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Robert W. Cox
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Part I
Overviews

1 Beyond international relations theory: Robert W. Cox and approaches to world order

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Robert W. Cox's work stands outside the usual parameters of international relations theory. Strongly historical in perspective, Cox's method of understanding global change represents a challenge to conventional ontological assumptions about international relations. These assumptions, the central of which is that states are the major actors whose interaction is to be explained, are qualified by Cox based on his observation that the major driving forces of world order change, albeit slowly, over time. Rather than discuss "the state," Cox's focus has been on forms of state and how these change under pressure from forces from above (world order) and from below (civil society). Cox considers states to be focal terrains of conflict and institutional means of action internationally and nationally. In Cox's worldview the future represents an opportunity to break with the structures of the past and thus the potential to escape the strictures that bind human potential.

This essay is intended to provide the reader with an introduction to Robert W. Cox's approach to the study of international relations. It has four sections in which this is pursued. In the first part, the importance of Cox's work is established by reference to the changing nature of world order and the critical stance of his work. Unlike other approaches, it is argued, Cox's intellectual stance makes change a central feature of the understanding of international relations. This gives it an advantage over status quo perspectives in a world order characterized by transformation. In the second section of the essay, Cox's rejection of positivism and endorsement of an historicist epistemology is evaluated. This is followed by a discussion of his method of historical structures, which embodies his assumptions about the basic components of an understanding of historical change. This is where Cox

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is most innovative, so most attention will be focused on this section of the essay. Finally, there is some brief consideration of the reception and criticism Cox's work has received. The reaction to his work raises sociology-of-knowledge questions about why his work is read, and why not, as the case may be.

Turning points and critical purposes

One senses that the course of history is at a turning point, a juncture where the opportunities for movement toward peaceful cooperation, expanded human rights, and higher standards of living are hardly less conspicuous than the prospects for intensified group conflicts, deteriorating social systems, and worsening environmental conditions.¹

As Rosenau's comments suggest, the contemporary world order is characterized by change. In a trivial sense, of course, change never stops. There is, as Helleiner has paraphrased Braudel, a "world of events" in which to place the day-to-day changes that impact on us directly as individuals.² Second, there is the "conjunctural" time of trends that take place over ten, twenty or fifty years. This "history of gentle rhythms, of groups and groupings" has been the focus of social scientists and historians. Beyond this there is the very long run – the *longue durée* – that might cover a number of centuries and which focuses on the broadest patterns and structures.³

The most obvious recent instance of conjunctural change is the apparent end of the Cold War, which is perceived to have fundamentally transformed the preexisting pattern of relations between states. East–West tensions are no longer thought by most observers to dominate the inter-state system. Ethnic and related conflicts within states and former states are now widely understood to be significant. In fact, as Cox has observed, there is a change *in* the Cold War, not a change *from* the Cold War. Formally, the Cold War between the United States and USSR has passed into history, but there is a substantive meaning to the Cold War which has to do with the construction and maintenance of a set of structures – the national security state, the ideology of national security itself, intelligence and surveillance systems, and the co-optation of the political leadership of subordinate states, amongst other things. These structures remain in place, although they are now much less stable as events in Japan, Italy, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia attest.⁴ The inter-state certitude provided by the Cold War

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has been mourned by some commentators.⁵ Others seem to have sought solace in phenomena such as “Japan-bashing.” This change in the form of world order tensions has been matched by the growth of competitive pressures within the global economy, connected to the advent of mobile financial capital. State policy making is now conditioned by the need to attract these financial flows, expressed in the commitment to an appropriate “business climate.”⁶

These twin developments have altered the nature of authority in the global system and upset the intellectual means through which international relations is interpreted. The absence of formal super-power conflict and the emphasis on competitiveness within the global economy have decreased the leverage of states and seemingly increased that of corporations and other institutions of global civil society. Mainstream approaches to international relations have not lived up to their scientific aspirations and have failed to predict these developments. The change in the form of the Cold War came as more or less a complete shock to the policy intellectuals informed by neorealist and related frameworks. As Richard Falk has suggested, this “disciplinary ‘oversight’ was not a matter of a surprise development but represented the overnight collapse of the intellectual framework that had guided academicians and policymakers for decades and was expected to last indefinitely.”⁷ The demonstrated inadequacies of mainstream approaches to international relations place a premium on theoretical innovation in the study of international relations in the 1990s. The gap between predictive aspiration and predictive failure suggests new departures are required, that the assumptions that guided theory building in the postwar era were tied to the needs of that time. New times require new thinking. Robert W. Cox’s work provides one cogent set of concepts with which to approach change in world order.

The crucial thing to understand about Cox’s framework is that he begins with a different purpose in mind to that of neorealist international relations scholars. This is the key to the flexibility of his approach when considered beside that of neorealist orthodoxy, in the context of global change. Cox argues that there are two broad purposes for theory.⁸ The first is problem solving. Problem solving assumes that the major components of the system, such as states, are not subject to fundamental change. They provide the limits of the system in which the action occurs. It is the action, not the limits of the system, that is the analytical focus of problem solving. Critical

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theory steps outside the confines of the existing set of relationships to identify the origins and developmental potential of these phenomena. While problem solving theory assumes the functional coherence of existing phenomena, critical theory seeks out the sources of contradiction and conflict in these entities and evaluates their potential to change into different patterns. There is an ethical dimension to the distinction as well, because problem-solving theory, in its concern with solving problems that arise in distinct parts of a complex whole aims to "smooth the functioning of the whole," whilst critical theory "allows for a normative choice in favour of a social and political order different from the prevailing order."⁹

Problem solving and critical theory are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They may be understood to address different concerns or levels within one overall story. However, as Cox argues, the salience of each approach to international relations will vary in relation to each other depending on historical conditions. In conditions of relative stability in the fundamental structures and relationships that constitute international relations, problem-solving work is likely to be more salient. There will be more of a fit between the explanations offered by the various theoretical approaches that make up the problem-solving mainstream and scholarly and public perceptions of international relations phenomena. As Cox observes, for problem solving, "The Cold War was one such period."¹⁰ When this fit becomes too loose, as seems to be the case in the context of the global economy of the 1990s with its heightened competitiveness, the utility of problem-solving theory breaks down and scholars, the general public, and policy makers become more receptive as communities to new ideas that challenge conventional dogmas and received understandings about the limits of the system. Cox's ideas for such a critical theory are examined in the following section.

Coxian historicism¹¹

Cox matches his interest in transformations in world order and his critical purpose to an historicist set of assumptions about acquiring knowledge. Historicism can be contrasted with positivism, which tends to provide the assumptions for those with problem-solving purposes. Positivism is that school within philosophy of science which holds that the only means by which claims to knowledge about the world can be sustained is through an appeal to experience, obser-

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vation, and testing.¹² As Hollis and Smith and Cox comment, positivism, or behavioralism as it has been known in international relations, takes the methods of the natural sciences (specifically, Newtonian physics) as its guiding light. Adopting this approach, observes Cox,

involves positing a separation of subject and object. The data of politics are externally perceived events brought about by the interaction of actors in a field. The field itself, being an arrangement of actors, has certain properties of its own which can be called "systemic." The concept of "cause" is applicable within such a framework of forces. Powerful actors are "causes" of change in the behavior of less powerful ones, and the structure of the system "causes" certain forms of behavior on the part of actors.¹³

The problem with this approach, according to Cox, is that it cannot account for significant, that is, structural, change which transcends Braudel's "world of events." As Cox writes, "insofar as this approach aspires to a general science of society, it cannot discriminate between times and places."¹⁴ The problem with a "general (read: universally applicable) science of society" is that although it can allow for variance in technological capacities and the leverage of actors, it cannot allow for fundamental divergences in "either the basic nature of the actors (power-seeking) or in their mode of interaction (power-balancing)." In the positivist method, the

universality of these basic attributes of the social system comes to be perceived as standing outside of and prior to history. History becomes but a mine of data illustrating the permutations and combinations that are possible within an essentially unchanging human story.¹⁵

Within international relations, this ahistorical worldview is evident in realism's transhistoricization of states as ever-present elements of world order. As Gill writes, by contrast, for Cox, "there are different forms of state and world orders, whose conditions of existence, constitutive principles and norms vary over time."¹⁶ Accordingly, "no trans-historical essentialism or homeostasis is imputed to any given social system or world order."¹⁷ Social science theories which postulate general or universally valid laws or human regularities are not sustainable, except where the temporal boundaries of these laws are acknowledged. Things change over time, including what might be thought of as basic driving forces. Positivism can be useful, but only within "defined historical limits." It is the research program or

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method of historicism, Cox notes, "to reveal the historical structures characteristic of particular eras within which such regularities prevail."¹⁸ The next section considers this method.

Method of historical structures

The notion of a framework for action or historical structure is a picture of a particular configuration of forces. This configuration does not determine actions in any direct, mechanical way but imposes pressures and constraints. Individuals and groups may move with the pressures or resist and oppose them, but they cannot ignore them. To the extent that they do successfully resist a prevailing historical structure they buttress their actions with an alternative, emerging configuration of forces, a rival structure.¹⁹

Cox's method of historical structures is an innovative and significant contribution to the study of international relations. While others have written on Gramsci and the influence of social forces on global relations, Cox's unique method for understanding the structures of world order has not been matched elsewhere in the emerging critical tradition for its flexibility and adaptability to research problems. Unlike other methods, Cox's approach is designed to incorporate both the static and dynamic aspects of structures, and thus the use of historicist and positivist epistemologies is conceivable within the parameters of his method, in different instances.

There are two major moments in Cox's research program. The first moment is that of static or synchronic understanding. It has to do with contemplating the coherence of a social relationship within its own terms. Problem-solving theory can be put to a critical purpose here to evaluate how a relationship, an institution, a process operates in narrow or day-to-day terms. The second moment involves understanding the developmental potential in a whole. This diachronic moment seeks out the contradictions and conflicts inherent in a social structure and contemplates the characteristics of emerging social forces and the nature and extent of structural change that is feasible. Governing both these moments is a specification of the basic components, or ontology, which are understood to constitute and to interact within a structure.

How does Cox specify his ontology? In *Production, Power, and World Order* he begins by establishing the ontological significance, if not the primacy, of the production of material life.²⁰ Cox has been criticized by

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some for reductionism to production, where production is narrowly conceived. Cox certainly sees the production of the material basis of life as a fundamental activity for all human groups. Social practices evolve as collective human responses to the problem of group survival. In this sense, Cox is an historical materialist, although emphasizing Gramsci's distinction between historical materialism and historical economism. Production, for Cox, includes the production of ideas, of intersubjective meanings, of norms, of institutions and social practices, i.e., of the whole context of ideas and institutions within which the production of material goods takes place. Looking at production is simply a way of thinking about collective life, not a reference to the "economic" sectors of human activity (such as agriculture, commerce, industry, and so forth).²¹

Cox recognizes a level of ontological selection which transcends individual choice. This is the level of intersubjective or collective meanings. Considered in this way, ontologies are sets of shared meanings, which come to define reality. Because people – including scholars – tend to think in collective ways, our actions and words tend to reproduce this understood and shared reality, even if we do not approve of it. As Cox writes, "They [ontologies] are the parameters of our existence. Knowing them to be there means knowing that other people will act as though they are there."²² The state is an historical example of an intersubjectively constituted entity created by collective human response to material conditions. This and other intersubjectively constituted entities constitute a prevailing ontology. "Ontologies are not arbitrary constructions; they are the specification of the common sense of an epoch."²³

Cox's work reflects a willingness to sample from discordant intellectual traditions to create a method. For example, he sees no contradiction in using the Weberian notion of elite and the Marxist idea of class in the same analysis, based on the specification of an elite as the political and moral leadership of a class. Elites lead historic blocs understood in the Gramscian sense as coalitions of social forces bound by consent and coercion. Elites comprise the organic intellectuals (including political leaders) who lead hegemonic and counterhegemonic formations. One of Cox's major contributions to international relations is to demonstrate the utility of Weber's ideal type method in dissecting ontological constructs.²⁴ In doing so, Cox has provided the international relations scholar with a vehicle through which a much more thoroughgoing understanding of intersubjectively

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constituted entities can be achieved. Ideal types are, in Cox's words, "a concrete and specific way of grasping the variety of actual forms" encountered in the contemporary world and in history. "Persistent patterns" amongst the selected intersubjectively constituted entities can be identified by stopping the movement of history, and "conceptually fixing a particular social practice." In simple terms, this means that the analyst must specify the core relationships and the parameters of the object in question in a systematic way before other considerations take place. The ideal type can now be compared and contrasted with other social practices to assess its significance. In the second moment, that of diachronic development, ideal types can be evaluated to assess the points of stress and conflict within respective practices.

Cox's "frameworks for action" are a development of his synchronic tool kit, incorporating a series of ideal types, as dictated by the particular circumstances under consideration. They are the gateway to diachronic understanding within his method. The task of the analyst is to specify the forces that interact in a structure, through the delineation of ideal types, and determine the "lines of force" between these different poles, which is "always an historical question to be answered by a study of the particular case."²⁵ There is no repetition of the reductionism inherent in the structural Marxist conception of a material or objective base determining an ideal or subjective superstructure (commonly referred to as the base–superstructure metaphor).²⁶ For Cox, historical structures

are contrast models: like ideal types they provide, in a logically coherent form, a simplified representation of a complex reality and an expression of tendencies, limited in their applicability to time and space, rather than fully realised developments.²⁷

Cox proposes that three broad categories of forces interact in a structure: material capabilities; ideas; and institutions. Material capabilities consist of dynamic productive capabilities (such as technology) and accumulated resources. There are at least two kinds of ideas: intersubjective meanings, which tend to cut across social divisions; and rival collective images of social order, which are specific to competing social forces based, amongst other things, on locality, ethnicity, and religion, and which relate to the material conditions of existence of the group. Institutions tend to stabilize and perpetuate a particular order. They may also acquire a degree of autonomy, take on their own life, and serve as agents of change.²⁸ They may become the "battle-

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ground" for opposing tendencies. Accordingly, institutions and the processes of struggle between contending social forces that occur within and around them have a close connection to Gramsci's discussion of hegemony.²⁹ Institutions provide the opportunity for dominant social forces to soften their social domination through the buying off of subordinate forces, thus strengthening their hold through a process of consensus building. Both hegemonic and nonhegemonic structures can be distinguished. In the latter case, social control may be maintained through explicit domination and terror.

An important consideration in Cox's method of historical structures is the limited nature of each structure. These "limited totalities" as Cox calls them, do not incorporate everything, but rather represent "a particular sphere of human activity in its historically located totality." The problem inherent in problem-solving theory, of holding everything static through the *ceteris paribus* invocation is avoided in Cox's method by "juxtaposing and connecting" historical structures in related spheres. Diachronic understanding is introduced by deriving structures from historical situations rather than abstract models of world order, and by anticipating the development of rival or counter-hegemonic structures.

My research on the impact of wholesale credit rating in the global economy is an example of the exploration of just such a limited totality.³⁰ In this research I explore the ideas central to the rating process which derive from prevailing models of economic and financial analysis. The material capabilities of the process are evaluated, as they relate to the impact of downgrading on the cost of capital. Lastly, rating agencies and related institutions are examined as sources of authority in competition with other institutions involved in allocating capital, including governments. This work has suggested the existence of a nascent counterhegemonic structure in Europe opposed to some of the features of this existing limited totality, based on sources of material capability (the Euromarkets), and a different history of capital allocation practices from that prevailing in the United States.

The final element to Cox's research program or method is to place the hegemonic and counterhegemonic structures that have been identified by the analyst, comprising sets of material capabilities, ideas and institutions, into three broad "levels" or "spheres" of the social world.³¹ These three spheres consist of the social forces related to production, forms of state, and world orders. These levels are not in any fixed relationship to each other, just as the three categories of forces