

# Elements of Critical Theory in BRICS: An evaluation of BRICS' critique of global affairs

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In the 1980s, Robert W. Cox (considered the “father of Critical Theory” in IR) envisioned that a counter-hegemonic movement could arise in the future from the multilateral alliance of less privileged States, which could resist the dominance of the central powers of the system. Almost three decades later, the 2008 Financial Crisis, the decline of the US hegemony (propelled by its unilateralist actions) and the rise of emerging economies all over the world resulted in a scenario of transformation and redistribution of power in international relations. In that context, a reformist movement driven by developing countries (some of them located geographically distant from one another), especially by the BRICS nations, voiced new demands for democratization of global governance at the international level, contesting the US and Western hegemony in world affairs and the underrepresentation of less-privileged States in important multilateral organizations. From the analysis of the conceptual framing of Critical Theory to the context behind the inception of BRICS and its positions in international relations, this article aims to explore the elements that could possibly connect the group to the interpretations undertaken by Critical Theorists, showing that the group does hold certain positions that can allow such an association.

*Keywords:* BRICS, multilateralism, Critical Theory, Western Hegemony, emerging economies.

## Introduction

In the mid-1980s, a new interpretation of international affairs (led by Robert Cox, and having the contributions of authors such as Andrew Linklater and Richard Falk)<sup>1</sup> known as “Critical Theory” arose in the academy of IR, bringing elements such as skepticism towards the world order and the international system, perceived by the proponents of the theory as representing a division between *dominating and dominated States*. The first group had their interests represented in multilateral organizations, while the neglected ones had their voices and concerns most of the time ignored by the Great Powers. Critical Theory, therefore, represented a set of interdisciplinary concepts (with components of International Relations Theory (IRT), Sociology, International Political Economy and International Law) developed mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries (Great Britain, Canada

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<sup>1</sup> Other scholars mentioned in this paper (such as: Immanuel Wallerstein, Amitav Acharya, John Ruggie, Øle Wæver, etc.) do not necessarily belong to the Critical Theory school, however being cited in specific parts of the current work.

and the USA) during the transition period from the classical IRTs (such as Realism, Liberalism, Neorealism and Neoliberalism) to the postpositivist paradigm of IRT (Critical Theory, Feminist Theory, Post-Structuralism and others).

Be it as it may, this perception of skepticism about the world order and the international system only got stronger after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the world witnessed an unchallenged American predominance. In the early 2000s, however, a great number of countries (labelled emerging economies or even “middle powers”) started to create new demands for democratization and greater participation in decision making processes at the international level, challenging the American hegemony in world affairs. In particular, the unilateral militarism prevalent during George W. Bush’s administration (2001–2009), which, alongside the 2008 Financial Crisis, became important factors in bringing together emerging countries willing to defend concepts such as “multilateralism” in global affairs and the diplomatic (instead of militarist) solutions to acute international crises.

Since then, the rise of the Global South<sup>2</sup> and a shift in global power towards emerging economies-China, in particular-has become more obvious [1]. Such previously neglected States started to criticize the current state of affairs as well as global financial institutions (such as the World Bank and the IMF) for representing the interests of the developed countries, while used by powerful States (or Great Powers) to persuade less-powerful nations into opening their economies through policies of deregulation, privatization and external interference in their internal affairs. As an example, for many years the IMF “forced States in the developing world to cut welfare spending in favor of debt repayment” [2], while arguing that these policies were intended to bring prosperity to developing nations. This thought was based on an interpretation of those institutions within a South-North framework, whereas the North is comprised by advanced capitalist economies whose historical dominance jeopardized the development of countries pertaining to the Global South. However, even IMF specialists reported that the organization had in fact “seriously underestimated the perils of financial liberalization, both domestic and external” [3, p. 7], and memories related to IMF dependency and debt repayment have instigated anti-IMF sentiments in many countries in the Global South, with the institution being sometimes equated to American imperialism.

Apart from the points discussed earlier, there is also a common understanding within the political leaders of less privileged-States that processes of globalization contributed — to a certain extent — to the worsening of wealth inequality around the world, benefiting a small economic elite in developed countries in detriment of the developing ones, while at the same time the cooperation received by countries in the Global South (be it through the IMF, World Bank and otherwise) was usually “given with one hand and taken away with the other” [4], using the expression of former [Brazilian] Minister of Foreign Affairs Celso Amorim.

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<sup>2</sup> The understanding behind the term “Global South”, by its turn, corresponds to the peripheral (and/or semi-peripheral) regions of the globe or countries within the world capitalist economy, formerly known as the Third World. While loosely associated with Latin America, Africa and some parts of Asia, those States were seen as a metaphor for social exploitation and economic exclusion experienced throughout their historical relationship with the core capitalist nations of the international system, or to put it simply the Global North.

It is within this context that BRICS, composed by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, has been contesting the status quo through creative forms of cooperation, including the establishment of the New Development Bank, the first non-regional post-Bretton Woods financial institution, the Contingent Reserve Agreement (CRA), the establishment of vaccine research centers to face the challenges related to COVID-19, the strengthening of cybersecurity coordination, among others. Sharing similar grievances against the unfair aspects of the international system, BRICS cooperation became in essence devoid of the aspects of domination and dependence that usually characterized the hegemonic relationship between North and South, West and East. In comparative terms, within BRICS Brazil, South Africa and India reflect more upon the world within a paradigm of North-South relations between developed and developing countries, whereas Russia and China usually interpret the current institutions of Global Governance within the frameworks of an East-West divide, where the Western countries exercise predominance/hegemony in world affairs.

In terms of characterizing BRICS theoretically, using models of integration from the XX century (neo-functionalism concepts and new regionalism) might represent a risk, inasmuch as BRICS do not congregate all of its basic elements. Meanwhile, an interpretation based on the power transition theory also brings some limitations. Even though power transition theory tries to explain the high potential for conflict when a challenger and a preeminent or dominant nation reaches the stage of relative equivalence of power, and specifically, when the challenger is dissatisfied with the status quo, this theory is not sufficient to explain the reason why five different countries categorized as emerging powers unite their efforts in order to create a new model of cooperation that contests some aspects of the status quo, but without intending to overhaul the system as such. BRICS countries united their agendas against some (not all) structures present in the international system with which they disagree. As emerging countries, they started a dual movement: contesting outdated hierarchies and established structures of world politics while presenting an alternative view that stands for change; and building new forms of cooperation, including the creation of a new international organization.

Considering that BRICS countries represent a type of counter-hegemonic coalition within an international system still dominated by powerful nations from the past centuries, this paper aims to investigate if they may present some points of connection with the Critical Theory. This paper, therefore, aims to provide an analytical answer to the following question: how do BRICS countries, currently the main representatives of emerging powers' movement, encompass elements of Critical Theory in international relations? To this end, the paper will be separated into two different sections: the first one dealing with the conceptual framing of Critical Theory in international Relations (IR) and the second one will discuss the context behind BRICS' inception and its positions on international relations, in order to expose the elements that could possibly connect the group to the interpretations undertaken by Critical Theorists.

## **A historical and conceptual framing of Critical Theory in IR**

The idea of bringing more inclusiveness to the processes of decision-making in international relations dates back to the Cold War period. During the 1950s, for instance, a broad coalition of States (known by then as 'the Third World') tried to present themselves

as an alternative to the realistic world order embedded within the bipolar logic of the Cold War. The Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77, composed of developing countries, refused to completely embrace the liberal order, considered unfair for treating unequal as equals, while working together to create a fair economic environment governed by rules that would take into account the differences between rich and poor nations and against the principles of liberal orthodoxy, which were incorporated into the Bretton Woods institutions defended by developed countries, especially the United States.

As a milestone, in the Bandung Conference of 1955, important developing countries (including China, India, Indonesia and Yugoslavia) declared to be neither on the Soviet nor on the western side of the Cold War and pressed for admission to United Nations membership. In the wake of that Conference, the international context “led to a concern for what came to be called development <...> [expressing] the aspirations of backward countries which sought to achieve more humane living conditions” [5, p. 21].

By that time, many newly created States in the developing world indeed joined the United Nations, raising its membership from 60 (in previous years) to 99 by 1960 and, as a result, the relative influence of developing countries increased [6]. According to Bedjaoui [7], the Third World then exposed the weakness of the United Nations system while still bearing a real affection towards it, and this is not the result of some strange fickleness. The developing or non-aligned countries did not challenge the United Nations’ existence, which they valued, so much as its conditioning by the Great Powers of the day, which they refused to accept. On this note, according to Neorealism for example, powerful States only abide by rules when it suits them, bending international law whenever they feel necessary [8].

By the mid-1970s and 1980s, criticisms about the international order included the interpretation of less-developed countries about the leadership of the US and its western allies in the monetary and financial institutions of global governance as a mean to perpetuate their underdevelopment and dependence from the Global North, while developing nations in debt to the IMF were pressured by economically powerful States to meet their commitments to the organization, regardless of the domestic consequences.

During the 1990s, under the auspices of the United States, the adoption by many countries from the developing world of the so-called Washington Consensus, which consisted of a “one-size fits all” development receipt including fiscal discipline, market deregulation, privatization of State assets, financial and trade liberalization, etc., ultimately triggered “less growth in per capita GDP than in 1950–1980” [9, p. 975] in regions such as Latin America, for instance, followed by economic depression, inflation, and social instability. Meanwhile, multilateral institutions of global significance were under the sole leadership of the United States, during a time when analysts, such as Francis Fukuyama, announced triumphantly “The End of History”.

All the elements mentioned above helped explain the inception and development of Critical Theory in IR since the mid-1980s, whose proponents have challenged the way in which the international system was built in socially, politically and economically unequal terms, while also challenging the theories produced within the academy of powerful Anglo-Saxon States in order to explain and to justify that world order. Hoffmann [10] is among the first voices to describe International Relations for instance as an American social science. According to the critical perspective, theories of international relations reflect a western thought with an essentially liberal tradition [11]. In this sense, it sought to deconstruct the previously accepted explanations of International Relations, while reconstructing them in

favor of all those excluded by dominant discourses emanating from the centers of power in the system. It is, in this regard, an emancipatory project in which the study of IR should also be concentrated in the elimination of the most diverse forms of domination that exist in humanity as well, not only in terms of class, but also racial, ethnic, sexual, etc. This conceptual framing is mostly associated with ideas from Neo-Gramscian scholars, such as Robert Cox, who drew upon Gramsci's philosophical insights about the possibilities for a counter-hegemonic resistance to a global — and especially capitalist — hegemony.

In the scope of the critical theory's agenda, poverty, international migration, religious and cultural pluralism, gender issues, environmentalism and human rights are regularly discussed. Building upon a socially oriented perspective, critical theorists refuse to take the world as it is, but instead they attempt to transform it. Cox [12], for example, has employed the term “global governance” to point out how powerful States and certain governments are united around the support for a “globalization model” that entrenches the interests of a global capitalist hegemony. According to Cox, “global governance” is about dynamics of power and authority in world politics, which, by its turn, do not necessarily benefit all actors in the system equally. Therefore, the theory proposes fundamental changes within the system, in order to attend as well the interests of the least advantaged States, by removing — or reforming — hierarchically accepted structures of domination. In addition, Cox argues that certain theories of international relations (such as Realism and Neorealism), viewed as traditional in the academy, in fact serve the interests of the most powerful States (and dominant elites) from which they emanated, meaning those nations pertaining to the so-called “Global North”.

During the twentieth century, the Realist theory of international relations was developed and structured preponderantly in the academic environment of the United States, where Realism and Neo-Realism emerged. Kenneth Waltz and H. J. Morgenthau represented the main exponents of those theories that denoted the rise of American concepts, whose main premises have developed around security and defense as the primary interests of the States. In this sense, the prevailing postwar paradigm in international relations became realist in nature, which ab initio rejected international law as relevant to political issues. In a realistic perspective, international relations are characterized by the search for power in an anarchic system context in which States are the main actors, who cooperate or create international institutions according to their own interests.

Due to the elements and the discussion aforementioned, critical theory dismisses the idea of any “theory's neutrality”, once theory is always derived from some perspective of dominance and from a given center at a specific time and place. Therefore, theory is used to legitimize the prevailing social order and political structures in world affairs for the benefit of the hegemonic power. In this sense, while studying power dynamics in IR.

All mainstream theoretical assumptions [such as Realism, Neoliberalism and Neorealism] are determined by the interests of former colonial empires and describe international relations from their perspectives. Considerations of States, international institutions, international cooperation and conflicts, <...> reflect a pro-western point of view <...> while multiple non-western aspects do not fit into this description of world order; they are marginalized, and their interests are not taken into account [13, p. 20].

Nevertheless, critical theory does not consider institutions and power relations as given, while questioning their origins (as stated by the author, Critical Theory “stands

apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about” [14, p. 129]) and how they can be modified. Put differently, “critical theory raises questions about the formation of the ‘prevailing order of the world’, interests that were reflected in this world order <...> and possible ways to transform world order” [13, p. 19]. Linklater [15], for instance, observes that the concept of social immutability (or the prevalence of the status quo)<sup>3</sup> is associated with traditional theories of IR, which defend that States cannot escape the logic of power maintenance in an international anarchic system.

However, in the Critical Theory’s view, historical circumstances are the product of social relations at a specific moment in time and, therefore, can indeed be modified once those relations are changed. Thus, the theory’s role consists in bringing up the forces that work against hegemony and against the structures present in the international system. Hegemony, in this case, is a concept of great relevance to critical theory. Introduced by the Marxist Italian philosopher Gramsci, the concept of hegemony explains how the capitalist system had become accepted around the world as the only one valid, while based on coercive and consensual elements (or Soft Power<sup>4</sup>) used by the Hegemon to spread its own values as “universal” to other societies and States [12]. By Hegemony, additionally, one could also understand the situation in which the permanent rival between the so-called “Great Powers” is so unbalanced, that one power holds the status of *primus inter pares*, that is, it can impose its rules and desires unto others in the economic, political, military, diplomatic and cultural fields [16].

Justifying such a state of affairs, interpretations from the centers of power put forward concepts such as “hegemonic stability”, where the existence of a hegemonic State (based on overwhelming military and economic might) is necessary to keep the international system stable [17]. This stability, by its turn, would stem from the impracticality of counterbalancing such a powerful State (given the unsurmountable material disparity between the leading power and the rest), reducing dramatically the importance of “Balance of Power” politics [17]. In such a scenario, proponents of the so-called hegemonic stability theory expect other (less privileged) powers to be satisfied with their respective positions in the system, once there is “no use” in manifesting one’s criticism about the given condition, since the hegemonic State holds all the assets and levers of power.

Critical theorists suggest the concept of counter-hegemony, through which less privileged States could potentially overturn outdated hierarchies and established structures of world politics, while presenting an alternative view that stands for change (both socially and economically<sup>5</sup>) to international affairs [14]. Methodologically, this approach is summarized by 1) the deconstruction of theoretical discourses and social practices that work

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<sup>3</sup> The immutability thesis is an example of dogmatism that exists in positivist theories of International Relations. The role of Critical Theory is to deconstruct the traditional explanations in IR, that is, to show that there are no natural phenomena in political and social life and, therefore, there are always alternative paths that can be pursued by societies in order to improve their conditions.

<sup>4</sup> Hegemony therefore is viewed as embedded with subtle forms of ideological indoctrination perpetuated by the Hegemon through things such as propaganda, cultural products, media, IR theories and etc. that serve to entrench exploitative structures underpinning the capitalist global order.

<sup>5</sup> The emancipatory project of international Critical Theory consists as well in reducing material as well as wealth inequalities between States and in the respect for cultural, ethnic, and civilizational differences existent in the world [15]. In this context, Linklater suggests two international forms of social organization: 1) a pluralist society of States in which the principles of coexistence function as the key to the preservation of freedom and equality between independent political communities and 2) a society of States that agrees with substantive moral principles in order to co-ordinate their goals.



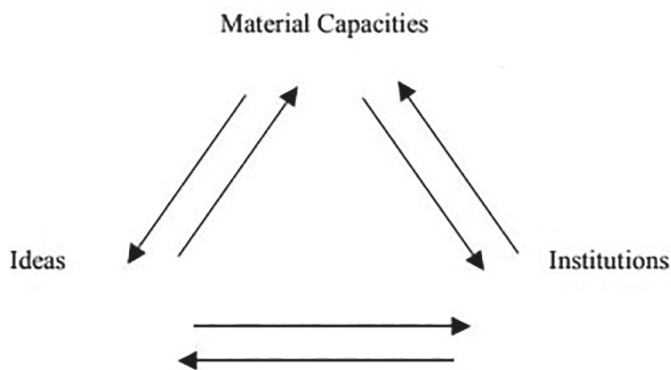


Fig. 1. Categories that form Hegemonic International Structures  
Material Capacities

Source: Adaptation by the authors of [14]

in the interests of the status-quo (and to the benefits of the powerful States) and 2) the presentation of emancipatory alternatives to the dominant order.

Cox [14] posits as well the existence of three categories of forces that interact within the international structure: material capacities, ideas and institutions, which are fundamentally co-determined. Material capabilities are related to technological developments that can produce for instance advanced armaments, which, by its tum, serve as a deterrent for counter-hegemonic initiatives. Ideas have intersubjective meanings, in which “universally” shared notions about social behavior tend to legitimize frozen configurations of power. Finally, institutionalization is seen as the means to perpetuate dominant orders, as it reflects the prevailing power hierarchies while privileging unbalanced relationships among actors.

The model above (see Fig. 1) is useful to understand the maintenance of hegemonic systems, whereas privileged members of the international community believe they are the only ones entitled to deal with matters of “global” significance. This thought, however, is not shared by States that feel dissatisfied about their position in the system and their lack of representation and voice in decision-making processes. Whereas historically international relations envisioned “hierarchical and binary relations of domination that work[ed] to the advantage of those structurally empowered” [18, p. 56], States located at the “outer rings of power” felt justifiably underrepresented and alienated within institutions whose resistance to change led ultimately to an expected “crisis of legitimacy”.

In this sense, Cox [14] envisioned, at the beginning of the 1980s, that a counter-hegemonic movement could arise in the future from the multilateral alliance of less privileged States, which could resist the dominance of the central powers. The BRICS phenomenon, within the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, seemed to confirm Cox’s predicament. The group’s inception can be considered as being related to the historical relationship between developed and developing countries, reflecting a certain form of contestation of the current status quo. After framing some aspects of Critical Theory in IR in this first section, the next segment of the paper will deal with BRICS agenda in order to verify the possible links existing between the group’s positions and views from critical theorists.

## The context behind BRICS' inception and an overview of its political positions

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the world witnessed an unchallenged American predominance in international affairs, with the previously Bipolar order suddenly giving place to a Unipolar one based on the US hegemony. Within the 1990s, the then so-called Washington Consensus, arising from Neoliberal thought and proposing: fiscal discipline, market deregulation, privatization of State assets, financial and trade liberalization etc., was being adopted all over the world; however, contrary to initial expectations, its implementation prompted some countries (such as Brazil and Russia) to fall into economic depression, inflation and social instability. In fact, some contended that Neoliberalism reread “in its own fashion the historical evolution of humanity. In this way it deprive[d] the poor nations of their history and disguise[d] <...> [their social and economic] asymmetries” [1, p.24].

Within such a context, it is justifiable that some States become less willing to bear the costs and obligations of maintaining certain multilateral institutions and their adherence to Neoliberal predicaments in the face of declining effectiveness. Moreover, small (or less powerful) States, although they depend on — and participate in — international organizations, feel usually alienated by the political power embedded within elitist forms of multilateralism present in them. Meanwhile, citizens and non-State actors are frustrated by what they see as a lack of accountability and transparency in multilateral organizations (such as the IMF and the World Bank). In this context, when the effectiveness of multilateral institutions cannot meet expectations of performance and embrace contemporary norms, legitimacy is put into doubt [19]. As a result, confidence in many of the institutions that preach multilateralism is diminishing at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century [20].

According to Ruggie [21], multilateralism appears to be challenged on two fronts: institutions forged in the post-1945 environment (or during the period of the Cold War) may be normatively depleted and their structures incompatible to contemporary challenges. Similarly, Keohane [22] argues that the institutions of multilateralism face problems of legitimacy since they do not reflect democratic values. In this context, international institutions should reinforce its criteria of legitimacy based on inclusion in order to reconstruct its legitimacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century [23].

The union of power, ideology and institutions formed the basis of the US predominance in world affairs, especially during the 1990s, with the fall of the Soviet Union when America and its western allies exercised uncontested hegemony in the mechanisms of global governance. In the specific case of the American (and more broadly the western) hegemony in world affairs, the existence of material forces linked to the institutionalization of US political and economic ideology, mainly by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (in the economic field) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (in the field of international security) helped crystallize the United States' hegemony globally.

Nevertheless, since the early 2000s, some countries started to oppose certain aspects of the American hegemony, which, after the 2008 Financial Crisis<sup>6</sup>, brought together emerging countries in defense of concepts such as real “multilateralism” in global affairs

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<sup>6</sup> Russian professor Maria Lagutina [24, p.5] affirms for instance that “the Financial Crisis laid the foundations for the transformation of the world order and the redistribution of power centres in its structure”.



and more inclusiveness in the global processes of decision-making. By that time, political pundits would thus claim the “end of unipolarity” “and with it the illusion that other nations would simply take their assigned place in the US-led international order” [25]. As some have argued, the United States is no longer able “to create the rules and dominate the institutions of global governance and world order in the manner it had for much of the post- World War II period” [26, p.277], due to the rise of different economic as well as political centers of power within the system. With the coming of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, affirms Acharya [26, p.275], emerging countries started to challenge the very “framework that has underpinned the post-war order”, seeking to improve their decision-making authority in various mechanisms of global governance.

It is important to highlight that the term “emerging”, by its tum, comes from the understanding that some States, once seen as “peripheral” within the system, have now improved their economic standing, elevating their status vis-à-vis traditionally established powers [27]. Others associate emerging countries with “middle powers”, which usually behave in counter-hegemonic ways (differently from superpowers which exercise hegemonic positions in the international system), while acting towards a multi-polarization of global politics. Under this assumption, not only do middle powers prefer to build a world that looks more like a (multipolar) beehive rather than a (unipolar) spider’s web, but they also act more effectively under such conditions. According to Gilley and O’Neil [28], multipolarity is most obviously in the interest of middle powers since it widens the group of what David Dewitt and John Kirton called “principal powers” in the international system, those States that possess the ability to have a decisive influence on important issues.

Another commonly noted feature of the “middle powers” interpretation about emerging countries is their emphasis on diplomatic initiatives that seek to constrain the exercise of power through rules and institutions. Thus, middle powers are expected to be status quo powers when it comes to preserving the rules and institutions of the international system, but “revisionists” when it comes to undue injustices caused by Great Power over-influence. Similarly, Jordaan [29] points out that all middle powers have a foreign policy behaviour that stabilizes and legitimizes the global order.

According to Macfarlane [30], by its tum, emerging States are differentiated by their dynamic identity whose position changes as their power increases, in an attempt to redesign the international system, while challenging the established hierarchy in which they operate. Wood et al. [1] also emphasize that emerging countries seek to strengthen multilateral institutions and work at the same time at bilateral and in regional levels. It is in light of the aforementioned that the old US-led Post-War order is seen as giving way to a more multipolar configuration of power in international relations, represented by new coalitions of States and new governance institutions (with some affirming that the decades-old traditional system of global governance suited in fact “the power and purpose of the US and the West” [31, p.10]); analysts point out as well that “one of the leading trends in world politics today is the growing number of countries with some degree of status dissatisfaction” [32, p.20], with transitions especially in economic power prompting some States to question the previously established status quo. Within that context, since 2009, the BRICS group, composed of rising non-western States, began to claim a greater voice in global governance [24], and for a “less US and western-centric” and more representative world order.

Considered as the main representative of emerging countries in today’s world, some authors argue that BRICS positions itself as a coalition of countries dissatisfied with their

participation and voice in international institutions, while willing to contribute to the democratization of global politics, but not necessarily to change the rules and values that govern the system. BRICS could be defined as an informal mechanism of co-ordination created by the political efforts of its members [33, p. 30] and a new model of cooperation that differs from traditional alliances or regionalisms, especially because they do not represent a military alliance, do not have a declared common enemy, and the five countries are scattered in different parts of the world [34, p. 51].

BRICS also does not have a consistent project to change the current global order in an attempt to enter the “elite club” of the international community [35, p. 3]. Similarly, Abdenur and Folly [36] point out that although BRICS is an anti-hegemonic<sup>7</sup> initiative aiming for a multipolar system, they do not represent a systemic rupture effort. BRICS [37], instead defines itself as “an important force for incremental change and reform of current institutions towards more representative and equitable governance”<sup>8</sup>. Although the group’s official discourse emphasizes the need for a more multipolar, equitable and democratic international order, the main objective of these countries is to expand their influence in the world, not to disengage or replace the established international institutions.

According to Papa [38], the BRICS represent a new form of peer-learning-based cooperation between countries that have some similar development features, and in the light of functionalism through cooperation in several thematic areas. From this perspective, BRICS could produce practical solutions to current problems and influence the perceptions of other countries, which is feasible and desirable. Nevertheless, BRICS and most of the G-20 nations favor a UN system reform because the current organism’s configuration (and especially its Security Council) is seen as a relic of the 1945 balance of power [39, p. 103]. BRIC’s 2009 declaration already stated “the need for a comprehensive reform of the UN with a view to making it more efficient” [40].

Some four years later, BRICS declared that the prevailing architecture of global governance was “regulated by institutions which were conceived in circumstances when the international landscape in all its aspects was characterized by very different challenges” [41]. In fact, although BRICS countries are integrated into the orbit of western economic institutions, they hold an (albeit modest) interest in changing some of its specific rules and norms [42]. This is explained, according to Alexandroff and Copper [43], by the fact that emerging countries (as those represented by BRICS) do not see themselves as beneficiaries of the liberal international system. The fact that international aid provided by institutions such as the IMF was “dependent on neoliberal-style adjustment measures” led many countries to face acute economic and political instability [44], which is a situation that affected some of the BRICS countries during the 1980s and 1990s.

As reformist States BRICS countries share a common belief that the structure of global institutions is inadequate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century realities, while the plans to reform these institutions exist, but remain just on paper. BRICS believes that emerging powers should rightly question the legitimacy of the existing system and want a global political struc-

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<sup>7</sup> The dichotomy hegemony/anti-hegemony, of neo-Gramscian origin, is recurrent in the discussions belong to postpositivist schools (especially among poststructuralists) as well, not being restricted to the Critical Theory mindset elaborated by Cox and others.

<sup>8</sup> Referring to the obsolescence of international financial and economic organizations which do not consider the increased economic importance of emerging countries — a criticism that is constantly directed against the World Bank and the IMF.

ture that reflects the multi-polar world order that is gradually taking shape. This common desire to reform global economic governance is the issue that has driven BRICS since the 2008 Financial Crisis. In the search for reform that the BRICS countries established in 2014 the New Development Bank (or NDB), which, according to Griffith-Jones [45], has been created in part from the refusal of developed countries, particularly the USA, to increase the capital of existing multilateral development financing institutions, as well as to ensure a greater voice for emerging and developing countries in those organizations.

BRICS general perception is that established organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank find it difficult to accommodate the interests of rising powers in the system (BRICS suggests that reforming the IMF and the World Bank requires augmenting the voting power in favor of emerging economies “to bring their participation in decision making in line with their relative weight in the world economy” [46]). The economist Paulo Nogueira Batista Jr [47, p. 180] argues that the NDB reflects the BRICS dissatisfaction with existing multilateral institutions, which have been slow to adapt to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to give sufficient decision-making power to developing countries. Other analysts defend that the NDB can be considered as proof that BRICS does have a revisionist agenda: representing a strong example of aggregation of revisionist powers, insofar as it challenges the structures and legitimacy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

In addition to the NDB, BRICS has also created a Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA, which plays an important role in stabilizing the national currencies of the BRICS member-states, serving as an instrument “to forestall short-term balance of payments pressures, [and] provide mutual support and further strengthen financial stability” [48]. According to the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) the BRICS’s CRA can indeed “become an adequate safety net <...> and hence ensure participating countries’ independence from the IMF” [49], representing a symbolic and exploratory move away from Western-centered institutions and capable of drawing in other emerging economies as well.

Notwithstanding, with the G-20 support, the BRICS countries managed to reform the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund by strengthening their positions in those organizations. Once again, concerning the necessity to reform the Bretton Woods institutions (dominated by the West and specially the United States), BRICS insists on a rearrangement of Voting Share and Quota’s allocation within the IMF, a position that can be seen from the group’s first documents since 2009, in order to give more voice and responsibility to emerging powers in managing financial global affairs. In fact, after 2010’s Quota Reforms (known as the 14<sup>th</sup> General Review of Quotas, which was completed on December 15, 2010, and whose effectiveness came into effect on January 26, 2016), the G7 currently went from 43 % to 41.2 % of the Voting Shares at the IMF, while BRICS countries, on the other hand, went from 10.99 % to 13.54 %, amplifying its voting power; the most significant increase after 2010’s Quota Reforms came from China, whose voting power went from 3.8 % to 6 % after 2010 [50]. For years, the BRICS have demanded a reform of the Bretton Woods institutions, where western powers remain overrepresented at the expense of emerging economies [51, p. 57].

In more recent times, it can also be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated vulnerabilities and inequalities between developing and developed countries. Frustrations with the inadequacies of technical assistance undertaken by developed countries, especially in providing vaccines to the less developed ones, reinforced the ini-

tiatives promoted in the context of the South-South cooperation. Once BRICS countries have significant experience in combating communicable diseases, and some of them in developing vaccines, the leaders demonstrated a willingness to cooperate and coordinate efforts in the field of vaccine cooperation and supporting the progress towards establishing the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Centre, as agreed in the 2018 Johannesburg Declaration.

Moreover, BRICS countries have long been engaged as well in cybersecurity cooperation, giving prominent attention to this field as one of its priorities in the last Summit of 2021. According to the Delhi Declaration, BRICS countries underscore the leading role of the United Nations in promoting dialogue, forging common understandings in the security of and in the use of ICTs, and developing universally agreed norms, rules, and principles for responsible behavior of States in the realm of ICTs, without prejudice to other relevant international fora. They also emphasized the necessity to advance practical intra-BRICS cooperation in this domain, including through the implementation of the BRICS Roadmap of Practical Cooperation on Ensuring Security in the Use of ICTs and the activities of the BRICS Working Group on Security in the use of ICTs. Internally, BRICS countries have recently adopted similar regulatory initiatives with some particularities and even some points of divergence, while challenging the hegemony of the United States in global cyberspace [52]. Nevertheless, BRICS still face major challenges in their cybersecurity cooperation, namely different conceptions of cyberspace governance, internal constraints of cybersecurity coordination and differentiation of policies from those undertaken by Western countries [52].

Having all the aforementioned into consideration, it can be argued that the BRICS group, by means of its political positions and cooperation in different fields, does invoke some aspects that resemble the criticisms levelled by the critical theorists since the 1980s, while at the same time taking actions to help undermine the gap between the developed and developing countries within the international system.

## Conclusion

For critical theorists, the reconstruction of international politics should be based on the consent of all actors in the process of global decision-making, providing a more democratic alternative for how world affairs have historically been dealt with. By this same token, States located at the outer rings of “power” and underrepresented within institutions whose resistance to change leads ultimately to a “crisis of legitimacy”, should bring together in order to better defend their interests. Even during the Cold War era, ideas about bringing more inclusiveness to the processes of decision-making in international relations flourished since at least the Bandung Conference, advancing all the way to the modern times. The realist notion that great powers are the only ones who can provide stability in the international system, according to Critical Theory’s interpretation, is nothing but a means to justify the status quo and to oppose necessary changes that would benefit the interests of a wider group of States. In this regard, the system is understood by critical theorists as differentiated between powerful and neglected countries, without rules that take into account the specificities of the poor nations.

Since the early 2000s, however, the world witnessed changes in the international distribution of economic and military might due to the so-called emerging States (or emerg-

ing economies), which started to play a more active role in world politics, contributing to the formation of the group BRICS, with its critique about the current global governance, not meaning, necessarily, a fundamental rejection of the established principles of the system. Since its first joint declaration in 2009, the BRICS have highlighted the need to increase the “voice and representation” of developing countries in global governance mechanisms in order to promote an “open, inclusive and balanced economic globalization”, to correct the “North-South” outdated dichotomy and to contribute to the promotion of democracy in international relations. Similar to the critical theorists, BRICS did not challenge the current international organizations, but the political and economic inequalities present within institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank.

The main reason why the five countries came together is the search for the democratization of international relations and the resistance to a unipolar order context in which the United States plays a hegemonic role. The democratization of international relations, as demonstrated through the research, represented the main demands raised by the so-called non-aligned countries or third world countries in the 1960s–1970s. At that time, despite the first attempts of South-South initiatives, progress was limited due to the lack of resources and post-colonial fragilities. Past and current reform movements do not deny the importance of international institutions; on the contrary, they aim at its constant improvement through changes and implementation of mechanisms that make its actions more representative and effective. In fact, as far as analyses of BRICS documents are concerned, it is possible to highlight the group’s interpretations about the necessity of multipolarity in world affairs (defined by the presence of multiple centers of economic, political, and civilizational influence), as well as the necessity to reform the current architecture of financial governance in order to empower emerging economies, which can be considered one of the factors behind the creation of the BRICS Bank (or the NDB).

Connections between BRICS and critical theory’s views on international relations can be found inasmuch as the group does represent a type of counter-hegemonic coalition of less-privileged States, but for the BRICS countries the term “hegemony” concerns mostly the western overrepresentation in institutions of global governance and not the existence of the capitalist system itself. On this regard, to attend the interests of the least advantaged States (or emerging economies), BRICS stands for reforming certain processes of decision-making, but contrary to some of Critical Theory’s predicaments, the group does not intend to overhaul the liberal-based structures that compose international organizations such as the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions. Whereas Critical Theory expects less privileged States to potentially overturn outdated hierarchies in world politics, BRICS works to provide less radical suggestions, presenting instead an alternative view in terms of dealing multilaterally and diplomatically with acute problems of international life, while criticizing (as Critical Theorists do) both social and economic inequalities embedded within global politics.

Nevertheless, the extent to which BRICS reflect all of critical theory’s views on international relations can indeed be a contested matter, deserving some further theoretical as well as analytical elaboration in the future. Be it as it may, points of contact between some of BRICS’ positions and critical theorists do exist, as we have previously discussed, but they do not translate into BRICS seeing the world order and its institutions with full-fledged skepticism, regardless of the group’s perception of international organizations as being too “western-centric”. Arguably, the most essential topic of concern for both critical



theory and BRICS consists in paying more attention to the so-called neglected States (irrespective of their other labels), whose voices and aspirations were up until recently ignored by the leading powers of the system, but whose accumulated dissatisfaction over the years are now an essential factor of world politics.

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