently, the dismantling of social structures of domination and oppression. The dominant intellectual influences of the thinkers associated with the Institute include Kant, Hegel, and Marx, as well as late nineteenth and early twentieth-century thinkers such as Nietzsche, Weber and Freud. It was from this array of German philosophers, social theorists and psychoanalysts that Critical Theory took its direction.

Although Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would write a withering critique of the Enlightenment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), they did not entirely forsake it or the forms of critical reasoning improvised by Kant in his three critiques. Their point was that one form of Enlightenment reason – instrumental or technical reason – had become dominant, and in colonizing vast areas of social and private life had introduced numerous modern pathologies. The end result was that the Enlightenment turned on itself, becoming totalitarian (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 6). The will to dominate nature had expanded and transformed into a general will to exercise domination over men, they argued. Writing in the aftermath of two World Wars, the Gulag and the Holocaust, it is perhaps unsurprising that the leading figures of the Frankfurt School should indict the Enlightenment as its pathological instrumentalization of reason became ‘an instrument of rational administration by the wholly enlightened as they steer[ed] society toward barbarism’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 20). Though *Dialectic of Enlightenment* may have left little space for a reconstruction of Enlightenment reason and the ‘project of modernity’, elsewhere, especially in the writings of Habermas, the Frankfurt School engaged in a critique of reason intended to transform and reconstruct it for the practical moral and political purposes of replacing forms of domination with more just, free and democratic forms of society. According to Habermas (1983, 1987), the ‘project of modernity’ was formulated by eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers who sought to release progressive social potentials capable of redeeming reason and reconciling it with notions of universal freedom and justice.

Central here is Kant. He has been at the heart of Habermas’s effort to reconstruct the project of modernity (Habermas 1997), just as he has to efforts by critical international theorists (Devetak 1995, Linklater 1990: 21, Neufeld 1995: 14-15, Shapcott 2010: 26ff). Of particular importance here are Kant’s historico-political essays written late in his life: ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’ ([1784] 1970a), ‘An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”’ ([1784] 1970b), ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’ ([1795] 1970). There is no need here to provide a close contextual reading of Kant’s argument, suffice it to make three points. First, that Kant conceives of Enlightenment as intimately tied up with the freedom to make public use of critical reason (Kant [1784] 1970b, Habermas 1989: 102-117). Second, that history is governed

by the cosmopolitan purpose of perfecting republican civil and global constitutional orders capable of achieving 'the supreme political good – perpetual peace' (Kant [1797] 1970: 175, also see Bohman and Lutz-Bachmann 1997, Cronin 2003, Schmidt 1992). Third, that Kant envisioned his philosophical history as a propaedeutic of the cosmopolitan constitutional order. As Habermas (1989: 115-116) observed, 'by virtue of the fact that its insights entered into the public's processes of critical reflection, the philosophy of history itself was to become a part of the enlightenment diagnosed as history's course'. For Kant, the cosmopolitan end enjoined by the Enlightenment project is the moral construction of a kingdom of ends wherein humanity, through the public articulation of a philosophical history, achieves universal freedom based on the universal principle of right.

Linklater's Kantian Critical Theory of International Relations

As we shall see, Linklater's Kantian program of critical international theory has been, from its first formulation in *Men and Citizens*, crucially, supplemented by Marx. Linklater's (1982) attempt to combine Kant and Marx in a critical theory of international relations was highly original. Its originality was perhaps heightened by the fact that it came at a time when International Relations, especially in the US, was enamoured of the realist and positivist theory program set out by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979). By contrast, Linklater's *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (1982: x-xi) laid the foundations for an ambitious research agenda concerned to recover a 'critique of the international states-system', and to establish 'a non-rationalist foundation' for moral and political obligations to humankind. If Waltz exhorted International Relations scholars to cultivate an intellectual persona committed to a positivist conception of knowledge and an analytical conception of method aimed at providing an explanatory theory of international relations; Linklater countered with an exhortation to cultivate an intellectual persona committed to a critical conception of knowledge and a method of philosophical history aimed at providing a normative or emancipatory theory of international relations. Kant and Marx were to provide the intellectual resources for this explicitly critical and emancipatory theoretical program.

While Linklater has drawn upon both Kant and Marx, there can be little doubt that Kant has provided the moral compass for Linklater's employment of Marx. Marx may provide indispensable categories and concepts of social theory, yet they remain in need of normative orientation by the cosmopolitan purpose elaborated by Kant. In other words, Kant provides the normative framework within which Marx's theoretical resources are reconstructed. It is on the Kantian normative framework which I want to focus because it supplies a philosophical history that not only combats the historiographical assumption of recurrence and repetition that defines Waltz's neorealist theory of international relations, but, as we shall see, also distinguishes it from the historicist mode of critical theory advocated by Robert Cox.

Cosmopolitan Enlightenment: Kantian Philosophical History

As Linklater (1982: xi) explained in the 'Preface' to *Men and Citizens*, the 'principles of a universal history' underpinning his critical international theory are 'exemplified in, but not completed by, the Kantian theory of international relations'. It is in this context then that Linklater has pursued, across three books (1982, 1990, 1998), a sophisticated attempt to complete Kantian and post-Kantian forms of moral and political theory by the addition of Marxist and post-Marxist forms of social theory and historical sociology. Although the details of Linklater's integration of Kant and Marx have changed over the years, what has not changed is Linklater's commitment to a Kantian philosophy of history.

In *Men and Citizens* Linklater employs a 'philosophical history' to suggest that the conflict at the heart of modern international life – the tension individuals experience by simultaneously bearing the personae of 'man' and 'citizen' – may only be capable of resolution if 'the human capacity for self-determination can be expressed more perfectly' (Linklater 1982: 138). Inspired by Kant, Linklater argues that, 'The enhancement of the condition of civility within the state is but one step within a much more broadly conceived historical process which culminates in the granting of political expression to the idea of humanity' (Linklater 1982: 55). This is Linklater's way of expressing the Kantian hope that the persona of 'citizen' will eventually give way to 'man' in the projected 'kingdom of ends', thus overcoming the extant tension at the heart of modern international life.

Of particular interest for our purposes, is Linklater's reliance on Kant's philosophy of history. What Linklater (1982: 116) finds attractive in Kant is the progressivist reading of history whereby states, like individuals, learn to overcome their ethical particularity in order to bring into existence a universal kingdom of ends where universal justice and perpetual peace will prevail. This historical movement towards perpetual peace rested on a particular conception of history which Kant had previously sketched in his essay on the 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose' ([1784] 1970a).

Philosophical history, as proposed by Kant, demonstrates and promotes the movement towards the 'completion' or 'perfection' of humankind's 'natural or 'original capacities'. This, he believed, depended on the transformative effects achieved by perfecting domestic and international political constitutions, thereby realizing 'the highest purpose of nature, a universal *cosmopolitan existence*' (Kant [1784] 1970a: 50-51). While Linklater clearly eschews the notion of nature's purposiveness, and downplays the notion of perfecting humankind's natural capacities, he remains committed to a philosophical history that, by describing and supporting the progressive realization of human freedom, participates in the cosmopolitan transformation of political community.

This philosophical history operates at two levels: the level of theory and the level of empirical history. At the level of theory, Linklater posits a dialectical passage from the moral and political thought of Pufendorf, through Vattel to Kant. 'Each [thinker] progresses beyond the other' (Linklater 1982: 60), overcoming weaknesses and correcting inconsistencies, culminating in Kant's theory of international relations. Even if Kant's theory remains to be completed by Hegel and Marx, or Habermas and Norbert Elias, it represents something like the crowning moment in this philosophical history.

At the level of empirical history, the task of philosophical history is to track the progress of universal human freedom in the phenomenal world, to identify obstructions as well as positive developments. In the absence of this Kantian philosophical history, critical international theory would lack a philosophical benchmark, such as the cosmopolitan 'kingdom of ends', against which to judge international history. It is for this reason that Linklater (1982: 165) affirms that, '[t]he philosophy of history creates the basis for a critical theory of international relations'. It makes possible an international theory from

the moral point of view; a theory not just capable of critique, but of pointing the way to 'realising the moral life in an international system of states' (Linklater 1990: 138).

That said, Linklater was well aware that Kant needed a social-theoretical supplement if philosophical history were to contribute to an understanding of empirical rationalization processes. For Linklater, the work of Karl Marx was decisive; offering the methodological means of analysing the social, economic and technological forces driving history and shaping the boundaries of political community. In *Beyond Realism and Marxism* (1990) Linklater proposed a theory which would integrate the multiple logics of modernity: the geopolitical logics of war and state-building, the capitalist logics of production and accumulation, and the normative and civilizing logics of international society.

To reconstruct the development of this third set of logics, Linklater has engaged closely with the writings of two distinct bodies of literature: English School writings on the historical evolution of rules, norms and institutions in the society of state (Bull 1977, Wight 1977, Linklater and Suganami 2006), and the writings of Norbert Elias on civilizing processes (Elias 2000, Linklater 2004, Linklater and Mennell 2010). Linklater argues that Elias and the English School complement each other by virtue of Elias's focus on processes of internal pacification and civilization, and the English School's focus on external civilizing processes. In both cases, the emphasis has been on how restraints on violence have been historically developed and cultivated. This has led Linklater to embark on an ambitious three-volume historically- and sociologically-informed study of the way that different states-systems have conceptualized harm and devised norms, rules and institutions for its minimization.

Paralleling Kant's 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose' ([1784] 1970a), Linklater recently titled an article, "Towards a Sociology of Global Morals with an "Emancipatory Intent"" (2007). This suggests that his move to write longer-term histories should be read as an attempt to reconstruct, rather than abandon, Kantian philosophical history by rendering it more empirical. To summarize, Linklater's critical international theory approaches history through a Kantian philosophical history. This historiographical genre encourages a critical theory characterized by a normative

philosophy with a cosmopolitan or emancipatory intent. History is put to the service of normative philosophy; tracing the gradual realization of reason and freedom.

Cox's Vichian Critical Theory of International Relations

Cox, as we have seen, disavows the Frankfurt School as an intellectual source for his Critical Theory. Interestingly, in the interview here and elsewhere, Cox (1996) also disavows any intellectual debts to the Enlightenment. This again will surprise many, since Linklater, Ken Booth, and others take their orientation from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, especially the cosmopolitan moral and political project of Kant. Instead, Cox mentions thinkers more commonly characterized as anti-Enlightenment: Edmund Burke, the great critic of the French Revolution, and Giambattista Vico, whose emphasis on culture so interested Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), the ex-pupil of Kant. If this were not bad enough, Cox also acknowledges debts to writers assigned to the traditions of political realism and historicism; traditions usually considered anathema to critical theory. Among the names Cox lists are E. H. Carr, Friedrich Meinecke and his student Ludwig Dehio, as well as the 'diabolical' figurehead of realism, Niccolò Machiavelli. To be sure, Linklater makes good use of realists and historicists too, but always through a Kantian philosophical history that claims to supercede them. Of course, Cox also recognises the large debt he owes to Antonio Gramsci, who, as is well-known, informs a good deal of Cox's theory of historical materialism (Cox 1983, Bieler and Morton 2004). It may be the case that Cox's long-term engagement with the sickly Sardinian hunch-backed Communist Party leader is enough to outweigh his affection for the realists; but if we hope to gain a better appreciation of Cox's critical theory and its distinctiveness from other critical international theories, such as Linklater's, we need to understand the reasons for his interest in realism and historicism.

In the remainder of this chapter I want to suggest that Cox's version of critical international theory inherits a critical attitude and method derived from a tradition of early modern political thought which has remained distinct from Kantian-inspired or Enlightenment-forged philosophical history. This alternative form of critical method was designed to historicise and 'detranscendentalize' the way people think and write about politics, not to disclose the unfolding of reason and freedom in history. This form of political criticism first originated in the Renaissance courts of secularizing princely authorities who were determined to develop critical humanist methods for analysing

history. In other words, it was designed to defend the state (and the prince) against attack by moralists as much as by internal insurgents or external foes.

A full account would require exposition of the Renaissance revival of *studia humanitatis* (humanist studies), and of its anti-scholastic tendencies which cannot be undertaken here. For Renaissance humanists influenced by Cicero, the hypertechnical logic of Christian-Aristotelian scholasticism was a barbarism lacking any practical application (Copenhagen and Schmitt 1992: 29). A major deficiency, according to humanists, was its unhistorical method. For scholastics, the classical philosophical texts were to be read as if they were outside historical time; they were wrenched from the particular time and place of their production and transported to the higher plane of transcendental philosophy where they could be examined as intricate assemblages of propositions (Grafton 1999). Classic texts were thus little more than disembodied statements which could yield insight, or not, according to their capacity to answer questions in an unchanging *hic et nunc* (here and now), against universal principles of reason and justice.

Against scholasticism's universalistic and moralistic approach to politics, humanism sought to develop an historically-contingent approach which recognized and preserved the autonomy of the political. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, humanism began to draw more heavily upon Cornelius Tacitus than Cicero as a source of inspiration (Tuck 1993: 39ff). The Roman senator, whose histories recount Rome's bloody civil wars, became one of Europe's most fashionable intellectual influences; with intellectuals such as Justus Lipsius combining Tacitism with scepticism and reason of state to furnish an approach to politics which resolved to sacrifice Christian moral ideals for the end of civil peace (Tuck 1993: 45-64). In the context of Europe's fractious religious wars, the moral politics offered by scholasticism seemed too abstract, too detached from history and political practice, and insufficiently detached from the confessionalism driving the violent conflict. By bringing politics down to earth, humanists from Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini to Lipsius and Paolo Sarpi, were bent on treating the Church just like any other political actor, unmasking its mundane political interests, and denying it any transcendental privileges.

It is out of this Renaissance humanism that seventeenth-century absolutist theorists of natural law, such as Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius, developed their anti-metaphysical historiographies (Hunter 2001). The critical historiographical methods forged by Renaissance humanists and further developed by absolutist natural law theorists were taken up in the eighteenth century by historians composing what J. G. A. Pocock (1999) called, 'Enlightened narratives'. These histories – narrated by Pietro Giannone, David Hume, John Robertson, and Edward Gibbon among others – shared with Renaissance humanist histories the historicizing urge, and with the absolutist theorists of natural law the secularizing urge. Politics, as understood by exponents of this humanist, anti-metaphysical approach to history, was a mundane civil matter incapable of resolution by appeal to higher moral norms. Political orders, domestic and international, were to be founded on procedures, practices and institutions compatible with civil government; and the key to understanding these procedures, practices and institutions lay with history rather than philosophy.

I want to suggest that it is in this intellectual context that Cox's interest in Vico makes sense. Cox repeatedly expresses an interest in historiography and historical modes of understanding in both the interview published here and elsewhere. Indeed, in the interview he goes so far as to equate critical theory with an 'historical mode of thinking'.

Neapolitan Enlightenment: Vico's Civil Historical Method

If we accept, with Pocock, Ian Hunter (2001, 2004) and others, that there are multiple Enlightenments, we may yet conceive Vico as an Enlightenment thinker; after all, like the humanist and Enlightenment historians discussed above, he insists on non-transcendental civil history as the most appropriate context for understanding human society. This, I believe, may explain why Cox finds Vico so attractive and so useful for the kind of critical international theory he proposes.

A long way from the French and German centres of Enlightenment thought that were so fashionable in his day, Vico was a participant in the Neapolitan Enlightenment (Robertson 2005: ch. 5). Among the various reasons Cox takes an interest in Vico we may consider two: first, Vico's *New Science* ([1744] 2001) offered a critique of the dominant form of philosophical reasoning in his day, Cartesianism, and second, it emphasized the changing historical forms of 'human civil institutions'. Each of these

Vichian features is present in Cox's critical theory. Like Cox (1981), Vico reacted strongly to the privileging of naturalistic philosophy (positivism in Cox's case) by advocating an historicist approach. Similarly, Cox (1981, 1983) adopts an approach to world order that, like Vico, takes them as civil institutions interacting with ideas, and susceptible to modification over time.

Cox's (1981, 1985) critique of positivism echoes Vico's rejection of Cartesian philosophy. In both cases, a philosophy that abstracts human consciousness from the world is indicted. It is in this context that Vico posited his *verum-factum* doctrine (the true is the made) as an alternative approach to knowledge. This 'maker's knowledge' doctrine implies that making something gives the maker a special knowledge or insight into what is made. The upshot is that humans are better positioned to gain knowledge of history rather than nature since they have made the former, but not the latter. Only God, the argument goes, can know nature. As Vico explains ([1744] 2001: 119-120):

The civil world is certainly the creation of humankind. And consequently, the principles of the civil world can and must be discovered within the modifications of the human mind. If we reflect on this, we can only wonder why all the philosophers have so earnestly pursued a knowledge of the world of nature, which only God can know as its creator, while they neglected to study the world of nations, or civil world, which people can in fact know because they created it.

Cox (1996: 29) glosses the *verum-factum* doctrine's applicability to history by saying that 'history is the most appropriate form of human knowledge, since history was made by men and therefore men are capable of understanding what they have made'. By emphasizing the constitutive human elements in civil history, Vico's historiographical method may thus be considered a continuation and adaptation of the humanist methods improvised by Renaissance historians, absolutist natural law theorists, and Enlightenment civil historians.

Two and a half centuries after Giambattista Vico improvised his 'new form of criticism' to undermine fashionable Cartesian natural philosophy, Robert Cox, set out an agenda of critical theory to undermine the positivism of mainstream international relations. In both cases, an historical mode of knowledge was deployed to combat scientific pretensions, and to historicise human civil institutions. For Vico, writing the history of

the civil world required a method capable of understanding changing cultural, legal, and political conditions, for these conditions form the contexts within which civil institutions such as nations or states rise and fall. Vico rejected Cartesian natural philosophy because its scientific method extinguished history and denied the constitutive role played by ideas in making human civil institutions. Ultimately, it remained incapable of grasping the interplay of ideas and institutions, and thus could not contribute to an understanding of 'the world of nations in its historical reality' (Vico [1744] 2001: 84).

For neither Vico nor Cox does history have to answer to normative philosophy. History's purpose is not governed by the cosmopolitan intent to trace the progressive unfolding of reason and freedom that characterizes Kantian philosophical history. Rather, it is to make sense of the changing ways in which civil institutions have shaped human experience. This historiographical genre encourages a critical theory characterized by an empirical intellectual history with mundane or civil intent. Even though it may contribute to understanding the potentials and limits of human reason and freedom, such a history makes no claim to reach for higher moral purposes.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to provide a brief account of two leading exponents of critical international theory: Andrew Linklater and Robert W. Cox. It carried out its task by historiographically redescribing the approach to history embodied in each version of critical international theory. In appealing to such radically different thinkers as Kant and Vico, it can be no surprise that Linklater and Cox cultivate such different approaches to history, and, in the end, elaborate such divergent programmes of critical international theory. Against the dominance of Kantian philosophical history in critical international theory, there is a case to make for accepting Cox's (1981: 133) claim that Vico's historical approach is also 'that of critical theory'. The purpose of this chapter has not been to pass judgment on either approach, or to choose one over the other, but to clarify some points of difference that arise from these rival conceptions of history, and to encourage further reflection on the historiographical assumptions underpinning contemporary expressions of critical international theory.

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