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## “GREENING” THE CRITICAL THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS WITH THE CONCEPT OF WORLD-ECOLOGY

### ABSTRACT

The article signals the need for a deepened theoretical analysis of environmental issues in International Relations studies. It initializes the idea of “Greening” the Critical Theory of International Relations with critical concepts from other sciences. Thus it proposes the scope of Critical Theory of IR to be expanded to cover not only the relations between power and capital, but the relations of power-capital-nature. It shows common points between the Critical Theory of IR and the concepts of world-ecology and the Capitalocene by Jason W. Moore and proposes reforming some founding definitions that the Critical Theory of IR is based on. This includes re-conceptualizing the critique of capitalism as a way of organizing nature, but also distancing oneself from the Cartesian dichotomy of Society + Nature, which is an obstacle to properly including environmental issues in IR research.

**Keywords:** theory of international relations, critical theory, environmental issues, world-ecology, Capitalocene

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The necessity for the discipline of International Relations to tackle environmental problems should be incontestable, given the predicted dominant causes of future tensions and conflicts. Traditional methods of analysis inherent to International Relations research will no longer be able to explain or predict local and global conflicts, while the origins thereof shift from purely economic or political into ecological ones. Even though many of the issues in international relations over the past three decades were already predicated upon competition for space, soil and water, climate change will accelerate that process. Some predict that if humanity does not

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take proper actions, climate wars will become the main driving force for violence around the world (Welzer, 2010; Busby, 2018).

The fact that both political science in general and the discipline of International Relations does not address (or if it does, it does so sluggishly) the issue of climate change has already been pointed out by one of its prominent theorists, Robert O. Keohane (2015). Putting aside the possible policy frames proposed, he emphasized how political scientists could help avoid the paths of least resistance, reframe issues of climate change in ways that make political action feasible and find the conditions that let countries generate a constructive political discourse on environmental issues. Pointing out the great historical trends of rising inequality, injustice and ignored problems of the international system has traditionally been the goal of the Critical Theory of International Relations. Thus it would seem plausible for this specific school of thought to be the best suited to explaining the relation between the ecological crisis, capitalism and the system of nation-states.

The article aims to find some way of incorporating the concepts of *world-ecology* and the Capitalocene by Jason W. Moore into the Critical Theory of International Relations, thus “Greening” it and updating it to be able to exert some influence upon the ways of thinking about and researching the biggest threat that humanity has ever faced and its relation to the contemporary international relations. Therefore, the research questions are: What is the current state of environmental research in International Relations discipline? What are the common points between the Critical Theory of International Relations and the concepts by Moore? How can they be merged?

## 2. ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS RESEARCH

Targeted studies (Green & Hale, 2017) have recently shown that International Relation scholars still have little to say about the environmental crisis. It appears that environmental issues are marginalized in International Relations research, as fewer than 2% of the articles published in the top disciplinary journals are on environmental subjects even though the scholars themselves claim to recognize the importance of climate change (Green & Hale, 2017, p. 474). Their opinion does not reflect their choice of research subjects and there is a huge discrepancy between what they perceive as important and what they choose to publish. Other areas, such as human rights or humanitarian issues are also underrepresented, but not as much. What is also interesting, among those that do publish on environmental issues, there are much more women than in other fields of International Relations research. Environmental politics are also generally not taught to graduate students in the US, which can safely be extrapolated onto the whole Western academia.

Any “Green” theory of International Relations rarely makes its way into academic textbooks used by Polish students of International Relations or political science. For example, there is no mention of it in probably the most popular and certainly very notable textbook by the Polish author Jacek Czaputowicz (2007). Another important textbook widely used by Polish students, written by Jackson and Sørensen (2012), has only a small section on how environmental issues are becoming more prevalent on the international forum and are now the third most important issue for world politics. It presents a short and simplified picture

of the theoretical challenge that the environmental crisis brings into the field, proposing that either the traditional approaches can deal with it by slightly broadening the scope of their research subjects, or the traditional approaches could be shunned completely if one is a revolutionary "eco-radical" (Jackson & Sørensen, 2012, p. 284). The only major academic textbook on the theories of International Relations that describes the Green Theory (*ekologizm* in Polish) in one of its own chapters, treating it on a par with other paradigms, is the one by Scott Burchill et al. (2006). This is probably still the only source for International Relations students in Poland from which the latter can learn about a theoretical framework that can be used in developing a Green Theory of International Relations. It is worth mentioning that post-colonial perspectives on international relations are also missing from academic textbooks available in Poland (Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2012). Given the fact that any school of thought directly contesting the legitimacy of Western paradigms is marginalized, one may conclude that including environmental issues in International Relations research may lead to an unprecedented contestation of the dominant ideas and theories, which is why they are being actively marginalized by their representatives.

The Green theory of International Relations, whenever its existence is even acknowledged, is called a new and yet not fully formed concept. Paterson (2005) writes that at its core there lies the rejection of anthropocentric world-view – ecocentrism – and the argument of "limits to growth". Another key plank to Green politics are decentralization and "reclaiming the commons", which have the most significant implications for international relations, according to Paterson. He concludes that a Green theory of International Relations should be regarded as critical rather than problem-solving and is both explanatory and normative, but it usually distances itself from meta-theorizing and reflecting on its own theoretical toolkit. There is no identifiable Green methodology, although some suggestions have been made to use the method of critique from traditional Critical Theory (Frankfurt School) and further break down disciplinary boundaries in International Relations. Patterson points out the similarities between this image of Green International Relations Theory that he constructed with other critical approaches, which include the matter of value distinction, resisting the concentration of power, emancipation and focus on political economy.

It is also worth mentioning that environmental issues seem to be marginalized in non-Western theoretical reflections on International Relations as well. The analysis made by Gawrycki, Zajączkowski and Bógdał-Brzezińska (2012) does prove that International Relations science is not universal in character and Western models are adapted to the cultural and civilizational specificities of other countries, but the major problems of the modern world that are taken into account by non-Western scholars are still only political, social or economic ones. Along with critical and post-colonial scholarship the non-Western thought challenged the confidence in the image of a global international society created via the universalization of European institutions, but a critique of how the whole world participates in the functioning of a system posing a threat to the environment is missing. This runs counter to the knowledge that it will be the non-European and non-North American countries that will bear the brunt of the detrimental effects of climate change (King & Harrington, 2018).

### 3. ANTHROPOGENIC ROOTS OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

To provide some foundation for the stated necessity for International Relations to tackle environmental problems, one may first reintroduce the concept of Anthropocene. It entered the scientific discourse in 2000, proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer (2000, p. 17–18) in their short article for *The International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Newsletter*. Crutzen and Stoermer used various markers and indexes – such as demographic growth and the growing number of domestic animals, the progress of urbanization, use of fossil fuels, greenhouse gases emission, the scale of landscape transformation, diminishing fresh water sources, plant and animal extinction – to show the scale of anthropogenic changes in all ecosystems. They also pointed out humanity's ever growing role in those processes and thus proposed the current geological epoch to be named after the *Anthropos*. They later popularized the term by publishing in *Nature* (Crutzen, 2002). Thus they became the authors of the most popular concept in environmental studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which rightly entered and stayed in the scientific mainstream, but also somewhat unevenly in the public awareness, bringing along important questions that needed to be answered (Moore, 2016, p. 2).

The concept of Anthropocene was not fully incorporated by academic environmental history textbooks only because of the problem of determining its beginning. Crutzen and Stoermer proposed the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the turning point of domination of anthropogenic factors, because of the first noticeable rise in the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which coincided with the outset of the industrial revolution. However, they also admitted to picking that moment in history arbitrarily and stated their openness to alternative proposals. Even though the industrial revolution did indeed bring a new dimension to the relations between man and nature and it is very commonly associated with the beginning of Anthropocene, alternative turning points did appear, as Crutzen and Stoermer had predicted. One of them pointed out the fact that the decimation of the population of Americas during the long 16<sup>th</sup> century, mainly by the pathogens brought by Europeans (Crosby, 1999, p. 221–238; Diamond, 2000, p. 221–222, 243), caused such a big change in the local ecosystems (Loughlin et al., 2018) that its effects were global in scope. That is why some researchers opt for the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as the start of Anthropocene. Some even point directly at the year 1610, because geological research shows that the sudden drop in the population of Americas caused lower metabolic cost incurred on the environment, which in turn caused natural forests to grow over now uninhabited and not cultivated land, eventually causing a large drop in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (Lewis & Maslin, 2015).

Still, the most common choice for marking the Anthropocene is the industrial revolution because of the new technologies' impact on energy consumption, which first led to massive deforestation and later to the growing extraction and burning of coal. The rise in atmospheric carbon dioxide was noticeable and unquestionable, but the amount and the diachronic character of changes in the global geological markers make it difficult to point out a single date as the turning point in question (Bińczyk, 2018, p. 85–86).

Anthropocene is sometimes also described as a geological period that has been starting in the last decades. The term used most commonly then is the Great Acceleration. It appeared in the first decade of this century, associated with the commonly known “hockey stick graphs”, presented in a 2004 report, which showed the correlation between anthropogenic environmental change markers and civilization growth indexes (Steffen *et al.*, 2004). The physical

data seems so undeniable that associating the Great Acceleration with the beginning of the Anthropocene is beyond dispute for many scholars (Bińczyk, 2018, p. 86–93).

What is important for this analysis is that the concept of Anthropocene is not political in nature. It only tries to objectively show the current state of the Earth’s ecosystem and the amount of human intervention, but it completely abstracts from the issue of the values lying at the bottom of this type of human activity. Only after the Anthropocene had begun to be incorporated by social scientists into their research, different systems of values (i.e. neoliberalism, communism, Christianity etc.) were shown to have been closely tied to the human propensity for radical environment transformation. This allowed for the critique of the socio-centric paradigms and a constructive critique of the modern neoliberal model and its connection to the Anthropocene and the current ecological crisis (Connoly & MacDonald, 2015).

#### 4. THE CONCEPT OF CAPITALOCENE AND THE POLITICAL QUESTION IT BRINGS

Moore claims the concept of Anthropocene shows an overly monolithic image of humanity. He appreciates the argument that it is indeed *Anthropos* that is responsible for most of the modern environment transformation and degradation, but calls it insufficient. He points directly at the inadequacy of calling the ecological crisis Anthropogenic. For him it is “an old capitalist trick playing out through environmentalist discourse: take a problem created by the 1 percent, then tell the 99 percent it’s their fault” (Moore, 2017b, p. 195). He emphasizes that the main factor of modern environmental change is “capitalogenic” and not anthropogenic. Most notably, he points at the ontological mistake of treating Humanity and Nature as different categories. He is critical about separating parallel issues like environmental and social justice, ecological and economic imperialism, exploitation of Nature and exploitation of labor, ecological crisis and economic crisis etc. This is because Moore interprets capitalism not as a construct consisting of a sum of its social and environmental parts, but as a way of organizing Nature. This, combined with his Marxist inspirations, gave name to the concept of Capitalocene (Moore, 2015). He also proposed the category of *world-ecology*, which is an extensions of Wallerstein’s (2007) world-economy. World-ecology, as Moore says, is a paradigm that “is not only intellectually, but politically, necessary if we are to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century” (Moore, 2015, p. 2–3).

Moreover, Moore thinks it is necessary do leave behind the concept of interaction between Humanity and Nature in order to introduce a new dialectical category of the two worlds’ mutual and interdependent interaction as Humanity-in-Nature and/or Nature-in-Humanity (Moore, 2015, p. 31–88). To give an example of how the socio-economic is interconnected with the environmental he writes about how it is wrong to differently and separately describe the farmers’ relation to their land and the financial operations in the global markets, because Wall Street is as dependent on the environment as agriculture is. Almost all of the financial operations undertaken there are somehow connected to the ecological web on unprecedented scale (Moore, 2017a, p. 20). Capitalism is, as Moore says, a system that develops itself through Nature, not parallel to Nature (Moore, 2017c). Only to dissociate oneself from the Cartesian dualism of *Nature and Society* and to regards at the current crisis, as well as world history, as a multilayered process of environment transformation, power and capital

creation and making of ideas can be truly fruitful. This is why Moore criticizes the re-reading of Marx made by John Bellamy Foster (2000) for still following the duality of “Nature and Society” and making the environment just another analytical object for Marxists (Moore, 2017c). The debate between Moore and Foster is ongoing, with the latter defending his own version of Marxian ecological critique and accusing the former of a simplistic view of the distinction between dualism and monism and “turning Marx on his head” (Angus, 2016). Despite obvious differences in the ways of reading Marx, the main critique of Moore’s work from eco-Marxists and ecosocialists seems to be ideological in nature – for them Moore is not an open proponent of revolution and thus is apologetic of capitalism. He does, however, stress the importance of postcolonial and feminist paradigms, which are essential to his own critique of capitalism, as they both describe the power and capital’s relation to Cheap Natures and Cheap Labor.

As already shown, dating the beginning of the Anthropocene is open to discussion. However, Moore has already settled the turning point in history that marks the beginning of the Capitalocene. His chronology runs counter to the commonly and often blindly picked turning points. He finds that environmentalists choose the moment of the appearance of modern machines, especially the steam engine. Marxists choose the moment of the appearance of the proper class structure. Economists choose the moment of the birth of new types of markets and institutional mechanisms that fuel modern economies. Moore admits that all of those were important, but they overshadow a much more important phenomenon, which was the appearance of a new way of organizing nature and shaping the environment in the long sixteenth century (Moore, 2016, p. 97). Moreover, it is the processes that shaped the birth of capitalism, related to the geographical discoveries and colonization, consisting of newly crystallized techniques of transforming space according to human needs, that explain the current patterns of relations between power, capital and nature (Moore, 2017d).

Moore points at the colonization of Madeira in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and sees the new kind of interaction between power, capital and nature that took place there. The Spanish capital entered a specific new relation with monoculture crops, deforestation, slavery and imperialism. The new treatment of nature by man established the direction of development that still persists today. Moore even claims that the Columbian Project which started in 1492 did not end, but rather, that is still remains operative. The long 16<sup>th</sup> century brought fundamental changes to market logic, including the imperative of the accumulation of capital and labor, but also the capitalization of nature and a new level of transforming land and labor. By tracking those processes Moore came up with an internal periodization of the Capitalocene, based on the dominant power centers or ideologies. It includes: 1) a Germanic-Iberian cycle (c. 1451–1648); 2) a Dutch-led cycle (c. 1560s–1740s); 3) a British-led cycle, c. 1680s–1910s); 4) an American-led cycle (c. 1870s–1980s); 5) a neoliberal cycle that commenced in the 1970s and is still ongoing (Moore, 2015, p. 119–120). Each of these cycles was founded on key processes of acquiring new Cheap Natures (i.e. forests), including Cheap Energy (i.e. timber, coal, oil) and Cheap Food (i.e. Polish grains in the 17<sup>th</sup> century), with Cheap Labor (i.e. slavery or desperate English factory workers from the industrialization era).

Ewa Bińczyk (2018, p. 158) insightfully summarizes Moore’s thought, writing that “the contemporary phenomena of global warming and the financialization of the economy are neither purely social nor purely environmental processes [...] We are faced with a dialectical combination of accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power and the processes of nature

reproduction". Even though the term "Capitalocene" does not convince geologists and researchers from other natural sciences, its accuracy and its author's rhetorical skill cannot be denied (Bińczyk, 2018, p. 100). Despite being treated with skepticism by natural sciences, it seems to be at least a useful supplement to – or at most the basis of – the critical view of the world, which should underlie any Green Theory of International Relations.

## **5. THE NATURAL ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE CRITICAL THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE CONCEPT OF WORLD-ECOLOGY**

As per Green and Hale (2017), large areas of environmental problems remain untouched by International Relations theorists. Moreover, traditional approaches focusing on multilateral cooperation fail to solve complex issues of systemic nature, such as the ecological crisis. What is important though is that this complexity is an ideal laboratory for International Relations scholars to study trends and developments, while being a fertile ground for new theoretical approaches. Among those, some might unite the "Greened" Critical Theory of International Relations with the concepts of Jason W. Moore.

What is important is that the whole concept of "Greening" International Relations theory is founded on the notion of a global ecology, with this notion being believed to be endowed with some explanatory power (Paterson, 2005, p. 238). This makes the category of world-ecology by Moore automatically craving for constructing a broader theoretical framework for analyzing international relations through a Green scope. Moreover, the central tenet of Green thought is ecocentrism, which is opposed to anthropocentrism; and therefore the former tallies well with Moore's rejection of the "Society and Nature" dualism. The problem is that ecocentrism is in itself politically indeterminate, but the Society-in-Nature and Nature-in-Society categories combined with Moore's interpretation of capitalism make this key concept of Green International Relations theory politically determinate. By utilizing Moore's critique of capitalism, any Green Theory might get along much better with both neo-marxist theories and Critical Theory of International Relations by coming up with possible transformations of forms of political community and the economic system.

The idea that a theory is critical if it calls for emancipation, which has been present since Marx, meshes well with the new idea that Nature herself needs emancipation from the oppressive forces of capitalism and its discourses. However, in order to be "Greened", Critical Theory itself should have its definition updated to include the natural environment and distance itself from the Nature vs Society dualism. Out of all political theories, Critical Theory seems to be the one that could achieve this goal most easily. According to Horkheimer, Critical Theory should be explanatory, practical and normative, so that it should explain the faults of the contemporary social reality, point out the actors of change, provide clear frame of critique and knowledge about possible social transformation (Walentowicz, 2001). Now, simply by understanding social as ecological, or better yet world-ecological, by following Moore's Society-in-Nature and Nature-in-Society notions, it is perfectly viable for Critical Theory to be the scientific force of change of the current international order in relation to the ecological crisis.

The above intuition is further strengthened by a reevaluation of Robert Cox's understanding of a Critical Theory of International Relations, pertaining to the critique of hegemonic discourses and the opinion that traditional paradigms – (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism – are unable to solve the most important problems in world politics. This Critical Theory of International Relations is based on an analysis of the way in which the current world-order was established, how the dominant institutions and norms were created. Most importantly, it is not a goal in itself, but a waypoint to better understanding of those mechanisms in order to carry out the emancipatory project for a better and more just world (Dyduch et al., 2006, p. 62–64). There seems to be no obstacles in extending this historical analysis onto environmental issues, simply by drawing from Moore's history of the Capitalocene. The task seems easy enough especially considering the fact that Cox was one of the very few scholars of the 80s and 90s that was (impressively) aware of the threats to the biosphere that stemmed from globalizing capitalism and its fallout and emphasized the need for ecological sustainability. This understanding came long before any other International Relations theorists looked at the issue of sustainability and its necessity for human well-being (Falk, 2016).

Combined with Moore's acknowledgment of the inequalities and violence of race, class and gender, all of the above makes his theories fit together with those of all types of critical theorists of International Relations, including neo-marxist, post-colonial and feminist researchers. They all share a commitment to challenging the legitimacy of the current world order and the acceptability of its relations of dominance and practices of power. Critical theories find and explain the ways in which various modes of power are involved in the production of world order and are still as relevant as ever (Duvall & Varadarajan, 2003), but they usually ignore or simplify the relation with the environment. Accepting the category of capital-power-nature as the basic tool of viewing those modes of power extrapolates the theory's critical ability onto the whole world-ecology.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Theories of International Relations have long been under criticism. They are perceived as attempts to create reality by overinterpreting facts, manipulating history and juggling of ideas (Mikiewicz, 2006, p. 172). Giving environmental politics more space and weight in the discipline of international relations would bring numerous benefits. The discipline itself would be enriched and avoid the slowly approaching stagnation. The matters of global environmental politics would also test the current paradigms in ways that they have never been tested yet. Most of all, it would be good for policy, giving policy makers new insights that come from scientific sources that they trust (Green & Hale, 2017).

Putting environmental issues on the forefront might benefit the Critical Theory of International Relations even more. The traditional paradigms seem to be unable to tackle the great systemic ecological crises and are too rigid to extend their methodological tools to cover those, while still focusing on traditional international relations concepts like security or growth. Given the findings of Green and Hale, environmental issues are marginalized by the discipline itself, but it is not clear whether they are treated the same way by scholars representing different paradigms. The fact that female researchers tend to focus on environmental problems more than men might suggest that critical scholars may also be more interested in those, but maybe lack the necessary tools. The concepts of world-ecology and the



Capitalocene coined by Jason W. Moore could become those tools by re-conceptualizing the relations between power, capital and nature and the way they are used in International Relations research. They could also re-conceptualize the critique of capitalism after rephrasing its definition to include organizing nature, and by stretching the notions of Nature-in-Society and Society-in-Nature, including the system of states and the way it projects itself onto the environment. This seems a good way for Critical Theory to avoid getting trapped by the discourse that it is attempting to deconstruct, which is based on the damaging dichotomy of Society vs Nature. After all, no human organization of any kind, including the main actors of international relations like states or transnational corporations, can be adequately understood when abstracted from the web of life (Moore, 2017b).

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