

Outside of Critical Theory, What Has Marxism Contributed to Understanding IR?

Written by Rory Gillis

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RORY GILLIS, AUG 29 2018

This paper will argue that the application of Marxism to international relations has inspired more second-image economic analysis of the international system, which has been useful in criticizing instrumental defenses of state supremacy. By doing this, this second-image analysis has also aided the progression of liberal international relations theory.

The Three Defenses of the State

Before the publication of Karl Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859, there existed three distinct defenses of the primacy of the state in international relations. These were the religious defense, the instrumental defense and the moral defense. All three arguments agreed that the nation-state should remain the primary actor in international relations following its development in the seventeenth century, albeit for different reasons. Conversely therefore, these arguments disagree with the view that a supranational political organization should exist to curtail the power of states.

As argued for in Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1680) and famously critiqued in the first of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), the religious defense of the state simply maintains that particular rulers have the divine right to rule as head of state (Filmer, 1680; Locke, 1999, p. 141). These heads of states, endowed with such legitimacy, should not have their power superseded by any greater authority. Although a less popular argument by the time of Marx, the religious defense laid the foundations for statism by dominating international relations discourse throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century, particularly in the English tradition. However, this defense has been largely silenced following criticism from moralistic and instrumentalist statist, and has become less relevant given the growth of democracy worldwide. In the Marxist philosophy of history, such an argument would perhaps be more relevant to feudal societies, from which Marx saw capitalism as a clear progression (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 221).

The instrumentalist defense of the primacy of the state doesn't appeal to the supernatural, but instead makes the more modest claim that the state is the only practical means of stable political organization. Other forms of organization are either intrinsically unstable, or have been proved to be defunct by historical evidence. This grouping is much more diverse than the religious defense, containing more purely instrumentalist thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes who simply fear a return to the state of nature, to more moralistic authors such as Edmund Burke who maintain state supremacy is in some sense more rational or in accordance with natural law (Armitage, 2000, p.618; Hobbes, 1985, p. 185). In contrast to the religious defense, the instrumentalist defense has continued to dominate after Marx, on both sides of the realist-liberal divide. Most notably, structural realists still look to further substantiate the instrumentalist claim that a state-led system is the only practical means of achieving international stability. Although in the move from realism to structural realism the first-image analysis of human nature underlying the conclusions of Hobbes and Burke has been surpassed (Waltz, 2001, p. 166), neo-realism continues to defend state supremacy on an instrumentalist basis.

The final defense of the state comes from social contractarian liberals such as Immanuel Kant, who argue that states can be an intrinsically just means of political organization. For social contractarians, representative, democratic

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states are formed through the creation of a just social contract by autonomous individuals. The rights of individuals can best be protected and enhanced in republics, and these republics should not, at least *prima facie*, have their power curtailed by any organization stronger than a voluntary federation. This was the view of Kant as famously expressed in international relations terms in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795), building upon themes expressed in his more philosophical works such as the *Metaphysics of Morals* and *The Contest of the Faculties* (Franceschet, 2001, pp. 219–221). Indeed, contrary to the ‘Jacobin legend’ that Kant supported a stateless cosmopolitan world order, the Sieyèsians (a competing faction within the French revolution) “welcomed *Perpetual Peace* because it was not ‘cosmopolitan or ‘philanthropic’ in the conventional eighteenth-century sense.” (Tuck, 1999, pp. 222–223). Even the most cosmopolitan superstructure would curtail the power of these just states, and would therefore be morally unjustifiable. The moral defense of the state doesn’t view supranational international organizations as desirable but unachievable, but rather as simply undesirable.

The Failure of the Radical Liberal Case Against the Instrumental Supremacy of the State

The only substantive critique of the primacy of the state by 1859 came from radical liberals, who supported global cosmopolitanism, in both a moral and political sense (Ypi, 2008, p. 49). Most famously articulated by Prussian nobleman Anarchis Cloots, radical liberalism looked to draw cosmopolitan conclusions from the same initial premises as the moral defense of the state. Individuals’ rights could not be fully protected by the nation-state alone as claimed by social contractarians, and instead a further organization more powerful than the state is required in order to impose and enforce an international cosmopolitan morality. Indeed, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Cloots expounded that “*the secret of the new moral cohesiveness*” was to be found in “*the expulsion of heterogeneous bodies [states]*” (Bevilacqua, 2012, p. 564). This ‘expulsion’ was in fact the curtailment of state power by a supranational government, thereby achieving ‘moral cohesiveness’ through political means.

Analytically speaking, this radical liberal cosmopolitanism was founded upon two main arguments, which can be viewed as retorts to the instrumentalist and contractarian defenses of the state. The argument against the instrumentalist defense of the state is as follows: (1) States cannot coexist peacefully for an extended period; (2) As long as states are unregulated actors in international relations, continual peace will not exist; (3) Therefore, nation-states should be subjected to a strong system of international law.

Secondly, the case against the contractarians: (1) Individuals have inalienable democratic rights; (2) Democracy at the level of the nation-state is not sufficient to protect these rights; (3) Therefore, nation-states should be subjected to a democratic, supranational government. This argument starts from the same moral foundations as the social contractarian defense of the state but is simultaneously trying to highlight the supposed contradiction between those principles and the resulting statism.

The instrumental argument, certainly in any strong sense, has been largely undermined by democratic peace theory. As pioneered first by Kant and later the liberal tradition of international relations, democratic peace theory claims that democratic states, due simply to the nature of their government, are less likely to go to war, at least with each other (Doyle, 1983, p. 213). The theory has since become empirically grounded, and has been praised as being “*as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.*” (Levy, 1988, p. 662)

Whether radical liberalism’s moral argument is valid will be ignored by this paper. At best, radical liberalism leaves us with an argument for moral cosmopolitanism, but no political map of how to get there. It therefore cannot be said to offer a rebuke of Carr’s notion that liberalism often secedes into utopianism (Carr, 2016, p. 12). The contribution of Marxism is to offer the tools for a reply to the supporter of democratic peace theory, and thereby substantiate an instrumentalist argument against the instrumentalist defense of the state.

The Marxist Second-Image Analysis of the State

In the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx details his view of the state as a political superstructure built on top of the relations of production. As an economic reductionist, Marx maintained that all “*social, political and intellectual life*” is dependent on and defined by the economy (Marx & Engels, 1859, p. 2).

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The government, judiciary and religion (indeed anything but the economy) is grouped as the 'superstructure' of the state. This 'superstructure' is built on top of the economic 'base' of the class struggle, and exists in order to maintain the economic relations of production. As detailed by Engels in *Anti-Dürhing* and faithfully referenced by Lenin in *State and Revolution* (Lenin, 1992, p. 16), Marxists believe that when the world fully moves past the capitalist mode of production (and therefore the class struggle), it will have no need for the existence of the state (Engels, 1877).

The Marxist analysis of the state is clearly a second-image analysis (Waltz, 2001, p. 80). It seeks to explain the existence and behavior of the state through its internal characteristics (Lenin, 2010, p. 109). Unlike Kantian liberalism however, which focuses on the political characteristics of a given state, Marxism emphasizes the economic status of the nation-state. All capitalist states are built on top of the class struggle, which determines their action. Through this economic analysis, Marxism offered the groundwork for the first capitalistic theories of international relations.

The Influence of the Marxist Case against the State

Marxism brought economics into focus in international relations. Apart from broad-stroke economic claims mirroring the domestic *doux commerce* thesis (such as Kant's that commerce and war were naturally opposed (Kant, 1917, p. 157)), the domestic economy's influence on international relations had been largely neglected pre-Marx. Marx's groundbreaking analysis and dissection of industrial capitalism had repercussions for international relations that had to be accepted or rebuked.

After Marx, the radical liberal case against the state took a huge step forward from offering purely political analyses and solutions to analyzing the specific impact of industrial capitalism on international relations. J.A. Hobson's theory of under-consumption detailed in *Imperialism* (1902) was a prime example of this, both explaining and offering solutions to state aggression on economic grounds (Hobson, 1902, pp. 79–80). Rather than viewing the state as a cohesive unit, Hobson expertly demonstrated that the state was in fact composed of a conflict of interests. Effectively, Hobson was highlighting that the bourgeoisie (to use a Marxist term) were more likely to benefit from imperialism, and therefore had a vested interest in supporting it through foreign investment[1]. Although Hobson's theory of under-consumption has largely been superseded and has been heavily criticized by modern economists for ignoring other possible causes of foreign investment (Brewer, 2002, p. 76), capitalist theories of imperialism can be seen as a definite progression in explaining state action from vague appeals to the civilizing influence of empire, as offered by J.S. Mill (Bell, 2010, p. 41).

To be clear, Hobson does not conclude that the powers of the state should be curtailed by a supranational government. However, his capitalistic theory of imperialism offers further evidence, using Marxist second-image economic analysis, as to why states cannot coexist peacefully. It can therefore substantiate the instrumentalist argument against the instrumentalist defence of the state, showing why states' power should be curtailed.

Avoiding the Charge of Utopianism

It is when liberalism moves past the purely political case against the state made by 18th Century radical liberals and argues for the reformation of the base (the economy) in order to influence the superstructure (the state) that it avoids E.H. Carr's charge of economic utopianism (Carr, 2001, p. 54). In his analysis in *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919-1939* (1939), Carr criticizes liberalism for not considering the division of countries into the 'haves' and the 'have nots' (Carr, 2016, p. 77). Perpetual Peace projects of the kind offered by Cloots fail to recognize that there is an irreconcilable tension between the two groups, and that their interests do not match. Indeed, Carr even deploys Marxist terminology to insinuate that utopian liberalism amounts to the global imposition of bourgeois morality. Although everyone has a basic interest in pursuing peace, this is not a strong enough interest to encourage the 'have nots' to settle for an evidently unequal status quo that directly goes against their interests. This is the foundation of Carr's critique of the Versailles Treaty, where Germany was transformed into a 'have not' and expected to accept the settlement because it was in their interest to achieve peace. Utopian liberals, for Carr, failed to recognize that countries such as Germany would not so easily accept such an 'unjust' status quo.

Carr's thesis is resting on an economic claim, and mirrors Marx's division of the world into the capitalist and non-

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capitalist nations. By offering purely political solutions such as the League of Nations, liberalism ignores the role of international capital and is simply offering superstructure reforms, without considering what the superstructure is resting on.

A response to Carr's criticism does not have to be a Marxist one. Indeed, one might reasonably argue that revolutionary reforms to the current capitalist base aren't feasible. However, in offering convincing liberal solutions to state aggression, one must consider the role of international capital. By doing this, liberalism can move past the charge of utopianism, and create plausible arguments against the instrumentalist defense of state supremacy in order to further the initial sentiments of the cosmopolitan radical liberals of the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has looked to substantiate its opening claim that the application of Marxism to international relations has been a positive one. It has aided the progression of liberalism by forcing it to consider the role of the economy in state action, and thereby has provided a method to evidence the radical cosmopolitan claim that the instrumentalist defense of state primacy is flawed. Marxism can therefore be said to have had an important impact outside of Critical Theory in our understanding of international relations.

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Notes

[1] “the business interests of the nation as a whole are subordinated to those of certain sectional interests that usurp control of the national resources and use them for their private gain” ((Hobson 1997, p. 46) as cited in Bell, 2011, p. 889))

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