

International theory: positivism and beyond

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 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521479486

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First published 1996
Tenth printing 2008

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

International theory: positivism and beyond / edited by Steve Smith,
Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 47418 3 (hardback) ISBN 0 521 47948 7 (paperback)

1. International relations – Philosophy. 2. Positivism.

I. Smith, Steve, 1952- . II. Booth, Ken. III. Zalewski, Marysia.

JX1391.I6394 1996

327.1'01-dc20 95-44524 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-47418-4 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-47948-6 paperback

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13 The achievements of critical theory

Andrew Linklater

Over the past ten years Marxian-inspired critical social theory has exercised significant influence upon international theory and has emerged as a serious alternative to orthodox approaches to the field. Critical theory has enlarged the parameters of the discipline by showing how efforts to reconstruct historical materialism offer direction to International Relations in the post-positivist phase. The position covered in this chapter, Marxian-inspired critical theory, should be distinguished from post-modern critical theory which displays considerable scepticism towards the emancipatory project associated with Marxism. The relationship between these perspectives is a matter to come back to later. The main aim of this chapter is to consider the achievements of the Marxian branch of critical theory, discuss some of the criticisms which have been levelled against it and suggest areas for further research.

As a strand of social theory and as an approach to international relations, critical theory has four main achievements. First, critical theory takes issue with positivism by arguing that knowledge does not arise from the subject's neutral engagement with an objective reality but reflects pre-existing social purposes and interests. Critical theory invites observers to reflect upon the social construction and effects of knowledge and to consider how claims about neutrality can conceal the role knowledge plays in reproducing unsatisfactory social arrangements. In International Relations, these themes have been crucial elements in the critique of neo-realism and in the gradual recovery of a project of enlightenment and emancipation reworked to escape the familiar pitfalls of idealism.

Second, critical theory stands opposed to empirical claims about the social world which assume that existing structures are immutable. The central objection to these claims is that notions of immutability support structured inequalities of power and wealth which are in principle alterable. Critical theory investigates the prospects for new forms of community in which individuals and groups can achieve higher levels

of freedom. Its orientation towards existing constraints is shaped by the Marxian assumption that all that is solid eventually melts into air, and by the belief that human beings can make more of their history under conditions of their own choosing. It rejects the utopian assumption that there is an unchanging universal ethical yardstick for judging social arrangements, recognises the constraints upon radical change stressed by perspectives such as neo-realism but avoids the latter's advocacy of resignation to international political fate. Having overcome the flawed dichotomy between realism and idealism which has lent a peculiar structure to so much debate within the field, critical theory examines the prospects for greater freedom immanent within existing social relations.

Third, critical theory learns from and overcomes the weaknesses inherent in Marxism. The project of reconstructing historical materialism associated with the writings of Habermas is especially significant in this regard. This project denies that class power is the fundamental form of social exclusion or that production is the key determinant of society and history. Post-Marxist critical theory extends conventional Marxist analysis by considering axes of exclusion other than class and by analysing the variety of forces, including production, which shape the contours of human history. Particular emphasis is placed upon the forms of social learning. Recent analysis stresses how human beings learn to include some within, and exclude others from, their bounded communities and also how they can develop the capacity to engage all others in open and potentially universal discourse. The analysis of boundedness opens up new possibilities for constructing an historical sociology with an emancipatory purpose.

Fourth, critical theory judges social arrangements by their capacity to embrace open dialogue with all others and envisages new forms of political community which break with unjustified exclusion. Realist and neo-realist arguments that communities must deal with one another in the currency of military power is rejected by critical theory which envisages the use of unconstrained discourse to determine the moral significance of national boundaries and to examine the possibility of post-sovereign forms of political life. The theme of dialogue is one area where different strands of post-positivist theory can converge to chart future possibilities for the study of international relations and to envisage forms of political community which overcome the limitations of the bounded sovereign state.

The remainder of this chapter is in four parts. Sections one and two consider the first two achievements in more detail. Since these achievements are now firmly embedded in the literature this paper pays more

attention to the reconstruction of historical materialism and to the relationship between discourse ethics and international politics. These themes are considered in sections three and four.

Subject and object

In an oft-quoted article Cox (1981) made the important observation that knowledge is always for someone and some purpose. Problem-solving knowledge is geared to making the international system function more smoothly on the understanding that fundamental change is either impossible or improbable. Critical-theoretical knowledge searches for evidence of change on the assumption that present structures are unlikely to be reproduced indefinitely. If change is not imminent it might seem wise to ensure that existing arrangements operate as smoothly as possible but critical theory rejects this conclusion since those who belong to the same political order are not treated equally or fairly by it. If international order works to the advantage of the most privileged groups then the well-meaning aim of managing an existing order has the unpalatable political effect of neglecting marginal groups and subordinate interests. Observers who analyse the prospects for the smoother functioning of the existing system may claim value-neutrality for their inquiry but they fail to understand that intellectual projects have important moral implications for the national and international distribution of wealth and power. Any assumption that critical theory starts from normative and inevitably subjective preferences whereas problem-solving theory avoids moral commitments in order to grapple with basic truths objectively is therefore untenable.

Critical theory collapses the subject/object distinction and emphasises the human needs and purposes which determine what counts as valuable knowledge. As already noted Cox identified two interests. Following the publication of Ashley (1981) it is now widely known that Habermas (1972) identified three: the technical interest in understanding how to extend control over nature and society, the practical interest in understanding how to create and maintain orderly communities and the emancipatory interest in identifying and eradicating unnecessary social confinements and constraints. From the critical-theoretical perspective these three interests constitute knowledge, frame the subject's mode of analysis and reveal that serious difficulties attend the claim that knowledge is value-free. Critical theory argues that knowledge about society is incomplete if it lacks the emancipatory purpose.

Critique of the immutability thesis

Claims that the social world is immutable illustrate these points. Critical theorists are inevitably troubled by the immutability thesis given their assumption that human beings make their own history and can in principle make it differently. According to this thesis social structures or forms of human action are natural and unchangeable rather than contingent and renegotiable. Critical theory aims to subvert immutability claims and to identify and channel countervailing tendencies immanent within social frameworks.

Three examples may suffice to explain how critical theory endeavours to undermine perspectives which naturalise what is essentially social and historical. The first is Marx's critique of bourgeois political economy which supposed the institution of private property was natural. The second is Hegel's critique of the Indian caste-system which contended that nature decreed that human beings be arranged into sharply divided social categories. The third is the feminist critique of the patriarchal claim that the nature of womanhood precludes full involvement in the political realm. For Marx, private property is not a natural institution but an historical product to be overcome within Communist society. For Hegel, caste distinctions are not given in nature but arise within a particular ensemble of social relations in which spirit has yet to release itself from nature. For feminism, nothing in the nature of womanhood precludes full involvement in a public realm which can be reconstituted in the post-patriarchal state. In each case, the critical-theoretical response is to oppose claims that structures cannot be transformed because they are securely grounded in human nature or in a condition (like anarchy) which human beings are deemed powerless to alter. Critical theory therefore takes issue with accounts of reality which underestimate the human capacity to problematise and transform inherited, and apparently natural, social conventions. It rejects systems-determinism and affirms the capacity of human agents to act collectively to free themselves from structural constraints.

Critical theory is sharply opposed to neo-realism and its variant of the immutability thesis. The immutability thesis here is that political communities cannot escape the logic of power inherent in the condition of anarchy. The thesis fails to provide an adequate account of the relationship between agency and structure (Wendt, 1987; Hollis and Smith, 1990). For example, Waltz (1979) recognises that units have the capacity to influence the operation of the international system but strongly argues that in the main causality flows in the opposite direction with the result that units are forced into similar responses to the

constraints inherent in the anarchic system. However, Waltz's observation that the study of international relations is primarily concerned with relations between the great powers recognises that although they are forced to act in the context of anarchy (and may be powerless to transform it) they enjoy a capacity to determine the functioning of the system which lesser powers do not possess. To adopt Wendt (1992) to a large extent anarchy is what the great powers make it. The incidence of war and the prospects for peace depend not on the anarchic nature of the international system, *per se*, but upon the ambitions of the great powers, the principles of foreign policy to which they are committed and the effectiveness of international norms as constraints upon their behaviour (Linklater, 1994). The logic of conflict and competition cannot be regarded as unalterable.

Not that it can be easily swept aside either, and one of the virtues of the neo-realist stress on long-standing international constraints is that it usefully counterbalances voluntarism in international relations. Even so, the immutability thesis sanctifies historically specific configurations of power which the weak may resent and which the strong are not powerless to change. Contingent political arrangements are placed outside the ambit of legitimate efforts to secure political reform. Knowledge is confined to the problem-solving mode and performs the ideological function of perpetuating the international status quo. Not only does the language of immutability convert humanly produced circumstances into quasi-natural forces – it also contributes to the production of political subjects who accept that relations between political communities must be as they are. Immutability claims help construct political subjects who accept sharp and politically stultifying distinctions between utopia and reality (Ashley, 1984).

For Horkheimer (1978) critical theory was contrasted with traditional theory or positivism which sought to explain social laws and regularities. Critical theory regards the analysis of social regularities as useful for understanding the constraints upon political change but it transcends positivism by analysing logics which may bring about the transformation of social systems. To illustrate, whereas neo-realism aims to account for the reproduction of the system of states critical theory endeavours to highlight the existence of counter-hegemonic or countervailing tendencies which are invariably present within all social and political structures. The sceptical retort that countervailing forces may be ineffectual, even short-lived, is not a decisive objection to this project because critical theory endeavours to identify the sources of potentially far-reaching change so that human subjects can grasp the possibility of alternative paths of historical development which can be explored

through collective political action. It need only suppose that what is not at present a principal determinant of society and history could become so in future. In contrast, neo-realism privileges structure over agency, provides legitimation for the status quo and assumes that the threat and use of force are an essential part of international anarchy. It obscures the crucial point that the reform of the international system should begin with the transformation of the idea of the state as a moral community, with the alteration of past assumptions about the rights and duties of bounded communities (Linklater, 1990a, pp. 26–32).

The reconstruction of historical materialism: from production to discourse ethics

The first and second achievements of critical theory imported critical tools fashioned by Marx and Marxism into International Relations in order to challenge orthodox approaches such as realism and neo-realism. The third and fourth achievements criticise Marxism in order to develop a more adequate account of social evolution and an improved normative standpoint. The crucial theme here is the transition in critical social theory from the paradigm of production to the paradigm of communication in the writings of Habermas which has immense significance for the development of post-realist international relations theory.

The limitations of the paradigm of production are well-known. The emphasis of historical materialism fell too heavily on modes of production and class conflict while the historical importance of race, nation, gender, state-building and war was relatively unexplored. Three criticisms of the paradigm of production stem from these observations. In the first place, Marxism pondered the conceptual issue of what it would mean to be free from capitalist exploitation but failed to define freedom in relation to forms of oppression anchored in state power, patriarchy, nationalism or racism. In the second place, Marxism lacked an adequate historical sociology. Too much emphasis was placed on production, and too little importance was attached to state-building, war, morality and culture. In the third place, Marxism produced a clear but limited political vision which defended the abolition of class relations, private property and commodity production but offered no clear vision of the social order which was required to secure freedom outside the sphere of production. Recent critical theory has endeavoured to solve these problems by developing the idea of undistorted communication, creating a more complex historical sociology which is based on the idea of social learning and envisaging the democratisation of politics, domestic and international. These important developments rework the

Marxian analysis of the historical development of species-capacities and construct an account of human emancipation which is concerned with enlarging the meaning and scope of discourse rather than with elaborating the relationship between the species and nature (Habermas, 1979).

To begin with social learning, the essence of Habermas's critique of Marx is that Marx assumed that progress in learning how to master nature would create the context in which freedom could be realised. Marx overlooked the danger that the expansion of technological control would enable new forms of domination to develop. For these reasons Habermas (1979) argues that technical-instrumental learning which enables humans to increase their collective control over nature should be distinguished from moral-practical learning in which human beings learn to create more consensual social relations. Habermas introduces a third type of learning, strategic learning, in which human beings learn how to manipulate and control others. These distinctions are designed to support an analysis of freedom and history which overcomes the problems inherent within earlier Marxist analysis. Social evolution is explained by focusing on diverse learning-processes involving species-wide competences and capacities.

Having separated the spheres of technical-instrumental and moral-practical learning Habermas analyses the species-capacities which develop in this second and independent realm. Learning in this sphere does not have any particular kind of technical-instrumental learning as its prerequisite; the preconditions of freedom include moral and cultural factors which cannot be reduced to material circumstances and which can undergo separate logics of change. Moral-practical learning refers to the ways in which human beings learn how to conduct social relations consensually so transcending strategic considerations of power. Habermas (1979) draws upon Kohlberg's analysis of stages of individual cognitive development and suggests that there are homologies between individual and social development. Three forms of morality are identified. Pre-conventional morality exists when actors obey norms because they fear that non-compliance will be sanctioned by a higher authority; conventional morality exists when norms are observed because actors are loyal to a specific social group; post-conventional morality exists when actors stand back from authority structures and group membership and ask whether they are complying with principles which have universal applicability.

The development of various species-powers is evident within the post-conventional stage which is for Habermas the highest form of morality. Post-conventionalism demonstrates a capacity for ethical reflectiveness

in which agents recognise that moral codes are malleable social products rather than immutable conventions to which they must submit. It reveals a capacity for de-centredness in which agents recognise that moral standpoints are diverse and that none has *prima facie* validity across time and place. It demonstrates a capacity for universality in which human agents move away from efforts to resolve age-old disputes about the universalisable good life and seek to define universal procedures for dealing with moral and political disputes.

Discourse ethics affirms that the validity of principles must be established through a mode of dialogue in which human beings strive to reach an agreement. No person and no moral position can be excluded in advance. True dialogue exists when moral agents accept that there is no *a priori* certainty about who will learn from whom and when they are willing to engage in a process of reciprocal critique (Habermas, 1990, p. 26). Dialogue makes it easier for agents to understand how their moral choices and preferences reflect personal biases and local cultural influences which others may not share. Discourse ethics is therefore regarded as overcoming the weaknesses inherent in monologic reasoning such as that employed by Rawlsian contractors choosing political principles behind a veil of ignorance without any form of communication with one another (Habermas, 1990, p. 36). Participants aim to be guided by nothing other than the force of the better argument (Habermas, 1990, pp. 66, 89) and agree that norms cannot be valid unless they command the consent of everyone who stands to be affected by them (Habermas, 1989, pp. 82ff). The objective is unconstrained communication although this is an ideal which may never be realised completely because agents could not be sure that they had reached a stage of social development in which there are no further constraints for them to discover.

Extending this further, moral-practical learning involves, *inter alia*, a willingness to question all social and political boundaries and all systems of inclusion and exclusion. Systems of exclusion have been problematised in most parts of the world and the critique of the systematic exclusion of women, national minorities, racial and religious minorities is a fundamental dimension of the politics of most societies. What Marx took to be the fundamental form of struggle against exclusion (the struggle between social classes) proved to be an instance of the broader phenomenon of resistance to 'the closure of social relationships and the monopolisation of opportunities' (Kalberg, 1994, pp. 120ff) in all its forms. The contention that the human species constructs complex systems of inclusion and exclusion in the course of its development is a better starting point for critical theory.

In particular, human beings learn how the social bond which unites

them in one community simultaneously divides them from outsiders. They learn subtle distinctions between insiders and outsiders, but they can also unlearn them and move to new principles of organisation in the light of changing normative commitments. Discourse ethics reflects a particular stage in moral development in which human beings question inherited systems of inclusion and exclusion and ask whether the boundaries between insiders and outsiders can be justified by principles which are agreeable to all. The attempt to move beyond Marxism as critical theory is a response to these themes, and specifically to the diverse ways in which boundaries are contested in modern political life (Linklater, 1992).

In the contemporary world of international relations critical theory is inevitably concerned with the ways in which bounded communities include and exclude. The focus is on the state although the significance of other political actors is not overlooked. Two main approaches to the state have appeared within critical-theoretical writing in recent years (George, 1994). One approach, developed by Robert Cox (1981, 1983, 1989) emphasises the revolt of Third World states and political movements against the effects of the globalisation of relations of production and the linkage of elites in core and periphery on the distribution of the world's wealth. The main emphasis falls upon counter-hegemonic states and social movements and their ability to pool their political resources to transform the world economy. A second approach, closer to Habermasian critical theory, emphasises the changes affecting the social bond which unites members of the sovereign state and separates them from the outside world. The main emphasis falls upon the tensions within, and the challenges to, the sovereign state which are evident not just in peripheral areas but in varying degrees throughout the world. The second approach is explicitly concerned with the nature and future of the state as a bounded moral and political community.

To illustrate what is significant from this point of view, it is useful to recall that the social bond which simultaneously unites and divides has been problematical from the beginning of the modern states-system. Great difficulties have arisen in trying to understand the relationship between duties to fellow-citizens and duties to the rest of humankind (Linklater, 1990a; Habermas, 1979). These difficulties are evident in many areas of international political life including the theory and practice of the law of war, human rights and social justice. Quite what the bond which unites the members of the state means for the rights of those living outside the state – exactly what its moral significance should be – is a matter of continuing debate, as is the sociological question of whether the social bond is weakening as new patterns of economic and social

interaction (usefully captured by the term globalisation) entangle nation-states.

Much recent literature has focused upon the developments which are weakening the bond between the citizen and the state and undermining tightly bound communities in many parts of the world (Linklater, 1995). They are discussed here not in order to reach any definite conclusion about the future of the sovereign state but to outline some important sociological questions from a critical-theoretical point of view. The obsolescence of force between the major industrial powers is one development, possibly a temporary one, with implications for the bond between citizens and the state. Given the role that war has played in the creation of national communities it is unsurprising that the pacification of the Western or Western-inclined regions of the world-system has been accompanied by calls for greater political representation and voice from national minorities and migrant organisations which feel marginalised by dominant conceptions of the community and its purpose. Globalisation and pacification are interconnected in important respects as Rosecrance (1986) observes in the analysis of the rise of the trading state. If the conquest of territory is no longer necessary for economic growth but is detrimental to it then the cult of violence is less likely to feature strongly in the self-image and behaviour of the great powers and centrifugal forces are, in consequence, freer to develop.

Centripetal forces are also more able to emerge. Globalisation fragments national cultures as some groups embrace what Bull and Watson (1984) described as 'the cosmopolitan culture of modernity' but others rebel against the intrusion of predominantly Western symbols and images. The social bond which unites citizens and divides them from other societies is further weakened by the challenge to a dominant theme in the ideology of state-building, namely national-assimilationism. Sub-national groups and indigenous peoples spearhead the politics of identity in which dominant conceptions of national community are challenged and the recognition of group rights is demanded. For these reactions the immanent possibility of new forms of political community has become apparent – a possibility which neo-realism blinkered by the immutability thesis cannot explore. New conceptions of citizenship, community and sovereignty are invited by these changes, and new constructions of community are beginning to appear (Connolly, 1993; Held, 1993; Kymlicka, 1989; Linklater, 1990a; Walker, 1993).

One function of this brief analysis of the forces currently affecting nation-states is to raise several questions which can be asked of bounded communities at any stage in the development of the human race. These questions are not concerned with the traditional question in

International Relations of how bounded communities interact with one another but with the much-neglected issue of how boundedness is constituted in the first place (Devetak, 1995). The main questions are these:

- 1 What unifies insiders as members of a bounded community? What is their shared identity? Who is 'the other' within the community and how does otherness within the community help define common identity (Habermas, 1989, p. 400; Foucault, 1979)?
- 2 What level of social and political homogeneity within the bounded community is demanded of insiders, and what level of heterogeneity is permitted?
- 3 How do members of the bounded community understand their separateness from other communities? What are the principles of separability (Ruggie, 1983) to which they are committed?
- 4 How closed is the community to outsiders? Does the bounded community allow outsiders to become members? What level of internationalisation is possible between bounded communities? Which areas of social and political life are most subject to internationalisation (Nelson, 1971, 1973)?
- 5 To what extent is the moral significance of boundaries open to question? How far does the boundary between inside and outside include or exclude the forms of moral-practical learning noted above: namely ethical reflectiveness, the decentring of world-views and open dialogue with outsiders to decide the moral significance of political boundaries and to determine the principles of social interaction?

Some of these questions about bounded communities have been central to Marxist critical theory (Linklater, 1990b). Marx's social theory aimed to show how capitalist social relations were being transformed in ways which would both deepen and widen communities: deepen them by enabling subordinate classes to enjoy the material wealth of a community previously constructed to advance the project of the dominant class; widen them by lowering the barriers between the national community and the species in general. But, as already noted, Marx overemphasised the role of the class struggle in his account of political resistance to systematic exclusion and obscured wider logics of change within the moral-practical domain. Arguably, the logic of Marx's project invites problematising all forms of social exclusion but Marx neither articulated this claim precisely nor argued that principles of inclusion and exclusion required the authority of dialogue. Later Marxist writings on nationalism and imperialism asked how the national bond might be reconstituted and how community might come to be shaped by the principles of socialist internationalism, but the paradigm of production meant that the

possibilities inherent in the analysis were not realised. The reconstruction of historical materialism, as it is understood here, takes some of the questions which Marxism raised in connection with modes of production, extends them and applies them to a larger domain.

Coming at this from another angle, one of the main sociological critiques of Marxism over the past ten years points to its simplistic single-logic account of human history. Multi-logic analysis has been emphasised in the analysis of the nature of social power (Mann, 1986, 1993) and in accounts of the state and violence (Giddens, 1985; Tilly, 1990) but there has been no similar account of how boundedness arises from the interaction between multiple logics. Boundedness arises as a sociological question in the writings of Mauss and Durkheim (Nelson, 1971) and in an important essay by Benjamin Nelson (1973) but hardly ever as a theme in International Relations. Closer co-operation between Sociology and International Relations is required to develop sophisticated analyses of bounded communities (Scholte, 1993; Rosenberg, 1994).

Discourse ethics: implications for politics

The preceding section set out the main themes of discourse ethics, explained how it renders boundaries problematical and suggested some issues for historical sociology. This section considers the relationship between discourse ethics and practical politics. It begins with the criticism that the universalistic dimension of critical theory generates its own form of exclusion and proceeds to the claim that discourse ethics fails to offer guidance on substantive moral issues. Neither claim is wholly convincing.

Deep concerns about the exclusionary character of Western universalistic reasoning have been raised by many post-modernist writers. Foucault claimed that 'the search for a form of morality acceptable by everyone in the sense that everyone would have to submit to it, seems catastrophic to me' (Hoy, 1986, p. 119). However, as McCarthy (1990) has argued, Foucault and Habermas were agreed that the politics of speech was preferable to the politics of force. The gulf between Habermas and Foucault's thought is not as great as it is sometimes thought to be, as recent comments by the leading post-modernist thinker, Lyotard, reveal. Lyotard (1993, pp. 140–1) claims that the right to speak, and the right of the different not to be excluded from the speech community, are fundamental rights. He argues that it is possible 'to extend interlocution to any human individual whatsoever, regardless of national or natural idiom' (p. 139). Through speech, human beings 'can

come to an agreement, after reasoning and debate, and then establish their community by contract' (p. 138). Stressing the universalistic theme which has long been central to critical social theory, Lyotard (p. 139) concludes that 'civility may become universal in fact as it promises to do by right'.

Although Habermas (1985, pp. 94–6) defends a 'pluralism of life forms' and adds that a 'fully transparent . . . homogenised and unified society' is not a political ideal his claim that the aim of dialogue is to determine which interests are generalisable seems to imply the search for a universal consensus (Benhabib, 1992, p. 9). Feminist theorists have argued that ethical universalism is an exclusionary and masculinist ethic. In her critique of Kohlberg, Gilligan (1993) argues that the public domain which is largely populated by men is regulated by general principles which apply to everyone irrespective of personal characteristics. Gilligan argues that the belief that the higher forms of moral reasoning are concerned with creating abstract principles of justice devalues the moral skills present in the ethic of care and responsibility which is concerned with the particular needs of concrete persons. The belief that the most advanced moral perspectives are specifically concerned with universal principles devalues the moral skills displayed most typically by women within the family.

Young (1991) refers to the need for a communicative ethic which does not permit the search for universalisable principles to overshadow efforts to respond to the specific needs of particular human beings. Some theorists such as Benhabib (1992), Gilligan (1993) and O'Neill (1989) argue that the moral agent needs to balance the two moralities which deal with the generalised and the concrete other. Remarking on Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg, Habermas argues that discourse ethics requires the hermeneutic skills which are evident in the ethic of care and responsibility. Discourse ethics is not a form of 'moral rigorism' which applies universalisable principles in a mechanical fashion with no regard for personal need and social context. The hermeneutic skill of reflecting on the relationship between moral principle, social context and the concrete needs of particular individuals is central to discourse ethics (Habermas, 1990, pp. 176–80).

However, the contention that the moralities of justice and care complement one another has more profound implications which concern the meaning of true dialogue. True dialogue is not exhausted by the quest for generalisable principles governing similar persons in similar circumstances: it requires genuine engagement with the different and possibly alien standpoint taken by the 'other'. In her argument for 'post-conventional contextualism' Benhabib (1992, pp. 151, 163–4) makes the

crucial point that knowledge of the concrete other is essential before deciding the extent to which the circumstances of others are alike and therefore capable of being regulated by generalisable principles. Frazer and Lacey (1993, pp. 203–12) in their recent defence of the ‘critical feminist enterprise’ argue for ‘dialogic communitarianism’ which recognises the role of community in the constitution of the self and the value which particular groups have in the lives of individuals. From this point of view open dialogue recognises the significance of ‘unassimilated otherness’ and renounces any commitment to a ‘unified public’ or stultifying social consensus (Frazer and Lacey, 1993, p. 204). These feminist approaches are not opposed to universalism in all its forms but take issue with a universalism which opposes or attaches little significance to difference (Young, 1991, p. 105). Their effect is to imagine a strong universalism in which dialogue encounters difference and is open to what White (1991) has called ‘responsibility to otherness’.

No doubt debate will continue over whether or not this construction of discourse ethics retains too much emphasis on a universalistic ethic which undervalues and threatens cultural difference. It should be noted, however, that discourse ethics defends procedural universalism and does not claim that any one conception of the good life should be universalised. The contention that critical theory is committed to modes of thought and action which would subsume difference within one totalising identity is increasingly widespread in the literature (George, 1994, ch. 7) but totally false. The error is to suppose that reaching an agreement is the same as arriving at a total consensus (Benhabib 1992, p. 9).

To develop this further it is useful to identify four forms of understanding. The first is anthropological understanding which has the aim of comprehending difference for its own sake. The second is strategic understanding which has the aim of understanding the other’s aspirations, interests and intentions in order to control the other’s behaviour or to outwit and outmanoeuvre the other conceived as adversary. The third is socratic understanding in which actors suspend their truth claims and enter into dialogue with others to seek the truth. The fourth is political understanding which has two dimensions: the attempt to understand the plurality of moral views in order to reach agreement about the principles of inclusion and exclusion, and the attempt to understand the rules of coexistence which agents could accept where they fail to reach consensus.

Three of these forms of understanding are relevant for the emancipatory project. Anthropological understanding is relevant because it requires the empathetic skill of appreciating what is unique or different

about the other. Socratic understanding is relevant since actors can only arrive at principles which are true for all by first embracing the moment of Cartesian doubt and succumbing to a process of reciprocal critique. Political understanding is relevant since it maintains that principles of inclusion and exclusion and rules of co-existence can only acquire universal validity through open dialogue embracing all points of view. Strategic understanding alone clashes with the emancipatory project since it is geared towards controlling others and belongs therefore to the sphere of strategic as opposed to moral-practical learning. The accusation that critical theory is driven towards the cancellation of difference misreads the nature of its commitment to 'the goal of coming to an understanding' (Habermas, 1979, p. 3). Coming to an understanding may not culminate in a moral consensus. But it is reaching an understanding which captures the most important respect in which critical theory, post-modernism, feminism and also philosophical hermeneutics (Shapcott, 1994) are involved in a common project.

One further criticism accuses discourse ethics of formalism. There is some truth in this charge. Discourse ethics sets out the procedures to be followed so that individuals are equally free to express their moral differences and able to resolve them, if this is possible, through the force of the better argument. Discourse ethics is not an attempt to predict or pre-empt the likely result of dialogue; it does not provide putative solutions to substantive moral debates, envisage end-points or circulate blue-prints. But it is not wholly lacking in content. The gulf between actual social practices and discourse ethics provides an immediate rationale for political critique. In addition to setting out the formal conditions which have to be satisfied before open dialogue can exist, discourse ethics invites the critique of structures and beliefs which obstruct open dialogue. On this basis critical theory develops a normative vision which is often missing from, although it is not necessarily inconsistent with, elements of post-modernism. Ashley and Walker (1990, pp. 391, 394–5) take issue with claims 'to stand heroically upon some exclusionary ground' and challenge obstacles to dialogue across the 'institutional limitations that separate nations, classes, occupational categories, genders and races'. This concern with advancing an 'ethic of freedom' (Ashley and Walker 1990, p. 391) is the starting point for critical social theory.

Illustrating this theme, Cohen (1990, pp. 71, 100) argues that discourse ethics is critical of 'forms of life based on domination, violence and systematic inequality' which prevent full participation and therefore supportive of moves to equalise power. Cohen stresses the achievements of liberal-democratic society in this regard without losing sight of its

imperfections and without assuming that Western liberal democracy is the model of government which should apply universally. Discourse ethics can be institutionalised in structures of participation the precise character of which varies from place to place.

It is important to take this point further by noting that discourse ethics cannot be completed by a number of separate experiments in democratic participation within independent sovereign states. Discourse ethics clashes with the idea of sovereignty which restricts the capacity of outsiders to participate in discourse to consider issues which concern them. The important point that such discourse needs to be embodied transnationally is captured in recent writings on cosmopolitan democracy (Held, 1993). The logic of discourse ethics is that moral agents should be willing to problematise all boundaries and bounded communities.

Discourse ethics therefore invites the questioning of traditional notions of sovereignty and the reconsideration of citizenship. Rethinking citizenship is crucial since this concept is central to the bond which unites the members of the sovereign state and separates them from other communities. Part of the recent challenge to citizenship concentrates upon the denial or inadequate consideration of the rights of members of other communities. Notions of cosmopolitan democracy imagine communities in which insiders and outsiders participate on equal terms. An additional critique of the modern idea of citizenship raises issues about the supposition that citizens must share the same identity or have exactly the same rights. Criticisms of this belief argue that particular groups within the sovereign state (such as indigenous peoples) reject the dominant understandings of community and desire the recognition of particular cultural rights. This critique argues that traditional ideas of citizenship possess an assimilationist logic which indigenous peoples and sub-national groups increasingly reject (Kymlicka, 1989). Not only might one imagine communities in which outsiders have greater representation and voice; one might imagine communities which recognise the claims of the culturally marginal within their boundaries and promote their representation within international institutions authorised to implement principles of transnational democracy. Discourse ethics questions the social bond between the citizen and the state which perpetuates the sovereign state as a system of exclusion.

Finally, some observations about the earlier theme of the relationship between universalism and difference in the light of these comments on sovereignty. An account of the prospects for increasing dialogue across bounded communities might note the following developments. Post-nationalist claims and identities are developing in two ways: through the

universalisation of moral ideas such as the rights of women or the need to care for the environment, and through regionalism. Each move generates fears. The first raises the fear that universalisation will incorporate the other within an essentially Western framework. According to this view, the process of universalisation might therefore result in the triumph of a world-view in which there is no strongly felt need for dialogue with others. For its part, regionalism raises the fear that new boundaries will be drawn between the regional community and outsiders. Each of these fears recognises how the rise of post-nationalist frameworks might pose threats to difference or reinstate problematical boundaries.

A further pronounced development in the modern world – the politics of cultural identity in which groups react against perceived threats to their values – may produce several different responses: first, that such responses should encourage those in the dominant culture of the West to question the universal significance of their world-view in the light of its rejection by groups in other parts of the world; second, that expressions of difference can be as unwelcome as the form of universalisation mentioned above – unwelcome because some racist and nationalist expressions threaten the existence of different communities; third, that claims to defend culture invite basic questions about who claims to represent the culture and who may be excluded from the more vocal representation of its values and traditions. Discourse ethics is an approach to the dangers mentioned above. Discourse ethics encourages open dialogue between the diversity of moral views and facilitates the expansion of the range of moral and political points of view. Open dialogue is a check against the dangers of domination inherent in some claims about cultural difference (such as arguments in defence of racial superiority). It seeks to ensure that only those norms which meet with the approval of all who are affected acquire universality. Discourse ethics therefore encourages efforts to strike the right balance between unprecedented levels of diversity and universality. Achieving the aims of critical theory requires the reconstruction of the state as a bounded community and the introduction of post-nationalist conceptions of citizenship (Linklater, 1995). This is the meaning of an earlier claim that the reform of international relations has to begin with the transformation of the state as a bounded moral community.

Conclusion

Four main achievements of critical theory have been discussed in this paper: one, its critique of the supposition that subjects can be engaged in the politically neutral analysis of an external reality and its stress on the

role which knowledge can play in the reproduction of problematical social arrangements; two, its critique of the immutability thesis and its argument for the analysis of immanent tendencies towards greater human freedom; three, its critique of Marxism and its argument for a more complex account of social learning and discourse ethics; four, its critique of barriers to open dialogue and support for post-sovereign communities in which new levels of universality and difference become possible. Critical theory maintains its faith in the enlightenment project and defends universalism in its ideal of open dialogue not only between fellow-citizens but, more radically, between all members of the human race.

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