

# Is Marx Relevant to International Relations Today?

Written by Pia Muzaffar

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PIA MUZAFFAR, JAN 31 2008

Marx – and by implication, *Marxism* – is frequently disregarded, arguably needing “to be returned to the nineteenth century where many suspected he had always belonged” (Gamble 1999:128). This opposition comes not only from those who have an interest in perpetuating capitalist social relations, but also more recently from the Left, contending that the materialist premise of historical materialism makes it ill-equipped to conceptualise other forms of exploitation and domination. However, there is clearly no definitive Marxism, and there may not even be a definitive Marx. This essay focuses specifically on a ‘neo-Marxist’ theorisation of the capitalist manifestation of power, evaluating its implications for international relations. I first outline the capitalist redefinition of power, arguing that the economic/political divide constitutes a systemic continuity making Marx’s critique still highly relevant. I then assess the quite formidable implications for contemporary international relations, both as a critical interrogation of the norms of orthodox IR, and for the way we presently theorise the ‘international’, looking specifically at the ‘globalisation debate’. I conclude that one central problem remains regarding this Marxist theorisation of the international: namely that the normative concern of historical materialism can engender hostility towards contemporary ‘postmodern’ themes, which may ultimately prove an intractable obstacle to further intellectual enquiry.

### I. Power Depoliticised: The Uniqueness of Capitalism

Capitalism’s redefinition of the ‘political’ derives from a real shift in the nature of power, which formed a fundamental part of the historical transitions to capitalism in those European societies that were first to do so. Recent scholarship, using Marx’s understanding of the economic/political dichotomy as an artificial differentiation of capitalist power, has begun to theorise alternative accounts of the process of modern state-formation and its attendant concepts of ‘state’, ‘civil society’ and ‘market’, situating their construction within the *historically specific* development of the capitalist system. Teschke’s analysis emphasises the uniqueness of this manifestation of power, noting that in pre-capitalist Western Europe social relations of property were at once both ‘political’ and ‘economic’. Those who exercised direct control over production processes were part of a system of “vertical relations of subordination and horizontal relations of co-ordination” (2006:536) forming a highly complex power-system that was far more precarious than the later manifestation of capitalist power, since sovereignty was fragmented or “parcellised” (Anderson 1974) and authority was “personalised” or direct (Teschke 2006:538). The construction of the English state, the formative moment of which Teschke locates in the Glorious Revolution making ‘sovereign’ power conditional on parliamentary approval, embodied the exceptional conditions of the capitalist configuration of power relations – namely the economic/political or private/public split. It enabled a “de-personalization of public authority... as accumulation was prosecuted increasingly in the private sphere of production, whereas the British state assumed, if not overnight, the role of the general public guardian of a private property regime” (2006:539).

The state in capitalist society is therefore defined by its abstraction from ‘civil society’, from private property and the

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market, and from the processes of production and surplus extraction (Rosenberg 1994:123-8). Parallel to this, the uniqueness of capitalism is also constituted by civil society, as the state's necessary counterpart, characterised by formally 'free' individuals engaging in exchange relations – in other words, the market. This appearance of freedom is caused by the shift in the nature of power from direct domination, which characterised pre-capitalist society, to the impersonal exigencies of the market – “the dissolution of these relations into a general form” (Marx 1973:164). Power is de-personalised, automated, abstracted to the market's anarchic structure. Under this system, in which “the ‘moment’ of coercion is separate from the ‘moment’ of appropriation” (Wood 1995:30), subordinate individuals are far less able either to comprehend their domination, or to resist it. This differs clearly from comparatively precarious pre- or non-capitalist power structures. Thus it can be seen that the system's unique strength derives from its depoliticisation of Economy, whereby “the totalizing logic and the coercive power of capitalism become invisible” (1995:245).

This historical transformation of the nature of power has been buttressed, of course, by an accompanying ideology. Yet the conceptual separation of Economic and Political not only constituted a basic assumption of classical political economy, but also continues to be accepted and reproduced in contemporary intellectual discourses, having taken on the appearance of a self-evident truth. This is certainly true of Neoliberal and Realist analyses, but also of many Marxist accounts, particularly 'base/superstructure' theories. Yet Marx in fact saw no such separation; he understood Economy as Political, both in terms of the power relation between capitalist and worker, and in the structuring of broader social relations (Wood 1995:20-1). The abstraction of 'economics' from processes of domination and exploitation divests economic exchanges of their political content, creating the appearance of a neutral, impersonal market. Furthermore, it necessitates a separate and specialised public realm in which 'political' practices are conducted, exemplified by the construction of the modern state as articulated above. Hence power becomes differentiated into the private (market) and the public (state), but “the differentiation of the economic is in facta *differentiation within the political sphere*” (Wood 1995:31; emphasis added).

Marx challenged these assumptions of classical political economy in order to explain how these economic processes came to be understood “as the inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded” (Marx 1973:86), an observation which remains entirely applicable today. The absolute impunity with which actors in the 'economic' realm are permitted to carry out market transactions with serious social consequences – companies using sweatshop labour, or IMF 'structural readjustment' programmes, to give a few pertinent examples – can only be possible if this false dichotomy remains intact. Thus Wood's emphasis on the systemic unity of capitalism is clearly justifiable, since this element of Marx's analysis remains fundamental in explaining *contemporary* structures of domination. Despite capitalism's unquestionable evolution and adaptation over time, certain defining elements, including the way in which the exercise of power is redefined and thus obscured (which Marx was first to identify and critique in such a way), continue to characterise social relations even now.

## II. Implications: IR Theory and the 'international'

Thus the very idea of the 'international', and its widely accepted definition as a separate, externalised realm governed by a separate logic to 'society', is undermined. If, as this essay argues, 'state' and 'society' form a constructed (rather than natural) dichotomy; if power is revealed to reside elsewhere than merely the 'political': what is to be made of the conception of international relations as inter-*state* relations, or of the notion of national or state interest? Under this dominant paradigm how can we theorise, for example, the actions of multinational corporations, which exercise their power across 'state' boundaries whilst remaining chiefly *within* the apolitical realm of 'civil

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society' and its market imperatives? In short, we can't. This theory constitutes a direct challenge to IR's dominant Neorealist paradigm in which modern categories and social forms are often assumed to be natural, timeless, and universal. 'Civil society'; 'the state'; 'natural law'; 'individual freedom': these concepts crumble (or at the very least, quaver alarmingly) under a critical analysis which locates their establishment firmly within the European capitalist experience.

Indeed, in opposition to the positivist assumptions that dominate the discipline in its present condition, orthodox IR theory can be better understood "as aspects of contemporary world politics that need to be explained [rather] than as explanations of contemporary world politics" (Walker 1995:6), being part of the institutionalisation and legitimisation of the particular norms and ideas which constitute the capitalist logic. Of course, this criticism of IR has already been made in reference to its establishment as an academic discipline, heavily determined by normative concerns surrounding security, diplomacy and inter-state conduct (Bierstecker 1999:3). It is also evident in contemporary practices whereby 'political' determinants limit the direction and scope of intellectual enquiry (Smith 2002). And yet even aside from any ethical concerns about the autonomy of research and education, a deeper problematic emerges. Namely that, as Teschke and Rosenberg demonstrate, the analytical constructs much mainstream IR theory unapologetically employs are revealed to be thoroughly embedded in, and constitutive of, the historical construction of capitalist relations. "Epistemologically, Neorealism's survival is predicated on its move to cut off the political from the social" (Teschke 2003:274) and thus preserve a relationship which obscures *social* mechanisms of power, treating these as automatic, whilst maintaining a designated sphere within which IR theorists may theorise. Unfortunately any theory which reproduces existing structures of power ceases to be of explanatory value, and this may be said not only of Neorealism, but of Neoliberalism and a large proportion of political 'Marxism' too. Hence whilst these schools constitute the mainstream, the discipline will remain principally a "science of domination" (Teschke 2003:274). The relevance of Marx to international relations theory can therefore be understood primarily in terms of a critical interrogation of the most basic, underlying assumptions of the discipline – even the elemental internal/external analytic divide. By historicising the construction of these assumptions, it becomes possible to relativise and thus completely undermine the universalising claims of orthodox theories of the 'international'.

How then, having established the critical value of this approach, can it be used *constructively* to contribute to contemporary debates in IR? According to Justin Rosenberg, it is the approach best equipped to conceptualise 'globalisation'. For what distinguishes a Marxian analysis from, for example, the postmodernist approach to which Wood so disdainfully refers for its emphasis on fragmentation and heterogeneity (1995:1-4; 256-7) – or indeed from Neorealism's backward projection of contemporary social forms – is Marx's conception of capitalism as possessing a uniquely totalising or 'globalising' dynamic. "[F]rom the cosmopolitan assertion of the *Communist Manifesto* onwards... Marxism has seen world affairs confidently in terms of a single world process" (Halliday 1994:50). Building on Trotsky's notion of 'uneven and combined development', Rosenberg (2007) argues that modern capitalism radically transformed the nature of world-history and historical change itself. Pre-capitalist interactive systems of social development should be characterised as 'inter-societal' rather than 'global' since they were episodic and not worldwide; only under capitalism is it actually possible to speak of the overall logic of a globalising process. The process does not produce equal results in different societies, but this 'unevenness' is characteristic of, not contradictory to, the structural unity of capitalist development. Rosenberg rephrases Thomson's words from, "It happened one way in France, and another way here" (1978:269) to "it happened another way' in France in part *because* it had already happened 'here'" (2007:23).

This 'globality' is descriptive, certainly, being characterised by the gradual incorporation of every society into a

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worldwide division of labour, but more significantly it is also constitutive of a shift in the nature of inter-societal interaction – capitalism does not encounter other social systems in an external or superficial way; it penetrates, transforms and incorporates their productive foundations into itself (Rosenberg 2007:4-5). This implies a radical reformulation of the way we understand the processes of historical change. It is a clear improvement on much ‘globalisation theory’ (which Rosenberg distinguishes sharply from ‘theories of globalisation’; see 2000:4), which remains premised on the fallacious state/society analytical divide discussed above, treating the ‘global’ as external to the ‘social’ (Morton 2004:136). This misguided focus – generating such banalities as the observation that globalisation has “deepened and strengthened practices that enhance the state’s role as much as it has generated practices that bypass the state” (Migdal:142) – and preoccupation with the ‘public’ realm of power “obscures the fact that capitalist exchange relations have always been implicitly ‘supra-territorial’” (Rosenberg 2007:14), able to transcend the ‘political’ demarcations of state by marking out a separate space within which to operate the exercise of power. Thus a Marxian approach to the ‘globalisation debate’ can avoid making descriptive and circular claims about the character of inter-societal relations, instead providing an alternative basis for analysis centred on the capitalist dynamic as a uniquely globalising agent. Furthermore, as Wood argues, resistance – the normative premise of all Marxist analysis – is only possible from the perspective of capitalism as a *totality*, both in terms of the broad spectrum of power relations (rejecting the public/private divide) and in terms of a single, *totalising* historical process (1995: 1-4; 19-20).

### III. Totalising Knowledge vs. The Rest of the World

The problem, however, is that the historical materialist understanding of capitalism as “the most totalizing system the world has ever known” (Wood 1995:2) can be interpreted as the approach’s principle strength, or indeed as its fundamental flaw. Certainly, the capitalist system is a globalising process and, as this essay has argued, its unique mechanism of obfuscating power relations by consigning them to a non-political sphere does constitute a rupture with patterns of social relations that had gone before. But the danger in this approach is the hostility it can engender to ‘postmodern’ themes of heterogeneity and fragmentation. Though the two schools are often believed to be diametrically opposed, by both historical materialists (see Wood 1995) as well as by postmodernists, who tend to conflate Marxism with economism and reproduce the misguided dichotomy of discourse/representation versus material reality (Laffey 2004: 460), it is worth considering whether each may in fact benefit considerably from engaging with the other. Reluctance to do so places major limitations on the scope of enquiry, denying Marxism the ability to theorise potential sites of resistance located in the encounter between the totalising dynamic of capitalism and the Other identities with which it is continuously interacting. Using Trotsky’s concept of ‘uneven and combined development’, Rosenberg certainly furthers the potential for theorising how the capitalist dynamic *combines* with indigenous forces in other societies. Yet even this, as Hobson notes, must be seen as Eurocentric since it includes the analysis of other societies only insofar as they encounter Western capitalism (Hobson 2005:378). After condemning Marx’s consistently Orientalist outlook – an issue which many Marxists will concede as problematic – he outlines a historical account which traces the formative influences on Western capitalism to a “global economy” existing in the East as far back as the year 500 (2005:376-8). Rosenberg responds by charging Hobson with the mistaken conflation of the term ‘global’ with the merely ‘inter-societal’, re-emphasising the point that not until capitalist industrialisation in Western Europe could a uniquely ‘globalising’ process be identified (2007:8-11).

However, the problem with this insistence on historical uniqueness and systemic unity is that it justifies treating capitalism as a totality *by virtue of the totalising nature of capitalist development itself*. In this sense the argument is

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tautological, the consequence of which is that the approach is severely limiting. For when Wood stresses that “Marxist political economy and history are intended to challenge capitalism as a totality head-on”, she assumes that *only* by understanding capitalism as a totalising system can that system be effectively contested. Theories of fragmentation and heterogeneity “clos[e] off critical access to this totalizing power by denying its systemic unity and insisting on the impossibility of ‘totalizing’ knowledges” (Wood 1995:1-2). Yet the antithesis of capitalism is not an antithetical totality; it must surely be the *antithesis of totality* – in other words, fragmentation. It seems simplistic, therefore, to accuse identity politics, cultural studies and the like of attempting to skirt around the issue of capitalist globalisation, when what could better counter the totalising, universalising capitalist logic than an approach which renders that uniqueness highly visible by locating where and how capitalist social relations encounter Other epistemologies and alternative bases for organising society? If historical materialism refuses to engage with these ‘postmodern’ themes, it will not shake off its lingering Eurocentric heritage. Though, as this essay has shown, it remains an effective and consistent critique of orthodox theory and norms, a denial that Marxist theory itself is prone to Eurocentric, ‘totalising’ tendencies will limit its potential for theoretical innovation. As Morton notes, it is

crucial to reflect further on whether an account of the rise of capitalism and the modern state can avoid the perils of Eurocentrism. Or whether, by moving away from the genesis of capitalism in Europe, this would merely end up producing conclusions that are “tantamount to rejecting capitalism as a useful notion for analysing world historical social change”.

(2005: 517; citing Arrighi 2003:133)

The question, then, of whether Marx and historical materialism provide useful concepts for international relations today depends quite significantly on the extent to which it is willing (and able) to combine its normative emphasis on challenging capitalism, “the most totalizing system the world has ever known” (Wood 1995:2), with an approach it has hitherto resisted; an approach which attempts to locate both capitalism *and* Marxism within an Orientalist discourse, but one which may yet prove crucial in understanding – and *resisting* – capitalism itself.

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