**WEEK 5 -- Alternative Approaches: Feminism, and Critical Theory**

**Lesson**

**Alternative Approaches: Feminism, Marxism, and Beyond**

         Thus far, our survey of IR theory has focused primarily on the three primary and mainstream approaches/paradigms to the study of international relations: Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism (although the latter was certainly not considered mainstream when it arrived on the scene two decades ago). These three, however, are far from the only perspectives on international relations that we have to be aware of. This week we will discuss a variety of alternative approaches to the three main paradigms. These approaches don’t only hold different assumptions about who the central actors are in the international system, they also challenge the way in which the field is defined, and even the way in which we produce knowledge through the use of the scientific method (positivism). While there is no shortage of alternative approaches, we will limit our examination to Feminist IR theory, Marxism, and two examples of Critical Theory In examining these approaches we will discuss their major claims, their major assumptions and the challenges that they pose to the mainstream IR paradigms.

**Feminist IR theory**

         As Ann Tickner argues in her overview of the evolution of Feminist theory in general, and IR in particular, there is no single feminist approach to the study of social relations or international relations. However, at the core of the feminist argument is the idea that social structures across societies are organized in a “gendered” manner, having been built primarily by men, and for men, and according men superior positions to women. Feminist theory does not only seek to identify these inequities, but is – of course – highly critical of these social structures and aims to change them. As Tickner points out, however, Feminist theorists don’t necessarily agree on how to do this, with Liberal Feminists and Radical, or “Critical,” Feminists identifying different solutions.  In reading Tickner’s article, it is important to recognize that like Constructivism (and to a certain extent Realism and Liberalism as well), Feminism is more of a paradigm than a specific theory about the relationship between genders. While we will be discussing Feminist theory as it relates to international security later in the course, you should take the opportunity to think critically about some of the (often) unspoken assumptions in mainstream IR theory. First, that we can – in fact – use the scientific method to explain social relations and structures. In other words, that we can produce objective knowledge. Second, that mainstream IR theory offers an objective view of the international system, or whether our theories and our knowledge are inherently influenced by gender, and its role in structuring not only what we know, but how go about producing knowledge. In thinking about these things pay special attention to the examples that Tickner offers, of Feminist scholarship that challenges mainstream IR theory and practice.

**Marxism**

Although Marxism has fallen out of favor as the basis for political systems in most of the world (with only North Korea and Cuba holding on to some form of government that they argue is associated with Marxism), Marxist thought has long played an important – although dwindling – role in the study of international relations. In the late 19th century, and the first half of the twentieth century, Marxist scholars developed ideas about international relations based upon basic Marxist assumptions about politics. Since the end of WW II, however, a newer iteration of Marxism, called neo-Marxism, has focused instead on the relationships between the economically developed countries of the world and the less-developed countries in the world. We will discuss both variants of Marxism in this section.

         According to Karl Marx, the main mode of human organization was economic class. He argued that human history was a process made up of a series of conflicts between economic classes that would ultimately lead to a better society, or what he called a socialist society, in which the working class would prevail and in which social justice would be the order of the day. In this socialist system, there would be no state, and everybody would work according to his/her ability, and receive what he/she needed. According to Marx, who developed his theory in the middle of the 19th century, he and his contemporaries were witnessing the last major conflict between economic classes prior to the arrival of socialism. He argued that the system now pitted two classes against one another. On the one hand you had the capitalist class, or the owners of the means of production (factories etc.), on the other you had the working-class (or proletariat). The capitalist class, according to Marx, was accumulating ever more wealth, by squeezing more productivity out of the working-class, and by selling its products to the working class. The capitalist class was so effective at this process that it was growing richer and richer, while the working class (which constituted the largest part of the population) was growing poorer and poorer. According to Marx, the capitalist class was unwittingly setting itself up for ultimate defeat, however, as the seeds of its demise were to be found in its own success. Eventually, Marx argued, the disparities in wealth would become so pronounced, and the condition of the working class would be so miserable, that it would lead to increasing unrest, and ultimately to a revolution, in which the working class would rise up against the capitalist class and destroy its influence. The means of production would then be shared by society at large, and as mentioned, people would work to the best of their ability and the fruit of their labor would be divided according to need, rather than greed.

Despite the failure of the revolution to materialize during Marx’s lifetime, Marxist theory continued to appeal to many people across the world, who continued to develop the theory, especially as it was starting to look like its predictions were less than accurate (for instance, the last decade of the 19th century saw a significant improvement in the conditions of the working classes in Europe, something that Marxist theory could not account for). One particular problem with the original theory was that class-consciousness was clearly not as well-developed as Marx had hoped. After all, he argued that the world was divided into economic classes. This meant that workers across the world would feel an affinity with one another, while capitalist classes would also combine across borders. Surprisingly enough, however, from the Marxist perspective, working-class folk were willing to be mobilized by states to pursue international conflicts, and were even willing to fight members of the working class from other states. This was particularly obvious in WW I, when many communist/Marxist theorists had predicted that the workers of the “world would unite,” and refuse to fight one another, they were shocked to find that workers of the world gladly (often) were conscripted and were willing to participate in large-scale violence against one another. This reality, the lack of clear class-consciousness, was explained by Marxist theorists as a result of “false consciousness,” the result of the devious machinations of the capitalist class that had created the state to give workers something to transfer their loyalty too (religion, according to Marx, was the other method by which worker were deluded and distracted from their true interests. According to Marx, religion was like “opium to the people.”). The state, in this context, became the “handmaiden of the bourgeoisie (capitalist class),” and was there to pursue the interests of the capitalist class, while harnessing the enthusiasm of the working class. How does all this pertain to international relations? First, and foremost, is the notion that states are not considered to be representative of broader societies. That is, Marxists diverge from both Realists and Liberals in how they view the origins of state interests. Realists are more or less agnostic about the origins of state interests.  After all, they argue that all states pursue one or two fundamental interests (that is, security and survival), and that states have all kinds of other interests in addition to that. They do not try to explain where these interests come from, they just argue that states pursue interests. For Liberals, the source of state interests can be found in the people. That is, the citizens of every state aggregate their interests, and state interests are, by and large, representative reflections of societal interests. For Marxists, the source of state interests can be found in the interests of the capitalist class. This means that the state is a tool to pursue the economic interests of the capitalist class. In order to understand international relations, therefore, we have to examine the economic interests of the ruling economic classes.

Vladimir Lenin, moreover, the leader of the Russian revolution, who was responsible for the overthrow of the Czarist regime and the creation of the Soviet Union, also offered an explanation for international conflict (and the outbreak of WW I) that was directly derived – according to him—from Marxist logic. According to Lenin, the way in which national capitalist classes had managed to avoid a revolution in their own countries was through imperialism. Imperialism allowed them to find outlets for the tensions inherent in a capitalist system. It gave them the opportunity to acquire more markets for their goods, and for distracting the working-class, and for sharing some of the benefits with the working class, all in order to keep the latter quiet. He also argued, however, that the world was finite, and that the imperialist powers were competing over these territories, and that eventually these conflicts would become so fierce, that they would affect the relationships between the Great Powers at the core. He looked, therefore, at the colonial conflicts between the French and British at the end of the 19th century, and at Germany’s attempts to create a colonial empire, as proof that his theory of international conflict and imperialism was working. The upshot was, according to Lenin, that conflict in the periphery would make its way into the core, and that this conflict (which he believed would be WW I) would shatter the capitalist system. To an extent, of course, it did, as Lenin managed to instigate his revolution in Russia (although Lenin had also significantly adapted Marxist theory, by adding the necessity of creating a small vanguard to lead a revolution before the working-class was ready, because he wanted to bring the revolution about earlier rather than later). Although few people have bought into Lenin’s arguments about the origins of WW I, it is important to keep in mind for the simple reason that there is, of course, the distinct possibility that economic interests are at the basis of state behavior, and that parochial economic interest groups may try to capture the state in order to pursue their interests. This theory has a much more broader appeal today, and parts of it can be found in arguments about the Iraq war, and the purported role played by economic interests (big oil, Halliburton etc) in driving the decision to go to war. Most people who subscribe to such arguments today, of course, (especially in the US) would certainly not describe themselves as Marxists (in fact, they would probably scream and shout if one suggested they were).

After WW II, classical Marxism was largely discredited in the West as a useful theory of international relations. However, a new variant of the theory gained prominence in the 1960s, to account for the increasing disparities in economic development in the world.Neo-Marxismas this theory was soon called, found that many of the post-colonial states that had emerged from colonial rule failed to develop economically, even after gaining independence. The cause for this phenomenon, they argued, could be found in economic interests and class-collusion between elites in the advanced industrialized states (which were commonly referred to as the “core” in the neo-Marxist literature) and the elites in the developing world. According to the theory, the elites in the cores had struck deal with political elites in the periphery in order to promote their economic interests, at the expense of the population of the periphery (this process is known as cooptation). In return for favorable economic access to the former colonies, the elites in the core offered political and economic support for the local elites in the periphery, allowing them to maintain their hold over power in their countries while enriching themselves. In this way, neomarxists argued, two classes of states continued to exist in the world: the capitalist industrialized states and the developing states. While the former produced value-added industrial goods, the latter remained primarily producers of raw materials and commodities. As a result, the latter were doomed to economic backwardness, because they did not produce goods that could allow them to escape poverty.  They would remain at the mercy of international markets for commodities (that were highly unstable) and would never be able to create economies and industries that would allow them to produce value-added goods. In this way, the imbalance in the international economy was kept in place by an “unholy alliance” between economic elites in the industrialized world and local elites in the developing world, who were compensated handsomely for their cooperation.  It is important to understand, that Neo-Marxism does not only offer an analysis of political and economic interactions in the international system. It also offers a call to action, as it offers a prescription for poor states to escape their condition. It also offers a competing explanation for international economics and foreign aggression relative to Liberal and Realist theories of international relations.

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| **Critical Theory**     Both Feminism and Marxism are examples of critical theory in International Relations, in that they don't only challenge the main assumptions about the world that are prevalent in the mainstream literature, but also in that they challenge the way that we should be thinking about politics in general, and international politics in particular. The article by Hobson and Sharman (2005) is also a good example of critical theory. It takes issue with the notion that the international system can best be understood as a system of independent sovereign state that interact under conditions of anarchy. The assumption of anarchy is the foundation not only of Realism, but also of Liberalism and other mainstream approaches, and forms the basis for many of the explanations of the interactions between states in the international system. Hobson and Sharman challenge this notion by explaining that the system can best be understood as a mixed system. Thinking about it in this way will lead one to different conclusions as to how to understand the relationships between the various actors in the international system. Kratochwil (2006) urges us to think about the way in which we use history to understand international relations. In particular, he argues that history is not an objective "data bank" that we can use to test our theories, and to understand our presence.          In summary, the theories that we examine this week are certainly not uncontroversial. They are also not always easy to follow and to understand (similar, perhaps, to the mainstream theories). I will also certainly not argue that these theories are better, or more accurate, than mainstream theories. It is, however, important for serious students of international relations to consider these alternative theories, if only to question our existing assumptions about the international system, the important actors in the system, and their interactions. Keep an open mind, and consider these theories. At the same time, you should also regard them with a critical eye, and keep in mind that the ultimate value of a theory lies in how well it helps us understand the topic that we are trying to study.**Sources**J.Ann Tickner, “You just don’t understand: Troubled engagements between Feminists and IR theorists.” *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 41, Issue 4 (1997): 611-632 <http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=http://www.jstor.org/stable/2600855>Laura Sjoberg, “Gendered Realities of the Immunity Principle: Why Gender Analysis needs Feminism,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, Issue 4(2006): 889-910.<http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=http://www.jstor.org/stable/4092784>John M. Hobson and J.C. Sharman, “The Enduring Place of Hierarchy in World Politics: Tracing the Social Logics of Hierarchy and Political Change.” *European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 11, No.1 (2005): 63-98.<http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/211965494?accountid=8289>Friedrich Kratochwil, “History, action, and identity: Revisiting the ‘Second” Great Debate and Assessing its Importance for Social Theory.” *European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 12, No.1 (2006): 5-29. <http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/211985246?accountid=8289> |
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