Introduction

David Ingram

Published online: 17 Dec 2019.

Submit your article to this journal ⬀

Article views: 164

View related articles ⬀

View Crossmark data ⬀

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Introduction

David Ingram

Department of Philosophy, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

Author's introduction

The last 30 years have witnessed a momentous shift in our thinking about international justice. Since the end of the Cold War, humanitarian law has become a prominent tool in the struggle against genocide and other human rights violations. The dislodging of international relations from state-centric concerns regarding the balance of power and maintenance of international peace brought in its train a further departure from the old paradigm of *realpolitik*. Thanks to growing awareness of the impact of heightened economic globalization on the world's poor, underdevelopment has emerged alongside social justice and human rights as a pressing matter of deep concern. The study I propose in *World Crisis and Underdevelopment* aims to develop a critical theory that draws together these normative concerns within a critique of contemporary global capitalism.

Critical theory reflects on the social crisis as the inextricable dilemma of our times. *World Crisis and Underdevelopment* extends this reflection to illuminate the injustices and social pathologies that specifically inform poverty remediation and social development within the current global order. My *institutional* analysis of that order draws from a wide range of thinkers within critical theory. Although it chiefly takes its normative bearings from Habermas' theory of communicative action and Honneth's theory of recognition, it also appropriates much of the social contractarian tradition descending from Rawls and his followers along with insights developed by proponents of the capabilities approach.

As I see it, critical theory's chief advantage over competing approaches lies in its linkage of theory and practice. In contrast to idealizing theory, it situates itself at the crossroads of historical reality and experience. How the disadvantaged experience deprivation and powerlessness as a modality of structural *coercion* guides its criticism. A theory whose aim is to clarify and critically deepen that experience – and theoretical enlightenment can do nothing more than explain widespread feelings of unhappiness and injustice with an eye towards inducing emancipatory struggle – must conceive its task modestly, as crystalizing potentials for short-term and long-term change within the limits of historically malleable humanity, its evolving nature and institutions.

In my opinion, most of what passes as critical theory today has dissociated itself from empirical social science and what, for lack of a better term, might be described as applied social theory. Critical theory's original guiding thought as laid out by Karl Marx and later by Max Horkheimer in his famous manifesto, *Traditional and Critical Theory* – to shed light on contemporary social struggles for purposes of enlightening progressive tendencies – has been largely replaced by critical commentary on critical theorists themselves – an important and necessary task, to be sure, but not the ultimate aim. After years of writing a commentary on theorists – some of which is continued in the present study – I have turned my attention to thicker descriptions of the concrete institutions, social practices, and social actors inhabiting the current global system. As I have attempted to show in my companion text to *World Crisis and Underdevelopment*, *The Ethics of Development: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2018), which I co-authored with Thomas Derdak, philosopher and founder of Global Alliance for Africa, a great deal of critical social description can be undertaken by contrasting competing social perspectives on globalization, its institutions, and its recurring crises, without having to wade too deeply into the waters of abstract theory.

Focusing as I do on applied social theory has come at the cost of my developing finer-grained commentary and theory-building. Taking a path of least resistance, I have simply borrowed insights from a number of different thinkers. As for the normative impulse that chiefly impels my study – a theory of agency – I have mainly relied on the pioneering work of two very different thinkers who have at various times characterized their projects as retrieving the Hegelian legacy and its distinctly social (intersubjective and recognitive) account of free agency. In Habermas' theory of communicative action, I find resources for developing an ontological account of agency that, when suitably supplemented by an historical theory of modernity, also has potential to provide scaffolding for an abstract moral theory of universal human rights and political democracy. In Honneth's theory of recognition and social freedom, I find an ethical complement to Habermas' theory that focuses much more concretely on the interactive dynamics of modern social practices and institutions.

In general, what has been described as the ethical turn in critical theory towards concrete historical understanding and thick institutional description offers a refreshing antidote to a procedural focus on formal accountability. The latter focus, as explained by Habermas, eschews any reference to the non-universalizable value-laden motivations that inform the shared understandings of everyday agents in their institutionally embedded interactions. At the same time, the procedural reconstruction of mutually accountable interaction offers a way to begin to conceive the possibility of a universal dimension of morality that transcends the parochial ethical understandings of concretely situated actors: human rights.

As I point out in the introduction to *World Crisis and Underdevelopment*, these theories, as they have been richly elaborated by their authors, are programmatic and have yet to be worked out in a fully coherent manner. Aside from their somewhat conflicting accounts of societal practices and institutions – Habermas' strong differentiation between lifeworld and system versus Honneth's de-differentiation of the same being one example that comes to mind – both theories have been criticized for harbouring a Eurocentric bias in their interpretation of what counts as universal 'progress' at both individual and societal levels of development. Indeed, as Amy

Allen, drawing from Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault, trenchantly argues the concept of universal progress is itself intrinsically suspect.

Although I share Allen's concern, I do not think that critical theory can nor should abandon all references to the idea of progress (and neither, I take it, does Allen). In *World Crisis and Underdevelopment*, I argue that theories of progress are historically path-dependent. What critical theorists, drawing from the German Idealist tradition, refer to as modern progress is predominantly (perhaps exclusively) informed by the European experience. The claim to universality made on behalf of a European experience of modern enlightenment was, in fact, ideological. It was true (for European-descended peoples) to the extent that it was embedded in a historical narrative that interpreted the end of slavery and feudalism and the birth of liberal freedom, equality, and democracy as progress. It was false (for non-European descended peoples) who suffered the violence of European ethnocentrism, racism, and colonialism in the name of those very same ideals.

So why retain such a benighted notion as progress (or development)? Social criticism could survive the loss of grand narratives of progress. One could simply narrow one's critical focus to this or that group having suffering uncontestable material deprivation (starvation, say) or violence/disrespect (genocide or torture, say). Decrying these kinds of outrages requires no theory – not even ethical theory. Theory becomes necessary in explaining, to ourselves and others, why we feel compelled to decry them. Beyond that, a theory is needed to explain why societal safeguards might be needed to protect against them.

Justifying our moral outrage against this or that injustice supplemented by a desire for this or that societal reform needn't require anything like a universal theory of progress. Immanent criticism grounded on a given community's (unfulfilled) moral expectations can suffice. However, if the outrages in question are not local but global, and if we then expect that anyone should perceive that outrage as we do, and that therefore some reforms are necessary or at any rate better than others, then taking a step in the direction of universal morality and comparative assessments of progress in social reform is unavoidable. Certainly, our universal-settled judgement that slavery, genocide, torture, and starvation are wrong might overlap or converge for different (perhaps incommensurable) theoretical reasons, but the bare assertion that there exists such a convergence and that the convergence is right will require a theory of progress.

This will be a theory of *relative* progress accompanied by a theory of r*elative* loss or regress. As critical theorists ceaselessly point out, progress within any social dimension is 'dialectical.' That holds doubly true when talking about conflicts between dimensions. Thus, the destruction of traditional life wrought by European modernity 'emancipated' European *individuals* from certain forms of hierarchically structured solidarity groupings while subjecting them to new forms of hierarchy, domination, and 'egalitarian' mass society and 'democratic' civic solidarity. And the economic changes associated with that emancipatory subjugation, namely those accompanying the emergence of capitalism, were accompanied by new legal-technical forms of domination that, in turn, both enabled and undermined individualism and civic solidarity.

Progress is relative – historically, dimensionally, and contextually. What enables – and to a certain extent justifies our use of – the idea of *universal* progress is the fact of globalization itself. Thanks to a process of globalization that extends back hundreds of

years, the economic-legal system that originated in Europe has generated the same threats to human well-being and the same (or similar) moral responses to those threats everywhere, even though the precise manifestation of threat and response varies from place to place.

That said, historical memory is probably not (pace Honneth) the main reason why non-Europeans (as opposed to Europeans) would regard human rights as a permanent template for universal moral progress. A more plausible reason why many non-Europeans regard human rights this way – and one which leads me to note another weakness in the phenomenologically motivated idealism implicit in Habermas' and Honneth's normative theories – is that, as Andrew Feenberg puts it, the material resistance of legal-economic-political techno-systems generates its own momentum that cannot be undone, save for some apocalyptic catastrophe. Non-Europeans, for the most part, have no long Hegelian memory of the events that compelled the formation of the modern European *Rechtsstaat*, its imperialistic demise and postwar social democratic rebirth (which is not to deny that they may have a different memory of analogous events in their nation's past). Instead of regarding human rights as the necessary, progressive culmination of a painful and protracted learning process, they are likely to regard it simply as a more or less permanent feature of the global modernization process that has engulfed them. For them, the 'rights of man and citizen' are increasingly becoming a new second nature by force of imposition as much as by moral struggle, just as they became second nature for Europeans during the long course of juridical modernization that inaugurated the end of feudalism (*Gemeinschaft*) and the birth of civil society (*Gesellschaft*).

Now that I have explained why I think 'progress' and 'development' can (and must) find some qualified application in critical theory, let me turn to the argument of my book. As I mentioned above, *World Crisis and Underdevelopment* does not aim to develop a new comprehensive critical theory of development. Rather, it draws its inspiration from a number of critical theory traditions. I adumbrate my own critical re-appropriation of these traditions and other normative traditions within Anglo-American social philosophy in the Introduction. This theoretical discussion follows upon a short synopsis of global crisis tendencies and the failure of international institutions to remedy them commensurate with their own expectations. Here I defend global justice and human rights as two distinctive approaches to measuring the wrongs inflicted on the poor and vulnerable by a global capitalist system and its institutional pillars. I also propose several controversial theses, including the thesis that agency itself consists of conflicting aspects, that competing narratives of development highlight one aspect of agency (and freedom) to the exclusion of others, and that determining the causes of poverty and economic inequality is not necessary for determining whether poverty is unjust and whether we have duties to remedy it; the coercive nature of extreme poverty in its disparate positioning of persons with respect to opportunities for leading a worthwhile life suffices to condemn it. Another controversial thesis I propose is that humanitarian law (for example, the prohibition against human trafficking) can confront those it ostensibly protects as an unsuspected form of coercion. Criminalizing human trafficking and coercing those who voluntarily consent to being trafficked to testify as witnesses against traffickers impose risks on those who are

trafficked and fails to address the coercion effected by a global economic system that regularly produces poverty, social inequality, and insecurity.

In order to grasp the phenomenon of coercion as a function of structural and social incapacitation, I begin by discussing (in chapter one) the concept of agency. Agency is the basic capability (or good) that human beings must have in order to acquire other capabilities. It forms the core of our freedom and thus constitutes one of the most central foci of human rights protection. It also constitutes the heart of social justice; for if agency implicates a distinctly social conception of freedom, as I think it must, freedom from social domination born of excessive social inequality must be one of its conditions.

Chapter one elaborates the concept of agency as social freedom. I begin this chapter by criticizing minimalist accounts of agency that neglect agency's social dimension. This dimension, I argue, is partly captured by Hegel's understanding of the importance of social recognition, in which what is done as well as who is doing it depends on the critical confirmation from others. From this quasi-ontological characterization, which can be analysed in terms of a model of communicative interaction of the sort developed by Habermas, Brandom, and Pippin, I then propose, following Honneth and Taylor, several ethically richer schemes of social recognition. The *historical (or teleological)* scheme distinguishes between traditional and modern forms of social recognition, with the former based on the fulfilment of concrete role expectations within social hierarchies premised on honour and unquestioned (often inherited) authority, and the latter based on the fulfilment of abstract role expectations within egalitarian relationships of mutual accountability premised on mutual respect for the dignity and freedom of the other. The *societal* scheme distinguishes between familial, moral, and socio-ethical types of social recognition. These types of recognition foster (respectively) self-confidence (through loving relationships), self-respect (through moral relationships), and self-esteem (through forms of cooperative work and group membership).

Elaborating on this schema, I further differentiate social recognition and agency, noting that different types of agency and social recognition can be developed in opposition to each other. Here I endorse Nancy Fraser's criticism of Honneth's reduction of economic, political, and cultural injustices to experiences of misrecognition. Following her lead, I suggest that we view all injustices – if not all forms of social pathology–as violations of a principle of participatory parity in discussing not only cultural roles, economic distributions, and political systems of representation, but in questioning the basic frameworks in which such questions of justice are raised in the first place. In the final analysis, I propose a combination of Fraser's Habermas-inspired deontological theory of democratic justice and Honneth's teleological theory of recognitive development. Thus, using the example of microcredit in a social context still marked by traditional forms of recognition, I argue that the development of feminist agency, which may come at the expense of welfare agency, requires an expansive understanding of agency that entails participatory parity in all three dimensions of social interaction.

Chapter two exposes the underlying racism and ethnocentrism of modern development theory, specifically highlighting the failure of public policy and ethical theory to adequately conceptualize the relationship between poverty and coercion. I begin with a discussion of the debate over the causes of poverty in the USA and the importance of

social recognition in establishing a notion of rational autonomy. I argue that the two dominant views embedded in public policy expertise – that poverty is caused by deficient cognitive and moral habits of the poor (the so-called 'culture of poverty' view) and that poverty is caused by lack of economic opportunities (the so-called 'structural imposition of poverty' view) – oversimplify a more complex reality. The moral and cognitive 'habits' of the poor often reflect rational choices in the short term that are sub-optimal in the long run; but these choices, however free and rational they may be, are not wholly unconstrained. They are coerced by situations characterized by lack of opportunity. In contrast to the abstract, individualistic understanding of free, rational choice (autonomy) found in liberal social contract theory, I defend a social-interactive view, which emphasizes the unreliability of our individual-centred knowledge of others, which unavoidably relies on second-hand expertise. Given the superficial picture of poverty provided by so-called experts, typically depicted as shortfalls in household income, and the susceptibility of such supposedly value-neutral data to multiple – conservative and progressive – interpretations, I argue that 'poverty knowledge' should take its bearings from qualitative field research grounded in narrative interpretation of the sort that was pioneered by the Chicago Settlement movement. So construed, poverty knowledge would shed its deceptive appearance as a value-neutral, objective science and become a partisan advocate on behalf of enlightening, emancipating, and empowering the poor.

Using a combined discourse- and recognition-theoretic approach to reforming poverty expertise, I then turn to several models that have been proposed for implementing international development. Despite its checkered history as recounted in post-colonial literature, the right to development, I argue, can become an effective right once it is theoretically elaborated and practically implemented in dialogical collaboration between local communities and experts. The disadvantages of direct aid, even when it involves mediation of technical expertise and local knowledge, recommend alternative strategies of development that build on inclusive economic collaboration between cooperative worker-management experiments and foreign businesses. Fair trade relationships need to abide by discourse ethical norms of cooperation that respect the dignity and interests of all parties. However, as I point out, such negotiations will be constrained so long as power imbalances between providers and recipients of developmental assets persist.

Part two examines some of the most important global crises that threaten development today: coercive migration, poverty and global inequality, and environmental destruction. Chapter three discusses the ethical, political, and legal responsibilities associated with modern migration. Political refugees fleeing violence continue to suffer human rights violations and injustices at the hands of their would-be protectors, who have few qualms about treating them as criminals. The justification for this treatment is the suspicion that self-identified political refugees are really economic opportunists. I argue that the distinction between political and economic migrants fails to apply when one scrutinizes today's global political economy, in which varying degrees of political abuse intersect a coercive and hostile economic environment. Economic refugees who engage the services of smugglers belie the stereotype of passive victims; being neither accomplice to nor the victim of crime, the migrant who is compelled to violate the law out of desperation diminishes her own agency. I argue, however, that uprooting oneself

from a community of social recognition out of economic necessity is agency diminish-ing even when undertaken legally. This diminishment is experienced by both migrants and the families (especially the children) they leave behind.

In my opinion, neither communitarian nor cosmopolitan moral theories adequately respond to the dilemmas faced by migrants who are forced to sacrifice some portion of their agency. Standing between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism, discourse ethics, I submit, responds more sensitively to this dilemma. Although discourse ethics provides a warrant for questioning border and immigration policy, its true value, I argue, resides in mandating an empathetic application of immigration law in a way that does justice to the uniquely coercive life circumstances of each claimant to asylum.

Chapter four examines the economic forces that drive migration. I begin by exam-ining one political factor underlying these forces: the imperial hegemony exercised by the USA and its allies in imposing a neo-liberal regime of finance and trade that perpetuates neo-colonial dependency and inequality between developed and developing nations. After laying out the multiple social contractarian duties of repair and care that the USA and its allies have with respect to the global poor subject to their governance, I analyse the global economy from a less political social contractarian perspective. I ask whether an unregulated (viz. free) global trade regime of the sort defended by neoliberal apologists can be justified as mutually beneficial to all contracting parties. Crucial to my inquiry is an analysis of the principle of comparative advantage that economists invoke in touting the benefits of free trade in reducing poverty and advancing development.

In recommending models of poverty reduction and development that endorse fair trade principles permitting protectionist and import-substitution policies for develop-ing nations, I defend internationally engaged forms of economic cooperation that take account of the environmental and climatological effects of global production. Although I do not discount the advantages of combining market-based solutions to this problem with stronger forms of democratic regulation, I submit that any such model of green, sustainable development needs to be qualified by a sober analysis of the growth dynamics driving capitalism, which undermine efforts at government regulation. I therefore conclude that, given *this* contradiction between capitalism and democracy, any long-term solution to the chief economic and political crisis of our era will require infusing the economy with discourse ethical principles of the sort commensurate with market socialism and workplace democracy.

Special duties owed to co-nationals and foreigners who participate in, or find themselves subjected to, legal–political relationships of trade, finance, and imperial domination, must be distinguished from the truly universal cosmopolitan duties owed to all human beings with whom we might have a lesser degree of contact. The question I address in chapter five is whether such universal duties, specifically as they flow from human rights, provide a different set of reasons for condemning the economic injustices noted above. For example, ecological costs of doing business that endanger human rights might not be justifiable by appeal to overall greater benefits of doing business. If this is so, I argue, it is because human rights law imposes a duty on states to provide robust levels of social welfare to their subjects that should not be hindered by condi-tions of finance and trade imposed on states by the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and other global economic multilaterals (GEMs).

It might be argued that such a robust interpretation of human rights cannot be justified or practically implemented. Following an argument developed recently by Allen Buchanan, I argue that the problem of rights inflation, while real, is partly a figment of the philosophical fantasy that there is only one justification for human rights: their moral role in protecting the individual agency. Once we drop this Mirroring View (as Buchanan refers to it) we are free to think of human rights as having multiple moral grounds, compatible with collectivist moralities, group rights, and the procurement of social welfare.

Having refuted one-sided political, constitutional, and ethical (agent-centred) theories of human rights, I argue that an institutional understanding of human rights must accompany an interactional understanding, *if* we are to grasp the full range of justiciable human rights claims (both criminal and civil) that touch on poverty and resource deprivation. This explains why the official addressees of human rights should be expanded to include non-state institutions. I conclude by defending a human right to democratic participation, which I argue must be respected at the level of global governance as well.

Chapter six examines the legitimation crisis facing the current human rights regime. Lack of accountability, both internal and external, has rendered this regime powerless to mitigate current humanitarian crises. Reforming that regime, I submit, requires infusing it with constitutional structure of the kind found in liberal democracy. This regime should incorporate institutions that function more like legislative, judicial, and executive bodies without, however, evolving into a full-fledged, democratic world government.

Buchanan's qualified justification of the current regime poses a serious challenge to my thesis insofar as he understands the regime's legitimacy as sufficiently established by its modular composition and dependence on sovereign democratic states. Although I agree that Buchanan's *ecological* understanding of the relationship between international human rights law and sovereign states is basically correct and allows for potential reform of the human rights system in ways that will increase its overall legitimacy, I submit that it does not go far enough in addressing concerns that Buchanan himself raises regarding human rights treaty law as an instrument for combatting global poverty and climate change.

To see how this might be done, I examine Habermas' much-debated proposal for making the UNSC and the General Assembly more democratically accountable and less subject to manipulation by entrenched government interests. Habermas' intriguing proposal for integrating transnational negotiations regarding trade, development, and global environmental risks into human rights law as well as his suggestion that international human rights courts exercise some kind of review over executive decisions renders plausible a global institution that Habermas endorses at the domestic level: a constitutional court. Taking up this intriguing possibility, I examine the *Kadi* case in which judicial review has already been effectively exercised by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) with respect to the UN Security Council's unconstitutional listing of individuals suspected of terrorist activity.

The final chapter examines the possibilities for achieving solidarity in fighting global poverty and global environmental damage. Among the various types of solidarity, civic solidarity shows promise as an achievable cosmopolitan goal. However, its volatile

combination of cosmopolitan and national loyalties raises obvious doubts on this score. One such doubt is scepticism about the human rights that compose its cosmopolitan core. Two sceptical challenges merit special consideration in this regard: the charge that human rights conflict with national obligations and the objection that they reflect a Western secular bias.

Responding to the first objection, I argue that the conflict between human rights and duties to the community, although internal to the humanitarian order, expresses a conflict that can occur between any human rights, in this instance between human rights ascribed to individuals and those ascribed to groups. Not only are group-ascribed human rights genuinely irreducible to individual-ascribed human rights, but both rights together capture the dual kinds of solidarity that should inform global democratic governance. A further concern that democratic deliberation erodes group solidarity likewise vindicates democracy's genuine potential to critically transform cultural identities without, however, undermining cultural attachments as such. Encouraging cultural groups to reflectively revise their self-understandings in dialogue with other groups further facilitates the convergence of group solidarities and cosmopolitan solidarity.

This fact informs my response to the second objection, which holds that human rights and secular democracy conflict with the core commitments of Islam and other world religions. I argue that this objection is not only unsubstantiated but neglects the contribution of world religion as the most original cosmopolitan form of solidarity – and one, moreover, that has recently assumed prominence in promoting human rights and secular democracy. This contribution depends on the capacity of believers and non-believers alike to avail themselves of the cultural values solidifying social justice struggles within the civil dialogue, qualified by the constraints of public reason.

The existence of sectarian fundamentalism reminds us of the formidable barriers that must be overcome in order to achieve solidarity. In this regard global capitalism imposes an especially formidable barrier. Not only does capitalism feed a self-centred consumer mentality that is hostile to communal forms of solidarity, but it exacerbates class conflict. Its pathological forgetfulness of any socially recognized community beyond that of economic status scarcely permits empathy for the world's poor and vulnerable.

I conclude that the possibility of achieving cosmopolitan civic solidarity depends on forging a different kind of cosmopolitan solidarity: Network solidarity. Building upon the organic interdependence of groups struggling on behalf of different constituents, network solidarity opens lines of political communication that expand the internal identifications and attachments of regional and sectorial social justice movements to encompass a broader, cosmopolitan horizon of solidarity. My analysis of the social factors engendering network solidarity – a preference for mutually beneficial cooperation, a consciousness of social dependency, and an awareness of luck's role in assigning us our place in life – compels a guardedly optimistic assessment of the prospects for achieving cosmopolitan civic solidarity.

I add this personal note as a final guidepost for the reader. *World Crisis and Underdevelopment* is dedicated to Herbert Marcuse, who by his teaching and conduct inspired my interest in critical theory as a vehicle for political practice. Although I do not cite him, this book honours his utopian vision. My life can be read from these pages

as well: I organized boycotts on behalf of the United Farm Workers Union, accompanied Loyola's students on their journey of awakening to Central America and the Caribbean, worked with Guatemalan refugees and community organizers in Chicago, and learned about the possibilities and limits of development while visiting the slums of Kibera with aid providers. I hope *World Crisis and Underdevelopment* vindicates in theory what our collective struggles have honoured in practice.