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Hegelian Philosophy and the Problem of Instrumental Reason in International Relations

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*Reason, of which we have said
that it rules in the world, is
a word as indeterminate
as providence.*

Hegel

Enlightenment is totalitarian.

Horkheimer & Adorno

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Abstract

This study examines the enduring influence of G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy on International Relations (IR) theory, tracing its roots from the Enlightenment to contemporary debates on order, reason, and sovereignty. It reconstructs how Hegel's dialectical rationalism and his conception of the state as the actualization of freedom have shaped liberal, solidarist, and constructivist traditions. Hegelian notions of historical progress, ethical statehood, and recognition between states are shown to provide a foundational normative framework for theories of international society, constitutionalism, and cosmopolitanism. A critical rupture is then introduced through the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, whose critique of the Enlightenment challenges the teleological optimism of Hegelian rationalism. Drawing on Adorno's negative dialectics, the analysis shows that reason does not necessarily culminate in emancipatory order, but may reproduce domination, bureaucratic rationalization, and systemic pathologies in global politics. By contrasting Hegel's affirmative dialectic with Adorno's critique of dialectical resolution, this analysis views International Relations (IR) theory as a field where projects of rational

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progress face growing scrutiny over reason's potential complicity with domination. This tension is further linked to the contemporary crisis of the liberal international order, where institutional erosion, hegemonic fragmentation, and authoritarian resurgence reveal the limits of both rationalist and critical paradigms when taken in isolation. A self-reflexive engagement with the normative stakes of reason remains essential for understanding the possibilities and limits of order in international life.

Keywords: Hegel, Enlightenment, dialectics, critical theory, International Relations

Resumen

Este estudio examina la influencia duradera de la filosofía de G. W. F. Hegel en la teoría de las Relaciones Internacionales (RR. II.), rastreando sus raíces desde la Ilustración hasta los debates contemporáneos sobre orden, razón y soberanía. Se reconstruye cómo el racionalismo dialéctico hegeliano y su concepción del Estado como actualización de la libertad han configurado tradiciones liberales, solidaristas y constructivistas. Las nociones de progreso histórico, Estado ético y reconocimiento entre estados se presentan como un marco normativo fundamental para las teorías de la sociedad internacional, el constitucionalismo y el cosmopolitismo. Posteriormente, se introduce la ruptura crítica formulada por Max Horkheimer y Theodor W. Adorno, cuya crítica de la Ilustración cuestiona el optimismo teleológico del racionalismo hegeliano. A partir de la dialéctica negativa de Adorno, el análisis muestra que la razón no culmina necesariamente en un orden emancipatorio, sino que puede reproducir formas de dominación, racionalización burocrática y patologías sistémicas en la política global. Al poner en diálogo la dialéctica afirmativa de Hegel con la dialéctica negativa de Adorno, la teoría de las RR. II. es analizada como un campo estructurado por una tensión no resuelta entre proyectos de progreso racional y críticas de la razón como instrumento de dominación. Esta tensión se vincula con la crisis contemporánea del orden internacional liberal. Una reflexión autocrítica sobre la razón resulta clave para comprender los límites y posibilidades del orden internacional.

Palabras clave: Hegel, Ilustración, dialéctica negativa, teoría crítica, Relaciones Internacionales

International Relations Theory and the Enlightenment Legacy: Hegel as a Foundational Voice

International Relations theory, as a formal academic discipline, is conventionally traced to the aftermath of the First World War and the founding of the first dedicated chair at Aberystwyth in 1919. Yet this institutional genealogy conceals a deeper philosophical inheritance. The normative and epistemological premises of IR theory -the rationality of the state, the progressive potential of international law, and the possibility of rule-governed order- were inherited from the Enlightenment (1685–1815). Recovering this inheritance is essential to understanding the theoretical disputes that continue to shape the discipline, and it is within this intellectual trajectory that Hegel occupies a foundational position.

The Enlightenment, broadly understood as the intellectual movement that transformed Western European political culture from the late seventeenth century onward, placed reason at the foundation of both individual and collective life. Against the inherited authority of

revelation, faith, tradition, and dynastic legitimacy, its major thinkers argued that human beings possess the rational capacity to understand and change their world and to reorganize their shared institutions accordingly. Locke (1689/1988), for example, grounded political legitimacy in “consent and natural rights”, establishing the premise that government derives its authority from the governed: a claim that would later underwrite liberal theories of international order and the rights of peoples to self-determination. In another sense, Rousseau (1762/1968) complicated this liberal picture by insisting that the general will, rather than the aggregation of private interests, constitutes the only authentic basis of political community, thereby opening a tension between democratic self-determination and cosmopolitan governance that, from our point of view, IR theory has never fully resolved.

Adding to the discussion, Kant (1795/1991) carried these threads most systematically into the international sphere: his “Perpetual Peace” philosophical essay proposed a federation of republican states bound by cosmopolitan right, arguing that the rational telos of international political development was a condition in which war would be structurally eliminated rather than merely contained. Together, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant define the greater philosophical horizon against which Hegel’s distinctive contribution must be situated.

Hegel’s relationship with the Enlightenment heritage is neither a matter of mere continuity nor a simple rupture. His dialectical thought was not predetermined *a priori*; rather, it emerged through the complex interplay of historical, philosophical, and conceptual influences. He is simultaneously the tradition’s most ambitious heir and its most penetrating internal critic. On one hand, he pursued the Enlightenment’s central belief that the traditional concept of reason shapes history to its limits, arguing in “Philosophy of Right” that reality and rationality are intrinsically connected, so that what exists is ultimately rational. Reason, for the German thinker, is not a regulative ideal hovering above the historical world, perpetually frustrated by the recalcitrance of institutions; it is immanent within that world, progressively actualizing itself through the concrete forms of ethical life. On the other hand, Hegel critically examined the abstract universalism of Kantian ethics, arguing that it is overly formal and empty. According to him, it produces moral duties without concrete content and obligations without any real institutional basis, creating an ideal “ought” that is constantly at odds with the reality of historical life (Hegel, 1820/2003). From this point of view, genuine freedom is not the formal autonomy of the Kantian moral subject but the concrete freedom of a subject who recognizes herself in the institutions of her community, and above all the state as the highest actualization of ethical life.

This distinction carries immediate consequences for IR theory. When liberal internationalists of the early twentieth century invoked reason as the foundation for international institutions, they drew, knowingly or not, on a broadly Kantian framework

that Hegel had already subjected to immanent critique. The Wilsonian vision of a “League of Nations” presupposed precisely the kind of formal, institutional extension of moral universalism that Hegel had argued could never substitute for the substantive ethical communities through which reason actually “becomes real”. It was Morgenthau (1948) who, launching the realist challenge to liberal internationalism, diagnosed this moralism as not merely “naïve” but dangerous, that is, as a disposition that obscures the genuine dynamics of power politics beneath the language of supposed universal values. In this sense, the foundational Western debate of twentieth-century IR theory, between liberal idealism and political realism, can be read as a disciplinary replay of the deeper philosophical controversy between Kant and Hegel over the relationship between abstract morality and historical institutions.

Hegel’s thought occupies a pivotal position at the origins of IR theory, serving not only as a direct source that theorists consciously draw upon but also as the philosophical matrix in which the discipline’s foundational tensions were first articulated. By building on and intensifying the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason, his work provides a historically grounded account of political institutions, steering clear of both the false comforts of utopianism and the skepticism of cynicism. In addition, Hegelian epistemology develops a vocabulary of recognition and ethical community that continues to shape contemporary normative debates in the field. As Reus-Smit (1999) has argued, the constitutional structures of international society are not merely strategic arrangements but carry within them normative purposes that reflect the deeper commitments of their member states; a claim that is recognizably Hegelian in its insistence on the ethical content of institutional form. To engage seriously with Hegel is therefore not to step outside IR theory but to grasp more clearly the philosophical stakes of debates that are still very much alive.

Hegelian Rationalism and Its Imprint on IR Theory and Practice

The influence of Hegelian rationalism (opposed to classical abstract rationalism) on IR theory is neither direct nor uniform; it operates through a layered series of conceptual mediations that have shaped the discipline’s core frameworks in ways often invisible precisely because of their pervasiveness. Three nodes of influence are especially significant: the theory of recognition (*Anerkennung*) and its implications for sovereignty and interstate order; the dialectical philosophy of history and its resonance with liberal and progressive internationalist thought; and the concept of the ethical state as the fundamental normative unit of an ordered international system (currently being questioned). Taken together, these three threads reveal Hegelianism not as one theoretical option among many but as a constitutive element of the discipline’s very grammar and epistemology. The theory of recognition, elaborated most dramatically in the “master-slave dialectic” of the “Phenomenology of Spirit”, holds that self-consciousness is not a solitary achievement

but an irreducibly intersubjective one (not in the subsequent Habermasian perspective): the subject attains genuine self-knowledge only through the mediation of another subject who recognizes it (Hegel, 1807/1977). Transposed to the international sphere, this logic yields a distinctive and non-reductive account of classical sovereignty. States, like individuals, require recognition from other states to achieve their identity as fully legitimate political actors; the international system is, on this reading, not the Hobbesian state of nature in which sovereign power precedes and precludes all community, but an intersubjective (dialectical) space in which states mutually constitute one another through ongoing practices of acknowledgment, challenge, and negotiation. This insight inspired IR theorists across a range of traditions. Wendt (1999), for example, developed his constructivist theory of international politics on a distinctly Hegelian premise: identities and interests are not fixed prior to interaction, as Plato, and much later Kant, might have assumed, but are constituted through it. Similarly, the structure of anarchy is not a natural condition with predetermined behavioral consequences; rather, it is “what states make of it”. From another angle, Linklater (1998), extending this dialectic turn in a more explicitly emancipatory direction, argued that the transformation of political community requires progressively expanding the boundaries of “moral obligation” to encompass all those affected by political decisions, not merely those within state borders, a cosmopolitan ambition that draws on both the Kantian and Hegelian schools of thought while subjecting both to critical revision.

The English School, developed by Wight (1966), Bull (1977), and their successors, represents perhaps the most directly Hegelian strand within mainstream IR theory, even though this influence is likely unacknowledged. Bull’s (1977) foundational distinction between an international system, which is a mere collection of states interacting strategically, and an international society, a community of states bound by shared interests, rules, and institutions, closely parallels Hegel’s distinction between the realm of abstract right and the concrete ethical community of *Sittlichkeit* (ethical order in a broad sense). The “anarchical society” that Bull describes is neither the Hobbesian “*bellum omnium contra omnes*” (the war of all against all), nor the Kantian “cosmopolitan republic”, but something more historically specific and institutionally dense: a society of sovereign states that sustains a normative order through shared practices of, for example, diplomacy, international law, and balance of power. By contrast, Waltz (1979) challenged this picture from a structuralist realist position, insisting that the anarchical structure of the international system generates recurrent behavioral patterns regardless of the normative content of state interactions, a claim that implicitly rejects the Hegelian premise that institutional forms carry irreducible ethical significance. Yet even Mearsheimer (2001), a principal figure in offensive realism, cannot entirely escape the Hegelian problematic: his account of great-power competition presupposes states that are not merely power-maximizing units but

bearers of “historical identities” and accumulated “strategic memories”, precisely the kind of contextual particularity that Hegel’s philosophy of the state sought to capture.

The dialectical philosophy of history has left an equally profound imprint on the liberal and progressive traditions in IR, even before Marx developed his theory of historical materialist dialectics. Hegel’s argument that world history unfolds through identifiable stages toward the progressive realization of freedom (Hegel, 1837/1956) offered a powerful framework for understanding international relations as a directional historical process rather than as an endless cycle of power competition, a perspective later critiqued by the Frankfurt School and postmodern theorists. This teleological sensibility underwrites liberal internationalism from Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” to contemporary democratic peace theory, and it informs the liberal institutionalism elaborated by Keohane (1984), who argued that states can learn, over time, to cooperate and to construct self-sustaining frameworks that progressively constrain the unilateral exercise of power. Rawls (1999), in “The Law of Peoples”, offered a more discreet liberal vision: rather than a globally extended liberal justice or a cosmopolitan world state, he proposed a society of peoples, liberal and non-liberal alike, bound by principles of mutual respect and non-aggression that recall, in their structure if not their philosophical grounding, the Hegelian community of ethical states. Pogge (2002) criticized this Rawlsian reticence precisely for its failure to engage the systemic injustices of the current global institutional order, a critique that, in its moral urgency, pushes beyond the boundaries that both Rawls and Hegel drew around the normative obligations of the international community.

The Hegelian legacy is clearly reflected in the institutions that structure the postwar international order. The United Nations system, premised on the conviction that sovereign states can be brought into a rule-governed association that progressively expands the domain of law while reducing the resort to force, reflects the Hegelian belief that reason can acquire institutional form without ceasing to be reason. The project of European integration, which sought to transform the violent rivalries of the first half of the twentieth century into a supranational legal and political order, represents perhaps the most ambitious historical experiment in actualizing the Hegelian synthesis between particular state interests and a universal ethical community. Habermas (1998), analyzing this project from the perspective of communicative reason, argued that European integration constitutes a genuinely post-national constellation that forces theory to develop conceptual tools adequate to forms of political community that do not fit the Westphalian template.

This Hegelian legacy is not, however, without its profound ambiguities and internal tensions. Hegel’s insistence that the state is the highest actualization of ethical life can be read as subordinating individual rights and cosmopolitan obligations to the

imperatives of state sovereignty. More troublingly, his treatment of non-European peoples as standing outside the march of world history and progress has been rightly identified as a philosophically sophisticated form of Eurocentrism that lent intellectual legitimacy to imperial domination (Inayatullah & Blaney, 2004). It was Marx who, working from within the Hegelian tradition while radically transforming it, exposed this conservatism most sharply: the Hegelian state, far from realizing universal freedom of the proletariat, is the political form in which the particular interests of a dominant class are presented as the universal interests of the community. This Marxian deconstruction, understood as the claim that the apparent universalism of international order conceals the particularity of hegemonic interests, has given rise to a rich and enduring tradition of critical scholarship that, paradoxically, constitutes one of the most vital and consequential strands within the very Hegelianism it seeks to overcome.

This Marxian critique translates into IR theory most directly through the tradition of critical and neo-Gramscian scholarship that treats the international order not as a “neutral arena of sovereign equals” but as a structure organized around the interests of a dominant social bloc. Where mainstream liberal and institutionalist accounts describe multilateral institutions, free trade regimes, and human rights frameworks as expressions of “shared universal norms”, this Hegelian-Marxian lineage reframes them as historically specific arrangements that generalize the interests of dominant states and transnational capital while presenting that generalization as the “natural order of things”. The distinction between problem-solving theory, which takes existing institutional arrangements for granted and asks how to make them function more smoothly, and critical theory, which interrogates the origins and interests served by those very arrangements, is itself a direct descendant of the Marxian move against Hegel: it refuses to accept the “given order” as the “rational culmination of history” and instead asks whose particular position has been mistaken for the universal.

The tangible influence of this inheritance can be traced in several specific strands of the discipline. Analyses of hegemonic stability that read the postwar liberal order as a hegemonic project, sustained not merely through coercion but through the diffusion of a normative vocabulary that renders particular arrangements internationally consensual, apply the Marxian unmasking of “Hegelian universalism” directly to institutions such as the Bretton Woods system and the language of a rules-based international order. World-systems and dependency approaches extend the same logic spatially, treating the core-periphery structure of the global economy as the material substrate beneath formally equal state sovereignty. Postcolonial and historical-sociological critiques of international law and development discourse likewise draw on this Marxian move when they show how notions of civilization, modernization, or good governance have functioned to

universalize the particular historical trajectory of Western capitalist states. In each case, the Hegelian architecture of a rational, self-realizing international order survives, but only as an “object of suspicion”: the task of theory becomes that of locating the particular class or state interest concealed beneath its universalist self-presentation.

Adorno’s Negative Dialectics and the Conditions of International Reason

If Hegel represents the philosophical high-water mark of rationalist confidence in the progressive self-realization of reason through history, Theodor W. Adorno, together with Max Horkheimer, articulates one of the most consequential critiques of that confidence from within the tradition that produced it. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002), composed in American exile as the Nazi extermination machinery reached its industrial boom, is not an external attack on rationalism but an intrinsic critique, a demonstration that the very principles of reason that define the Enlightenment contain the seeds of the domination they claim to overcome. It is in this precise sense that Adorno and Horkheimer claim that “Enlightenment is totalitarian”: not that reason and fascism are equivalent, but that the logic of instrumental reason, unchecked by genuine self-reflection, tends toward a totalization that ultimately turns back upon its human subjects.

The argument unfolds as a dialectical rupture of the Hegelian narrative of historical progress. Where Hegel read the Enlightenment as the decisive moment in which reason overcomes mythology, Adorno and Horkheimer (1947/2002) argue that this period, in its drive to master and quantify the natural world, does not overcome myth but rather takes on a new form. In this form, the abstract equivalence of exchange value replaces the qualitative richness of experience, and particularity is subordinated to the demands of a dominating universal. The concept of instrumental reason names this condition: a reason that has abandoned the question of ends in order to perfect the calculation of means, and that thereby loses the capacity to critically examine the purposes in whose service it operates. Gramsci (1971), approaching the same problem from a materialist direction, identified a similar mechanism in the concept of hegemony, the capacity of dominant social groups to present their particular interests as universal values and to secure the active consent of subordinate groups through cultural and ideological means rather than mere coercion (predating soft power theory). Applied to the international order, Gramscian hegemony illuminates how the institutional architecture of the postwar liberal system can function simultaneously as genuine achievements of multilateral cooperation and as mechanisms for the subtle reproduction of structural inequality (Cox, 1981).

Cox’s contribution lies precisely in disaggregating Gramsci’s concept of hegemony into three interacting elements that could be operationalized for the analysis of world order: material capabilities, ideas, and institutions. Material capabilities refer to the

productive and destructive potential embedded in a given configuration of technology, organizational capacity, and natural resources; they set the outer limits of what any historical bloc can accomplish, but they do not by themselves determine which social forces will dominate or how that domination will be exercised. Ideas, in Cox's framework, operate on two interdependent levels: intersubjective meanings, the broadly shared understandings of how the world works that structure the very possibility of communication and cooperation among states, and collective images, the more contested visions of legitimate authority and social order held by different groups within and across states. It is at the level of intersubjective meanings that the Hegelian-Marxian dynamic identified earlier becomes analytically precise: a historic bloc's particular vision of order does not persist through coercion alone but by embedding itself as "common sense", as the taken-for-granted horizon within which alternatives become "unthinkable". Institutions are for Cox the concrete mechanisms through which a given configuration of material power and ideas is stabilized and reproduced over time; they crystallize the norms and practices of a particular order and, in doing so, lend it an appearance of permanence and neutrality that conceals its origins in a specific configuration of social forces.

The interaction among these elements is what allows Cox to reformulate Gramscian hegemony as a proper international phenomenon rather than a domestic one. A hegemonic world order, in this account, emerges when a dominant state's material capabilities are translated into a set of ideas capacious enough to be adopted, or at least tolerated, by other states and social forces as a general framework for organizing international life, and when this ideational consensus is then embedded in multilateral institutions that manage, adjudicate, and diffuse it. The Bretton Woods institutions offer the paradigmatic illustration: American postwar material preponderance was not imposed through "naked coercion" but translated into the ostensibly universal ideas of open markets, multilateral governance, and juridical equality among sovereign states, which were then institutionalized in the IMF, the World Bank, and the GATT in ways that reproduced American structural advantage while appearing to serve the collective interest of the international system as a whole. This is precisely the mechanism through which the Hegelian problem identified above becomes tractable for empirical IR analysis: the "universal interests of the community" that Marx accused Hegel's state of manufacturing find their international analogue in the intersubjective meanings that a hegemonic historic bloc projects outward, and Cox's tripartite framework supplies the analytical vocabulary for tracing how that projection is materially produced, ideationally naturalized, and institutionally secured.

Adorno's development of negative dialectics deepens this critique in directions particularly consequential for IR theory. In *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 1966/1973), the fundamental target is Hegel's affirmative dialectic, the logical structure in which every

contradiction is overcome in a higher synthesis that preserves, cancels, and elevates the contradictory moments. This structure, Adorno argues, is not a neutral description of how thought and history actually move but a form of “conceptual violence” (arguably anticipating key themes later developed in decolonial theory): by insisting that every particular must find its place within the movement of the whole, the Hegelian dialectic forecloses the irreducibly non-identical; that is, the suffering, the disposable, the damaged life, the experience that resists subsumption under any concept. Negative dialectics refuses this position; it insists on maintaining the tension between concept and object as a source of “negative contradiction” rather than a deficiency to be overcome through synthesis. In this regard, Walter Benjamin (1940/1999), arriving at a similar insight through a different path, argues that genuine historical materialism requires “brushing history against the grain” by attending to the catastrophes, defeats, and silenced voices that every official narrative of progress systematically suppresses. This methodological imperative resonates with force in post-colonial and subaltern approaches to IR, which have insisted that the history of international order cannot be told from the perspective of its architects alone.

The concern with the remainder excluded by universalizing forms of knowledge finds important parallels in later decolonial and postcolonial thought. Aníbal Quijano’s (2000) concept of the “coloniality of power” demonstrates how the classification of populations through race became embedded not only in political and economic structures but also in the production of knowledge and in the Eurocentric rationality through which modernity represents itself. Walter Dignolo (2007) develops this critique through the notion of “coloniality of knowledge”, arguing that modern systems of knowledge are inseparable from the colonial difference that establishes some forms of knowledge as universal while relegating others to the margins. From a different geographical and historiographical position, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) project of “provincializing Europe” similarly questions the assumption that European categories can serve as universal frameworks for narrating historical development. His argument exposes the ruptures that emerge when categories developed from a particular historical experience are treated as universally applicable. Taken together, these interventions give more concrete form to the problem identified by Adorno: what appears as a universal conceptual order may depend upon the exclusion or marginalization of experiences that do not conform to its categories. The connection should not be understood as a direct intellectual lineage from Adorno to decolonial or postcolonial theory, but as a significant convergence around the critical task of revealing the historical and epistemic exclusions concealed by claims to universality (Chakrabarty, 2000; Dignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000).

This imperative to attend to what dominant narratives exclude can be traced to intellectual traditions that preceded the consolidation of postcolonial IR as a recognizable subfield. The so-called Howard School of International Relations provides an important

example. Scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Bunche, Alain Locke, Merze Tate, Rayford Logan, and Eric Williams challenged the assumption that international politics could be adequately understood through categories detached from race, empire, and colonial hierarchy. Their work did not simply add marginalized actors to an otherwise intact history of international relations; it questioned the conceptual architecture through which the international itself had been theorized. By foregrounding racial hierarchy, colonial domination, and the experiences of peoples subjected to imperial rule, the Howard School exposed dimensions of international order that were rendered invisible by dominant approaches to the discipline (Henderson, 2017; Vitalis, 2015). In this respect, its contribution can be read alongside Benjamin's injunction to "brush history against the grain": rather than treating imperialism and racial hierarchy as peripheral deviations from an otherwise progressive international order, these scholars placed them at the center of the analysis. The same epistemological movement is evident in Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial subjectivity and violence, and in Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, both of which demonstrate how systems of domination operate not only through material power but also through categories of knowledge that define who can speak, who can represent others, and whose experience counts as politically intelligible (Fanon, 1961/2004; Said, 1978).

This critical orientation subsequently became more explicit in postcolonial and critical approaches to IR. Phillip Darby and A. J. Paolini (1994), for example, argued for a more direct engagement between IR and postcolonialism, while Darby (2004) challenged the disciplinary construction of the "political" itself, arguing that dominant conceptions of international politics can marginalize dissent, everyday experience, and forms of political agency that do not conform to established categories. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (2010) extended this challenge by questioning why IR theory has remained overwhelmingly Western in its conceptual foundations and by recovering non-Western intellectual traditions as potential sources of theory rather than merely empirical cases to which Western theories are applied. Siba N. Grovogui (1996, 2006) similarly interrogated the supposedly universal categories of sovereignty, international law, and international society by recovering the experiences and intellectual contributions of African and postcolonial actors. Even Hedley Bull's (1977) influential account of international society can be reconsidered through this critical lens: although Bull sought to explain how states construct order through common rules and institutions, a postcolonial reading asks whose historical experiences are incorporated into that society, whose conceptions of order are privileged, and which forms of violence or exclusion remain outside its normative boundaries. The point is therefore not to equate Bull's English School with postcolonial theory, but to demonstrate how the question raised by negative dialectics —what does an apparently coherent whole exclude in order to appear coherent?— can be applied even to theories primarily concerned with international order.

More recent scholarship has pushed this methodological imperative further by questioning the boundaries of the IR canon and recovering actors, histories, and forms of knowledge that conventional narratives have probably marginalized. Neta C. Crawford's (2002) historical analysis of argument and change in world politics, for instance, demonstrates how political concepts and normative arguments acquire meaning through historically situated struggles rather than through abstract and timeless rationality. Robbie Shilliam (2020) has gone further in recovering the intellectual and political significance of race, colonialism, Black internationalism, and thinkers whose contributions were marginalized by the conventional disciplinary history of IR. His work, together with Grovogui's (2011) analysis of the Global South as a political and intellectual project, makes visible forms of international thought that cannot be reduced to the categories established by the dominant Western canon. These interventions exemplify the methodological implication of negative dialectics for IR: the task of critical theory is not simply to construct a more comprehensive synthesis of international history, but to remain attentive to the remainder (the experiences, intellectual traditions, political subjects, and historical violences that resist incorporation into the dominant account). From this perspective, postcolonial and decolonial scholarship does not merely provide additional perspectives on international politics; it challenges the very criteria by which the discipline has historically determined what constitutes legitimate international knowledge (Acharya & Buzan, 2010; Grovogui, 2006; Shilliam, 2020).

Thus, the critical implications for IR theory are far-reaching and operate on at least two levels. The first concerns the normative status of international law and liberal institutionalism. The still dominant liberal tradition argues that international law represents the progressive institutionalization of reason in the international sphere, the gradual replacement of arbitrary power by binding norms that protect the weak as well as the strong. Adorno's critique renders this narrative suspect: if instrumental reason tends toward the administration and domination of its objects, then the expansion of international frameworks may represent not emancipation but a more sophisticated form of control. Anghie (2005) demonstrated this mechanism with historical precision, showing that international law was not a neutral framework subsequently extended (or denied) to non-European peoples but was itself constituted through the colonial encounter, shaped by what he terms "the dynamic of difference", or the perpetual redefinition of the standard of civilization that kept the non-European world in a condition of perpetual inadequacy relative to norms it had no part in making.

The second level of critique concerns what may be described as the bureaucratic condition of international governance. Max Weber's (1922/1978) account of rationalization, in which substantive rationality is displaced by formal rationality and

value-oriented action is subordinated to instrumental, goal-oriented action, provides the sociological foundation for Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's philosophical proposition. International organizations, on this reading, are subject to a characteristic tendency to develop institutional interests distinct from and potentially opposed to their nominal normative mandates, to reduce complex political conflicts to technocratic management problems amenable to standardized solutions, and to systematically exclude voices that cannot be translated into the administrative languages of global governance. Habermas (1984) developed the concept of the "colonization of the lifeworld" to describe how strategic and systemic rationality intrudes upon communicative practices. At the same time, he seeks to identify within communicative action a form of reason that cannot be reduced to instrumental logic, one oriented toward genuine mutual understanding rather than strategic success. His theory of communicative action represents the most sustained attempt to reconstruct the emancipatory potential of Enlightenment rationalism after the Adornian critique, and it provides one of the most important philosophical bridges between critical theory and normative IR scholarship (Linklater, 1998).

This critique becomes visible in normative approaches to international relations, where the limits of state-centred and instrumental rationality are brought into question. Charles Beitz (1979), for example, challenges the realist separation between international politics and moral reasoning by extending questions of justice beyond the boundaries of the state. His account of international distributive justice shifts attention from states as strategic actors toward individuals affected by transnational structures and inequalities. The significance of this move lies in showing that what conventional IR treats as external to political analysis (distribution, justice, and individual well-being) is itself constitutive of international political relations.

A similar concern emerges in the effort to make the normative assumptions embedded in international practices more explicit. Rather than treating institutions and political practices as neutral objects of explanation, Mervyn Frost (1986) argues for a normative theory capable of evaluating the principles through which international practices are constituted and justified. This perspective challenges the appearance of neutrality associated with purely explanatory approaches: categories, institutions, and practices are not simply given but reflect particular understandings of political legitimacy and community. The critical question consequently shifts from how international arrangements function to what forms of political relationship they enable, reproduce, or exclude.

This line of inquiry becomes emancipatory in Andrew Linklater's (1998) analysis of political community. By questioning the sovereign state as the ultimate boundary of moral obligation, he explores how dialogue and moral learning might expand the community of those whose interests are considered in political decision-making. In this respect, the

Habermasian distinction between communicative and instrumental rationality acquires an international dimension: the issue is not merely whether institutions efficiently coordinate collective action, but whether those affected by their decisions can participate in the processes through which norms are justified and contested. Critical IR thus transforms the critique of instrumental reason into a question of inclusion, exclusion, and the boundaries of political community.

Taken together, these critical approaches suggest that the Hegelian inheritance cannot be understood without confronting the limitations identified by Adorno. It is a tension that must be sustained rather than resolved, for it is precisely its maintenance that enables critical thought to resist the temptation of naive progressivism and paralyzing pessimism. As Cox (1981) formulated it: “theory is always for someone and for some purpose”. IR theory that takes Adorno and Horkheimer seriously cannot rest content with celebrating the efforts to institutionalize international norms; it must attend with equal rigor to what those norms exclude, administer, and silence. Only by holding both imperatives in view can the discipline do justice to the complexity of an international order that is at once a genuine achievement of human reason and a persistent site of domination and injustice, and whose internal tensions point toward the possibility of systemic breakdown.

The Contemporary International System and the Dialectic of Order and Disintegration

The theoretical tensions discussed above are especially relevant to the current context of world politics. The liberal international order constructed after 1945, based on multilateral institutions, rule-based cooperation, and an expanding normative framework, is undergoing a profound crisis. This is not merely a shift in the distribution of power but a challenge to the normative premises of the order itself, requiring the kind of philosophical engagement developed in the preceding analysis.

Ikenberry (2011), writing at a moment of relative institutional confidence, argued that the liberal international order possessed a distinctive self-reinforcing quality: its institutional density, its network of economic interdependencies, and the normative commitments it had generated made it resilient to hegemonic decline and capable of integrating rising powers without fundamental rupture. What this author did not anticipate was the possibility that the erosion of that order might originate not from external challengers but from within the very hegemon that constructed it. The Trump administrations have pursued a foreign policy that treats the institutional architecture of liberal internationalism not as a vehicle for the realization of shared global interests but as a set of constraints to be renegotiated, circumvented, or abandoned whenever they prove inconvenient for narrowly defined national priorities (Make America Great Again agenda). The withdrawal from multiple climate agreements, the systematic deconstruction

of the WTO's dispute-settlement mechanism, the open skepticism toward NATO's collective defense commitments, and the dismantling of USAID and other instruments of international cooperation are not isolated policy choices but expressions of a coherent if internally contradictory political doctrine: the logic of a declining hegemon that has concluded that the costs of maintaining an open international order now exceed the benefits it extracts from it. Mearsheimer (2001) probably would read this as the predictable reassertion of great-power interest beneath the liberal institutional structure; Waltz (1979) would locate its structural cause in the imperatives of an anarchical system that no institutional overlay can permanently suppress.

A Hegelian reading of this polycrisis system would begin by situating it within a larger dialectical movement. The postwar liberal order can be understood as an attempt to institutionalize, at the global level, a dialectic reconciliation between the particularity of sovereign state interests and the universality of a shared ethical community, a negative appeasement made possible by the catastrophic demonstration of what unconstrained power rivalry and ideological extremism had produced. Its partial successes in managing great-power conflict over the past decades, generating unprecedented levels of economic interdependence, and expanding the scope of international human rights law represent genuine, if incomplete, actualizations of reason in the sphere of international relations. The present polycrisis, from this perspective, is the antithesis that the thesis of the postwar order has generated through its own internal contradictions: the inequitable distribution of its economic benefits, its structural Eurocentrism and occidentalism, its democratic deficits, and its failure to extend a genuine voice to the Global South(s).

Negative dialectics calls for skepticism toward Hegelian rationalist dialectics in international relations. The conviction that every negation will lead to a higher synthesis, and that crisis is a necessary passage to a better order, reflects what Adorno identified as the ideological form of "historical optimism". It "whitewashes" suffering by folding it into a narrative that claims to give it meaning, subordinates the particularity of concrete harm to a teleological scheme, and closes off the possibility that some contradictions may be irresolvable and that some forms of destruction cannot be repaired by any later synthesis. In this respect, W. Benjamin's (1940/1999) "angel of history," gazing upon the accumulating catastrophe of the past while being propelled into the future, remains a more adequate figure for the present moment than any dialectical narrative of necessary negation. The accelerating climate emergency, the mass displacement of populations, the systematic dismantling of decades of institutional construction: these are not dialectical moments in a progressive unfolding but what Adorno called "determinate negations": specific, historically located refutations of the promise that reason could organize collective life rationally and justly.

The global rise of authoritarian nationalism requires analytical resources beyond liberal institutionalism and structural realism. Gramsci's (1971) concept of "hegemonic crisis" captures the loss of capacity of established ideological frameworks to organize active consent, producing an "*interregnum*" in which old certainties dissolve before new ones emerge. The nationalist backlash against liberal internationalism can therefore be understood as a crisis of political representation: existing institutions have failed to articulate the interests and identities of sectors of the population left materially and culturally behind by globalization.

It is at this juncture, where neither the Hegelian faith in dialectical resolution nor the Adornian insistence on irresolvable contradiction can be simply applied, that the question of a theoretical space adequate to the present moment becomes most urgent, and most difficult to answer. Habermas (1984, 1996) has offered the most sustained attempt to navigate this impasse, relocating the normative foundations of political order neither in the Hegelian state nor in the Kantian moral law but in the communicative practices through which citizens and political actors deliberate, argue, and reach intersubjective understanding. His discourse theory preserves the Hegelian insistence on the institutional embeddedness of reason while incorporating the Adornian diagnosis of instrumental reason's negative condition; it grounds normative validity not in teleological history but in the ongoing, fallible, and always contestable practices of reasoned public argument. Linklater (1998), building on Habermas while drawing on post-colonial perspectives, reconceives moral progress in international relations as the progressive expansion of the "community of dialogue", the widening of the circle of those whose voices are genuinely heard and whose interests are actually considered in the making of binding political decisions. Pogge (2002), from another theoretical frame, argues that the current global institutional order does not merely fail the global poor but actively harms them through structural mechanisms, a claim that is simultaneously Adornian in its critique of reason's complicity with domination and Kantian in its normative demand for enforceable institutional reform.

Yet Habermas's emphasis on communicative rationality also requires a critical qualification concerning the conditions under which communication can actually be considered free and inclusive. Nancy Fraser (1990) argues that the ideal of a unified public sphere can obscure the unequal social conditions that determine who is able to participate, whose claims are recognized as legitimate, and which issues become objects of public deliberation. Her critique therefore shifts attention from the formal possibility of dialogue to the power relations that structure access to it, including gender, class, and status inequalities. From this standpoint, communicative rationality cannot by itself "guarantee" emancipatory outcomes: deliberative practices should also be examined in relation to the

exclusions and asymmetries that shape participation. Fraser's intervention complements the Habermasian project while exposing one of its central vulnerabilities: its tendency to underestimate how unequal social structures can shape the very communicative spaces through which normative validity is supposedly established.

Following this logic, IR theory, at this conjuncture, cannot fully understand the limits and possibilities of its rationalist inheritance without confronting the critical rupture introduced by Adorno. The significance of Adorno for the present argument is therefore not to establish a theoretical alternative equivalent to Hegel's influence on the discipline, but to illuminate the internal tensions and limitations of the Hegelian legacy as it has been transmitted into IR. Read in this way, negative dialectics provides a critical vantage point from which to examine how assumptions of rational progress, institutional development, and historical reconciliation may obscure forms of domination and exclusion within the international order. The broader intellectual trajectory traced in this article thus points from Hegel's foundational influence on IR toward the subsequent critical questioning of that inheritance, rather than toward a symmetrical comparison between Hegel and Adorno. This methodological decision makes it possible to recognize both the enduring analytical significance of Hegelian concepts for understanding international order and the necessity of critically interrogating the limits of the rationalist premises that continue to shape the discipline. In this sense, the value of the Adornian intervention lies in its capacity to reveal unresolved tensions within a Hegelian inheritance that remains constitutive of IR theory. ❀

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