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Revisiting Critical Theory in the Post-September 11 World

Identity, Security, and Democratic Governance

There is a consensus within debates on terrorism that the aim of terrorist acts is "very much larger than the direct physical destruction" they cause.[1] The September 11 attack illustrates this point very clearly, in so far as the effect it generated in the world went far beyond the physical destruction of killing around 3,000 innocent people. Its effect has also gone far beyond its political aim, which, voiced by Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, was to create a "clash of fundamentalisms" in world politics in the name of the Islamic Jihad, against infidel American imperialism in particular, and Western modernity in general.

Since U.S. president George Bush defined September 11 as a "war on the homeland" and responded to it by unilaterally declaring a global war on terror, we have seen the emergence of a number of radical developments, changes, and crises in world affairs. It has become possible to characterize the "present" as the post-September 11 era. The unlilateral declaration of a U.S.-led global war on terror, aimed at revitalizing the state-centric international politics, and based on the normative and strategic primacy of security issues over global-wide social justice problems, has concretized, unearthed the concealed problems of key international institutions, such as the UN and the NATO, created a split in the precess of European integration, and divided the world into those who are the friends of the U.S. and those who are against the war on terror. Thus, in the name of a global war on terrorism, the state-centric reordering of world affairs has operated not only by establishing a linear causality between the fight against terrorism and war, but also by codifying difference as a direct or indirect threat to security. In this sense, both the September 11 attack, and the state-centric response

to it, have created a radical change in international relations, in which we seem forced to choose between security and liberty, hegemony and autonomy, community and individuality, state-centric nationalism, and democratic cosmopolitanism.

In this article, I suggest that there is another possible response to terrorism, a democratic response which approaches terrorist attacks as a "crime against humanity" and defines September 11 as a terrorist attack not only on America but on humanity as a whole, and promotes and puts into practice cosmopolitanism and multilateralism as the philosophical and political basis for our global fight against terror.[2] I argue that such a democratic response to terrorism should be constructed on the basis of a theoretical framework capable of explaining and reflecting upon international relations in the post-September 11 era. Critical theory has the potential to do this, since its *modus vivendi* aims not only to analyze critically the present nature of world affairs, but also, and more importantly, to alter it in such a way that democratic global governance can be made possible. The existing critical theories of international relations, whether it be postmodern, Gramscian or Habermasian, all operating still at the level of metatheory, fall short of framing such a democratic response, in so far as they are, in their own ways, preoccupied either with identity-issues, economic processes, or discourse ethics. In this sense, I suggest that a viable democratic response to September 11 requires an attempt to reconstruct the existing critical theory of international relations in such a way that not only provides a powerful critical analysis of the present nature of world affairs, but also promotes a democratic global governance which approaches "international security," "sustainable economic development" and "democratization" as intertwined processes or problem-areas. In doing so, critical theory functions as a theoretical basis for democratizing the key institutions of international relations, international organizations, nation state and global civil society and their interactions, and locates its democratic response in their cosmopolitan and multilateral fight against terrorism.

In substantiating these suggestions within what follows, I will first delineate the way in which critical theory, operating not only as a "metatheoretical critique" of the existing positivist and rationalist theories of international relations, but also as a "first-order theorizing" about the structure and dynamics of the international system, has the potential to provide us with a more adequate and feasible theoretical framework for constructing a democratic response to terrorism.[3] Second, I will focus on what I call "international relations in the post-September 11 era" and also the different perceptions of the "Other" in this era, both of which will provide an adequate ground for the reconstruction of critical theory. This attempt will allow me to delineate my suggestion that the post-September 11 era requires a reconstruction of critical theory that enables it to become a viable and adequate ground for the creation of a powerful democratic alternative to the current state-centric operation of international relations.

Critical Theory, Modernity, and International Relations

First emerging as an alternative to positivist and rationalist philosophical discourses of modernity, critical theory aims at breaking with the empirico-analytical conception of theory in order to see that what is regarded as "objective" is always "humanly objective," that is, "historically subjective." The most clear expression and articulation of the suggestion of the "objective" as "humanly subjective" can be seen in Antonio Gramsci's intervention on the positivist distinctions drawn between objective fact and subjective value, the universal and the particular, and science and ideology:

> Objective always means 'humanly objective' which can be held to correspond exactly to historically subjective: in other words, objective would mean universal subjective. Man knows objectivity in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race *historically* unified in a single unitary cultural system. But this process of historical unification takes place through the disappearance of the internal contradictions which tear apart human society, while these contradictions themselves are the condition for the formation of groups and for the birth of ideologies which are not concretely universal but are immediately rendered transient by the practical origin of their substance.[4]

Gramsci's suggestions in this quotation, conceiving objectivity as historically subjective, situating knowledge in a historically unified cultural system, and underlining the intertwined character of knowledge and interest, clearly demonstrates the specificity of critical theory vis-à-vis positivism and rationalism. More specifically, and within the context of international relations theory, by approaching the structure and dynamics of the international system not as "an ontologically given reality" but as "a historically and intersubjectively constructed practice," critical theory draws our attention to the intertwined character of knowledge/power relations. It thereby demonstrates that what is presented as objective, factual, scientific and universal is always and already embedded in an historically and discursively constructed system of power and domination. Thus, the basic objective of critical theory cannot be only to explain the existing structure of international relations, but also to alter it into a more just and democratic system of governance. It is in this sense that critical theory functions not only as an explanatory but also as an "emancipatory and democratic mode of theorizing" about international relations.[5]

As critical theory attempts to explain and reflect upon the structure and dynamics of the international system, it puts forward two interrelated propositions.

The first proposition concerns the intertwined character of knowledge and power.[6] Critical theory argues that what is at stake in theories of international relations is not only explanations about the existing "political conditions in the modern world" but also, and more importantly, "expressions of the limits of the contemporary imagination" about creating an

alternative, just, and democratic world.[7] In this way, critical theory attempts to discover how knowledge claims about international relations function also in the service of power and domination by imposing a set of epistemological and normative limits on both our understanding of the world and our attempts to imagine making it just and democratic. In this sense, the modern practice of inclusion/exclusion, embedded in the objectivist epistemological procedures and representations of reality, as well as in claims to universality, has been central to the functioning of international relations theory. Thus, the suggestion that critical theory puts forward that the "objective" is in fact historically subjective, enables us not only to see that international relations theory operates as power/knowledge, but also to search for alternatives that enlarge the horizon of the contemporary political imagination about the modern world.

The second proposition concerns the way critical theory approaches and defines theoretical activity. Contrary to positivist and rationalist theories of international relations, critical theory regards theoretical activity not as a neutral instrument or an abstraction that aims at explaining the existing international system on the basis of a set of epistemological distinctions drawn between the objective fact and the subjective value, the universal and the particular, and science and ideology, but as "a (cultural) criticism," a "lens" through which one, as an active subject, attempts to problematize the world, to critically analyze interactions between the international organizations, the state, and civil society, and searches for possibilities of creating a just, emancipatory, and democratic global governance. Thus, as Andrew Linklater has pointed out, critical theory has to articulate philosophical, empirical, and practical concerns.

At the philosophical level, critical theory will have to provide an alternative world order grounded in concepts of freedom and universality that are historically derived. Empirically, it has to construct a sociology of constraints upon the realization of these concepts, and practically, it has to provide us with strategies of transition to bridge the gap between the two.[8]

These two propositions, namely conceiving theory as power/knowledge and theoretical activity as a practice of explanation and reflection, enables critical theory both to gain specificity as a first-order theorizing about the structure and dynamics of the international system, and to differentiate itself from the positivist and rationalist theories of international relations, by attempting to enlarge our political imagination about creating alternative and democratic world visions. Thus, not only does critical theory call into question the very language, concepts, methods, and discourse of the existing structure and dynamics of the international system, it also helps us to think of the world in which we live differently and democratically.

The Post-September 11 World

Understood and put into practice in this mode, critical theory becomes an important theoretical device to explain and reflect upon the current state of international relations, which have been increasingly marked by the September 11 terrorism and its devastating impacts on our world. Today, it is possible and necessary to define the world in which we live as the post-September 11 world. A quick glance at recent discussions about the impacts of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on global politics reveals that there have been three important ruptures that the September 11 terrorism created in world affairs. These ruptures, which have brought about a number of fundamental and radical ambiguities in world affairs and global politics, have altered the current state of international relations and the existing structure and dynamics of the international system. A point of clarification is worth emphasizing at this point. Unlike the neoconservative ideology of the Bush administration that has tended to characterize the post-September 11 era as a totally "new stage," "new condition," or "new epoch" in international relations, I am suggesting that to speak of the nature of the present world affairs and global politics as the post-September 11 era should entail the recognition of "continuities and changes" in international relations. In other words, to speak of the post-September 11 era is to recognize the novelty of the crucial impact of the September 11 terrorism on international relations without losing sight of the continuing fundamental problems of the existing international system in terms of security, social justice, and democratization.

These ruptures concern (a) "the emergence of the world risk society," (b) "the changing nature of American hegemony," and (c) "the globalization of violence."[9] Today, we live in a "world risk society" which involves ambiguity, uncertainty, and ontological insecurity about the nature, as well as the future, of international relations, derived from the fact that terrorism is a serious and real danger, and operates as a globalized act of violence and intimidation directed mainly against the innocent. The September 11 terrorist attack and subsequent attacks in Istanbul, Madrid, London, Bali, and Egypt, have given rise to the idea of a "world risk society." It should be pointed out, however, that the idea of a "risk society" is not new. Recent environmental hazards and accidents on the one hand, and the increased number of devastating financial crises in different parts of the world on the other, have already demonstrated that we live in a globalizing world in which modern societies are becoming risk societies.[10] Likewise, the September 11 terrorism has generated an important change in the way in which American foreign policy acts as a hegemonic vision of the world. It has resulted in the reconstruction of hegemony on the basis of the privileged status of (a) military power and security over economic power and social justice, (b) unilateralism over multilateralism, (c) politics as a friend-foe relationship over politics as negotiation, (d) hard power over soft power, and (e) community and security over liberty and freedom. With this change, the new American foreign policy, operating as a neo-conservative ideology of power and domination,

has attempted to reorganize global politics and world affairs through the acts of war and occupation.[11] Of course, American foreign policy has been hegemonic in the post-WWII order, but it is the neo-conservative re-articulation of American foreign policy through the above listed principles that has given rise to the emergence of rupture in its *modus vivendi* in the post-September 11 world.

Both of these radical transformations in global politics and world affairs — the emergence of the world risk society and the neoconservative operation of American hegemony — have also resulted in a significant rupture in globalization, in that violence and terrorism, rather than a free market and social justice, have become the constitutive elements of the present nature of inter- and intra-national relations.[12] The increasing attention to the problems of violence and terrorism in globalization discourse has led to the neglect of both global social justice issues, such as poverty and inequality, and global democracy problems, such as human rights violations and the reduction of cultural difference to a dangerous foe.

Perceiving the Other in the Post-September 11 World

As a result of these ruptures in global politics and world affairs in the post-September 11 world, the question of how to perceive or approach cultural difference has become a question of utmost importance, in so far as it places the concept of the "Other" at the centre of any attempt to understand the post-September 11 world, or to explore the possibility of democratic governance in this world.[13] One can discern at least four different conceptions of the "Other" in this context:

i) *The Other as an Empirical/Cultural Object* > Approached this way, the Other is regarded as an object that can be accounted for through collecting facts. Here, the intention is to explain the Other by providing so-called objective and factual knowledge of the Other. It should be noted immediately, however, that this notion of the Other is an outcome of the cultural essentialism embedded in the "modernizationist" dichotomy drawn between modern (Western) and traditional (non-Western). In this respect, although it is assumed that a search for objective and factual knowledge leads to a better understanding of other subject positions and cultures, such a search is embedded in an *a priori* characterization of the Other as a fixed entity, a non-Western subject which lacks essentially what the modern subject has, i.e., rationality, modernity, reason, progress. In fact, as Talad Asad correctly points out within the context of anthropology, what objective and factual knowledge provides is a substantiation of the already established classification of non-Western culture in accordance with "Europe's story of triumph as progress."[14] Thus, the Other

then becomes defined with respect to what it is not rather than what it is. It constitutes a cultural object whose condition of existence reveals a lack of everything the modern self possesses. It is approached from within the privileged and universal category of the modern self as a rational thinking subject and is represented as an inverted image of that self. In the post-September 11 world, this perception of Other as an empirical/cultural object operates as the dominant mode of approaching difference, mainly and concretely to the Islamic identity, and can be seen in the neo-conservative ideology of the new American foreign policy, the racism of the extreme-right in Europe, and in the discourse of Islamic fundamentalism about Western modernity.

ii) *The Other as Being* > Employed in the theories of international society, as well as in liberal institutionalism and constructivism, the Other as being refers to "the under ground" of the modern self, that which contributes to the constitution of the self. These theories not only write about the Other but also attempt to discover new relationships to the Other by exploring the cultural and historical quandaries of his/her "self." This conception of the Other breaks radically with both the empiricist collection of facts and the cultural dissolution of the Other into the privileged modern self. However, by regarding the Other as a historical being, as a "real" historical existence, both interpretive and existential discourse operate in the regime of modernity, maintain the self/Other opposition, and fail to break with the category of the Other as a discursive construct. The liberal and social democratic approach to Islam in Europe, and the recent calls for the idea of, and the need for, "inter-civilizational" dialogue, both employ the perception of the Other as being.

iii) *The Other as a Discursive Construct* > Viewed in this way, the Other constitutes "an object of knowledge" constructed by various discourses and institutions. In his influential book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said shows how the entity called the "orient" was constructed, even produced, during the post-Enlightenment period, as the Other in such a way that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self."[15] On the basis of the epistemological and ontological distinction between the Orient and the Occident, the oriental Other was constructed and functioned as an integral part of European material civilization and culture. This conception of the Other brings about an epistemological and philosophical break with the modernist conception of the self, both by rejecting the historicist account of the subject as a historical being and by relocating the question of the Other into systems of representation. This conception of the Other as a discursive construct provides a strong criticism of the neo-conservative and meta-racist perceptions of the

Other as an empirical/cultural object, and makes it possible to see that the total reduction by these discourses of Islam to the dangerous foe, a potential terrorist or an object to be controlled, which is initiated at the level of representation is, in fact, a strategy aimed at securing the dominance of the West over the non-West.

iv) *The Other as Different* > Although Said's attempt to unearth the discursive character of the Other produces a significant breakthrough, it does not say much about the Oriental Other in itself. This is a result of Said's over-preoccupation with the discursive construction of the Orient as an object of knowledge, which constructs a binary dichotomy between Oriental and Occidental. In Said's attempt, the oriental Other becomes a totalizing and homogenous construct which does not permit understanding of the Other in itself, in its own cultural and historical specificity. This critique of Said leads to the conception of the Other as different, which allows for a consideration of the complex structures of cultural and national identity. Hence, the Other as different emphasizes the relational character of the self and the Other, allows room for a critical examination of the mutual dependence between colonizer and colonized, and shifts the focus to the question of identity/difference, all of which makes possible a careful deconstruction of the self/Other binary opposition as the basis of the cultural essentialism of modernity. This perception of the other as different can be seen in the post-colonial theories of European identity, multiculturalism, migration, and the subaltern subject. It has been used as a strong criticism of the recent attacks on multiculturalism in Europe, as well as of the meta-racist approaches to the question of European identity.[16]

Revisiting Critical Theory

In order to respond effectively to these ruptures and transformations in international relations in the post-September 11 era — the emergence of a world risk society, the unilateral fortification of the American hegemony, the new configuration between violence/terror and globalization, and the neo-conservative, meta-racist, and Islamic fundamentalist approaches to the Other — critical theory needs to be reconstructed in a way that no longer functions as a second-order or metatheory, but "consist[s] of first-order theorizing about the structure and dynamics of the international system."[17] In doing so:

i) Critical theory should recognize that the world in which we live is increasingly marked by the idea of the world risk society, in which the relationships between the self and the Other, the self and nature, and the self and his/herself, are confronted by the dilemma

of the tension between security and liberty, and develop its response by confronting this dilemma by approaching security and liberty in *relation*, and *intertwined*. This way, critical theory accepts the basic parameters of world risk society, but at the same time urges democratic governance on the basis of an interconnected understanding of the relationship between security and liberty;

ii) Thus, critical theory, with its *modus vivendi* of democratic global governance, provides a strong alternative to the unilateral operation of American hegemony, and in doing so, promotes (a) the principle of multilateralism that will frame the functioning of international organizations, nation-states, and global civil society, (b) the idea of politics as democratic and participatory deliberation that will resist its articulation as a friend-foe opposition, and (c) notions of tolerance, dialogue, and coexistence that will confront the discourse of the "clash of civilizations."[18] On the basis of these principles, critical theory constitutes the philosophical and normative foundation of the multipolar world vision supported by the agencies of trilateralism, namely those of international regimes, regional organizations, and global civil society;

iii) The multipolar world vision of democratic global governance in the post-September 11 era requires a critical analysis of neo-liberal globalization and its free-trade ideology. In this sense, critical theory, while attempting to construct a democratic alternative to the unilateral operation of American hegemony, also functions as a transformative discourse of globalization which takes, as its starting-point, the problem of global justice.[19] Thus, critical theory aims at altering the existing neo-liberal globalization by suggesting that the problems of inequality, poverty, recognition, and participation, embedded in the domain of social justice, constitute global problems that require global solutions. Hence, critical theory locates global social justice at the centre of the globalization debate, and, in opposition to unilateralism, attempts to link security problems with those of sustainable economic development and democratization;

iv) In doing so, critical theory pays attention to global civil society and global civil resistance to neo-liberal globalization, and promotes the bottom-up, rather than the top-down, direction of globalization. This way, critical theory has the potential to transform the "anti-globalization" discourse, voiced within global civil society, into the "alter-globalization discourse" that forces the important and powerful actors of the multipolar world vision, namely those of (the universal and the regional) international organizations and the nation-states, to produce effective and long-term solutions to the problems of global social injustice.[20]

On the basis of these four functions, a reconstructed critical theory not only explains the existing structure and dynamics of international relations in the post-September 11 era, but also can give a democratic direction to it. That direction has not been taken by the Bush administration with its neo-conservative ideology in its response to September 11, and as a result, the effect of terrorism has gone very much beyond its direct physical destruction. It is for this reason that it is necessary and timely to focus our attention, both theoretically and strategically, to the direction that critical theory can provide for us.

NOTES

1 Blackburn, R., The imperial presidency and the revolutions of modernity. In D. Archibugi (Ed.), *Debating cosmopolitics*. London: Verso, 2003, 141.

2 Calhoun C. The class consciousness of frequent travellers. In D. Archibugi (Ed.), *Debating cosmopolitics* London: Verso, 2003, 87.

3 The difference between "first order theorizing" and "second order," or meta-theorizing, in international relations theory has been developed by Alexander Went in the following way: "The field of international relations theory is something of a misnomer, since it is constituted by two distinct, though not unrelated, scholarly enterprises. Its core consists of first order theorizing about the structure and dynamics of the international system, and as such it attempts to contribute directly to our understanding of world politics.... The objective of (second order or meta-theorizing) is also to increase our understanding of world politics, but it does so indirectly by focusing on the ontological and epistemological issues of what constitutes important or legitimate questions and answers for international relations scholarship." For detail see: Wendt, A. *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 3. In this sense, whereas first order theorizing deals directly with the questions concerning the structures, dynamics, problems, and processes of world politics, second order theorizing deals with how to methodologically, epistemologically and theoretically approach the international system. However, in this study, as well as in other places, I have challenged this distinction and attempted to show that it is possible to develop a critical theory of international relations not as second order but a first order theorizing of the structure and dynamics of the international system. See: Keyman, E.F., *Globalization, state, identity/difference: Toward a critical social theory of international relations*. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997.

4 Gramsci, A. *The prison notebooks*. New York: Vintage, 1971, 445.

5 Berstein, R. *The new constellation: The ethical-political horizons of modernity/postmodernity*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992, 43.

6 See: Foucault, M. *Power/knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Book, 1997; Fontana, B., *Hegemony and power*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

7 Walker, R.J.B. *Inside/outside: International relations as political theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 211.

8 Linklater, A. Realism, marxism and critical international theory. *International Studies Quarterly*, 38 (1986), 204-236.

9 For detail see: Appadurai, A. Fear of small numbers. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006; Beck, U. *Cosmopolitian vision*. Cambridge: Polity, 5, 2006.

10 See Lechner, F.J., and Boli, J. (Eds.)*The globalization reader*. London: Blackwell, 2004.

11 Chomsky, N. *Hegemony or survival*. New York: Hamish Hamilton, 2003; Aronowitz, S., and Gautney, H. (Eds.). *Implicating empire*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

12 See Nairn, T., and James, P. *Global matrix*. London: Pluto, 2005.

13 Sen, A. *Identity and violence*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006.

14 See: Keyman, E.F. *Globalization, state, identity/difference*. (1997).

15 Said, E. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1978, 3.

16 Following Etienne Balibar, by meta-racism I mean an act of silencing, excluding and othering a culturally different identity through the assertion that cultural differences in the form of race, gender, religion and ethnicity have become, and are, irreconcilable, and that these generate and foster conflict in society. It is through this assertion that a political and normative border is constructed around the cultural Other, with the aim of maintaining what is asserted as a core, national idenity. The use of meta-racist discourse and policies can be seen in the new immigration policies in North America and Europe, as well as in the strategies of extreme-right parties in Europe. For detail, see: Balibar, E., and Wallerstein, I. *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities*. London: Verso, 1991; Balibar, E. *We, the people of Europe?: Reflections on transnational citizenship*. (J. Swenson, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

17 Keyman, E.F. *Globalization, state, identity/difference*, (1997): 18.

18 Bernstein, R.J. *The Abuse of evil*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.

19 Pogge, T. *Global justice*. London: Blackwell, 2004.

20 Sim, S. *Fundamentalist world*. London: Icon Books, 2005.