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✓ Reader's guide

In discussions of world politics, it is not uncommon for Marxism to be dismissed out of hand as being preoccupied with economics rather than politics, and concerning itself with domestic rather than international social relations. In this chapter I will suggest to the contrary that Marxist theory aims at a critical understanding of capitalism as an historically particular way of organizing social life, and that this form of social organization entails political, cultural, and economic aspects which need to be understood as a dynamic ensemble of social relations not necessarily contained within the territorial boundaries of nation-states. Viewed in this way, Marxism can yield insights into the complex social relationships – on scales from the workplace and the household to the global – through which human beings produce and reproduce their social relations, the natural world, and themselves. The case-study section delves deeper into the insights that can be gained from Marxism in understanding the so-called 'War on Terror'.

Introduction

Marxism and critical theory¹ may be fundamentally distinguished from both the liberal and the realist traditions. Liberalism generally constructs its view of social reality in terms of individuals pursuing their private self-interest. These individuals may be led by self-interest into a social contract to create a government which will protect their lives, liberty, and property (John Locke), or to specialize and exchange with one another so as to create the germ of a market-mediated social division of labour (Adam Smith). With such contractual theories, liberalism purports to have resolved the problem of social order and cooperation among self-interested individuals. But the question of relations among these contractually constituted political communities remains problematic. Accordingly, the modern structural realist theory of International Relations has defined its field of inquiry in terms of a fundamental distinction between 'international' and 'domestic' politics (evident in Chapter 4). While the latter is held to be governed by a sovereign authority and hence allows for the authoritative resolution of disputes, the former is distinguished by the absence of these. In such an insecure 'anarchic' environment, sovereign states encounter one another with diffidence, suspicion, and, potentially, hostility. On this view, the 'high politics' of national security and power struggle necessarily dominate the horizon. Neoliberalism has sought to reintegrate into this state-centric world the liberal concern with contractual relations of cooperation, suggesting that international interdependence can create a demand for more cooperative forms of interaction which are facilitated by regimes and international organizations (as set out by Lisa Martin in Chapter 6). Thus can the 'low politics' of interdependence and routinized cooperation tame the 'high politics' of power struggle.

Viewed from the perspective of Marxism and critical theory, both liberalism and realism (and their neo variants) are profoundly limited, and limiting, for each takes as its premise a world of preconstituted social actors (whether self-interested individuals or security-seeking states) and is therefore unable to understand the social processes through which these kinds of actors have been historically constructed, and implicitly denies the possibilities for alternative possible worlds which may be latent within those processes of social self-production. In addition to the analytical blinders which this entails, the presuppositions of liberalism and realism are exposed as embodying political commitments which are profoundly conservative in effect. In order to recover the analytical and political possibilities denied by liberalism and realism, Marxism and critical theory have sought to illuminate processes of social self-production and the possibilities they may entail.

Marxism constitutes a huge and varied tradition of scholarship and practical political activity which is probably impossible to catalogue adequately. Therefore, rather than attempting to map this extensive and varied terrain, I will instead sketch out a particular interpretation which I believe builds upon the strengths of the dialectical social philosophy developed by Karl Marx, and shows how those strengths can yield insights into the politics of global production as well as the production of global politics. I will relate this tradition of dialectical theory to strains of thought sometimes characterized as 'Western Marxism' (to distinguish them from the official state Marxisms of the twentieth-century 'East') – including the critical theory associated with the so-called Frankfurt school, and the political theory of Antonio Gramsci. The Western Marxist encounter serves to

highlight the many ways in which humans are socially self-productive, and suggests important critical insights which include the cultural and political, as well as the economic, aspects of that process. These conceptual tools, then, enable a much richer and politically nuanced interpretation of the politics of globalizing capitalism, and the role of imperial power within that process.

Historical materialism and the purposes of critical theory

While it may not be possible to provide a simple or straightforward definition of Marxism which would comfortably encompass all its different variants and divergent strains, one fundamental commonality is the desire to provide a critical interpretation of capitalism, understood as an historically produced – and therefore mutable – form of social life, rather than as the ineluctable expression of some essential human nature. To the extent that the ways in which we live our lives, the kinds of persons that we are, and our social relations, are all seen as historical social products, the critical question arises as to whether, and how, we might organize ourselves differently. Given the historically specific social context in which we find ourselves, are there tensions or possibilities for change which might enable us to produce a different, conceivably more equitable and democratic, future possible world? Before any such questions can be posed, however, it is necessary to exert some critical leverage on the prevailing view that social life in commodity-based society is a necessary outgrowth of the natural characteristics of individual human beings.

Contrary to Adam Smith's world of self-interested individuals, naturally predisposed to do a deal, Marx posited a *relational* and *process-oriented* view of human beings. On this view, humans are what they are not because it is hard-wired into them to be self-interested individuals, but by virtue of the relations through which they live their lives. In particular, he suggested that humans live their lives at the intersection of a three-sided relation encompassing the natural world, social relations and institutions, and human persons. These relations are understood as *organic*: each element of the relation is what it is by virtue of its place in the relation, and none can be understood in abstraction from that context. Insofar as humans are material beings, we must engage in some kind of productive interchange with the natural world in order to secure our survival. Insofar as we are social beings, this productive activity will be socially organized, necessarily involving thinking, talking, and planning together. And in the process of this socially productive activity, Marx believed, humans continuously remake their world (both its natural and social aspects) and themselves. If contemporary humans appear to act as self-interested individuals, then, it is a result not of our essential nature but of the particular ways we have produced our social lives and ourselves. On this view, humans may be collectively capable of recreating their world, their work and themselves in new and better ways, but only if we think critically about, and act practically to change, those historically peculiar social relations which encourage us to think and act as socially disempowered, narrowly self-interested individuals.

The meaning of dialectic: social relations in process

This view of human social life as *relations in process* forms the core of Marx's famous dialectical understanding of history: humans are historical beings, simultaneously the producers and the products of historical processes. In one of his more justly famous aphorisms, Marx summarized his view of history in the following terms: 'Men [*sic*] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past' (2000: 329).²

This process is sometimes described as a dialectic of agents and structures. Agents are social actors, situated in the context of relatively enduring social relations or structures, often embodied in institutions. Structures generate the possibility of certain kinds of social identity and corresponding forms of action (i.e. roles which actors may play in the context of those structures), but the structures are not themselves determinative or automatic. They require human agents continuously to re-enact their structural roles. Actors or agents may enact structural roles in ways which reproduce, alter, or potentially even transform social structures in which they are embedded. 'This interplay between individual actions and the institutions that form the framework for individual action is what Marx means by dialectic' (Schmitt 1997: 50).

This dialectical, or process-oriented approach has important implications for the way in which we study social life. As Marx himself put it, 'as soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists' (2000: 181). On this view, causal explanations which posit objective 'laws' of social life may be misleading insofar as they distract us from the ways in which our world has been produced by historically situated human social agents. For if we understand history as an open-ended process of social self-production under historically specific circumstances, then we are led to inquire about the historical context of social relations in which social action takes place, to ask about the historical processes which generated that kind of social context, and to look for structured tensions in those historically specific forms of life, tensions which could open up possibilities for historically situated actors to produce social change. Further, we are encouraged to ask how our own social situation in the present relates to that of those whom we are studying. Might our own inquiries have implications for the ways in which contemporary people know and (re-)produce our own social world?

Marx's dialectical framework of relations in process also has important implications for the ways in which we think about politics, freedom, and unfreedom. Traditionally understood in terms of authoritative processes of rule (based upon an official monopoly of the means of coercion), or the authoritative allocation of values (who gets what, etc.), from a Marxian perspective these understandings of politics seem remarkably limited, and *limiting*. In the context of a dialectical view of history, politics appears as struggle over processes of social self-production, the ability to steer those processes in one direction or another and thus to shape the kind of world in which we will live and the kinds of persons we will become in that world. Politics, in short, concerns future possible worlds. And freedom may correspondingly be understood in terms of social self-determination – our collective ability to shape ourselves and our world. This is an expansive understanding of freedom, much broader and potentially more empowering than the traditional liberal

understanding of freedom as individual choice (often expressed in a market context where the object of choice is the maximal satisfaction of the individual's private wants and needs). Based on the dialectical approach to understanding history, with its expansive conceptions of politics and of freedom, Marx developed a powerful and enduringly relevant critique of capitalist social life.

Marx and the critique of capitalism

Marx was one of the most incisive critics of a peculiarly modern form of social life – capitalism. For Marx, capitalism was not to be confused with markets or exchange, which long predated capitalism. Rather, capitalism represented a form of social life in which commodification had proceeded to such a degree that human labour itself was bought and sold on the market. One of Marx's central insights was that this situation presupposed the development of historically specific class-based relations and powers: the concomitant development of capital – socially necessary means of production reconstituted as the exclusive private property of a few – and wage labour as the compulsory activity of the many. Under the class relations of capitalism, direct producers are not personally tied to their exploiter, as were slaves in bondage to their master or feudal serfs bound to the lord's estate. In a real historical sense, then, capitalism frees workers to treat their labour as their own property. However, this freedom is complemented by a peculiarly capitalist kind of unfreedom. Insofar as means of production are under the ownership and control of a class of private owners, workers are *compelled* to sell their labour to members of this owning class in order to gain access to those means of production, engage in socially productive activity, and secure through their wages the material necessities of survival.

Marx's critique of capitalism hinged upon the claim, intelligible within the context of his dialectical theory of social self-production, that capitalism simultaneously involves historically unique forms of human freedom and unfreedom, empowerment and disempowerment. Marx believed that although capitalism develops the productive powers of human societies to historically unprecedented heights, it does so in ways which are also disabling, exploitative, and undemocratic.

Capitalism is *disabling* insofar as this way of organizing social life distorts and obscures real historical possibilities for social self-determination. Socially empowered as never before to remake their world and themselves, people under capitalism are simultaneously prevented from realizing the full implications of their socially productive powers and the fuller forms of freedom these powers might make possible. Within the context of capitalist commodification and the ideology it supports, historically specific forms of social organization and activity take on the appearance of objective, necessary, natural, universal conditions. Marx referred to this kind of disabling mystification as 'alienation' or 'fetishism'. Insofar as these appearances involve abstracting particular elements out of the constitutive relations through which they are produced, and representing them as if they were self-subsistent, preconstituted entities, this ideological mystification may be understood as a sort of reification – the practice of conflating abstractions with reality.

One of the reified forms of appearance generated by capitalist social life is the abstract individual. When we understand ourselves as monadic persons pursuing private wants and needs via our interactions with others, our social practices reproduce our identity as

abstract individuals. These individuals are abstract insofar as they are understood to embody certain attributes (propensities, preferences, aptitudes, rights, etc.) which 'are assumed as given, independently of social context' (Lukes 1973: 73). For persons understood in this way all social relations appear 'external', that is, as either an instrument or an obstacle for the realization of already given private purposes. The practices which might be seen as specific to a particular historical or social context (and hence to be potentially changeable along with that context) are instead presumed to be hard-wired into individuals as such. Thus the self-interested behaviour which Adam Smith observed among private producers in the context of a commodity society is represented as a universal human attribute, a natural 'propensity to truck, barter, and exchange' (Smith 1993: 21).

Further, to the extent that we understand ourselves as isolated individuals, we confront our social environment not as our collective social product, but as an objective constraint on our individual choices. Social life becomes something which happens to us, rather than a collective way of being in the world. This is an instance of a powerful critical insight derived from Marxian theory: to the extent that people understand existing social relations as natural, necessary, and universal, they are prevented from looking for transformative possibilities, precluded from imagining the social production of alternative possible worlds. In short, they may abdicate their collective powers of social self-production. Ironically, then, the unprecedented development of productive capacity under capitalism has as its historical correlate the disempowerment of collective human producers.

A second strand of Marxian critique holds that capitalism is exploitative. Often couched in the arcane language of the labour theory of value which Marx adopted for the purposes of his critical engagement with classical political economy, the theory of exploitation is a complex and controversial topic (Brewer 1990: 26–36; and Schmitt 1997: 100–13), but it may be more readily understandable when expressed as an instance of the disabling unfreedom discussed above. On Marx's view, capital is the *result* of socially productive activity, the creation of value by labour. Viewed as a 'thing', capital itself has no productive powers. But viewed as a social relation, capital is productive only as accumulation of previously expended labour power, set in motion by newly expended labour power. Yet, because capitalism is characterized by private ownership of the means of production, as owner the capitalist controls the production process and expropriates its product – the *surplus value* created by labour (i.e. the product of labour above and beyond that required to sustain the workers themselves). The process and product of socially organized labour are subordinated to private property and incorporated into the accumulation of capital.

Of course, the capitalists' ability to control the production process and expropriate its product depends upon the successful reproduction of their class-based powers, and the insulation of these powers from more democratic, collective forms of decision-making. The third strand of Marxian critique thus highlights the degree to which capitalism creates *private social powers* located in a separate 'economic' sphere of social life, effectively off limits from explicitly 'political' public deliberation and norms of democratic accountability. This is perhaps best understood in terms of an historical contrast. Pre-capitalist modes of production such as feudalism involved the direct coercive expropriation of surplus labour by the dominant class, a landed nobility whose social powers were simultaneously economic and political. Should serfs fail to yield surplus labour to their lord, the social significance of this was not simply a private deal gone bad but rather a direct

challenge to the political-economic order upon which the lords's social position rested. That the lord would respond with coercive force would not have seemed extraordinary in a social context where economic and political aspects of social life were fused in this way.

In a modern capitalist context, however, it is relatively unusual (although certainly not unheard of) for employers to use direct coercive force as an integral part of their extraction of surplus labour. Rather, workers are compelled to work, and to submit to capitalist control of the workplace, by what Marxists often refer to as the 'dull compulsion of economic life', the relentless daily requirement to earn enough to pay the rent and put food on the table. The direct intervention of explicitly political authority and directly coercive force within the capitalist workplace is the exception rather than the rule. The social powers of capitalist investors and employers are enconced in this depoliticized and privatized economic sphere, understood not as intrinsically political powers but as individual prerogatives attendant upon the ownership of private property. By virtue of being understood as attributes of 'private property', these powers are made democratically unaccountable (it is, after all, nobody else's business what each of us does with our own private property). Further, because of the state's structural dependence on private investment, government is effectively compelled to serve the long-term interest of the capitalist class (not necessarily congruent with that of individual capitalists). Failure to create the political conditions perceived by capitalists as a business-friendly climate would result in capitalist investors sending their capital after higher profits elsewhere and leaving the government to preside over economic crisis which could well be politically catastrophic for incumbent office holders. Insofar as politicians of all major parties are acutely aware of this structural dependence upon maintenance of a business-friendly climate, a range of possible policy orientations (which might be perceived as threatening to the profitability of private investment) are effectively precluded. This implicit veto power over public policy is yet another sense in which Marxists have argued that capitalism is undemocratic.

In these ways, then, capitalism effectively privatizes the social powers of investors and employers, lodging these in a privatized economic sphere, understood to be separate from the sphere of politics, public affairs, or the state. None of this is uncontested in principle or uncontested in fact. A system of social organization premised upon *privatized social powers* is a system fraught with contradictions and tensions. Historical materialism highlights these powers, along with their structural and ideological defences, in order to subject them to critical scrutiny. The purpose of this critical analysis of historical structures is to enable identification of historically real possibilities for progressive social change.

Capitalism as a system of social organization, as a way of life, presupposes as part of its structure both a privatized and depoliticized economic sphere and, correspondingly, a public, political state. Further, this separation is embodied in a variety of cultural practices and representations in which we appear to ourselves as private individuals, workers, consumers, rights-bearing citizens, confronting a pre-given world in which we must choose the most efficient means for the realization of our private purposes. To identify capitalism narrowly with the economy – and therefore Marxism with economic analysis – is to miss the crucial point that particular forms of political and cultural organization and practice are bound up with capitalist social reality, and are implicated in political struggles over the reproduction – or transformation – of that entire way of life.

Classical theories of imperialism

Among the most influential contributions of the Marxist tradition to the study of world politics have been theories of imperialism. According to Anthony Brewer's authoritative text (1990: 25), Marx himself never actually used the term 'imperialism'. Further, Brewer's interpretation of Marx's relatively few discussions of the topic suggests that colonialism is not essential to capitalism: 'capitalism does not need a subordinated hinterland or periphery, though it will use and profit from one if it exists' (Brewer 1989: 57). Although he had relatively little to say about imperialism as such, regarding the expansionary dynamics of capitalism which we would nowadays associate with globalization Marx was prescient:

“ The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. ”

Marx 2000: 248–9³

The conventional wisdom of some mainstream IR theorists notwithstanding, capitalism for Marx was clearly not a purely 'domestic' phenomenon, hermetically contained within the territorial vessels of modern nation-states. Its expansionist dynamics (rooted in the imperatives of competitive accumulation) overflowed those boundaries and outdistanced the geographical scope of state-based political authority. For Marx, the privatized social powers of capital have long had global horizons. Marx thought that the international activities of industrial capital (as distinct from the trading of merchant capital) were potentially transformative for the social organization of production on a world scale, spreading and intensifying the capitalist organization of production and greatly expanding socially productive powers. Consistent with his dialectical analysis of capitalism, Marx believed this process would entail both progressive and retrogressive aspects, generate massive suffering as well as the potential for qualitative and, he hoped, progressive social change.

In the early twentieth century, as the First World War loomed, a generation of Marxist writers emerged who are most appropriately associated with the theory of imperialism. Including Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding, Nicolai Bukharin, and most famously Vladimir Lenin, these writers argued that advanced processes of capitalist accumulation were driving the major capitalist countries into colonial expansionism. Although the precise mechanisms driving capitalism toward imperialism varied (e.g. the quest for raw materials, overproduction requiring a search for new markets, or over-accumulation compelling the export of capital), their thinking converged on the notion that advanced capitalist countries would be driven by the imperatives of capital accumulation to support the international expansion of their great monopolistic blocs of industrial-financial capital. In a finite world where much of the globe had already been colonized by one or another of the great imperialist powers, 'inter-imperialist rivalry' was seen as an

overwhelmingly likely source of conflict, and the First World War would have appeared as confirmation of this.

Classical theories of imperialism have been subjected to sharp criticism insofar as they represent species of economic determinism – the idea that processes intrinsic to the economy are the primary determinants of social and political life. In the following section, I will discuss the evolution of dialectical theory in the form of Western Marxism and critical theory, and explain how these theoretical developments provide important conceptual resources for recasting Marxian theories of global power in more dialectical, and enabling, forms.

Western Marxism and critical theory

The Bolshevik revolution and the rise of Official Soviet Marxism in the 'East' provided the backdrop for the development of 'Western Marxism' – a family of innovative theories which both built upon, and reacted against, aspects of the classical Marxist tradition. The Marxist expectation that proletarian revolution, once ignited, would sweep the advanced capitalist world was bitterly disappointed in the early twentieth century. The Russian revolution gave birth to socialism in one nation and Marxists in the West were left to ponder the reasons why working-class revolution had failed to materialize in their own countries and, subsequently, why fascism had triumphed in some Western countries. Official Soviet Marxism soon solidified into a rigid Stalinist dogma in the service of a one-party state, stifling rather than enabling critical discourse and social self-determination. It is in this historic context that we may understand Western Marxism and critical theory not just in terms of a critique of capitalism but also a corresponding critique of positivism and economic determinism as ways of understanding social life. In the apt summary of critical theorist Douglas Kellner, 'those individuals who became known as "Western Marxists" saw the need to concern themselves with consciousness, subjectivity, culture, ideology and the concept of socialism precisely in order to make possible radical political change' (1989: 12). I will highlight the core contributions of two major strands of the Western Marxist tradition: the critical theory associated with the Frankfurt school, and the dialectical Marxism associated with Antonio Gramsci and his followers (among whom I count myself).

The term Frankfurt school refers to a group of theorists originally associated with the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt University beginning in the 1920s. In some regards, these theorists worked within the spirit of the Marxian critique of the disabling effects of capitalist modernity, but in other ways they diverged from more mainstream forms of Marxism. Two of the early leading lights of the Frankfurt school, Horkheimer and Adorno, began 'to lose faith in the revolutionary potential of the working class in the face of the triumph of fascism and the integration of labour into the capitalist system in the democratic capitalist countries' (Kellner 1989: 105). Further, they saw how, in the Soviet Union, Marxism was being transformed into rigid doctrine of economic determinism sanctified as objective 'science'. In the face of these developments, they wanted to retain

a critical and potentially progressive role for social theory, but were wary of orthodox Marxism's preoccupation with production (narrowly understood) and the corresponding emphasis on the historic role of the proletariat. Critical theorists were deeply suspicious of the idea that objectively valid forms of knowledge could be arrived at independent of social context, innocent of prevailing practices and norms. They questioned the dichotomization of is and ought, fact and value, known object and knowing subject, which underpinned 'positivist' forms of scientific knowledge claims and associated constructs. Horkheimer and Adorno, in particular, were sharply critical of 'instrumental reason' – a technical rationality of means (choosing the most efficient instrument to pursue a pre-given goal) which claims neutrality as to ends. Rather, the construction of knowledge claims is no less a purposive social practice than any other, and theory is permeated with social values and norms, fraught with political implications for the future, whether these are explicit or implicit. Theories which claim objective truth are then profoundly misleading: on the one hand, mystifying the normative commitments which underpin their own truth claims; and, on the other, denying that alternative normative values and future possible worlds are at stake in knowledge claims which the theory offers up as fact. Underlying bureaucratically administered societies of both East and West, twentieth-century cultures permeated by positivism and instrumental reason stifled critical discourse.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, incarcerated in Mussolini's fascist prisons for the last decade of his life, was likewise sharply critical of economic and positivistic forms of knowledge, including forms of Marxism based on economic determinism. Gramsci insisted on situating the process of human knowledge construction in particular historical social contexts and, in a devastating critique of the economic and scientific Marxism of Bukharin, he derided as 'metaphysical materialism . . . any systematic formulation that is put forward as an extra-historical truth, as an abstract universal outside of time and space' (Gramsci 1971: 437). For Gramsci, Marxism was not the objective truth of history, but was rather a way of telling the story of history from *within* a capitalist historical context, a story which could lead people to consider possible post-capitalist futures and ask themselves how, together, they might get there from here.

Accordingly, Gramsci developed a theory of hegemony as a form of political power which relied more strongly upon consent than coercion. In a hegemonic social situation, dominant groups (classes, class fractions, and their various allies) articulate a social vision which claims to serve the interests of all, and they use selective incentives to recruit junior partners into their coalition and to divide and disable opposition. Gramsci believed that in advanced capitalist societies, in which civil society was highly developed, hegemonic power might be promoted and contested in fora of popular culture, education, journalism, literature, and art, as well as in political parties and unions. Under conditions of hegemony, subordinate social groups might be led to consent to the power of dominant groups, making the widespread use of direct (and obviously oppressive) coercive power unnecessary. However, Gramsci argued, hegemony was not seamless, a dominant ideology which simply foreclosed any possibility of critique. On the contrary, hegemony could be and should be continuously challenged throughout civil society. In this way, Gramsci hoped, an atomized and depoliticized capitalist culture might be challenged by a counter-hegemonic political culture, people might be led to think of their economic lives as having

political significance, and they might begin to question capitalism's structured separation of the economic from the political aspects of social life. This latter he saw as the necessary precondition for the concurrent democratization of economic, cultural, and political life, a gateway to a variety of possible postcapitalist futures (see Rupert 2005).

Contemporary critical analysis of global power

The forms of critical theory developed by the Frankfurt school and by Gramsci might lead us to regard with some scepticism claims of scientific objectivity associated with positivistic forms of International Relations theory, and the economic determinism underlying classical theories of imperialism. And, indeed, contemporary theorists have drawn upon these and related intellectual resources to begin to construct critical theories of world politics. Pioneering contributions were made in the early 1980s by scholars such as Richard Ashley, Robert Cox, and Andrew Linklater.

Ashley (who initially drew heavily on the contemporary critical social theorist Jürgen Habermas, but later became more closely associated with poststructuralism) began to develop a critique of Waltzian neorealism which, he argued, reframes classical realism (with its emphasis on actively interpreting the pragmatic, artful, and creative practices of statecraft) into a positivist theory in which world politics is itself depoliticized, reduced to an economic logic which takes as given the world it confronts, and inquires only as to 'the efficient achievement of whatever goals are set before the political actor' (Ashley 1986: 292). Questions regarding political ends are evacuated from the study of world politics, and the ability of theory critically to contemplate alternative possible worlds is effectively denied. The result, according to Ashley, is 'the impoverishment of political imagination and the reduction of international politics to a battleground for the . . . clash of technical reason against technical reason in the service of unquestioned ends' (1986: 297). Also, drawing on Habermas, critical IR theorists such as Linklater (1996) have sought to dereify the state, and to reincorporate processes of social reasoning and 'discourse ethics' into an explicitly normative account of the construction of political community at various levels. As Devetak (1995: 172) explains, 'discourse ethics promotes a cosmopolitan ideal where the political organization of humanity is decided by a process of dialogue in which participation is open to all who stand to be affected by the decision'.

Robert Cox (1986) also drew on the idea of critical theory to call into question prevailing modes of theorizing world politics: as a species of positivist or 'problem-solving' theory, 'Neorealism implicitly takes the production process and the power relations inherent in it as a given element of national interest, and therefore as a part of its parameters' (1986: 216–17). Assuming what needs to be explained, neorealism describes patterns in the operation of power among states without inquiring as to the social relations through which that power is produced. Moreover, those relations themselves have a history, a process of production, and they need not remain forever as we see them now. Accordingly, Cox adopts what he calls a method of 'historical structures' in which 'state

power ceases to be the sole explanatory factor and becomes part of what is to be explained' (1986: 223):

“ The world can be represented as a pattern of interacting social forces in which states play an intermediate though autonomous role between the global structure of social forces and local configurations of social forces within particular countries. . . . Power is seen as emerging from social processes rather than taken as given in the form of accumulated material capabilities, that is as the result of these processes. (Paraphrasing Marx, one could describe the latter, neo-realist view as the 'fetishism of power'.) ”

Cox 1986: 225

A critical theory approach to global politics would then take a relational, process-oriented perspective, and seek to show how social forces (classes, social movements, etc.), states, and world orders are bound up together in particular constellations of historical structures. It would inquire as to the ways in which those historical structures – entailing political, cultural, and economic aspects – had been socially produced, the ways in which they differentially empower various kinds of social agents, and the kinds of resistances which those power relations engender. It would seek to highlight tensions and possibilities within the historical structures of the present in order to open up political horizons and enable social agents situated within those structures to imagine, and potentially begin to realize, alternative possible worlds. The view of theory defended by Cox – and his characterization of 'problem-solving theory' – is discussed in Chapter 1.

Case study: War on Terror or twenty-first-century imperialism?



Within eighteen months of the horrible events of 11 September 2001, the USA, the UK, and an assortment of junior partners were engaged in a massive military invasion of Iraq. Despite the fact that Iraq had no demonstrable connection with the attacks, in its public justifications of the war the Bush administration associated the invasion of Iraq with its 'War on Terror'.

How can the dialectical approach to explanation associated with Marxism and critical theory help us to make sense of these vexing developments? From this perspective, a satisfactory account would need to incorporate not just the historical structures of global capitalism (with their economic, political, and cultural aspects) but also the ideologies and actions of human agents situated within these structures. The resulting multi-layered explanatory account would resemble a sort of dialectical layer cake seeking to explain: (1) how the structures of capitalist modernity create the possibility of particular kinds of world politics; (2) how those possibilities were realized in the particular forms of the twentieth-century capitalist world order; (3) within those historical structures, the key relationship between capitalism, Fordism, and the geopolitics of petroleum; and (4) the ideologies of 'economic security' which have animated US policy-makers from the Cold War to the Bush administration. I will be able to do no more in this context than to sketch

out the broad outlines of what such an explanation might look like. That should be enough, however, to show how this kind of analysis differs from other approaches to the study of world politics.

Recall that at the heart of capitalism is a class relation between those who own means of production and those who must sell their labour-power in order to gain access to those means of production. One of Marx's most important insights was that this class relationship presupposes a broader set of social relationships, a set of social structures which make this kind of relation possible. One of these enabling structures involved the constitution of social means of production as private property, and hence presupposed the privatization and depoliticization of economic life (recall, by way of contrast, how economic and political life had been fused under feudalism). The creation of a privatized and depoliticized economy implies the exclusion of public, political concerns from the economy, and their assignment to a separate sphere of society, one which we have come to associate with the modern state. The political states which have developed within capitalist modernity are understood to be sovereign within their territory, and thus are enabled to legislate and regulate 'domestic' affairs. Yet, the activities of private economic actors continuously overflow those boundaries – in no small measure because of the dynamics of capitalism as a system of accumulation without limits, driven by the compulsions of relentless market competition. The structural contours of capitalist modernity, then, involve a system of territorially limited political authority and flows of economic activity which are not similarly limited. This structure represents a condition of possibility for imperialism – the exercise by states of coercive power in the service of capital accumulation – as well as systems of global hegemonic power in which coercive force is less evident and the ideological politics of consent come into the fore (Rosenberg 1994; Wood 2003; Cox 1986).

The productive power of Fordist capitalism

These structures of capitalist modernity are not automatically self-perpetuating, but rather are continuously (re-)produced, challenged, or changed by human agents under particular historical circumstances. Thus, these structures may assume distinct forms during identifiable historical periods. During the twentieth century, Fordist industrial capitalism in the USA was setting global standards of dynamism and productivity (this itself was not simply an historical datum but the result of long and complex political struggles – see Rupert 1995). After the Second World War a transnational coalition, centred on Fordist industrial capital, emerged and promoted a hegemonic world-order project which envisioned a global economy of free trade, but one in which state managers would be able to use macroeconomic policy to sustain economic activity and levels of consumption, and in which labour unions might be tolerated or even encouraged as brokers of industrial consent, securing the cooperation of workers within the framework of Fordist mass-production industry in exchange for real wages which would grow along with productivity. In the USA and across much of the industrial capitalist world, organized labour was integrated into a hegemonic coalition which sought to rebuild the world economy along the lines of this 'corporate-liberal' model (van der Pijl 1984; Rupert 1995). Securing a measure of political stability and institutionalizing a rough correspondence between mass production and consumption, this set of historical structures enabled a period of unprecedented economic growth and capital accumulation, and

institutionalized a culture of mass consumerism, especially in the wealthy global 'North'. The political economy of Fordist capitalism played a central role in the great global order struggles of the twentieth century: arguably, it was the unparalleled productive power of Fordist capitalism which enabled the geopolitical triumph of the allies over the autarkic and authoritarian capitalism of the axis powers, and subsequently of the reunified West over the Soviet bloc in the Cold War.

Fordist capitalism depended not only on politically quiescent industrial labour and predictable levels of consumer demand for the products of mass production industry; it also required fuel and lubricants for its machines, raw material for its pervasive petrochemical industry, and inputs for its increasingly mechanized and chemical-intensive agriculture. Oil, in short, was indispensable to the energy-intensive form of Fordist capitalism at the heart of the twentieth-century world order. Although the US oil industry was able to provide from domestic production the great bulk of the oil consumed by the allies during the Second World War, by the end of the war it was clear that US reserves were not sufficient to fuel the reconstruction of the capitalist world economy or its growth in subsequent decades.

US foreign policy in the pursuit of capitalist interests

Framed in terms of 'economic security', US global strategy after the Second World War aimed not just at 'containing' the power of the Soviet Union, but also at creating a world which would be hospitable to the growth of US-centred capitalism (Pollard 1985). US strategists explicitly envisioned a symbiotic relationship between the vitality and robustness of the capitalist 'free world' and globally projected US military power (May 1993). Viewed through the lenses of this strategic vision, protecting the free world was closely identified with promoting a vigorous US-centred capitalist world economy, and it was this world-view which appeared to justify US interventions in order to counter political forces which might inhibit the growth of US-dominated global capitalism. Insofar as the Fordist world order depended upon ample and cheap supplies of oil which the USA could not itself provide, US strategists sought to establish predominance in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region.

Pivotal to postwar US strategic dominance in the Gulf were its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Franklin Roosevelt had established a strategic partnership with the Saudi ruling family in 1945: 'Roosevelt forged an agreement with Abdul-Aziz ibn Saud, the founder of the modern Saudi dynasty, to protect the royal family against its internal and external enemies in return for privileged access to Saudi oil' (Klare 2004: 3). In Iran, US influence was secured for a quarter-century by the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup in which the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, was overthrown by forces who re-established the autocratic power of the Iranian monarch, the reliably pro-American Shah. In light of this history, it is little wonder that the Iranian Revolution which finally ended the Shah's rule in 1979 fused a Shiite Islamic theocracy with bitter anti-Americanism (Kinzer 2003). Nor should it be surprising that the USA-Saudi relationship is deeply ambivalent, with widespread resentment of US influence (and, for the last decade, military presence) in the Kingdom finding expression through the fundamentalist Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam which predominates there. It is against this backdrop of global geopolitics and the ideology of economic security that we can reinterpret the invasion of Iraq under the guise of the War on Terror.

The most hawkish elements in the administration of George W. Bush exploited the atmosphere of jingoism and fear in the USA following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 to put into effect their long-cherished vision of US global military supremacy, unilateral action, and the pre-emptive use of military force deployed to create a world in which the US model of capitalist democracy is unquestioned – a strategic vision now known as the Bush Doctrine. Building on ‘a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence’ – a unipolar condition to which Bush refers as ‘a balance of power that favors freedom’ – ‘[t]he United States will use this moment of opportunity to extend the benefits of freedom across the globe. We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the globe’ (White House 2002: 1–2). Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s continuing defiance of US power in a region of such enormous strategic significance effectively mocked the Bush administration’s pretensions to unquestioned global supremacy. That removing Saddam was a high priority for those who formulated the Bush Doctrine should not then be surprising. The administration also hoped that a postwar client regime in Iraq would provide the USA with a base of operations in the heart of the Gulf region more reliably open to US forces than Saudi bases. Further, among the so-called neoconservatives in the administration and their intellectual guides (such as the Arabist Bernard Lewis), it was believed that a forcefully ‘democratized’ Iraq would lead to the spread of liberal democracy throughout the Middle East, ‘drain the swamp’ of authoritarianism and poverty which was believed to be the breeding ground of terrorism, and lessen the perceived threats posed to Israel. Speaking just before the invasion of Iraq began, Vice-President Cheney suggested that the ‘War on Terror’ might be won by a forceful display of power and resolve in the heart of the Arab Middle East: ‘I firmly believe, along with men like Bernard Lewis, who is one of the great students of that part of the world, that strong, firm U.S. response to terror and to threats to the United States would go a long way, frankly, toward calming things in that part of the world’ (Cheney quoted in Waldman 2004).

But the Iraq War cannot be properly understood in abstraction from questions of world order following in the wake of Fordist capitalism. Iraq sits atop oil reserves estimated as second only to those of Saudi Arabia, so US dominance in postwar Iraq might promise a reliable source of petroleum supply as well as significant leverage over the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and global oil prices. US dependence on imported oil continues to grow – as does the petroleum consumption of Europe, Japan, and rapidly industrializing countries like India and China – and no other petroleum reserves are as vast, or as significant for the future of global strategic power in a post-Fordist world, as those of the Gulf region. The Bush administration’s National Energy Policy task force, chaired by Vice-President Cheney, estimated that the Gulf region will be supplying around two-thirds of the world’s oil needs by the year 2020 (Dreyfuss 2003: 44). In their quest for global supremacy and a capitalist world order favourable to US interests, Bush administration officials may well have believed that militarily-based strategic dominance in the Middle East, and an American hand on the world’s oil tap, would represent a bargaining chip of incalculable value when dealing with potentially incoherent allies and emergent rivals (especially China) even more dependent upon imported oil than the USA itself (Everest 2004).⁴ On this view, the War on Terror is inextricably bound up with US attempts to achieve strategic dominance in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region, and this latter is deeply entangled with the historical structures of US-centred global Fordist capitalism.

Conclusion

Marxism is neither solely preoccupied with the economy, nor with domestic relations. Rather it aims at a critical understanding of capitalism as an historically particular way of organizing social life, one which entails political and cultural as well as economic relations and practices, which has never been containable within the boundaries of territorial states, and which has crucial implications for processes of social self-production on scales from the workplace and household to global order. Conceived by Marx as a dialectical theory of relations in process, the enabling implications of Marxist theory were substantially vitiated by interpretations which cast it as a form of economic determinism. Seeking to recover its ability to illuminate dialectical tensions and possibilities, Western Marxism and critical theory formulated sharp critiques of economic determinism and positivistic forms of knowledge more generally. These currents led toward a re-emphasis of politics, culture, and ideology within a broadly materialist understanding of social life, pointing towards an approach which Cox (1986) described as a ‘method of historical structures’. Employing an analytic approach similar to the one Cox suggests, we may understand the Iraq War as the product of a confluence of social relations and processes which traverse and interrelate social forces, states, and world orders. The structures of capitalist modernity, the historical forms they assumed in the epoch of Fordism and the hegemonic world order which emerged out of that context, strategic ideologies of economic security, and the culture of Fordist consumerism are all implicated in this story.

But what of the political potential of Marxist theory, its ability to illuminate tensions and possibilities in the present which could open up alternative possible worlds and modes of social life? This is, in one sense, the perennially deferred question of Marxist theory. In the absence of a unitary revolutionary agent – the famous ‘workers of the world’ – how can a materialist theory talk about transformative politics? Some Frankfurt school theorists became deeply pessimistic about this. Certainly, from the perspective of an anti-determinist, non-teleological ‘marxism without guarantees’ (Hall 1996), no straightforward *a priori* answer to this question is possible. But twenty-first-century global politics is not without hope. As the century turned, a confluence of diverse social forces and movements – a ‘movement of movements’, radically decentralized yet strategically coordinated, sharing not so much a coherent ideological vision as a vigorous opposition to capitalist globalization – began through its collective resistance to enact new kinds of global politics. In a series of dramatic, globally visible protests, they called into question the reified representations of capitalist global hegemony and asserted that ‘another world is possible’. They explicitly connected globalizing capitalism with US imperial power and, just prior to the invasion of Iraq, used their transnational activist networks to call forth and coordinate simultaneous anti-war demonstrations in hundreds of cities around the world, involving many millions of participants – an unparalleled achievement of grassroots global politics. While some of these social movements embraced heterodox forms of Marxism such as ‘Autonomism’ (on which, see Tormey 2004: 114–17), most were probably non-Marxist in their political orientation. Yet, these movements were united in a kind of dialectical self-understanding: they represented themselves as contesting historically specific constellations of capitalist or corporate social power in order to open up the

possibility of alternative future worlds. In this, I would suggest, they were true to the spirit if not the letter of Marx's dialectical theory of politics in the modern, capitalist world (see Rupert 2005). In such a world, where dialectics of power and resistance are continually re-enacted in various ways, I would argue that the central insights of Marxism and critical theory retain their relevance.



QUESTIONS

1. What do Marxists mean when they talk about a *dialectical* understanding of history?
2. How does such a view shed critical light on liberal individualist theories, such as that of Adam Smith?
3. What are the implications of a dialectical understanding of history for the way in which we think about *politics* and *freedom*? When we see the world in terms of dialectical theory, how do we need to redefine these terms?
4. Why do Marxists believe that capitalism cannot be adequately understood as a 'domestic' phenomenon? How has this belief been reflected in the theories of imperialism?
5. What do Marxists mean when they talk about capitalism as more than just an economy? In what ways are politics and culture integral to capitalism as a way of life?
6. How do the insights of Western Marxism shed critical light on more 'economistic' forms of Marxism?
7. What is the purpose of critical theory? How does it differ from 'positivist' or 'problem-solving' theory?
8. On what grounds has 'neorealist' IR theory been criticized by contemporary proponents of critical theory? What are the analytical and political limits of neo- or structural realism which critics highlight? What would a critical theory of world politics do which structural realism or other positivist theories cannot?
9. How does a critical understanding of capitalism as a way of life encompassing economic, political, and cultural or ideological aspects help us to make sense of US global strategy since the Second World War?
10. How does such an understanding enable us to reframe the War on Terror as an instance of twenty-first-century imperialism?



FURTHER READING

- **Brewer, A. (1990), *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge).** A comprehensive explication and critique of the various theories of imperialism to which the Marxian tradition has given rise.
- **Cox, R. and Sinclair, T. (1996), *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).** Collected in this book are some of the most seminal essays by a leader in the neo-Gramscian tradition of international studies.

- **Isaac, J. (1987), *Power and Marxist Theory* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press).** This innovative book uses a 'critical realist' view of the relation between agents and structures to reinterpret the concept of social power at the heart of Marxian theory.

- **Kellner, D. (1989), *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).** Interprets the critical theory associated with the Frankfurt school as an outgrowth of a strongly Marxian-inflected critique of capitalist modernity, but one which diverged from increasingly orthodox Marxism over the course of the twentieth century.

- **Robinson, W. I. (2004), *A Theory of Global Capitalism* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).** Robinson posits the emergence of a globalized process of capital accumulation, a transnational capitalist class, and a nascent transnational state.

- **Rosenberg, J. (1994), *Empire of Civil Society* (London: Verso).** Rosenberg critically situates the theory and practice of *Realpolitik* within the relations and processes of capitalist modernity.

- **Rupert, M. and Smith H. (2002) (eds), *Historical Materialism and Globalisation* (London: Routledge).** Essays from a variety of scholars broadly sympathetic to historical materialism but understanding in very different ways its significance in a world of globalizing capitalism.

- **Shannon, T. (1992), *An Introduction to the World-system Perspective*, 2nd edn (Boulder CO: Westview).** A schematic overview and sympathetic critique of world-system theories.

- **Tormey, S. (2004), *Anti-Capitalism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld).** Informed by a post-communist sensibility, this book offers a critical overview of theories and practices of contemporary anti-capitalism from Autonomism to Zapatismo.

- **Wood, E. M. (2003), *Empire of Capital* (London: Verso).** A contemporary reinterpretation of imperialism theory from an influential Marxian political theorist.



IMPORTANT WEBSITES

- Marxists.org Internet Archive. A massive electronic resource including extensive selections of texts (in a variety of languages) from many major Marxist theorists, articles on the history of Marxism, and an encyclopedia of Marxism.
www.Marxists.org
- The Socialist Register. Web page of a leading socialist annual containing Marxian analyses of globalizing capitalism, US imperialism, and a variety of other topics.
<http://socialistregister.com>
- Dialectical Marxism. The writings of political philosopher Bertell Ollman, one of the world's leading scholars of dialectical theory. Check out 'Class Struggle', Ollman's Marxist board-game.
www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/index.php



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