Chapter 9

Marxist theories of international relations

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Reader's Guide

This chapter will introduce, outline, and assess the Marxist contribution to the study of international relations. Having identified a number of core features common to Marxist approaches, the chapter discusses how Marx's ideas were internationalized by Lenin and subsequently by writers in the world-system framework. It then examines how Frankfurt School critical theory, and Gramsci and his various followers, introduced an analysis of culture into Marxist analysis, and how, more recently new (or orthodox) Marxists have sought a more profound re-engagement with Marx's original writings. The chapter argues that no analysis of globalization is complete without an input from Marxist theory. Indeed, Marx was arguably the first theorist of globalization, and from the perspective of Marxism, the features often pointed to as evidence of globalization are hardly novel, but are rather the modern manifestations of long-term tendencies in the development of capitalism.

Introduction: the continuing relevance of Marxism

With the end of the **cold war** and the global triumph of 'free market' capitalism, it became commonplace to assume that the ideas of Marx and his numerous disciples could be safely consigned to the dustbin of history. The 'great experiment' had failed. While Communist Parties retained **power** in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, they did not now constitute a threat to the **hegemony** of the global capitalist system. Rather, in order to try to retain power, these parties were themselves being forced to submit to the apparently unassailable logic of 'the market' by aping many of the central features of contemporary capitalist societies. One of the key lessons of the twentieth century, therefore, would appear to be that Marxist thought leads only to a historical dead end. The future is liberal and capitalist.

Yet, despite this, Marx and Marxist thought more generally refuse to go away. The end of the Soviet experiment and the apparent lack of a credible alternative to capitalism may have led to a crisis in Marxism, but two decades later there appears to be something of a renaissance. There are probably two reasons why this renaissance is occurring, and why Marxists walk with a renewed spring in their step.

First, for many Marxists the communist experiment in the Soviet Union had become a major embarrassment. In the decades immediately after the October Revolution, most had felt an allegiance to the Soviet Union as the first 'Workers' State'. Subsequently, however, this loyalty had been stretched beyond breaking point by the depravities of Stalinism, and by Soviet behaviour in its post-Second World War satellites in Eastern Europe. What was sometimes termed 'actually existing socialism' was plainly not the communist utopia that many dreamed of and that Marx had apparently promised. Some Marxists were openly critical of the Soviet Union. Others just kept quiet and hoped that the situation, and the human rights record, would improve.

The break-up of the Soviet bloc has, in a sense, wiped the slate clean. This event reopened the possibility of arguing in favour of Marx's ideas without having to defend the actions of governments that justify their behaviour with reference to them. Moreover, the disappearance of the Soviet Union has encouraged an appreciation of Marx's work less encumbered by the baggage of Marxism–Leninism as a state ideology. The significance of this is underlined when it is realized that many of the concepts and practices that are often taken as axiomatic of Marxism do not, in fact, figure in Marx's writings: these include the 'vanguard party', 'democratic centralism', and the centrally directed 'command economy'.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Marx's social theory retains formidable analytical purchase on the world we inhabit. The vast bulk of his theoretical efforts consisted of a painstaking analysis of **capitalism** as a mode of production, and the basic elements of his account have not been bettered. Indeed, with the ever-increasing penetration of the market mechanism into all aspects of life, it is arguable that Marx's forensic examination of both the extraordinary dynamism and the inherent contradictions of capitalism are even more relevant now than in his own time. A particular strength of Marx's work is his analysis of crisis. Liberal accounts of capitalism suggest that free markets will move towards equilibrium and will be inherently stable. Our day-to-day lived experience suggests otherwise. The 1987 stock market crash, the **Asian financial crisis** of the late 1990s, and the '**credit crunch**' of 2008–9 all demonstrate that global capitalism continues to be rocked by massive convulsions that have enormous implications for the lives of individuals around the globe. On Marx's account, such convulsions, and their baleful human consequences, are an inherent and inescapable part of the very system itself.

Compared to **realism** and **liberalism** (**see Chs 6, 7, and 8**), Marxist thought presents a rather unfamiliar view of international relations. While the former portray world politics in ways that resonate with those presented in the foreign news pages of our newspapers and magazines, Marxist theories aim to expose a deeper, underlying—indeed hidden—truth. This is that the familiar events of world politics—wars, treaties, international aid operations—all occur within structures that have an enormous influence on those events. These are the structures of a global capitalist system. Any attempt to understand world politics must be based on a broader understanding of the processes operating in global capitalism.

In addition to presenting an unfamiliar view of world politics, Marxist theories are also discomfiting, for they argue that the effects of global capitalism are to ensure that the powerful and wealthy continue to prosper, at the expense of the powerless and the poor.

We are all aware that there is gross inequality in the world. Statistics concerning the human costs of **poverty** are truly numbing in their awfulness (the issue of global poverty is further discussed in **Ch. 28**). Marxist theorists argue that the relative prosperity of the few is dependent on the destitution of the many. In Marx's own words, 'Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality at the opposite pole.'

In the next section we shall outline some of the central features of the Marxist approach—or historical **materialism**, as it is often known. Following on from this, subsequent sections will explore some of the most important strands in contemporary Marx-inspired thinking about world politics. We should note, however, that given the richness and variety of Marxist thinking about world politics, the account that follows is inevitably destined to be partial and to some extent arbitrary. Our aim in the following is to provide a route map that we hope will encourage readers to explore further the work of Marx and of those who have built on the foundations he laid.

Key Points

- Marx's work retains its relevance despite the collapse of Communist Party rule in the former Soviet Union.
- Of particular importance is Marx's analysis of capitalism, which has yet to be bettered.
- Marxist analyses of international relations aim to reveal the hidden workings of global capitalism. These hidden workings provide the context in which international events occur.

The essential elements of Marxist theories of world politics

In his inaugural address to the Working Men's International Association in London in 1864, Karl Marx told his audience that history had 'taught the working classes the duty to master [for] themselves the mysteries of international politics'. However, despite the fact that Marx himself wrote copiously about international affairs, most of this writing was journalistic in character. He did not incorporate the international dimension into his theoretical mapping of the contours of capitalism. This 'omission' should perhaps not surprise us. The sheer scale of the theoretical enterprise in which he was engaged, as well as the nature of his own methodology, inevitably meant that Marx's work would be contingent and unfinished.

Marx was an enormously prolific writer, and his ideas developed and changed over time. Hence it is not surprising that his legacy has been open to numerous interpretations. In addition, real-world developments have also led to the revision of his ideas in the light of experience. Various schools of thought have emerged, which claim Marx as a direct inspiration, or whose work can be linked to Marx's legacy. Before we discuss what is distinctive about these approaches, it is important that we examine the essential elements of commonality that lie between them.

First, all the theorists discussed in this chapter share with Marx the view that the social world should be analysed as a totality. The academic division of the social world into different areas of enquiry—history, philosophy, economics, political science, sociology, international relations, etc.—is both arbitrary and unhelpful. None can be understood without knowledge of the others: the social world has to be studied as a whole. Given the scale and complexity of the social world, this entreaty clearly makes great demands of the analyst. Nonetheless, for Marxist theorists, the disciplinary boundaries that characterize the contemporary social sciences need to be transcended if we are to generate a proper understanding of the dynamics of world politics.

Another key element of Marxist thought, which serves to underline further this concern with interconnection and context, is the materialist conception of history. The central contention here is that processes of historical change are ultimately a reflection of the economic development of society. That is, economic development is effectively the motor of history. The central dynamic that Marx identifies is tension between the **means of production** and **relations of production** that together form the economic base of a given society. As the means of production develop, for example through technological advancement, previous relations of production become outmoded, and indeed become fetters restricting the most effective utilization of the new productive capacity. This in turn leads to a process of social change whereby relations of production are transformed in order to better accommodate the

new configuration of means. Developments in the economic base act as a catalyst for the broader transformation of society as a whole. This is because, as Marx argues in the Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general' (Marx 1970 [1859]: 20–1). Thus the legal, political, and cultural **institutions** and practices of a given society reflect and reinforce—in a more or less mediated form—the pattern of power and control in the economy. It follows logically, therefore, that change in the economic base ultimately leads to change in the 'legal and political superstructure'. (For a diagrammatical representation of the base–superstructure model, **see Fig. 9.1**.) The relationship between the base and superstructure is one of the key areas of discussion in Marxism, and for critics of Marxist approaches. A key contribution to this debate has been the work of Historical Sociologists inspired by the work of Max Weber (see **Box 9.1**).

Class plays a key role in Marxist analysis. In contrast to liberals, who believe that there is an essential harmony of interest between various social groups,

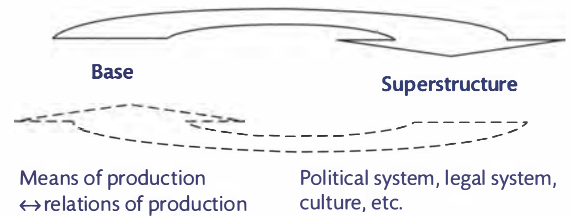


Figure 9.1 The base–superstructure model

Marxists hold that society is systematically prone to class conflict. Indeed, in the *Communist Manifesto*, which Marx co-authored with Engels, it is argued that 'the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' (Marx and Engels 1967). In capitalist society, the main axis of conflict is between the bourgeoisie (the capitalists) and the proletariat (the workers).

Despite his commitment to rigorous scholarship, Marx did not think it either possible or desirable for the analyst to remain a detached or neutral observer of this great clash between capital and labour. He argued that 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'. Marx

Box 9.1 Historical sociology

As we have seen, one of the key debates in Marxism concerns the relationship between the base and superstructure. Traditionally, Marxists have focused attention on the base, seeing the elements of the superstructure as a reflection of economic relations. At its most forceful, this is often viewed as 'economic determinism'—the view that social relations (e.g. law, politics) can be directly correlated from the underlying mode of production. Frankfurt School critical theorists and neo-Gramscian scholars have relaxed this view, focusing their analysis on the superstructure, and its role in maintaining the economic base.

Another way of thinking about these issues is to consider the work of historical sociologists. The term 'historical sociology' is somewhat daunting and potentially misleading. In essence it means an approach to the study of the social world that draws on history as the main source of evidence. Historical sociologists are interested in the ways in which social life changes over time, and attempt to provide explanations for those changes. As an example, Theda Skocpol's book, *States and Social Revolution* (1979), attempted to develop a theory of revolution, and then drew on the examples of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions to confirm her analysis.

Historical sociology comes in many different forms (see Hobden and Hobson 2002), one of which is Marxism itself, having as it does a theory of history. However, in international relations, the term has become synonymous with the work of what are termed neo-Weberian scholars. These writers came to the attention of international relations theorists because of their interest in international relations; their analysis of social change, in particular state formation, provided a more nuanced account than that suggested by realism. For example, part of Skocpol's theoretical analysis argues that it was inter-state relations (e.g. involvement in war) that contributed to a revolutionary outcome, and influenced the outcome of revolutions. Likewise, Charles Tilly (1975; see also Tilly 1992), in his analysis of state development, drew a direct link between war and state-making with his claim that 'war made the state and the state made war'.

Perhaps the most influential of the neo-Weberians has been Michael Mann. His major work, *The Sources of Social Power* (1986; 1993), attempts a rewriting of global history through the lens of a multicausal approach to social change. Whereas Marxists see the main explanation of social change at an economic level, Mann argues that there are four types of social power: ideology, economic, military, and political (often shortened to IEMP). Rather than arguing that one source of social power is more significant (as Marxists do), Mann argues that different sources of social power have been more significant in different historical epochs. For example, Mann argues that in recent centuries economic power has been significant, whereas in the past ideological power (particularly religion) has been more important. Furthermore, the sources of social power can amalgamate to give different combinations. Pre-guessing Mann, one might argue that, given the increasing significance of religion in international politics, economics and ideology are the leading sources of social power in the current era.

was committed to the cause of **emancipation**. He was not interested in developing an understanding of the dynamics of capitalist society simply for the sake of it. Rather, he expected such an understanding to make it easier to overthrow the prevailing order and replace it with a communist society—a society in which wage labour and private property are abolished and social relations transformed.

It is important to emphasize that the essential elements of Marxist thought, all too briefly discussed in this section, are also essentially contested. That is, they are subject to much discussion and disagreement even among contemporary writers who have been influenced by Marxist writings. There is disagreement as to how these ideas and concepts should be interpreted and how they should be put into operation. Analysts also differ over which elements of Marxist thought are most relevant, which have been proven to be mistaken, and which should now be considered as outmoded or in need of radical overhaul. Moreover, there are substantial differences between them in terms of their attitudes to the legacy of Marx's ideas. The work of the new Marxists, for example, draws far more directly on Marx's original ideas than does the work of the critical theorists.

Key Points

- Marx himself provided little in terms of a theoretical analysis of international relations.
- His ideas have been interpreted and appropriated in a number of different and contradictory ways, resulting in a number of competing schools of Marxism.
- Underlying these different schools are several common elements that can be traced back to Marx's writings.

Marx internationalized: from imperialism to world-systems theory

Although Marx was clearly aware of the international and expansive character of capitalism, his key work, *Capital*, focuses on the development and characteristics of nineteenth-century British capitalism. At the start of the twentieth century a number of writers took on the task of developing analyses that incorporated the implications of capitalism's transborder characteristics, in particular **imperialism** (see Brewer 1990). The best known and most influential work to emerge from this debate, though, is the pamphlet written by Lenin, and published in 1917, called *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Lenin accepted much of Marx's basic thesis, but argued that the character of capitalism had changed since Marx published the first volume of *Capital* in 1867. Capitalism had entered a new stage—its highest and final stage—with the development of monopoly capitalism. Under monopoly capitalism, a two-tier structure had developed in the world economy, with a dominant core exploiting a less-developed periphery. With the development of a core and periphery, there was no longer an automatic **harmony of interests** between all workers as posited by Marx. The bourgeoisie in the core countries could use profits derived from exploiting the periphery to improve the lot of their own proletariat. In other words, the capitalists of the core could pacify their own working class through the further exploitation of the periphery.

Lenin's views were developed by the Latin American Dependency School, adherents of which developed the notion of core and periphery in greater depth. In particular, Raul Prebisch argued that countries in the periphery were suffering as a result of what he called 'the declining terms of trade'. He suggested that the price of manufactured goods increased more rapidly than that of raw materials. So, for example, year by year it requires more tons of coffee to pay for a refrigerator. As a result of their reliance on primary goods, countries of the periphery become poorer relative to the core. Other writers, in particular André Gunder Frank and Henrique Fernando Cardoso, developed this analysis further to show how the development of less industrialized countries was directly 'dependent' on the more advanced capitalist societies. It is from the framework developed by such writers that contemporary world-systems theory emerged.

World-systems theory is particularly associated with the work of Immanuel Wallerstein. For Wallerstein, global history has been marked by the rise and demise of a series of world systems. The modern world system emerged in Europe at around the turn of the sixteenth century. It subsequently expanded to encompass the entire globe. The driving force behind this seemingly relentless process of expansion and incorporation has been capitalism, defined by Wallerstein as 'a system of production for sale in a market for profit and

appropriation of this profit on the basis of individual or collective ownership' (1979: 66). In the context of this system, all the institutions of the social world are continually being created and recreated. Furthermore, and crucially, it is not only the elements within the system that change. The system itself is historically bounded. It had a beginning, has a middle, and will have an end.

In terms of the geography of the modern world system, in addition to a core–periphery distinction, Wallerstein added an intermediate semi-periphery, which displays certain features characteristic of the core and others characteristic of the periphery. Although dominated by core economic interests, the semi-periphery has its own relatively vibrant indigenously owned industrial base (**see Fig. 9.2**). Because of this hybrid nature, the semi-periphery plays important economic and political roles in the modern world system. In particular, it provides a source of labour that counteracts any upward pressure on wages in the core and also provides a new home for those industries that can no longer function profitably in the core (for example, car assembly and textiles). The semi-periphery also plays a vital role in stabilizing the political structure of the world system.

According to world-systems theorists, the three zones of the world economy are linked together in an exploitative relationship in which wealth is drained away from the periphery to the core. As a consequence, the relative positions of the zones become ever more

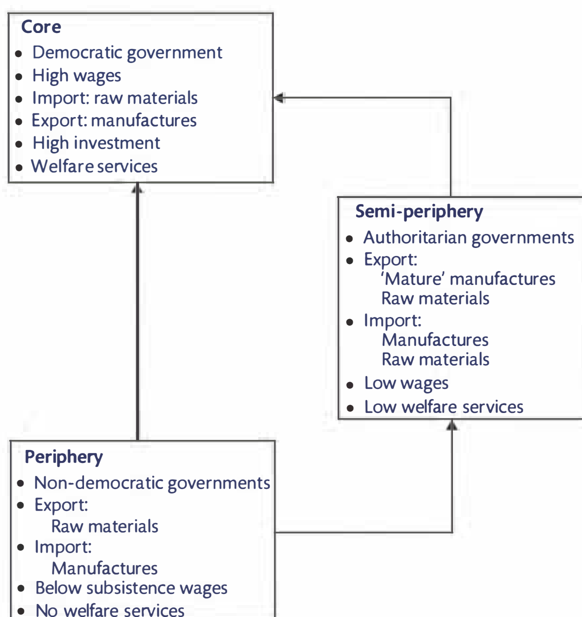


Figure 9.2 Interrelationships in the world economy

deeply entrenched: the rich get richer while the poor become poorer.

Together, the core, semi-periphery, and periphery make up the geographic dimension of the world economy. However, described in isolation they provide a rather static portrayal of the world system. A key component of Wallerstein's analysis has been to describe how world systems have a distinctive life cycle: a beginning, a middle, and an end. In this sense, the capitalist world system is no different from any other system that has preceded it. Controversially, Wallerstein argues that the end of the cold war, rather than marking a triumph for liberalism, indicates that the current system has entered its 'end' phase—a period of crisis that will end only when it is replaced by another system (Wallerstein 1995). On Wallerstein's reading, such a period of crisis is also a time of opportunity. In a time of crisis, actors have far greater agency to determine the character of the replacement structure. Much of Wallerstein's recent work has been an attempt to develop a political programme to promote a new world system that is more equitable and just than the current one (Wallerstein 1998, 1999, 2006). From this perspective, to focus on **globalization** is to ignore what is truly novel about the contemporary era. Indeed, for Wallerstein, current globalization discourse represents a 'gigantic misreading of current reality' (Wallerstein 2003: 45). The phenomena evoked by 'globalization' are manifestations of a world system that emerged in **Europe** during the sixteenth century to incorporate the entire globe: a world system now in terminal decline.

Various writers have built on or amended the framework established by Wallerstein (Denemark et al. 2000). Christopher Chase-Dunn, for example, lays much more emphasis on the role of the inter-state system than Wallerstein. He argues that the capitalist mode of production has a single logic, in which both politico-military and exploitative economic relations play key roles. In a sense, he attempts to bridge the gap between Wallerstein's work and that of the new Marxists (discussed below), by placing much more of an emphasis on production in the world economy and how this influences its development and future trajectory (see Chase-Dunn 1998).

Feminist Marxists have also played a significant role in theorizing the development of an international capitalist system. A particular concern of feminist writers (often drawing their inspiration from Engels's 1884 work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*) has been the role of women, both in the workplace and as the providers of domestic labour necessary

for the reproduction of capitalism. Mies (1998 [1986]), for example, argued that women play a central role in the maintenance of capitalist relations. There is, she argues, a sexual division of labour: first, in the developed world as housewives, whose labour is unpaid, but vital in maintaining and reproducing the labour force; and second, in the developing world as a source of cheap labour. Women, she later argued, were the 'last colony' (Mies et al. 1988), a view that can be traced back to Luxemburg's claim regarding the role of the colonies in international capitalism.

Key Points

- Marxist theorists have consistently developed an analysis of the global aspects of international capitalism—an aspect acknowledged by Marx, but not developed in *Capital*.
- World-systems theory can be seen as a direct development of Lenin's work on imperialism and the Latin American Dependency School.
- Feminist writers have contributed to the analysis of international capitalism by focusing on the specific role of women.

Gramscianism

In this section we discuss the strand of Marxist theory that has emerged from the work of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's work has become particularly influential in the study of international political economy, where a neo-Gramscian or 'Italian' school is flourishing. Here we shall discuss Gramsci's legacy, and the work of Robert W. Cox, a contemporary theorist who has been instrumental in introducing his work to an International Relations audience.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was a Sardinian and one of the founding members of the Italian Communist Party. He was jailed in 1926 for his political activities, and spent the remainder of his life in prison. Although he is regarded by many as the most creative Marxist thinker of the twentieth century, he produced no single, integrated theoretical treatise. Rather, his intellectual legacy has been transmitted primarily through his remarkable *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971). The key question that animated Gramsci's theoretical work was: why had it proven to be so difficult to promote revolution in Western Europe? Marx, after all, had predicted that revolution, and the **transition** to socialism, would occur first in the most advanced capitalist societies. But, in the event, it was the Bolsheviks of comparatively backward Russia that had made the first 'breakthrough', while all the subsequent efforts by putative revolutionaries in Western and Central Europe to emulate their success ended in failure. The history of the early twentieth century seemed to suggest, therefore, that there was a flaw in classical Marxist analysis. But where had they gone wrong?

Gramsci's answer revolves around his use of the concept of hegemony, his understanding of which reflects his broader conceptualization of power. Gramsci develops Machiavelli's view of power as a centaur, half beast, half man: a mixture of coercion and consent. In understanding how the prevailing order was maintained, Marxists had concentrated almost exclusively on the coercive practices and **capabilities** of the state. On this understanding, it was simply coercion, or the fear of coercion, that kept the exploited and alienated majority in society from rising up and overthrowing the system that was the cause of their suffering. Gramsci recognized that while this characterization may have held true in less developed societies, such as pre-revolutionary Russia, it was not the case in the more developed countries of the West. Here the system was also maintained through consent.

Consent, on Gramsci's reading, is created and recreated by the hegemony of the ruling class in society. It is this hegemony that allows the moral, political, and cultural values of the dominant group to become widely dispersed throughout society and to be accepted by subordinate groups and classes as their own. This takes place through the institutions of **civil society**: the **network** of institutions and practices that enjoy some autonomy from the state, and through which groups and individuals organize, represent, and express themselves to each other and to the state (for example, the media, the education system, churches, voluntary organizations).

Several important implications flow from this analysis. The first is that Marxist theory needs to take superstructural phenomena seriously, because while the structure of society may ultimately be a reflection of social relations of production in the economic base, the nature of relations in the superstructure is of great relevance in determining how susceptible that society is to change and transformation. Gramsci used the term

'historic bloc' to describe the mutually reinforcing and reciprocal relationships between the socio-economic relations (base) and political and cultural practices (superstructure) that together underpin a given order. For Gramsci and Gramscians, to reduce analysis to the narrow consideration of economic relationships, on the one hand, or solely to politics and ideas, on the other, is deeply mistaken. It is the interaction that matters.

Gramsci's argument also has crucial implications for political practice. If the hegemony of the ruling class is a key element in the perpetuation of its dominance, then society can only be transformed if that hegemonic position is successfully challenged. This entails a counter-hegemonic struggle in civil society, in which the prevailing hegemony is undermined, allowing an alternative historic bloc to be constructed.

Gramsci's writing reflects a particular time and a particular—and in many ways unique—set of circumstances. This has led several writers to question the broader applicability of his ideas (see Burnham 1991; Germain and Kenny 1998). But the most important test, of course, is how useful ideas and concepts derived from Gramsci's work prove to be when they are removed from their original context and applied to other **issues** and problems. It is to this that we now turn.

Robert Cox—the analysis of 'world order'

The person who has done most to introduce Gramsci to the study of world politics is the Canadian scholar Robert W. Cox. He has developed a Gramscian approach that involves both a critique of prevailing theories of international relations and international political economy, and the development of an alternative framework for the analysis of world politics.

To explain Cox's ideas, we begin by focusing on one particular sentence in his seminal 1981 article, 'Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory'. The sentence, which has become one of the most often-quoted lines in all of contemporary international relations theory, reads as follows: 'Theory is always for some one, and for some purpose' (1981: 128). It expresses a worldview that follows logically from the Gramscian, and broader Marxist, position that has been explored in this chapter. If ideas and values are (ultimately) a reflection of a particular set of social relations, and are transformed as those relations are themselves transformed, then this suggests that all knowledge (of the social world at least) must reflect a certain context, a certain time, a certain space. Knowledge, in other words, cannot be objective and timeless in the sense that some contemporary realists, for example, would like to claim.

One key implication of this is that there can be no simple separation between facts and values. Whether consciously or not, all theorists inevitably bring their values to bear on their analysis. This leads Cox to suggest that we need to look closely at each of those theories, those ideas, those analyses that claim to be objective or value-free, and ask who or what is it for, and what purpose does it serve? He subjects realism, and in particular its contemporary variant **neo-realism**, to thoroughgoing critique on these grounds. According to Cox, these theories are for—or serve the interests of—those who prosper under the prevailing order, that is the inhabitants of the developed states, and in particular the ruling elites. Their purpose, whether consciously or not, is to reinforce and legitimate the status quo. They do this by making the current configuration of international relations appear natural and immutable. When realists (falsely) claim to be describing the world as it is, as it has been, and as it always will be, what they are in fact doing is reinforcing the ruling hegemony in the current world order.

Cox contrasts problem-solving theory (that is, theory that accepts the parameters of the present order, and thus helps legitimate an unjust and deeply iniquitous system) with **critical theory**. Critical theory attempts to challenge the prevailing order by seeking out, analysing, and, where possible, assisting social processes that can potentially lead to emancipatory change.

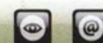
One way in which theory can contribute to these emancipatory goals is by developing a theoretical understanding of world orders that grasps both the sources of stability in a given system, and also the dynamics of processes of transformation. In this context, Cox draws on Gramsci's notion of hegemony and transposes it to the international realm, arguing that hegemony is as important for maintaining stability and continuity here as it is at the domestic level. According to Cox, successive dominant powers in the international system have shaped a world order that suits their interests, and have done so not only as a result of their coercive capabilities, but also because they have managed to generate broad consent for that order, even among those who are disadvantaged by it.

For the two hegemons that Cox analyses (the UK and the USA), the ruling hegemonic idea has been 'free trade'. The claim that this system benefits everybody has been so widely accepted that it has attained 'common sense' status. Yet the reality is that while 'free trade' is very much in the interests of the hegemon (which,

as the most efficient producer in the global economy, can produce goods which are competitive in all markets, so long as they have access to them), its benefits for peripheral states and regions are far less apparent. Indeed, many would argue that 'free trade' is a hindrance to their economic and social development. The degree to which a state can successfully produce and reproduce its hegemony is an indication of the extent of its power. The success of the USA in gaining worldwide acceptance for neo-liberalism suggests just how dominant the current hegemon has become.

But despite the dominance of the present world order, Cox does not expect it to remain unchallenged. Rather, he maintains Marx's view that capitalism is an inherently unstable system, riven by inescapable contradictions. Inevitable economic crises will act as a catalyst for the emergence of counter-hegemonic movements (**see Case Study 1**). The success of such movements is, however, far from assured. In this sense, thinkers like Cox face the future on the basis of a dictum popularized by Gramsci—that is, combining 'pessimism of the intellect' with 'optimism of the will'.

Case Study 1 Occupy!



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A core element of Marx's analysis of capitalism was that it would be subject to recurrent crises. Such a crisis has engulfed the world economy since 2008. One of its key features has been a crisis in the banking system, which has seen governments intervening to prop up failing or ailing banks. While governments felt that they had little option but to do so, their actions have in turn left them highly indebted. In response to this we have seen the imposition of austerity programmes: cutbacks in services (such as welfare, education, health, and pensions) as well as in public sector employment. Despite the 'free market' dogma of recent decades, markets have failed, and this failure has been paid for by the most vulnerable members of society. As David Harvey (2010: 10) put it, it's been a case of 'privatise profits and socialise risks; save the banks and put the screws on the people'.

The imposition of austerity programmes by governments has resulted in widespread resistance, seen at its most radical in Greece, where the heavily indebted government has been put under extreme pressure by its fellow eurozone partners to slash its spending. The result has been a dramatic cut in wages (an average of 35 per cent), extremely high levels of unemployment, and threats to the political system itself with the rise of the Golden Dawn neo-Nazi party.

An alternative response has been the Occupy movement, whose founding can on most accounts be traced to the establishment by a group of protesters of an encampment in Zuccotti Park, close to Wall Street, New York on 17 September 2011. The New York protesters had themselves been inspired by the so-called Arab Spring as well as *Los Indignados*—the protest movement that developed in May 2011 in Spain, another heavily indebted eurozone country. Underlining these global interconnections and influences, the Wall Street camp catalysed occupations in a further 951 cities over 82 countries. Despite the subsequent break-up of the major encampments, Occupy has maintained a high profile as a networked group of worldwide activists.

One of Occupy's key slogans—'We are the 99 per cent'—has sought to highlight the growing disparity between the richest and the poorest in society, and the ways in which, even at the height of the post-2008 economic crisis, the very richest have been able to not only protect their incomes, but even to boost them. But, while the movement may have been effective in highlighting the iniquities of the capitalist system, it has been less successful in advocating an alternative to global capitalism. Ultimately, Occupy appears to support a reform of capitalism, with a greater distribution of wealth, debt cancellation, less political power to the financial class, and the protection of public services (see Occupy London 2012). This would place it at odds with much Marxist thinking, which would advocate the wholesale overthrow of capitalist social relations.

Theory applied

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Key Points

- Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci for inspiration, writers within an 'Italian' school of international relations have made a considerable contribution to thinking about world politics.
- Gramsci shifted the focus of Marxist analysis more towards superstructural phenomena. In particular, he explored the processes by which consent for a particular social and political system was produced and reproduced through the operation of hegemony. Hegemony allows the ideas and ideologies of the ruling stratum to become widely dispersed, and widely accepted, throughout society.
- Thinkers such as Robert W. Cox have attempted to 'internationalize' Gramsci's thought by transposing several of his key concepts, most notably hegemony, to the global context.

Critical theory

Both Gramscianism and critical theory have their roots in Western Europe in the 1920s and 1930s—a place and a time in which Marxism was forced to come to terms not only with the failure of a series of attempted revolutionary uprisings, but also with the rise of fascism. However, contemporary critical theory and Gramscian thought about international relations draw on the ideas of different thinkers, with differing intellectual concerns. There is a clear difference in focus between these two strands of Marxist thought, with those influenced by Gramsci tending to be much more concerned with issues relating to the subfield of international political economy than critical theorists. Critical theorists, on the other hand, have involved themselves with questions concerning **international society**, international ethics, and **security** (the latter in development of critical security studies). In this section we introduce critical theory and the thought of one of its main proponents in the field of international relations, Andrew Linklater.

Critical theory developed out of the work of the **Frankfurt School**. This was an extraordinarily talented group of thinkers who began to work together in the 1920s and 1930s. As left-wing German Jews, the members of the school were forced into exile by the Nazis' rise to power in the early 1930s, and much of their most creative work was produced in the USA. The leading lights of the first generation of the Frankfurt School included Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. A subsequent generation has taken up the legacy of these thinkers and developed it in important and innovative ways. The best known is Jürgen Habermas, who is regarded by many as the most influential of all contemporary social theorists. Given the vast scope of critical theory writing, we can do no more here than introduce some of the key features.

The first point to note is that their intellectual concerns are rather different from those of most other Marxists, in that they have not been much interested in the further development of analysis of the economic base of society. They have instead concentrated on questions relating to culture, bureaucracy, the social basis and nature of authoritarianism, the structure of the family, and on exploring such concepts as reason and **rationality** as well as theories of knowledge. Frankfurt School theorists have been particularly innovative in terms of their analysis of the role of the media, and what they have famously termed the 'culture industry'. In other words, in classical Marxist terms, the focus of critical theory is almost entirely superstructural.

Another key feature is that critical theorists have been highly dubious as to whether the proletariat in contemporary society does in fact embody the potential for emancipatory transformation in the way that Marx believed. Rather, with the rise of mass culture and the increasing commodification of every element of social life, Frankfurt School thinkers have argued that the working class has simply been absorbed by the system and no longer represents a threat to it. This, to use Marcuse's famous phrase, is a one-dimensional society, to which the vast majority simply cannot begin to conceive an alternative.

Finally, critical theorists have made some of their most important contributions through their explorations of the meaning of emancipation. Emancipation, as we have seen, is a key concern of Marxist thinkers, but the meaning that they give to the term is often very unclear and deeply ambiguous. Moreover, the historical record is unfortunately replete with examples of unspeakably barbaric behaviour being justified in the name of emancipation, of which imperialism and Stalinism are

but two. Traditionally, Marxists have equated emancipation with the process of humanity gaining ever greater mastery over nature through the development of ever more sophisticated technology, and its use for the benefit of all. But early critical theorists argued that humanity's increased domination over nature had been bought at too high a price, claiming that the kind of mind-set that is required for conquering nature slips all too easily into the domination of other human beings. In contrast, they argued that emancipation had to be conceived of in terms of a reconciliation with nature—an evocative, if admittedly vague, vision. By contrast, Habermas's understanding of emancipation is more concerned with communication than with our relationship with the natural world. Setting aside the various twists and turns of his argument, Habermas's central political point is that the route to emancipation lies through radical democracy—that is, through a system in which the widest possible participation is encouraged not only in word (as is the case in many Western democracies) but also in deed, by actively identifying barriers to participation—be they social, economic, or cultural—and overcoming them. For Habermas and his many followers, participation is not to be confined within the borders of a particular sovereign state. Rights and obligations extend beyond state frontiers. This, of course, leads him directly to the concerns of international relations, and it is striking that Habermas's recent writings have begun to focus on the international realm. However, thus far, the most systematic attempt to think through some of the key issues in world politics from a recognizably Habermasian perspective has been made by Andrew Linklater.

Andrew Linklater has used some of the key principles and precepts developed in Habermas's work to argue that emancipation in the realm of international relations should be understood in terms of the expansion of the moral boundaries of a **political community** (**see Ch. 32**). In other words, he equates emancipation with a process in which the borders of the sovereign state lose their ethical and moral significance. At present, state borders denote the furthest extent of our sense of duty and obligation, or at best, the point where our sense of duty and obligation is radically transformed, only proceeding in a very attenuated form. For critical theorists, this situation is simply indefensible. The goal is therefore to move towards a situation in which citizens share the same duties and obligations towards non-citizens as they do towards their fellow citizens.

To arrive at such a situation would, of course, entail a wholesale transformation of the present institutions of governance. But an important element of the critical theory method is to identify—and, if possible, nurture—tendencies that exist in the present conjuncture that point in the direction of emancipation. On this basis, Linklater identifies the development of the European Union as representing a progressive or emancipatory tendency in contemporary world politics. If true, this suggests that an important part of the international system is entering an era in which the sovereign state, which has for so long claimed an exclusive hold on its citizens, is beginning to lose some of its pre-eminence. Given the notorious pessimism of the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, the guarded optimism of Linklater in this context is indeed striking.

Key Points

- Critical theory has its roots in the work of the Frankfurt School.
- Habermas has argued that emancipatory potential lies in the realm of communication, and that radical democracy is the way in which that potential can be unlocked.
- Andrew Linklater has developed critical theory themes to argue in favour of the expansion of the moral boundaries of the political community, and has pointed to the European Union as an example of a post-Westphalian institution of governance.

New Marxism

In this section we examine the work of writers who derive their ideas more directly from Marx's own writings. To indicate that they represent something of a departure from other Marxist and post-Marxist trends, we have termed them 'new Marxists'. They themselves might well prefer to be described as 'historical materialists' (one of the key academic journals associated with this approach is called *Historical Materialism*), although as that is a self-description which has also been adopted by some Gramsci-inspired writers, that appellation may not be particularly helpful for our present purposes. At any rate, even if there

is (at present) no settled label for this group of scholars, the fundamental approach that they embody is not hard to characterize. They are Marxists that have returned to the fundamental tenets of Marxist thought and sought to reappropriate ideas that they regard as having been neglected or somehow misinterpreted by subsequent generations. On this basis, they have sought both to criticize other developments in Marxism, and to make their own original theoretical contributions to the understanding of contemporary trends.

Justin Rosenberg—capitalism and global social relations

The new Marxist approach can be exemplified through an examination of the work of Justin Rosenberg, and in particular his analysis of the character of the international system and its relationship to the changing character of social relations. Rosenberg's starting point is a critique of realist international relations theory. He seeks to challenge realism's claim to provide an ahistorical, essentially timeless account of international relations through an examination of the differences in the character of international relations between the Greek and Italian city-states. A touchstone of realist theory is the similarity between these two historical cases. Rosenberg, however, describes the alleged resemblances between these two eras as a 'gigantic optical illusion'. Instead, his analysis suggests that the character of the international system in each period was completely different. In addition, he charges that attempts to provide an explanation of historical outcomes during these periods, working purely from the inter-state level, is not feasible (as, for example, in realist accounts of the Peloponnesian War). Finally, Rosenberg argues that realist attempts to portray international systems as autonomous, entirely political realms founder because in the Greek and Italian examples this external autonomy was based on the character of internal—and in each case different—sets of social relations.

As an alternative, Rosenberg argues for the development of a theory of international relations that is sensitive to the changing character of world politics. This theory must also recognize that international relations are part of a broader pattern of social relations. His starting point is Marx's observation:

> It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers ... which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state.
>
> *(Rosenberg 1994: 51)*

In other words, the character of the relations of production permeates the whole of society—right up to, and including, relations between states. The form of the state will be different under different modes of production, and as a result the characteristics of inter-state relations will also vary. Hence, if we want to understand the way that international relations operate in any particular era, our starting point must be an examination of the mode of production, and in particular the relations of production.

In his more recent work, Rosenberg has turned his critical attention to 'globalization theory' (Rosenberg 2000, 2006). He argues that globalization is a descriptive category denoting 'the geographical extension of social processes'. That such social processes have become a global phenomenon is beyond dispute, and a 'theory of globalization' is needed to explain what and why this is happening. Such a theory, for Rosenberg, should be rooted in classical social theory. But, instead, a body of 'globalization theory' has emerged premised on the claim that the supposed compression of time and space that typifies globalization requires a whole new social theory in order to explain contemporary developments. But on Rosenberg's reading, this body of theory has produced little in terms of explaining the processes. Moreover, the events of the early twenty-first century were not those predicted by 'globalization theory'. As a result, such theorizing is best understood as a product of changes that occurred in the last years of the twentieth century, and in particular the political and economic vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, rather than an adequate explanation of them. A proper explanation, rooted in classical social theory in general, and Marx's thought in particular, would examine the underlying social relations that have led to the capitalist system becoming dominant throughout the globe.

Key Points

- New Marxism is characterized by a direct (re)appropriation of the concepts and categories developed by Marx.
- Rosenberg uses Marx's ideas to criticize realist theories of international relations, and globalization theory. He seeks to develop an alternative approach that understands historical change in world politics as a reflection of transformations in the prevailing relations of production.

Conclusion: Marxist theories of international relations and globalization

As outlined in the first chapter of this book, globalization is the name given to the process whereby social transactions of all kinds increasingly take place without accounting for national or state boundaries, with the result that the world has become 'one relatively borderless social sphere'. Marxist theorists would certainly not seek to deny that these developments are taking place, nor would they deny their importance, but they would reject any notion that they are somehow novel. Marx and Engels were clearly aware not only of the global scope of capitalism, but also of its potential for social transformation. In a particularly prescient section of the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1967: 83–4), for example, they argue:

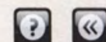
> The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country ... All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe ...

According to Marxist theorists, the globe has long been dominated by a single integrated economic and political entity—a global capitalist system—that has gradually incorporated all of humanity within its grasp. In this system, all elements have always been interrelated and interdependent. The only thing that is 'new' is an increased awareness of these linkages. Similarly, ecological processes have always ignored state boundaries, even if it is only recently that growing environmental degradation has finally allowed this fact to permeate public consciousness.

While the intensity of cross-border flows may be increasing, this does not necessarily signify the fundamental change in the nature of world politics proclaimed by so many of those who argue that we have entered an era of globalization. Marxist theorists insist that the only way to discover how significant contemporary developments really are is to view them in the context of the deeper structural processes at work. When this is done, we may well discover indications that important changes are afoot. Many Marxists, for example, regard the delegitimation of the sovereign state as a very important contemporary development. However, the essential first step in generating any understanding of those trends regarded as evidence of globalization must be to map the contours of global capitalism itself. If we fail to do so, we shall inevitably fail to gauge the real significance of the changes that are occurring.

Another danger of adopting an ahistoric and uncritical attitude to globalization is that it can blind us to the way in which reference to globalization is increasingly becoming part of the ideological armoury of elites in the contemporary world. 'Globalization' is now regularly cited as a reason to promote measures to reduce workers' rights and lessen other constraints on business. Such ideological justifications for policies that favour the interests of business can only be countered through a broader understanding of the relationship between the political and economic structures of capitalism. As we have seen, the understanding proffered by the Marxist theorists suggests that there is nothing natural or inevitable about a world order based on a global market. Rather than accept the inevitability of the present order, the task facing us is to lay the foundations for a new way of organizing society—a global society that is more just and more humane than our own.

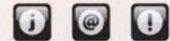
Questions



1. How would you account for the continuing vitality of Marxist thought?
2. How useful is Wallerstein's notion of a semi-periphery?
3. Why has Wallerstein's world-systems theory been criticized for its alleged Eurocentrism? Do you agree with this critique?
4. Evaluate Rosenberg's critique of 'globalization theory'.

5. In what ways does Gramsci's notion of hegemony differ from that used by realist International Relations writers?
6. In what ways might it be argued that Marx and Engels were the original theorists of globalization?
7. What do you regard as the main contribution of Marxist theory to our understanding of world politics?
8. How useful is the notion of emancipation used by critical theorists?
9. Do you agree with Cox's distinction between 'problem-solving theory' and 'critical theory'?
10. Assess Wallerstein's claim that the power of the USA is in decline.

Further Reading



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Cox, R. W. (1981), 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium*, 10(2): 126–55. Cox's much-quoted essay continues to inspire.

Derlurguian, G. M. (2005), *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press). This unconventional book is a dazzling display of the insights generated by the world-system approach.

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Linklater, A. (2007), *Critical Theory and World Politics: Sovereignty, Citizenship and Humanity* (London: Routledge). An important book from one the most influential critical theorists working on international relations.

Marx, K., and Engels, F. (1848), *The Communist Manifesto* (multiple editions available). The best introduction to Marx's thinking. Essential reading even after 150 years.

Teschke, B. (2003), *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso). A powerful new Marxist reading of the development of international relations.

Wyn Jones, R. (ed.) (2001), *Critical Theory and World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner). Contributions from the most significant writers working in the critical theory tradition.

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