

New theoretical approaches to International Relations: a preliminary assessment

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Introduction

At present, it is said that is easier to say what International Relations (IR) *is not*, than *what it is*. This phrase illustrates the current special situation in which IR theory finds itself as an academic discipline whose established paradigms are challenged by new theoretical approaches that point to opposing trends for its future development. Thus, there is not only an "inter-paradigm debate" dealing with the three traditional paradigms or general theories (realism, pluralism, structuralism), but also a debate as to what will be the next stage in the evolution of IR theory. This "next stage debate" considers the effects of the so-called "new approaches" (normative theory, neo-structuralism, feminism, critical theory, postmodernism and the like).

In this context, this paper aims to survey the most recent theoretical approaches, in order to take a first step towards understanding the extent of their contributions to IR theory. To achieve this, we will assume that one way to evaluate the "new approaches" is to determine their capacity to generate questions at two levels: (1) the epistemological-ontological level and/or (2) the level of theoretical categories. The latter comprises: (2.1) actors, (2.2) dynamics, (2.3) function, (2.4) scope, (2.5) core and specific concepts of IR theory. Likewise, the greater or lesser questioning capacity shown by each approach will be the criterion used to determine whether it is an analytical approach ("theory island") or a synthesis ("general theory", "paradigm").

Before starting the evaluation, it is necessary to establish our reference standards. Therefore, what do we understand by epistemological-ontological level and what are the theoretical categories used by the three traditional IR paradigms?

While epistemology deals with the nature, validity and limits of inquiry (how the knowing subject approaches to the object of knowledge), the ontological dimension relates to the nature of reality (the object of

knowledge). In short, the ontological-epistemological level is "how we know what we know, how we go about producing knowledge, and what constitutes knowledge itself" (Rosenau P. 1992, p. 109). In IR, the three traditional paradigms share the modern social science conviction that "there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness".¹

This epistemological consensus, characteristic of what has been called "modernity," is located in the project of the Enlightenment, which defended the idea that the liberation of humanity by the power of reason was possible. The modern epistemological consensus assumes the existence of an objective reality, independent of subjective mediation and available for grounding knowledge claims, as well as to establish foundational or initial meanings.

Regarding the theoretical categories, M. Banks points out the fundamental differences between the three traditional IR paradigms. Thus, for realism, the only actors are states; power and force explain the dynamics; the function of IR is to explain the behavior of states; the scope is a narrow state-centric realm called "international politics"; the key concepts are "power understood in terms of interest" and "balance of power". Pluralism, on the other hand, considers the existence of state and non-state actors; the dynamics are determined by complex social movements; the role of IR is to try to explain all major world events; the scope of study is "world society" made up of states, markets, multinational companies, ethnic groups, transnational social and religious movements; the key concept is "interdependence". Structuralism considers classes as actors; economic processes provide the dynamics; the function of IR is to show why there is such a striking contrast of development and wealth in the world; the scope of study is the whole "world system"; the essential concepts are "exploitation" and "dependence" (Banks M. 1985, pp. 12-13). Let us contrast these elements with those provided by more recent approaches.

International normative theory

¹ Richard Bernstein, quoted in (Peterson V. Spike 1992: 185 note 7).

By normative theory, Brown refers to: "that body of work which addresses the moral dimension of international relations and the wider questions of meaning and interpretation generated by the discipline. At its most basic it addresses the ethical nature of the relations between the communities/states, whether in the context of the old agenda, which focused on violence and war, or the new (er) agenda which mixed these traditional concerns with the modern demand for international distributive justice" (Brown C. 1992, p. 3).

This approach does not question the epistemological-ontological level proper to modernism, since normative theory entails a claim for the existence of a ground where moral values are based.

In fact, normative theories can be built either on the "cosmopolitan tradition" which asserts that the ultimate source of moral value is the individual "understood as part of a wider species-being"; or on the "communitarian tradition" which, rejecting the idea of autonomous moral agents, argues that the "self" is embedded within a concrete set of social relations and so, "the central source of moral values inheres in particularist communities" (Hoffman 1994, p. 29). What is relevant to this essay, however, is that, despite this divide, each of these traditions recognizes the existence of a ground for truth, for foundational knowledge. Thus, the modern epistemological-ontological consensus is not rejected, but implicitly accepted.

On the other hand, normative international theory challenges some elements at the level of theoretical categories, such as "scope" and "function". But how new is this? The roots of normative theory lie deep in the classical literature of political philosophy; some authors point out that normative theories were for a long time "at least in Britain, the principal form of theorising about International Relations" (Olson & Groom 1992, p. 300).

Indeed, normative issues such as order, justice, fraternity, prosperity, were considered essential elements of political theory, as opposed to survival theory (conceived as the content of international theory) which focused on instrumental means to protect the state and its citizens from external threats (Williams, Wright & Evans 1993, p. 2).

Consequently, normative issues are not new in IR; what is new is the context in which this approach is re-established. Why in the 1990s? We find three possible reasons: (1) Due to the revitalization of the debate on the nature of IR theory, the need to revise the texts on political theory is encouraged in the academic field. (2) In an increasingly globalized world, the usefulness of distinguishing between political theory and international theory is questioned. Thus, the theoretical category "field" of IR, conceived in terms of the "realist" paradigm, appears today as "narrow" and is no longer meaningful in the current context. (3) The rise of global issues such as human rights, environmental preservation, civilian refugees, drug trafficking, distributive justice - all with normative components - affects the conception of what is - or what should be - the "function" of IR.

There is a possibility that international normative theory will increase its salience as IR theory takes the form of social and political theory supported by critical theory, and as the current process of globalization demands norms and rules to regulate the resulting interdependencies.

Neostructuralism

The starting point of neo-structuralism is the structuralist paradigm; in fact, it seeks to overcome the criticisms that structuralism received at the level of theoretical categories. In the "inter-paradigm debate", structuralism argues that the role of IR is to explain the dynamics of social development rather than the interaction and behavior of states. Thus, the proper scope of IR is not "international society" but a "world system".

However, both world system theory and dependency theory focus on the processes of state and societal transformation occurring *globally*, "without always sufficiently problematizing the domestic level of response and transformation" (Gills B. & Palan R, 1994, p. 3). On the other hand, the current process of globalization shows that "interdependence" (albeit not symmetrical) is as good - if not better - a concept to explain "reality" as "dependence", if not better. That is, the argument that global processes are determinant causes of processes occurring at lower levels is only partially true. For example, in 1993, the steep downturn in the industrial economies did not turn into a global recession; on the contrary,

growth in developing countries exceeded 6% and accounted for virtually the entire 2.25% global growth rate. This suggests that developing countries have been able to ensure that their own growth is "independent of the capricious economic swings of industrial economies" (Camdessus 1994, p. 3).

In order to overcome the theoretical shortcomings of structuralism realized by academic criticism and evidenced by practical facts, neo-structuralism posits to focus on how global processes interact with other processes of state/social transformation in the world. From this point of view, "it is the transformative processes themselves that are placed at the center of the analysis" (Gills B. & Palan R. 1994, p. 3). Consequently, the boundaries of theoretical categories such as "actors" and "scope" are largely expanded. Furthermore, the "dynamics" of IR is redefined under the term "*vast transmission mechanism*" within which all participate mutually ("the 'strong' as well as the 'weak' and the 'advanced' as well as the 'backward'") stimulated by, and responded to, at all levels, "which are intricately interwoven" (Gills B. & Palan R. 1994, p. 4).

Regarding the "function" of IR, it seems that explaining the "dynamics of social development" is only a partial similarity with structuralism. Why? It seems that neo-structuralism pretends to go beyond that function. Indeed, Susan Strange commented that this was like "building an eclectic social science appropriate to the twenty first century."² Furthermore, the Newcastle-upon-Tyne stream of International Political Economy (IPE) states that: "for some(ones) IPE can no longer be a branch of IR,³ but the nexus around which research into the many aspects of global change can be fruitfully linked together in a new understanding" (RIPE 1994, p. 12). In relation to concepts, it is important to note that neo-structuralism uses the term "state" with a particular connotation. It is no longer the "cohesive actor" as imagined by the realists; neo-structuralism demystifies the State, either by considering it a "social formation" with a secondary role in relation

² Susan Strange in Gills B. & Palan R. 1994: Foreword.

³ The London School of Economics and Political Science's conception of IPE is apparently alluded to here, as evidenced in A.J.R. Groom & Margot Light (eds.), 1994, *Contemporary International Relations: a guide to theory*, London and New York, Pinter.

to socio-economic structures, or by simply stating that the State "cannot be a volitional subject: it has no needs, it does not pursue power and prestige, it does not possess a unique agenda. It is not an 'it' (Gills B. & Palan R. 1994, p. 6).

The challenge to traditional paradigms posed by neo-structuralism at the level of theoretical categories subsequently leads it to formulate a questioning at the epistemological-ontological level. How? By expanding the "scope" of IR and consistently rejecting both (1) the arbitrary division between domestic political economy and global political economy, as well as (2) the artificial separation of economy, politics and society, neo-structuralism calls for a new epistemology in these terms: "the time is ripe for a general relaxation in methodologies.... Now facing a new millennium, an unexpected and curious alliance of business studies and Marxism, geography and history has emerged in search of a new epistemology" (RIPE 1994, p. 12). What is not clear is whether this new epistemology being sought is "new" *within* the system of modern and positivist epistemology, or, on the contrary, is a "new" one that implies a change of *the* modern epistemological framework.

Feminism

Feminist thought is very varied and, although its first manifestations date back to the 19th century, its appearance on the IR scene has only recently been verified. In general, it is common to distinguish three different streams within feminist theory. Thus, (1) *liberal feminism* is the "add the woman factor and remove" variety; (2) to put an end to women's oppression, *Marxist and socialist feminism* is clearly committed to abolishing both class and gender; (3) *radical feminism* assumes that there is a common and universal oppression of women (through masculine values at all levels: physical, social, knowledge, economic, and the like); thus, it aims to re-describe the world from a woman's perspective (Zalewski 1993, pp. 116-119).

What is the impact of feminist thought on IR? At first glance, it appears that an "island of theory" is developing by introducing gender as a category of analysis in international affairs. That is, using the perspectives of *liberal feminism* and partially those of *radical feminism*,

many studies are being conducted to find out the effects of incorporating gender and the "woman factor" in IR. Thus, it is already possible to find literature on women and war, women and peace, women and development, a feminist reformulation of Morgenthau's principles of political realism, the role that gendered divisions of labor and power play in defining and maintaining modern states and the contemporary interstate system, and so on.

However, further evaluation leads to the realization that "adding the woman factor" in empirical form generally leads to a questioning of both the theoretical categories and the epistemological-ontological level. In the words of Spike Peterson: "as fundamental categories are reconfigured, so are the frameworks .. in which categories are embedded... this ... interdependence of empirical and theoretical claims ... is an additional contribution of feminist scholarship" (Peterson, V. Spike 1992, p. 17).

It is relevant for this essay to establish what kind of challenges the feminist approach poses at the epistemological-ontological level. According to Sandra Harding's epistemological typology,⁴ there are also three feminist approaches: (1) *feminist empiricism*; (2) *feminist standpoint*; (3) *feminist postmodernism*.

Because of this particular situation, the feminist approach could question the epistemological-ontological level either *within* the modern system or *by rejecting* this modern system. How is feminist questioning possible within the modern epistemological consensus? *Feminist empiricism* shares the modern epistemological belief that there is a world out there that a) can be apprehended and understood using the right methods in the right way and b) exists independently of our senses or our creation of knowledge about it. The difference -the question-is that *feminist empiricism* "claims that there has been an androcentric (male-centered) bias in conventional empiricism (modern science)"; thereafter "eradication of the androcentric bias is a necessary measure to achieve the goal of objective knowledge" (Zalewski 1993, pp. 120-121). Hence, *feminist empiricism* is the feminist way of

⁴ Harding S., *The Scientific Question of Feminism*, Milton Keynes, Open University. Referred to in Zalewski 1993, p. 120 note 5.

questioning the epistemological-ontological level without rejecting the system established by modern science.

By contrast, *feminist postmodernism* is a real challenge to the modern epistemological consensus: postmodernism rejects the idea that there is a real world out there waiting to be discovered. This is a radical questioning, since at stake in the debate are not isolated beliefs of particular theories, but our "foundations"; that is, what S. Peterson calls "the objectivist metaphysics presupposed in conventional accounts of knowledge whether these are labelled instrumentalism, empiricism-positivism, Enlightenment, rationality, or logocentrism" (Peterson V. Spike 1992a, p. 185).

Nevertheless, for feminist postmodernism to be coherent, it must overcome the following apparent contradiction. On the one hand, since postmodernism rejects the validity of claims that are considered grounded knowledge, as well as the possibility of establishing foundational meanings, this current denies the centrality of the subject as the privileged owner of knowledge (Peterson V. Spike 1992, p. 27 note 61). But on the other hand, this author states in the same article: "I hope to clarify... how taking gender seriously is essential for more *"accurate" (realistic) knowledge claims*" (Peterson V. Spike 1992, p. 6).⁵ As Sylvester puts it, quoting Ferguson: "How can we simultaneously put women at the center and decenter everything, including women?"⁶

Postmodernism

Many philosophical and intellectual practices -such as genealogy, deconstruction, semiotics, feminist psychoanalytic theory, intertextuality- are designated by the terms "postmodern" and "poststructural." These practices challenge the intellectual assumption on which Western rationalism and positivism are based, addressing the problems of how knowledge, truth and meaning are constituted (Gregory Donna 1989: p. xiii).

Thus, postmodernism questions the epistemological-ontological level not only of the IR discipline, but also of the social sciences as a whole. How great is

⁵ The italics are mine.

⁶ As mentioned in Brown C. 1994, p. 231 note 46.

this challenge?

Postmodernist critiques are radical. The "skeptical postmodernists" deny the possibility of truth. For them, truth claims are simply the consequence of power games. As M. Foucault puts it: "we are subjected to the reproduction of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the reproduction of truth".⁷ Foucault states that it is absurd to demonstrate that there is a clear difference between truth and ideology, understood as false propaganda (Rosenau P. 1992, p. 78).

On the other hand, the skeptical theory of language considers truth as a "linguistic convention". For postmodernists, considering that language produces its own world without allusion to reality, it is impossible to say anything definitive (Rosenau P. 1992: 79). This argument has its origin in poststructuralist linguists and in the postmodern critique of representation.

The main idea of structuralist linguists is that language operates as a relation of difference: "Meaning emerges not from the relation between a signifier and the signified, but in the relationship between signifiers" (Brown C. 1994a, p. 223). Then, the philosopher Jacques Derrida developed concepts such as *logocentric thought* and practices such as *deconstruction*, both of which are crucial to the postmodern approach.

What is *logocentric thought*? Derrida observes that every text or argument depends on a structure of opposition. While some of these terms are presented as oppositions about truth (rational/irrational, true/false), most are opposed in the sense that they are different and mutually exclusive (general/particular, peace/war). But the terms not only differ and set one in opposition to the other, they are also differently weighted, one having more power than the other: "the denigrated term essentially functions to highlight the other". Donna Gregory explains: "this operation (which immediately differentiates one term from the other, prefers one to the other and arranges them hierarchically, displacing the subordinate term beyond the boundary of what is significant and desirable in context) typifies the logocentric procedure" (Gregory D. 1989: p. xvi). What, then, is incorrect? Derrida

⁷ As mentioned in Rosenau P. 1992, p. 78.

stresses that while meaning is completely dependent on the presence of *at least* one other signifier, "the second or third term by which we can know the meaning of the first is not given by nature." Thus, poststructuralists argue that logocentrism (Western thought) is unaware of the cultural contingency of its philosophical categories: "meaning is then a dynamic process, much more like an interaction between particles... than a steady light emitted from a solitary beacon" (Gregory D. 1989, p. xvi).

The practice of *deconstruction* is related to this concept. What is the goal of this practice? It is to *deconstruct* the structuring of the paired concepts by reversing the hierarchy and undoing the pairing. According to Rosenau: "deconstruction tears a text apart, reveals its contradictions and assumptions; its intent, however, is not to improve, revise or offer a better version of the text" (Rosenau P. 1992, p. xi).

These ideas are linked to *the postmodernist critique of representation*. Postmodernists note that representation assumes that the individual's "information processing procedures can in fact represent 'external reality.'"" Postmodernists doubt this; instead, they seek a more subjective, non-representational conception of reality. Rosenau explains, "representation is epistemologically objectionable because it assumes the ability to reproduce and duplicate external reality. Objects are supposed to refer directly to things outside themselves that can be represented...representation implies that things exist independently in a real world, and the postmodernists contend that the real world no longer exists" (Rosenau P. 1992, p. 97). Derrida's slogan "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*"⁸ illustrates well this argument. From this point of view, the object of knowledge disappears. Postmodernism has yet another reason to criticize representation. It believes that representation encourages generalizations and in so doing "concretizes, finalizes and excludes complexity"; and "fails to appreciate the importance of difference" (Rosenau P. 1992, p. 94-97).

One of the "paired concepts" established by the "logocentric procedure" is *the distinction between the logical and the rhetorical*. This leads to an explanation of *textuality*, another important concept for postmodernists. In the common practice of interpretation, it is easy to verify that some criteria

⁸ "Nothing exists outside the text": as mentioned in Brown C. 1994a, p. 224 note 24.

are preferred over others. Thus, some *logical* basis for meaning (rational, cause-effect explanations) is privileged over the many *rhetorical* bases of meaning (dimensions excluded from the logical one). Roland Barthes coined the term *textuality* to encompass *all* dimensions of a text and thus "overcome the long-established opposition (logical-rhetorical) in order to constitute a multi-faceted basis for meaning-making" (Gregory D. 1989, p. xviii). Thus, "textual" interpretation constituted the way to diminish the importance of the author and expand the importance of the text and the reader. According to R. Barthes: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author".⁹ However, postmodernists do not seek to constitute the reader as a new center of authority because "postmodern readers are equal in the sense that none can claim special expertise or knowledge. In the extreme, all readings are equivalent" (Rosenau P. 1992, p. 25). Consequently, the subject also disappears or is irrelevant.

Therefore, according to postmodernism, there is no truth, representation is epistemologically objectionable, the object of knowledge disappears, as well as the knowing subject. This constitutes a radical challenge to the modern epistemological-ontological consensus. Indeed, it is absolutely rejected.

How did these concepts and practices, which originated in the humanities, reach the field of social sciences in general and IR in particular? The *text* referred to "all phenomena, all events"; the *reader* became the observer; *reading* meant "understanding-interpretation" ("my reading", "your reading", "a reading") without reflecting on the sufficiency or validity of that reading. With this background, M. Foucault warned that a process analogous to the logocentric process was occurring in world society: a process of differentiation, marginalization and domination; either to establish meanings (in the linguistic world) or to establish hierarchies (in the social world). According to Foucault's analysis: "there are profound interconnections between differentiations at the level of discourse and of social action" (Gregory D. 1989: p.xxi). Postmodernism had arrived in the social sciences.

⁹ " As mentioned in Rosenau P. 1992, p. 25.

What about postmodernism in IR? Postmodern practices have been applied to issues such as anti-diplomacy diplomacy; crises of representation; security studies; sovereignty; intervention and feminist approaches influenced by postmodernist notions of difference.¹⁰ Der Derian, Ashley, R. B. J. Walker, Shapiro, are the main representatives of this current. The most common attitude is to criticize both the sovereign power of the nation-state and efforts to clearly define and distinguish disciplines such as IR. Ashley and Walker point out that there are several similarities between states and disciplines; for example, both disciplinary boundaries and national borders are arbitrarily determined and maintained by force (Linklater 1992, p. 88). But they do not provide a solution. Since postmodernism lacks any reliance on reason, there is no criterion for judging variable perspectives; for them there is no basis for agreement on the goal and purpose of the study of IR. Indeed: "rather than invent means of bringing different islands of theory together, post-modernists seek to 'impede, disrupt and delay' such an endeavor" (Linklater 1992, p. 89).

Thus, postmodernist critiques at the ontological-epistemological level of IR lead to its critiques at the theoretical categories level. However, postmodernism provides only a small contribution to the "next stage debate", since it does not postulate an alternative general perspective or prescription. Rather, from the postmodern point of view, this aim is worthless.

Critical theory

Critical theory agrees with postmodernism that modern science is a myth and the heritage of the Enlightenment is totalitarian and dominant (Rosenau P. 1992, p. 13). Nevertheless, its reaction to this situation is very different. Unlike the postmodernist attitude, critical theory, through the process of self-understanding and self-reflection, is able to provide a critique of the existing social order and to point out its immanent capacity for change and for the realization of human potential. In this sense, critical theory is emancipatory.

The starting point of critical theory was established by the Frankfurt

¹⁰ As mentioned in Brown C. 1994, pp. 60-62.

Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt School.¹¹ Horkheimer's first critique of traditional theory warned that it reflected, in the field of social science, the foundations of the natural sciences, which was a mistake for two reasons. First, the natural sciences maintain a subject-object relationship and is aimed to know a reality that is independent of the knowing subject. This criterion does not match the particularities of the field of social sciences, because here the knowing subject is at the same time the object of knowledge; and so, the reality is that social changes are the most powerful forces for changes in theory. Consequently, Horkheimer asserted that knowledge is not independent of our existence, but rather is a component of social relations. Second, taking the natural sciences as its model, traditional theory seeks to establish value-free theories in the social sciences. Horkheimer rejected this objective since it implied maintaining the *status quo* whose features impede the realization of human potential.

In the social sciences, from the point of view of critical theory, "reality" is not only constituted by everything that is tangible, that can be seen and felt, but also by what individuals can construct (a better social order) through social change. In view of this, critical theory seeks not only to reproduce society via description, but to understand and change it. Thus, a social science theory cannot be value-free. According to Hoffman: "the problem which Horkheimer addressed was how to create the conditions for the realization of human potential" (Hoffman M. 1989, p. 63).

Habermas then observed that in modern society the classical notion of politics has been abandoned. The result is the transformation of politics from being concerned with the overall organization of society to being concerned with making possible a life of well-being within a preordained order, which is not questioned. In this way, Habermasian work is designed to develop the emancipatory spirit of critical theory. To do so, Habermas established a basis for knowledge that is neither positivist nor a-politically-hermeneutic. Instead, he developed a "theory of truth" that goes beyond the limits of paradigmatic representation and its subsequent "correspondence with reality" because Habermas is aware that "current notions of reality may

¹¹ The following is based mainly on personal notes of the classes given in 1991 by Rafael Caro in the course Political Science I of the Diplomatic Academy of Peru.

stand in the way to emancipation" (Brown C. 1994a, p. 219).

Habermas thus identifies three "knowledge-constitutive interests": (1) in prediction and control, faced by the empirical-analytic sciences; (2) in the understanding of meaning, faced by the historical-hermeneutic sciences; and (3) in freedom from domination, emancipation, and the achievement of rational autonomy, met by critical theory. This last category has been highly influential, in so far as it "seems to promise an escape route from both status-quo oriented positivist social science and apolitical hermeneutics" (Brown 1994, p. 59).

Critical theory has inspired (and is encouraging) much work in IR theory. Robert Cox distinguishes "*problem-solving theory*" from "*critical theory*" by setting out the principles of the latter. Cox's definition of "problem-solving type theory" implies a subtle critique of traditional paradigms (especially realism), as he states that: "*problem-solving type theory* takes the world as it finds it with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organized, as the given framework for action". Its general aim is "to make these relations and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of troubles"; therefore, "the general pattern of institutions and relationships is not called into question". By contrast, *critical theory* is critical in the sense that it "stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about." It does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted, but questions them (Cox R. 1993, pp. 277- 278).

The set of basic elements of critical theory offers a perspective that entails: an historical component, a normative component; thus, the "problem-solving type theory" is only a starting point for establishing possible alternatives. The latter means that critical theory contains an element of utopianism (utopian idea), but "its utopianism is constrained by its comprehension of historical processes" (Cox R. 1993, p. 279).

Mark Hoffman, in assessing the impact of Habermas' work on the interparadigm debate, concludes that: "critical theory represents the next stage in the development of International Relations theory" (Hoffman M. 1989. p. 78). Andrew Linklater partially agrees with M. Hoffman in arguing that "while critical theory itself cannot be the next

stage it can, nevertheless, shed light on what the ensuing phase should be" (Linklater 1992, p. 79).

Conclusions

A preliminary assessment of the most recent theoretical approaches to IR suggests that each presents its challenges at different levels and to different degrees of depth. Thus, international normative theory raises some questions at the theoretical categories level, such as "scope" and "function". But this is not *new*, as it is linked to idealism and the tradition of political philosophy; what is new is the current context, which enhances the salience of this approach.

By reformulating the structuralist tradition, the neo-structuralist perspective challenges all the elements of our level of theoretical categories: actors, dynamics, function, scope and essential concepts of IR. In doing so, and to be consistent, it also problematizes the epistemological-ontological level claiming for a "new epistemology". Notwithstanding, it is not clear whether its claim is oriented to break the modern epistemological consensus. In any case, neo-structuralism is a general theory that challenges the three established perspectives at both the epistemological-ontological level and the level of theoretical categories.

The feminist approach makes it possible to develop an "island of theory" by adding gender and woman-factor as categories of analysis in international affairs. Since from the feminist point of view it is argued that there is an interdependence between empirical and theoretical claims, feminist challenge at the theoretical categories level requires extending such questioning to the ontological epistemological level. However, this questioning is ambiguous. On the one hand, *feminist empiricism* shares modern epistemological beliefs and its only demand is to add the woman's point of view; thus, it is a challenge *within* the system of modern epistemological consensus. On the other hand, *feminist postmodernism* rejects the modern epistemological consensus; here it is worth noting that this position implies an internal contradiction between the claim that "the feminist point of view is better" and the postmodernist rejection of the subject as the privileged owner of knowledge.

Both postmodernism and critical theory are reactions to the crisis in Western thought. However, while postmodernism devalues all pretensions of theory-building and denies the possibility of truth with the subsequent radical challenge at the ontological epistemological level, critical theory aims at reshaping social and political theory, by challenging positivist approaches to social science, as well as proposing alternatives.

For our part, we believe that postmodernist concepts and practices can be very well applied in the humanities, but we doubt that they can be fully put into practice in the social sciences, unless they pave the way to *nihilism* and justify political indifference based on relativism of ideas and values. By contrast, critical theory is a perspective conceived to develop especially in the social sciences and seems to provide a way to overcome the current crisis of the Enlightenment project. In fact, critical theory appears in IR as a field where other approaches could converge: the emancipatory approach of feminism; the problems of explaining social change and the process of development at all levels of neo-structuralism; and finally, the moral issues of international normative theory. In short, the "next stage debate" seems to be far from its culmination.

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