Markus Fischer, "Feudal Europe, 800-1300: Communal Discourse and Conflictual Practices", *International Organization* 46, 2 (Spring 1992): 427-66.

Fischer sees a new debate in international relations, between proponents of Critical Theory (CT) and Neorealists, with the former critiquing the latter's "ahistorical, scientific, and materialist conceptions". According to CT, the Middle Ages "constitute the most important case to support their argument that world politics undergoes fundamental change". Fischer proposes to examine the discourse and practices of the Middle Ages, in order to test that hypothesis. In doing so, he finds that while feudal actors seem to have been operating in distinct ways, most of the difference is nominal; below the surface they "behaved like modern states". Thus, Fischer finds that there is no basis for the CT claims for historical change in international politics, which lends support to the Neorealist position that "conflict and power politics are a structural condition of the international realm—present even among individuals in a stateless condition".

After a brief sketch of the basics of the Neorealist position, Fischer explains the main points of CT. With regard to international relations, CT sees "a community structured by a historically contingent discourse of shared understandings, values, and norms about the principles of political authority and economic production". These concepts "motivate and guide" actors, who then "reproduce or transform their discourse over time". Modern politics, according to this view, is shaped by the concept of sovereignty, which CT sees as the origin of conflict and violence, in contrast to medieval times, which were characterized by "communal discourse".

Fischer does not dispute the nominal difference, but wishes to test "whether feudal actors behaved in accordance with their particular communal norms". He claims that an examination from this point of view reveals that behavior in the middle ages did not differ from that prescribed by the politics of sovereignty and described by Neorealist theories. To arrive at this conclusion, Fischer looks at four areas of feudal discourse: unity, functional cooperation, heteronomous and communal relations, and just war resolution. With regard to unity, he finds that despite a long tradition of empire (Rome) and persistent rhetoric regarding a Christian union under God, medieval politics was characterized by extreme fragmentation—"a fluid condition of power politics among atomistic individuals". The situation was similar where functional cooperation is concerned: despite strict doctrines regarding the functions of individuals and orders, norms prescribing one's place were constantly violated, and each actor had to provide for his own security. Unsurprisingly, Fischer finds that this state of affairs extends to heteronomous and communal relations, with actors pretending to observe their obligations and communal values, but in reality engaging in conquest and subjugation (although it is not clear why this falls outside of those roles). Finally, Fischer turns to immanent justice for the resolution of conflicts, which he finds equally hypocritical, since it amounts to nothing more than "self-help".

Fischer concludes that his examination takes away one of the main arguments for those, like Ruggie, who claim that there is change in world politics over time. It confirms Neorealist arguments regarding the role of anarchy (it compels actors to behave in similar ways, despite their differences), and demolishes CT claims regarding change, by alerting proponents of CT to the fact that they should not confuse rhetoric with practice. After pronouncing CT to be "inherently unsuited for the study of international relations", Fischer proceeds to explain the four steps that CT could take to counter his argument. Alas, as all of them are impossible, according to his assessment, his case stands.