The Paradigm of Critical Theory

Pedigree of the Critical Theory Paradigm

- Distinguishing characteristics:
  - The critical theory is a kind of reflectivism, comparative with rationalism, or problem-solving theory.
  - The critical theory rooted neither in politics as the realist and liberal paradigms are, nor in economics as the radical paradigm is, but in sociology.

Theoretical Perspectives

- At the individual level
  - Individuals, especially elites, are major units and most important actors.
  - Individual elites or “epistemic communities” play a key role in transforming language and discourse about international politics.
  - Social groups and collective identities are also actors in international area.

- At the state level
  - States behavior is shaped by elite beliefs, collective identities, and social norms.
  - Individuals in collectivities forge, shape, and change culture through ideas.
  - National interests are the result of the social identities of these actors.
  - State power is the power of ideas, culture, and language.

- At the international system level
  - Whether the system is anarchic depends on the distribution of identities, not the distribution of military capabilities.
  - “Anarchy is what states make of it.”
  - There is no relevant distinction between the international system and the state or between international politics and domestic politics.
Theoretical Hypotheses

➢ Theorizing about Theory
  □ There exists no single general-purpose theory able to account for all questions regarding international relations.
  □ Wendt, “constructivism is not a theory of international politics”; rather, it helps to “clarify the differences and relative virtues” of alternative theories.

➢ Theorizing about Theory
  □ Theories of international politics are often contested on the basis of ontology and epistemology.
  □ The critical theory argues that since there is no single objective reality, a general theory is impossible to achieve.
  □ Constructivists turn to discourse analysis to answer the questions of IR.

➢ Ideas, Identities, and Interests
  □ Power is more than brute force; ideas are a form of power.
  □ Material Power
  □ Discursive Power

➢ Ideas, Identities, and Interests
  □ Constructivists believe in the power of knowledge, ideas, culture, ideology, and language, that is, discourse, or how we think and talk about the world.
  □ The discursive power is the power to produce inter-subjective meanings within social structures, and actors’ ability to persuade others to accept their ideas.

➢ Ideas, Identities, and Interests
  □ Constructivists State behavior is shaped by elite beliefs, identities, and social norms; ideas and discourse are the driving forces that shape the world.
  □ EG: A theater fire
  □ Identity ➔ Behavior

➢ Ideas, Identities, and Interests
  □ Ideas and identities shape state behavior by defining national interests.
  □ Identities tell you and others who you are and they tell you who others are, implying a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of actions in particular domains, and with respect to particular actions.
Theoretical Hypotheses

Ideas, Identities, and Interests

- National identities are multiple and changing, therefore national interests are multiple and changing.
- National interest is not pre-given and state behavior is not predetermined.

Identities \( \rightarrow \) Interests \( \rightarrow \) Behaviors

Theoretical Hypotheses

Identities, Cultures, and Int’l Structures

- Structures constitute state identities and interests.
- Actors also constitute structures.

Identities \( \rightarrow \) Interests \( \rightarrow \) Behaviors

Theoretical Hypotheses

Identities, Cultures, and Int’l Structures

- Structures are determined by the distribution of ideas and identities.
  - shared knowledge
  - Practices
  - material resources
- Inter-subjective norms and practices are critical to the meaning of structure.

Theoretical Hypotheses

Norms, Institutions, & Security Community

- The expectation of constructivists is to create a more harmonious and peaceful international system.
  - a “world society”
  - a genuine “peace system”
  - a “cooperative security system”
  - a “pluralistic security community”
Key characteristics of a “pluralistic security community”:
• non-violent problem solving (Deutsch)
• mutually accepted value (Deutsch)
• dependable expectations (Deutsch)
• positive collective identity (Adler and Barnett)

To achieve such a “peace system,” the key is to alter state identity and to transform how states think about themselves and their relationship with other states.
• That is, to cultivate and bolster positive and constructive collective identities.
• “Identities reduce uncertainty.”
  • EG: nuclear weapons in different hands

International norms:
• Ethical principles about how actors should behave.
• Mutual expectations about how actors will behave in certain situations.
• Social identities, indicating which actors are considered to be legitimate.

Focus on the role of norms as constitutive, constraining, or enabling.
• Norms and institutions play a central role in the process of transforming the fundamental nature of international politics and creating a more cooperative and peaceful world.
• security dilemma vs. security community
### PARADIGM IN BRIEF

**The Paradigm of Critical Theory**

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<th>Major approaches</th>
<th>Deconstruct concepts; advocate normative innovation through construction of new images; cultivate positive collective identities</th>
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<td>Policy prescriptions</td>
<td>Establish a pluralist security community by changing norms, institutions, and collective identities</td>
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<td>Central concepts</td>
<td>Idea; discourse; identity; inter-subjective understanding; culture; norms; institution; security community</td>
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<td>Major theorists</td>
<td>Wendt, Katzenstein, Hopf, Adler, Sylvester</td>
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### In Sum: Contributions and Limitations

**Two basic claims:**
- The fundamental structures of int’l politics are social rather than strictly material (opposes materialism).
- These structures shape actor’s identities and interests, rather than just their behavior (opposes rationalism).

**Contributions**
- It returns international scholars to the foundational questions of IR (state, sovereignty, and theory).
- It opens new substantive areas to inquiry (gender).
- It elucidates the sources of power in ideas and how ideas shape identity.

**Limitations**
- It overemphasizes the role of ideas, identities, and discourses, but it fails to explain why discourses rise and fall and why the new discourse will not be more malignant than what it replaces.
- It does not adequately address a critical aspect of the realist worldview: the problem of uncertainty and deception.

### Theoretical Paradigms Compared

**Theory in Action: Analyzing the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War**
- The realist paradigm
- The liberal paradigm
- The radical paradigm
- The paradigm of critical theory