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### How to change the world, theoretically

*International Relations Theory, its eternal debates, and how Critical Theory can help us to never resolve them*

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Inaugural address, University of Amsterdam

**How to change the world, theoretically:  
International Relations Theory, its eternal debates, and how Critical Theory  
can help us to never resolve them**

**Annette Freyberg-Inan, Professor of International Relations Theory**

Amsterdam, April 7th, 2022

*“Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.”  
Faust I, 2038 f. / Mephistopheles*

Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus,  
Mevrouw de decaan,  
Geachte toehoorders,  
Welcome and thank you for coming.

The Dutch call what is unfolding here an ‘oratie’, which means that I am allowed to orate, and you have to sit still. That is pleasant for me, but the English term ‘inaugural address’ is more interesting.

In the classical Roman world, augury was the practice of interpreting the will of the gods by studying signs in nature, such as the flight of birds. An inauguration was a ceremony by which the augurs worked to obtain the sanction of the gods for an endeavor of humans. To align the wills of gods and humans, and thereby maximize the chances of success, one had to do two things: First, it was necessary to identify the right time for beginning something new, like a professorship. Secondly, one had to perform the necessary rituals to ensure that the beginning would be made properly, in a way that would draw the gods’ blessing. These ideas still reverberate today. Thence, for example, our master of ceremonies still has a staff and a bell, and I am, as some of you are, robed.

Our ceremonial trappings are a reminder of a time when academic life was slow enough to conduct augury, or in other words: to take the auspices. I invite you for these 45 minutes to slow down with me and I will tell you what is on my mind as I take up this professorship. You can later tell me if you find it auspicious. In the course of my musings, I will make the following central claims.

First, theoretical and empirical research, if done at all well, depend on each other and must be valued together; this also means that it is incumbent upon social scientists to school themselves to this end.

Second, the field of International Relations is defined by its paradigms - its isms, neo-isms, and post-isms - and by enduring debates between them. There are two points to be made about this: First, contrary to many voices, this is as it should be; there is no reason to ‘diss’ the paradigms, abstract as they may be. Second, we must by all means avoid the temptation to resolve these debates.

This, third, means that we have to be able to live with the cognitive tensions produced in these debates. I will argue that a critical theoretical position is best suited to enable us to do that.

Fourth, I illustrate how these ideas can come to life in scholarly practice with reference to my own work. In one of my main projects, I import empirical insights from psychology to innovate IR theory, in the hope that this, in turn, will allow us to navigate more successfully in the empirical world of international affairs.

Those of you who are outsiders to the field of International Relations will learn something about this field. Those of you who are insiders will be familiar with at least some of what I will explain. For them, the manner in which I position myself may be relatively more interesting. In any case, I hope that you will all hear something worthwhile here today.

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The word 'theory' appeared in the English language in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to denote a mental scheme or conception. It was derived from the Late Latin 'theoria', which in turn comes from the Greek theōria. Theōria is "having a good look at something, or "contemplating something from a distance." The concept is composed of two elements: θεά "a view" + ὁράω "to see." The verb is theōrein "to consider, to look at". The one who does so is theōros, the "spectator".

The adjective "theoretical" had made it into the English language already in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. It referred to the "principles or methods of a science or of an art" (as opposed to its practice); think, for example, of music theory, which is the science of musical composition, as opposed to musical practice or performance.

Since the 1630s we use the word theory in its current sense of "an intelligible account or explanation based on observation and reasoning". That is a 400-year history of the word. The practice is of course vastly older and more widespread than our ability to speak about it.

So, theorizing literally means to look and to see. This has two immediate implications.

First, as a necessary precondition for reality-constituting observation, theory is entirely unavoidable. To be a human being with senses and a brain means to theorize. We perceive the world, and we try to make sense of it. Our theories, mostly implicitly, help us in this process, not only by fitting our perceptions into the categories and relationships we use to interpret what we perceive, but also by allowing us to infer. Inference is that magical process of coming to know things we cannot perceive. We do so – you guessed it – by employing theory. This may sound complex but is entirely trivial. When there are dark clouds in the sky you take an umbrella to work, even though it is evidently not raining. At work in your mind is a theory linking the appearance of dark clouds to subsequent precipitation. We are all constantly theorizing in this manner. If we were not, we would stand bewildered and overwhelmed by our sensory impressions, disoriented, unable to act.

But there is a second immediate implication of the fact that to theorize is to look and to see: It is a *sine qua non* of any kind of research. In empirical research, we, first, draw our propositions from theory, and empirical research is like shooting at moths in the dark if its propositions are not theoretically founded. Second, we analyze our evidence with the help of a theoretical framework that guides our attention and interpretation. And third, much empirical research employs theoretical generalization, by claiming to produce insights that can be useful beyond the empirical population which its evidence samples. So, theory is thrice necessary to make empirical research work.

In turn, theoretically informed empirical research feeds the further development of theory. It does so alongside theoretical research. This concept requires a brief defense, as the value of theoretical research tends to be difficult to grasp for those of us who are not “into theory”. Sadly, that includes most funding agencies. To them it may look as if theorists just read heavy books and write up what comes to mind in the process. Their work may be interesting, even inspiring, and it may be original, if we have some out-of-the-box thoughts, but it’s not scientific, they would say, and it’s not really research, because real research is supposed to be scientific in the empiricist sense. Furthermore, it’s hard to see the practical pay-off of theoretical work.

At this point, allow me to return to the meaning of theory as principles or methods of a science or of an art, and to music theory, which we defined as the science of musical composition, as opposed to its practice or performance. Imagine Beethoven composing. His work would not exist if he had not listened to and played music – if he had not moved in the empirical terrain of practice and performance. But neither would his work exist if he had not spent great amounts of time in the private occupation of composing. Furthermore, he was able to compose some of his greatest work after having literally become deaf to its empirical implications. He knew enough about the empirics, by that time, to move purely in the realm of theory.

I am not Beethoven. I do not ask leeway to theorize free from the constraints of empirical relevance, realism, or feasibility. But I, too, need time to sit at my piano to compose. The theorist contributes essential work to scientific research by creating sense-making frameworks, concepts, narratives, or models. She does so by linking knowledge and insights, both empirical and theoretical. The theorist’s expertise is, first, to know and understand many diverse contributions, often across several disciplines, that can be brought to bear on a given question – a good theorist is always broadly educated and open-minded; the theorist’s expertise is furthermore to create linkages across those diverse contributions, to weave new cognitive fishing nets for the catching of meaning. A good theorist has that creative capacity.

In science as a collective endeavor of coming to know or understand things that were less well known or understood before, theory therefore plays a crucial part. It makes very little sense to dispute the scientific standing of theoretical research, as long as that research can be connected to, and made useful for, the domain of empirical investigation. The cooperation between theoretical and empirical research is vital, and it must be based on mutual respect for what the other contributes.

Allow me to draw on Beethoven once more to make a final point about the importance of theorizing.

Imagine Beethoven had never performed music for anyone else to hear. I believe we would still judge him to have contributed enormously to the development of music. On the other hand, if he had not spent his time theorizing, we would not be able to listen to his music today, or to recognize his signature in the works of others. It is the compositions that survive and that connect empirical perceptions over time. The field of International Relations is a field in which this is particularly obvious, because it is a field defined not by its empirical contents or methodologies, both of which are subject to dynamic expansion, but it is a field defined by its body of theory.

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Scholars of International Relations like to call their field 'IR'. We think that sounds cool. I will provide you with a concise summary of the field's intellectual history.

Outsiders to IR are often puzzled by the preoccupation we have with so-called paradigms, our big -isms, and with so called great or inter-paradigm debates. Students tend to get frustrated with having to study our isms, time and again. Of course, they can see immediately that no ism is the truth, that they all have a point, and that even if you can recite all isms backwards and forwards you haven't solved one single practical problem of humankind. In a survey conducted in the English-speaking world in 2009, many IR scholars reported that for their own research our paradigms were not useful. But still we keep reproducing our paradigms; textbooks continue to be structured by them with near inevitability. Why?

My colleague Gunther Hellmann at Goethe-Universität Frankfurt has suggested that the reason might be what sociologists of science call "task uncertainty", a lack of clear consensus of what IR scholars should be studying, and how.<sup>1</sup> The field has been incredibly dynamic and expansive. It has spread from Europe and North America to all continents, for many decades in a rather unidirectional manner, but that is now changing; it has progressively expanded its share of space within Political Science; it has continued to build up its bodies of theory and methodology; and it has taken on ever more research topics. I'll give you a brief history of substantive expansion, which is at the same time the answer to the question: what is IR other than its paradigms and great debates, to which I will turn later.

As an academic discipline or sub-discipline, IR dates to the end of the first World War, and for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, war and peace were its central preoccupations. We studied almost exclusively governmental activities crossing national borders, using the languages of international law and diplomatic history. After World War Two the field was broadened in the direction of international economic relations and towards other decision-making agents involved in what came to be called international politics. The nuclear age produced the field of strategic studies, with concerns like deterrence and the negotiation of arms control. Simultaneously, European integration drove not only its own subfield but also, more broadly, the development of the study of comparative regional integration. Decolonization expanded the territorial reach of IR scholarship and further strengthened the link with economics. The field of development studies was born, and from the 1970s onwards International Political Economy was established as one of our major subfields. In parallel, the study of foreign policy was evolving into foreign policy analysis, which drew on neighboring disciplines psychology and sociology, because they help us make sense of group-decision-making processes. At the end of the 1960s the term "transnational politics" was coined, and the demand to include other actors than merely state governments in our analyses received another boost. We began to study interdependence, and globalization. Simultaneously, the 1970s brought environmental issues onto the agenda. They recently loom large, along with health concerns; we have developed a language to address them using concepts like 'human security'. Since the end of the Cold War, we see concerted efforts to make different forms of marginalization in world politics visible and bring in marginalized voices, while all the previously mentioned efforts also continue. Most recently, we are, for obvious reasons, experiencing a revival of concern with military alliances and deterrence.

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<sup>1</sup> Gunther Hellmann, "International Relations as a Field of Study", in: *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, eds. Bertrand Badie et al. (Sage, 2011).

In the context of this increasing scope and complexity, our disciplinary identity has formed around the so-called paradigms and great debates. This began in the 1950s, when Hans Morgenthau called the debate between realism and idealism a “great one”. It had kept IR scholars busy since the inception of the field in 1919, but frequently references sources going as far back as Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which was written in the fourth century BC. For this reason, it is often considered one of the eternal debates of humankind. The disagreement is primarily ontological, aiming to pin down the relevant features of the world which we need to understand in order to navigate more successfully in the international realm. Its core questions are: What are human beings like, and what are social relations therefore like? What is consequently possible in relations between groups in general and between states in particular? Ian Clark has succinctly summarized the resulting positions as: idealism being the tradition of hope, and realism the tradition of despair.<sup>2</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> great debate, coming into force in the 1960s, was an epistemological one between traditionalists and behavioralists. The Dutch-born comparativist Arend Lijphart was to blame for applying the Kuhnian term ‘paradigm’ in this context. It stuck. Scholars debated whether IR should follow the natural sciences (and economics) and focus on identifying patterns in observable behavior, and on testing hypotheses about them? Or should we continue to try to learn from history, get into the minds of statesmen, and study and design institutions? As you might imagine, the behavioralists became the modernizers of the field, but to this day work in the more traditionalist vein remains significant.

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> great debate, the picture became more complicated; there is as of yet no consensus about whether there have been three or four great debates, and how they should precisely be labeled. I teach my students about a third inter-paradigm debate between realism, liberalism, and broadly speaking Marxist approaches. This is also a primarily ontological debate, but it focuses more directly than the first debate on specifically the nature of international politics. It asks: Who are the most important actors in world politics? What are their motivations? What are the most important structures in which these actors are embedded? Which constraints and opportunities do these structures present? What patterns of interaction then emerge between the actors? What results from the interplay of all these factors? And which historical dynamics are thereby created?

The three camps in this debate are themselves composed of a variety of sub-camps, and much of our competitive academic exchange takes place across sub-groups within the same broader paradigm. An important instance of such productive quibbling occurred in the early 1980s, when a liberal school called neoliberal institutionalism and a realist school called neorealism began to argue over the relevance of so-called relative gains in international politics. In a nutshell, the question at stake was: How significant is it that while actors may be happy that they gain something from cooperating with others, they might also be worried about the fact that those others also gain from the cooperation, and perhaps even more than themselves. If those others become enemies in future, one may regret having helped them to achieve those gains. How one thinks about this question affects how one thinks about the likelihood of international cooperation.

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Clark, *The Hierarchy of States: Reform and Resistance in the International Order* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

However, on most other aspects of international politics, the two schools of thought agreed, and so they faced the accusation that this was not a neo-neo debate, but a neo-neo synthesis, that had in fact begun to merge realism and liberalism.

In reaction, the field experienced what was called the constructivist turn – we imported social constructivism - and that was what produced the fourth debate.

The fourth debate pitches positivism against post-positivism or, in another terminology, rationalism against reflectivism. It is once again primarily an epistemological disagreement, but with important ontological underpinnings and methodological consequences. It asks: Where do patterns come from, and how should we go about uncovering and explaining them? Whose perspectives are important to learn about world politics? At what level of generality of knowledge should we aim? And what should be the purpose of the knowledge we create?

On one side in the fourth debate are those who believe that knowledge transcending the individual subject can be created by means of theoretically informed empirical research. In most places they are the majority; they also include most constructivists. On the other side, we have a smaller group of post-structuralists, who believe that our theories and anything we might be tempted to call evidence are so mutually impregnated that such knowledge-creation through research is not possible. The logical consequence is that they do not set out to analyze an external reality, but to analyze the way in which a reality is thought up, how through our thinking and speaking we construct the world we perceive. The goal is to show how meaning is constructed and how power is exerted through the ascription of meaning as well as how such meaning-making is context-dependent: things could always be different. My own theoretical position, critical theory, on which I will elaborate in a few minutes, is suspended between the two poles in this great debate as well as between the two poles in the first great debate between realism and idealism.

The inter-paradigms debates all continue. For example, in debates 1 and 3, realism has regained strength recently, as a result of a more unilateralist US foreign policy under Trump and the rise of (more or less aggressive) nationalism in many other parts of the world. This illustrates how our theories and theoretical debates not only structure the way we see the world but also evolve in response to what we see. They are not static. Still, they seem to be more stable than their empirical referents, and that is how and why they form the core of our disciplinary identity. There is by now a large literature examining whether we should and how we could move beyond our competitive paradigmaticism. I, for one, am not enthusiastic about the idea. As Gunther Hellmann has phrased it, “loss of disciplinary coherence may loom [...] if IR loses its traditional paradigmatic signposts.”<sup>3</sup>

I will now elaborate on my own position. I will not attempt to summarize my work, but pick some illustrations for the sake of making my more general points.

As a young PhD student of Political Science at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, USA, I was trained broadly across the fields of International Relations, Comparative Politics and Political Theory.

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<sup>3</sup> Gunther Hellmann, “International Relations as a Field of Study”, in: *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, eds. Bertrand Badie et al. (Sage, 2011). Hellman cites Ole Wæver, “Still a Discipline After All These Debates?” In *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, eds. T. Dunne et al. (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 300-301.

I stumbled upon the topic of my dissertation, published as *What Moves Man: The Realist Theory of International Relations and Its Judgment of Human Nature*,<sup>4</sup> by means of the stranger's gaze. I came from psychological lineage, my father and his father before him were psychologists, and my previous education had mostly taken place in Germany. I had entered the US academy, and a course on International Relations theory. I learned about realist IR theory, and I found the ideas it contained about human nature to jar, to dissonate, to give offense. I wanted to find out why, and the end result was a critique on three levels: I found the ideas about human nature on which realist theory was built to be empirically biased, epistemologically abused, and normatively harmful.

From there this line of research diverged in two directions. I continued to study the psychological and social psychological content of IR theories, across the spectrum of such theories. The last and most comprehensive contribution in this line of work is *Human Beings in International Relations*,<sup>5</sup> edited with Daniel Jacobi, which covers the full range of ways in which IR theories engage with the human element in world politics.

I also continued to study realism and to contribute to conversation among and with realists from a critical vantage point. An example that is relevant in the current context is a 2018 chapter, co-authored with Paul van Hooft, in which we argued for the enduring relevance of realist understandings of power dynamics in Europe in an era of relative decline of western security structures.<sup>6</sup>

Looking back, I have done quite a bit of work over the past 20 years on the psychological foundations of the theories we use to understand international politics. I have examined and criticized them. My project for the *future* is to re-think them constructively. In the next few minutes, I want to give you a sneak preview of what this work will involve.

Human agency is a big theoretical problem in IR, because even though we know that it is, of course, ultimately people who act politically, the actors theorized in IR are usually collectives; the level of analysis is inter-collective or even supra-collective; intra-collective dynamics are black-boxed; and collective actors are treated “as if” they were individuals. What then happens is that different theoretical approaches rely on different assumptions about those “as if” individuals, often implicitly, so that the effects of these assumptions, even though highly significant, remain hidden. These psychological assumptions are significant, because from them follow different understandings of world politics and different behavioural prescriptions for what should be done. Given the hidden nature of their axiomatic disagreements, the different approaches in the field become incommensurable; scientific progress across them becomes impossible. And the behavioural prescriptions created in the field will be biased in different ways, creating real world inability to relate to others.

I want to illustrate this with a simple juxtaposition of realist and liberal human nature foundations. On the level of theorizing international politics, these are well-known

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<sup>4</sup> Annette Freyberg-Inan, *What Moves Man: The Realist Theory of International Relations and Its Judgment of Human Nature* (New York: Suny, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Jacobi and Annette Freyberg-Inan (eds.), *Human Beings in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Paul van Hooft and Annette Freyberg-Inan, “Europe May Be Done With Power, But Power Is Not Done With Europe: Europe During American Unipolarity and Relative Decline,” in: *Fear and Uncertainty: Realism and Foreign Policy in Europe*, eds. Vincent Della Salla and Roberto Belloni (Palgrave, 2018).



paradigmatic worldviews. On the realist side, international politics are characterized by anarchy, the absence of enforceable rules; states are by far the most important actors; their main goal is survival; to achieve this they can rely only on themselves; their attempts to make themselves more secure will be seen as threatening by others, leading to so-called security dilemmas; the best thing we can do under these circumstances is to strive to maintain ever precarious balances of power. Liberals, by contrast, point out that while there is no world government, the international system knows plenty of rules, developed and upheld by institutions, which can be important actors in their own right; actors want to survive but have plenty of other goals as well; often they have to cooperate to achieve those goals; one example are security communities. By forming those as well as other types of cooperative arrangements, states and other actors can actually become significantly interrelated and interdependent, with European integration being a prime example for how a region previously rife with antagonisms might be transformed away from anarchy.

This is what our students learn in the introductory courses in International Relations, and it is what you can recognize in everyday political rhetoric, for example in the starkly different ways in which the Russian and NATO member states' leadership approach their relations with each other. But this is the surface. Underlying these different worldviews are radically different psychological assumptions.

Realism is based on an extremely individualistic view of agency, and one whereby actors are primarily driven by fear for their survival. Other actors are perceived as threatening; trusting these others would be insane. Thence emerges a quest for power, ideally superior power but at least enough power to make it irrational for others to attack. The hope is that these others are rational – our hopes from Putin are a good example of this dynamic. But we cannot be sure that rationality will always obtain, so we must expect even our best efforts to sometimes not be enough to save our skins – a thoroughly bleak view of social life.

Liberalism also begins from an individualistic view of agency, but here individualism is tempered by reason, that is, by the ability to see what would be best for the self, for the other, and potentially for all. The faith in rationality is stronger. Actors are less fear-driven, aspiring to a range of goals beyond survival. Others can be useful to achieve those goals, so we have to work with them; this requires trust. The moment I trust the other I am less worried about their increases in power; their gains may even be good for me, too.

So here we are, with a very deep-down disagreement about the nature of the actors inhabiting the international realm, and consequently about our horizons of possibility and advisable courses of action. How can we move on from here? My future work essentially consists of empirically informed theoretical integration of clashing positions, such as the two I just sketched. What can this look like more concretely? Again, I want to provide an illustration, at the level of theorizing about motivation.

Going back 2,400 years, Thucydides has the Athenians tell the Spartans before the outbreak of the Second Peloponnesian War: “Though overcome by the three greatest things, honour, fear, and profit, we have both accepted the dominion delivered us and refuse again to surrender it, we have therein done nothing to be wondered at nor beside the manner of men.”<sup>7</sup> Honor, fear, and the desire for profit, according to the Athenians in Thucydides, were the natural drivers of conflict.

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<sup>7</sup> Thucydides, *Hobbes's Thucydides*, ed. Richard Schlatter (Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1975), p. 70 (Thuc. 1.76).

Thomas Hobbes, who is considered one of the founding fathers of IR realism, translated Thucydides into English; so it was not a coincidence that in his *Leviathan* he speaks of "three principall causes of quarrell. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory."<sup>8</sup> Competition arises out of every man's desire for personal gain and power (that is profit), diffidence arises from fear, and glory is derived from the motive of pride or arrogance (that is honor). This is the same trinity of motives, and it re-appears in similar form in 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology.

David McClelland, following Henry Murray, identified Power, Achievement, and Affiliation as a motivational (or needs) trinity,<sup>9</sup> and this is echoed in much psychological literature since. But importantly, psychologists do not see these motives as all necessarily fostering conflict, while IR realism does. This harks back to the argument I made in my dissertation that realism contains a motivational bias. Of course, liberalism does, too, only that it is a different bias. And at this point learning from psychological scholarship can help us in IR move beyond our own fixed and exclusionary thinking patterns.

This will involve using available motivational frameworks like McClelland's to achieve modular comprehensiveness of psychological axioms across the realist-liberal and other divides, by theorizing when and why which motive complex in which form becomes more or less relevant. The frameworks developed by our colleagues in psychology are very helpful in this regard, but they have not been imported into IR. Doing so will be an important part of my future work.

A second part will be to broaden our view of decision-making by moving beyond rationalism and integrating emotion, but also intuition, as non-negligible elements of how humans act in the world. Consider the statement made by Sir Edward Gray, British Foreign Secretary, before the British Parliament in 1909: "Remember, in Germany there is apprehension with regard to our intentions. I am constantly told [...] that one of the reasons why German public opinion is apprehensive is the fear that we may be preparing an attack upon them – a most wild apprehension. But see how an increase of naval expenditure, how debates of this kind [...] must foster these ideas in the minds of the public [...] Deeply as I feel [...] the great evil of increased naval and military expenditure not only here but in Europe [...] we must be prepared to defend our national existence."<sup>10</sup>

Gray expresses a complexity in his decision-making process that the current, weakly theorized psychological foundations of IR theory cannot grasp. For them it will forever remain puzzling how one could knowingly enter security dilemma dynamics that cannot but end up in war. But, again, by bringing in work from psychology we can understand such behavior better. Intuition is difficult to theorize, but it might, for example, be theorized through the concept of alief, which has already been brought to our field in work by Marcus Holmes.<sup>11</sup> Alief is defined by Tamar Szabo Gendler as "a mental state with associatively-linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral, and that is activated – consciously or unconsciously

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge University Press, reprint 1991 [1651]), p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> David C. McClelland, *Personality* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951); Henry A. Murray, *Explorations in Personality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938).

<sup>10</sup> Cited in: Marcus Holmes, "Believing This and Alieving That: Theorizing Affect and Intuitions in International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 59, No. 4, December 2015, p. 716.

<sup>11</sup> Marcus Holmes, "Believing This and Alieving That: Theorizing Affect and Intuitions in International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 59, No. 4, December 2015, pp. 706-720.

– by features of the subject’s internal or ambient environment.”<sup>12</sup> Alief directly activates behavioral response patterns. The paradigmatic example is the response people typically show when going out on a transparent bridge or platform, like the glass platform hanging over the Grand Canyon. They believe the platform to be safe 100%, otherwise they would not step on it, but they still get very stressed. They believe that the platform is not safe. In the case of Sir Edward Gray, there is clearly the rational belief in the security dilemma, but there is also latent existential affective fear (which supports worst case scenario thinking). It is this alief which will be acted out in the resulting behaviour of naval build-up. Between 1908 and 1913, the military spending of the European powers would increase by 50%.

I will wrap up on my research plans. States, international organizations, and other collective actors in world politics are made up of many individuals and groups; that matters, because those individuals and groups have agency, they are ultimately the source of both continuity and change in world politics. If we want to understand what happens, we need to have some understanding of how they operate. There are many sources for such an understanding, but almost all of them are located outside the disciplinary confines of IR. They have to be found and their usefulness considered for my discipline, and that is what I want to work on.

My primary focus will lie on insights created in social psychology, for two reasons. One reason is that at the group level processes emerge which transform collective agency into something rather different from just the sum of individual decisions. Think, for example, about how populations become mobilized for war. If we want to understand how collective actors work and how they interact, we have to understand these social processes.

A second reason why I want to primarily focus on the level of social psychology is to avoid the slippery slope down the levels of analysis, away from sociology via psychology to biology. It is becoming more popular, also in IR, to employ explanations drawing on evolutionary biology or neuroscience; these approaches are deterministic (sometimes even to the point of being apologetic of atrocities), they represent humans as machines, and they deny sociality. I want to steer well clear of that, because I want humans understood in social context and I want to emphasize possibilities for agency.

This leads me to the last part of my talk, which clarifies my theoretical position.

I call myself a critical theorist. What does that mean to me? I will summarize the mission of critical theory by emphasizing three core elements:

One, critical theory is conscious and self-conscious regarding the role theorizing plays for power relations. Sense-making always occurs from a position; if it occurs from a position of power, it is likely to function in the service of that power. That means that critical theorists will encourage sense-making from the margins, and that claims from positions of privilege will undergo special scrutiny.

Two, critical theorists approximate the role of the stranger in the sociology of Georg Simmel. The gaze of the stranger makes strange that which is otherwise taken for granted. This is often the starting point for theoretical discovery. As my colleague Stefano Guzzini has recently put it, as IR theorists, “we have to start from the irremediable diversity and pluralism of the world around us.”<sup>13</sup> This is *nota bene* not a comfortable starting point. It is more comfortable to start from a taken-for-granted normality, reducing diversity to error and aberration. But we have

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<sup>12</sup> Tamar Szabó Gendler, “Alief and Belief,” *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 105, No. 10, October 2008, p. 642.

<sup>13</sup> Stefano Guzzini, Keynote Address at annual conference of the Central and Eastern European Studies Association (online), 8th October 2021, author’s own notes.

come too far for such a naïve positivist stance. IR scholars today need to acknowledge, mediate and translate the diversity and pluralism we find in the world. To do so we practice the stranger's gaze, and we facilitate the entry into our conversations of other strangers with their own languages.

Three, and relatedly, critical theory has a normative mission of human emancipation. If, as in the famous words of Robert Cox, "theory is always for someone and for some purpose,"<sup>14</sup> critical theory wants to be for the disadvantaged, for the subaltern, and for the purpose of their empowerment.

The second and third principle are often needed to temper our reactions to the first. The first principle teaches us that IR theories do not just structure our view of the world; they are also tools for governing the world. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainstream IR theories buttressed US dominance; this has legitimately led to a quest for greater pluralism. However, principles two and three allow us to see that this desire for pluralism sometimes derails into the competitive nationalization of theory-formation, with attempts to, for example, construct a Chinese version of IR, or a Russian version. This is to be rejected to the extent that it serves neither science nor emancipation. We should be critical of the role of theories in constructing and maintaining relations of power, we should open up space for other perspectives and traditions, but we should not descend into intellectual parochialism. Fracturing knowledge can only be unhelpful, both in the quest for scientific progress and in the pursuit of international cooperation.

Critical theory is suspended between two epistemological poles, and must remain thus suspended. On the one side is the "incredulity of metanarratives", as Jean-François Lyotard has defined postmodernism,<sup>15</sup> which, Alex Callinicos has called the brainchild of 1960s revolutionary disappointment.<sup>16</sup> This incredulity of metanarratives can clearly be taken too far, if thereby we lose the ability for social analysis. Marcuse worried about this already back in 1969. He wrote: "The notion that happiness is an objective condition which demands more than subjective feelings has been effectively obscured; its validity depends on the real solidarity of the species 'man', which a society divided into antagonistic classes and nations cannot achieve."<sup>17</sup> Poststructuralist currents in the social sciences contribute to this division, which in Marcuse's words fosters "a civilized *bellum omnium contra omnes*, in which the happiness of the ones must coexist with the suffering of the others."<sup>18</sup> Allied to individualism, commercialism, and consumerism, poststructuralism breeds a politics of "your truth, my truth" which makes collective progress impossible. Marcuse worried: "Objectively, 'in-itself,' labor still is the potentially revolutionary class; subjectively, 'for-itself, it is not.'" <sup>19</sup> It has been disempowered by the lack of a shared interpretation of a shared experience. Collective self-empowerment has thereby become impossible.

These three principles create between themselves a tension, and perhaps the defining characteristic of the critical theorist is that she wills to live and work within this tension. The

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<sup>14</sup> Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium* Vol. 10, No. 2, 1981, p.128.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester University Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

<sup>16</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 16.

normative ambition of critical theory functions like an anchor against the drift into non-foundationalism and excessive self-critique. There is work to do in the real world, after all. The acknowledgement of the plurality of human experiences and a self-critical attitude, on the other hand, function as an anchor against the drift into missionary overconfidence. We remain scholars, even though it is quite logical that we would many times also be activists.

It should now have become clear why I said earlier that my own, critical theoretical position is suspended between the two poles in the fourth great debate. I said that it is also suspended between the two poles in the first great debate, between realism and idealism. It is realist in its diagnoses but able to sustain idealism in its prescriptions. That is not an easy position to maintain, because it requires an ability to sustain a certain level of cognitive dissonance. But that ability is crucial.

From realism we must take its keen eye for the workings of power, the destructive force of fear in particular and the threat of failings of reason in general, its ethos of responsibility, and its attention to feasibility.

From idealism we must take the motivation to work towards improvement, the ability to take leaps of faith, and the ability to see that things could always be different.

This concludes my explanation of how Critical Theory can help us to never resolve the great debates that define the field of International Relations, and why that is important. Remember who it was who said: "*Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.*" It was Mephisto. It is better not to listen to him. Do not underappreciate theoretical paradigms, as irritatingly abstract as they may seem; the great debates of IR helpfully structure our thinking. Do not try to resolve these debates; the tensions they create are productive. You can employ a critical theoretical position to keep the balance. But whatever you do, learn to live with ambivalence.



It takes a village to raise an IR scholar, my villages have most importantly been the International Studies Association and the Central and Eastern European International Studies Association. I am indebted to many colleagues near and far. To start far, my gratitude goes to the late Daryl de Bell, who as emeritus professor of psychiatry at Stanford confirmed me at a crucial moment in the intuition that would drive my PhD: that there is something decidedly pathological about the image of human nature in IR realism. Other particularly good spirits in my professional life were Michael McKinley, Jennifer Sterling-Folker, Patrick James, Jacqueline Markham, Ron Linden, Steve Rosow, and Petra Roter. Closer to home special mention goes to the late Frances Gouda and the late Uwe Becker, whom I truly miss.

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*Ik heb gezegd.*