The ideological mantra of “there is no alternative” has come to sound increasingly discordant. Far from the promised land of liberal democratic peace and prosperity at the end of history, the late-modern world is roiled in ecological crises, vast and increasing inequalities, endemic violence, political repression, ferocious exploitation and manifold discrimination, gross over-consumption, and staggering human deprivation. Emergent from within such discordance is the growing conviction among huge numbers of people that another world is possible, “that another future is ready to be made.”

The (under-reported) signs are everywhere that people not only want radical change, but are determined to effect it: from the establishment of alternative currency and exchange systems in Ithaca, New York (1991) and the barrios of Buenos Aires (2001) to the global day of action against the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial meeting in Seattle (November-December 1999); the fourteen million workers that resisted privatization through strike action in India and South Africa (July-August 2001); the occupation of the Chevron/Texaco oil terminal by women in Ugborodo, Nigeria (2002); the millions across seven continents that demonstrated against the long-anticipated U.S. invasion of Iraq (February 2003); the 2005 European Action Day for Freedom of Movement and Right to Stay (Here); the establishment in 2007 of the regional Banco del Sur in South America; the banning of genetically-engineered plant and animal material by Medecino County, California (March 2004); First Nations resistance to state racism in the Australian Northern Territory and Queensland (2007); the Egyptian midfielder’s “Sympathise with Gaza” T-shirt, beamed globally through post-goal celebrations at the African Nations Cup (2008); over 100,000 incidents of civic unrest as China moved toward neoliberalism, to mention but a few.

Inspiring as these acts of resistance and new movements are, sustained socio-historical analysis is necessary to avoid the various pitfalls...
and dead ends that await if we “fail to understand the nature of the system . . . and the sorts of social and political strategies necessary to radically change it.”3 Whilst the role of critical theory in emancipatory politics is complex and contested, critical theorizing constitutes a necessary (although by no means sufficient) part of subaltern politics and radical transformation: “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.”4

The mode of theorizing has profound implications, however, not only for explanation and analysis, but also for political practice. Intrinsically within the critical theoretic endeavor are certain aspirations or ends to which political struggle is directed. But this is not to be understood as the theorizing of moralistic utopias or the (elusive) quest for eternal values that dominate much social and political thought. Rather, values are expressions of, and indeed derive their content from, definite historical needs.5 Marx made the case for socialism “from the essential defects of capitalist society, visible as such from within that society . . . the scientific analysis of capitalism is the case for socialism.”6 The radical core of the Marxist project arises, therefore, not from a commitment to certain a priori “ideals” or principles7 nor shared political sympathies and ideal-oriented worldwide manifestos, or from a different political tradition from subjective “value-judgments,” but rather, from explanatory critique.8

Emancipatory politics not based on knowledge of internal constraints, in the reproduction and transformation of the socio-historical reality, are more liable to failure. But the refusal to provide concrete descriptions or “blueprints” of future socialist societies also bears witness to “a respect for the freedom of future generations to transform the world in accordance with their own wants, not those of their forefathers.”9 It recognizes that people make their own history, albeit not in circumstances of their own choosing10 and definitely not according to, or in a way prescribed by, some long-dead theoretician. It is only the insistence of “starting from where we are and what we want now (whenever that ‘now’ might be) that guarantees the open-ended, liberatory and humanitarian nature” of the historical materialist project.11

It is to this critical theoretic project that neo-Gramscian scholars in International Relations have sought to contribute. For much of the twentieth century, the concerns of critical theory and emancipatory politics had remained largely outside the essentially conservative discipline of International Relations.12 As such, the popularizing of insights of Antonio Gramsci and the emergence of a neo-Gramscian school constitute a significant endeavor within international studies. Elaborated in a seemingly unpropitious historical moment, clamorous