

Developing A Critical Approach Towards Contrasting Protectionist and Free-Trade Paradigms

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Abstract

This paper utilizes critical theory to interrogate the normative ontological and epistemological assumptions undergirding free-trade and protectionist paradigms, the two dominant paradigms within Western economic orthodoxy. In comparing both paradigms, this paper argues that protectionism better aligns with critical economics' agenda of remaining responsive and aware of theory's undergirded, normative assumptions. This argument is inductively corroborated using the empirics of the 1994 EZLN uprising. Ultimately, given a binary between free-trade and protectionist paradigms, as per Western economic orthodoxy, critical economists should advocate for protectionist measures as they better align with their political project.

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Theoretical Context

Political theory and economic theory by extension, can be subdivided between problem-solving theories and critical theories. Problem-solving theories, including both free-trade and protectionist paradigms, prescribe policy to remedy normatively identified economic problems. Contrasting, critical theories employ a meta-analysis of problem-solving theories to expose both their identified problems and their prescribed policies as epistemologically and ontologically contextual. This paper bridges the empirical debates between free-trade and protectionist paradigms, concluding that if we assume a binary between free-trade and protectionism, as per Western economic orthodoxy, then protectionism's responsiveness to shifting normative contexts better aligns with critical theory's advocacy of remaining aware of theoretical context, thus should be advocated for, by critical economists.

Crucially, this paper refers to free-trade and protectionism as an economic binary only insofar as they are assumed as such within Western economic orthodoxy evident in both being the two dominant paradigms within western economic tradition and that within the hegemonic dominance of Western economic orthodoxy, deviant economic traditions are interpreted as pertaining to either a protectionist or free-trade paradigm. This paper cites the tendency for "deviant" economic traditions, such as Mesoamerican Indigenous economic traditions, to be interpreted as effectively protectionist within Western economic orthodoxy as evidence that protectionism proves more accommodating of "sociologically deviant" economic traditions. Ergo, between protectionist and free-trade paradigms, critical economists should advocate for protectionism as it better aligns with critical economics' agenda of remaining responsive and aware of theory's undergirded, normative assumptions.

Argumentative Structure

This paper's deductive component will begin by outlining various critical approaches and argue that neo-critical/poststructuralist approaches provide the best analytical

framework to compare the normative assumptions undergirding both free-trade and protectionist paradigms. Secondly, this paper will compare poststructuralist meta-criticisms levied against free-trade orthodoxy with those levied against the protectionist paradigm to expose the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning both economic approaches. This is important because both paradigms are undergirded by their own normative fallacies. Ergo, exposing fallacies which underpin only one of the two paradigms is not a sufficient argument in support of the other paradigm. This comparison will expose that between the two, the free-trade paradigm tends to assume an economic ontology, whereas the protectionist paradigm is more open to assuming a social/environmental ontology. Lastly, this paper will engage in a further meta-analysis of the normative assumptions undergirding both theories and ultimately conclude that although protectionism is not the necessary contrapositive to free-trade, since it better accommodates social/environmental ontologies it is more responsive to critical economics emphasis on being aware and responsive to shifting normative contexts when compared against the free-trade paradigm. Thus, if assuming a binary between free trade and protectionist paradigms, as per Western economic orthodoxy, protectionism should be favoured by critical economists. Rephrased, this paper's deductive argument follows this set of premises:

1. Critical theory encourages problem-solving theories to be aware of their normative contexts
 2. Free-trade and Protectionist paradigms are both problem-solving theories.
 3. Free-trade paradigm tends to subscribe to an economic ontology
 4. Protectionist paradigm tends to subscribe to an social/environmental ontology
 5. Social/environmental ontologies are more responsive than economic ontologies to changing contexts and are more aware of normative biases.
- Conclusion: Assuming a binary between protectionism and free trade paradigms, protectionism is more able to be responsive to changing normative contexts and thus, should take precedence.

Inductively, this theoretical framework and its corresponding conclusion will be further corroborated alongside the empirics of the 1994 Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) uprising which is interpreted by Western, orthodox economists as effectively protectionist despite EZLN motivations ideologically predating western economic orthodoxy. As a result, this paper reiterates that if assuming a binary between free-trade and protectionism, as per western economic orthodoxy, protectionism better aligns with critical economics' agenda of remaining “reflexive”, responsive and aware of a theory’s undergirding normative assumptions.

Determining Methodology: Selecting A Suitable Critical Approach

Whereas there are an indiscernible number of potential biases within positivist approaches, and thus an indiscernible number of problem-solving theories, critical approaches can be generally categorized into two approaches. These approaches criticize the ontological and epistemological assumptions of problem-solving theories as being either materially contextual or holistically contextual. Critical approaches, which explore the material context

of a problem-solving theory's normative biases, are regarded as historical-materialist approaches. For example, orthodox realists derive their understanding of a state's universal and unchanging ethos as extensions of a self-interested and rational ontology. In challenging this assertion, a historical-materialist would employ critical theory to argue realism's assumed state ontology is materially contextual, what Marxists refer to as "the means" and "relations" of production. According to historical-materialists, these contextual means and relations of production ultimately define how a state will behave in the international arena, undermining realist assumptions about nation-states' universal, rational self-interest. Contrasting historical materialism, neo-critical/poststructuralist critical theories assert that the normative assumptions that undergird problem-solving theories are more holistically contextual. This differs from a historical-materialist approach in allowing for the possibility that a given problem-solving theory's normative contexts are ideologically constructed, not always wholly materially constructed.

Crucially, if critical approaches encourage proponents of problem-solving theories to be wary of normative assumptions, then critical approaches must not employ the use of any of their own normative assumptions. It would be paradoxical for a critical theory to employ meta-narratives while simultaneously exposing problem-solving theories' usage of meta-narratives as normative and contextual. Yet, poststructuralism criticizes historical-materialism's economic determinism by equating it to a meta-narrative. Recast, historical-materialism arguing that problem-solving theories' normative biases are materially contextual is itself a normative bias. If the purpose of this paper is to levy the normative assumptions of free-trade orthodoxy against those of the protectionist paradigm, utilizing an approach which can be criticized for employing its own normative ontology would leave it subject to criticism. Ergo, poststructuralism proves as a better descriptivist critical approach than historical materialism in dismantling protectionism and free-trade's respective normative ontologies.

Notably, poststructuralism does not discredit historical-materialism entirely. Instead, poststructuralists argue that historical-materialism's tendency to be economically deterministic has stunted its ability to challenge all a problem-solving theory's normative

assumptions. Rather than discredit historical materialism's economically deterministic biases, poststructuralism supplements them by arguing problem-solving theories are undergirded by both ideologically contextual assumptions, as well as materially contextual assumptions. Simply, poststructuralism does not limit its meta-criticisms of problem-solving theories as unitarily materialist by positing that free-trade orthodoxy is simultaneously maintained by both ideological and material contexts. For example, poststructuralism does not disagree with historical-materialism's position that the free-trade orthodoxy fails to identify the material contradiction between capital's infinite growth as an antithesis to earth's finite bio-power. However it might additionally add that free-trade also legitimizes itself via ideological contexts such as the contextual dominance of western epistemologies informing free-trade's capital centric nature. Again, since poststructuralism proves itself a more holistic approach to critical economics than historical-materialism, poststructuralism will be the primary mode of analysis used in this paper to challenge protectionist and free-trade paradigms.

Further, as problem-solving theories, free-trade and protectionist paradigms prescribe policy to address identified political problems. Additionally, the role of critical theory is to provide a meta-commentary on both paradigms by exposing normative assumptions in the paradigms' identified political problems and their corresponding political prescriptions. Yet, since free-trade and protectionist paradigms both employ normative assumptions, it must be noted that free-trade is not the contrapositive to protectionism. Therefore, poststructuralist meta-criticisms of free-trade orthodoxy are not sufficient arguments in favour of protectionism. Similarly, poststructuralist criticisms of protectionism cannot be interpreted as arguments in favour of free-trade. Rephrased, exposing the ontological underpinnings of free-trade as contextual does not render the ontological underpinnings of protectionism any less contextual. As a result, properly contrasting these paradigms requires employing poststructuralist analysis to determine the nature of each paradigm's ontological and epistemological assumptions. Once determined, this analysis compares each paradigm's biases to determine which proves more

responsive and aware of shifting ontological contexts, and thus, is more in line with critical economics' agenda of remaining responsive and aware of theory's normative contexts.

Additionally, to reiterate that free-trade is not the contrapositive to protectionism, it is noted that both paradigms often share normative assumptions. For example, a shared Western-centric epistemology between free-trade and protectionism has encouraged both ontologies to assume a commodity-centric understanding of land tenure. By contrast, prior feudal modes of production, as well as certain contemporary Indigenous modes of production, predate Western understanding of land as a commodity. Protectionism and free-trade's shared historical processes such as the ontological imposition of binding land to the commodity form were forcefully imposed on these competing Indigenous modes of production resulting in both paradigms' shared normative assumptions. Further, shared historical processes are evident in the transition between feudal and capitalist modes of production which encouraged land commodification by enclosing the commons, as well as contemporary agrarian land reform projects designed to snuff non-capital centric, Indigenous resource management practices in the Global South. The existence of these Indigenous competing modes of production, and their forced subversion to Western epistemologies, corroborates the poststructuralist position that objective ontologies do not arise from a liberal, free marketplace of ideas. Rather, poststructuralism posits that there is no teleological trajectory towards an objective epistemological end-point and that epistemological and ontological assumptions simply assume dominance through historically imposed hegemonic structures. As such, protectionism and free-trade paradigms share normative assumptions as they both remain tied to Western epistemologies, which are established and maintained via shared historical processes.

Another example of overlapping normative assumptions between free-trade and protectionism resulting from Western-centric epistemology, is both paradigms' subscription to Westphalian state-centrism. Protectionism, if advocated for within the context of realist nationalism, assumes an ontologically Westphalian nation-state model. Similarly, free-trade paradigms, which subscribe to Kantian

peace theory, dismiss the internal contexts of nation-states on the international arena arguing instead that nation-state behaviour is universal and can equally be coerced into cooperation under specific economic conditions. Again, these overlapping normative assumptions wholly contrast Indigenous ontologies that predate the shared state-centric assumptions shared by protectionist and free-trade paradigms.

Still, despite their shared normative assumptions, free-trade and protectionist paradigms differ ontologically. Contrasting these differences concludes that the free-trade paradigm tends to situate itself within an economic ontology whereas the protectionist paradigm is more willing to assume a social/environmental ontology. Although free-trade and protectionist paradigms are both informed by normative ontologies, whichever ontology is more responsive and aware of its normative contexts will better align with critical economics' advocacy for remaining responsive and aware of a theory's normative contexts. Ultimately, I conclude that social/environmental ontologies are more responsive to these contexts because they can form out of non-Western-centric ontological contexts. By contrast, the economic ontology often assumed by free-trade orthodoxy is less malleable to non-Western contexts. Therefore, if assuming a binary between protectionism and free-trade, protectionism better aligns itself with the project of critical economics.

Competing Ontologies and Their Responsiveness To Shifting Contexts

The argument that despite being subject to its own ontological assumptions, the protectionist paradigm is more responsive than free-trade to changing theoretical contexts relies on three provable premises. Firstly, free-trade orthodoxy tends to assume an economic ontology. In comparison, protectionism is more willing to assume a social/environmental ontology. Lastly, a willingness to assume a social/environmental ontology is necessarily more responsive to undergirded contexts and assumptions when compared to a rigid economic ontology. As such, critical economics should support protectionism as it better aligns with its meta-

objective of remaining responsive and aware of a theory's normative contexts.

Using a poststructuralist approach to interrogate free-trade's normative assumptions emphasizes free-trade's tendency to assume an economic ontology. For example, according to Robert Driskill, free-trade advocates argue free-trade is beneficial "on average" while acknowledging some people will necessarily be worse off because of it. Driskill argues free-trade orthodoxy's tendency to reduce the human experience to a set of economically deterministic variables neglects the social contexts of individual people. He posits that assuming that the economic detriment of some people caused by free-trade will not evolve into social detriment that outweighs the economic benefits of other people is a wholly normative assertion. Rephrased, reducing human contexts to universal economic variables, and using such variables to generalize policy, ignores the human contexts that critical theory implores us to attend to. By contrast, Driskill posits protectionism is necessarily defined by changing human contexts. Protectionism ontologically decentralizes power which allows various human contexts to permeate through its political prescriptions.

Aside from Driskill's challenge against free-trade orthodoxy's tendency to reduce the human experience to economically deterministic variables, other poststructuralist challenges to free-trade similarly expose its overreliance on an economic ontology. For example, George Stigler criticizes David Ricardo's 'labour theory of value' for overprescribing the role of labour in production. In reducing labour to a universal, measurable variable, anthropocentric contexts embedded within that labour are lost. Such contexts include neglecting the potential alienation of labour, the physiological degradation induced by various types of labour, the environmental and sociological impacts of various types of labour as well as the social contexts of individual labourers. Another poststructuralist challenge to free-trade's economic-centric ontology confronts Kantian peace theory. A poststructuralist interpretation could challenge Kantian peace theory's assumption that the way in which a nation-state will behave is determined by its economic relationship to other nation-states. Again, this approach

neglects the possibility that shifting human contexts influence a state's behaviour on the international arena.

In contrast to free-trade, protectionism better allows the permeation of social/environmental ontologies. Although protectionism often employs economic-centric policies, such as “protectionist monetary policies and the restriction of foreign investment”, these policies are often socially/environmentally informed. This reflects protectionism's non-expansionary tendencies when compared to free-trade. For example, protectionism can justify itself via an economic ontology like protecting jobs. Equally, protectionism can justify itself via a social ontology of preserving traditional approaches to production. Here, protectionism has adopted two entirely different ontologies for its justification based on shifting ontological contexts. The free-trade paradigm also sometimes assumes a social/economic ontology, such as asserting that the revenue produced from free-trade can finance, and thus preserve, local cultures. However, this argument assumes non-capital centric modes of production are not a part of these cultures. Since culture influences production, just as production influences culture, an injection of Western economic practices will snuff traditional production practices. As such, whereas the protectionist paradigm can easily assume a social/environmental ontology, the free-trade paradigm struggles to do the same.

Further, social/environmental ontologies prove less expansionary than Western-informed economic ontologies. As noted, if protectionism assumes a Western economic paradigm, it shares free-trade's understanding of land as a commodity. This commodity-centric ontology proves antithetical to many non-Western resource management practices. Still, the difference between free-trade and protectionist paradigms is evident in protectionism's ability to abandon its economic ontology more easily for a social/environmental ontology. Thus, protectionism can also more easily abandon the expansionary tendencies of Western economic ontologies. For example, if assuming a social ontology, a hypothetical ‘expansionary-protectionism’ would only encourage various regions to enact measures to better control their resources. Each region could hypothetically assume an ontology in line with

their regional values to inform the ways in which they exercise control over those resources. By contrast, 'expansionary-free-trade' still bound to an economic ontology would involve the forceful imposition of epistemologically Western resource management practices. In this situation, market mechanisms would challenge traditional resource management practices for hyper-productive alternatives.

The EZLN As a Corroborating Case Study

The tendency for advocates of distinct ontologies and distinct resource management practices to support protectionism rather than free-trade further illustrates protectionism's responsiveness to shifting normative contexts when compared against free-trade. As mentioned, certain Indigenous ideologies predate free-trade and protectionist paradigms of state-centrism and commodified land tenure. Despite this, advocates of these Indigenous ideologies often subscribe to the protectionist paradigm when situating their struggle within the western-centric context of the two paradigms. The tendency for Indigenous ideologies to favour protectionism over free-trade corroborates protectionism's malleability to different ontologies. Additionally, bridging this paper's theoretical underpinnings alongside the empirics of the 1994 EZLN uprising further strengthens the claim that critical economics better aligns itself with protectionism than free-trade.

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) consists of Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples from Chiapas, México. Crucially, their *extra commercium* conception of land tenure contradicts both free-trade and protectionist ontologies of land commodification. Notably, EZLN land tenure and EZLN ontology refuse to situate themselves Western economic paradigm. Despite EZLN's ontological assumptions contradicting protectionism—within Western economic orthodoxy's assumed free-trade/protectionist binary—EZLN policies remain effectively protectionist. This is exemplified by the EZLN's challenge to free-trade expansionism evident in the EZLN uprising occurring the same day, and as a direct response to, the North American Free Trade Agreement's (NAFTA) implementation. This is because NAFTA's

free-trade expansionism proved antithetical to the EZLN's understanding of *extra commercium* land tenure. Contextualized, EZLN leadership considered NAFTA the latest in a long line of free-trade imposed revisions to *Article 27* of the post-revolutionary Mexican constitution which had prohibited the privatization of Mesoamerican land. Reiterated, given the binary between free-trade and protectionism, free-trade's inability to escape an economic ontology proved more antithetical than protectionism when pitted against Mesoamerican ontological conceptions of land tenure.

Unlike free-trade, protectionist ontological malleability allowed the EZLN to redefine a Western-economic ontology to one newly informed by Mesoamerican social ontologies. This shift redefined epistemologically Western protectionism from a concept of protecting jobs within a very specific, capital-centric economic ontology to one useful to the "protecting of Indigenous land rights". Ultimately, this is a result of protectionism's ability to abandon its economic ontologies and redefine its existence based on Indigenous social ontologies.

In many ways, Mesoamerican ideology, which informs the EZLN's 1994 militancy, parallels poststructuralist theory. Like poststructuralism, Mesoamerican ideologies stress pluriversality—a rejection of meta-narratives, with an emphasis on remaining critical of normative biases. The EZLN conceptualizes this pluriversality of ontologies via establishing "a world in which many worlds fit". This ideology directly opposes the mono-logical approach of problem-solving theories and their propensity to subscribe to one set of ontologies/epistemologies. Despite its apparent poststructuralist leanings, Western economists tend to interpret the EZLN's 1994 uprising as protectionist. This interpretation is a result of protectionism's ability to justify itself via distinct social ontologies and individual human contexts. In this sense, although protectionism effectively remains a problem-solving theory, when compared with free-trade, it better parallels critical theory in its ability to abandon the mono-logical assumption of a single economic ontology.

Theoretical Applications

Critical theory exists as a tool for theoretical introspection. Still, as a descriptive theory, it is often criticized for being unable to produce applicable policy. Paradoxically, when critical theory produces policy, it often requires subscribing to its own set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. For example, Marxist prescriptions of historical-materialism assume an economically deterministic ontology as well as a dialectically derived epistemology. This paradox ultimately led me to abandon historical-materialism as a suitable meta-theoretical approach in this thesis' analysis. In contrast, critical theory's assertion that there is no policy free of ontological bias, or that "theory is always for someone and some purpose" produces a self-defeating prophecy. If normative contexts inform theory and theory informs policy, critical theory will never realize a policy free of normative bias and evolve from a descriptive into a prescriptive theoretical approach. The closest prescriptive political application of critical theory is to produce policy that is self-aware of its own ontological biases while being malleable enough to accommodate a plurality of changing contextual ontologies.

Ultimately, neither the theoretical interpretation of this paper's deductive argument, nor the inductive empirics of the EZLN uprising argue that protectionism exists as a practical application of critical theory. Rather, it concludes that, if assuming a binary between free-trade and protectionist paradigms, as per western economic orthodoxy, protectionism's willingness to accommodate shifting ontologies rather than remain dogmatic to a Western-centric economic ontology better aligns with critical theory's project of theoretical contextual awareness.

Critical theory exposes the ontological and epistemological biases of problem-solving theories. As a result, critical theories either struggle to manifest their insights as policy (as is the case with poststructuralism) or they paradoxically adopt their own normative assumptions (as is the case with historical-materialism). Further, since free-trade and protectionist paradigms exist as problem-solving theories, they each subscribe to normative biases. However, in

analyzing the biases employed by free-trade and protectionist paradigms, it becomes clear that free-trade tends to assume an economic ontology whereas protectionism is more willing to assume a social/environmental ontology. Protectionism's willingness to accommodate a plurality of ontologies is further corroborated by the empirics of the EZLN uprising. Although subject to their own normative biases, if assuming an economic binary between free-trade and protectionist paradigms, protectionism better aligns with the interests of critical theory. As such, protectionism with critical theory's advocacy of remaining aware of theoretical context, thus should be advocated for, by critical economists.

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