

The contemporary relevance of Marxist thought in International Relations?

By D.A. Parker

Cold War: The Poisoned Pen

Historically Marxism has been discredited. To the uninitiated, Marx's name brings forth visions of an Orwellian, authoritarian state like Stalinist Russia or Maoist/Communist China; invoking depictions of the poor worker banished to the salt mines of Siberia. Not to disregard the millions of people who suffered horrendously under Leninist/Stalinist Russia or under the cruelty of the Maoist regime and the use of Marxism to justify a brutal one party state regime is however, a distorted misrepresentation of Marxist ideology. Consequently the cold war forced Marxists to rethink their ideological objectives; by the end of the Cold War they had to concede that the conception of replacing the market with a centrally planned economy was dupable, no matter how democratically organised or designed (Gamble 1999).

Since the end of the cold war Marxism has become reinvigorated and freed from the chains of Leninist/Stalinist bonds, (Gamble 1999) Marxism is now free to return to its roots as a theory of emancipation, class struggle and an invaluable critique of capitalism. Subsequently, to disregard Marxist thought from IR altogether would be to disregard a large portion of critical thinking in IR at a stroke. The result would be to leave IR thinkers without a viable tool of which to critically analyse the conditions of global relations.

The recent financial crises is justification for many Marxist thinkers of the over accumulation crises as expressed by Marx in his epic works "*Das Kapital*" (1867). Capitalist accumulation takes place in two ways: one is through appropriation, considered to be the normal expression of capitalist accumulation and the other is through expropriation or coercion which Marx defines as the primary means of accumulation of capital, these two processes have

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coexisted historically. In the past Primary accumulation has taken place either through direct colonization or more recently through coercive international policy implemented by dominant states (Marx 1990).

Imperialism as describing contemporary international relations and the hegemony of neo-liberalism

The foremost Marxist theory describing interstate relations is the theory of imperialism. Marx does not use the term imperialism himself, but argues that developed capitalist nations would draw-in less developed nations into a global capitalist system. ‘It compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeoisie themselves, in one word it creates a world after its own image’ (Marx, 1990: p 249-9: cited, Dunne, Kurki and Smith, 2010: p 164).

There exists cleavages within the capitalist class; it is fragmented from competition between capitalists for resources and new markets to exploit, this leads to conflict. In the early part of the twentieth century ‘Inter-imperialist rivalry was seen as an overwhelmingly likely source of conflict’ (Dunne et al, 2010: p 164-5). Contemporary Capitalisms continues need to find new markets in which to invest surplus capital is inherent with the system; ‘over-accumulation compelling the export of capital’ (*ibid*).

Capitalism is game of winners and losers, on a global scale. Third world countries, or the under-developed states, are unable to compete in the global market and are left behind the rest of the world. The strength and power of multinational and transnational corporations operating in the domestic market are forcing local companies out of business whilst buying out or

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incorporating larger national companies into the multinational corporations; thus gaining an increasing dominance in global and domestic markets. The resulting absorption of production and capital into fewer and fewer organizations, is compounding the over accumulation problem that many Marxist thinkers perceive as the 'crises of capital' (Harvey 2005& 2006).

State monopoly capitalist theories that originated out of the Soviet Union around the 1950s onwards, saw the rise of trans-national institutions akin to multi-national companies and international state organisations, like the nascent EU for example, that would further the imperialist logic of capitalism, 'The rise of transnational companies and the political apparatus above the level of the nation states, such as the EEC, IMF and WTO help to enforce existing structures and set pathways for new ones concomitantly highlighting 'another stage in the development of monopoly capital and international imperialism'(Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987: p 241).

Marxists like Harvey see US imperial power exerted through international economic institutions such as the IMF, G7 and WTO. The imposition of neo-liberal policy upon developing nations is backed by the threat of sanctions or military force, 'the G7 brought Europe and Japan into alignment with the US to shape the global financial and trading system in ways that effectively forced all other nations to submit. "Rogue nations" defined as those that failed to conform to these global rules could then be dealt with by sanctions or coercive even military force if necessary' (Harvey, 2006: p 13).

The hegemony of the neo-liberal model is forced upon all nations wanting to take part in the international trade system through international institutions, forcing them to structurally

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adjust to the hegemonic model, if they want to take part in the system that is, however, the alternative of staying out is too costly a price to bear. 'Furthermore, the rules of engagement now established through the WTO (governing international trade) and by the IMF (governing international finance) instantiates neo-liberalism as a global set of rules. All states that sign on to the WTO and the IMF (and who can afford to stay out?) agree to abide (albeit with a "grace period" to permit smooth adjustment) by these rules or face severe penalties' (Harvey 2006). When "leftist governments do gain power, international financial markets and the loss of business confidence automatically create an unfavorable climate for radical social reforms, shaping the "economic facts of life" to constrain any fundamental alteration of capitalism' (Dunleavy et al, 1987: p 238), thus preventing any organic or natural social change whilst contrarily promoting the homogenisation of society.

One could question whether foreign policy and inter-state relations are more autonomous from economic explanations and more political or complex, thus decreasing the validity of the imperialist argument. Even Marxists like Miliband do not see imperialism in the past as solely explained by capitalist class interests; instead Miliband understands that history is more complex. 'The whole history of Western and Japanese imperialism is a clear case in point. It is certainly not true that these governments went into Africa or Asia simply to serve powerful economic interests. Nor did they embark upon imperialist expansion simply because they were "compelled" to do so by such interests. Vast historical movements of this kind cannot be reduced to these simplicities' (Miliband 1969: p 77), However, Miliband also states that this class interest is the dominant reason to maintain an imperial presence "In service of these purposes, they became dedicated servants of their business and investing classes" (op cite).

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A World system

A critical Marxist offshoot Wallenstein's (1976), "World Systems Theory" appeared around the same time some East Asian countries were showing signs of rapid growth. These new and fast growing "Asian Tiger" economies could no longer be described as dependent; they were beginning to challenge American economic supremacy. The US, tried to counter this growth by forming alliances that in the past would have seemed unthinkable; the China-USA trade relationship for example. The growing economic and social crisis in the Eastern bloc was helpful towards this eventuality that led to the new direction of international capital.

Neo-Marxism holds the viewpoint of the peripheries, and examines the consequences of Imperial intervention into these countries (Schuurman, 1993). Wallenstein's theory may not be the best theory for identifying social achievement however; it does have its use, although not without a price. 'Neo-Marxist and World-System literature offer important insights into the economic conditions of existence of the state, and therefore some of its causal powers and liabilities' (Wendt 1987). His theory also gives us a clear illustration of the technological underachievers in the global theatre. If this is placed beside Marxist "social change theory" (see (Marx, 1990: ch15, fn4, p 493) a correlation could be found between States that have had the least access to modern technologies and the amount of positive social change experienced?

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If Marx's conception of the technological interrelation with social change is true then the presupposition that international trade policy and regulations that hinder accesses to technology e.g. "trade related international patents" (TRIPS) must be, severally hindering social change in many countries around the World, must also be true? Unfortunately, this paper does not allow the space or time to investigate this theory in more depth. However, what is essential to remember about Marxism is the notion of capital as a social relation. It is the reproduction of social relations, and its incursion into social life in much of the world, and as such, 'is central to most conceptions of modernity' (Gamble 1999: p 143).

The price to be paid for world system theory is the structural stratification it asserts. By dividing the world into core, periphery, semi-peripheries, it creates a mindset through which the world is viewed. Whether or not this is a good thing is dependent your position and ranking in world system. This typical Marxist dialectic between ruling elites (bourgeoisie) and the working class (proletariat) means a global class struggle is created within the structure of global production and social relationships. 'Structuration theorists argue the scientific realist thesis that because social structures generate agents and their behavior (in the sense that they make the latter possible), that because social structures have observable effects, we can potentially claim that they are real entities despite being possibly unobservable' (Wendt 1987).

The balance of world power

Realists argue that International relations function in a state of anarchy with each state behaving in accordance of its own interest, as priority. It is the control of this anarchical state that is at the heart of the international relations debate. 'Realist approaches to international

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theory largely assume that the separate state units have distinct national identities. Realists emphasize that national identity provides states with legitimacy and serves as a basis for the mobilization of resources against outside threats' (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999: p193-192) . Waltz (1979) would argue that states are restrained in their behaviour by the international structures in which they operate. Realism maintains that states are not satisfied with a specified amount of power, but seek hegemony for their own security.

After the end of WW II, the US found itself in a position of being the most dominant economic and military power of the time, and by joining with existing capitalist democracies after the war they created an 'unprecedented institutional framework' based on liberal ideals and morals in which the world must operate (See Waltz, 1979) This system has been growing organically since the war ended and the US dominance in this system is self evident.

'Despite their many insights, neither realism nor liberalism gives us adequate tools to grapple with security, globalization, the liberal ascent and the American role in their development' (Deudney, 2006: p190-193). Perhaps this is because realism and liberalist theory are after all based on 'fragments of republican security theory' (op cite), which has the principal allegation that security necessitates the 'simultaneous avoidance of extremes of anarchy'; reciprocally preventive states are necessary for security. Liberalist believe that in order to survive political liberty needs to continuously form new global unions, thus creating 'bounding power' (Deudney 2006); to control the anarchy and stop hegemony.

Structural Realists, like Gilpin (2001), sees international relations in a constant state of anarchy, because of lack of controls placed on international organisations, States and agents.

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Strong States, like the USA are needed, to control international regimes such as the WTO, GAT and IMF which counter the Marxist debate of imperial hegemony. 'Under bounded rationality, the inclination of Governments to join or support international regimes will be reinforced by the fact the alternatives are less attractive than they would be if the assumptions of rationality were valid' (Keohane, 1984: p 115). However 'the international system is a self help system' (Brown 2001: p 46) states which assumes unity are in obligation to look after their own interest first, so the assumed unity is a fragile relationship that may be "Pareto-optimal" {mutual beneficial} however, that does not mean the relationships are 'ipso-facto' {on equal terms} (Gilpin & Gilpin, 2001: p 87).

Contemporary Marx

In conclusion it has to be said that contemporary Marxism has become a philosophy in the realms of Hegel or Kant (Gamble 1999), it is a way of thinking as opposed to way of doing things however, it is foremost a tool to be used by critical thinkers in IR to make sense of international political relations. Consequently Marxism is no longer a theory of how to run the world, either globally or domestically, after all few would want to live in a society based on the doctrine of the Communist Manifesto (1888). However, the Manifesto (1888) should not be taken on face value alone rather; it can be understood best within the context of Marxist thinking that is, the emancipation of the working class, and the continuing class struggle within the capitalist mode of production and social relations, is the root of Marxism.

Historic usage of the Manifesto (1888) is an example of how theories can be misrepresented to suit the whims of the politician and the justification for a one party State

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system, as in the Communist China and the Soviet Russian example. Marxism is discredited as a prescriptive blueprint for ordering society and international relations, however for Marxist authors like Harvey, imperialism and its imposition of a hegemonic dominant ideology of neo-liberalism is still valid in describing international relations, institutions and forms a central part of the anti-globalization arguments challenging US dominance.

World systems theory elaborates Marxist structural theory positing that semi-periphery and periphery relations are in actuality a division of production capability and resource extraction economies and their relationships with the central/core economies and their place within the global power structure. However, imperialism and hegemonic ideology may not be a complete picture of international relations; state centric realist would argue the necessity for strong governance from states like the USA is needed to maintain the balance of power in a global theatre of anarchy. They do this by the dissemination of liberal international policies under the name of free market democracy that is promoted by international regimes through structural adjustment policies that are attached to loans issued by the IMF the World Bank and as a last resort through the coercive power of the United Nations or by military incursion. Marxist thinking in IR is the core theory through which to observe and critique these relationships.

Key to terms:

EEC: European Economic Community

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EU: The European Union

IMF: International Monetary fund

USA/US: The United States of America

IR: International Relations

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