

# The purpose of theory in international relations philosophy essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

International Relations (IR) theory aims to provide a conceptual framework upon which international relations can be analyzed. Ole Holsti describes international relations theories act as a pair of colored sunglasses, allowing the wearer to see only the salient events relevant to the theory. An adherent of realism may completely disregard an event that a constructivist might pounce upon as crucial, and vice versa.

Robert Cox's ideas on the purpose of theory in International Relations, is not a search to find the truth but it is a tool to understand the world as it is, and to change it through the power of critique. According to Robert Cox, theory has two purposes: one of them is the problem-solving purpose that is synchronic which deals with the givens and tries to manage the smooth functioning of the system. The other kind of theory is the critical theory, and the purpose is to become aware of the situations not chosen by one, and to establish an emancipatory perspective. Once looked from the Coxian lens, it is clear that the discipline of international relations were from the very beginning loyal to this kind of purpose in theorizing, i. e., the smooth working of the system. As Robert Cox articulates, ' Theory is always for someone and for some purpose'; this statement reflects the context in which the theory is being analyzed.

Robert Cox says in one of his interview, " 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”.

Cox has analyzed various theories and he critiques the earlier theories for their absolutism. He presents three challenges to previously established theories of IR. Firstly, he appreciates the holistic intent behind both neorealism and world systems theory but warns against drawing conclusions which may detract from true formulation of a holistic approach. Secondly, the state and social forces ought to be considered jointly in order to understand the route created by historical processes. Finally, he argues for an empirical-historical methodology that accommodates and explains change more effectively than neorealist’s historical positivism.

All theories derive from a perspective which determines their purpose. By that Cox means all theories are colored by the time, place, and culture which produced them. Cox identifies two strains of theorizing, the first, problem-solving theory, employs the existing theoretical framework and political conditions in order to isolate and address issues. Conversely, critical theory is reflective, rejecting the “ false premise” of a fixed social and political order, which Cox asserts is a “ convenience of method” that constitutes an ideological bias in favor of the status quo. If the purpose of political and social inquiry is indeed to effect change, critical theory is best suited towards that mandate, as a “ guide to strategic action” cognizant of the history and ideology which inevitably impacts theory. Problem-solving theory restricts the theorist into (perhaps inadvertently) perpetuating the status quo. That being said, Cox acknowledges (in accordance with his belief that theory

belongs to its historical climate) that there can be a time and place for 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.

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 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.

Cox believes that Critical theory 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.

Cox sums up the salient features & the purpose of the Critical Theory as follows:

1. Action is never absolutely free but takes place within a framework for action with constitutes its problematic
2. Not only action but also theory is shaped by the problematic
3. The framework for action changes over time and a principal goal of critical theory is to understand these changes
4. The framework has the form of an historical structure
5. The framework is to be viewed from the bottom or from the outside in terms of the conflicts which arise within it and open the possibility of its transformation

Having outlined his theoretical perspective, Cox explicates the role of historical structure in the formation of world orders, paying particular attention to hegemony. a structure is defined by its potentials in the form of material capabilities (technological, organizational, and natural resources) and ideas (historically conditioned intersubjective meanings and conflicting

collective images of social order) institutionalization, which reflects and entrenches the power relations evident when particular institutions arose, is linked to the Gramscian concept of hegemony. In a hegemonic structure, the dominant interests secure power by co-opting the weak as they “ express their leadership in terms of universal or general interests” these processes are not static; rather, they are limited totalities of a particular time and space which contain the dialectic possibility of change; that is, social forces, forms of state, and world orders can all be represented as a series of “ dominant and emergent rival structures” = Social forces, hegemony, and imperialism interact as states mediate global and local social forces, establishing the political economy perspective in which “ power emerges from social forces” and ideas, institutions and material capabilities are assessed on these three levels

Cox then discusses the internationalization of the state as “ fragments of states” evolved to become the primary units of interaction in developed states this represents the ascendancy of state ministries as independent actors, while in the periphery the power rests with international organizations. International production is engendering a global class structure which co-exists with national class structures, led by the transnational managerial class. Workers have also been fragmented into non-established and established, working respectively in international and national production, creating problems for social cohesion.

Future world order prospects are presented in three hypothetical situations based on configurations of social forces with varying implications for the state system. Firstly, there is the possibility of a new hegemony based on <https://assignbuster.com/the-purpose-of-theory-in-international-relations-philosophy-essay/>

internationalized production, suggesting a continued primacy of international capital and interests in both the core and the periphery. Conversely, “ a non-hegemonic world structure of conflicting power centers” may emerge if neo-mercantilism rises in the core, creating a climate of cooperation with a particular core state for each periphery country. Finally, Cox does not rule out the possibility of a counter-hegemony based in the periphery, resulting in the “ termination of the core-periphery relationship” which is entirely contingent on increased development in the periphery.

Cox’s strength lies primarily in his thorough assessment of historical examples without downplaying the role of history as neorealists do with their picking historical facts out of a quarry approach. Moreover, his re-orientation and reframing of international relations theory as a normative, emancipatory exercise establishes the discipline as a source of progress, rather than a cottage industry justifying the status quo. Critical theory emphasizes the political aspect of political science, reminding students and observers that each theorist (or diplomat) must contend with their own personal and cultural prejudices as human observers of politics cannot divorce themselves from their subject matter. Ultimately, critical theory’s value rests with its reflexivity and hope for progress.

Let us take an example to understand the applicability of this statement in real life scenario.

Let us look at Climate change as a scenario and apply the statement and the theory relevance.



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 <https://assignbuster.com/the-purpose-of-theory-in-international-relations-philosophy-essay/>

nature, implies seeing humans as an entity with a responsibility vis-à-vis the bigger world of which they are a part.

## **Conclusion**

One has to question about the intent, the goal and the 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 or the status quo. 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 is called 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.

We need to know the context in which theory is produced and used; and we need to know whether the aim of the user is to maintain the existing social order or to change it?

Ever since, Cox's work has inspired critical students of IR and International Political Economy 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.