Most readers of *Historical Materialism* will be familiar with the work of Marta Harnecker. A renowned Chilean academic and journalist, Harnecker has published more than fifty books on contemporary Latin American history, the problems of socialism, and philosophy. Her classic book, *Los Conceptos Elementales del Materialismo Histórico*, originally published in 1969, has been translated into five languages, and its sixty-two editions have sold more than one million copies. This book was hugely influential in Latin America, where it helped to educate an entire generation of Marxists struggling against ubiquitous military dictatorships: I fondly remember reading an illegal and much-thumbed mimeographed copy of Harnecker’s book in the late 1970s, and participating in numerous discussions about the meaning of the categories explained there.

Harnecker has been deeply involved with the Latin-American Left for more than three decades. She has lived in Havana since 1973, where she heads the Latin American Popular Memory Research Centre (MEPLA). Harnecker currently spends a lot of her time in Venezuela, where she is researching (and actively supporting) the Chávez administration.
In the following paper, Harnecker reflects upon ‘the first’ September 11 – the day Chilean President Salvador Allende was overthrown, in 1973. For too many years, the achievements of Allende’s administration have been swept under the carpet, both by the extreme Right and the ultra-Left. In spite of misleading images of chaos and incompetence (for the Right) and mindless hesitation (for the ultra-Left), there was substantial social, political and economic progress in Chile between 1970 and 1973. In this period, there were notable improvements in the distribution of income, wealth and political and economic power in Chile, against the background of a profoundly élite society. Mass popular mobilisations in a scale not seen before (or since) in Latin America imposed radical transformations at all levels of society.

In ‘Understanding the Past to Make the Future’ Harnecker briefly reviews the Allende years, reflects upon this extraordinarily important experience, and draws lessons for the future of the Left in Latin America and elsewhere. This is essential not only in order to honour and understand the past, but also to bring this episode, and its lessons, to the attention of the emerging generation of left activists around the world. This paper is a celebration of the achievements of the Chilean Left, and the memory of President Salvador Allende.
An electoral victory

Thirty years after the September 11 that Latin America will always remember, we need to ask ourselves what lessons we can learn from the Chilean experience.¹ In September 1970, something occurred which deeply moved the Left in general, and the Latin-American Left in particular: the electoral victory of Salvador Allende in Chile. It was the first time in the history of the Western world that a Marxist candidate had gained the presidency through the ballot box.

In the face of this victory, the opposition forces had the following alternatives: they could either respect the simple majority (Allende had only 36 per cent of the votes), as traditionally had been done in Chile, or they could impede, by any means necessary, the Marxist candidate from assuming government. The most conservative forces in Chile tried to put

¹ In writing this article I have combined information about the Allende experience from my forthcoming book (Harnecker forthcoming), and a text prepared for a book about the film ‘The Battle of Chile’ by Patricio Guzmán (1975) and subsequently published partially as Harnecker 1995. [Editorial note: For a general overview of the Chilean experience during the last quarter of the twentieth century see also Taylor 2002.]
this last option into practice. They initially tried to get Congress to elect their own candidate (and runner-up with a second relative majority) Jorge Alessandri, into the presidency. In pursuing this objective they resorted to various tactics: a run on banks, the expatriation of US dollars, a campaign of fear, abandonment of companies and so on. For their part, the ‘Freísta’ sector – the more conservative sector of centrist Christian Democracy [Democracia Cristiana, DC] – was also very tempted to follow this road. However, they understood with great lucidity that such a trajectory would bring the country to chaos and civil war, and so the majority of the party chose to respect the winner. To have voted for Alessandri in Congress would have sent a message to over a third of the Chilean population that the democratic and electoral roads were closed to them and that they should turn instead to violence and insurrection. But this support for Popular Unity was not for free; its price was that the Allende government accept the Statute of Constitutional Guarantees, through which the government promised not to touch the armed forces, the educational system and the media.

While this agreement was reached, a sector of the ultra-Right (supported by the US government) concentrated its energies on plotting against Allende’s victory, bringing together diverse political sectors of the opposition, elements of the armed forces and of the outgoing government. Spurred on by the murder of the pro-constitutional commander of the Army, General René Schneider, the victorious UP [Unidad Popular, Popular Unity] coalition focused part of its national campaign on gaining the support of the armed forces on the basis of its constitutional character.

**The UP offensive**

Despite this opposition, Allende assumed office with the support of the Christian-Democratic Party on 4 November 1970, thus inaugurating a new period in the country’s history. The government immediately moved onto the offensive. In order to carry out the structural transformations outlined in its electoral programme, the UP government drew on some important legal instruments available to the state. The Law of Land Reform approved during

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2 In Chile a candidate can be elected without the absolute majority of the votes, as long as he is ratified by Parliament. Though the tradition has always been to ratify the candidate with the relative majority, the question was, would that tradition be rejected with the election of Allende?

3 After the former Christian-Democratic President Eduardo Frei.
the Frei administration, despite its limitations, allowed the new government to advance quickly in the expropriation of big *latifundios*. Using a an existing decree (passed in August 1932 under the short-lived Socialist Republic) to avoid probable mutilation of their programme by the parliamentary opposition, the UP government took the initial steps toward the socialisation of property: on 2 December, the expropriation of the first company, the Bellavista textile factory, was announced. The Lanera Austral factory followed on 27 January as did FIAP-Tomé and Fabrilana on 11 March 1971. After the unanimous approval by Congress of a constitutional reform allowing the nationalisation of copper and other basic natural resources, the big foreign companies were also expropriated without compensation.

On other fronts, the attempt at restructuring the judicial system in order to establish neighbourhood tribunals produced the first great reaction of the Right. The UP decided to back away from this initiative and it was shelved forever. During the same period, however, the UP government’s economic strategy was broadly achieved. There was a considerable redistribution of income; government economic policy yielded rising production, whilst unemployment – which had previously reached alarming levels – fell significantly. In the area of finance, the government advanced less far: there, the resistance of bank employees controlled by DC hindered the creation of a unified banking system.

The government also pushed forward an international political offensive, restoring relationships with Cuba and establishing diplomatic relations for the first time with China, North Korea, North Vietnam, East Germany and other Communist states. The new government gained the respect and sympathy of international public opinion at a moment when the European Left was looking for a democratic road to socialism. If the Cuban Revolution had fortified the position of those who advocated armed revolutionary struggle, the triumph of Allende vindicated those who defended the peaceful path.

The experience was short-lived, however, as Allende lasted little more than three years. Following his election, many people lost sight of the fact that it was the government, but not power itself, that had been won by Allende. The legislative and judicial powers were still under the control of the opposition, as well as the fundamental pillar of the bourgeois state – the armed forces – which remained intact, and were protected by the so-called

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4 Zemelman and León 1972.
Statute of Constitutional Guarantees. The government’s offensive found a fractionalised opposition, weakened politically by its electoral defeat in September and its frustrated coup attempt in October. They had two options: to try to overthrow the UP government once again or to grind it down gradually so as to win the presidential elections in 1976. While the Right debated different strategies, the popularity of the government in this period increased considerably as a result of its successful economic policies. The elections of April 1971 demonstrated this: in only five months, the UP increased its share of the vote from 36 to 49 per cent. In retrospect, this would have been, without a doubt, the most favourable moment to have approved a referendum authorising the creation of a Constituent Assembly to elaborate a new constitution. In order to advance along the legal, peaceful road to socialism, it was essential for UP to change the rules of the institutional game. In the event, UP chose not to take the risk.

During these years, the country was plunged into a climate of revolution and profound transformation. Many Chileans were full of hope and felt themselves to be masters of their own destiny. It was a dangerous example not only to the powerful in Chile but to the rest of the world as well. For them, this new paradigm had to be defeated. The Right, keeping in mind the possibility of a military coup, made it its strategic objective to thwart, by all possible means, the coalition of political and social forces that would give Allende a parliamentary majority and would allow him to transform society through the legislative process. The principal political force among the opposition were the Christian Democrats, who had their fundamental social support among the middle class, certain sectors of the working class, and the urban poor. The murder of Pérez Zujovic at the hands of former UP militants in June 1971, however, would prove to be a gift for the Right, as it allowed the ‘Freísta’ sector of the DC to recover the leadership of the party.

**The contradictions of state power**

On balance, we can say of this early period that, despite the considerable advances carried out by the government, the popular sectors appear as mere spectators and supporters of the transformative process. The Committees of Popular Unity, which had experienced an extraordinary development during

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5 Former Minister of the Interior in Frei’s Christian-Democratic government and highly influential member of the Christian-Democratic Party.
the pre-electoral period, mainly disappeared after the victory. The parties devoted all their cadres to government tasks, abandoning to a significant extent their work in the popular movements. Apart from the mobilisations to support the government, the only important mobilisations during this period were those carried out by the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria [MIR, Revolutionary Left Movement] among the Mapuche natives in the territories of Cautín and Valdivia, to recover lands expropriated from them in the past. The popular government’s publicly-announced decision not to use repression against workers stimulated further similar actions. As the latter negatively affected small and medium peasants, they broke with the agrarian strategy of UP which initially sought to attack only the big latifundistas.

The ultra-Right magnified these actions and took advantage of them in launching its campaign of delegitimisation against the government and mobilising important sectors of the rural and urban middle classes against the government by presenting it as the enemy of private property. On the other hand, the first serious divergences arose inside UP when the first important initiative involving popular participation – the creation of the Communal Peasant Councils – was activated in December 1970. One group conceived of these councils as rural structures at a national level that would contain a multiplicity of existing rural organisations (trade unions, co-operatives and asentados – organisations of peasants who had repossessed their land). Others saw some problems in this way of organising the councils. They argued that it excluded the associations of small, independent proprietors and other sectors in the country still not formally organised, and gave supremacy in these councils to DC, as this party controlled two of the three peasant union federations and the federation of asentados whilst the Left, especially the Communist Party, controlled only one union federation. Yet another group, agreeing with the MIR, insisted on the formation of the Communal Councils by the grassroots, which would allow, in principle, the incorporation of the whole peasantry – including the non-organised sectors – and to break the dominance of DC in the rural organisations. The problems of this last position were twofold: first, the difficulty in having a truly democratic grassroots elections without political manipulation by the parties and, second – and most seriously – the division of the peasantry, as, in reality, the non-UP sectors were excluded from the Communal Councils.

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6 A leftist political movement outside the Popular Unity coalition.
After several months of discussion, the leadership of UP reached an agreement, but, despite this, the character of each Council came to depend on the orientation that each party gave it, thus resulting in further division among the proletarian peasantry. In addition, the loss of support of an important sector of small and medium landowners prevented UP from gaining the massive support of the peasantry. Thus, despite the notable advances in agrarian reform, the main ally of the working class was not won over to the extent that had been anticipated.

This period of offensive among revolutionary forces also lay bare the limits of the Chilean bourgeois state and its legality. Excessive centralism prevented initiatives and decision-making at the local level. Without economic resources, local initiatives remained pipe-dreams. The majority of the cadres of the bureaucratic apparatus and other organisms of the state were not involved in the day-to-day decisions and the government controlled only the higher echelons of the state. Under the existing constitution, the Contraloría (the highest judicial entity of the state) had the power to determine what was constitutional and what was not. It rejected the idea of creating centres of power outside the state structure, thereby denying the possibility of legalising the Peasant Communal Councils. It only approved a project which reduced their function to a mere advisory role to the state’s agricultural organisms. The same happened later on with the legalisation of the Councils of Supply and Prices (Juntas de Abastecimientos y Precios)\(^7\) created to fight against the black market and inflation.

Political ‘quotas’ proved to be an additional problem. Each party within UP demanded a certain number of positions in the public administration for its own members, so that each ministry, each organism of the state, was expected to reproduce the representation of all the parties in UP. This idea, which was intended to produce an integrated leadership within each organism, in reality produced the opposite. As there was no unified leadership of the political process, each party made its own policy. The inefficiency of the bourgeois state was accentuated by the absence of a common approach in each ministry and within each administrative organism. Furthermore, in order to fulfil their quotas, each party named candidates who often did not have the requisite competence, and so opportunists of all stripes were able to rise

\(^7\) Groups of people that organised themselves to control prices.
within the ranks of the state. As a result of parties jockeying for position, many experienced, efficient but independent individuals were excluded from positions of influence. The lack of power and resources at the local level made decentralised policy initiatives and decision-making all but impossible, and so mass mobilisations were limited to pressuring the central organisms of the state, thereby exacerbating a historical tendency of the Chilean people to expect all solutions to come from above. In addition, the incorrect methods of leadership of the UP militants, formed in centralised organisations, reduced their ability to implement concrete tasks incorporating the people at local and grassroots level.

Another aspect that we must consider is that the political strategy of UP in relation to the popular sectors was centred fundamentally on the proletariat of the big industrial centres, mining and agriculture. Due to their high levels of organisation and previous social conquests, these sectors were in large measure privileged with regard to the rest of the labour force working in small industries, small agricultural farms, as well as in relation to the immense sector of small self-employed workers – the truly marginal sectors of both town and country. This privileging of the organised, urban, industrial proletariat was evident in the priority given by UP to the improvement of union organisation, without a similar concern for the organisation of the poor. On the one hand, UP promoted production committees in the big industries but, on the other, they did not implement supervisory committees in the medium and small industries. The redistributive policy based on wages did not reach the non-salaried sectors of the urban population. It should be recognised that DC had a much more intelligent policy in this regard, concerned in particular with the organisation of the ‘marginalised sectors’. Lastly, in spite of insisting on the importance of incorporating the masses to the transformative process in its documents, UP did not formulate concrete tasks aimed at encouraging greater numbers to become part of the process, thereby enlarging the government’s support base. Instead, these tasks were carried out within the respective party structures.

**The ultra-right counteroffensive**

As we saw earlier, Pérez’s Zújovic’s murder energised the effort of the ultra-conservatives sectors in unifying the opposition. Their strategy revolved around six basic objectives. First, to divide the ruling UP coalition. This was
done by attempting to exploit supposed divisions between ‘Marxist’ parties and ‘democratic’ ones. By using an old anticommunist trick, the ultra-Right attempted to isolate Marxists from the rest of the UP coalition by accusing them of trying to ‘take over the whole government’, and of ‘unyielding sectarian loyalty to Moscow’. Second, maintaining control over the mass media at all cost. At the time, the opposition controlled 70 per cent of the written press and 115 of the 150 radio stations existing in the country, including the most powerful. The third objective involved the defence of private property. The Right used every legal mechanism and pressure tactic within reach to prevent the transition from private to social property: the clearest example of this was the constitutional reform project presented by DC in order to prevent the nationalisation of many businesses. Fourth, the ultra-Right sought the creation of an anti-Popular Unity consciousness within the Armed forces. To do this, they exploited every opportunity to present the country as being ‘in chaos’, ‘under anarchy’, or ‘ungovernable’ and ‘in a power vacuum’. And, without a doubt, the central goal of this aspect of their campaign was the denunciation of the existence of other armed groups outside the army. Fifth, the ultra-conservatives encouraged the middle class to act against the government by supporting the supervisors who boycotted copper mine production; mobilising their professional colleagues; using the universities as target groups for their strategies. But the last and fundamental goal – that which would later allow them to achieve others – was to provoke the economic failure of the Allende government. Almost immediately after Allende’s electoral victory, they began to implement their counter-measures: capital flight, the illegal trafficking in US dollars, the paralysis of certain industries, a freeze on raw material imports and industrial parts, and so on. The dominant classes not only blocked the government’s every attempt to modify the unfair tax system through their parliamentary majority, but, at the same time, they denied the budget resources to carry forward the new social agenda: including milk distribution, health-care plans, housing, and other public works. Thus, they blocked UP’s effort to improve workers’ standards of living and, at the same time, spread fear among foreign investors and domestic businesses, leading to a stagnation of productivity.

This plan had the full support of multinational corporations and the Nixon administration, which besieged the Allende government by reducing credits,

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8 This made any attempt to arm the people to defend the popular government much harder.
preventing the renegotiation of foreign debt, and by placing an embargo on goods from nationalised companies, whilst spreading the image abroad that Chile was a bankrupt country, thereby strangling it economically. The Allende government, not wanting to compromise the negotiating capacity of the workers, had no other alternative but to increase the amount of money in circulation, knowing that this would result in steep inflation. At the same time, the US government embargo prevented them from importing enough food to keep up with the purchasing power of the population. Food shortages steadily worsened. In addition to these factors, the opposition’s efforts caused the economic situation to deteriorate further through speculation, hoarding and the growth of the black market. In tandem with this, the opposition-controlled media unleashed a systematic campaign to show that the country lacked basic necessities and placed this at the centre of their attacks. Thus, as the Allende government moved forward, a truly counterrevolutionary situation was fermenting internally. The first symptoms were already evident when Fidel Castro visited Chile in November 1971. More and more social sectors of the Right and their allies participated in demonstrations, protests, transport strikes, copper strikes and demonstrations against the military. As the oppositional forces continued to execute their strategy, the forces of the UP coalition could not agree on how to react to this counteroffensive. In response to this spiralling deterioration of the political and socio-economic climate, Allende decided to address the situation by calling for a popular referendum. The presidential address was scheduled for 11 am on 11 September, 1973. Gunfire would silence the heroic Chilean leader at that time instead.

**The military coup**

The military coup was made possible by the success of a right-wing counteroffensive. While the right-wing forces grew in strength, and contradictions among the forces of the Left sharpened, an important part of the middle class – which had initially supported Allende – distanced themselves from his project, creating a fertile political and social terrain for the military coup. I agree with Jorge Arrate, the Chilean socialist leader, that Allende’s project was far too heterodox for the orthodox character of the Left at the time,\(^9\) whose ideas did not correspond to the new challenges faced by the

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\(^9\) Arrate 1985, p. 175.
country. When Allende spoke about the democratic transition to socialism, sectors of the Left painted on the walls: ‘Long Live the Dictatorship of the Proletariat!’ When Allende spoke about winning over sectors of the bourgeoisie for his project, a significant portion of the Left identified the entire bourgeoisie as the enemy, basing everything on dependency theory, which maintained that national capitalist development was no longer possible. When the socialist President fought for unity, the most powerful parties – the socialists and Communists – made their differences public. While Allende sought to consolidate economic achievements through the strategic nationalisation of certain industries, aware of the limits of his own power, other sectors of the Left wanted to extend the nationalisation even to small businesses, demanding that Allende assume a more radical stance, as if all power were in his hands. On the other hand, the leadership of Popular Unity coalition and President Allende himself understood quite well that the Chilean process could not succeed without the support of the armed forces. Accordingly, they made a big effort to win them over to the popular cause. However, they trusted excessively in the constitutionalist loyalties of the Chilean armed forces and failed to work sufficiently for the creation of their own loyal force.

Yet there is something else that was only understood later on, namely that this type of ‘peaceful’ transition from capitalism to socialism – using the resources and the possibilities of power within a system of democratic representation – needs another conception of socialism. It was necessary to rethink what kind of socialism we wanted to build, a socialism better adapted to Chilean reality. This was what Allende seemed to understand intuitively when he used the folk metaphor of ‘socialism with red wine and Chilean empañadas’, indicating the need for a socialist society that was democratic and rooted in popular national traditions.10

References

Arrate, Jorge 1985, La Fuerza Democrática de la Idea Socialista, Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Del Ornitorrinco.


10 Moulián 1995, p. 25.
Zemelman, Hugo and Patricio León 1972, ‘El Comportamiento de la Burguesía Chilena en el Primer Año del Gobierno de la Unidad Popular’, Revista de Sociología, 1, August.
I. Empire and America

Antonio Negri’s and Michael Hardt’s *Empire* poses a challenge to thinking about the changing nature of political power in the international capitalist system, the role of sovereign statehood in that order and, particularly, the character of American power. The key theses of *Empire* are simply stated: first, the global order of capital is regulated by a new logic and structure of rule, a new form of sovereignty; and, second, this logic and structure of rule is glued together by the society of the spectacle, in which power resides ultimately in the multitude.

‘Empire establishes no territorial centre of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers’.¹ While US ‘hegemony over the global use of force’ stands at the top of the pyramid of the ‘global constitution’ that governs this order,

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¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. xii.
the glue that holds together the diverse functions and bodies of the hybrid constitution is what Guy Debord called the spectacle, an integrated and diffuse apparatus of images and ideas that produces and regulates public discourse and opinion.\textsuperscript{2}

‘Empire’, then, involves a hierarchy of power within the capitalist world but this is anchored in a ‘global constitution’, rather than in direct imperial control of some political-territorial units over others. Whereas imperialism was associated with an extension of political control from one territory to another – ‘imperialism was really an extension of the sovereignty of the European nation-states beyond their own boundaries’\textsuperscript{3} – Empire is an essentially deterritorialised field of economic and cultural relationships.

This is ‘Empire’ as seen in the mirror of Rome, and as found in both the pre-Roman culture of ancient Greece and the post-Roman culture of Christian Europe, as a hierarchy of polities that guarantees a universal order based on shared identities, values and interests, in which one power, the hegemonic power, is raised above others, not so much by force as by force of example, or as exemplar. It is the notion of Empire as, in Dominic Lieven’s terms, ‘first and foremost, a very great power that has left its mark on the international relations of its era’.\textsuperscript{4} It is Empire as a form of rule over many territories and peoples that works by incorporation, associated with an economic and cultural order that proclaims itself the basis of a universal civilisation. The novelty of Hardt’s and Negri’s characterisation is the insistence that this Empire is now universal and that its power is no longer anchored in a fixed, territorial centre, since power – the glue of the ‘global constitution’ – is primarily cultural, not political.

\textit{Where in the world is America?}

There is, then, already a tension in this account, never properly explored let alone resolved, between the recognition that the United States exercises ‘hegemony over the global use of force’ and the wider idea of a universal empire. The United States certainly claims an exceptional role in world affairs, uniquely defining its national interest as more or less synonymous with that of the international community \textit{tout ensemble}. Its liberal advocates concur:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 321.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Hardt and Negri 2000, p. xi.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Lieven 2000, p. xiv.
\end{itemize}
‘America’s national interest . . . offers the closest match there is to a world interest’. The formation of the United States was a result of the networks of trade, people, conquest, settlement and ideas that circulated in the Atlantic economy, linking north-west Europe, the Americas and Africa, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. After the independence of thirteen colonies from Britain in the American Revolution of 1776, the subsequent development of the United States was, in part, an indirect continuation of that process – both globalising and imperial – of European expansion into the non-European world.

At the same time, however, US expansion was also defined as anti-colonial rather than colonial, republican rather than monarchical, the New World rather than the old European order. Unlike the major European states, the United States became a major power more or less without a formal empire. Rather, independence cleared the way for westward expansion and settlement and ‘the whole internal history of United States imperialism was one vast process of territorial seizure and occupation’. As John Adams, the second President of the new Republic (1797–1801), had expressed it in 1774, the purpose of American independence was to pursue the formation of an ‘independent American empire’.

It is only by presenting this ‘internal colonialism’ as an expansion into uninhabited or freely alienated lands that the American ideology of ‘exceptionalism’ could take root. But, among the overwhelmingly European majority of the population, such an idea did strike a deep chord. This ideology of exceptionalism encompasses two sets of ideas: first, that the United States is uniquely fortunate in having escaped the patterns of historical development characteristic of the old order in Europe and in being able to create anew a society based on security, liberty and justice; and, second, that it is an exemplary power, representing a model that is universally applicable to the rest of mankind. In this way, the United States has been able to present its national interest as simultaneously unique and universal, as entirely consistent with a form of cosmopolitan internationalism.

The consolidation of the sovereignty of the Union after the Civil War and the development of the national market, based on federal transfers of land to private ownership, laid the basis for the later development of a mass society:

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5 Emmott 2002, p. 10; see also Emmott 2003.
the US pioneered the culture of mass consumption as well as the consumption of mass culture, both of which were based in mass production, or what foreigners simply called ‘Americanism’. The age of mass destruction followed shortly after, as the United States pioneered the combination of the mass production of high-explosive weapons and massive increases in the mobility of means of their delivery. This is what a ‘superpower’ originally meant, defined by William Fox as ‘great power plus great mobility of power’.7

Substantial elements of this model proved to be transferable to other capitalist countries. This meant that the leading economy in the world became a pole of attraction for others, as Perry Anderson, following Antonio Gramsci, has recently emphasised.8 It was this generalisation of the US model, its partial replication outside the United States, that gave its unique ideology of exceptionalism – the only national interest that presents itself as a universal, cosmopolitan interest – such a powerful grip.

In a highly prescient analysis of ‘Americanism and Fordism’ in his Prison Notebooks, Gramsci asked ‘whether America, through the implacable weight of its economic production (and therefore indirectly), will compel or is already compelling Europe to overturn its excessively antiquated economic and social basis’.9 Gramsci’s conclusion was that this was indeed the case, but that it represented ‘an organic extension and an intensification of European civilization, which has simply acquired a new coating in the American climate’.10 That is to say, just as the United States itself was, in part, a product of European capitalist imperialism, of colonial settlement in the Americas, so European capitalism was now being reshaped by the more advanced economic order in America.

Gramsci also saw clearly that Americanism was not simply a new mode of mass production and mass consumption but also a new form of social structure and state:

Americanism requires a particular environment, a particular social structure (or at least a determined intention to create it) and a certain type of State. The State is the liberal State, not in the sense of free-trade liberalism or of effective political liberty, but in the more fundamental sense of free initiative.

7 Fox 1944.
8 Anderson 2002.
and of economic individualism which, with its own means, on the level of ‘civil society’, through historical development, itself arrives at a regime of industrial concentration and monopoly.\textsuperscript{11}

At the time he was writing, Gramsci observed the beginnings of Americanism in Europe – in Berlin and Milan, less so in Paris, he thought – but this was to become a much more important development after the Second World War. Thus was Americanism reproduced outside the territory of the United States.

In an essay seeking to place American history in a wider world context, Charles Bright and Michael Meyer describe the consequences after 1945 as follows:

The postwar American sovereign, built on territories of production, had created vectors along which elements of the U.S. state and American civil society could move off into the world and benefit from the permanent projections of American power overseas. . . . The tools of control – military (the alliance systems and violence), economic (dollar aid and investments), political (the leverage and sanctions of a superpower), and ideological (the image of the United States as leader of the free world) – were tremendously powerful, and the ideological imaginary of the territories of production, with its emphasis on material progress and democracy, proved extraordinarily attractive.\textsuperscript{12}

Hence, Bright and Meyer’s question, ‘Where in the World Is America?’, has two parts: first, what is the position of the (territorial) United States in the international system, and second, where – and with what effect – is Americanism in the rest of the world? The idea I want to explore by asking these questions is that American power in the round is based on both these Americas. Or rather, that the key to US power is the relation between these two senses of American power.

\textit{The American constitutional project}

Hardt and Negri generally present the historical development of the United States as one in which ‘a new principle of sovereignty is affirmed, different from the European one: liberty is made sovereign and sovereignty is defined
as radically democratic within an open and continuous process of expansion’.\(^\text{13}\)

In relation to this project, Native and African Americans represent externally and internally subordinated peoples. Recognition of this prompts a further thought. ‘Perhaps what we have presented as exceptions to the development of imperial sovereignty’, they write, ‘should instead be linked together as a real tendency, an alternative within the history of the U.S. Constitution. In other words, perhaps the root of these imperialist practices should be traced back to the very origins of the country, to black slavery and the genocidal wars against the Native Americans’.\(^\text{14}\)

This seems to me, in some ways, correct. From the time of the proto-liberal thought of Thomas Hobbes, through to the more expansive notions of rights and self-government in John Locke, to the comments of John Stuart Mill on the rights of intervention of ‘civilised’ peoples against ‘barbarians’, liberalism has been entirely consistent as a theory of liberty and empire.\(^\text{15}\)

Natural law, in the hands of such early enlightenment thinkers as Hobbes, was transformed from a divinely ordained external standard into the idea of subjective natural rights, universal rights that are duplicated in every individual and which no one can rationally deny to another. The natural law was understood as the basis of a universal moral theory.

These individual rights – broadly to seek peace and uphold agreements – can be alienated to a collective body, thereby effecting a transition from the universal order of morality among rights-bearing individuals to the inevitably particular and legal order of a given state. Hobbes remains the commanding theorist of this idiom. The basis of political authority is thereby conceptualised in effectively secular terms, in terms of autonomous individuals, rights-bearing agents, who transfer some of their rights to the state, in order that the latter may protect their remaining freedoms. The legitimacy of the state is thereby rendered contingent on law conforming to the private morality of rights-bearing, property-owning individuals.

Within Europe, these ideas constituted a powerful liberal attack on the arbitrary power of rulers whose claim to legitimacy was either religious or absolutist. However, societies that did not uphold these rights in this way were, according to these theorists, in a sense pre-political. Considered as

\(^{13}\) Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 169.

\(^{14}\) Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 177.

\(^{15}\) See Tuck 1999.
individuals, their people were entitled to the same moral considerations as was everyone else, but they had no legal-political status as peoples. Even John Stuart Mill wrote, in his essay ‘A Few Words on Non-Intervention’ (1859), that:

barbarians have no rights as a nation, except a right to such treatment as may, at the earliest possible period, fit them for becoming one. The only moral laws for the relation between a civilized and a barbarous government, are the universal rules of morality between man and man.\(^{16}\)

By these means, liberal thinkers sought to reconcile notions of individual rights, limited government and the rule of law with capitalist colonial expansion and settlement in foreign lands. These ideas represented an important shift in the ruling mores and discourses of empire. In contrast to conquest empires of feudal aristocracies based on force and religious conversion, trading empires would be based on wealth and common interests – what the English in the eighteenth century liked to call ‘empires of liberty’. This shift was accompanied by the enlightenment’s ‘powerful celebration of the civilizing and humanizing power of commerce’.\(^{17}\) ‘Civilisation’, rather than evangelisation, thus became the official discourse of the European empires. And to be civil was to be someone who new correctly how to interpret the natural law – nowadays extended to include the full panoply of free markets, liberal democracy and human rights. Empire, in turn, could increasingly be represented as a commonwealth of ‘free’ peoples enjoying individual liberties under the rule of law.

Hardt and Negri say, ‘the contemporary idea of Empire is born through the global expansion of the internal U.S. constitutional project’.\(^{18}\) I think that there is a large element of truth in this, even if that project had its origins in the prior expansion of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European, and especially English, society. But this does not mean that the process has no centre. In fact, it has a hierarchy of centres located in an increasingly co-ordinated set of territorial states, that is, compulsory apparatuses of political power, in which the power of the United States plays a complex and ambiguous role, sometimes directing collective forms of empowerment to mutual

\(^{16}\) Mill 2002, p. 487.
\(^{17}\) Pagden 2001, p. 92.
\(^{18}\) Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 182.
advantage, sometimes using its coercive power to deter and compel adversaries, and sometimes using both to engineer an imperialist creation of new forms of capitalism.

Today, the borders of capitalist states are, at least in the more open, liberal economies, no longer ‘fixed boundaries or barriers’ to the flows of capital, they are indeed increasingly open and permeable to such flows, but this mobility of capital across borders presupposes the definition, regulation and enforcement of rights of contract and rights to property, and much else besides, within and, crucially, among many territorially ordered centres of power, that is, states. It is the increasingly liberal codification of these rights and contracts within a growing number of capitalist states, and, perhaps even more importantly, the co-ordinated processes of aligning one such jurisdiction with another and others, which makes possible the very global mobility of capital that Hardt and Negri seek to emphasise.

This is, I will argue, a form of liberal imperialism with deep roots, and a more or less continuous presence, in the history of capitalist development since the late seventeenth century; it is motored by the economic dynamics of the restless expansion of capitalism, and by the competitive and co-ordinated states-system, which provides its political armature. What glues this system together is less Guy Debord’s spectacle than the common verities of material interests; the co-ordinated power of a liberal and essentially ultra-imperialist order; and, acting on behalf of this, in the last instance (and sometimes it now seems in the first instance), the coercively deployed political power of the United States.

II. Imperialism

Empire, according to Hardt and Negri, is to be contrasted with imperialism, the latter being defined in terms of the ‘extension of the sovereignty of the European nation-states beyond their own boundaries’, that is, in terms of its political form, rather than in terms of its economic mechanisms. By defining imperialism in political-territorial terms, Hardt and Negri, in effect, concede much of the liberal self-understanding of a world of independent states. Empire represents a global expansion of the US constitutional project, but America is not imperialist.

Of course, capitalist imperialism (often) involved ‘an extension of the sovereignty of the European nation-states beyond their own boundaries’; but,
even where it did so, it was also an economic process, which established relations of economic domination – ‘specifically, the formal or informal control over local economic resources in a manner advantageous to the metropolitan power, and at the expense of the local economy’.\(^\text{19}\) Indeed, as Ellen Meiksins Wood has pointed out, ‘capitalist imperialism eventually became almost entirely a matter of economic domination, in which market imperatives, manipulated by the dominant capitalist powers, were made to do the work no longer done by imperial states or colonial settlers’.\(^\text{20}\) Capitalist imperialism, on this understanding, is a set of coercive power relations established between different parts of the world economy, such that one region benefits at the expense of another. Its central mechanisms are economic and involve the ability of one region to manipulate market imperatives to its advantage. These economic mechanisms – operating by means of control over trade, investment or labour migration – may or may not involve the extension of political-military control by one polity over another.

Radical-liberal and classical-Marxist thinkers shared this essentially economic understanding of imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which derived from attempts to understand the character of the European capitalist empires, specifically the character of the relations between the metropolitan centres and colonial peripheries. In this modern usage, the primary reference of ‘imperialism’ was to the ‘political and cultural domination, and the economic exploitation, of the colonial periphery by the metropolitan state and nation’.\(^\text{21}\) While liberal and Marxist critics of imperialism were all agreed that relations between the metropoles and the peripheries were exploitative, of equal concern for the classical-Marxist debate was the nature of the competitive relationships between the rival national imperialisms that, in combination and effect, dominated the non-European world until the era of decolonisation.

This question had not escaped radical-liberal theorists and it was, in fact, Hobson who first drew attention to the distinction, which was to play a key role in subsequent Marxist debates, between what he called ‘Imperialism’ and ‘Informal Empire’. As Giovanni Arrighi explains, the distinction between Imperialism and Informal Empire was as follows:

\(^{19}\) O’Connor 1970, p. 118.  
At least in principle . . . two quite distinct types of rivalry were involved. In the case of Imperialism, rivalry affected political relations among states and was expressed in the arms race and the drive to territorial expansion; whereas in the case of Informal Empire, it concerned economic relations among individuals of different nationality and was expressed in the international division of labour. Thus Imperialism signified political conflict among nations, Informal Empire economic interdependence between them.22

This fundamental distinction was to reappear in the form of Bukharin’s and Lenin’s notion of interimperial rivalries, that is, rival national Imperialisms, and Kautsky’s idea of ultra-imperialism, that is, a concert of Informal Empires, the possibility of which was noted by Hobson, who – somewhat confusingly – referred to it as ‘inter-imperialism’. In fact, these opposing characterisations – Lenin on the one side and Kautsky on the other – contained two fundamentally different views of international order in a capitalist world. In an interimperialist world, one imperialism gains at the expense of another, even as both exploit the periphery; in an ultra-imperialist world, each gains by co-operating with the other, even if the sharing of the gains is uneven.

As it developed in classical Marxism, the importance of this debate was that the theory of imperialism aimed to provide an explanation of world politics and not just accounts of metropolitan exploitation of the periphery, for they were as much concerned with the relations between and among the leading capitalist countries as they were with the effect of capitalist expansion, forcible or otherwise, into the periphery. The later attempt to read the character of capitalist development in toto through its effects on peripheral formations was, as Bill Warren, memorably pointed out, an inversion of the central purpose of Marxist thinking.23

Coercion, co-ordination and power

The central analytical question at stake here is this: What is the relation between the co-ordinated liberal capitalist order, on the one hand, and the hierarchy of power among its constituent states, on the other? Now that the Communist challenge to capitalism has folded and the limits of the social-

22 Arrighi 1983, p. 41.
democratic additions to liberal capitalism have been revealed, the relationship between the collective empowerment of states and capital, which is a product of a co-ordinated liberal international order, and the patterns of economic domination and subordination among states is, arguably, the central question of intercapitalist relations. Is US economic hegemony a wasting asset as the original theorists of hegemonic stability supposed? And, if so, what are the implications of this? Or, can US military hegemony compensate for, or even restore, its loss of economic dominance?

In order to address these questions, we need to recognise that the uneven distribution of economic and military resources across the world of capitalist states underpins relations of power of two fundamentally different kinds. In the first place, there is what I will call distributive or coercive power. This is the notion of power implicit in realist balance-of-power (and hegemonic stability) thinking and in the Marxist literature on interimperial rivalries and superimperialism. Distributive power is the capacity of one party to get another to comply with its goals, power relations are hierarchical relations of super- and sub-ordination: there is a given distribution of power in which some have more at the expense of others having less, and power operates by imposing costs on others (or by means of a credible threat to do so).

And, secondly, there is what I will call collective power. This is the notion of power implicit in the idea that states have common interests that can be advanced by forms of co-operation. Collective power is a property of a group of co-operating actors, in which the total ability to effect favourable outcomes is increased, over and above that which could be achieved by each acting independently. Collective power works, not by imposing costs on some, but by producing gains for all. This is the notion of power implicit in the idea that hegemony is a pole of attraction, that there are benefits in co-ordinating multiple poles of capitalist power, and that international order is basically ultra-imperialist. (These two forms of power are often difficult to disentangle for two reasons: first and most straightforwardly, the gains from collective empowerment are often distributed unequally based on different bargaining power; and, second, what looks like a voluntary exercise of collective power may, in fact, represent a response to an anterior – and perhaps hidden – exercise of distributive power.)

The distinction between distributive and collective power is not to be confused with that between military and economic means of exercising power. There is, of course, a sense in which military means of exercising power are
always distributive for some, since they involve imposing costs on others (or at least a credible threat to do so), but military means can be turned to collective account, at least for some against others. This is precisely how US military power functioned during the Cold War as far as its capitalist allies were concerned. Economic power need not be distributive for any in a wide class of cases.

**The relations between economic and military power**

Another prominent feature of the classical-Marxist debate on imperialism was the attempt to understand and explain the relationships between military power and military conflict, on the one hand, and forms of intercapitalist competition in circumstances of working-class and peasant opposition to and mobilisation against core capitalist interests, on the other. The purpose of this reminder is not to review these well-known debates yet again, but rather to pose afresh the relationship between economic and military power in the present international system. Hardt and Negri are, in my view, substantially correct to insist that, in detail, the classical contributions have little bearing on contemporary developments – that has been true since 1945, if not before – but the ambitions of the classical debate to apprehend world capitalist order as a whole, and to relate questions of capitalist development to the functions of military power, need to be upheld.

The classical theories of imperialism typically saw military power as serving two analytically distinct functions. In the first place, just as Marx had argued that primitive accumulation, which gave rise to private property in the means of production and ‘free’ wage-labour, involved the violent dispossession of the direct producers and dissolution of precapitalist forms of property, so Luxemburg argued (in *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913)) that the expansion of capitalism into its periphery, and the confrontation with the ‘natural’ economy that this entailed, could only be accomplished on the basis of force. This echoed Marx’s own views, for notwithstanding his reflections on the dynamic power of the world market in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) – ‘chasing of the bourgeoisie’ across the globe, the ‘artillery of commodities’ battering down ‘Chinese walls’ – Marx insisted that force was an essential component of an expanding capitalist system – in India, in China, in the victory of the North in the American Civil War, in the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and in the containment of Tsarist Russia.

These contributions emphasised that capitalism was driven to expand on
an ever-wider, ever-deeper basis, that this expansion often presupposed the forcible destruction of other modes of economic and political life, and that this made the outer edges of the world market particularly unstable and combustible. Trotsky, in particular, emphasised this latter point: uneven development was also combined, with the impact of the most advanced elements of capitalism thrust upon the most backward, thereby forging a series of weak links in the chains of capitalist control across the globe. What made the weakest links so important, according to Trotsky, was that they could become the site of socialist revolutions, thereby sparking a challenge to core centres of capitalist power. Even in the absence of socialist challenges, these weak links, especially in strategically important or resource-rich areas, continue to pose a challenge to the interests of core capital.

The second function of militarism, for the classical debate, was the role it played in interimperialist rivalries. The canonical statement in this context was that of Lenin’s *Imperialism: intercapitalist competition, operating internationally, has, in Perry Anderson’s formulation, ‘an inherent tendency to escalate to the level of states’ and, left unchecked, ‘the logic of such anarchy can only be internecine war’.*

Taken largely from Bukharin’s *Imperialism and the World Economy* and the analysis of finance capital developed by Hilferding, this view accorded priority to the division of the world economy into national states. While capital in general has a common interest in ensuring the subordination of labour to capitalist command and in guaranteeing the overall preconditions for capital accumulation, these political functions are divided among multiple states, tied to nationally organised blocs of capital, which are compelled to compete against one another, as rival imperialisms, as the circuits of capital become increasingly international. The key link, for Bukharin and Lenin, was between the state and its ‘national’ capital; the end result was an increasing militarisation of interimperialist rivalries.

The epoch of the latest stage of capitalism shows us that certain relations between capitalist combines grow up, based on the economic division of the world; while parallel and in connection with it, certain relations grow up between political combines, between states, on the basis of the territorial division of the world, of the struggle for colonies, of the ‘struggle for economic territory’.

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25 Lenin 1916, p. 89.
This argument was questioned by Kautsky’s untimely claim, published on the eve of the First World War, that the survival of capitalism depended on the emergence of a mechanism for co-ordinating competing states – ultra-imperialism – in order to ensure that the general preconditions for accumulation were met. Kautsky reckoned that an international division of labour structured along corporate lines, rather than national ones, would provide the basis for such an order. Capitalist firms as well as ‘their’ national states would recognise the mutually destructive nature of interimperialist rivalry and fashion forms of co-operation to secure the common interests of the leading countries. Lenin recognised the general, abstract logic of Kautsky’s argument but argued that it was nonetheless utopian, since there was no agency in the international system that could effect the requisite co-ordination.

The Cold War and superimperialism

The outbreak of the First World War and the rivalries between the leading capitalist states in the interwar depression and the Second World War seemed to support Lenin over Kautsky. But, after the Second World War, relations among the leading capitalist states stabilised and, under American leadership, deep and extensive forms of co-operation were fashioned. Theories of US superimperialism in effect argued that Kautsky’s world had been achieved by Leninist means. One imperialism – that is, US imperialism – had established such overwhelming dominance, by virtue of the defeat and exhaustion of its rivals during the War, that it was able to monopolise the stabilisation of capitalism in the periphery as well as the defence of world capitalism against the challenges now posed by the Soviet Union and the rest of the Communist world. Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, for example, argued that ‘the rise of a world socialist system as a rival and alternative to the world capitalist system’, combined with the economic weakening of Europe and Japan and the emergence of social and national revolution in the colonial regions, meant that ‘policing the [US] empire and fighting socialism are rapidly becoming, if they are not already, one and the same’.26 Because the United States protected all capitalist power centres against communism and social revolt in the periphery, it was able to play a decisive role in directing a wide range of co-ordinating actions among the leading capitalist powers.

26 Baran and Sweezy 1966, p. 204.
By the early 1970s, however, this view was powerfully challenged: the Soviet Union had achieved a rough strategic parity with the United States and détente appeared to be loosening the cohesion of the Western bloc; the Bretton Woods order was in retreat and Japanese and West European capital launched a parallel competitive internationalisation through foreign direct investment to that pioneered by the United States in the 1950s and 1960s;\(^\text{27}\) anti-imperialist movements, political and economic, swept across the former colonial world in ways that the North was unable fully to contain; and the slackening of accumulation and innovation were accompanied by growing worker militancy in the centres of capitalist power.

Nonetheless, there did not appear to be a return to the interimperialist rivalries of the interwar years. It became increasingly difficult to analyse the turmoil in the world economy during the 1970s and 1980s in terms of tensions between national and international capital, let alone between juxtaposed imperialist bourgeoisies encamped in rival national economies.\(^\text{28}\) As Nicos Poulantzas pointed out in the early 1970s,

> What is currently in crisis is not directly American hegemony, under the impact of the ‘economic power’ of the other metropolises. . . . It follows that there is no solution to this crisis, as the European [and the Japanese] bourgeoisies themselves are perfectly aware, by these bourgeoisies attacking the hegemony of American capital.\(^\text{29}\)

Rather, the economic crisis that set in during the 1970s represented a general overaccumulation of capital in all the leading centres. Of course, states jockeyed for competitive advantage against one another as best they could, attempting to shift the burden of adjustment to slowing growth, rising inflation and growing fiscal indebtedness onto the weaker members of the system.

But, and this was a key difference with the interwar years, there was no general recourse to protectionist measures, to restrictive currency arrangements and to controls over the movements of finance capital. On the contrary, the response of the core centres of capitalist power was to liberalise their economies. Despite the severity of the downturn and the failure to restore Golden-Age rates of growth, the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s witnessed a further wave

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\(^{27}\) See Rowthorn 1980 [1971].

\(^{28}\) See Arrighi 1983.

\(^{29}\) Poulantzas 1975, p. 87.
of trade and investment liberalisation measures across the capitalist world, including many of the new centres of accumulation and growth in the developing world and the former Communist states. There was little evidence of national bourgeoisies resorting to interimperialist rivalries as a way out of the crisis.

Some have seen this as primarily the result of an exercise of the continuing economic and military power of the United States, a continuation of superimperialism by other means. Writing before the end of the Cold War, indeed during the escalation of the ‘Second’ Cold War, Arrighi argued that the erosion of formal US leadership over international trade, money and oil prices, had ‘not led to the end of U.S. hegemony but simply to its transformation from formal, state-organized hegemony to an informal, market-enforced/corporately organized hegemony’.

Imperialism after the Cold War

During the Cold War, two different objectives of the United States – first, ‘making the world safe’ for capitalism, and second, ensuring its hegemony within the capitalist world – reinforced one another. The first ambition involved containing the power of Russia in Europe and Asia and of China in Asia, including the ability of these Communist states to support revolution outside their borders, among the anti-colonial struggles in the developing world. In pursuit of this aim, America’s capitalist allies were generally willing to follow its political leadership. Since the collapse of Communism, the project of making the world safe for capitalism has gone global, with China and Russia as the biggest potential prizes. What does ‘making the world safe’ for capitalism now involve? Already, during the Cold War, the economies of Western Europe and Japan grew more rapidly than that of the United States (at least until the latter half of the 1990s), thereby eroding US economic leadership. What, then, might become of the ambition to ensure hegemony within the now much expanded capitalist world?

Is America’s role that of a key directive player in an ultra-imperialist order or is it still a superimperialism capable of disciplining potential interimperialist rivals? In both cases, the underlying idea is that the stability of the capitalist world depends upon the performance of certain global political

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30 Arrighi 1982, p. 66.
functions – stabilising the periphery, combating ideological challenges, solving conflicts of policy among the leading centres of the capital accumulation – in order to uphold the common interests of different, and potentially rival, capitalist classes and states. Both ultra- and superimperialism refer to co-operative relations among the leading capitalist powers: in the former ultra-imperialist case, co-operation results from co-ordination to mutual advantage; and in the latter superimperialist case, co-operation is enforced by the superior power of one state.

After the end of the Cold War, Peter Gowan described Washington’s pursuit of the liberalising agenda noted above as a ‘global gamble’ for world dominance, a Faustian bid to utilise the unipolar moment following the end of the Cold War to restructure the international political economy in ways that serve the particular interests of the United States, and especially those of the Wall-Street-Treasury axis.31 In effect, Gowan argues that the end of the Cold War restored the status of US superimperialism: he highlights what he sees as ‘the central fact of contemporary international relations: one single member . . . has acquired absolute military dominance over every other state or combination of states on the entire planet’.32 This military dominance is what imposes unity on the capitalist world, ‘whose empire is guarded not by any supra-state authority, but by a single hegemon’.33

Others contend that this not only overstates the continuing degree of US superimperialism but also, thereby, displaces the analysis away from the economic character of contemporary capitalism, which is no longer configured into national blocs of capital. Peter Green has argued against Gowan’s analysis on two counts:

Firstly, there is the identification of globalisation as simply a political project, an instrument of US ‘supra-imperialism’. The account virtually ignores the profit-motivated drive of all transnational capital, regardless of its origins, to break down national and regional barriers. . . . Secondly, there is Gowan’s interpretation of the evident complicity of the EU and Japan in this process as a function of political and military weakness in the face of US exercise of its hegemonic resources. What is missing here is any sense that moves towards greater ‘liberalisation’ within both the EU and Japan, or elsewhere

31 Gowan 1999.
32 Gowan 2001, p. 81.
33 Gowan 2001, p. 89.
in the world, have not been driven primarily by external pressure, although that has played a role. . . . [These bourgeoisies have been] joined by the new bourgeoisie in much of the so-called Third World and Eastern Europe, who would rather buy in to that order, even on unfavourable terms, than risk the consequences of exclusion.\textsuperscript{34}

The upshot of this, says Green, is that the G7 states, and most of the states of the second tier, are now almost inextricably locked into structures that they themselves have created, which do not simply serve the interests of US capitalism, or any other particular capitalism.\textsuperscript{35}

Not only does Green reject what he sees as the super-imperialism invoked by Gowan, but he also argues that ‘it is no longer valid to leap from the plane of competition for profit to the plane of interimperialist rivalry in the model of Lenin and Bukharin’.\textsuperscript{36} ‘There are still issues of geopolitics on the agenda – not least in the Middle East and Central Asia, with their huge oil reserves. That is very different’, says Green, ‘from suggesting that what is at stake in the tensions between the USA, Russia and China is a matter of economic rivalry in the Bukharinite sense’.\textsuperscript{37}

\section*{III. The character of US hegemony}

There are, then, several different ways of making sense of the power of the United States to shape the international order. We can think of American power as a form of empire that leaves ‘its mark on the international relations of its era’ by providing a model for others to emulate, the replication of Americanism outside America as Gramsci put it; we can see the world as a series of rival imperialisms, potentially configured in postures of interimperialist rivalry, pacified by the overwhelming military power of US superimperialism; and we can see relations among the leading capitalist states as altogether more co-operative, as a form of ultra-imperialist co-ordination based on the mutual interests of internationally organised capitalist firms and markets.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Green 2002, p. 55.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Green 2002, p. 50.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Green 2002, p. 42.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Green 2002, pp. 60–1.
\end{itemize}
These are not mutually exclusive and elements of all three may be present in different parts of the world and circumstances. Making sense of American power is, I suggest, a question of seeing how these different elements relate to one another in different international contexts and how, if at all, they fit together as a whole.

Anderson has recently argued that the ‘ultra-imperialist’ need for co-ordination ‘can be satisfactorily resolved only by the existence of a superordinate power, capable of imposing discipline on the system as a whole, in the common interests of all parties’. 38 ‘Such “imposition”’, he continues,

\[\text{cannot be a product of brute force. It must also correspond to a genuine capacity of persuasion – ideally, a form of leadership that can offer the most advanced model of production and culture of its day, as target of imitation for all others. That is the definition of hegemony, as a general unification of the field of capital.}^{39}\]

On Anderson’s account, this ‘target of imitation’ is what accounts for the consensual nature of the United States’s ability to direct the co-ordination of the capitalist world as a whole, while its military preponderance forms the moment of hegemonic domination. This is surely an important part of the story.

**Co-ordination in an ultra-imperialist order**

However, there is a second element: namely, the activity of co-ordination itself. The fundamental point about co-ordination is that it is, in the parlance of game theory, a positive-sum process, in which all parties are better off afterwards than in the pre-co-operative status quo. That is to say, all prefer co-ordination to an absence of co-ordination, even if some would have preferred to co-ordinate differently. Co-ordination on unfavourable terms is still better than no co-ordination at all. Anderson appears to recognise this, since he says that co-ordination is ‘in the common interests of all parties’. But he does not draw the obvious conclusions. The first is that, in addition to US capitalism being a target of imitation for other centres of capitalist power, the co-ordination of those centres is itself a process by which all benefit. Perhaps the reason Anderson does not stress this is that he believes that only a hegemonic power

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38 Anderson 2002, pp. 20–1.
can effect such co-ordination, only a target of imitation can overcome the obstacles to co-operation. This is, however, a mistake.

The first stage in Anderson’s logic for the necessity of a hegemonic co-ordinator, the Lenin-Bukharin thesis, involves two separate claims. The first is that there is an inherent tendency for competition between capitals for profit to escalate to the level of states, once capital is internationally mobile. This is surely true in some respects, but Leninist conclusions do not necessarily follow. The logic of intercapitalist competition is both equilibrating and disequilibrating, it both follows and seeks to evade or override market forces, and it takes both economic and political forms. As Immanuel Wallerstein has written:

If capitalism is anything, it is a system based on the logic of the endless accumulation of capital . . . capitalists seek profits, maximal profits, in order to accumulate capital. . . . They are thereby not merely motivated but structurally forced to seek monopoly positions, something which pushes them to seek profit-maximization via the principal agency that can make it enduringly possible, the state.\(^{40}\)

At the same time, however, capitalism involves an historically specific privatisation of the relations of production, freeing property relations from fixed territorial bases, and, correspondingly, fixing the general political aspects of domination in the territorial (national) state. This tends to result in a general subordination of the economy to the rule of law and of money functioning as capital. Its political correlate is the impersonal, bureaucratic state also operating according to the rule of law. This separation is a process that is constantly repeated and it is always an object of class struggles, but it provides, in liberal-capitalist states, a general framework for accumulation. Moreover, since the liberal state is dependent for its tax base on the tempo of accumulation in the domestic economy as a whole, it is ‘not merely motivated but structurally forced’ to attend to the general functioning of the economy.

The second claim in the Bukharin-Lenin thesis is that competition between states tends to rivalry that is ruinous for the system as a whole. Clearly, this is a standing possibility. But it is by no means the only one. It is not even the general case. Competition between states – for market shares and for access to internationally mobile capital – is not a zero-sum phenomenon in the way

\(^{40}\) Wallerstein 1988, pp. 100–3.
that competition between capitals is in any given market, because the overall process of competition, capital accumulation and technological innovation is constantly expanding the size of the market. In these circumstances, the only way in which inter-state competition becomes strictly zero-sum is if states evaluate the gains they make relative to those of others, that is, if they measure their success in terms of their share of world output, or if there are no gains to share – that is, if capital accumulation and innovation are stagnant. In all other circumstances, there is some scope for positive-sum interactions, even if some states are able to garner more of the gains than others.

In a world where states were only concerned about their absolute gains, that is, where they evaluated their positions in relation to their own starting point, independently of the position of others, economic competition among states would be a purely positive-sum process. In reality, most interactions are mixes of positive- and zero-sum interactions. Co-ordination among dynamic centres of capitalism is, in general, a process from which all can gain.

In short, states that are able to uphold broadly liberal forms of economic and political regulation, checking the monopoly, rent-seeking activities of capital, are able to compete with one another to mutual advantage, and, because of this, they have strong incentives to co-ordinate with one another in order to govern this competition. That is to say, the liberal form of regulating capitalism is as much a project of international management as it is a set of domestic arrangements. Its international elements involve the subordination of key aspects of the external economic policies of states to individual rights to trade, to ownership and to travel across borders, including the extension of these rights to foreign nationals. Any given state is thus a ‘local guardian of the world republic of commerce’, in which states co-ordinate with one another to ensure mutual gains. This was the logic correctly anticipated by Kautsky.

The final plank of Anderson’s analysis is that such co-ordination requires a superordinate power ‘capable of imposing discipline on the system as a whole, in the common interests of all parties’. In order to be co-ordinated, there must be a co-ordinator. This is simply a restatement of hegemonic stability theory as found in the work of Charles Kindleberger and Robert

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41 It need not be, since states may fail to realise the gains because of adverse terms of trade. But while such immiserising growth is undoubtedly a real possibility for small, basic commodity-producing economies, it does not apply, in general, to the high-income countries in the capitalist core.

42 Hirst 2001, p. 64.
Gilpin. In his account of *The World in Depression*, Kindleberger wrote: ‘For the world economy to be stabilized, there has to be a stabilizer, one stabilizer’. In one form or another, this has become the conventional wisdom in much realist writing about the international economy. Writing in the 1970s, when the military power of the United States was to a substantial degree checked by that of the Soviet Union, and when the long-boom had seen Western Europe and Japan grow more rapidly than North America, the original theorists of hegemonic stability reckoned that hegemony was destined to be a temporary phase. The very stability and openness that resulted from a hegemonic order allowed competitors to pursue catch-up growth and to free-ride on the security services of the hegemon, thereby undermining its original preponderance.

According to Anderson, the end of the Cold War changed all that: ‘if the consensual structure of American dominion now lacked the same external girders, its coercive superiority was, at a single stroke, abruptly and massively enhanced’. With military, if not economic, hegemony unambiguously restored, there was once again a superordinate co-ordinator. In both its realist and Marxist forms, this argument stresses the need for a coercive power to impose co-operation, even when common interests are served. There are, indeed, many forms of co-operation where a superordinate power is required to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes because parties cannot come to binding agreements in the absence of some form of sanctions. The structure of incentives facing the parties in a co-ordination situation is, however, different. This is the second feature of the ‘common interests’ that Anderson’s account appears to overlook. While the existence of a superordinate power may make co-ordination easier, there is no reason why a multipolar system of capitalist power centres cannot co-ordinate on common policies and institutions to realise a range of mutual gains. In the absence of a superordinate power able to impose discipline on the system as a whole, the co-ordinated outcome is a function of the bargaining power of the parties concerned, measured by the degree of their preference for the pre-co-operative status quo. It may be easier to be co-ordinated than to co-operate without a superordinate co-ordinator, but the logic of co-ordination does not presuppose such an agency.

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43 Kindleberger 1973, p. 305.
44 See, for example, Gilpin 1981.
This is not, in any sense, to deny the fact that in the contemporary world ‘domination’, or force, especially military force is concentrated – as never before – in the hegemonic power. But it is to question whether this is either necessary or sufficient for intercapitalist co-ordination among liberal capitalist states (in the sense defined by Gramsci). It is not necessary because if there is scope for co-ordination, that is, if there are common interests in which being co-ordinated is better than not being co-ordinated, then multiple centres can effect the necessary agreements. And it is not sufficient because unless there is scope for co-ordination, in the sense just defined, then domination does not serve the common interest. Rather, domination becomes a zero-sum game in which one state gains at the expense of another. Co-operation after hegemony is perfectly intelligible in a liberal-capitalist order, even in the absence of an overwhelming military power. Contra Lenin, there is in general nothing utopian about Kautsky’s logic.

**Economic multipolarity**

The historic core of the contemporary capitalist world – Western Europe, North America and Japan – today operates on the basis of a system of states that are partly co-ordinated with one another to their mutual advantage, organised in networks of international governance whose principal purpose is to enhance the openness of their territories and peoples to the competitive dynamics of capital. This represents a partial consolidation of a liberal-capitalist order, within and among the leading capitalist states. It is, of course, a highly asymmetric order, in which there are marked disparities of power, despite the more or less universal maintenance of *de jure* sovereignty. There is, in short, a hierarchy of economic and military power among the constituent states of that co-ordinated international order. Undoubtedly, US hegemony has played, and continues to play, a key role in bringing this order into being.

However, the very success of the United States in fashioning this order and, hence, the steady expansion of its membership is undermining the *economic* dominance of the US in the world economy. Thus, the world economy is multi-polar and will become more so in the future, even though the United States has a privileged position because of its technological lead, the scope and depth of its financial markets, the global role of its currency, and the size of its domestic market and the asymmetric integration of the latter with the world market. But the unchallenged position that the US economy enjoyed after the Second World War – technological leadership across all sectors,
dominance of world output and unrivalled competitive position on the world market, the international role of the dollar as the only effective currency and the dominant place of US foreign direct investment – has gone for good.

US distributive economic power persists but it is a wasting asset. First and most obviously, there is the sheer size of the US economy, which remains impressive; secondly, there is the relative insulation of the US economy from events in the rest of the world market as compared with the effects of the US economy on others, though this asymmetry is diminishing; thirdly, there is the distinctive manner in which the internationalisation of US capital has occurred, primarily through foreign investment rather than exports, but other centres of capitalist power are following suit; and fourthly, there is the specific form of that internationalisation, a selective and asymmetric form of liberal capitalism based on the relative separation of the economic and political moments of capitalism, but this presupposes a co-ordinated multi-state international order.

Moreover, it is essential to notice that the third and fourth of these advantages have depended on the construction and reproduction of models of capitalism more or less consistent with US priorities outside the territory of the United States. This was, in part, the legacy of the defeat of rival models of capitalist development in the Second World War, the subsequent role of the US in post-war occupation and reconstruction, and the distributive power associated with US hegemony. But, increasingly, it rests on the fact that access to the world market is an essential precondition for successful accumulation and, especially, technological innovation for all capital, including US capital. As these processes increasingly incorporate larger and larger elements of the world economy, the first and second advantages of US economic power will diminish, and its third and fourth features will increasingly be shared by others. In short, the governance of the world economy is something that has to be accomplished collectively, if it is to be accomplished at all.

Military unipolarity

In marked contrast to economic multipolarity, the states-system is now effectively unipolar in terms of military power. The only sense in which the world is unipolar, the meaning of the epithet ‘hyperpower’, is in the military sphere. How far the United States can sustain the unipolar moment is much debated, but it is certainly with us for the foreseeable future. But the meaning of unipolarity, that is, its implications for political struggles to shape the future
of the international order are far less clear. Unipolarity undoubtedly confers advantages on the United States that it did not possess during the Cold War, at least not after the Soviet Union attained a rough strategic parity in the early 1970s, but the collapse of bipolarity and, perhaps more importantly, the absence of a clear ideological division defining the fault lines of international politics, renders the purpose of military power more opaque and makes the cost-benefit calculus involved in its exercise immeasurably more complicated. Who is to be deterred from doing what? Who is to be compelled to do what? And how can deterrence and compellance reassure allies when there is no longer a single axis of strategic political competition?

Peter Gowan and, somewhat more ambiguously Perry Anderson, argue as if US super-imperialism has been effectively restored by military means, such that the level of co-operation among the core capitalist countries can be read as a product of Leninist means. Such an account emphasises the role of political power in shaping the international capitalist order, specifically the military power of the United States. As the consensual basis of US leadership declines – either because of the end of the Cold War or because of a reduced ability to operate as a pole of attraction – its hegemony can be expected to take an increasingly unilateral and predatory form, thereby prompting reactions in other power centres.

On the other hand, if intercapitalist relations are, for the most part, closer to those anticipated by Kautsky than Lenin, and if a co-ordinated liberal order provides benefits to all, even if the United States has greater bargaining power within that order than any other single state, then the role of US military power is much more ambiguous. The thesis I want to explore is that, while US military power can always be used unilaterally, it will only serve as a means of hegemony when it is used to protect and advance the common interests of the co-ordinated liberal order.

IV. US power and the liberal-capitalist international order

The boundaries of the liberal-capitalist world are essentially political, economic, and hard to define with any precision but its historic, geographical core has been the transatlantic alliance forged after the Second World War. Among the European states of this order – that is, roughly speaking the newly expanded membership of the European Union – and those of North America, the generation of collective power plays an important role. (Japan is, of course,
strongly integrated into the Atlantic order by virtue of its economic links with the West and its security arrangements with the United States. Thus, Japan is politically, if not geographically, part of this order, but it also has one foot in a rather different configuration of power among the leading Asian states.) In this region, the power of the United States in the international system and that of Americanism without can be thought of in largely positive-sum terms. Most of the power generated in this arena depends upon co-operation, mutually advancing the interests of all, even if there is hard bargaining to determine the distribution of the gains from that co-operation. Overall, the collective production of power through co-ordinating the two Americas overrides distributive conflicts. Kautsky rather than Lenin is the better guide to intercapitalist relations in this region.

Perhaps the central question facing US policy towards this region is how, if at all, to develop further the forms and levels of co-operation achieved thus far. At the core of this is the question of American attitude towards the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Although the reproduction of Americanism in Europe provided an economic basis for transatlantic co-operation, there can be little doubt that the Cold War rivalry between the superpowers, and the competition for global influence between capitalism and Communism, also served to cement political and military relations across the Atlantic. It was NATO’s guarantee of the post-war division of Europe, defining the westward limit of Soviet power and settling decisively the German problem, which stabilised the states-system in Western Europe. The American military presence in Western Europe, as well as the extension of the US nuclear guarantee to its NATO allies – that is, extended deterrence – may have been a form of informal empire, or hegemony, but it was also an ‘empire by invitation’, and it provided the framework within which the EU could develop as a ‘civilian’ power. European integration has, in effect, been the enemy of European military power on a wider international stage.  

Under NATO’s security umbrella, extensive and deep forms of economic and political co-operation prospered. Post-war recovery saw the economies of Western Europe rapidly catching-up with the United States, at least until

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46 See Lundestad 1986 for the idea of an ‘empire by invitation’; Milward 1992 for the idea of the EU as a ‘civilian’ power; and Lundestad 1998 for the idea that the EU was, from an American point of view, an empire by integration.
the 1970s, and the Atlantic powers appeared to consider their (collective) position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union as far more important than the relative position of each within the alliance. To be sure, at no stage was American military preponderance within NATO ever in doubt. Indeed, the continuing imbalance in military power within NATO, even as the two sides of the Atlantic became more equal economically, was and remains a major source of tension. The result has been a confused and confusing debate about ‘burden sharing’ that has become more serious as NATO struggled to define a new role for itself after the Cold War.

**Breaking with NATO?**

With the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany, many concluded that NATO’s original purpose had largely evaporated. NATO began a process of enlargement to include states that had formerly fallen under Soviet control in Eastern Europe, while the EU also began accession talks with many of the same countries. At the same time, the EU began to develop a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). On the European side, membership of NATO and the EU increasingly overlapped. This posed the question of the division of labour between NATO and the CFSP of the EU, in turn raising the question of the definition and purpose of NATO.

NATO was established in order to commit American military power to preventing the re-emergence of a hegemonic power in Europe. It was a military alliance with a clear rationale. Enlargement has run the danger of turning it into a strategically neutral organisation for collective defence, with no defined mission. Increasingly, the United States bypasses NATO for its ‘out of area’ operations, preferring *ad hoc* arrangements with those of its members (as well as other non-NATO states such as Australia) that join a ‘coalition of the willing’. Simultaneously, some advocates of the EU’s CFSP have wanted to develop procedures by which the European members of NATO might act independently of the United States. And underlying all this uncertainty has been the overwhelming military fact that the already marked imbalance between European and American military capabilities widened after the end of the Cold War. Not surprisingly, many in Washington are beginning to ask whether the United States needs NATO.

Considered in these terms, there are several possible futures. First and most likely, the CFSP will amount to little and fail to develop a serious military
capability that can act independently of the United States, in which case the European members of NATO will have little option but to seek ultimate military security through the alliance. Second, the EU might become serious about military matters such that the expansions of the EU and of NATO go hand-in-hand. The obvious way of accommodating this change would be for the EU to declare an interest in safeguarding its territorial integrity and for NATO to affirm that this is one of its vital interests. NATO would then become a more equal partnership between the United States, on the one side, and the EU, on the other. While this has been the declared policy of successive US administrations, Washington’s enthusiasm for this might diminish as it became a reality. Third, the EU (or some of its members) might develop a serious military capability outside of NATO, prompting the United States to disengage militarily from Europe, both in the sense of removing the forward deployment of personnel and materiel and, by implication if not declared policy, ending the nuclear guarantee provided by extended deterrence. While the Republican Right might welcome this in favour of alliances with perimeter states such as Poland and Spain as well as new links out of area such as India, it is anathema to most of the foreign policy élite in the United States who view the transatlantic alliance as the core of American global security.

French policy has long favoured a policy pointing towards the second option noted above. The UK has always favoured the first. Prior to reunification, (West) Germany defined its foreign policy primarily in the context of limited rearmament under NATO auspices, and secondarily, through Franco-German co-operation in the EU. Whenever it had to choose between its NATO and EU commitments, the former came first. Now that reunification has been achieved, whether Germany will continue to give priority to its transatlantic ties over its leadership ambitions in Europe is one of the most important questions facing European geopolitics. (Whether Germany’s decision to side with France (and Russia) over Iraq is a portent of things to come remains to be seen.) Many of the new members of NATO and the EU, from former Eastern Europe, regard the transatlantic commitment as especially important, as a safeguard against potential future Russian, and even German, domination.

A final complication is that the importance attached to global questions of military security differs markedly on the two sides of the Atlantic. This is, as Robert Kagan has recently pointed out, partly a consequence of the massive disparity in military power. It is also a consequence of the fact that the EU is more a regional than a global power, whereas the converse is the case for
the United States. The EU has developed as a civilian power. Indeed, European integration has, thus far, gone hand-in-hand with a decline in Europe’s relative military power, while that of the United States has increased. This leaves the EU no option, for the present, but to conduct its foreign policy through diplomacy and economic statecraft. Simply put, it has no serious military options. Yet, it aspires to a global role in a world that is far from dispensing with military power. ‘Today’s transatlantic problem’, writes Kagan:

is a [military] power problem. America’s power, and its willingness to exercise that power – unilaterally if necessary – represents a threat to Europe’s new sense of mission. . . . American [military] power made it possible for Europeans to believe that power was no longer important.47

This is an oversimplification, since much of the transatlantic debate – as in the dispute over how to deal with Iraq – turns on different assessments of the long-term costs and benefits of using military power, but it does capture an important reason why politicians across the Atlantic often appear to talk past one another. (It also overlooks the fierce divisions within both Europe and America, as evidenced by the run-up to the war in Iraq in 2003.) Nevertheless, the only distributive power possessed by the EU is economic. The United States, by contrast, has military power as well. Consequently, the assessment of how far to pursue goals collectively is bound to differ from one side of the Atlantic to the other.

V. Expanding the capitalist world: the US-Russia-China triangle

In contrast to the partial transcendence of interimperialist rivalries and balance of power considerations within the Atlantic order, the other potential powers – Russia and Japan; China, India and Pakistan – consider one another, or at least potential coalitions of others, as possible future threats to their security. As noted above, Japan is also integrated into the Atlantic order. But, in other respects, these states treat one another as military-strategic rivals, even as they engage in forms of economic co-operation. Notwithstanding growing economic integration between and among these (and other) countries, each is either tempted, or threatened, by competition for regional dominance; all are currently increasingly their military capabilities against one another

as well as their smaller neighbours; and there are no regional or continental forms of co-operation that are durable enough to encompass and contain these differences. Questions of distributive power assume a much greater salience in this region and between its powers and the United States than in the transatlantic arena.

This is a complex area for US policy, since its Cold-War alignments, directed at containment towards the Soviet Union, no longer make sense; important legacies of the Cold War – most notably the division of Korea and the problem of the North – remain to be dealt with; and the underlying balance of power in the region is being rapidly reshaped by the knock-on effects of the collapse of Soviet power and the dynamics of Asian and, most recently, especially Chinese capitalist development. The operative principle for maintaining international order in this region is likely to remain the strategic management of the balance of power. What remains to be seen is whether (Leninist) interimperialist rivalries will develop in this region or whether it can be incorporated into the ultra-imperialist world. I will explore this by considering the strategic triangle between the United States, China and Russia.

**China and Russia**

In the era of the Cold War, China’s external strategy focused on maintaining its political and territorial integrity in the bipolar, superpower system. Initially, China pursued an alliance with the Soviet Union against the United States; this was followed in the 1960s by an abortive attempt to unite revolutionary forces in the Third World against both superpowers; and finally, once China concluded that the Soviet Union was less interested in the cause of international Communism than it was in achieving a traditional great-power status, it made a limited rapprochement with the United States, directed against the Soviet Union.

The collapse of Soviet power, together with the rapid and increasingly market-oriented industrialisation of the Chinese economy, brought about a new orientation in China’s foreign policy, based on an attempt, first, to maintain the international preconditions for its internal development, and second, to reduce the ability of the United States (or others) to frustrate its international ambitions. (The domestic legitimacy of the Chinese government now rests squarely on national unity and economic performance – Communist ideology no longer plays a significant role.) Accordingly, China has embraced multilateralism as a means of countering US primacy, seeking to dissuade
Japan and Australia from developing strengthened bilateral ties with the United States, ties which would be, in effect, directed against China. This is, however, a conditional and partial embrace of multilateralism since ‘Beijing still views national military power as the primary guarantee of “comprehensive security”’. China’s pursuit of multilateralism is intended to forestall others balancing against it, with or without the United States.

As the successor state to the Soviet Union, Russia has had to make the most dramatic adjustment to the post-Cold-War world. Russian foreign policy is still in a state of considerable flux and one can only hazard an interpretation of its long-run national strategic priorities. These are, I tentatively suggest, as follows: first, to manage the military, especially nuclear, balance with the United States in a way that ensures the continuing viability of Russia’s deterrent forces; second, to stabilise its ‘near abroad’ by making independence among the former republics of the Soviet Union so painful that returning to the Russian embrace becomes the least costly option; third, to seek external assistance for its economic reconstruction, especially foreign investment in key sectors such as oil and membership of the WTO; and fourth, to co-operate with the other permanent members of the Security Council – the United States, China, France and the UK – in selectively containing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and in the campaign against ‘international terrorism’. For precisely similar reasons to China, Russia has an interest in working multilaterally on many issues.

In short, both China and Russia, perhaps like France and Germany in Europe, envisage a long and complicated struggle between American efforts to preserve its unipolar moment and their desire to hasten the transition to a multipolar world, in which the major powers fashion some kind of agreed regional division of labour among themselves, while working in concert on truly global issues. However, until such a situation evolves, neither has anything to gain from directly antagonising the United States. Nor are they likely to forge an alliance hostile to US interests. China and Russia share a long border that constitutes a zone of potential instability and there is scant prospect that either will trust the other to guarantee its security. Moreover, it is far from clear how they could gain from establishing closer links with one another than they have with Washington. On the other hand, aggressive, unilateral action by the United States – especially in the Middle East and

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Central Asia – is likely to enforce a greater degree of (reactive) co-operation between China and Russia.

It is true that both can make life difficult for the United States in several respects: both have a veto on the Security Council; both can export nuclear and missile technology, effectively undermining the nuclear non-proliferation régime; both can limit their support for the ‘war on terrorism’ to areas of direct mutual concern; and both can be unco-operative on the settlement of various regional issues – for example, Iraq and North Korea. However, aside from frustrating unilateral American efforts, they have no interests in staging a direct confrontation with the United States.

What is the logical course of action for the United States faced with this strategic environment? As yet, forms of capitalism organised along broadly liberal lines, let alone liberal-democratic norms of politics, have not sunk deep roots in China and Russia – nor is there much indication that they will in the foreseeable future. Correspondingly, the level and depth of economic co-operation and co-ordination among the United States, China and Russia do not match those found in the transatlantic arena. However, China has now joined the World Trade Organisation and Russia has expressed an ambition to do likewise. Assuming that China and Russia integrate smoothly into the existing institutional framework of the capitalist world, hegemony cannot rest on the kinds of economic preponderance that the United States enjoyed in respect of its European and Japanese allies on the eve of the Second World War. US distributive economic power can only continue to decline in this scenario. More likely, in fact, their integration will dampen the liberal character of that order.

As with Western Europe and Japan after the Second World War, US policy must aim at the maximum reproduction of the economic aspects of Americanism outside the United States, and at keeping the US economy at the leading edge of productivity and technological development (even as its share of world income declines). Its economic power in relation to these other centres of capital accumulation and innovation will increasingly come from the co-ordination of the US economy with these economic competitors. Economically speaking, the US has no option but to follow the logic of Kautsky rather than Lenin. Interimperialist rivalry is becoming a negative-sum game, a default option of last resort in the economics of the capitalist world.

Militarily speaking, however, the unipolar moment offers a temptation to attempt to freeze the current position of US superiority for the foreseeable
future, to maintain its distributive military edge over all other powers. This is what the Revolution in Military Affairs and the National Missile Defense programme are all about. At present, US military strategy aims to prevent the emergence of any regional power capable of matching its military might. One element of that strategy is continued investment in technological innovation in military affairs as well as the maintenance of forces on land, at sea, and in the air and space that are so far in advance of those of other powers that they see little point in attempting to compete with the United States. As of now, neither Russia nor China, let alone Europe, is seeking to compete with the United States in any of these domains and none is currently capable of doing so. The most they can do is to maintain a nuclear deterrent against direct attack. This is likely to be the case for a generation or more.

The other element of military preponderance is open access, by means of markets and corporations, armoured by forward-basing and military cooperation agreements, to key strategic resources that underpin economic and military power. China (and India) have a growing dependence on Middle East oil, and the largest expansion of oil consumption over the next several decades will be in Asia. On current trends, an increasing proportion of world oil exports will be accounted for by the Persian Gulf region, over one-half and perhaps as much as two-thirds by 2020. Maintaining influence in the Middle East, and countering the influence of Russia, China and Iran in Central Asia are thus becoming increasingly important elements in US thinking. Of course, this is, in effect, an extension of the Carter Doctrine of 1980, attuned to new circumstances.49

The danger, from a US point of view, which is well recognised in Washington, is that this dominance will provoke two kinds of reaction: first, new attempts to acquire weapons of mass destruction as an insurance against US power (the lesson of the Kosovo War, according to the Indian government, was ‘don’t oppose the United States without nuclear weapons’), as well as increasing incentives to trade the necessary materials on the black market; and second, popular antagonism to the US as a result of its support for local, authoritarian régimes that facilitate access to resources and bases and hence a fertile soil for terrorist networks. I return to some of the implications of this below, but for now I simply note that one critical unresolved question for both Russia

49 On the new American strategy for the Middle East and its role in US power and its ability to shape the international order, see Bromley 2003 and 2004.
and China concerns the question of nuclear proliferation. Whereas the United States has a clear interest in attempting to prolong its military dominance by preventing the emergence of new, regional nuclear powers, the logic for China and Russia is less clear. They cannot aspire to a unipolar moment of their own; rather, the best they can achieve is regional dominance and international recognition of great-power status in a multipolar world. Accordingly, the prospect of a series of secondary, nuclear powers poses a quite different kind of challenge to their future power than it does to the United States. And without their co-operation, it is unlikely that the United States will be able to prevent further proliferation.

Strategic ‘partners’ or ‘competitors’

The central question for the United States is, therefore, how to combine its economic and military ambitions. One way in which the choices have been debated is in terms of whether to treat Russia and China as ‘strategic partners’ in the project of managing a universal capitalist order, that is, to enlist them as partners in the production of collective power, or to deal with them as ‘strategic competitors’ that threaten that order, as potential adversaries in clashes of distributive power. Until now, and for a while yet, the obvious answer is to do both. The important point to understand, however, is that at some point this will involve a strategic choice, in a situation in which the decisions of the United States, China and Russia are interdependent.

Treating China only as a strategic competitor would be tantamount to a new policy of containment. This makes little sense. On the one hand, it is not obvious that the United States possesses the distributive power to stall Chinese industrialisation to any significant degree. And on the other hand, there is no evidence that Western Europe, Japan and Russia could be brought into a collective alliance directed to such an end. If anything, US hostility to China’s emerging great-power status would likely drive China and Russia closer together, as its attempted dominance would look increasingly threatening to both. In short, the United States really has no option but to accommodate the rise of China’s power.

In playing this game, however, the United States does have some considerable support, since neither Russia nor Japan can regard an unchecked rise of Chinese power in the region with equanimity. The United States already maintains a close defence and security arrangement with Japan. And the prospects for common ground with Russia are substantial on two important
issues: Russian membership of the WTO and its more general economic trajectory; and prosecuting the ‘war against terrorism’, especially as it pertains to Central Asia. However, there are also factors limiting closer US-Russian relations. On the Russian side, a permanent US presence in Central Asia would amount to a significant loss of influence. For the United States, at least, Russian membership of NATO would undermine its sole remaining strategic purpose, as an insurance against any single power bidding for hegemony in Europe. As long as Russia maintains an interest in dominating its ‘near abroad’, including the resource-rich and strategically crucial regions of Central Asia, the United States is unlikely to welcome Russia fully into a collective security arrangement.

Moreover, Russian membership of NATO would have destabilising consequences elsewhere. It would either dilute the military character of the alliance to such an extent that it would become, in effect, a mini-Security Council, or if it remained a coherent alliance, what would it be directed against? It would become a mini-Security Council minus China. As Henry Kissinger has pointed out, this would amount to an ‘anti-Asian – especially anti-Chinese – alliance of the Western industrial democracies’. Apart, perhaps, from Russia, who could gain from this?

The obvious role for the United States, therefore, is as the external balancer to the rivalries and balance of power among these states. It is possible that the current re-adjustment of the balance of power in Asia, as well as the armament of many major states in the region against one another, can be peacefully managed by the United States, using its forward military deployments around the edges of the region as a sign of its intentions and as a means of deterring local attempts to disrupt the regional balance. For this strategy to be successful, however, the United States will need the co-operation of the major states in the region if faced with a serious attempt to disrupt the status quo. This policy might founder if several states within the region began to balance against the United States, but this looks very unlikely any time soon. However, this strategy presupposes the continued ability of the United States to forward-base its armed forces – something that is increasingly being questioned in, for example, South Korea and Japan.

In the longer term, both economic integration within the region, and changing assessments of the costs and benefits of seeking security through a finely

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50 Kissinger 2002, p. 79.
balanced and nuclear-armed balance of power, might bring about greater political co-operation, mutual security guarantees and a diminishing concern with the military-strategic balance of power. If stably managed, this might allow China and Russia to join Japan alongside the West as members of a global concert of powers – Russia is already a member of the G8 – for the international economy. (Other important regional powers, Indian in the sub-continent, Indonesia in southeast Asia, Brazil in Latin America, etc. might also eventually join the club.) This is the distant future envisaged by the liberal theorists of international order – the Pacific Union anticipated by Kant.

Alternatively, the delicate balancing act might break down. The removal of US forces currently guaranteeing the security of the South against the North on the Korean peninsula, for example, would almost certainly raise serious questions about the future of US bases in Japan. More generally, a widespread withdrawal of the forward deployment of US forces from the Pacific Rim, while not threatening the homeland security of the United States, would dramatically change the strategic and political calculus among the major Asian powers. The United States would no longer be able to play the role of an external balancer in these circumstances, for even if the global reach of US military power enables it conduct operations anywhere in the world from the territory and airspace of the United States and its key allies (as well as international waters), it is only a military presence on the ground that can effectively signal a clear political commitment to a determined adversary. This kind of strategic withdrawal by the United States would open up the prospect of major geopolitical realignments as the regional powers sought to balance against one another – Russia and India balancing against China, Pakistan and Iran perhaps? This would be uncharted territory. Thus, a review of US basing strategy, especially by the Central Command (expanded in 1999 to cover Central Asia as well as the Middle East), is well underway.

For the present, however, the United States is a global power operating to sustain the regional balance and this suits the regional powers well, since all fear each other more than they do the United States. The strategic imperative for the United States is to continue to manage this regional balance and forestall the emergence of either a threatening regional hegemon or an alliance of regional powers seeking to exclude the United States from the regional balance. In short, the military and increasingly nuclear balance of power remains a fundamental basis of international order in Asia.
VI. Policing the periphery

The ‘war on terrorism’, declared by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the attacks on America of 11 September 2001, is shorthand for a complex set of problems that defy easy summary. Many analysts took issue with the use of the word ‘war’, because the perpetrators of the acts were not states but part of a transnational network, a cellular structure that crossed a number of territories on a clandestine basis, and because there was no obvious way in which the war aims could be specified and measured. Like many other critics, the military historian, Michael Howard, argued that the attacks should be treated as a criminal matter and that the appropriate response was one of international policing and judicial process. Other commentators saw the actions of al-Qua’ida as an example of an ‘asymmetrical conflict’, that is, a conflict whose nature is determined by the marked lack of symmetry in the power of the contending forces. President Bush’s response seemed determined, if anything, to increase this asymmetry, thereby prompting the fear that it would only serve to generate yet more conflict in the future. What could be gained, these various critics asked, by a military campaign by the most powerful state in the world against one of the very weakest? This was not so much the clash of civilisations predicted by Samuel Huntington as a clash of barbarisms.51

The immediate background to the rise of al-Qua’ida was the civil war in Afghanistan. The rise to power of the pro-Soviet People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978 provoked a civil war as significant elements of the Muslim society resisted its secularising and socialist measures. The decision of the United States to arm the mujahidin was taken, according to President Carter’s National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in the summer of 1979 in order to ‘induce a Soviet military intervention’. Brzezinski later said that: ‘The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border [24 December 1979], I wrote to President Carter, saying: “We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War”’.52 Moreover, when the USSR finally withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988, on condition that the West and Pakistan stop supporting the mujahidin, the Reagan Administration

51 Achcar 2002.
illegally continued such support. After years more civil war, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia created and financed the Taliban and supported their conquest of power between 1994–6.

Al-Qaeda was created during this Western, Saudi and Pakistani backed operation to finance and organize the mujahidin’s resistance to Communism in Afghanistan and to recruit (mainly Arab) Muslims from abroad to fight in that cause. Once the Taliban came to power in Kabul (1996), they formed a close alliance with Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda organisation – indeed, in some respects, al-Qaeda was the military arm of the Taliban. However, while the Saudis had been willing to provide support for the fight against the PDPA, they were not prepared to accede to demands for a strict Islamism of the Saudi state and, in particular, the demand that the ‘infidel’ and ‘crusader’ armies – that is, the United States – withdraw from the Arabian peninsula. This would have amounted to a transfer of control of the Saudi state from the monarchy to Islamist forces. And so, after helping to evict the Soviets from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda turned their attention to their erstwhile Western backers who were also engaged in the military support of the monarchical regime in Saudi Arabia. The result was explosive, as Fred Halliday explains:

Three elements therefore came together: a reassertion of the most traditional strands in Islamic thinking, a brutalization and militarization of the Islamic groups themselves, and a free-floating transnational army of fighters drawing support from Pakistan, the Arab world, south-east Asia and Chechnya with its base in Afghanistan. In the context of the greater west Asian crisis, and the revolt against the states of the region, as well as their western backers, there now emerged an organized and militant challenge.

Asymmetric conflict

The term ‘asymmetric conflict’ originally came to prominence during the Vietnam War to refer to the way in which the militarily weaker party seeks to take the conflict to public opinion in the enemy’s homeland, as an attempt to undermine its will to prosecute the war. It was an adjunct to the theory of guerrilla war, which also relied on an asymmetry: between forces able to move and mix among the rural population and urban-based combatants (local

54 Halliday 2002, p. 45.
and foreign). As such, it is one very plausible reason why the United States, the dominant military party to that conflict, lost. The most likely rationale of the 11 September attacks is that they too were an attempt to undermine the adversary’s will, only this time the will of the United States to support the monarchy in Saudi Arabia and, perhaps, Israel in its dispute with the Palestinians. Whereas the Vietnamese appealed to international and American public opinion in the name of a universally acknowledged value – that of a national right to self-determination – al-Qua’ida’s strategy was essentially negative, to instil fear, and its positive appeal extended to only a minority of the world’s Muslims. For the Vietnamese, an appeal to norms of justice embodied in international public reason was a weapon of the weak; for al-Qua’ida, terrorism was the weapon.

By its very nature, asymmetric conflict is extremely hard to deter. In particular, violent asymmetric conflict carried out by clandestine adversaries is almost impossible to deter. The operation of the balance of power and the logic of deterrence presuppose conflicts of interest as well as a common recognition of certain shared objectives – namely, survival. The logic of deterrence is, says Thomas Schelling, ‘as inapplicable to a situation of pure and complete antagonism of interest as it is to the case of pure and complete common interest’.55 Faced with an adversary that has an absolute hostility, that is prepared to risk all, deterrence is largely irrelevant. As Gilbert Achcar has argued, in this situation, ‘the causes of “absolute hostility” must be reduced or eliminated, in such a way that a “common interest” emerges as a possibility’.56

One way of reducing the hostility of al-Qua’ida would have been to address the issues that provoked its hostility in the first place, broadly US foreign policy in the Middle East and, in particular, its military support to the régime in Saudi Arabia. Another response was to try to eliminate al-Qua’ida. If the asymmetry of US power was producing absolute antagonists that could not be deterred, then why not use that power to destroy the adversary, even before it attacked, and engineer a new situation capable of producing some minimal common interests? This is the doctrine of pre-emption, which said that, rather than wait for a recognised casus belli (as in the case of Afghanistan), the United States would act to remove potential threats before they materialised. In fact, some in Washington came to believe that both the destruction of the

55 Schelling 1960, p. 11.
enemy and addressing the issues that provoked the hostility could be achieved by the same means.

Since al-Qua’ida was, in effect, the military arm of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, the latter was directly implicated in the attacks of 11 September. The precondition for treating the attacks as a criminal matter – that the state from which the attackers operated was prepared to uphold international law – arguably did not obtain. In any case, this was no part of Washington’s agenda and, in truth, there was precious little international support for such a strategy. Nor were the war aims of the United States unlimited. They may not have been wholly clear, but destroying al-Qua’ida’s ability to operate inside a state that itself repudiated all international responsibilities was not especially opaque. And, although the war against al-Qua’ida was not fully successful, there is little doubt that its capacity for organised activity was dramatically curtailed by its eviction from Afghanistan; the Taliban government that had existed in symbiosis with al-Qua’ida and allowed its territory to be a haven for transnational terrorism was routed; a new administration was established in Kabul that had some chance of ending the long-running Afghan civil war; and the United States was able to establish a (temporary?) military presence in resource-rich Central Asia. There are no guarantees that any of this will prove durable, but, from the point of view of the United States, it is hard to see that it is a worse situation than that which existed prior to 11 September 2001. In that sense, those who questioned whether it was a war that could be won were on shaky ground: it was a war and a major battle was won.

Recasting influence in Central Asia

Perhaps because they feared antagonising the United States after the events of 11 September, or perhaps because they wanted a free hand with their own problems – in Chechnya and with Uighur separatists – Russia and China extended considerable co-operation to the US military operation in Afghanistan. Although pushed by the Central Asian states, especially by Uzbekistan, Russia acceded to a temporary US military presence in the region, allowed the use of its airspace, shared intelligence, and supported the Northern Alliance, while China was active in persuading its ally Pakistan to work with the Americans. As a report written for the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College has pointed out, since recognising the Central Asian states in 1991:
Expanding U.S. military engagement with Central Asian states has been viewed as a key mechanism to promote their integration into Western political-military institutions, encourage civilian control over militaries, and institutionalize co-operative relations with the United States military, while dissuading other regional powers – especially Russia, China, and Iran – from seeking to dominate the region.\footnote{Wishnick 2002, p. 10.}

After 11 September 2001, however, the balance tilted dramatically in Washington’s favour, as China saw Russia and Pakistan and India all develop closer ties with Washington, and Russia took a conciliatory line (including on the December 2002 decision of the United States to withdraw from the ABM Treaty) to an increased US role in return, it would appear, for little beyond a silence over events in Chechnya. In this respect, Russian (and Chinese) opposition to the subsequent war against Iraq marked a limit to how far such acquiescence would go.

**The doctrine of pre-emption**

In fact, what caused most concern among the United States’s rivals (and many of its allies), in relation to the ‘war on terrorism’, was not the war in Afghanistan, despite the by-passing of NATO, but the subsequent mobilisation against Iraq and the new doctrine at work in US foreign policy, that of pre-emption. Moreover, the doctrine appeared to receive a more or less open-ended remit as it was to apply not just to terrorist networks and those who harboured them but also to ‘rogue’ states, that is, states that the United States deemed unfit to possess weapons of mass destruction. In his State of the Union address in January 2002, President Bush pulled these originally distinct ideas – that of ‘international terrorism’ and ‘rogue states’ – together and spoke of an ‘axis of evil’, a symbiotic alliance of transnational networks of terror and states with access to, or aspirations for, weapons of mass destruction.

Many argued that the United States was, in intention and effect, embarking on exactly what the historian Charles Beard had cautioned against when he spoke of a ‘perpetual war for perpetual peace’, a charge resurrected by Gore Vidal.\footnote{Vidal 2002.} Ellen Meiksins Wood offered a Marxist (or, better, Hobbesian) gloss on this, suggesting that the purpose of such a response was to declare war on all states that dared to challenge the US-dominated international order, a
declaration of ‘infinite war’, in which US imperialism would discipline other states in the system: ‘It is this endless possibility of war that imperial capital needs in order to sustain its hegemony over the global system of multiple states’. The idea here seems to be that, as the economic components of US superimperialism, or US hegemony, decline, so the balance of rule shifts in a more coercive direction.

At the centre of this analysis of American policy is the claim that the war against Iraq represented a shift from containment and deterrence to a doctrine of pre-emption, and that pre-emption was aimed at producing a general disciplinary effect over rival powers tempted to challenge the imperial order. Along with the war in Afghanistan, this seemed to open an entirely new chapter in post-war international relations. Such accusations have been a standard criticism of the interventionist strand of liberal imperialism in US foreign policy. The realist thinker Kenneth Waltz, for example, argued that interventionist liberals do not reject the balance of power, ‘they think it can be superseded’, and cautioned that this policy must ‘if implemented, lead to unlimited war for unlimited ends’. ‘The state that would act on the interventionist theory’, Waltz pointed out, ‘must set itself up as both judge and executor in the affairs of nations’.

Now, it is certainly true that, after 11 September 2001, the question for the United States was whether continued deterrence of Iraq made better sense than pre-emption. (However, ‘régime change’ in Iraq had been Washington’s policy since 1998.) But it is perhaps not surprising that the United States believed that what was done in Afghanistan could also be done in Iraq, for all the differences between the two cases. Strategically, the only real difference was that the action in Afghanistan could be presented as a defensive response, whereas that in Iraq was clearly pre-emptive. Important though this difference may be, the underlying rationale was, I believe, broadly similar: namely, state- or nation-building.

Between the end of the Gulf War of 1991 and 11 September 2001, US policy towards Iraq had been one of containment and deterrence. This was based on two principles: UN-monitored disarmament and economic sanctions. By

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59 Wood 2002, p. 25. Given that Wood had earlier argued that capitalist imperialism primarily operates by economic means, it is not clear to me why she thinks that ‘endless’ war is now required.
60 Waltz 1959, pp. 110 and 113.
61 Waltz 1959, p. 113.
the late 1990s, these had stalled and demonstrably failed to achieve their objectives. (The Russians and Serbs, for example, had been active in rebuilding Iraq’s air defences; the French and Russian governments were more concerned with commercial links to Baghdad than completing the disarmament process; and there was growing international criticism of the disastrous effects of sanctions, as implemented by Saddam Hussein, on the civilian population of Iraq.) In order to see why pre-emption was in some ways an attractive alternative, it is necessary to situate Iraq in relation to the broader role of the United States in the Middle East.

Ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, US policy in the Middle East had been based on a series of contradictory commitments that increasingly undermined its ability to play a directive role. Its hegemony has increasingly relied on its military power. Yet, the lesson of the Iranian Revolution was that this was an unsustainable strategy in the long-run. Prior to the second US-led war against Iraq (March/April 2003), its policy in the Middle East comprised hostile relations with Iran, a failed attempt to disarm Iraq (because of a collapse of support from Russia and France on the Security Council) and support for Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states that was generating considerable opposition among many Arab Muslims (remember that most of the 11 September hijackers came from Saudi Arabia), to say nothing of its support for the hard-line policies of Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians. There was, in short, precious little basis on which the United States could construct even a minimal set of common interests with the region.

A new start in Iraq, however, might provide the beginnings of a strategy for dealing with what Halliday has called the ‘west Asian crisis’, a series of crises affecting the region that encompasses the Arab states of the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The new logic of US policy thus became pre-emption, in order to establish common interests, by means of ‘nation-building’. The United States was extremely reluctant to admit this, and made strenuous efforts to garner multilateral support for it, but its overwhelming military power gave it the confidence to regard pre-emption as favourable to a messy combination of containment and deterrence. Reconstituting states that are able to operate successfully within, rather than against, the prevailing capitalist order of co-ordinated sovereignty was the prize. If Saddam could be removed from Iraq, US troops could be withdrawn from Saudi Arabia, thereby putting pressure on, but also giving space for, the monarchy to address its domestic opposition; Syria and Iran could be pressured into withdrawing
support from radical Palestinian factions that undermined the ability of the ‘moderate’ leadership to commit meaningfully to peaceful negotiations with Israel; and a new round of the Palestinian-Israeli ‘peace process’ could begin.

The alternative, as viewed from Washington, was: a continuation of hit-and-run guerrilla tactics against terrorist cells as and when they could be found; economically ruinous and otherwise ineffective sanctions, and a policy of dual containment – of Iraq and Iran – that had already lost the determined support of key Security Council members and, in the case of Iran, lost the support of the European Union and even the United States’s closest imperial ally, the United Kingdom; continued support by Syria and Iran for radical Palestinian elements; and a general disaffection across the Arab, and increasingly the Islamic, world. In this context, Iraq presented a golden opportunity. What made this particular region of crisis a candidate for this approach was, of course, its strategic and resource significance: the oil and gas resources of the Middle East and Central Asia are a vital economic interest for the dominant capitalist powers (and increasingly for China and India too). And what made the new approach something more than a reckless gamble was the overwhelming military preponderance of the United States after the end of the Cold War.

In the west-Asian region of crisis, ‘Americanism’ is established hardly at all – there is no basis for the common interest required for co-ordination. It is an aspiration among some élites, a yearning among many impoverished and powerless, but not a substantial reality. Even worse, from an American point of view, many of the states in the region were in danger of becoming too unstable to be deterred from attempting to disrupt the regional and, by extension, international order. Both co-ordination, based on mutually beneficial economic interactions, and the predictable management of the balance of power, based on deterrence, presuppose the existence of states with sufficient domestic legitimacy and stability to negotiate and uphold the requisite compromises.

In the absence of such states, the United States had no operating principles to guide its interventions, save the obvious attempt to control or protect strategically important sources of raw materials and, by extension, the régimes that facilitated access to them. This was an expensive and risky policy of crisis management based on régimes that were liable, at best, to generate more opposition to US interests, and at worst, to be overthrown by even less palatable forces. It was not a realistic basis for a durable international order
that guaranteed US economic interests. Pre-emption, followed by nation-building, appeared to offer the possibility of constructing the requisite stability and common interests.

That, at least, was the theory. What this might mean in practice and how it can be implemented is not at all clear. Many, especially in Europe but also in America, doubted that it could be implemented at all. It is, of course, an explicitly imperial policy, aiming to engineer from the outside a new form of rule – however much it seeks to involve the directly affected populations. But it is imperialism more in the manner of Marx and Luxemburg than Bukharin and Lenin. It is an attempt to impose a new dispensation of power, such that the resulting states and economies can be successfully co-ordinated with the rest of the capitalist world, rather than a prize to be won by the United States at the expense of rival core imperialisms. It is imperialism but it is not, primarily, interimperialist rivalry. At least since the post-war occupations of Germany and Japan, no US administration has given any thought to how it might be done. And notwithstanding its experience in Cambodia and the Balkans, it is something for which the United Nations – which above all has been a machine for effecting decolonisation – has precious little authority, experience or expertise.

It is, in short, a policy in search of an advocate and an agency. Thus far, its bearers have been the military forces of the United States and the United Kingdom. Its aftermath in Afghanistan involved both the United Nations and other members of NATO, and (at the time of this writing – early May 2003) this looks likely to be the case in Iraq as well. Even if Afghanistan and Iraq remain effectively a one-off enterprise (some kind of military action against Syria and Iran cannot be discounted), a composite response made possible by the events of 11 September 2001 and the corresponding (yet probably temporary) shifts of public opinion in the United States itself, it represents a significant departure from the norms of international order that stabilised after the post-war settlement was completed. However, we should not over-emphasise its innovative character. The United States’s definition of self-defence to include, in certain circumstances, pre-emptive attacks, may have shocked the pieties of the UN, but if this is an innovation at all, it is one in the politics of military strategy consonant with a strand of US thinking that has existed since considerations of pre-emptive nuclear strikes against the Soviet Union in the early 1950s and the string of interventions in the South throughout the Cold War.
VII. US power and world capitalism

The modern international system has witnessed two routes to international order. In the first, the dominant military and economic powers use their oligopoly of distributive power to compete and balance against one another and to manage the rest of the system, either on the basis of conceding spheres of more or less imperial influence to one another or through more concerted forms of global diplomacy. Understood in these terms, the United States is now in a unique position because of the unparalleled asymmetry of its military power. But as I have suggested above, we need to be careful about the conclusions we draw from this. The second route to international order is more co-operative and involves the generation of forms of positive-sum power by means of collective action in a partly co-ordinated liberal-capitalist world, the ultra-imperialist order anticipated by Kautsky.

The ambiguous nature of military power

Given the nuclear revolution and the end of colonial rule, the direct utility of military dominance to compel adversaries is much diminished compared with the widespread use of great-power military force prior to the Second World War, though the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate its continuing importance in imperial settings. But are wars against China, India, and Brazil, for example, feasible, even for the United States? Ellen Meiksins Wood’s ‘infinite war’ is not directed at them, even as the United States seeks to maintain its military unipolarity.

What about the indirect uses of military power to deter enemies and reassure allies? A comparison with the position during the Cold War is instructive in this regard. America’s NATO allies (and Japan) were willing to defer to its political leadership of the capitalist world on many issues because they reckoned that its military containment of the Soviet Union served their collective interests. For the same reason, if America’s military power were to be enlisted in purposes that are not recognised as based on a collective interest, if it was seen as serving the self-interest of the United States alone, then it would cease to generate the consensual leadership that has served it so well in the past. The collapse of the Soviet Union and with it the advent of the unipolar moment massively frees the hand for the use of US military power, as Peter Gowan and Perry Anderson have rightly insisted, but, for the same reason, it correspondingly reduces the role of that power as a lever of integration within the capitalist world. Military power remains important to US leadership
in this region but largely as something that must be used on its collective account, to protect and secure the West’s interests as against other parts of the world.

For example, if the revolution in military affairs and a successful national missile defence programme were effectively to decouple the security of the United States from the balance of power in Europe and Asia, that is, if the United States were able to retreat from its continental commitments and seek security in more unilateral ways, then it would be unable to command the political leadership of the capitalist world that it has treasured since 1945. In short, the price of that leadership is a forward commitment to maintaining stability in Europe and Asia. But that stability has to be one that genuinely accommodates the interests of Europe and Asia, not one that merely serves the self-interest of the United States.

Among the other major powers – Russia, Japan, China and India – US military power continues to play a fundamental role, this time in stabilising the regional balance of power during a period of radical change. In this theatre, the United States will likely play the role of an external balancer, that is, a power that does not have direct regional interests of a territorial kind – save the general ones of peace and stability, growing economic openness, and access for the forward basing of military forces – but which aims to prevent regional powers disrupting the status quo. This provides the best chance of integrating this part of the world into the broadly collective capitalist order already fashioned in the North Atlantic arena. The temptation (and danger) for the United States in this region is to use the unipolar moment to impose its interests unilaterally, thereby at best undermining the prospects for multilateralism and at worse provoking some powers in the region to balance against it.

Putting these two regions together, the trick for the United States is, as Stephen Walt has argued, to keep the rest of the world ‘off-balance’, to stop other powers (individually or collectively) balancing against it, to co-ordinate so as to prevent interimperialist rivalries from developing. As Walt points out,

the ability of the United States to achieve its foreign policy objectives at relatively low cost will depend in large part on whether other powers are inclined to support or oppose U.S. policies, and whether others find it easy or difficult to co-ordinate joint opposition to U.S. initiatives.62

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Some Washington neoconservatives argue that unipolarity means that the United States has no need to act strategically. Some Marxists, like Peter Gowan, seem to agree. In Walt’s summary, these arguments say that:

So long as the United States maintains a healthy economic advantage and a global military presence that is second to none, other states will not dare to balance against it. Potential rivals will be unwilling to invite the ‘focused enmity’ of the United States and key U.S. allies like Japan and Germany will prefer to free-ride on U.S. protection rather than trying to create stronger military forces of their own.63

This is a prescription of perpetual dominance for perpetual leadership but is it realistic? Or, rather, given that it is realistic, militarily speaking, how is the distributive power based on military primacy to be turned to economic advantage? Seeking primacy vis-à-vis an adversary that threatened your potential allies – as the Soviet Union did during the Cold War, even posing a threat to China after the early 1960s – made eminent sense, as leadership over those allies followed as a by-product. But seeking primacy over a range of powers – Western Europe, Russia, China, India, etc. – when the strategic alignments among them are varied and changeable is far from straightforward.

Economic power – co-ordination in a multipolar world

The second route to international order, anticipated by Gramsci and Kautsky, is a combination of a hegemonic form of leadership and the mutual advantage that derives from co-ordination among liberal-capitalist states. In this field, the key to US power has included both the specific assets of the territorial USA and the reproduction of what Gramsci called ‘Americanism’ outside in the rest of the capitalist world, and the co-ordination of the one with the other. This system has, of course, been designed to secure US interests. But it has equally served the interests of the other leading capitalist powers. Increasingly, the United States will loose the ability to determine the shape of this co-ordination on a unilateral basis. Just as other centres of capital have needed to co-ordinate with the United States, so the US market will increasingly need to co-ordinate with the most dynamic poles in the rest of the world.

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63 Walt 2000, pp. 11–12.
The United States still has a greater ability to determine the nature of this co-ordination than others – its specifically directive role within the hierarchy of capitalist powers – but this nonetheless presupposes collective benefits to all deriving from that co-ordination.

In this context, US military power only assists in integrating its core capitalist competitors when it is used in pursuit of what are widely recognised to be common interests. Unipolarity may yet provoke attempts by the others to reduce its effects. Compellence can work against some (as long as they do not have nuclear weapons) but it is not a general recipe for international order. It is not a mechanism for disciplining all states. It is, rather, an imperial project – as in Afghanistan and Iraq – for constructing some minimal common interests on which deterrence and co-ordination can subsequently operate. Where there are common interests in compellence, US military power can serve to buttress its directive role in an ultra-imperialist order. It is not a strategy of interimperialist manoeuvre in the Leninist sense. Reassurance presupposes a clear definition of allies and adversaries as well as means. (Iraq was a clear case of allies failing to be reassured by a unilateral switch from deterrence to compellance.)

**VIII. Conclusions**

I have argued that the core of the liberal-capitalist international order is an increasingly co-ordinated set of territorial centres of political power, in which the power of the United States plays a complex and ambiguous role in an expanding liberal-capitalist world. Now that the interregnum after the ending of the Cold War has passed, the United States is making determined efforts to spread this model on a wider and deeper basis.

The extent of its success in this regard will depend on its ability to co-ordinate power in an ultra-imperialist order, since a return to Leninist interimperialist rivalries would damage the interests of all concerned. As against powerful states that are both partly within and partly outside this order – such as China and Russia – a mixed strategy of deterrence and co-operation is likely for the near future and US interests will be best served by co-ordinating so as to prevent mutually damaging forms of economic competition and, still worse, active balancing against American power and an outbreak of negative-sum interimperialist rivalries. Direct imperial interventions are only likely to work against weak and recalcitrant régimes
that are poorly integrated into the co-operatively organised world of economic competition, and that are too unstable to be credibly deterred. Short of a marked deterioration in relations among the major powers, from which the United States – like others – cannot benefit, the role of US military power in a co-ordinated liberal-capitalist international order is far more ambiguous than simple balance of power or superimperialist considerations suggest. Economic multipolarity, as much as military unipolarity, may be the real key to the future of the capitalist international system.

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Premises: the elusive reality of consent*

When is a contract ‘voluntary’? The answer is, probably never. The underlying assumption in the claim that some or most contracts are ‘voluntary’ is that we can ‘descriptively identify domains of freedom and distinguish them from domains of choicelessness’.\(^1\) The conception of contracts as the outcome of a free choice generalises to all sorts of contracts, including contracts of employment. Through contract (the general theory/classical law of), the nineteenth century sanitised wage-labour in the sanguine images of individual autonomy, private volition, free will, and free agency. There was, of course, a long pre-nineteenth-century tradition, going back to antiquity, that had seen wage-labour (contracts for the hiring of labour; ‘service’ in an earlier terminology) in terms of the subordination of the employee to the employer.\(^2\) In one formulation of

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* Michael Anderson, Sebastian Budgen, Barbara Harriss-White, Karl Klare, Marcel van der Linden, and Pritam Singh supplied me with useful material when I was drafting this paper, and Tom Brass sent me a copy of his book. I am grateful to all of them.

1 Kelman 1987, p. 87.

2 For example, Cicero, De Officiis, II.22, ‘And there are persons who even subordinate themselves [subiciunt se] to the control and power of others for various reasons. [Among
this, what the worker sells is the ‘right to control his labour-power’. Since labour-power is never disembodied, what employers buy when they ‘buy’ ‘labour-power’ is command over the use of workers’ bodies and their persons. In other words, ‘The worker and his labour, not his labour power, are the subject of contract’. Liberal legalism, or the ‘pure’ or ‘general theory’ of contract that developed in the nineteenth century, grounded the almost limitless subordination of the wage-labourer in the anodyne fictions of consent. For example, it was possible and consistent for the US courts to maintain that ‘a servitude which was knowingly and willingly entered into could not be termed involuntary’. Here, ‘willingly’ meant no more than that ‘No person is required to enter into such a contract unless he chooses to do so’. The voluntary sale of labour-power was not the antithesis of servitude but its precondition. Contracts were made to be enforced, and it was convenient to assume that ‘enforcement of contracts was all about implementing the free wills of the parties’. Marx had no quarrel with this, describing the contract of employment or voluntary sale of labour-power as a ‘formality’, while undermining the underlying sense that it had anything to do with the ‘ultimate development of human freedom’ or with the kinds of transactions

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3 Marx 1976b, p. 1060: ‘The worker sold the right to control his labour-power in exchange for the necessary means of subsistence’; cf. Batt, 1967, ‘The master must have the right to control the servant’s work, either personally or by another servant or agent. It is this right of control or interference, of being entitled to tell the servant when to work (within the hours of service) or when not to work, and what work to do and how to do it (within the terms of such service), which is the dominant characteristic in this relation . . .’.

4 Pateman 1988, p. 151. Pateman suggests that the ‘disembodied fiction of labour power’ buttresses the illusion that workers themselves are not commodities under capitalism. In the Critique of Dialectical Reason, Sartre uses the expressions ‘selling labour-power’/‘selling oneself’ interchangeably, for example, he refers to the worker ‘selling himself as a material object [se vendre comme un objet materiel]’ and to the ‘worker-commodity [l’ouvrier-marchandise]’.


6 From a state Supreme Court ruling cited by Steinfeld 2001, p. 268.


8 Dalton 1985, p. 1027.

9 Marx 1976a, p. 724, n. 20: ‘It will not be forgotten that, where the labour of children is concerned, even the formality of a voluntary sale vanishes’.

10 Marx 1973, pp. 651–2: ‘Hence, on the other side, the insipidty of the view that free competition is the ultimate development of human freedom’.

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equally-placed capitalists struck between themselves. The will theory of contract was a construct of the legal formalism of the nineteenth century and was accepted for precisely what it was, hence the perfectly non-ironic assertion in Volume I of Capital that ‘the wage-labourer . . . is compelled to sell himself of his own free will’.13

At another level, however, it is possible to argue that no contract is free because economic coercion is pervasive under capitalism. (This is as true for ‘many capitals’ as it is for the individual worker.14) This is certainly what Marx had in mind in characterising wage-labour as ‘voluntary in appearance’, and, presumably, also the sense of Sartre’s characterisation of the contract of employment as a ‘pseudo-contract’.16 However, this sense of constraint – as the ‘diffused violence’ of the practico-inert (the labour market conceived as a ‘collective’ in Sartre’s sense) or the ‘dull compulsion of economic relations’ – is signalled in Marx less by any obvious desire to contest the language of voluntarism than by repeated references to the free worker as a ‘free’ worker.17 Whatever the common-law doctrine of duress, Marx and Engels clearly did not see the isolated wage-earner as a free agent or the wage contract as a free contract.18 The issue here is not that of the plasticity of legal reasoning, of where one draws the line between free and unfree labour, but of the incoherence of the concept of free labour under capitalism. Coercion is everywhere, because

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11 Hence the reference in Marx 1976b to the ‘deceptive illusion of a transaction’ (p. 1064; Marx’s emphasis), and in Marx 1976a, p. 520, to the ‘appearance of a contract between free persons’.
12 This is especially clear in Marx 1976a, p. 178 (‘a relation between two wills’); p. 280 (‘Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression’).
13 Marx 1976a, p. 932; my emphasis.
14 For example, Miranda 1982, pp. 26ff. On ‘many capitals’, note Marx’s references to the ‘coercive’ force of competition, Marx 1976a, pp. 381; 433; 436.
17 For example, Marx 1976a, pp. 382; 412; 612; Marx 1978, p. 117; Hobbes rejected the common-law doctrine of duress, treating contracts as equally binding whatever their origins, see Thomas 1965, pp. 185–236, esp. 232ff.
18 For example, Engels, in a review of Capital, Volume I, meant for The Fortnightly Review: ‘The contract, on the part of the labourer, is not a free contract . . . it is merely the opposition of the labourers, as a mass, which forcibly obtains the enactment of a public law to prevent them from selling themselves and their children, by a “free” contract, into death and slavery’ (in Marx and Engels 1985, p. 255).
the ‘outcomes [of bargaining] are heavily conditioned by the legal order in effect at any given moment’. The line between freedom and coercion is impossible to draw, ‘either as a matter of logic or as a matter of policy’. Indeed,

In every contract . . . it is an open question both whether the more informed party ought to have shared more of his information with his trading partner (that is, a question of ‘fraud’ arises, in some sense, in every case) and whether the contract would have been made had each party had other physically imaginable though socially unavailable options available to him (that is, a question of ‘duress’ arises in every case).

A Marxism of liberal mystifications?

In a monograph published in the late 1970s, a young economist Sudipto Mundle made the interesting move of describing the evolution of bondage in Palamau, a district of South Bihar in India, as an instance of what Marx called the ‘formal subsumption’ of labour into capital. Mundle argued that ‘the bonded labour system was a product of capital’s penetration into agriculture’ and was evolved by landowners in response to a massive exodus of labour, in a bid to hold wages down. Over a decade passed without any substantial theoretical discussion of these issues, till V.K. Ramachandran published Wage Labour and Unfreedom in Agriculture in 1990. Ramachandran displayed considerable condescension towards Mundle. To view the most backward forms of bonded labour as capitalist exploitation was only possible

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23 Kelman 1976, p. 21; cf. Wightman 1996 arguing that

[If consent is to retain its justifying power, the law must be able to distinguish when consent is real. But once the veil is pulled aside and the reality of consent is examined, all kinds of everyday economic pressure or necessity clamour for attention as potentially undermining consent. And since the law of contract has traditionally adopted an objective theory of agreement, where what counts is the appearance of agreement, it is not well equipped to begin to identify real consent. Thus the problem that legal writers face is one of confinement: how to define pressure in a way which will allow the victim to say the consent was not real without thereby undermining doctrines which depend on a much more restrictive conception of consent, the consequence of which would be the unravelling of all manner of contracts which are commonly entered into or modified without any real choice by one party. (p. 19)]

'by means of something of a definitional trick'. Bonded labour cannot be part of capitalism, it was alleged, because workers’ choice is central to the nature of capitalist exploitation. Surprisingly, Ramachandran’s own position has received scarcely any critical comment. In retrospect, it seems that if there was any juggling with definitions, it was his own curious assertion on the very first page of his book that whereas hired labour was compatible with ‘unfreedom’, wage-labour was not. The distinction stated there is obviously arbitrary. For most of us, hired labour and wage-labour are interchangeable terms, and there is certainly no lexicon of social-science vocabulary that assigns these particular distinctions to them. What Ramachandran was obviously keen to do was preserve a model of wage-labour that would make the institution unintelligible outside its conventional description in the language of voluntarism. That this language came to us suffused with the premises and dichotomies of classical individualism – suffused, in other words, with ideology in the strongest sense – was, ostensibly, beyond Ramachandran’s interest in the issue. Since I would define ideology as a system of beliefs/representations that naturalise social relations (particularly those of domination), the reflexive stance vis-à-vis the individualist construction of wage-labour as free labour seemed to do little to confront the illusion of naturalness wrapped up with this notion.

Accepting the individualist construction of wage-labour as a free bargain, Ramachandran then faced the problem of the value to assign to this freedom. Thus, *Wage Labour and Unfreedom* characterises the freedom of the free worker both as ‘formal’ and as ‘positive’. Not much is said about either of these notions or the contradiction implicit in using both characterisations. Free wage-labour is often referred to as ‘free’ wage-labour, implying adherence to the first description. But Ramachandran also speaks of the ‘basic self-dignity and freedom from servitude that the freedom to choose employers implies’. At any rate, one interesting consequence of this line of reasoning is that bondage precludes capitalism, since capitalism is based on wage-labour and wage-labour excludes bondage.

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26 Ramachandran 1990, p. 1: ‘... wage labour must be distinguished from the general category of hired labour. A wage labourer or proletarian is a hired labourer who is propertyless and is free to sell his or her labour power to the employer of his or her choice. This is in contrast, for instance, to a bonded labourer, who, though a hired labourer all right, is unfree to choose his or her employer’.
For Ramachandran, the polarity is one between wage-labour and unfreedom, because wage-labour is, by definition, free, and ‘free’ is construed here as substantially the opposite of ‘unfree’. Tom Brass replaces this with the general polarity between free and unfree labour because, unlike Ramachandran, he seems to be unsure whether wage-labourers can be unfree. There is only one passage in his book where he uses the expression ‘unfree wage-labour’,\(^2\) against many more where wage-labour is routinely described as ‘free wage-labour’ and numerous others where he speaks of ‘unfree labour’ tout court. Indeed, the index to *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour* contains no item for ‘wage-labour’. Measured against the reams of confident polemic on the issues of free and unfree labour, the least this suggests is a lack of clarity about where wage-labour itself fits into a conceptual schema built around the mesmerising contrast between ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour. Brass constructs a rigorously Manichean universe where workers are either free or unfree, and the scholars who write about them either realise that or function as apologists of bonded labour. He argues that debt-bound labour is unfree (i.e. not free labour dominated through debt), that employers use debt and bondage to ‘decommodify’ labour (re-incorporate labour into the means of production?), and, finally, that this tendency (of the forcible exclusion of workers from the labour market) increases as individual employers ‘restructure’ the composition of the workforce to stave off growing ‘class consciousness’ (since ‘unfree’ workers are unlikely to organise). Brass has a peculiar notion of ‘proletarianisation’. He defines it not in terms of the dispossession of labour but, evidently, as the formation of an organised working class. This enables him to speak of the factors which impede the formation of organised groups of workers as ‘deproletarianisation’. Bonded labourers may or may not be wage-labourers (Brass leaves this unclear) but they are not a proletariat (in the idealised, Lukácsian sense used by Brass). Agrarian capitalists use bondage to deprive workers of an incipient proletarian subjectivity.

The upshot of their stark dualities is that Brass and Ramachandran both subscribe to a liberal-individualist notion of wage-labour as essentially free labour, labour based on the ‘consent’ of the individual worker and the free bargain that embodies that ‘consent’. This is in sharp contrast to Marx whose

references to free labour have a profoundly delegitimating intent. There are
two aspects to Marx’s handling of free labour: in Marx, free labour is both
defined historically and contested ideologically. These are different levels of
abstraction, and, while both are significant, my interest in this paper is in the
second. I want to argue that his contestation of free labour makes Marx the
first significant thinker to have adumbrated the critique of contract which
emerged in the critical legal traditions of the twentieth century, starting with
the ‘Legal Realists’. To abstract the references to free labour from the framework
of this critique is to run the risk of imparting a naturalness to the notion of
freedom which it does not possess. Not only did it take the modern world a
long time to define a model of employment based on contract, but when
such a model did emerge, finally, in the nineteenth century, wage-labour was
shrouded in a legal mysticism that remains with us to this day.

The famous passage in *Capital*, Volume I, which describes the sphere of
circulation as a ‘very Eden of the innate rights of man’ is a succinct and
sardonic statement of the nineteenth-century liberal-individualist ideology of
contract. ‘Freedom’, ‘Equality’, and ‘Property’ are symbolic of the abstractions
of classical individualism (core individualist concepts), while the references
to natural rights, free will, and Bentham resonate with ideological imagery.

The implication is that ‘freedom’ is understood strictly in terms of the ideology
of contract and the abstractions of individualism. Later, in Volume I, Marx
characterises the employment contract as a ‘legal fiction’ which, with the
mobility of labour, sustains the ‘appearance of independence’. Later still,
the ‘free contract’ between capitalist and worker is described as an ‘illusion’.

The perspective framing these sorties against individualism is the conception
of the individual (free) worker from the standpoint of capital as such, that
is, of the *total* social capital. Thus,

> In reality, the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the
capitalist. His economic bondage is at once mediated through, and concealed
by, the periodic renewal of the act by which he sells himself, his change of
masters, and the oscillations in the market-price of his labour.

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29 See Kahn-Freund 1977, pp. 508ff.
30 Marx 1976a, pp. 280.
31 Marx 1976a, pp. 719.
32 Marx 1976a, pp. 935.
Again, the individual worker’s ‘enslavement to capital is only concealed by the variety of individual capitalists to whom [she] sells [herself].’

Finally, ‘the relation of exchange between capitalist and worker becomes a mere semblance belonging only to the process of circulation, it becomes a mere form, which is alien to the content of the transaction itself, and merely mystifies it’.

All of this is summed up in a fascinating passage of the famous ‘Appendix’ where free contract is described as a ‘formality’, though one essential to capitalism, ‘one of the essential mediating forms of capitalist relations of production’ which is nonetheless a mystification of the ‘essential nature’ of wage-labour, an ‘illusion’ or ‘deceptive appearance’.

In other words, the ‘essential’ nature of wage-labour cannot lie in any of the ideological representations which legitimate the oppression of workers. To counterpose free labour to unfree labour the way Brass does is to ignore ‘contract law’s role in making actual domination appear free, natural, and rational’.

As Feinman and Gabel argue,

The rise of capitalism . . . generated a dramatic and dislocating social upheaval. . . . How could people have been persuaded or forced to accept such massive disruptions in their lives? One vehicle of persuasion was the law of contracts, which generated a new ideological imagery that sought to give legitimacy to the new order. Contract law was one of many such forms of imagery in law, politics, religion, and other representations of social experience that concealed and denied the oppressive and alienating aspects of the new social and economic relations. Contract law denied the nature of the system by creating an imagery that made the oppression and alienation appear to be the consequences of what the people themselves desired.

It follows that two widely held views are in error: There are firstly those who consider that wage-labour, the sale of labour to the capitalist, and hence the wage form, is something only superficially characteristic of capitalist production. It is, however, one of the essential mediating forms of capitalist relations of production, and one constantly reproduced by those relations themselves. Secondly, there are those who regard this superficial relation, this essential formality, this deceptive appearance of capitalist relations as its true essence. They therefore imagine that they can give a true account of those relations by classifying both workers and capitalists as commodity owners. They thereby gloss over the essential nature of the relationship, extinguishing its differentia specifica. [italics in original.]


Marx’s conception of the wage contract can thus be summed up in the words used by Friedrich Kessler to describe standardised contracts or contracts of adhesion in modern capitalism: the worker’s ‘contractual intention is but a subjection more or less voluntary to terms dictated by the stronger party’. That is, nothing in the nature of free labour prevented employers from imposing the harshest possible terms on their employees, including restrictions on their mobility. If this seems paradoxical, that is only so because contract entails the ‘general irony of coercion imposed in the name of freedom’. Freedom of contract enables capitalists to ‘legislate by contract’, and to legislate in a ‘substantially authoritarian manner without using the appearance of authoritarian forms’.

Brass construes unfree labour in terms of mechanisms of control which tie labour down. The key mechanism is debt. The explanation lacks nuance (perhaps deliberately), and attachment, debt, and bondage become interchangeable expressions of an undifferentiated coercion = unfreedom. Marx himself defined free labour primarily in terms of the dispossession of labour, and then, of course, its ability to make valid contracts. Since subordination (obedience, subjection to the employer) is the essence of wage-labour, it would have made no sense to allow the control of labour, in the labour process and/or the employment relation, to cancel freedom all the way through. Discussing the feudal remnant in the governance of American labour in the late nineteenth century, the remarkable fact that ‘the law of master and servant was at the foundation of capitalist development and industrialism’, Karen Orren writes,

[W]hatever the public rights and private aspirations of the worker, he or she was in reality a free person against everyone except his or her employer. That does not mean there were no rights the servant could assert against the master, but they were severely restricted by the processes and content of the law, and by the practicalities that stemmed from the master’s own – absolute – right to terminate the employment at any time.

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39 Kessler 1943, p. 632.
41 Kessler 1943, p. 640.
42 This looks like a caricature but cf. Brass 1996, p. 237: ‘I tend to use all these four concepts interchangeably (attached labour = unfreedom = debt bondage = deproletarianisation)’.
43 Orren 1991, pp. 70, 92.
In the majority of instances discussed by Brass, contract is always the background against which coercion operates. But this is contract imbued with a profound sense of inequality, the hierarchy of master and servant, a ‘medieval’ remnant, even if the relations of production are certainly capitalist.

To repeat, in both Brass and Ramachandran, the critique of unfree labour is secured at a price, namely, endorsing the liberal mystification of a ‘free’ bargain, against Marx’s conception of the labour market as an instrument of coercion and the ‘Realist’ undermining of the premises of liberal legalism. On the other hand, their problematics diverge. The issue for Brass is whether labour that he construes as ‘unfree’ is compatible with capital/capitalism; the issue underlying the formalist orthodoxy on wage-labour (Ramachandran) is a different and more substantial one though, namely, whether ‘unfree’ labour can ever be construed as wage-labour, and here Brass is on the whole curiously silent, although he does, at one point, allow for the characterisation of unfree workers as unfree wage-labour.

The condescension with which Ramachandran dismissed Mundle would be less tenable today. In the diary of his travels in South India, Francis Buchanan refers repeatedly to ‘hired servants’ who were held in bondage by their masters. Unaffected by the formalisms that would later swamp the world of labour, he saw no obvious incongruity in juxtaposing what appear to us to be sharply conflicting images. To quote one of several possible passages from the travel diaries, he wrote, about southern Canara, ‘The cultivation is chiefly carried on by Culialu, or hired servants’.

At the end of the year the hired servant may change his service, if he be free from debt; but that is seldom the case. When he gets deeply involved, his master may sell his sister’s children to discharge the amount, and his services may be transferred to any other man who chooses to take him and pay his debts to his master. In fact, he differs little from a slave.

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44 Brass attacks Pranab Bardhan for construing attached labour relationships in India as ‘voluntaristic action by choice-making individuals’ (Brass 1999, p. 224) but how else does one characterise his own model of free labour? The bland assertion that ‘in economic terms the concept “market” is actually an antithesis of coercion’ (p. 262; his emphasis) forgets that ‘the freedom of the “market” [is] essentially a freedom of individuals and groups to coerce one another, with the power to coerce reinforced by agencies of the state itself’ (Dawson 1947, p. 266).

The bonding of migrant workers discussed by Breman in *Footloose Labour* describes a form of wage-labour in which employers ‘use force and oppression as tools with which to increase their hold on the workers’. Here, again, there is no abstract antithesis between bondage and the hiring of labour, even if the context is vastly different, with a massive erosion in the legitimacy of upper-caste dominance and workers less willing to accept domination. That workers did fight back even in much earlier periods is shown by the repeated litigation brought by Indian labourers before the General Indian Court of colonial Mexico for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Borah describes the form of exploitation involved, so-called debt peonage, as ‘the recruitment of wage labor bound by debt’, describing the workers themselves as ‘coerced but not enslaved’. Again, Martin Murray shows that the European rubber plantations of northern and eastern Cochinchina used a contract system that ‘legally bound wage-labourers to the point of production for periods that almost always exceeded the initial three-year agreement’. Finally, in a review of Byres’s book on agrarian capitalism, Charles Post argues that ‘capital is often compelled to rely on legally bonded wage-workers... These workers are bound to a single employer or branch of production by laws restricting their ability to move geographically and enter short-term labour contracts’.

Stating all this in a more general form, employers have repeatedly subjected free workers to repressive forms of control. The massive deployment of Polish seasonal labourers on the East Elbian estates during the First World War and under Nazism, the forced recruitment of wage-labourers in French and British Africa, and the position of nineteenth-century English wage-earners who faced criminal sanctions for breach of contract all exemplify situations where the ‘boundary between compulsion and free will... was neither distinct nor of any great interest’ to the authorities and employers. Likewise, if ‘attachment’ is basically a means of control over labour, there is no reason

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47 Borah 1983.
48 Murray 1992, p. 52, and the ref. to ‘bonded forms of hire’ at p. 59.
49 Post 1999, p. 289, noting that ‘Unlike slaves and serfs, coerced wage-workers are separated from both the means of production and subsistence’.
50 Herbert 1997.
51 Cooper 1996.
52 Steinfeld 2001, Chapter 2, linking the proliferation of stronger contract remedies to the evolution of ‘freer labour markets’.
53 Herbert 1997, p. 59, on German indifference to the Polish seasonal labourers.
why debt servitude cannot be a means of controlling wage-labourers. The advance payment of wages is manipulated to intensify the domination of labour.\textsuperscript{54}

This at least partly deals with the orthodoxy that restrictions on freedom undermine the nature of wage-labour. Regarding the related issue of whether capital can exploit workers who are truly unfree (who represent bondage in Kant’s sense),\textsuperscript{55} the major problem with Brass’s way of handling this thesis, apart from his definition of unfree labour, is that the needs of individual and social capital are conflated throughout his argument. Brass conceives capitalism entirely from the standpoint of individual capital, ignoring the fact that the logic that regulates capitalist economy is, necessarily, that of the total social capital. Thus, the real issue of theory here is whether we can sensibly visualise the accumulation of capital being founded on unfree labour (in the strict sense just noted) at the level of the expansion of the total social capital. And the obvious response is, no, since the mobility of labour is essential to the mechanism of capital at this level. That individual capitals are indifferent to the nature of the labour force and have no special concern for the rights of workers was argued at length in my paper in Capital & Class in 1977.\textsuperscript{56}

**Forms of exploitation based on wage-labour**

Expanding on the argument developed in that paper, capitalist accumulation may involve any of the following ‘methods’:\textsuperscript{57}

(i) more-or-less coerced/more-or-less ‘free’ forms of wage-labour;
(ii) unfree labour in the strict sense;
(iii) the integration of peasant family labour into the capitalist production process.

\textsuperscript{54} See Bolland 1981, especially p. 608: ‘Central to effective control of the labor force was the practice of paying wages in advance’, on the use of debt to trap free labourers in Belize.

\textsuperscript{55} In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, published in 1797, Kant produced one of the most interesting classifications of the forms of labour when he distinguished between bondage, service, and pure wage contracts. Bondage [Leibeigenschaft] was his generic term for all types of slavery and serfdom, while ‘service’ was discussed under the rights pertaining to the heads of households or family heads and seen essentially as a form of wage-labour subject to patriarchy; see Kant 1996, pp. 431ff., 471–2, 496.

\textsuperscript{56} Banaji 1977b.

There is scarcely any doubt that Marx came around to seeing the Southern plantations (based on slavery) as capitalist enterprises. Thus the overworking of slaves in the Southern states of the American Union was, he tells us in Volume I, a question of the ‘production of surplus-value itself’.\(^\text{58}\) In the *Grundrisse*, he refers to ‘[t]he fact that we now not only call the plantation owners in America capitalists, but that they are capitalists’\(^\text{59}\) and implies that these ‘anomalous’ forms of capitalist enterprise *could* exist because capitalism as a whole was based on free labour. (My interpretation of this is: the American slave owners *are* capitalists because they are part of the total social capital.)

In *Theories of Surplus Value*, he writes that the ‘business in which slaves are used is conducted by capitalists’, though this is qualified by saying that here the capitalist mode of production ‘exists only in a formal sense’.\(^\text{60}\) Finally, in Volume III of *Capital*, he writes, ‘Where the capitalist conception prevails, as on the American plantations, this entire surplus-value is conceived as profit’,\(^\text{61}\) and, in Volume II, slaves are described as ‘fixed capital’.

It is worth noting that, among later Marxists, Henryk Grossmann saw no incongruity in accepting Sombart’s description of the seventeenth-century plantations as the ‘first [exemplars of] truly large-scale capitalist organization’.\(^\text{62}\) Indeed, Grossmann argued that

> in the first hundred years following the discovery of America, the whole character of Spanish and Portuguese colonisation was already capitalist in nature, characterised as it was by a drive for surplus-value, even if the plantations were run on the basis of slave labour.\(^\text{63}\)

At the level of individual capitals, it is accumulation or the ‘drive for surplus-value’ that defines capitalism, not the presence or absence of ‘free’ labour. Yet a majority of Marxists are probably still reluctant to abandon the comforting idea that slavery precludes capitalism ‘because’ capitalism is founded on free labour.

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\(^{58}\) Marx 1976a, p. 345.

\(^{59}\) Marx 1973, p. 513.

\(^{60}\) Marx 1968, pp. 302–3.


\(^{62}\) Grossmann 1970, p. 406, citing Sombart 1917, Part II, p. 1011. In the first volume of *Modern Capitalism*, Sombart described the slave plantations as the ‘first large enterprises of a capitalist nature [die ersten kapitalistischen Großbetriebe]’.

\(^{63}\) Grossmann 1970, p. 408.
Ad iii), capitalist integration of the peasantry is best illustrated by the use of the advance system in nineteenth-century Indian agriculture. ‘Advances’ were especially widespread in the production of indigo, cotton, and sugarcane. Thus, the speculative capitalism of the Agency Houses that controlled the Bengal indigo trade in the early nineteenth century was based on a system of advances through which planters sought to ‘bind’ the peasantry to the factory.\(^64\) The Report of the Indigo Commission noted that ‘the contract for the growth and production of the plant, so far from being voluntary, is forced upon the ryot, who is compelled by more or less pressure to accept advances . . .’.\(^65\) About the squaring of accounts that began in October, one respondent told the Commission, ‘There are some individuals who could clear themselves, if we would let them, but we would not clear them on principle, inasmuch as it would be tantamount to closing the factory’.\(^66\) Indeed, Chowdhury reports that ‘Macaulay looked upon the contract between the planter and the peasant as of the same kind as one between the capitalist and a worker’.\(^67\)

In short, historically, capital accumulation has been characterised by considerable flexibility in the structuring of production and in the forms of labour and organisation of labour used in producing surplus-value. The liberal conception of capitalism which sees the sole basis of accumulation in the individual wage-earner conceived as a free labourer obliterates a great deal of capitalist history, erasing the contribution of both enslaved and collective (family) units of labour-power.\(^68\)

To take this further, it would surely represent an advance in Marxist theory to think of capitalism working through a multiplicity of forms of exploitation based on wage-labour. In other words, instead of seeing wage-labour as one form of exploitation among many, alongside sharecropping, labour tenancy,

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\(^64\) See Chowdhury 1964. Chowdhury writes, ‘The peasant had to sign a properly stamped contract by which he agreed to do whatever was necessary to cultivate indigo and to deliver the plant to the planter . . . . The primary allurement in cultivating indigo was the advances. [A]ccording to Walters (1830), “If a ryot once received an advance, he could very seldom or never clear himself and thus becomes little better than a bond-slave to the factory”’ (pp. 130–3). Walters was the then Magistrate of the City of Dacca.


\(^66\) Report of the Indigo Commission 1860, § 492 my emphasis.

\(^67\) Chowdhury 1964, p. 162 (about indigo).

\(^68\) Yann Moulier Boutang 1998 argues that capitalism has typically been founded on ‘dependent’ labour (rather than wage-labour specifically) and that the central issue for employers has always been some set of restrictions on the mobility of the worker (i.e., of living labour). More interestingly, he accepts that wage-labourers may work under diminished degrees of freedom, referring to ‘salariat non libre’ (e.g., p. 378).
and various kinds of bonded labour, these specific individual forms of exploitation may just be ways in which paid labour in recruited, exploited, and controlled by employers. The argument is not that all sharecroppers, labour tenants, and bonded labourers are wage-workers, but that these ‘forms’ may reflect the subsumption of labour into capital in ways where the ‘sale’ of labour-power for wages is mediated and possibly disguised in more complex arrangements. The prototype of this kind of analysis is Waszyński’s conception of the Byzantine sharecropper as a wage-labourer. Analysing Egyptian agricultural leases of the sixth and seventh centuries, Waszyński argued, ‘[the γεωργός of the sixth-seventh centuries] is basically no longer a tenant . . . he has become a hired worker [Mietling] or wage-labourer [Lohnarbeiter] whom the landlord can dismiss at any time’.70 ‘To form a proper assessment of these contracts, we should, instead of seeing the share accruing to the landlord in the division of the crop as rent, view the portion received by the γεωργός as a wage.’71 In Bengal in the 1930s, the various landholders’ associations consistently took the stand that their bargadars (sharecroppers) were ‘mere’ labourers, that is, workers paid in kind, arguing that landowners preferred sharecropping due to its greater intensity of labour.72 In the US, most Southern states drew a legal distinction between croppers and tenants. ‘Because the landlord supplied all necessary means of production, the sharecropper was a wage worker whose form of wages was a share of the crop’.73 Angelo characterises Southern sharecropping (or at least the legal construction of it) as a ‘disguised wage work contract’.74 Francesco Maria Gianni described the Tuscan sharecroppers of the late eighteenth century as ‘workers [operai] recruited by their respective landowners to hire out their labour not by the day or for any precise and definite daily wages but for at least a year and for half the crop produced by them’.75 Yet P.J. Jones showed how, even as early as the late fourteenth/fifteenth centuries, when mezzadria expanded on the estates in Tuscany, it embodied a form of ‘wage-type tenancy’, with

69 Marx 1976b, p. 1005: ‘... wage-labour (it is thus we designate the labour of the worker who sells his own labour-power)’; Marx 1972, p. 271: ‘... wage-workers, that is, workers who must sell their labour-power because their conditions of labour confront them as alien property’.
70 Waszyński 1905, p. 92.
73 Angelo 1995, p. 594; italics in original.
74 Angelo 1995, p. 595.
75 Gianni, cited in Giorgetti 1977, p. 231.
leaseholds akin to labour contracts.\textsuperscript{76} With renewed commercialisation in the late nineteenth century and the introduction of the new industrial crops, the mezzadri were subjected to further waves of proletarianisation, as farm sizes were drastically cut, work controls tightened, and eviction formally conceded to employers as their ‘sole means of restoring discipline’.\textsuperscript{77} Snowden refers to the ‘emergence in sizeable numbers from the end of the century of a variety of new sub-categories of semi-proletarianised mezzadri – camporaioli, logaioli, vignaioli, and mezzaioli. . . . The new sharecroppers did not live on their plots. . . . Instead, they commuted to the land from neighbouring villages or from labourers’ barracks’.\textsuperscript{78}

Labour tenancy is susceptible to a similar analysis. Lenin described this form of exploitation as the ‘capitalist system of providing the estate with agricultural workers by allotting patches of land to them’ and characterised the allotment itself as ‘wages in kind’.\textsuperscript{79} He referred to labour being ‘hired’ on a ‘labour-service and bonded basis’. Moreover, ‘the latter form of labour always presupposes the personal dependence of the one hired upon the one who hires him, it always presupposes the greater or lesser retention of “other than economic pressure”’.\textsuperscript{80} The less developed forms of agrarian capitalism made extensive use of labour tenancy.\textsuperscript{81} In South Africa, black families ‘without the resources to work the land themselves entered labour-tenancy agreements’.\textsuperscript{82} Labour tenants were thus worse off (less independent) than sharecroppers. Yet labour tenancy staved off total dispossession. The form of payment was at least as strongly influenced by tenants’ aspirations to regain access to land and accumulate cattle as by the shortage of cash among landowners. In fact, ‘obtaining pastures was far and away the most important reason for surrender to tenancy by homestead heads. . . . Typically, the negotiation of labour tenant contracts centred around cattle and children, with landlords grudgingly trading off grazing for the first in exchange for sufficient labour from the second’.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{76} Jones 1968, who says, ‘It [mezzadria] represented a “proletarization” of the peasantry’ (at p. 225).
\textsuperscript{77} Snowden 1979.
\textsuperscript{78} Snowden 1979, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{79} Lenin 1972, pp. 200–203.
\textsuperscript{80} Lenin 1972, p. 203.
\textsuperscript{81} For Egypt, see Owen 1981; for Peru, Jacobsen 1993, Chapter 8; for Prussia, Perkins 1984.
\textsuperscript{82} Keegan 1987, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{83} Bradford 1987, pp. 37–8.
\textsuperscript{84} Keegan 1987, pp. 122ff.
whom the ‘cash proceeds of their labour contracts were of little or no economic significance’. But white farmers lobbied aggressively to have labour tenants placed under the jurisdiction of the Master and Servant Acts. The general point to emerge from these struggles is that, as employers are driven to increase their control over these forms of labour (sharecroppers included), the contracts and means of compulsion used by them are progressively modified to diminish the rights of workers and their families and proletarianise them further.

Similarly, Buchanan’s reference to hired servants who were held in bondage by their masters forms the prototype for the analysis of bonded labour as a further distinction of form within wage-labour. The key mechanism here is debt, but the failure to disentangle ‘industrial profit’ (in Marx’s sense) from its fetishistic representation in the consciousness of employers generates endless confusion, even in the work of Marxists like Brass. ‘Interest is a relationship between two capitalists, not between capitalist and worker’. That employers choose to treat wage advances (part of their variable, i.e. productive, capital) as ‘loans’ has nothing to do with the real nature of the relationships, which are those between wage-labourers and the functioning capitalist. The contrast between these levels (or forms) of reality is recurrent in Marx. Thus, ‘Interest is just another name for surplus-value’, Marx says of the advances made by usurers (money capitalists) in India. Profit is ‘called rent, just as it is called interest when, for example, as in India, the worker (although nominally independent) works with advances he receives from the capitalist and has to hand over all the surplus produce to the capitalist’. Where profit is ‘acquired in the form of interest’ (is called interest), the capitalist

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85 Kanogo 1987, p. 23.
87 For Italy, see Snowden 1979; for Mexico, Bazant 1977, pp. 74ff. So, too, with the replacement of the Instleute by the Deputatisten, cf. Perkins 1984, p. 12: ‘The confined labourer was far more of an economic object than the cottager’.
88 See n. 45 above.
89 Marx 1972, p. 490: ‘Industrial profit, in contradistinction to interest, represents capital in the [production] process in contradistinction to capital outside the process, capital as a process in contradistinction to capital as property; it therefore represents the capitalist as functioning capitalist . . . as opposed to the capitalist as . . . mere owner of capital’.
91 Marx 1976b, p. 1023.
92 Marx 1972, p. 188.
‘appears as a mere usurer’. When this form of capitalism operates to control the labour of peasant producers who are both free and formally independent, ‘[w]e have here the whole of capitalist production without its advantages’, namely, the development of the social forms of labour and of the productivity of labour that these generate.\footnote{Marx 1972, p. 487, adding, ‘This form is very prevalent among peasant nations’ affected by market relations. The italics are mine.} In each of these passages, Marx implies a distinction between the actual nature of production, which is capitalist, and the forms in which those relations of production and exploitation are portrayed or ‘represented’ in the consciousness of its agents. To take these forms of representation at face value – for example, to divide the cash advances made by employers to their workers into a ‘wage’ component and a ‘loan’ component, as Brass does – is to move within the fetishised appearances that dominate the ‘everyday notions of the actual agents of production’.\footnote{Marx 1981, p. 969. Brass 1999, p. 82.} Thus, wage advances are characterised as ‘loans’, employers described as ‘creditors’, and workers transformed into ‘debtors’.\footnote{Brass 1999, p. 297: ‘Essentially, each consists of a relationship whereby cash or kind loans advanced by a creditor (usually – but not necessarily – a landlord, a merchant, a moneylender, a labour contractor, or a rich peasant) are repaid in the form of compulsory labour-service by the debtor personally etc.’, about enganche in Peru and attached labour in India.} The advances themselves are described both as ‘wages for future employment’ and as ‘a loan for work yet to be done’ – in the same paragraph!\footnote{Brass 1999, p. 225. Yet, Brass has a vague sense that one is dealing here with ideology, not with the actual nature of the transactions themselves, e.g., ‘In ideological terms, therefore, a bonded labourer works to pay off a debt rather than for a wage’ (at p. 12); or, ‘This sum was regarded by the employer as a debt contracted by the tribal’ (at p. 84); my italics.} What this does is to conflate a component of productive capital (namely, wages) with a form of interest-bearing capital. It also fails to see that when employers advance wages, they actually buy labour ‘instead of simply paying for it later’.\footnote{Marx 1978, p. 295.} Suppose that the use of cash/kind advances represents not the actual buying of labour-power (which is what it is) but simply the accumulation of claims to unrealised labour. There is still an issue about the nature of those claims. Conceived as interest-bearing capital, the claims to future labour would be fictitious capital, in the sense that ‘the creditor cannot recall his capital from the debtor but [at best] can only sell the claim, his title of ownership’.\footnote{Marx 1981, p. 595.} ‘The
capital itself has been consumed, spent by the [worker]. It no longer exists."  
In other words, conceived as debt (in the *strict* sense), the capital laid out in advances to the worker would be fictitious in exactly the sense in which the national debt represents ‘fictitious capital’. What the creditor possesses is simply a promissory note (a ‘bond’) equivalent to the state’s promissory notes when creditors buy government bonds. But the advances are not securities at all, there is no proper market for the circulation of such paper assets, and the analogy is as absurd as that between the usurer’s interest and the modern interest rate decried by Marx. ‘Debt’, that is, the depiction of wages as loans, is simply a device to control labour in conditions where the competition for labour is likely to drive up the bargaining power and wages of workers. It is a legal or pseudo-legal fiction used by employers to manoeuvre workers into a system of forced labour (which is still *wage-labour*) or contain their mobility and manipulate effort standards. Some employers clearly believed in the sanctity (‘legality’) of this fiction, others were (and have been) under no illusion.

‘Free contract’ in Sartre’s *Critique*

Vulgar Marxists have worked with a rigid dichotomy between free and unfree labour, suggesting that lack of coercion is a defining feature of wage-labour. This bright-line approach camouflages the fact that *all* wage-labour is subject to compulsion, both in the general and widely accepted sense that workers

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99 Marx 1981, p. 595, where the sentence reads, ‘The capital itself has been consumed, spent by the state. It no longer exists’.
100 Marx 1981, pp. 595ff.
101 For example, McArdle 1978, p. 118, ‘Peasant indebtedness formed gigantic paper assets’, about the Medici estates in Tuscany.
103 For example, McCreery 1983, p. 746: ‘Habilitadores [labour contractors] and employers competed fiercely among themselves for labor’.
104 Fiction: cf. Chaudhuri 1969, p. 245, citing the words of a nineteenth-century district official: ‘[T]he fiction is usually kept up that the labourer is in his master’s debt’. Forced labour: e.g., Daniel 1972. Marx characterised peonage as a form of slavery (Marx 1976a, pp. 271ff., n. 3), but see Zavala 1988, pp. 35ff. for the argument that *peonaje* involved a form of wage-labour, and his interesting comment on the footnote in *Capital.*
105 Cf. Breman 1974, p. 236: ‘[landlords] know that repayment is practically impossible for the farm servants and are under no illusion in this respect’. Elsewhere, Breman writes: ‘Employers present such arrangements as “advances” on wages that will be repaid through the labour of the borrower. However, such “advances” are solely intended to appropriate labour, whether immediately or at a later date. *Neither party views the transaction as a loan that will be terminated on repayment*’ (in Parry et al. (eds.) 1999, p. 419; italics mine).
are compelled to sell their labour-power and subject, at this level, to a general market or economic coercion, and more directly, insofar as the exchange involved in wage-labour is one of ‘obedience for wages’\textsuperscript{106} and employers have to find ways to enforce contracts.\textsuperscript{107} Given that all wage-labour is subject to constraint in this double sense, it follows that the ‘freedom’ of free labour is best construed in a \textit{minimalist} sense to mean, \textit{primarily}, the legal capacity (‘autonomy’) required to enter a labour agreement.\textsuperscript{108} Construed in this way, Marx’s references to successive Tudor governments driving the propertyless into free labour in a process he calls the ‘forced labour of free workers \textit{[Zwangsarbeit der freien Arbeiter]}\textsuperscript{109}’ seem much less paradoxical than they might otherwise, as does Sartre’s parallel reference to ‘free forced labour \textit{[le travail librement forcé]}’ as typical of the repressive liberal capitalism of the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{110} In particular, Sartre’s expression refers to the methods used by English employers to break the recalcitrance of skilled workers and produce a subjugated labour force. If labour subjected to ‘repressive practices within factories’\textsuperscript{111} was nonetheless ‘free’, this is because ‘freedom’, in \textit{this} context, refers, minimalistically, to the mystified/mystifying moment of the wage contract and the freedom-of-contract rhetoric of nineteenth-century liberal individualism.\textsuperscript{112}

Sartre’s references to free labour in the \textit{Critique} work in terms of an implicit contrast between the real freedom of the worker, identified as the worker’s \textit{human} reality, and the abstract or mystified freedom of the wage contract. Contract ‘mystifies’ freedom, both because the ‘form’ (of a free contract) disguises the dictatorial power of the employer\textsuperscript{113} and makes the worker’s domination appear ‘free, natural, and rational’,\textsuperscript{114} and because the worker’s

\textsuperscript{106} Fox 1985, p. 113, citing J.S. Mill, ‘obedience in return for wages’.
\textsuperscript{107} See Steinfeld 2001.
\textsuperscript{108} Cf. Orren 1991, p. 95. This is certainly how Marx understood free labour.
\textsuperscript{109} Marx 1973, p. 736; Marx 1974, pp. 623f. [‘Also noch \textit{Zwangsarbeit} zu einem bestimmten Lohn der freien Arbeiter. Sie müssen erst \textit{gezwungen} werden zu den vom Kapital gesetzten bedingungen zu arbeiten’].
\textsuperscript{110} Sartre 1960, p. 694 (Sartre 1976, p. 742).
\textsuperscript{111} Sartre 1960, p. 694 (Sartre 1976, p. 742); e.g., criminal restraints for breach of contract, cf. Steinfeld 2001.
\textsuperscript{112} Sartre 1960, p. 269 (Sartre 1976, p. 207) defines the free worker as ‘an exploited man whose exploitation resides entirely in freedom of contract’. At p. 697 (p. 746) he refers to ‘liberal atomism’, at p. 699 (p. 748) to ‘liberal ideology’.
\textsuperscript{113} Neumann 1936, p. 10.
freedom is in fact complicit in its own crushing. The wage contract belongs to the practico-inert field of exploitation, whereas employment and labour – the search for work and work itself – presuppose the human freedom of the worker, or free individual praxis, insofar as these are forms of human activity. Thus freedom is present in two guises – as the mystification of ‘free labour’ (the inert ‘idea’ of liberal ideology)\textsuperscript{115} and as the real freedom of the practical organism, which is praxis itself conceived not as an abstract force traversing the heterogeneous moments of dialectical intelligibility\textsuperscript{116} but as the ‘free actions of individuals’,\textsuperscript{117} the free activity which ‘in its freedom will take upon itself everything which crushes it’,\textsuperscript{118} which is masked by collective representations and the coerciveness of industrial routine,\textsuperscript{119} and without which alienation (that is, the impotence of freedom or the impossibility ‘inside’ freedom)\textsuperscript{120} would cease to have any meaning since there would be nothing to be alienated.\textsuperscript{121} Thus, to say that the worker freely sells his labour-power is not tantamount to the claim that the worker’s action is unconstrained or uncoerced but, rather, that the ‘sale’ of labour-power, like work itself and all human activity, requires the sovereign freedom of a practical agent. As Sartre says,

\begin{quote}
It is true that he has no other way out; the choice is an impossible one; he has not the ghost of a chance of finding better paid work and in any case he never even asks himself the question: what is the point of it all? He goes and sells himself at the factory every morning . . . by a sort of sombre resigned hexis which scarcely resembles a praxis. And yet, in fact, it is a praxis: habit is directed and organized, the end is posited, the means chosen . . .; in other words, the ineluctable destiny which is crushing him passes right through him.\textsuperscript{122}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{115} Sartre 1960, p. 644 (Sartre 1976, p. 679), ‘la mystification du libre-contrat’; cf. Trotsky 1969: ‘[F]reedom was reduced to a legal fiction, on the basis of freely-hired slavery. We know of no other form of free labor in history’ (p. 140; italics mine).

\textsuperscript{116} Sartre 1960, p. 359 (Sartre 1976, p. 319); ‘it would be absurd or idealistic to imagine that individual praxis, inert activity and common action are the three moments of the development of a single force conceived as human praxis’.

\textsuperscript{117} Sartre 1960, p. 370 (Sartre 1976, p. 332).

\textsuperscript{118} Sartre 1960, p. 364 (Sartre 1976, p. 325); emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{119} As Sartre would tell Simone de Beauvoir many years later, de Beauvoir 1981, p. 455.

\textsuperscript{120} Sartre 1960, p. 367 (Sartre 1976, pp. 328–9).

\textsuperscript{121} Sartre 1960, p. 180 (Sartre 1976, p. 97): ‘if human relations are a mere product, they are in essence reified and it becomes impossible to understand what their reification really consists in’.

\textsuperscript{122} Sartre 1960, p. 364 (Sartre 1976, p. 325).
One of the great strengths of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is its clarification of this issue. A Marxism untouched by the insights of the *Critique* conflates the real freedom of the worker (as a practical agent) – the freedom that wage-labourers *share* with all workers and all kinds of workers throughout history – with the mystified freedom projected in the rhetoric of liberal legalism and the common-law doctrine of the private right of free contract. More importantly, Sartre recovers the legal-realist insight that ‘constraint does not eliminate freedom (except by liquidating the oppressed)’. Coercion is not an ‘overpowering of the will’. ‘A victim of duress *does* normally know what he is doing, *does* choose to submit, and *does* intend to do so.’ Conversely, the fact that he [the victim] exercised a choice *does not indicate lack of compulsion*. Even a slave makes a choice. The compulsion which drives him to work operates through his own will power. . . . [T]hough he exercises will power and makes a choice, still, since he is making it under threat, his servitude is called ‘involuntary’.

It follows that the moment of the free contract between employers and wage-earners is, in Sartre’s words, ‘both the most shameless mystification and a reality’. And it is a *reality* not because freedom of contract implies or entails that labour recruited by contract is free in the sense of being uncoerced, but because ‘everything is sustained by individual praxis’.

### Summary

An uncritical deployment of the free/unfree labour antithesis valorises one of the most powerful fictions of possessive individualism, namely, the notion that the ‘freedoms of circulation inherent in contract’ are an expression of

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123 Sartre 1960, p. 690 (Sartre 1976, p. 737), ‘la contrainte ne supprime pas la liberté (sauf en liquidant les opprimés)’.
124 Atiyah 1982, p. 200, against the traditional view of duress as a coercion of the will that ‘vitiates consent’. The contemporary view is that a party’s will is never actually overborne in the sense of losing control, for example, Feinman 1987, pp. 1537ff., reviewing Collins 1986.
125 Hale 1943, p. 606; my emphasis.
127 Sartre 1960, p. 257 (Sartre 1976, p. 193). At p. 362 (p. 323) Sartre writes, ‘it must be pointed out both that the practico-inert field *exists*, that it is *real*, and that free human activities are not thereby eliminated, that they are *not even altered* in their translucidity as projects in the process of being realized.’
individual freedom and that free labourers have some measure of control over their working lives because they can choose who to work for. This contrasts sharply with Marx’s conception of the wage contract as a legal fiction that both mediated and masked the domination of labour by capital. Brass deploys a discourse of freedom and unfreedom as if these terms had an obvious meaning. He identifies free labour with the free circulation of labour, and this is clearly also how Marx understood the expression. The crucial difference, however, is that that is all free labour meant for Marx – he did not view the worker as a free agent – whereas, for Brass, free labour resonates with its opposition to unfree labour, evoking subliminal images of freedom from bondage, oppression, and coercion, as if free labour was exempt from violence, much less from subtler forms of bondage and coercion. In short, the fiction of the free labour contract is renaturalised in an uncritical antinomy of free and unfree labour. Secondly, I have argued that, while the organisation of labour under capital accumulation implicates forms of exploitation beyond the presumptively normative free labour contract (notably, slavery and the centralised field labour of slaves), the wage contract itself can be organised in different ways (under different labour systems), for example, as sharecropping, labour tenancy, or various forms of bondage, once we extend the notion of wages to include payments in land, housing, etc. Finally, free labour is a construct of liberal ideology, the lived experience of oppression under capitalism mystified as an ‘outcome of ordinary principles of freedom of contract’, and the only real freedom workers possess under capitalism or any system of domination is their power of resistance, that is, the capacity they have as individuals to act on the world, both individually and through the common action of groups.

References


128 Haag 1999, p. 36. Haag’s book is a brilliant critique of conflicting liberal constructions of women’s sexual agency/oppression and makes repeated reference to the fictions of the free labour contract.

129 Cf. Marx 1976, p. 820, ‘They receive cottages and coal for firing “for nothing” – i.e. these form part of their wages, paid in kind’, about miners in Britain.

130 Stokes 1994, p. 90, about the legitimation of managerial power in the contract version of the traditional legal model of the company.


Miranda, José Porfirio 1982, Communism in the Bible, London: SCM.

Mundle, Sudipto 1979, Backwardness and Bondage: Agrarian Relations in a South Bihar District, New Delhi: Indian Institute of Public Administration.


*Report of the Indigo Commission Appointed under Act XI of 1860, with the Minutes of Evidence Taken before Them; and Appendix, 1860, [Calcutta].*


In this essay, I want to make, and elaborate on, three claims. First, that the Holocaust is a transformational event, a qualitative break in the historical trajectory of capitalist civilisation; indeed, a break so great that, as Enzo Traverso has argued, the Nazi genocide ‘requires us to rethink the twentieth century and the very foundations of our civilisation’. Second, that as a qualitative break in the trajectory of capitalism, the Holocaust poses a fundamental challenge to Marxist theory, such that, for Alex Callinicos, ‘[n]o human phenomenon can put a stronger demand on the explanatory powers of Marxism’. However, it seems to me that orthodox Marxism, at any rate, has been inadequate to that challenge, has failed to provide us with a coherent or persuasive explanation of the ‘Final Solution’. Third, no explanation of the Holocaust, of its origins or unfolding, that does not

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1 The concept of the Holocaust as a transformational event was first articulated by Alan Rosenberg, and subsequently elaborated by the two of us in a series of essays, most notably Milchman and Rosenberg 2003.

2 Traverso 1999, p. 4. Traverso is one of those rare Marxist thinkers who has seriously grappled with the implications of the Holocaust for Marxist theory; who – in a series of books – has sought to utilise Marxism to understand the Nazi genocide and its singularity.

3 Callinicos 2001, p. 385.
link it to the immanent tendencies of late capitalism, can provide us with a purchase on what Traverso has termed this tear in the very fabric of history [l’histoire déchirée]. In my view, it is necessary to forge a direct link between the Nazi genocide and the unfolding of the operation of the law of value; to recognise, with the German dramatist, cultural critic, and Marxist, Heiner Müller, that ‘Auschwitz is the altar of capitalism’.

The Holocaust as a break in history

The origins of the Holocaust must be sought in the unprecedented and ever-increasing violence that has accompanied the unfolding of capitalism from its phase of the primitive accumulation of capital and the brutal expropriation of the immediate producers from their means of production, through the bloody colonial wars and orgies of mass murder that characterised the global expansion of capitalism, and that culminated in the mechanised slaughter of masses of conscript soldiers on the battlefields of the First World War. Within that bloodstained history, Auschwitz, understood as a synecdoche for organised and planned mass murder, marked the creation of a death-world in which the extermination of determinate groups of human beings had become the deliberate and systematic objective of the state. Thus, for Traverso,

[t]he ‘final solution’ appears to us today, at one and the same time, as the culminating point in an uninterrupted sequence of violence, injustice, and murder that has characterized Western development and as an unprecedented break in historical continuity. In other words, it is only by setting Auschwitz in a larger context of racist crimes and violence that its uniqueness may be perceived and analyzed.

For Traverso, that uniqueness lies not in the numbers of those slaughtered, but rather in the fact that ‘for the first time in history an attempt was made to eliminate a human group for reasons of “racist biology”’. What is at stake in the Holocaust is not simply race hatred, which has characterised capitalism since its very inception, but rather the project – integrally linked to the development of science and technology brought about by capitalism – to

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4 This is the title of one of Traverso’s volumes on the Holocaust.
7 Ibid.
quite literally subordinate the biological realm itself to the logic of capitalist domination and control. The death-world, inaugurated by Auschwitz, had as its goal nothing less than a ‘biological reconfiguration of humanity [remodelage biologique de l’humanité], devoid of any instrumental nature, conceived not as a means but as an end in itself’.\(^8\) One aspect of that control of the biological realm lay in the ability to remove – through planned extermination – those segments or groups within the human species deemed superfluous, worthless, or dangerous. For the Nazis, the Jews were such a group, a bacillus that had to be extirpated, virtually as a matter of public hygiene, though mass murder was never conceived as being limited to them. This biologisation and racialisation of alterity, and its physical elimination through state-organised politico-military means has become the veritable hallmark of the death-world.

And that death-world constitutes what the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch termed a novum in human history. In his open system, Bloch’s category of the novum designates what is radically new in history.\(^9\) It is intended to preclude any conception of a closed or completed world; any teleological vision of history, such as haunts orthodox Marxism. While, in Bloch’s philosophy of hope, the category of the novum generally refers to the good novum of revolution or communism, as the Blochian alternative of Alles oder Nichts (the ontological complement to Luxemburg’s prescient vision of ‘socialism or barbarism’) indicates, there is also the possibility of a bad novum.\(^10\) The Holocaust and the death-world that it inaugurated constitutes just such a novum.

In the Holocaust, the extermination of the racial Other proceeded along dual, though complementary, tracks, revealing two facets of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazi régime. One facet of the Nazi genocide, which has dominated the historiography of the Holocaust, is the rational, bureaucratically administered, industrial production of corpses, carried out in vast factories of death utilising poison gas, such as Auschwitz, Sobibor, or Treblinka. As Enzo Traverso has explained:

The system of extermination functioned like a factory, whose product was death. Jews were its raw material, and there was nothing primitive about

\(^{8}\) Traverso 2002, pp. 9–10.

\(^{9}\) See Bloch 1986, pp. 200–5.

\(^{10}\) See Bloch 1975, p. 141.
its means of production, at least once the mobile gas trucks were replaced in spring 1942 with the incomparably more efficient fixed equipment: the gas chambers. Here death was brought about by streams of Zyklon B, a type of cyanide specially prepared by IG Farben, the most advanced German chemicals company. The victims’ bodies were then burned in the camp crematoria, whose chimneys were reminiscent of the most traditional architectural forms of an industrial landscape.\textsuperscript{11}

There, the organisation of genocide was the responsibility of desk-killers like Adolf Eichmann, who could zealously administer a complex system of mass murder while outwardly displaying no particular hatred for his countless victims, no great ideological passion for his project, and no apparent sense that those whom he sent to the gas chambers were human beings and not things. An Adolf Eichmann, or a Rudolf Höss, the commandant at Auschwitz, is the high-level functionary in a vast bureaucratic organisation who does his killing from behind a desk, from which he rationally plans, organises, and administers, mass murder, treating it simply as a technical task, no different than the problem of transporting scrap metal or disposing of industrial waste. The desk-killer is the quintessential bureaucrat, but functioning according to the imperatives of the death-world. As a human type, the desk-killer is one more embodiment of the triumph of instrumental reason that shapes late capitalism. Millions of human beings were murdered in the factory-like setting of the death camps, and it is the image of those camps, symbolised by the smokestacks of Auschwitz, that has come to define the singularity of the Holocaust.

Recently, however, Holocaust historiography has begun to pay attention to another facet of the Holocaust, to those other millions of human beings murdered by the Einsatzgruppen, by the Order Police, by the Wehrmacht, by the local auxiliaries of the Germans in occupied Eastern Europe, or by ordinary citizens of those occupied lands who slaughtered their Jewish or ‘Bolshevik’ neighbours. Those killings – face-to-face, by shooting at close range or burning or beating their victims to death – were anything but cold, rational, bureaucratic, and without passion. They were marked by an orgiastic bloodletting, by a hot rage and hysteria, by what in German can only be termed Rausch, an intoxication and explosion of repressed emotional content. On the surface, such killing seems to have more in common with the pogroms that periodically

\textsuperscript{11} Traverso 1999, p. 15.
exploded in the villages and cities of precapitalist or early capitalist Europe than with the organised violence of a modern, technologically advanced, industrial state. However, these orgies of frenzied killing were not pogroms – spontaneous outbursts which have traditionally quickly run their course, no matter how violent they are – but, rather, an integral part of the systematic mass murder organised by a modern capitalist state. The shootings of more than thirty thousand Jews at the Babi Yar ravine in September 1941, no less than the murder of ten thousand people that Rudolf Höss claimed he had gassed in a single day at Auschwitz, proceeded from the same social conditions; different facets of the same project of mass murder, generated, as I will try to show, by the same capitalist civilisation.

It seems to me that a Marxist theory of the Holocaust must account not just for the industrialisation and bureaucratisation of mass murder, and for the primordial role of the desk-killer, but also for the Rausch, the unleashing of the orgiastic lust for blood exemplified by the Einsatzgruppen and their East European accomplices. Such a claim has nothing to do with the interpretation of the Holocaust as the violent and inevitable outcome of centuries of antisemitism peculiar to Germany, articulated by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. While Goldhagen correctly points to the role of Rausch in the mass murder of the Jews, his inability to recognise the enormous abyss between the Holocaust and the violent manifestations of antisemitism that have characterised the whole history of the West, his failure to link the Holocaust to the trajectory of capitalism, and his insistence that its bases are to be found exclusively in a purported German Sonderweg, vitiate that insight.

The failure of orthodox Marxism to comprehend the Holocaust

Thinkers working within the framework of orthodox Marxism have failed to grasp the singularity of the Holocaust. For the most part, orthodox Marxism has treated the Nazi genocide as a by-product of fascism, itself conceived as a screen for the rule of the most reactionary and imperialistic factions of monopoly capital or as a means for big business to mobilise the petty bourgeoisie behind it in its effort to crush the working class. The categorial arsenal deployed by orthodox Marxism is itself a formidable obstacle to any comprehension of the Holocaust. Orthodox Marxism’s base/superstructure

12 See Goldhagen 1996.
model of social reality, in which ideology is an epiphenomenon determined by the economic base; its pronounced tendency to a kind of economic reductionism; a vision of history that equates ‘progress’ with scientific and technological development; a failure to theorise the role of the irrational in human history; a disregard for the role of contingency in the social realm; and a tendency to see the Nazi genocide not as a novum in human history, linked to the immanent tendencies of late capitalism, but rather as an atavistic regression to an earlier stage of human development, all frustrate the efforts of orthodox Marxists to adequately confront the Holocaust. Thus, Ernest Mandel has argued that the actions of German imperialism in Eastern Europe were rooted in the same imperatives that motivated the crimes of colonialism/imperialism at the time of the African slave trade and the Spanish conquest of the Americas (‘But it was precisely German imperialism’s “manifest destiny” to colonize Eastern Europe’). In addition, Mandel has sought to demonstrate the at least partial economic rationality of the use of slave labour in the concentration camps (‘the costs of such labour can be reduced to almost nothing, a miserable pittance which rapidly reduces the labourer’s weight and health till he dies from starvation and deprivation’). Both claims, in my view, attest to the inability of orthodox Marxism to grasp the singularity and the break in history represented by the Holocaust.

This failure of orthodox Marxism has been clearly grasped by Enzo Traverso, for whom ‘Auschwitz has shown once and for all that economic and industrial progress is not incompatible with human and social retrogression’, and, according to whom, the racism of the Nazis cannot be reduced to a screen behind which the real economic interests of big capital hid. For Traverso,

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13 Mandel 1986, pp. 90–1. In a work of over 160 pages, Mandel devotes a mere five pages to the Holocaust! Decades before Mandel sought to assimilate the Nazi genocide to the crimes of colonialism, Theodor Adorno pointed to the dangers of such analogies: ‘[t]he statement that things are always the same is false in its immediateness, and true only when introduced into the dynamics of totality. He who relinquishes awareness of the growth of horror not merely succumbs to cold-hearted contemplation, but fails to perceive, together with the specific difference between the newest and that preceding it, the true identity of the whole, of terror without end.’ Adorno 1978, p. 235.

14 Mandel 1986, p. 93. Here, Mandel links the behaviour of the SS to that of ancient Roman latifundists and to early nineteenth-century Southern planters in the US. Beyond the highly questionable nature of such historical analogies, Mandel completely ignores the fundamental distinction between the latifundia and plantations, which were devoted to the production of commodities, and the Nazi death camps, the exclusive function of which was the production of corpses.

[a]n element that strikes and disconcerts historians studying the Jewish genocide is its essentially antieconomic nature. Where was the economic rationality of a regime which, to kill six million men, women, old people, and children, created in wartime conditions an administrative system, transport network, and extermination camps, employing human and material resources which would certainly have been put to better use in industry and on the increasingly depleted war fronts.  

Indeed, for Traverso, ‘[t]he Jewish genocide cannot be understood in depth as a function of the class interests of big German capital. . . .’ Alex Callinicos has also challenged the orthodox-Marxist interpretation of the Holocaust:

> [t]he primacy of Nazi ideology in the development of the Holocaust is critical to understanding that, even if economic pressures – for example, food shortages in the occupied USSR – may have helped motivate particular murder campaigns, the extermination of the Jews cannot be explained in economic terms.

For Callinicos, biological racism is the key to the Nazi genocide, thereby providing a more sophisticated account of the orthodox-Marxist relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure, and the task of Marxism is to explain ‘why this ideology assumed such centrality in National Socialism’.

While Traverso and Callinicos reject orthodox Marxism’s economic reductionism and its focus on the direct class interests of big capital as the basis for explaining the Holocaust, they remain committed to understanding the Nazi genocide as an expression of the immanent tendencies of capitalism. Norman Geras, by contrast, while also rejecting the orthodox-Marxist interpretation of the Holocaust, has completely severed the link between the Nazi genocide and capitalism. In his attempt to grasp the Holocaust, Geras breaks with the orthodox-Marxist vision articulated by Ernest Mandel in 1946, and subsequently only somewhat modified by him, according to which, as Geras explicates it, ‘the destruction of the Jews of Europe is rationally explicable as the product of imperialist capitalism, and as such is manifestly comparable to

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16 Traverso 1995, p. 127, my emphasis. This is indicative of what Traverso terms the ‘counter-rationality’ of the Nazi genocide.

17 Traverso 1999, p. 60.

18 Callinicos 2001, p. 403.

the other barbarisms which this socio-economic formation throws up.’

In challenging such a vision, however, Geras does not seek to explain the Holocaust by reference to the specific trajectory of late capitalism and its immanent tendencies, but rather to ‘something that is not about capitalism’ at all, something ensconced in what he terms ‘the subsoil . . . of the human psyche’, in a transhistorical human nature itself. Thus Geras is convinced that the radical evil instantiated in the Holocaust is an ineradicable potential embedded in an essentialised human nature; a free-floating danger that has haunted, and will haunt humanity, quite apart from the historically determinate social relations it constructs or civilisations it establishes. Thus, for Geras, the Holocaust tells us virtually nothing about the specific lethal potential of late capitalism, but a great deal about the capacity of an ahistorical human being for murderous violence.

The categorial bases for a Marxist theory of the Holocaust

A Marxist theory of the Holocaust, I believe, requires a different categorial basis than that provided by orthodox Marxism; by the Marxism of the Second, Third, and Fourth Internationals.

A Marxist dialectic comprehends the world as open, incomplete, unfinished, an *experimentum mundi*, in contrast to the vision that prevails in so many orthodox-Marxist conceptions of history in which human beings are subject to objective ‘laws of history’, to their implacable logic, and to a naturalistic causality. Thus, Ernst Bloch distinguishes between cause [*Ursache*] and condition [*Bedingung*], with causes, in this sense, understood as resting on the principle of ground, and implying necessity, while conditions ‘are the presuppositions of a possible realization, that will not be brought about without the intervention of the subject’. Conditions, therefore, are linked to what, for Bloch, is the primordial category of ‘objective-real possibility’: a possibility the conditions for which are developing within social reality; which exist in a state of what Bloch terms ‘tendency-latency’. What Bloch seeks, however, is a new concept.

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23 Space permits only a brief exposition of the Marxist categories adequate to an understanding of the Holocaust.
24 This is the title of Ernst Bloch’s last work, a Marxist *Kategorienlehre*.
of causality [Kausalität] that is shorn of the unilinear character of mechanical causality, a dialectical causality, in which the possibility of discontinuity, ‘dialectical interruptions [das dialektisch Unterbrechende]’ is always present. It is on the basis of such a dialectical concept of causality, in which contingency also plays a central role, that it is possible to understand the Holocaust.

Such an understanding also entails, from this perspective, the rejection of the base/superstructure model of social reality, and its pronounced tendency to economic determinism, that has characterised orthodox Marxism. In its place, what is needed is the concept of overdetermination, first adumbrated by Louis Althusser, and then developed by the Marxists of the Amherst school. Thus, for Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff:

[t]he centrality of the concept of overdetermination rules out any notion that any one social aspect, such as the economic, can be ultimately determinant in some last instance of other social aspects. This centrality also carries with it a definition of the particular kind of complexity characteristic of Marxian theory. That theory focuses not on the relative importance of the economic versus noneconomic social aspects but rather on the complex ‘fitting together’ of all social aspects, their relational structure, the contradictions overdetermined in each by all.

The concept of overdetermination permits us to appreciate how biological racism could play such a central role in the unleashing and unfolding of the Nazi genocide, even when the continuation of the Final Solution had become an impediment to the German war economy and to the actual military operations of the Wehrmacht.

The appearance of the desk-killer, of the functionaries of the death camps, and also of the troops and mobs who slaughtered Jews or ‘Bolsheviks’ in a state of Rausch, of rage and fury, and indeed of the countless bystanders whose silence or inaction were necessary for the Final Solution to be implemented, are all indicative of the need to confront the issue of philosophical anthropology, of a doctrine of an ahistorical human nature, in Marxism. In contrast to such a vision, defended, for example, by Norman Geras, I believe that the modes of human subjectivation are themselves historically variable; that the human subject has no ‘essence’, but is socially ‘constructed’, the ‘product’ of the social relations, the interaction of the complex causal chains.

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26 Bloch 1975, p. 141.
and overdetermined contradictions, that shape a specific civilisational complex. Subjectivation, here, means both the way that the human being is historically ‘constructed’ as a subject, and the modes by which the human being is historically subjected to the prevailing social relations. The latter, as Antonio Gramsci pointed out, can take the form of coercion or hegemony. Hegemony is the way in which a dominant class instantiates its rule over society through the intermediary of ideology. For Gramsci, ideology is not mere false consciousness, but rather is the form in which humans become conscious – become subjects. The desk-killer, the mass murderer in a state of Rausch, the bystander, as I hope to show, are all modes of subjectivation produced by late capitalism, and its ideologies.

The Holocaust as a refutation of the equation between technological development and human progress

A number of thinkers on the margins of Marxism – Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Günter Anders – have challenged the orthodox-Marxist equation of industrial, scientific, and technological development and the progress of the human species. This equation represents the productivist element in Marxism, which celebrates unlimited industrial growth and technological development, conceives of capitalism as historically progressive so long as it assures such development, and insists that the same science, technology, and industrial labour, that propelled the global expansion of capitalism will serve as the basis of socialism. Even before the Nazi genocide, Walter Benjamin, in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, had grasped the danger inherent in the orthodox-Marxist commitment to technological progress, and its concomitant fetishisation of industrial labour, as the standard by which to measure human development:

[...]his vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labour bypasses the question of how its products might benefit the workers while still not being at their disposal. It recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism.

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28 In his L’Histoire déchirée, Traverso has both elucidated the contributions of Benjamin, Adorno, and Anders, and explicitly linked them to an understanding of the Holocaust.
Benjamin’s recognition of the catastrophic side of capitalist progress, his anticipation of the death-world to come, was seconded by his friend, Ernst Bloch, who preferred ‘a dash of pessimism’ to ‘the banal, automatic belief in progress as such’, because it would help avoid being surprised by catastrophes, ‘by the horrifying possibilities which have been concealed and will continue to be concealed precisely in capitalist progress’.

Surely, the Holocaust was one of those ‘horrifying possibilities’, as Herbert Marcuse clearly recognised:

> concentration camps, mass extermination, world wars and atom bombs are no ‘relapse into barbarism’, but the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology, and domination.

I want now to briefly examine this catastrophic side of industrial, technological, and scientific progress, as it has been theorised by Adorno, Marcuse, and Anders, and to show its links to the death-world symbolised by Auschwitz. In his essay on ‘Society’ (1965), Adorno pointed to the ‘totalitarian tendencies of the social order’ inherent in the spread of the commodity-form to all aspects of social reality. For Adorno, totalitarianism is not just a political system, but the culminating point of the subjugation of the totality of social existence to the imperatives of the commodity-form. The autonomy of the various spheres of life, that still characterised early capitalism, is destroyed as the category of exchange-value invades all realms of existence, even the aesthetic, the erotic, and the psychological. Thus, as Adorno claimed in his essay on ‘Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?’ (1968):

> Material production, distribution, and consumption are jointly administered. Their boundaries – which once really separated the distinct spheres, in spite of their mutual dependence within the total process, and thereby respected their qualitative differences – dissolve. All becomes one [Alles ist Eins].

While Adorno’s vision of the totalitarianism of late capitalism seemingly leaves no space for opposition or resistance, and thereby leaves Marxism no basis for the revolutionary optimism or hope which is its hallmark, he nonetheless has grasped an important dimension of its historical trajectory.

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30 Bloch 1986, p. 199.
31 Marcuse 1966, p. 4. Marcuse’s linkage of Auschwitz and Hiroshima has been seconded, and elaborated, in the work of his friend Günther Anders.
32 Adorno 1979, p. 16, my emphasis.
33 Adorno 1979, p. 369.
This vision of the totalitarian tendencies of late capitalism also shapes the work of Adorno’s friend Herbert Marcuse, who, in his *One-Dimensional Man*, argued that science, technology, and rationality, all possessed a definite, capitalist, social content:

The principles of modern science were *a priori* structured in such a way that they could serve as conceptual instruments for a universe of self-propelling, productive control. . . . The scientific method which led to the ever-more-effective domination of nature thus came to provide the pure concepts as well as the instrumentalities for the ever-more-effective domination of man by man. . . . Today, domination perpetuates and extends itself not only through technology but *as* technology, and the latter provides the great legitimation of the expanding political power, which absorbs all spheres of culture. . . . Technological rationality thus protects rather than cancels the legitimacy of domination, and the instrumentalist horizon of reason opens on a rationally totalitarian society. 

This science, technology, and rationality, historically generated by capitalism, and inextricably linked to its social relations, and immanent tendencies – what Marcuse designates as ‘the Logos of technics’ – has, in late capitalism, ‘been made into the Logos of continued servitude’. And this same Logos of technics constituted one of the preconditions for the unfolding of the project of industrialised mass murder in the Nazi death camps.

Günther Anders illuminates several of the other causal chains, whose interaction provided the necessary conditions for ‘the *transformation of humans into raw material* [Rohstoff]’ for the factories of death. For Anders, the very technology generated by human beings, and brought to perfection within the framework of capitalism, risks rendering its creators – humankind – superfluous, obsolescent; this is the claim of Anders’s two-volume *magnum opus*, *The Obsolescence of Man* [Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen]. Not only have man’s own creations, technologies and their accompanying social relations, assumed a life of their own, become *things* which seem to escape human control, the phenomenon of reification, first adumbrated by Georg Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness*, but – according to Anders – they now threaten the very annihilation of the human species itself. Thus:

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35 Marcuse 1964, p. 159.
What we constantly aim at is to bring about something that can function without our presence and help, tools by which we make ourselves superfluous, by which we eliminate and ‘liquidate’ ourselves. It doesn’t matter that this goal has only been approximated. What matters is the tendency. And its watchword is: ‘without us.’

Indeed, for Anders, this tendency inexorably leads to an outcome in which technology becomes the subject of history. One feature of this impending ‘obsolescence of man’ as a result of his own technological prowess, according to Anders, is the new mode of human existence that it has wrought: being a means, ‘mediality [Medialität].’ This mode of existence is characterised by an extreme conformism, in which the human being executes her assigned tasks without question. This behaviour, so typical of a business office or state agency, reappears in Auschwitz, where ‘the employee [Angestellte] of the death camp has not “acted” [gehandelt], but, as strange as it seems, done a job.’

Action entails decision, thought, and conscience; doing a job, performing an assigned task, means asking no questions, especially about purpose or goal, demanding no reasons for the prescribed task, other than the order to do it. It is capitalism that generates this ‘medial’ existence, a mode of subjectivation integrally linked to an economy based on the law of value, and necessary for the appearance of the desk-killer, that essential functionary of the death-world.

These meditations on the totalitarian tendencies of late capitalism, on the integral links between science and domination, technology and annihilation, and the medial existence of contemporary humans, raise two important problems for the kind of Marxist theory that is adequate to the task of understanding the Holocaust. First, there is the possibility that Adorno and Anders, however prescient their analyses of certain determinate tendencies of capitalist social development may be, risk propounding a sort of negative teleology, in which the meaning or goal of history lies in totalitarianism or in nihilistic destruction. For example, such a negative teleology seems inherent in Anders’s vision of technology as the subject of history, culminating in an ‘Endzeit’ in which ‘humanity as a whole is eliminatable [tötbar].’ Such a vision appears to leave no room for a revolutionary alternative to capitalism;

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38 Anders 1961, p. 287.
for the overthrow of a system based on the commodity-form and the law of value. Second, these meditations need to be connected to Marx’s reflections on technology and automation, and his analysis of the transition from the formal to the real subsumption of labour under capital, reflections that did not directly shape the theoretical work of Adorno or Anders, and their analyses of late capitalism and its immanent tendencies. Indeed, I believe that the link between late capitalism and the death-world, requires a clear understanding of both the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital, and of the sharpening of the contradiction between value and ‘real wealth’, also adumbrated by Marx – developments that have transfigured the history of the twentieth century, and to which the Holocaust is linked.

**From the formal to the real domination of capital**

Marx links the formal subsumption of labour under capital to the extraction of absolute surplus-value, whereas the real subsumption of labour under capital is linked to the extraction of relative surplus-value. This transition accompanies the whole history of capitalism, and, while the extraction of absolute surplus-value never ceases, an ever-greater reliance on the extraction of relative surplus-value asserts itself, and becomes increasingly dominant in the course of the twentieth century. With the formal domination of capital, the commodity-form and the law of value remain largely confined to the immediate point of production: the factory and the direct extraction of surplus-value. The real domination of capital, by contrast, is characterised by the penetration of the law of value into every segment of social existence. Thus, from its original locus at the point of production, the law of value has systematically spread its tentacles to incorporate not just the production of commodities, but their circulation and consumption too. Moreover, the law of value also penetrates and then comes to preside over the spheres of the political and ideological, including – besides the modes of subjectivation of human beings – science and technology themselves. This latter occurs not just through the transformation of technological and scientific research (and the institutions in which it takes place) into commodities, but especially through the infiltration of the value-form into reason itself (the triumph of a purely *instrumental* reason), and the reduction of all beings, nature and humans, to mere objects of manipulation and control. While the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital begins in the industrial metropoles
in the nineteenth century, its triumph, consolidation, and global spread, is a twentieth-century phenomenon.

While the transition from the formal to the real subsumption of labour under capital entails an increasing reliance on the fruits of science and technology to raise the productivity of labour, and thereby extract relative surplus-value, no matter how many changes occur in the forms and techniques of production, according to Marx, capitalism remains a mode of production whose ‘presupposition is – and remains – the mass of direct labour time, the quantity of labour employed, as the determinant factor in the production of wealth’. However, the historical trajectory of capitalism produces a growing contradiction between its unsurpassable basis in the expenditure of living labour to produce exchange-value, on the one hand, and the actual results of its own developmental tendencies on the other:

But to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time, whose ‘powerful effectiveness’ is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production.

This disjunction between exchange-value and ‘real wealth’, the former dependent on the direct expenditure of living labour, and the latter increasingly dependent on the overall productive power of society, and its cultural and technological development, creates the preconditions for the supersession of value production and the commodity-form. In Marx’s words:

[as soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange-value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The surplus labour of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth. . . .

42 Marx 1973, pp. 704–5, my emphasis.
43 Marx 1973, p. 705.
Therefore, when the perpetuation of value production, with its insurmountable basis in the extraction of surplus-value from living labour, has become an obstacle to the continued production of material wealth, capitalism as a mode of production and civilisation becomes the site of social retrogression. At that point in its historical trajectory, only a social revolution, the abolition of the law of value, and a qualitatively different science and technology, one no longer bound to instrumental reason, quantification, and the logos of domination, can prevent the catastrophes that the perpetuation of value production will entail. In the absence of such a social revolution, the continued existence of capitalism, bound as it is to the extraction of surplus-value from living labour, and yet confronted by the tendential fall in the rate of profit by the fact that the rate of growth of surplus-value tends to fall even as the level of surplus labour rises, compels it to accelerate the development of the productive forces and technology at an ever-more frenzied rate and tempo. Marx clearly grasped this imperative:

Thus the more developed capital already is, the more surplus labour it has created, the more terribly must it develop the productive force in order to realize itself in only smaller proportion, i.e. to add surplus value – because the barrier always remains the relation between the fractional part of the day which expresses necessary labour, and the entire working day. It can move only within these boundaries. The smaller already the fractional part falling to necessary labour, the greater the surplus labour, the less can any increase in productive force perceptibly diminish necessary labour; since the denominator has grown enormously. The self-realization of capital becomes more difficult to the extent that it has already been realized.44

However, this very contradiction increases the pressure on every capital entity, on every business, to expand the forces of production, develop and implement new technologies, increase its productivity, in a desperate attempt to escape the downward course in the average rate of profit, and to obtain a surplus-profit by producing commodities below their socially average value. Therefore, the faster the rate of profit falls, as a result of the rising organic composition of capital, i.e. the growth of the productive forces, the greater the pressure on each capital entity – nation or firm – to accelerate the development of those self-same productive forces in the endless quest to get a jump ahead of its competitors, and to grab a surplus-profit. One result of this frenetic

growth of the productive forces in an epoch of social retrogression is the inevitable creation of a surplus population for which capital can find no profitable use.

**Surplus population and mass murder**

While each stage of capitalist development entails demographic displacements, what typically occurs is a shift of labour-power from one sector to another, from agriculture, to industry, to tertiary sectors. While such shifts continue to occur as the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital takes place, a new and unprecedented development also makes its appearance when capitalism, as Marx shows, ‘calls to life all the powers of science and nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it’. The result is the tendential ejection of ever-larger masses of labour from the productive process; the creation of a population that from the point of view of capital is superfluous, no longer even potentially necessary to the creation of value, and indeed having become an insuperable burden for capital, a dead weight that it must bear, even at the expense of its profitability. The existence of such a surplus population – at the level of the total capital of a national entity – can create the conditions for mass murder, inserting the extermination of whole groups of people into the very ‘logic’ of capital, and through the complex interaction of multiple causal chains emerge as the policy of a capitalist state.

In the specific case of Nazi Germany, Götz Aly and Susanne Heim have argued that the extermination of the Jews was the first stage of a far-reaching demographic project in the service of economic modernisation. Germany’s attempt to confront Anglo-American domination of the world market entailed the creation of a vast economic space [Grossraumwirtschaft], continental autarky for Europe, under German hegemony. But such a project was not simply based on geographical expansion; it also necessitated vast demographic changes, especially in Eastern Europe. There, the German planners, demographers, and economists, whose projects Aly and Heim have investigated, confronted a problem of economic backwardness linked to overpopulation. A vast agricultural population, with small landholdings and

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46 Aly and Heim 1993, pp. 102–24.
extremely low productivity, was a formidable obstacle both to German hopes for autarchy in food production for the European continent, and for industrial development, economic modernisation, in the East, so as to make the German economic space competitive with Anglo-American capital. The Jews in Eastern Europe, both as a largely urban population, and as the owners of small, unproductive businesses, constituted a particular obstacle to the migration of Slavs from the overpopulated countryside to the cities, such that their elimination was seen as a prerequisite for economic development. Moreover, for these planners, such processes of economic transformation could not be left to ‘market forces’ – which in England, the US, and in Western Europe, had taken generations – but, given the exigencies of imperialist competition and war, had to be undertaken by the state on the quick. The Generalplan Ost, within which the extermination of the Jews was the first stage, envisaged the elimination, by ‘resettlement’ (beyond the Urals), death by starvation and slave labour, or mass murder, of a surplus population of perhaps fifty million human beings.47

While emphasising the economic ‘utilitarianism’ and rationality of this project of mass murder, and ignoring the sadism and brutality of so much of the killing, Aly and Heim have nonetheless attempted to incorporate the role of biological racism into their analysis of the Holocaust:

[s]election according to racist criteria was not inconsistent with economic calculations; instead it was an integral element. Just as contemporary anthropologists, physicians and biologists considered ostracizing and exterminating supposedly ‘inferior’ people according to racist and achievement-related criteria to be a scientific method of improving humanity and ‘improving the health of the body of the Volk’, economists, agrarian experts, and environmental planners believed they had to work on ‘improving the health of the social structure’ in the underdeveloped regions of Europe.48

What seems to me to be missing in the work of Aly and Heim, is the link between racism and science constituted by their common source in a logos

47 Aly and Heim 1993, pp. 394–440.
48 Heim and Aly 1994, p. 50. In addition to a tendency to a monocausal analysis of the Holocaust, based on utilitarian factors, only partially modified in this and subsequent texts, Aly and Heim fail to account for the primordial role of antisemitism, of fanatical Jew hatred, and of the Rausch, the orgy of bloodletting, in which so much of the killing was carried out.
of technics based on the absolute control of nature and humans, right down to the most elementary biological level of existence. And that logos, as I have argued, is the product of the spread of the capitalist law of value into the sphere of reason itself. However, Aly’s and Heims’s research, particularly if it is linked to the operation of the capitalist law of value, and treats the demographic problems that German planners confronted in Eastern Europe as a manifestation of the specific tendency of late capitalism to create a surplus population, can help us to grasp one of the causal chains that led to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

**Massification and the Nazi genocide**

If we are to understand the role played by fanatical antisemitism, and by the orgiastic character of so much of the killing, in the Final Solution, then, it seems to me, we must also grasp another causal chain linked to the immanent tendencies of late capitalism: that unleashed by the phenomenon of massification.

One of the most dramatic effects of the inexorable penetration of the law of value into every pore of social and individual existence has been the destruction of all primitive, organic, and precapitalist communities. Capitalism, as Marx and Engels pointed out in the *Communist Manifesto*, shatters the bonds of immemorial custom and tradition, replacing them with its exchange mechanism, and contract. The outcome is the phenomenon of atomisation, the subjectivation of the person as an individual monad, animated purely by self-interest. Moreover, that very tendency produces an ever-growing mass of rootless individuals, for whom the only human contact is by way of the cash nexus. But those who have been uprooted – geographically, economically, politically, and culturally – are frequently left with a powerful longing for their lost communities (even where those communities were hierarchically organised and based on inequality), for the certainties and ‘truths’ of the past, which are romanticised the more frustrating, unsatisfying, and insecure, the world shaped by capital has become.

These longings can take the form of the constitution of a mass. In a work written in 1939, Emil Lederer analysed the formation of the mass as one of the dominant features of the epoch. In contrast to a class, this is how he described it:

> I understand by a mass or a crowd a great number of people who are inwardly united so that they feel and may possibly act as a unity. . . . The
individuals in a mass belong to different social groups, but that does not matter: they are not aware of it as long as they form part of the mass. Masses are therefore amorphous; social stratification is effaced or at least blurred. The point of unity for the individuals comprising a mass is always emotional. A crowd can be united only by emotions, never by reason: reason would be lost on the masses. . . .

According to Lederer, ‘usually the crowd will act only if there is a leader’. And when the mass acts, its members cease to think: they are moved, they are carried away, they are elated; they feel united with their fellow members in the crowd, released from all inhibitions. . . . Psychological descriptions of this phenomenon by individuals who have experienced it concur in this respect: they say they were ‘carried away’; that they only felt; that it is similar to intoxication.

What is missing in Lederer’s account, however, is the connection of the phenomenon of massification to the developmental tendencies of late capitalism. Indeed, Lederer explicitly links the formation of the mass to the end of class society; for him, the ‘state of the masses’ arises on the ashes of capitalism, not as one of its possible political forms. I want to refunction Lederer’s concept of massification by linking it directly to the trajectory of capitalism, and by showing how this phenomenon is connected to the orgiastic features of the Nazi genocide. It is the very longing for community that sociologically underlies the formation of the mass, a longing that the capitalist state under determinate conditions, such as those prevailing in Germany on the eve of Hitler’s seizure of power, could utilise in the interests of a mass mobilisation – even as those same longings powerfully affected segments of the ruling class itself. In that sense, the Nazi vision of a ‘racially pure community’, a Volksgemeinschaft, was directly linked to the effects of capitalism’s destruction of all genuine communal bonds, and to the void that it left in its wake. The powerful impact of such an ideology, its modes of subjectivation, and its deep roots, escaped the orthodox Marxist opponents of the Nazis, both Stalinist and Trotskyist, though they were clearly understood by Ernst Bloch.

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52 See Bloch 1990, especially pp. 37–185, for an insightful analysis of this phenomenon, first written in the 1930s. While Bloch grasps the significance of this longing for
No matter how intense this longing for community may be, it cannot be satisfied so long as the law of value regulates social existence. The organic communities of the precapitalist past can be neither preserved nor recreated; their destruction is irreversible. Moreover, no new communities, no human Gemeinwesen, can be created within the historico-economic space occupied by capitalism. The condition of massification, spawned by the very development of capitalism itself, leaves only the prospect of a ‘community’ in which a racial, ethnic, or religious identification is merely superimposed on the existing conditions of wage-labour. Yet, as Lederer points out, this identification is necessary to the constitution of the crowd or the mass out of the multitude of a given population:

[t]hat a multitude can easily become a crowd must not obscure the fact that its members must be susceptible to the same emotions, which presupposes . . . that they speak the same language and share a common historical experience. Large numbers of people belonging to different nations and races are not likely to coalesce into what we call a crowd. The existence of a common cultural basis is very important.53

The formation of the mass both provides a substitute gratification for the genuine longing for community felt by the multitude of the population, and a basis upon which the ruling class can establish its hegemony.

However, the foundation upon which such a mass is constituted, the identity upon which the pure community is established, necessarily entails the exclusion of those who do not share the common historico-cultural bases of the mass. Those excluded, the Other, racial, ethnic, or religious minorities for example, though they inhabit the same territorial space as the mass, become alien elements within the putatively ‘homogeneous’ world of the pure community. The Other, the Jew within the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft, for example, then becomes the scapegoat for the inability of the pure community to provide real communal bonds between people, to eliminate the alienation generated by capitalism. The more crisis-ridden a society becomes, the greater the rage of the mass against alterity; the more urgent the need of the ruling class for a mobilisation of the crowd behind its projects (including war), the more imperious the necessity to channel anger onto the Other. Thus racism and xenophobia are

community, and the success of the Nazis in mobilising it for their own purposes, he does not explicitly link it to the process of massification in late capitalism.

53 Lederer 1967, p. 31.
inseparable from the constitution of the mass in late-capitalist society. In an extreme situation, that rage against alterity can become one of the bases for a genocidal project directed at the Other, whose very existence is seen and felt to be a mortal danger to the pure community.

One outcome of that rage against alterity can be seen in the orgiastic bloodletting that characterised so much of the killing during the Holocaust. One example, from the war diary of Felix Landau, a member of one of the Einsatzkommando, active in Lemberg in 1941, can serve as an illustration:

[...]here were hundreds of Jews walking along the street with blood pouring down their faces, holes in their heads, their hands broken and their eyes hanging out of their sockets. They were covered in blood. . . . We went to the citadel; there we saw things that few people have ever seen. At the entrance to the citadel there were soldiers standing guard. They were holding clubs as thick as a man’s wrist and were lashing out and hitting anyone who crossed their path. The Jews were pouring out of the entrance. There were rows of Jews lying one on top of the other like pigs whimpering horribly. The Jews kept streaming out of the citadel completely covered in blood. We stopped and tried to see who was in charge of the Kommando. . . . Someone had let the Jews go. They were just being hit out of rage and hatred.54

The ‘cold’, rational, organisation of the factories of death and the transport networks that served them, administered by desk-killers like Adolf Eichmann, must be linked to the ‘hot’ rage and uncontrolled lust and aggression witnessed by Landau, in order to have a comprehensive picture of the unfolding of the Nazi genocide. The source of both these facets of the Holocaust, as I have argued, is to be found in the trajectory of late capitalism, and one vital task of Marxist theory is to expose the bases for this modern barbarism.

The future dimension of the Holocaust

The Holocaust opened a door into a death-world, and so long as capitalism exists that door will remain open. The horrors of the past decade, the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda, the concentration camps filled with starving prisoners, the mass rape of Muslim women, and the mass killings by beating and

54 Klee and Riess 1991, p. 91.
shooting of Muslim men and boys in Bosnia, the ethnic cleansing, first by Serbs and then by Albanians in Kosovo, the Russian army’s reduction of Grozny to a pile of rubble, beneath which are buried tens of thousands of Chechen civilians, deliberately killed by the most sophisticated modern weapons, all bear witness to the fact that the death-world remains an objective-real possibility on the front of history. Alex Callinicos has argued, that

... the point of Holocaust commemoration is surely not only to acknowledge the suffering of the victims but also to help sustain a political consciousness that is on guard against any signs of the repetition of Nazi crimes.\footnote{Callinicos 2001, p. 386.}

That political consciousness requires a recognition that key causal chains that came together to unleash the Nazi genocide, the logos of domination that shapes science and technology, the tendency to create a vast overpopulation, a multitude that cannot be profitably exploited by capital, the racism, and hatred for alterity, attendant on massification, are integrally linked to the trajectory of late capitalism, and decisively shape the contemporary socio-economic landscape. The narrative of the Holocaust cannot be written in the past tense, so long as the world created by the real domination of capital remains intact.

References


An Interview with Michael Hardt

Historical Materialism: Can you tell us something about your intellectual and political background, and how your collaboration with Toni Negri on Empire came about?

Michael Hardt: For one’s own past, one always constructs narratives. In the early 1980s, I was part of a US left youth that sought a kind of self-exportation of revolutionary energies. It seemed impossible for many of us to do politics in the US, and so Central America seemed like the only possibility. I was first working with something that we called the Sanctuary Movement, which was bringing Central Americans – Salvadorans and Guatemalans, mostly – to the US, to churches (it was a church-based movement) and have them tell their tragic stories to affect US public opinion. So, with them, I moved to Mexico City and then, out of frustration with them, went to El Salvador and got more involved with the National University in El Salvador, which seemed to me a more interesting political context.

In any case, from that perspective, it was there, reading Negri’s philosophical work and about what Italy had done in the 1970s, that the Italian context seemed that much closer to my own experience, or my own desires. One of my main complaints about the US Americans in Central America was that we were essentially observers, or sometimes participating,
in someone else’s struggle – but it was clearly not our own. And so the Italian thing seemed closer to home. The Central Americans always told us – and we didn’t know how to respond – they always said: ‘You know, it’s nice that you’re here and that you want to help, but it would really help us most if you went home and made revolution in the US’. And we were all willing, but had no idea of how to do such things. In any case, it was from that perspective that the Italian experiences seemed closer to my own desires, and Negri personally seemed to be one who had managed to have his scholarly and political activities combine – something which I was experiencing a certain amount of frustration with at the time.

Was it the Central Americans who pointed you to Negri?

No, it wasn’t. Actually, what I first read is the book that he co-wrote with Félix Guattari.\(^1\) It was a French version I read, and in fact I translated his Spinoza book\(^2\) in order to meet him. Because he was semi-clandestine in France at the time; I was a lowly graduate student and didn’t know how to present myself. So I went to Paris to ask some translation questions, really – and we had a nice time, and so I moved to Paris and that’s how I got things started.

Originally you were steeped in poststructuralist philosophy – did you move via Guattari to Negri, or directly to your interest in the 1970s in Italy, in the revolutionary movement there?

I knew a little bit of French philosophy before, but I read them mostly when I was in France. From literature programmes in the US I actually read Derrida first, which was much more important in the US than either Foucault or Deleuze or Guattari.

The Italian experience of the 1970s is obviously a very exciting and inspiring period, but it seems still quite alien to an American context. It seems like a very European kind of experience – high levels of class struggle, many large-scale revolutionary organisations, direct conflict with the state, and so on. It doesn’t seem like something that would automatically attract somebody from the US.

Right, but what else did I have to choose from? If only I knew Japanese, maybe that would have been better.

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\(^1\) Guattari and Negri 1990.
\(^2\) Negri 2000.
What about the place of Empire itself in this trajectory?

Its origin, in part, is in Toni’s and my thinking after working on Labor of Dionysus, that it was a very Euro-American book, and wasn’t able to grasp things going on elsewhere. So it was probably a questioning of, you know, ‘Do similar ideas actually correspond to what’s going on in other parts of the world?’ That was part of it, and then obviously, feeling engaged with other people. Postcolonial studies seemed very interesting to me in the mid-1990s – subaltern studies in particular. So, partly, it’s a result of the work of others, that seemed useful.

Presumably all of that stuff was quite new to Negri? Postcolonial studies and so forth?

Yes, it was. That literature’s new to him, and we always worked – this is the nice thing about collaboration – by giving each other reading lists, and suggesting books to read. It’s one of the nicest things about writing with someone, is that they insist on certain things. And then, strangely enough, something that I was previously interested in, I’d get him to start reading it, and he’s the one who actually does most of the work on that aspect, or something like that. I hadn’t read Carl Schmitt before writing this book, but then Toni used to say, read him and I’d write most of the Schmitt part.

Is Empire the product of a broader intellectual collaboration or project shared with other activists and theorists?

If I understand what you’re asking, it’s just the context in which the two of us find ourselves. I mean, I, and particularly my colleagues in my university, and then the people I know in the US, obviously are a primary reference. And then Paris was – for Negri, in particular, and for me also – an important context. But it wasn’t a conscious project to say: ‘Let’s experiment to and see if we can put European thought and US thought together.’ It’s a kind of dialogue between the two of us, and each of us has certain referents. One should also point out, it’s not just that we have a US-er and a European that have got together. Toni has a history of great engagement with US movements and intellectual work, and I, of course, was really formed in European thought. So it’s more like there’s a dialogue within each of us, as much as between the two of us.

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3 Hardt and Negri 1994.
From our perspective as a Marxist journal, what’s particularly striking and refreshing about the book, in terms of the general intellectual context, is all these names dusted off from the attic, who had been consigned to irrelevance – not just Marx and Lenin, but also Otto Bauer, Rosa Luxemburg. Interesting absence of Trotsky, he’s the only one, I think, who isn’t mentioned throughout the whole book. Is that a common intellectual context that you shared, or was that coming more from Negri’s background and history in the general Marxist movement?

He was formed in a different period than me, so there might be a difference there. But both of us come out of general Marxist traditions, so I mean, they’re reference points for each of us, and in that sense we did think it was important – maybe each time we write something, it seems important to us to gauge what we’re working on against, or in relation to, the history of Marxist theorising. And not always as if we’re positing a direct continuity with all of the tradition – while the tradition is so varied, also – but that it seems necessary to say how this relates to Lenin’s work, or to Luxemburg’s work, and not just assume that it’s completely different because we’re in different times.

That’s a striking feature of Negri’s work generally, though, isn’t it? In *Insurgencies*, for example, and in this book, there is a retrieval of these Marxist classics. It’s critical, it’s full of qualifications, and so on, but the fact that Negri doesn’t simply throw Lenin overboard, for instance, but takes him seriously as a thinker – not just a political activist – is a brave and important thing, in terms of not dumping a whole tradition. It’s quite unusual for a book published by Harvard University Press.

I know. Well that’s their fault! They misunderstood. But it seems perfectly coherent for us. And useful – I mean, one always gets something, one always learns something new by returning to these texts. So I mean, we don’t do it, certainly, as a matter of paying homage; in a way – it’s to learn something.

Can we turn to the book itself, and perhaps follow the structure of the text as you present it. To what extent can the Constitution of Empire as you outline it at the outset of the book, be understood as a realisation of a cosmopolitan, liberal-internationalist project for an international order that will secure perpetual peace?

One has to approach the tradition with a certain irony, or duplicity, because there are perspectives from which such a peace could be realisable. But it’s obviously not a peace; it’s a peace that’s completely underwritten by wars,

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by violence of different kinds – also by international hierarchies, and hierarchies that are not defined along national lines. So I think that, in a way, it’s interesting to follow that tradition, partly because of the influence it’s had in legal formations, and at the same time to see the underside of that tradition – the implicit, unsaid of that notion of international peace.

There’s another operation going on here, or another, let’s say, methodological approach, that one might question, which is that, in a way, we’re privileging the legal and juridical formation by starting that way. I think that it would be a mistake for the book to give that impression, because I don’t think that the juridical is somehow primary to cultural formations, other political formations, economic formations. It seemed to us, rhetorically – I mean, also in the process of our own understanding, which probably betrays our own past – that that legal framework seemed like the best introduction to us. And one shouldn’t think of it as exclusive – I think of other formations. In fact, I think someone else might start from the economic, and then arrive at this. We started from the juridical because it seemed like an entry point.

*And Negri’s background is jurisprudence, isn’t it?*[^5]

Right. His original background is very much philosophical-legal philosophy was the title of his position. In Italy they called it ‘state theory’, but I think we would call it something like ‘legal theory’.

*In what ways do you see this tendency towards a network society, a global network society, or a society of control, as you call it, being causally related to the Constitution of Empire?*

Well, just so there isn’t confusion, I think there are two separate things: one is the question about immaterial labour, or changes in the nature of labour forms or, really, hierarchies among different forms of labour. That I don’t think is causally related to the juridical formation. I mean, I think it develops in parallel, but not as if it were primary over the legal. It’s a separate question, really, about the network structure of power, which I don’t think is a result of technological innovations. In other words, in a way, the internet, or the notion of network more generally, has given us an imaginative schema for understanding a form of power; but it’s not like it was caused by the invention of the internet, or some other information-communication structures. I guess one could get that idea, say, from Castells’s work, that the technological

[^5]: See, for example, Negri 1958 and Negri 1962.
revolutions have in fact created a new form of power. Our argument about network power, as we call it, has a much different history, and doesn’t coincide in the same way. It doesn’t seem to me to be causally related.

In the book, you say that ‘the multitude called Empire into being’. You suggest that Empire is a response to the various struggles against modern machineries of power, and, specifically, to class struggle, driven by the multitude’s desire for liberation. Could you provide some illustrations where you feel that the Constitution of Empire has been the product of struggles by the multitude?

I’ll give the one that comes to mind immediately – it’s probably a bad example to give, because it’s undertheorised, but it’s in the second half of the book – which is more or less the claim that the struggles of a global ‘68 not only made impossible a certain disciplinary régime of labour, and created the need for a new régime, but also prefigured that new régime. In other words, our claim in that chapter is that the same qualities that defined the movements against the global disciplinary régime, as we’re calling it there – including feminist movements, student movements, worker movements, anti-imperialist movements – the qualities which I think we defined summarily as something like the communication, the importance of knowledge, the importance of affect... I can’t remember the other points – that those are the same axes on which capital restructured production, at least restructured the pinnacle of production.

So this is the way the Italian tradition of *operaismo* defines this, and it is Mario Tronti that defines it this way. Tronti says that the working class precedes and prefigures the successive restructurations of capital, which is a big claim. It’s not only that the struggle leads capital to change, but that it actually prefigures the changes that capital will make. In other words, the struggles of the working class are the only creative aspect – capital only recuperates and steps back. The primary example in Marx’s writing that Tronti gives, which is a reasonable one, is the part in *Volume I* on the factory, when Marx is talking about machines and says, famously, that a whole history of technological innovations could be written since – I can’t remember when, 1830 or something – based on the struggles of workers; I think Tronti summarises those passages as saying, ‘Where there are strikes, machines will follow’, meaning that the technology of capital follows dependent upon the

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6 Tronti 1971.
struggles of the working class. I think that is a fundamental theoretical axiom in our book – that it’s fundamentally the creativity of labour that defines society, and that forms of power are dependent upon that.

I wanted to follow up on that, because the book can be read uncharitably as expressing an almost vitalist notion that everything that’s creative, that’s passionate, that’s desiring, that’s positive, that’s formative, is on the side of the multitudes, of the proletariats; and capital is reactive, I think as you say – especially in your more lyrical passages – capital is vampiric, capital is always one step back, capital always adapts itself to the circumstances, tries to recuperate, but doesn’t seem to have any motive force of its own, apart from what it recuperates, or what it sucks, from the multitude. How do you guard against those two dangers: voluntarism and hyper-optimism on the one hand; and, secondly, a view of crisis which itself, the critics would say, is taken from neoliberal explanations of crisis, rather than strictly Marxist ones?

I’m not sure about that last bit, but anyway, let me come to the first part. There are two things. On the more specific, it is important, I think, to always emphasise the role of labour, the role of the multitude in its creative aspects, because those are the ones that are most hidden, and the most traditionally misunderstood. So that, it seems to me, there’s more need, rhetorically, to emphasise those moments, because the assumption is always that capital is the creative one – for instance that globalisation was the dream of capital, and that workers were always therefore anti-global. So, I think that you’re right to insist on a – I don’t want to say dialectical, but at least a reciprocal – relationship, in that.

The next question, about victory and loss, reminds me of two things. This is one reason why I like so much the bit from William Morris that we used as an epigraph, where Morris is essentially saying what we were saying, which is that what look to be failures turn out to be victories, but then a false kind of victory, and one has to in fact struggle for something new based on that. It’s that kind of notion that we wanted to . . . that the failures aren’t purely failures. Maybe that’s how I’d put it. They’re not, also, unqualified victories. This is what reminds me of Fred Jameson’s ‘winners lose’ scenario – that he’s focusing on the other side, really; what looks like the side that won in fact, actually, it turns out that they lost. We’re really talking about the same thing.

Lenin says somewhere – it must have been after 1905 – that the history of
communism is all about defeats. He was talking about the Commune, about 1905. He says, ‘We’re all about defeats, of course we’ve always had defeats, but that doesn’t mean that it hasn’t grown and that it isn’t victorious.’ And maybe, then Fred might say, well, 1917 turns out to be a greater loss than some others – he could say such a thing. I guess, in both cases, you’re adding a sort of second side to what we’re doing, which seems to me perfectly appropriate – although I would still like to insist on the importance of emphasising this one side, both, I think, because we’ve had the tendency to undervalue it, and also it can provide the seeds for a future.

Let me just go into that a little bit more. The book has been characterised as being optimistic. In certain ways, I’m sure that’s true. I think often, though, what’s meant by optimism is some sort of hope that the future will be better without any real basis for thinking so. And it’s this argument that seems to me one of the ways in which it’s not so much optimism, but a confidence in the movements of history. In other words, to the extent that we can demonstrate that the present situation was in fact created by the multitude, or by the proletariat – created, of course, and then distorted in [certain] ways – we can recognise our own power in the present form of domination, it then leaves us not powerless; it leaves us with a recognition of a kind of history of power, that then can be used alternatively. For instance, if one were to accept that, as I said, rather shaky hypothesis about how the movements of ’68, in a way, formed the axes for the new immaterial economy, then one could say, well, this new immaterial economy is not merely a form of domination; it’s also a result – a distorted result – of our own power. And we could use that power again to destroy this form of domination, and do something more. In a way, all of the book, it seems to me, is arguing against a feeling of powerlessness on the Left, and hopefully in justified ways.

Linking onto this, one of the refreshing and welcome aspects of the text is that it’s not exclusively on the structures, the powerful structures, of global capitalism, but also about the possibilities, the potentials, of transformation, which as you say in the book, are rooted materially. But, in the book, you also talk about the need to reject notions of strategy, or the old distinctions between strategy and tactics, and instead invoke this serpentine metaphor – the various struggles going on, Tiananmen, Chiapas, Indonesia, wherever it may be – the surging up of these movements.

Isn’t it precisely the absence of internationalist, transnational, old-style solidarity that may be partially accountable for these defeats? Because, frankly – for all the changes that have taken place in Chinese society, and certainly in Mexican society,
as a result of these protests – the fact of the matter is that the EZLN has been defeated in terms of its strategic objectives. Is this rejection of the idea of strategy and tactics not premature, as reflected in recent historical events?

Right. Let me try two separate things. One is that what we’re responding to in that Chapter, 1.3, where we talk about these various movements of the early 1990s – because it was before Seattle at that point – we recognise already the motto of what was more or less, ‘Think globally, act globally’. And the question is, of course, how do you act globally? Well, proletarian internationalism had functioned as a kind of global action, and particularly through cycles of struggles. And cycles of struggles were, of course, local, but they were repeatable in different local contexts – in other words, one could be in Hanoi and see what had happened in Shanghai, and say, ‘Well, that’s our struggle’, and, sometimes through misrecognition, recreate it, and create a sort of chain that extends globally. And that kind of horizontal organisation seemed to us the way that proletarian internationalism formed a kind of global action throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century – anti-slavery revolts, national liberation movements, in various ways.

It seemed to us that, since ’68, that was no longer happening, and these struggles in particular that you are pointing to seemed to us distinctive for the fact that they did not create chains, that they did not create cycles. What we were puzzling over is, well, if movements aren’t doing that now, how can they act locally? And our one hypothesis was that, perhaps, rather than gaining global significance by extending themselves horizontally in different regions, each of them were addressing global issues immediately. Chiapas, of course, was about racial relationships within Mexico, about particularly Mexican things, but it was also about NAFTA, it was also about globalisation. So that, it in a way leapt, in that sense, directly to the global level. I do agree with you that that’s a weakness, and in fact what we were thinking about was two things that had existed in a previous era that didn’t exist today: one was a recognition of a common enemy, which is a complex question; and the second is a common language, in the sense that proletarian internationalism, or Third-World liberation, formed common languages that could travel from one region to another. And these seemed to us at least two aspects that were missing, and that therefore needed to be created in order to extend struggles in the way that you were suggesting.

My second point is about strategy and tactics. Toni wrote a book about Lenin – he wrote it, maybe, in 1977, I think – called Thirty-Three Lessons on
Lenin or something like that. I think it only exists in Italian. I remember that Toni was reading Lenin on worker organisations, and the forms of organisation relating to labour. And his argument was that it would be an ahistorical reading of Lenin to take the same structure, the same form of organisation, that was appropriate then, and transport it to a later time period; that, in fact, he said, the secret to, or the essential point, of Lenin’s theory of political organisation was that the dominant form of labour in a specific society suggested the form that was most powerful for the political organisation of contestation. So that the hierarchical and centralised form of factory labour in Russia at the turn of the century provided the model for Bolshevik organisation. Later, what they called in Italy the mass worker suggested, in a way, a mass party. Now, what then one should think of is what forms of labour could suggest today the political form of organisation, and that seems to me a useful way of posing the question.

I don’t have, and certainly Toni and I don’t have an answer in the book – I’m not sure if you asked Toni, Toni will always give you an answer, whatever you ask him – but what I would say is, that’s a way of posing the question – I don’t have an answer to what the adequate form of political organisation is today, but it seems to me one useful way of approaching it is through an analysis of forms of relationships among labour today, and in a way transposing that to invent a form of political organisation adequate to it. So, that’s sort of related to strategy and tactics, right?

In relation to that, then, do you think that, because you say cycles are over, and...

Well, they were.

OK, but a clear cycle did emerge from Seattle to Genoa. What does that say about your thesis on the incommunicability of struggles? Because it does seem like there are common enemies, or some such things, and there is, if not a common language, some common slogans – you know, ‘The World Is Not for Sale’, ‘No Justice, No Peace’, which are shared globally, even if there is not yet a common language to structure them and to formulate them.

Limited. Yeah, I agree with you, though. I think that there is something that is different, that’s emerged since we wrote it. And it is clearly a cycle, of sorts, and there is developing a common language and common enemies. I think that there are some ways in which they’re inadequate, but the way it always

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7 Negri 1977.
is in such movements. I mean, it seems to me those are internal arguments within the movement that I would have. It seems to me, a fundamental challenge for these movements now is the extension of this cycle outside of the north Atlantic context – the north Atlantic and Australia, I guess. I mean, what’s clear is it’s not just people in the US, or North America and Europe and Australia, who are opposed to the super-national economic organisations. There are, of course, riots in Jamaica against the IMF, a variety of other places. It’s that, though, this cycle of struggles has not been able to communicate with such places – it’s not been able to extend itself. I’m not saying anything new here – most people in the movements recognise it’s an important challenge, too. It’s a large one – it’s not a very easy thing to do. For instance, I was in Indonesia before Genoa. It was a couple of weeks before, and I was meeting with these anarchist groups. I mean, I was on vacation – but anyway . . .

That’s what you do on vacation, is it?

Well, it’s fun! And they were sort of anarcho-punk groups, and they really wanted to go to Genoa. You know, it’s not like they didn’t have common desires to people their own age in Europe or the US; it’s that, (a) there’s no way they could fly to Genoa, and (b) if they try to do something in Jakarta, they get the shit beat out of them. So, I mean, there are objective problems – that’s all I meant, is that it’s not the kind of problem that, once various people in the movement say, yeah, this should happen, it’s going to mean it would happen – it requires a much larger revolution. But the only reason I launched on that is that I thought there are important ways in which this cycle of struggles is not yet a global cycle, and that that would be an important challenge for it.

You make a strong case in the book (which, I think, in all kinds of other ways, later has implications for the argument) about sovereignty emerging in the context of the two modernities – in Europe and in particular in relation to its extra-European Other. Yet, numerous Marxist historians have suggested that in fact the origins of capitalism and modern sovereignty are quite Eurocentric, in a strict historical sense. And not just Eurocentric, but emerged in England at a very particular conjuncture – I’m thinking of Robert Brenner’s and Ellen Wood’s arguments. How would you counter this?

I don’t quite see the differences so much. I mean, that we focus on Renaissance philosophy and Bob Brenner focuses on English agrarian economics. In a way, I think that what we’re both getting at a similar European and, in many
ways, pan-European transformation of forms of power at the end of the Middle Ages. I mean, there are two things that we add to this, but I’m not sure that they conflict with that hypothesis. The one thing that we insist upon is that, again, with the same paradigm that we were talking about before, that it wasn’t that these forms of power were invented by the emerging bourgeoisie, or rich capitalist farmers; it’s that, in a way, there were struggles of liberation that forced this first modernity of the great expression of both secularism and humanism, was countered in a recuperative way by another modernity. That’s one thing that we’ve added, but I’m not sure that that conflicts with Brenner – we’ll see in a minute.

The other is simply Europe’s relationship with non-Europe – the early colonial project. I think that we have an equally Eurocentric description of sovereignty. One should then discuss whether that’s a problem or not, but ours is Eurocentric – it’s just that the ‘centrism’ of Europe was continually in dialogue with and in conflict with its projects of conquest. And so, sometimes, the instruments of European power, and also the elements of European knowledge and musical inventions, etc., came from the colonial territories. Not because of any superiority of the colonies – in fact, in relationships of domination – but simply as a kind of recuperation of the creative energies. One famous Mexicanist writes of the ways that early Meso-American relationships with Spain produced a catalogue of European cultural forms that we thought were strictly European – musical forms, the sarabande and some others that he in fact shows were taken from Meso-America. The point is, people say ‘You’re trying to talk about a global trend of power, and yet your argument is Eurocentric, and Euro-American centred.’ And my response is that it’s Eurocentric because that is the path of the genealogy of power that we’re following.

I like the way a Chinese historian who works with me puts it. He wonders, writing about Chinese history, why it is that Eurocentrism won and other ‘centrism’ in the early modern period – Sinocentrism is what he studied – why didn’t that influence the world, and he says – quite simply but I think largely true – that it’s the success of capital working hand-in-hand with Eurocentrism, that made, in a way, the trajectory that we trace in our argument. So, in a way, it seems to me not necessarily a Eurocentrism on our part to recognise the European trajectory of those forms of power. But that’s, maybe, a defence that’s not as much required in this context as it is in the US – but it’s constantly brought up in the US.
I know it’s meant to be metaphorical, and in a way playful, but there’s this calendar that you speak of, where decolonisation is the equivalent of February, and October never arrives. But of course, seen through the perspective of, say, an Algerian, even of our generation – or a Vietnamese or a Cuban – clearly that calendar isn’t the same one, it seems to me, because February and October coincided, as it were. And indeed, in many other instances, there is still a project of October coming, in the context of those new states.

Hold on a second – just go back a second. Because you said that February and October came together, and then you said there’s still a project of October coming. Did it come or not?

I suppose I’m getting at two sets of questions. One is: should the notions of historical time that we employ, in terms of these changes, be made geographically variable? And, secondly, in relation to the book itself, there are several instances where you endorse the very transcendental power of the state, like for example in your references to the truth commissions in South Africa and in Central America, where it’s precisely the modern state – bourgeois it may be – that is capable of, at least formally, representing the interests of those that have been victims. So I saw a contradiction there, and I’m just a bit concerned that, again, you dismiss the idea of national liberation being a poisoned gift.

It is, though, isn’t it? Okay, let me start. Well, I can just do the truth commissions quickly. I mean, I think that it’s not really an endorsement of the state in that passage – it’s merely recognition that, in the context of certain postmodernist discourses, one shouldn’t dismiss claims to truth so quickly; that there are certain contexts in which truth is in fact not a problem, and is not ungrounded. And, in those instances, I do think that it’s important to pursue such projects, such as the South African Truth Commission, with huge problems and limitations. But that seems to me a rather limited question.

I think what I’m fundamentally in agreement with in your question is the matter of temporality. In other words, I think that there have been enormous confusions, and even disasters, created in the past by imagining a linear progression of different social struggles. The caricature of it is, of course, the stage theories in which the assumption is, each society will go through similar stages, just at different periods of time. So that, in colonial thought, primarily the colonies were always thought to be functioning in a kind of time-lag – always anachronistic. And, as clear as that might be, it crops up in thought over and over again. And I think it’s something that each of us has to be
aware of in our thought, because it seems to be such a powerful model that keeps cropping up.

So, [from what you say], this is what I understand: that one shouldn’t project a certain calendar onto various struggles for liberation, because they’re not functioning in the same world in which previous ones functioned. That seems exactly right to me; it seems to me that’s a kind of anachronistic thought, that is invalid, inappropriate. The real challenge is to try to understand the contemporaneity of the world, which is more of a challenge than it might seem at first. There are of course many people working in an auto factory in São Paulo today, and that auto factory is actually not technologically similar – but even if it were technologically similar to the one in Detroit in 1930, it’s a fundamentally different industrial working class; and it relates differently within the global economic structure, and so really should not be related back to something that previously existed in Detroit fifty or seventy years ago. It has to be thought in a contemporary way, with the various kinds of production that are going on globally. It’s that challenge of thinking contemporaneity that seems to me central here. The one thing that we are very insistent about – perhaps to excess, but that’s what we think – is a refusal of the nation-state form as liberatory. That’s not meant to imply a critique in retrospect of national liberation struggles. It seems quite possible to me that that was the only form in which to conduct the anticolonial struggles. Nonetheless, I think that the resulting nation was, in a variety of ways, hopelessly poisoned. I mean, in obvious other ways, which we’re not disagreeing about – for instance, in economic terms – they were faced with absolutely hopeless situations. But, precisely in political terms – I think that’s what we are discussing specifically – I think that the nation-state form itself introduced, or required, a series of hierarchies and the maintenance of forms of power that were detrimental. But, anyway, I think that’s the substance of the disagreement.

Just a quick follow on from that discussion on the question of temporalities and national liberation movements. It surprises me that Trotsky has no entry in the book’s index, because your critique of stageist views, deterministic stageist views of history; your focus on globality rather than the nation-state; your focus on permanent revolution and insurgencies . . .

Sure. All those fit very well.

They all fit very well, and there’s a passage in the book where you say Marxists have underestimated the unevenness of the spread of imperialism in its particular national
forms that it takes in different areas of the world. And, obviously, Trotsky’s notion of combined and uneven development is precisely an attempt to try and theorise that. All those things seem to fit very well with many aspects of the book, and yet you don’t touch on him at all. Is that just coincidence, or does that indicate a more general disagreement or critique of his view?

No, I think it’s just a missed opportunity. But I think Toni and I are less familiar with Trotsky’s work than with Lenin’s work, but, sometimes, those kind of familiarities are just coincidences of background.

Your text derives much more from the first part of the Communist Manifesto, which celebrates the dynamic and indeed revolutionary powers of the bourgeoisie, and capitalism as its concrete expression. One critic talks of your and Toni’s understanding as ‘hyper-globalist’. My quarrel with this is the absence – and I think it’s not just at the analytical level, but also the political level – of mediations. Throughout the book you seem to emphasise direct, unmediated power relations. Yet contemporary capitalism is arguably sustained through mediating structures of states, kinship relations or even multilateral organisations. If you take Saudi Arabia, for example, it’s obvious that forms of power and authority heavily dependent on kinship networks are still reproducing what appears to be a capitalist state, in terms of social relations. There are still precapitalist forms of exploitation, precapitalist forms of domination in the present, throughout the global international system. To put the question in your own terms: isn’t your insistence on the real as opposed to the formal subsumption of labour across the world again, overstated?

I wonder if the formulations that you’ve just given, though, don’t participate in that kind of historical anachronism argument that we were just talking about. I mean, I wonder, if one has to think these elements that are non-capitalist not as precapitalist, or not as remainders of ancient or historical forms, but as something within the system, and therefore equally contemporary. I’m not sure about that – that’s an interesting thing.

But what I was going to start with was that, for me, this was something starting in the 1980s that bothered me about these various theories of civil society, that seemed to place civil society as a realm of mediation outside of capital and the state, and therefore posed as a potential realm of liberation. There was both a Habermasian school that moved in this direction, and a school – well, I don’t know how to characterise the other one – neo-Gramscian perhaps. And I assume I have certain affinities with both, but this seemed to me both politically defeating, or politically harmful, and also analytically
incorrect – that those forms of social mediation both were central and functioning, and that they could be the mechanisms of liberation. So, in any case, often when Toni and I talked about mediation, or about lack of mediations, it’s the lack of those mediations – in a way, the lack of social institutions that function to mediate the relationship between capital and labour, or between the state and the population – that these are social institutions that have declined in their functions.

But that’s a different matter of mediations than you were talking about, so let me try to come to your direct questions. I guess I’m thinking now about the question of institutions that are non-capitalist, or at least have non-capitalist derivation, that are participating – how to think them. And how to think their simultaneity, like I was saying before. Our hypothesis is that this is in fact one global capitalist system that has internal variations, rather than externalities. I wonder sometimes – this thing, ‘There is no more outside’, the slogan is the thing that has generated the most... I don’t know if outrage, but at least controversy. Sometimes, though, I’ve been wondering to what extent it’s just a terminological difference, if someone says, ‘Oh, that’s an outside, or this is an outside.’ Because we’re not really disagreeing with that.

Let me come to another example: someone will say, for instance, ‘Yes, of course, there are outsides – sub-Saharan Africa is outside of the consumer circuit and even the production – I mean, its capital doesn’t need that labour.’ Well, that’s true, in those senses. If one looks from the perspective of debt, however, sub-Saharan Africa’s certainly inside with respect to debt; and debt is the primary disciplinary mechanism of global capital. So that, I guess what I’m trying to say is that there are some perspectives from which, of course, these places are inside – and that it’s important to remember that ‘insideness’. There are others in which, like the consumer markets, or even the necessities of labour to the capitalist system, in which they are effectively excluded, and that’s an important question too. So, whether it’s inside or outside, I’m not sure – maybe it’s a stupid question in a certain way – once you actually make specific what’s meant by the different things. The real challenge here – if one cuts through the various terminological provinces – how do you think difference, and radical difference, within one common system?

And that’s where I think try to come back to the Saudi monarchy. Here, we have a radically different form – certainly not common in Europe now, and it’s locally specific. And, yet, it functions within the global capitalist system, obviously: Saudi monarchs are, in a variety of ways, from a variety
of perspectives, completely within it. So one has to both think – maybe this is the problem that our project as a whole is trying to address – to think the unlimited nature of this form of rule, of Empire, of global capital; and yet recognise the singularity of local, if you want – or geographical – differences. I wouldn’t try to say, ‘We have the answer, read our book and that will no longer be a problem’ – so I don’t think that we’ve somehow solved it. On the other hand, I don’t think we’re in any way not conscious of that problem. It seems to me something that we’re all facing and trying to struggle with. It makes me think of the last part of David Harvey’s *Limits to Capital*, which is all about this, saying that Marx thought time, but he didn’t think space. And, so, he tries to, through theorising ground rent and so forth, he’s trying to think how spatial differences matter within capital. And I think that’s one way of posing a similar question.

*The book emphasises the operation of capital as a plane. There’s no structures, hierarchies, striations, indeed no centres of power. In the book, there are several instances where you flatly reject these categories and suggest instead that we are witnessing an unmediated form of global capital. But, equally, towards the end you invoke the Roman Empire by suggesting that Washington, New York and Los Angeles are ‘the new Romes, or cluster of new Romes’. How you reconcile that? To put it bluntly: is there not a disproportionate concentration of global power in somewhere like Washington, DC.?*

Right, certainly there’s differences. If one’s going to say that there are no fixed divisions and boundaries, that doesn’t of course mean that everything’s the same, and homogeneous. Deleuze and Guattari would talk about deterritorialisation that’s always involved in reterritorialisation, or we could talk about a kind of smoothing of space that then has new, sometimes hyper-striation, that’s involved in the same operation. So it’s not that things are made the same; it’s that there’s a different way that differences are managed. That’s what I would say.

But let me come back to the first thing. I’m thinking of one part of the book, in which we’re trying to talk about the relationship between capital and sovereignty. It seems to me that, in a way, we’re experimenting with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the immanence of capital, and reading its contradiction with the transcendence of sovereignty. Even in this estimation, however, it’s not that the institutions that regulate capital, and that foster capital, it’s that capital itself is. And, in fact, we go through another rough
genealogy of such things, and try to read the different forms of relationship between state and capital as a making of the state more adequate to the immanence of capital; and that’s what, in a way, imperialism – as we’re defining it, in its mostly nineteenth-century European form – presented a kind of transcendence that interrupted the flows of capital, that forced it into remaining, say, within the bloc of the British Empire; or even the distinctions between metropole and colony sometimes disrupted the developments of capital; that these, in a way, were barriers that had to be overcome. That’s the way we try to talk about this sort of historical dance between capital and the state, as relationships to one another. So the immanence of capital doesn’t prohibit the transcendence of institutions and forms of power; it’s just that there has to be continual negotiation between the two.

_I just don’t see how you can think this combination in a non-dialectical, anti-dialectical fashion. I mean, I absolutely accept that you can talk about the immanence of capital; you can talk about the pure logic – if you like a tendency in capital towards flattening and towards immanence. But if you leave it at that, then you just end up with a new liberal fantasy, basically, which is that markets can exist without institutions. Capital is always already institutionalised, it never attains its pure form, from the beginning. It’s not an alien thing that comes from the outside to constrict it; it’s always that from the beginning. Surely, that’s a classic example of dialectics there, isn’t it? Two contradictory tendencies that form a unity._

Well, sure, call that dialectics. I mean, I wonder if that’s another terminological problem. I mean, there’s a specific form of dialectics that I think Toni and I both are fixated on; but there’s a variety of ways in which the dialectic appears. In the tradition, in Marx’s own work. I mean, it’s not that the dialectic is one thing.

You see, at one end of the spectrum, one says, well, the dialectic means mutual determination and constant interactions; relationality. Bertell Ollman said something like that. I would say, of course. I mean, if that’s the dialectic, then how can one be against it? But, at the other end of the spectrum, if one thinks of it as the proposition of opposites that, through their contradiction, lead to a third turn which subsumes the two in a new unity, that’s the form that Toni and I have been fixated on – the resolving, teleological, mostly Hegelian conception, that has functioned in a variety of ways in left politics. That’s what we’re opposing.

Anyway, all I meant by that digression is to say – and it’s often this way when one conducts a sort of polemic against a form, there’s a tendency
to have it overgeneralised, and not recognise it’s specific. And also, that polemic matters sometimes; other times it doesn’t. At the moment, I’m not particularly tied to it. There are certain times when it appears as an important gesture, or corrective.

I’ve often thought that there are two central ambiguities in the book that Toni and I don’t resolve, because we can’t resolve them satisfactorily. One of them is the relationship between multitude and proletariat; and the other’s the relation between Empire and the US. I think that it’s important, in many respects – and I think, as a US-er, I’m sometimes more insistent on this than Toni is – to insist that the US as nation-state is not in control of contemporary globalisation; in other words, that this empire is not centred in the US. I find that a very important argument. Why important? Well, one, at the most basic level, I think that anti-Americanism is an unsatisfactory politics, both in the US and elsewhere. I think that it mistakes a number of things about the forms of power, and therefore has problematic political consequences. And I guess the second part of that is that it also tends to construct the national as one thing – and therefore one fails to recognise all of the wonderful histories within the United States, that should be linked to elsewhere and affirmed. That said, however, it is important to recognise the unequal relationships, and the importance of geographies; it’s just that the geographies are not simple.

For instance, when we argue against First and Third World division, or even North and South division, it’s not because the world is the same everywhere; it’s in fact that it’s more complicated than that. If one is going to draw the lines, they don’t follow national borders. In fact, within each local space, there’s a variety of spaces so that one needs to try to think relationships of commonality across national borders, and difference within national borders. That’s what one has to do.

So, yes, one should recognise the ways in which the US is the most powerful of nation-states; but, at the same time, not create the illusion – because I think it’s an illusion – that the US as nation-state is in fact in control of things. That would be my first critique of September 11. This is simple: I think everyone has nothing interesting to say about September 11, me included. But an obvious thing, it seems to me, is that the two contestants – the attackers and the US government – are both operating on a kind of nostalgia for a previous form of power. In other words, as far as I can hypothesise about what the attackers think, it would be that there is a centre to global power, and it’s located in Washington and New York; and, therefore, it can be attacked, and
threatened, and that will change the dynamics of global order in a way that will grant us more self-autonomy or some such thing. I assume that’s more or less what’s aimed at. And, similarly, the US government thinks that with a redoubled martial effort, it can both secure the safety of its own territory and impose a kind of peace through police on the globe. It’s also mistaken; it’s also thinking, I think, that it can play that central role. And, in fact, I think that – in this sense, at least – they’re prisoners of the same illusion.

False consciousness? Suffering from imperialist false consciousness?

Yeah. Or nostalgia for previous forms of power. Like when in the US, right after September 11, the government kept talking about Pearl Harbor, as if they had some Japan to go attack. I mean, it seemed to me the nostalgia for a sovereign enemy. And when they find themselves faced with a network, there’s a kind of vertigo, and that’s where I think that nostalgia emerges. They have this amazing military technology, and they don’t have adequate targets to point it at.

So there’s nothing distinctively imperial – as opposed to imperialist – about the current Afghanistan war? You say imperialism’s over, it’s finished, we’re in a new phase. Here we have a test case, a perfect test case for whether that’s true.

Well, I maintain what I thought before September 11. I think most people do, actually. You hear, at least in the US, everyone saying ‘The world completely changed, everything changed’ and then they say the same damn thing they said the week before. I think most of us probably think the same thing we thought before, and just try to apply it to this – I’m guilty of the same thing. Anyway, if the world did change, it’s going to take a while to think about it. I think you’re right, that this is a test case in the sense that one could interpret the result as the imperialism of the sole remaining superpower: it was threatened and now it’s responding. I still think that that’s not true, and that the fact that it’s not true will have that what they’re aiming for will not come about – I mean, that the US cannot exert the power of itself as nation-state over the global territory in such a way as to pacify the globe. I think that if it were to act not-unilaterally, but engage in more widespread, international, institutional structures, it would have much more success at those goals.

But you said that about Vietnam – and you said Vietnam was the last gasp of the American attempt at old-style imperialism, and then Empire dawnded. And here we are, thirty years later, with the same thing again.
It’s like one of those bad horror movies, when they’re buried and then the hand comes back out of the grave, and grabs you by the. . . . Yeah, but usually, there’s only a few minutes left in the movie . . .

You could then interpret Al Qaeda, rather than being an atavistic and archaic organisation, as being well in advance of the American military; as being the spirit of the times.

I wouldn’t say it’s the spirit of the times. . . . I don’t know if you’ve seen, since September 11 there have been right-wing press attacks on Toni and me in the US. There were one or two – either the National Review, or the New Republic, or both – who said that we were not only antisemitic, but we were pro-Islamic fundamentalist; and their justification, the way they illustrated our support for Islamic fundamentalism, is that we say that Islamic fundamentalism – like Christian fundamentalism, too – is not some primordial resurgence, but actually happens to be what’s going on in the world today. We, at the time, polemically compared fundamentalist with postmodernist discourses, and say that both of them are recognising something different, but have inadequate interpretations of it.

I think that was a very strong, impressive, element of the book – the way you polemicised against the idea that Islamic fundamentalism is merely a throwback, some attempt to go backwards; that it’s a more complicated phenomenon than that. But the current structure of US military power, exercised more or less unilaterally, with a few allies tagging along behind, against a rogue state – it doesn’t look very imperial to me, it looks . . .

It doesn’t – you’re right. This is what my theoretical perspective forces me to say. That’s why I think they’re mistaken. To put it in a more mainstream media way, if this is a network – if it’s not just bin Laden and a bunch of flunkies – if it’s actually a network and has a social basis, one can’t attack a network in a singular way. One has to have, in a way, a network approach that is going to address another network. So, therefore, the unilateral decisions of the US military, even if it keeps some other powers as so-called allies, won’t be able to attack a network. That’s my interpretation of it.

Castells has said a similar thing, setting himself up as a kind of unofficial adviser of the US military, saying you need to set up counter-networks, and this is how you do it.
Oh – I’m glad he has an idea! Well, I’m not sure if I’m glad, but anyway, it’s interesting that he has an idea. I mean, I do think that there are enormous tragedies that can result from this mistaken impression on the US government’s part, that it could conduct such a war successfully. I’m not prepared to advise them, though. And I think they’re not prepared to accept my advice.

Let’s move to the third part of the book, where you focus on the netherworlds of production. Echoing what we’ve been talking about now, much of your thesis hinges on what is now a fairly familiar refrain about the early 1970s witnessing a transformation in the labour processes and the forms of organising production, appropriation and consumption, and so forth. And, of course, you place keywords like ‘network’ and ‘immaterial’ labour at the heart of this transformation. On a purely empirical basis, and in so far as there are reliable statistics available, it seems that those proletarians employed in the information network, in information technology – in the immaterial dimensions of production that you talk about – are a minority. So, how can we extrapolate, from what is a minority of the proletariat, what might be the situation of the proletariat, let alone the global multitude you speak of?

Our argument is not that immaterial labour is dominant in quantitative terms, but in qualitative terms. The argument goes something like this: that, in each stage of economic history, there is a dominant sector in the economy that transforms the other sectors in such a way that they adopt its qualities. So that, in the same way that, with the industrial revolution, agriculture of course was dominant, quantitatively, but industry was dominant qualitatively – in the sense that agriculture was forced to industrialise, and adopt qualities that industrial production. Throughout the industrial revolution, all of society, including all forms of production, were coloured in a new light, I would say – they were brought within the orbit of industrial methods.

So the argument now, in the same way, is: even though immaterial forms of production are a minority in quantitative terms, and geographically specific, there is a tendency for them to transform other sectors of production. In other words, industrial production is becoming informationalised. Similarly, agriculture is becoming informationalised. For instance, in so far as genetic manipulation of seeds and plant varieties is all dependent on information. That’s one way in which information – here, genetic information – is transforming agricultural processes. Other ways that one might think of a kind of post-Fordism of agriculture would be in the movement away from massive and homogeneous production of agricultural commodities towards
specialisation markets, and a kind of flexibility of agricultural production. In any case, that’s the kind of thing that’s meant by this – that the dominance is qualitative in those terms, and therefore has a variety of effects.

The other thing to say, too, is that one shouldn’t think of immaterial labour, or immaterial production, as an exclusive, separate sector. Immaterial labour is almost always mixed with material forms of labour. And also – I should clarify – by ‘immaterial labour’, we don’t mean that the labouring process itself is immaterial; it of course involves bodies, and minds, but that the product is immaterial. But, when I think of immaterial forms of labour – for instance, examples that I often think of are flight attendants or healthcare workers, and fast-food workers. Those are three examples that often I like to use. All of them involve an immaterial component – in other words, creating a sense of well-being. Fast-food workers, are supposed to be ‘service with a smile’, so they seem to produce some kind of pleasure. But they’re obviously doing the real production, too – they’re flipping hamburgers, they’re changing bed-pans; flight attendants are giving pillows around . . .

One could, I think, make a very strong argument that these are actually throwbacks to the early stages of industrial capitalism, where it’s in fact absolute surplus-value which is dominant. In temporal terms, there’s a throwback, but even geographically there’s a throwback to very strategic decisions, on the part of capital, to exploit labour where the conditions are best presented – perhaps South Wales or South India. Despite your resistance to it, there’s a kind of teleology to your argument: that this immaterial economy is moving irreversibly to a different plane. Whereas, in terms of hours worked, in terms of conditions of employment, overtime and so forth, statistically, we seem to be closer to the early phases of capitalist industrialisation than to some new economy based on the productivity gains of say, information technology.

Toni and I are fascinated with this idea about immeasurability: there’s an immeasurable quality to this immaterial labour, which tends to deconstruct the contours of the working day; so that there’s a tendency to have life-time and work-time merge, so that one can almost not distinguish any longer between work-time and the time of life. And, in a way, you’re suggesting that is like a much more extreme form of the extraction of surplus-value than the delimited working days that were struggled for throughout the industrial era. That’s true. I mean, I think that there are resonances of that. I’m not sure if I see the use in thinking of it as a return, rather than something new – but we can come back to it again.
One thing I am finding interesting about this periodisation is trying, in fact, to line up to various theoretical frameworks – and I was thinking of Bob Brenner’s and Giovanni Arrighi’s, who both take the 1970s, more or less ’68 to ’73 (Arrighi always has very precise dates for these things), as a point of transfer, not, in a way, to pose it as a contest, as if they’re necessarily in disagreement with each other, but in a way to pose them as different approaches to the same problem, and try to line them up. We, too, are in a way posing that same period as the period of transition – but in ways that seem to me will share a lot of continuities with, at least, those two thinkers. I mean, there are probably others, in different realms, especially, the way Jameson thinks about postmodernism roughly in that same period, or other regulationists.

Of course, the difference with Brenner is that, despite the periodisation, he maintains the centrality of manufacturing and profitability in the present period, rather than stressing the transformation to immaterial labour. And, just polemically, on the last point: what bothered me about this section of the book was that, for a book that’s so iconoclastic and heterodox in so many other ways, there seemed to be a bit of a tumble into a kind of conformism of adopting wholesale categories from regulation theory, or from those types of theories – post-Fordism, I think ‘post-industrial’ is mentioned in passing at one stage – when these have been subject to enormous debate and controversy, which isn’t really alluded to, so that they’re taken for granted as describing the state of the world; counter-tendencies are underplayed. And also – I think this is something that has irked a lot of the Marxists that have read the book – empirically it seems to be the weakest aspect of the book. It doesn’t really try and sift through the evidence one way or the other. So, there’s something strange about that – about the way that you’re so keen to break with the orthodoxies in the rest of the book, but here, this is . . .

I don’t know if the regulation school is the left orthodoxy, and therefore Bob Brenner’s the iconoclast.

Well, Tony Blair talks a lot about the growth of services, the growth of the post-industrial economy, the fact that manufacturing is now history, we need to concentrate on . . .

Yeah. It’s not history, the various rulers of the most powerful nations have wanted their economies to focus on the kinds production that generate the greatest value, and so they have tried to focus on such things, and to export industrial production to subordinated countries. That, of course, doesn’t, and
they don’t, mean that manufacturing is a thing of the past; they mean they hope that they can make manufacturing a thing of the past for their country, and make is something of the present for someone else’s country. But that’s in a different framework – that’s in a framework of, so to say, competing national interests.

For me, whether it’s orthodox or not doesn’t enter into it – it seems right, to me. It seems right to me that there has been a shift in the structure of domination, within the sectors of the economy, and that’s what our argument is. Now, that we don’t use data – I mean, there are two ways of responding. One is, you know, we’re not really trained in that way – we make arguments on a different descriptive level, and using others’ analyses of data. It’s not like data’s not important to me, but I’m not going to do original data here. The other way of responding is, the book’s damn long enough as it is. I respect people who do the work – it’s not that I have a disrespect for it; it seems to me it’s simply a different area of analysis, and, in some ways, we’re dependent on the various competing interpretations of these data.

Sure, but the point is that the thesis of the paradigm shift – of the shift from manufacturing to services as a qualitative change; the thesis of the immeasurability of value, of new forms of value, and the fact that the labour theory of value doesn’t apply in the same old way. All those things, for the last ten, fifteen years, have been a battlefield between Marxists and non-Marxists, about what exactly it is, in the world, that we are dealing with. And, in the section, you skate over this, and you present one side of the story, which – coincidentally or not – is the side of the story which seems to accord most with what the people who do defend the status quo and so on like to reproduce: that we are in this completely new phase, where knowledge is the most important thing; that old-style manufacturing is fated to disappear . . .

No, not fated to disappear: subordinated. That’s a very different thing. Subordinated within the structures of the economy; and, therefore, there’s a tendency for those labourers also to be subordinated, and that’s something that has to be recognised and dealt with. But one can’t just pretend that industrial production plays the same role that it played a hundred years ago.

Well, you see, what struck me particularly – the thing that sparked this off, really – was that, you have in France since the mid-1990s, a kind of rediscovery of the French working class – the industrial working class. You know, you had the Bourdieu book about the ‘weight of the world’; you had the ’95 events; and now
there’s the big book called *New Spirit of Capitalism* by Boltanski and Chiapello. And the thing that they constantly emphasise is that the disappearance of the industrial working class, from the political scene and from sociological discussions – of course, in part, it reflects objective processes in production in the proportion of the workforce. But it is as much to do with the fact that sociologists have chosen not, for example, to talk about them anymore.

I’d insist you keep misinterpreting what we’re saying. We’re not saying that there’s been any quantitative reduction – I mean, we don’t broach the question of quantitative division of the population in different sectors. So we’re not saying that the industrial working class has disappeared, or even lessened. We’re saying that it is now subordinated, in a way – precisely in the way that it used to be dominant; that industrial production at 1930 was the pinnacle of the global economic hierarchy, and that it, at the time – like I’m saying, metaphorically – coloured the various other kinds of production. Today that’s no longer the case. There might be as many, or more, or a few less industrial workers – I’m not making any claim about that. I’m saying, though, that industrial production is now subordinated; it’s no longer in the dominant position. That doesn’t mean that one shouldn’t pay attention to it: one should recognise its relative position. But, anyway, I feel outside of that debate and development you were talking about, which is that sociologists had ignored the industrial working class and have now rediscovered it. That seems to me all to the good. But what would be a problem, I would think, is if the industrial working class were rediscovered as if it were the same industrial working class that we had in 1960 or 1930.

Can I shift, in a kind of roundabout way – still within the passages of production – to the Soviet Union. Throughout your narrative, actually-existing socialism, historical Communism, whatever you want to call it, crops up occasionally. But the experience of the Soviet bloc and the People’s Republic of China is very muted in the narrative. . . . Is this deliberate – particularly in terms of the Constitution of Empire? Because, again, returning to the notion of dialectical change, and to paradigm shifts and so forth, there is one reading of twentieth-century history that suggest the twentieth century was the age of extremes where the US-led Constitution of Empire might be explained as product of the existence of a counter-Empire, if you like, in the form of historical Communism.

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8 Boltanski and Chiapello 1999.
Right. And which goes often together with a notion of totalitarianism that puts together Nazi and Soviet [systems] as, not only parallel, but actually, functionally coherent. And we’re consciously arguing against such notions. I think, though, that you pose it exactly right for our argument about this, which is that our claim is that US constitutional history and US social history – during the twentieth century at least, and probably the nineteenth, too – provided the primary ground on which the Constitution of Empire was developed. In other words, it seems to me that the notion of US imperialism, that still functions quite a lot, essentially reads its genealogy as the European nation-states who were defeated by anticolonial struggles now passed on their form to the United States, and that’s the genealogy.

Ours goes rather different, which is that, after a certain initial construction in Europe during the modern period, that the different elements of the US constitution identified better some of the aspects of [the contemporary situation] and therefore are a more appropriate genealogy. The notion of open frontiers, of expandable space, of hybrid identities, etc. – these were things that were primarily worked out on US terrain, and now, at least conceptually, play important roles in our notion of Empire. The Soviets and the Chinese don’t provide the development of that form of power. The Cold War plays a certain role in our genealogy, but not the Soviet experience as a form of power. It seems to us, in a way, that the Soviet experience as a form of power – not as a liberation project, because the Soviet experience, of course, is a combination of those two – the form of power of the Soviet state doesn’t seem, to me at least, terribly innovative. The Soviet creative experience does – but these are different matters.

Okay, but to put it more sharply, is it not the case that the modes of power, the modes of rule – be they the ‘society of discipline’, ‘society of control’; be it the development of immaterial labour, or Empire as you’ve defined it – are all in a way reactions to the existence of a Soviet bloc, or the experience of historical Communism more broadly?

It seems to me that there are two ways in which the Cold War functions in terms of sovereignty, and one of them, in a way, was looking forward, and one of them was looking backward. In so far as the bipolar split of US-Soviet division of the globe functioned as the confrontation of essentially sovereign nation-states, that seems to me a repetition of, in a way, the contest for power that the European nation-states had conducted previously. And, in sometimes mirroring fashions, but in a way there were resemblances, certainly, between the scramble for Africa in the nineteenth century and the scramble for Africa.
and the Third World between the two superpowers. This seems to me the result of looking backward.

There’s another way, though, in which the Cold War appeared – certainly in Western Europe and the United States – as not the facing of a sovereign power and another nation-state, but of an ungraspable and unlocalisable enemy. Because it wasn’t just an external enemy, it wasn’t just the Soviet Union – it was communism, internally and externally. So that could generate a kind of hysteria on the part of power, on the part of the Western European nation-states and the US; and also showed the fundamental inadequacy, I think, of the older form of power, confronting such an unlocalisable enemy. This seems to me the kind of aspect of the Cold War that in fact looked forward to new confrontations. In fact, one might say that that moment of 1950s hysteria looks a little bit like this contemporary war on terrorism. Because the terrorist could be anyone, it could be anywhere. So there’s that unlocalisability of the enemy, and either the network structure of the enemy, or at least unknowability, poses a fundamental challenge to sovereign power.

I suppose one of the obvious things – and this has been covered in some of the media interviews that you’ve had – is the remarkable coincidence of the publication of *Empire* with the anti-globalisation protests. Do you feel in any way that the ‘multitude’ you speak of in the book is represented in Seattle, in Genoa, in Gothenburg? And, if so, do you personally – or you and Toni – have any particular political affiliations to groups that claim you, as it were – *Ya Basta!* or *Tute Bianche*?

It seems to me there are two fundamental ways in which these various movements do correspond to things that Toni and I were trying to think. One is that they are not fundamentally anti-American struggles, that they’ve been aimed at either an international, G8, or supranational forms of power, and that this is something fundamentally new. But I would also say that I see each of these targets as inadequate. In my view, for instance, if we were to destroy the IMF next week, it’s not going to make the world better, either immediately or in the long term. The IMF itself is not the enemy, it’s part of a network of it.

What I see the movements as doing, then, is recognising that there isn’t a specific source of power that can be attacked once and for all; that power itself is unlocalisable. And I see these various tactics as experimenting in confronting forms of power. So that, even with the recognition that the IMF is not the source of our problems, attacking it is a good first approximation.
That’s the way I see it. On the other side, the other thing that I think is extremely positive about these movements is the non-hierarchical structure, and the functioning of a multiplicity of groups. These are of course, also, relative because I think there are plenty of hierarchies and conflicts to criticise, within those movements. Since Seattle, it really hasn’t been resolved. I don’t think anyone really understands how it is that groups that we thought, previously, fundamentally antagonistic, could function together.

And it’s not through, it seems to me, the previous notion that we carried through the 1980s, and I guess the 1990s, [namely] that coalition was the answer. I think this is not a coalition; I think it’s a different form of organisation, or it’s the possibility of a different form of organisation, that can function in common with the real differences of the groups. In other words, groups don’t have to give up their differences in order to function in common. In any case, those are two aspects in which I welcome, in particular, the historical development – celebrate, even. But then it would make no sense to call them representative of the multitude. In fact, the notion of the multitude is anti-representation, and specifically in this sense: if one were to think that these movements were to be speaking for those who are suffering from globalisation – the ones who are working in sweatshops in the Philippines, etc. – if they’re speaking for them, that’s exactly what I’m opposed to. So that’s why, when we were talking earlier about the urgency or necessity of this expansion, so that it isn’t a movement that’s speaking for others but speaking with others, if that kind of language works, it would be that kind of thing that would make the movements a better approximation of what could be meant by ‘the multitude’.

Tute Bianche was a wonderful thing, in the beginning especially. I mean, it was born as a movement of immaterial labour, and so that’s what the whiteness means . . . they were supposed to be the invisible workers; whereas the blue [was what] the auto factory workers wore, or the red ones . . . so this was the white ones. And it was essentially, in the beginning, not immaterial labour in general, but [what] were called in Italy ‘precarious workers’, mostly in the media. Toni more than me, but I too have personal relationships to many of the people involved in Tute Bianche and in Ya Basta! So, I don’t know what counts for endorsement.

In relation to these questions of organisation and tactics, what do you think is now the distinctive difference between the communism that you argue for and anarchism?
There’s a passage in the book where you say ‘We are not anarchists’. What do you think still remains of the traditional distinction between Marxism and anarchism?

The question of organisation is the primary one. But then, you see, part of the confusion is that there are so many things meant by ‘anarchism’. And, particularly in the US, there’s a great resurgence of anarchism, at least as a label, which, as far as I can tell, generally means refusal of authority; and, therefore, a desire for democratic and autonomous relationships. Although it’s not an individualist anarchism, the most important difference, it seems to me, especially in the kind of discussion we’re having, is the need for organisation. And if then an anarchist responds, ‘Well, we also see the need for organisation, but our forms of organisation’ – well, I’d say, OK, that’s fine. I can’t satisfactorily replay the Marx-Bakunin thing, and put it onto these contemporary things – it doesn’t seem to fit, to me.

There are theoretical issues, are there not, that are distinctively Marxist and less distinctively anarchist, or less able to be absorbed? There is still the question, for example, about transition. A Marxist or a communist would still argue that you cannot abolish the state, for example; you cannot abolish the market; you cannot abolish Empire – that you have to engage in a struggle which can be a more-or-less long struggle, where you try and replace those forms of social relations with other forms of social relations, and that the outcome is not given in advance, that you need ideological clarity, that you need, perhaps, organisation – appropriate organisational forms, and so on – and that therefore you posit the need for a transitional period, a transitional process. Whereas an anarchist, generally, would see that as a kind of special pleading for a new form of authority, a new form of state, a new form of oppression, and that that should be rejected in favour of pure negation.

It sounds like you’re replaying ‘state and revolution’ argument, there. I agree with the anarchists that the state should be abolished – it’s just they think it should be abolished on the day after the revolution. And, yes, I agree with the social democrats, that they think there needs to be some new state form, but it needs to wither away in time. I don’t recognise myself and the anarchists I’m engaged with in that division.

There is one reading of the anti-globalisation movement, which is that, precisely because on this reading you can replay some of these earlier discussions, rather than the anti-globalisation movement being this completely new thing – that’s it’s rhizomatic, non-hierarchical, a completely new paradigm, a break from everything that’s gone before – actually, some of the old classical questions surrounding revolutionary change
vis-à-vis the international and financial institutions, for example, are re-emerging. The question that was posed in Genoa, for example, about the relationship between the movement and the organised working class, the trade unions. These old classical questions that, supposedly, should be in the dustbin because we’re in a new phase... Why should someone say that supposedly they should be in the dustbin?

Well, there are some readings that claim that they are irretrievably lost, the old questions of revolutionary strategy and tactics, which is something you write in the book. They’ve actually re-emerged, so there’s as much continuity as there is discontinuity.

Sure. Historical changes are never absolute. Those specific ones you were talking about do seem to me perfectly relevant in these globalisation struggles. If there’s an unmediated relationship between capitalism and the multitudes, the question of the trade unions, for example, seems to be out of the window, because these are archaic formations that are being swept aside by new processes, and anyway represent corporatist and sectional interests, and therefore the whole question about how you relate to them shouldn’t be that prominent, if that’s the view.

Right. The general thing is, I think you’re applying a slogan a little too absolutely. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t many things to criticise within the history of the trade-union movement, but to say that there is no use in the organisation of labour, or that there is nothing good to say from the traditional labour unions – I wouldn’t say either of those. It’s not exactly the same thing, but I was in a discussion with Giovanni Arrighi about two weeks ago, and he was trying to pose it like we were accusing him of a paradigm that just repeated the old, as if, you know, every damn cycle was always the same thing, which is a dominant tendency in his work. And we were just insisting on the new, as if it had no relationship with what went before. Now, neither of those is obviously true. I mean, there is perhaps a different emphasis, you know, that one wants to insist on the elements that are new, or the ways that things have changed. But, like I say, historical changes don’t happen that way – you can’t just leave things behind, and, in many ways, one doesn’t want to.

Interview conducted by Sebastian Budgen and Alejandro Colás in London on 26 October 2001.
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The issue with Documenta

Documenta takes place every five years in the German town of Kassel. First launched in the mid-1950s – partly as a regeneration initiative for a small town that had suffered extensive damage during World War II and partly as an attempt to counter the attack on modern art by the Nazis – Documenta has come to be today the most important international art event, with an agenda aided by, but also contesting, the increasingly global frameworks defining the production and reception of art. The significance of Documenta has less to do with its rare but periodic occurrence and more with the fact that the curatorial teams involved in the show’s production appear to be relatively uninhibited about working with the organising principle of ‘politics’, against the dominant trends in the art world and the world at large. Following on from this, the significance of Documenta also has to do with audience expectation and the promise of ‘documentation’ of current developments to which the name of the show itself alludes, although, in the case of Documenta 11, we are informed by
one of the exhibition catalogue authors, the exhibition’s ‘precise location . . . finds itself between that of an encyclopedia and a mirror’.\(^1\) Specifically, the post-Borgesian ‘encyclopedia of Documenta 11 quixotically proposes to disillusion us in our unshakable certainty in the world in which we believe we live’.\(^2\) But, arguably, this depends on the kind of world one believes one lives in.

Despite the region’s long history and various ‘tourist’ attractions, Kassel itself gives the impression that it just wakes up for the comet Documenta, to provide food and lodging for the flocking crowds of art tribes, and goes back to hibernate soon after the show is over. The young, art-literate, over-qualified guides to the exhibition I met during my visit appeared to have been recruited from the hordes of the humanities-educated unemployed produced en masse by European universities. They routinely raised the issue of the seasonal employment offered by art shows of a comparable scale, making it clear that they had taken temporary residence in an urban environment other than Berlin in order to get an art-related job that would help them get through the summer and that would hopefully look good in their CVs. Meeting the guides in their sparsely furnished apartments, as opposed to socialising with the curators in the more imposing venues of the exhibition, made one acutely and immediately aware of the global structures within which even the most self-consciously socially relevant show, a.k.a. Documenta, has to operate today. For, ultimately, even an explicitly critical exhibition has to rely on the availability of a surplus labour force for showcasing its critique.

Looking at Alan Sekula’s photographic documents of dockers enmeshed in the capitalist saga of maritime exploitation or Multiplicity’s ‘new research project’ focusing on ‘the nature of the Mediterranean, on the fluxes that cross it, and on the identities of individuals that inhabit it’\(^3\) (that is, on the Mediterranean as the site where the migration trajectories orchestrated by global capitalism habitually turn into maritime disasters) and talking to guides with postgraduate qualifications in art history or political science, already contemplating where the next temporary appointment might take them, pre-empted almost a reflexive but duly pessimistic response to the show. If one were generally aware of the limitations framing the presentational,

\(^1\) Basualdo 2002, p. 57.
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) From Multiplicity 2002.
representational and interventionist possibilities of art in an age dominated by the market, a visit to Documenta 11 (which attempted to be a heartening act by showing how many artists today are willing to be good, imaginative and critical researchers) would probably not displace one’s fear that art, including art which proudly recognises its lack of autonomy and seeks to re-establish its identity as praxis, has for a long time now been exiled to the realm of the discursive. What politics then signifies in this instance, as well as to what extent such an enquiry considers, in a promptly dialectical mode, the materially grounded premises that fix (rather than unfix) its wider social and appropriately global meanings, are the issues raised here. In other words, the present account focuses more on Documenta 11 as a thesis (Greek word for ‘position’, a term that already alludes to processes of emplacement) and less on an analysis of specific artworks. By reading Documenta 11 as a thesis, I also aim to displace its possible apprehension in terms of a mere response to whatever could be (mis)perceived as its external raison d’être.

My decision not to attempt an analysis resting on artworks also has to do with the fact that Documenta 11 was clearly not meant to be just an art show. In its various stages of production and dissemination, it was presented in terms of an oppositional formation that, through a series of events, staged a consciousness-raising approach to the theory and practice of culture itself. Documenta-the-art-show was identified as merely one such event among many. Known as Platform 5: Exhibition, this last ‘platform’ was preceded by four other platforms in the form of conferences, workshops and discussions in different cities around the world. The titles of these events are indicative of the issues prioritised as relevant not only to contemporary art but to a global condition of discontent. Platform 1: Democracy Unrealized took place in Vienna and Berlin in 2001. Platform 2: Experiments with Truth – Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation took place in New Delhi also in 2001. In 2002 Platform 3: Creolité and Creolization took place in St. Lucia, West Indies and Platform 4: Under Siege – Four African Cities – Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos took place in Lagos. The itinerary itself defined an axis of cross-cultural references in which Germany and Austria represented ‘the West’ and the West Indies, India and Nigeria represented ‘the rest’. As in the platforms, Documenta-the-show provided an opportunity for ‘the rest’ to confer with enclaves of opposition from ‘the West’ on what the real nature of interaction between ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’ is and has been.
But, if Documenta 11 is to be understood in terms of a complex intercultural research project, the outcomes, in either visual or textual media, were far from surprising. They amounted to what at least some professional researchers in the arts already knew: there is a globally secured condition of exploitation in which every possible social institution – from ‘democracy’ to ‘art’ – is implicated. This condition of exploitation is far from centre-less. Crucially, the notion of ‘centre’ acquires here a literal sense. Geography appears to be the key factor in the global condition of exploitation as understood in the Documenta 11 framework. Location – be it a Western inner-city slum neighbourhood or a Ugandan prison – is where exploitation occurs and resistance (hopefully) arises. Documenta 11, then, offered a summary of the points made by generations of ‘postcolonial’ theorists and confirmed the necessity of a return to what the 1990s British art-scene curatorial wizards had condemned as the dead-and-buried past: issue-based art. And Documenta 11 provided a ‘one-world, one-issue’ approach to issue-based art itself.

So, what was the issue? This was eloquently captured by the heading of the Documenta 11 review which appeared in *The Art Newspaper* and was identified as follows: ‘A Mighty Denunciation of Violence, Poverty and Social Dissolution’.4 But the sub-heading was even more illuminating: ‘No Sex, No Bodily Fluids, No Gender Politics, No Irony: Curator Okwui Enwezor Has Chosen Serious Artists Who Face Up to Grave Matters’.5 Apparently, the term ‘denunciation’ in the title is ascribed an explicit as well as an implicit meaning. The reviewer is on the right track here, and his observation stands up to scrutiny as feminist artists, whose work has been typically misconstrued in its association with sexual politics as distinct from other kinds of politics, were a rather marginal presence in the exhibition.6 But what is of critical importance in this instance is the impression, conveyed to *The Art Newspaper* reviewer, at least, that whatever serious politics is, gender politics is not.

Such a contention is not unheard of. The so-called micropolitical turn, mostly identified with postmodern art (on quite a few occasions, dismissed as unworthy by critics and historians associated to various degrees with the Left), has been seen as a historically generated condition akin to a reactionary

5 Ibid.
6 This despite Jean Fisher’s exhibition catalogue essay where she mentions art’s ‘long tradition of critique through political satire . . . and the reclamation and recycling of the discarded of history and ideology, all especially true of practices attentive to feminist and black politics’. See Fisher 2002, p. 64.
departure from what ‘really matters’. Hence Perry Anderson, in his reading of Fredric Jameson, noted in *The Origins of Postmodernity* that ‘women’, among other hitherto excluded groups including ‘ethnic and other minorities’, ‘gained access to the postmodern forms’ and ‘in quality, some levelling effect was undeniable’.7 Whatever this ‘levelling’ may mean, and despite Anderson’s effort to explicate Jameson’s position (quite rightly) as an attempt to understand a historical condition and not as ‘moralizing’,8 his observation that such developments ‘also expressed a new relation to the market – the extent to which this was a culture of accompaniment, rather than antagonism, to the economic order’,9 hardly constitutes a positive valuation. Given its purposeful emphasis on ‘the rest’ as opposed to the West, Documenta 11 prompts one to reflect on Anderson’s manifesto of defeat. But, of course, Anderson’s dictum is premised on a not-so-subtle misreading of the contemporary moment, unable or unwilling to distinguish between the complex articulation of oppositional discourses and dominant ideologies within an increasingly global market as a structural condition of art and one of relevance to both the West and ‘the rest’. Most importantly, it fails to posit a dialectical relationship (although there is an expressed wish for one) between historically engendered forms of resistance and the current possibilities afforded for the latter’s expression in terms of large-scale social intervention. This is why Anderson stresses that, for Jameson, ‘the collective agency necessary to confront this disorder was still missing; but a condition of its emergence was the ability to grasp it from within, as a system’.10 The attempt to emphatically stay in tune with the ‘contemporary’ was – to the organisers’ credit – at the heart of the Documenta 11 project. But, as with Anderson’s account, Documenta 11 did not succeed in renegotiating the intricate forms of interaction among emancipatory narratives that still remain of relevance. A critical re-appraisal of the complex interface between feminist politics and the praxis of the subaltern as well as between Marxism and more nuanced postcolonial paradigms,11 was crucially not achieved in Documenta 11 and it is doubtful whether it was even desirable.

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In the case of Documenta 11, what really matters – and let us assume that this is exploitation and current forms of social injustice – hardly ever implicates class or a mode of production, despite the inclusion of artists whose work is sensitive to, or even structured by, such references. Or, to be more accurate, the issue of a class-divided world, rather than a class-divided society, is part of the agenda but only to the extent that it can be adapted to fit ‘the West’ versus ‘the rest’ description of ‘what is wrong’. Putting Documenta 11 in historical perspective, what is regrettably present as the project’s overarching interpretive framework is the legacy of antagonism between different definitions of the political that appear to claim their unique and exclusive relevance to the contemporary moment. So, in this instance, gender and class politics are largely marginalised to make room for a politics of geography. This, I would argue, is the true spirit of the postmodern inability to account for the articulation as well as the reproduction of the extremely complex totality we are faced with and which is not inhabited by abstract subject formations (defined by their geographical co-ordinates) but by gendered, classed and racially marked bodies. That the deployment of the term ‘body’, as opposed to the ‘figure’, by politically engaged art critics in the 1970s and 1980s was intended to draw attention to the material grounding of subjectivities appears to have been forgotten in the current conjuncture. Bodies, as the argument went, need to be fed, need clean, ‘affordable’ water, cross borders to get jobs and are forced to produce ‘bodily fluids’ to make a living. The absence, then, of ‘bodies’ from a show such as Documenta 11 should not be exactly cause for celebration – if such an absence were indeed the case.

The inclusion in Documenta 11 of feminist veterans such as Joan Jonas, with a video installation (which predictably focused on the body) and Adrian Piper (whose work far from excluded the figure) functioned more as a reminder of what was missing rather than a serious attempt to render visible the intricate trajectories of the contested redefinitions of the political in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The same can be said about the inclusion of Mona Hatoum’s celebrated video Measures of Distance – celebrated because, at least for some of us, it highlights the multiple bids for ownership of the body as they occur within material practices extended, rather than undermined, by the workings of capital on a global scale. The question, then, was not the absence of ‘bodies’ or ‘gender’ in Documenta 11, but the decontextualisation to which the wider narratives and emancipatory projects which have given rise to such work were partly subjected in the context of the exhibition. This
threatened to reconstitute the latter as an anthology of recent and current trends rather than a politically meaningful mapping of the historically shaped motives and spaces of collective revolt.\footnote{This is possibly what led Nina Danino, a politically minded representative of the London film and video scene associated with the 1980s journal \textit{Undercut}, on which feminist politics had a great impact, to argue that, at least as far as film was concerned, ‘there seemed to be [in Documenta 11] a privileging of the spectator’s pleasure, the context of exhibition, the power of the spectacle, aesthetics and the demand for predominantly conceptual ways through which to engage with intentionality and authorship’ [my emphasis]. See Danino 2003, p. 8.}

The peripheralisation, then, if not suppression, of certain kinds of politics in the show was probably what confused \textit{The Art Newspaper} reviewer. That feminist politics specifically have been increasingly identified with the issues prioritised in the context of liberal feminism, excluding, for example, to a great extent the intellectual and political projects of Marxist, materialist and Third-World feminisms, should be, however, a matter of concern. Such a misidentification speaks volumes about existent forms of cultural and ideological hegemony (to which advocates of the postcolonial vantage-point are not immune) and conveys a sense of defeat for left politics in general, though of a different kind to the one manifested in \textit{The Origins of Postmodernity}. This is a ‘grave matter’, indeed, but one not openly addressed in Documenta 11.

\textbf{From documenta X to Documenta 11: What makes the beginning of the twenty-first century look like the end of the twentieth?}

The engagement of the show with the political meaning of geography offered a totalising view of the world by default – one that has been consistently proposed over the years by scholars and artists preoccupied with processes of decolonisation (and one might argue, \textit{recolonisation} of both minds and bodies, should the distinction be maintained) and one long overdue at the same time. Still, one should bear in mind that not every totalising view of the world necessarily succeeds in attending to a totality being clearly more than the sum of its parts.

Politics and art have been an issue with the Documenta organisers at least since 1997, when documenta X – itself an eloquent concluding remark on the
art and culture of the twentieth century – boldly went where quite a few shows had gone before with the risk of never finding their way back to media-controlled surface. Namely, documenta X turned to an explicitly anti-consumerism, anti-object, politically aware art that required a high level of intellectual engagement and was not really much fun to watch – i.e. documenta X summarised for its audiences what is at stake in late twentieth-century challenges against dominant ways of seeing.

In his review of documenta X for New Left Review, Masao Miyoshi suggested that the unusual appointment of a 43-year old, ‘politically-committed’ French woman, Catherine David, in the ‘role’ of maverick, revolutionary curator (David was also the first woman in that role) led to the staging of a groundbreaking show. What was groundbreaking about it? Its self-reflexivity, its commitment to an analytical, anti-art-market art. The 1997 Documenta undid the long process of, one might say, ‘mainstreamisation’ of the once avant-garde show, which, one might also add, reflected the severe defeat that the avant-garde had suffered in Europe and the West in general after World War II:

As its fame spread, documenta was increasingly absorbed into the mainstream of avant-garde art. Thus documenta eventually became a spectacular art fest, just like any other, where tourists flock and dealers speculate. If the goal of the first documenta was at least partly documentation and expiation, the aims of the later documentas [...] were far less definite.13

But the aims of documenta X were precisely that: definite. Miyoshi quoted them from the curator’s ‘Introduction’ in the Short Guide. The aims amounted to ‘a historical and critical gaze’ on the exhibition’s ‘own history’, the ‘recent past’ and ‘everything from that vanished-age that remains in ferment within contemporary art and culture’. This ‘everything’ included ‘decolonization’ and the ‘de-Europeanization of the world’ as well as ‘the complex processes of post-archaic, post-traditional, post-national identification at work in the “fractal societies” (Serge Gruzinski) born from the collapse of communism and the brutal impositions of the laws of the market’.14 Miyoshi then goes on to discuss the realisation of these aims that somehow had to be reflected in the selection of the works on show. For example, there was an abundance of work that relied on so-called advanced technology for its construction-process,

presentation and circulation (for instance, video and computers). As opposed to that, only ‘three artists who showed oil paintings appeared’. The adjectives attached to their names remind one of political correctness jokes: one of them was ‘gay’, the other one was an ‘African-American’ and the third one an ‘Israeli’ engaged in ‘documenting the Palestinian Intifada’.15

It is possible that, on the level of content (but that would introduce a sharp and rather problematic distinction between medium and signification), advanced technology art was more in line at the time with the critical perspective of the show as a whole. I would personally hesitate in suggesting this, first because of the distinction I pinpointed above and, secondly, because of the question of access to new media (as much as to painting perhaps, but my comments are not intended as a defence of the latter) by large sectors of the population. Was, then, the banning of oil painting from the 1997 show but the inclusion of advanced technology art, which had to use equipment produced by IT magnates, a revolutionary act? Yes, if one chooses to redefine the meaning of what a revolutionary act in such a context actually is: it is first and foremost a symbolic act. It is a semblance of a real revolutionary act and operates therefore at the level of discursive signification. What such an act achieves is the critical expulsion from a major art event of a group of objects (paintings) which, in the mind of the curatorial team, are a symbol of the commodification of art as such, of the existence of the art market, of the demise of the ‘true’ social role of art itself. The critical elaborations achieved in documenta X appear to have targeted the dominance and imperatives of the art market, not the market as such.16 The problem with this was the implied, but probably unconscious, distinction between the world of art (and its own demon: the art market and its obsession with ‘original’ paintings) and the real world (where Microsoft rules). And, in this wide world, as David Harvey has argued, ‘access to the latest technique, the latest product, the latest scientific discovery implies the possibility of seizing an important competitive advantage’.17 If one wishes to be seriously pessimistic about the logic of the capitalist market saturating culture, there might be an argument for the art world (even for its radical parts) unconsciously rewarding those artists or groups that seized this particular ‘competitive advantage’ by granting these

16 Which is perhaps why one of the three criticisms ‘from the Left’, as noted by Miyoshi, was the financial cost of the exhibition.
17 Harvey 1990, p. 159.
individuals or groups visibility. This hardly suggests that artists should withdraw from that terrain of struggle that technology constitutes, or that we should assume a philistine position towards contemporary art. My aim in this instance is to highlight the possibly unconscious operations of hegemonic ideologies in certain processes of selection which amount to a representation, indeed a *production*, of a contemporary moment in the arts. Were these new issues in 1997? Not quite – unless, of course, one had missed the twentieth century. For, the relationship of art to the market as well as to the art market as such has been a long-standing concern of politically engaged artists, spectators and anyone in between.

The brief discussion of the agenda and shortcomings of documenta X serves to contextualise the agenda and shortcomings of Documenta 11. I am not arguing that Documenta 11, with its first ever African Director, would not have happened had documenta X not paved the way. But the similarities, in terms of issues raised and media prioritised (one could only marvel at the sheer amount of electronic equipment ‘on show’ in Documenta 11), between the last Documenta of the twentieth century and the first Documenta of the twenty-first constitute an issue in their own right. This issue concerns essentially the relationship between art, politics and the definition of the contemporary. And, if Documenta 11 reminded one strongly of documenta X – a fact that did not escape the attention of reviewers, it has to be said\(^\text{18}\) – this is because the world has not radically changed in the past five years and documenting the Palestinian Intifada is even more globally relevant today. This is partly, then, why there was no new art to see anywhere at Documenta 11. Not only were there no new forms of artistic practice that one would need to come to terms with, but there were no new issues either. The persistence of the age-old problems, the absence of formalist exercises in the guise of the ‘new’, the ease with which the ‘new’ and the ‘original’ had been eclipsed from the Documenta 11 agenda without the need to invoke a legitimising postmodernism, was what itself was new and possibly one of the greatest achievements of the first Documenta of the new century.

Philosophically, Documenta 11 may be seen to constitute an argument about the arrested development of art at the age of global capitalism, or in the words of its Artistic Director, ‘late modernity’. Late modernity must, then, be quite different from that other modernity in which some artists sought to achieve

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\(^\text{18}\) Fernandez 2002, p. 43.
diversely pitched breaks from tradition, in terms of form and content, as a politically motivated and transformative act. Tradition and ‘the past’ were certainly not among the issues which preoccupied the artists defining the horizon of Documenta 11. The conditions of the present, the present’s particular ‘nature’, provided the focus for the majority of the works and, for that matter, practices on display.

On another level, the exhibition was even more instructive by demonstrating the extent to which contemporary art, at least of the variety included in Documenta 11, is and aspires to be a process more of insightful documentation than transcendence. This is what the numerous projects recording and questioning the impact of ‘development’ on equally numerous urban, rural and ‘hybrid’ sites, and using available hi-tech routes to do so, suggested. To properly experience in full the availability of such material across the sites of Documenta 11 alone would take days. Visitors who, like myself, could only be there for a weekend, having to be back at work on Monday morning, should be satisfied with hopping between Park Fiction, founded in Hamburg in 1994 ‘to stop plans for construction on the last remaining space’\(^{19}\) and turn it into a public park, and Huit Facettes, founded in Dakar in 1995 ‘to bridge the gap between Senegalese culture and development programs’\(^{20}\). That Documenta 11 required time should hardly be held against it, though. In some respects, the realisation that one would never have the time to see it in full, unless one had a specialist and subsidised interest in the show or infinite ‘leisure’ time, was a useful exercise in its own right. (Also, it was yet another parameter of the show legitimated by the legacy of conceptual art and the latter’s preoccupation temporality, duration and process.)

The audio-visual clatter of archival material in the chaotic Documenta 11 venues, the sheer flow of moving image pastiche, the fact that you could get glimpses of Eastern European urban deserts when your headphones played some modern Greek song, was certainly purposeful. Its purpose, speculatively, was twofold. First, it sought to demonstrate that, contrary to what art critic Hal Foster had argued in 1996, it is not only the Right that currently practises the ‘political importance of culture’\(^{21}\). Secondly, it sought to demonstrate that globalisation breeds a certain uniformity of resistance. The overwhelming

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\(^{20}\) Documenta 11, Catalogue Appendix, 2002, p. 16.
\(^{21}\) Foster 1996, p. xvii.
feeling that, once one had seen two or three such projects documenting the coming together of artists and citizens against the perpetrators of global and local misery, one had actually seen them all may well be the result of one’s overexposure to postmodern aesthetics. (In a way, and without a hint of irony, the exhibition reminded me of a high-school essay question which I had to answer in 1985 and which read: ‘Communication technologies have brought people together and yet people’s hearts and minds remain apart. Discuss.’) The question that inevitably springs to mind is whether all these groups and collectives are aware of how similar their aims, practices, media, images and effects are or appear to be. If so, what is it that prevents the emergence of a truly global project that would recast the condition of contemporary art? Why, as argued by Jean Fisher in the exhibition catalogue, is ‘the romantic idea of global resistance now untenable’? Why is it deemed to be ‘romantic’ in the first place? And – what could be perceived of as particularly worrying – do all these local and translocal projects amount to the big picture? The so-called ‘culture wars’ (misleading as the term may be) of the past few decades suggest, of course, that to expect art to function as the big picture – or as a picture of any kind – is to be missing the point about modernism and postmodernism alike. Art, from the time of the historical avant-garde onwards, has best been understood in terms of an intervention and it has now become a cliché to say so. The context, historical necessity, and outcomes of this intervention, require constant redress and, possibly, Documenta 11 provided an opportunity for such processes of syncretisation and cross-fertilisation to be initiated once more. But, is yet another beginning reason enough for optimism?

‘What is an avant-garde today?’ The Documenta 11 answer

Surprisingly, the curator’s catalogue essay made mention of the avant-garde. Conceptually, the avant-garde is now associated with, and to an extent redefined, through postcoloniality. The essay includes a section entitled ‘What Is an Avant-Garde Today? The Postcolonial Aftermath of Globalization and the Terrible Nearness of Distant Places.’ The argument developed here is that the transformation of spatial and temporal relations is what defines globalisation and that ‘it is in the postcolonial order that we find the most critical enunciation

22 Fisher 2002, p. 64.
23 Enwezor 2002, p. 44.
and radicalization of spatiality and temporality’. Also, it is argued that the postcolonial is no longer confined within the ‘former colonized world’ but that it is now spread within the ‘modernized, metropolitan world of Empire’. The choice of words is instructive. The author’s reference is indeed to Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*. Hardt and Negri’s model of global processes and its glimpse of resistance located in the multitude provides the perspective from which a truly contemporary avant-garde ought to understand the world and fashion its oppositional practice. The category of the avant-garde artist (or for that matter, group) is here usurped by the multitude. It is worth quoting at length:

Today’s avant-garde is so thoroughly disciplined and domesticated within the scheme of Empire that a whole different set of regulatory and resistance models has to be found to counter-balance Empire’s attempt at totalization. Hardt and Negri call this resistance force, opposed to the power of Empire, the ‘multitude’. If Empire’s counter-model is to be found in the pressing, anarchic demands of the multitude, to understand what sustains it historically returns yet again to the move by postcoloniality to define new models of subjectivity. In postcoloniality we are incessantly offered counter-models through which the displaced – those placed on the margins of the enjoyment of full global participation – fashion new worlds by producing experimental cultures. By experimental cultures I wish to define a set of practices whereby cultures evolving out of imperialism and colonialism, slavery and indenture, compose a collage of reality from the fragments of collapsing space.

In the context of the curator’s catalogue essay, this last sentence – amounting to a definition of ‘experimental cultures’ – functions as the verbal equivalent of what in photography theory has come to be known as the Barthesian ‘punctum’: ‘that unexpected prick, sting, or cut that [disturbs] the intelligibility of the culturally connotated meaning’. And this particular punctum suggests that there is a profound level of confusion as to what ‘late modernity’ is and what could possibly count as radical art in its context. Enwezor’s reliance on the buzzwords of postmodern rhetoric, inevitably recalling the

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24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
least enlightening examples of celebratory theorisations of ‘diversity’ and ‘difference’, could have been written twenty years ago, when speaking about postmodernism did not bring about the intellectual embarrassment it does today. Although, admittedly, a ‘collage of reality’ is not the same as a ‘pastiche’ of reality (the former alludes to an avant-garde technique of premeditated intervention in cultural-political spaces), the fact that the redefined realism which is required from the contemporary avant-garde is here perceived as the skill and desire ‘to compose a collage of reality’ from whatever kind of fragments is telling. It suggests that postmodernism itself, with its emphasis on the lack of distinction between reality and discourse, is no longer the subject of debate because it has been elevated to the supreme level of ideology as ‘the more or less unconscious medium of habitual behaviour’. Like the devil, postmodernism has convinced the world it does not exist when, one might argue, its existence is merely so integrated into current ideological landscapes as to no longer lend itself to analysis. That the fragment, associated in 2002 with experimentation and resistance, was the reality principle of postmodern aesthetics in the 1980s, adored and despised in equal measure because of the displacements its centrality was purported to effect, is a second instance of the last Documenta’s operative amnesia.

Having said this, it is also quite unclear which this avant-garde that has fallen out of grace actually is. The apparent contradiction in suggesting that ‘today’s avant-garde’ is disciplined and domesticated is that, if that were the case, it would then cease to be an avant-garde. Given the proposition that ‘experimental [oppositional] cultures’ exist today – and Documenta 11 created a worthy spectacle of their affinities –, the appearance of the term ‘avant-garde’ in this context registers as yet another rehearsed dismissal of the modernist lexicon when the latter has become an easy target for over half a century now.

However, none of the above would have been surprising had not the curator expressed in fairly unambiguous terms in his text postcolonialism’s distaste for postmodernism. In Enwezor’s own words,

postcoloniality must at all times be distinguished from postmodernism. While postmodernism was preoccupied with relativising historical transformations and contesting the lapses and prejudices of epistemological

grand narratives, postcoloniality does the obverse, seeking instead to sublate and replace all grand narratives through new ethical demands on modes of historical interpretation.\textsuperscript{30}

The first thing to be noted here is that the implicit discrediting of postmodernism has not replaced, but has come to complement, the obsession with an allegedly discredited modernism which was a key aspect of postmodern theory and practice in the first place. This desire to distance the critical project of postcolonial ethos and world-view from postmodernism constitutes a nominal victory for those who had always argued about the inherent reactionary character of all things postmodern. It also constitutes a radical sort of memory loss with regard to what postmodernism \textit{was} – in the past tense, to keep in line with the assumption regarding postmodernism’s ‘disappearance’. The critical projects launched in the name of an expanded subjectivity and the explicit politicisation of everyday life are not, of course, postmodern phenomena – unless the historical avant-gardes, from constructivism to surrealism, can be reclaimed as postmodern phenomena at the heart of modernism. But, undeniably, the historical ‘accident’ (obviously an ironic deployment of the term here) of a materialist-feminist politics articulated with unprecedented force within a postmodern context – to cite just one example – added a new intensity to these struggles. Ultimately, what is unsettling, but at the same time of critical importance, in Enwezor’s argument is the double rejection of modernist and postmodernist narratives and the consequent reduction of complex historical phenomena to their phantasmatic remoulding within and by dominant ideologies. To the extent that one would wish to retain this – in some quarters problematic – distinction in terms of a clear-cut opposition between modernism and postmodernism, the persistent refutation of their complexity and relationship, with regard to the cultures of opposition they gave rise to, and the latter’s partial recontainment, amounts to a profoundly undialectical understanding of art history – and history at large.

Following on from the above, it appears that the first Documenta of the new century is best understood as a symptom of its times: self-confident, aware of the issues, but unable to see through the web of solutions on offer, oscillating instead between the uncertain recognition that world violence, poverty and injustice are actually of benefit to some people and the unjustified

\textsuperscript{30} Enwezor 2002, p. 45.
optimism that ‘the rest’, in its timely guise as the multitude, will become – has become – the singularly legitimate locus of resistance. Given this, it is tempting to reread Hal Foster’s remark that ‘resistance is unknowing, that it is a process of un-knowing’ in a different, and more sinister, light. Based on Freud’s analysis of repetition in relation to reception, Foster’s remark aims to rethink the historical grounding of the neo-avant-garde and its contested failure as a repetition (and reception) of the historical avant-garde. But, when today we have moved from the individual and the collective to the multitude, this link between ‘resistance’, ‘repetition’ and a ‘process of unknowing’ can be seen to pave the way for an authorised retreat from a concrete political vision that assumes responsibility for the breaks it effects and for the future it knowingly imagines. If, indeed, the notion of resistance has undergone such a severe ideological distortion, one can reasonably make an informed guess: ‘resistance’ will be reconfigured as discourse and will be the current decade’s buzzword of triumphalist micropolitics. In other words, it will be for the ‘00s what the term ‘subversion’ was for the ‘80s, when dominant ideologies were allegedly ‘subverted’ at the same time as the argument about ‘post-historical’ art – today strongly reminiscent of the absurdity of the ‘end of history’ doxa – was gaining intellectual ground. Now, to recast every failure (the failure to fully subvert, the failure to know) in positive terms, understanding it as historically determined but not as a dead end, has been a strategy – indeed, a strategy often making good use of certain principles of dialectics – in the theory of art but, at present, one feels compelled to repeat the question of whether there might not be any other strategies available.

**Negative space: art, agency, utopia and the future in Documenta 11**

Keeping in mind the stated intention of the curatorial team that the exhibition component of the Documenta 11 project was not to be seen as the culmination of the processes and debates of the ‘theory’ platforms which preceded the show and that, instead, artists produced work which amounted to merely a different form of intervention and contribution to such debates, the question of what the role of artists and artworks is, or could be, in the era of deep

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globalisation processes looms large. The Documenta 11 exhibition was of formidable intensity and it included work by 107 artists and 11 groups/collectives. According to the exhibition catalogue, it was supported by four ‘main sponsors’, namely Die Bahn, Deutsche Telekom, S-Finanzgruppe and Volkswagen, each of whom had its own page bearing the company logo in the massive exhibition catalogue. There were also mere ‘sponsors’ (presumably corporations which funded the venture to a lesser extent than the ‘main sponsors’) and ‘media partners’. The catalogue opens with a selection of photographs documenting key events of recent years and, in fact, the first few pages remind one of documentary photography albums of the ‘world in pictures’ variety. Somewhere between these first pages of visual evidence of the evils of globalisation and the last few sponsors’ pages of the massive volume, we find the essays that provide the theoretical context as well as the artists and their artworks.

The Documenta 11 catalogue layout operates, then, as a metaphor for the uncertain role of the resistance art of the ‘multitude’. To borrow a term from postcolonial jargon, this appears to be an art in-between. Except that the in-between-ness, in this case, does not have to do with living in-between two cultures, with the crossing of borders and re-invention of oneself as a hybrid subject. This in-between-ness, as documented in the catalogue, is produced at the point where the desire to respond to the reality attended to by the opening photo-documents is curbed by the reality of the corporate funds that have to be there for this critique to be staged in the first place. The catalogue then becomes an exemplary ideological document, for the order of appearance in the catalogue reverses the real order of things. The sponsors’ pages should not have been the last but the first ones to appear, since the art exhibition format – and this becomes more evident in exhibitions of this scale – must be one of the few remaining structures today where the base (funding)/superstructure (culture) formula can be seen to work in a relatively uncomplicated manner. One cannot but wonder what sponsors think when coming across artist Barbara Kruger’s poster which reads ‘When I Hear The Word “Culture” I Take Out My Wallet’ (or was it cheque book? – not included in the show anyway). Documenta 11 inadvertently reintroduced the question – as it tends to be forgotten – of the institutional representation of art, especially when the emphasis is on practices which amount to an extension of public and community art. At present, the act of keeping the question on the horizon can be more disruptive than answering it. For, as any museum studies student
would admit, we (public, artists, critics) for a long time now know what they (sponsors) get out of having their companies associated with radical art, since the adjectives ‘radical’ or ‘cutting-edge’ can also apparently describe a wide range of products, from beer (think of Beck’s Futures) to mobile phones, for the knowing consumer who can afford the ‘best that life can offer’ and does not have to be a closet commodity fetishist. What art gets out of sponsors – as well as what it loses in the process – is also obvious.

Wandering about the exhibition, in its multiple locations around Kassel, and not having looked at the exhibition catalogue at the time, the condition of contemporary art appeared far healthier. Leon Golub’s large-scale paintings made perfect sense – especially if one had watched the painter talk about postmodernism in the 1980s Channel 4 series *State of the Art*. The same as Svetlana and Igor Kopystiansky’s video installation *Flow*, in which the camera follows the immensely sad, random movements of ‘found’ objects (meaning the excessive waste, such as plastic bags, produced in a nominally post-industrial society), today Golub’s paintings appear to be more about alienation than protest – possibly because the 1980s debates around the true meaning of the ‘return’ to figuration, which was seen to be either a market-inspired conspiracy or a radical re-investment in socially engaged, ‘accessible’ art left an indelible mark of bitterness in the mind of politically committed painters. The alienation I am referring to (possibly a problematic ‘humanist’ concept, but still of some use, I would argue) is both that experienced by the painter and the one that the painter finds at the core of social existence. But overall, alienation and protest appear to be the two conceptual poles of meaning in Documenta 11. Paradoxically, and despite the marginal appearance of painting in the show, it was a mural-scale, mixed media fusion of traditional painting techniques and a graffiti reconceptualisation of painting practice which succeeded in providing a balanced combination of both. Fabian Marcaccio is an Argentinean who lives and works in New York (not one exhibition in Argentina is mentioned in the Artist’s Biography in the catalogue) and his *Multiple-Site Paintants* (double-sided, free-standing, massive painted surfaces exhibited outdoors) were as refreshing an experience as watching some kids skating in a specially-constructed ramp which was presumably an artistic project in its own right (as there was a caption explaining what the ramp was doing there). But it is unclear whether this was yet another project prompting the visitors to rethink the distance between everyday practices and ‘performance’ and, if so, what purpose this served.
Overall, and despite its confused position towards the avant-garde, Documenta 11 sought to remind its visitors of art’s – even western art’s – emphasis on, and social purpose of, utopias. One great surprise encountered in Documenta 11 was Constant’s futuristic constructions from the 1950s and 1960s and the call for a radical transformation of social space. The display in a nearby room of Lisl Ponger’s snapshots, associated in some oblique way with the anticapitalist movement, did not however function in favour of the contemporary moment. Instead, the particular juxtaposition of ‘then’ and ‘now’ suggested that a crucial dimension of the artistic process, and thus of the identity of the artist, has been lost in the odd half a century separating these works. Namely, the ability of artistic process to imagine possible worlds, or else to render positive possibilities visible and by doing so to reclaim the material effects of both historically produced ways of seeing and artistic imagination. Instead, and this is certainly not disproved by the overwhelming emphasis of Documenta 11 on documentary practices, the curatorial choices appear to suggest that much of contemporary art is less able or willing to imagine a dialectical relationship with the future.

One suspects, however, that, in this instance, the emphasis is not on documentation (documentation functions perhaps as a method or even a medium) but on witnessing – specifically, of the artist witnessing on behalf of the public and, thus, of the artist becoming a ‘medium’ in her own right. It is somehow disappointing, however, that the act of witnessing is not here often proposed as something beyond the mere transcription of events – of fragments of events, to be more precise – into a different context. It is possible, nonetheless, to read into this tendency a conscious or unconscious disaffirmation of art as an adequate context in its own right. As already discussed, a number of projects included in Documenta 11 document, or witness, the artists’ involvement in practices of resistance which radically transform the ideologically dominant identity of the artist by re-inscribing artistic agency in everyday spaces. By doing this, the ‘documentary’ practices prioritised in the exhibition also succeed in foregrounding the relevance of historical agency to current practices of representation. This is precisely what audiences were asked to

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34 Attacks on Documenta 11 because of the exhibition’s emphasis on documentary
witness in the context of Documenta 11 and, in this sense, the exhibition appears to have revisited the concept, legacy and traditions of ‘realism’ – a term that appears to have lost nothing of its disruptive force in the new century. But the ways these practices and instances of resistance are documented can be seen to re-introduce a new gap between ‘form’ and ‘content’ that leaves something – possibly a more complex articulation of art as praxis – to be desired. In other words, Documenta 11 asserted the need for a new practice of realism but did not practise nor imagine one.

This is not to say that there were not works on show in which reality was given a spin – Isaac Julien’s and Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s moving image environments are good examples of this. But, even in the context of such works, the primary level of engagement was a present defined as a multitude of magnificently interwoven cases of alienation. Significantly, Ahtila’s DVD production, The House, as many other films and videos in and beyond the Documenta 11 framework, makes excellent use of the surrealist uncanny (currently making a major comeback in the most contemporary of contemporary film and video) which is seen to emerge at the interface of an array of distorted ‘realist’ and ‘real’ spaces – a house in Ahtila’s case. By showcasing such work, Documenta 11 has enabled a re-reading of video and experimental film, highlighting the latter’s move beyond the boredom principle identified by Jameson as

practices certainly say a lot about the apparently still prevalent myth of ‘pure’ art. So, in The Art Newspaper, we read: ‘The ideology of political correctness has led to the display of works that show artists as poor sociologists and poor anthropologists: works (photographs and films) whose documentary nature has priority – in which, not the image, but the document speaks.’ See Ammann 2002, p. 13. The reviewer assumes here a (rather facile and problematic) distinction between ‘image’ and ‘document’ and overlooks both the complex history of the two terms and how the works on display, being both image and document, relate to a wider frame of references that exists beyond representation. Such a response however should not come as a surprise, since the identity of the artist continues to be perceived in terms of a ‘specialism’ among many (anthropologist, sociologist, artist), aided, no doubt, both by the legacy of formalism and the demands of the market for ‘professionals’.

As put by John Roberts, ‘realism is neither an “outmoded” pictorial style nor an untheorised account of representation. On the contrary, it represents a continuing philosophical commitment to the application of dialectical reason to the problems of cultural production. We should not confuse the term, accordingly, with a defence of empiricism, although, of course, knowledge by acquaintance must play a part in any adequate realist epistemology.’ Roberts 1998, p. 11.

And, as this was done in a way which strongly recalled Mark Danielewski’s aggressive deconstruction of the novel, documentary video and several other practices and genres in his eminently post/modern prose of House of Leaves, it is already evident that the discourse on the horror of domestic space is gaining momentum once again – so soon after Rachel Whitehead’s House and the 1970s Californian feminists’ Womanhouse and all other ‘unhappy house’ projects in between.
underpinning the consumption of this art form in his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. However, whether this is still a ‘surrealism without the unconscious’, as suggested by Jameson, remains a moot point.\(^{37}\)

Undoubtedly, the emblematic emphasis of Documenta 11 on prioritising the meanings which ‘really’ count today in the exhibition’s purposeful focus on the postcolonial condition temporarily lends such works an unconscious with a view. That is, an unconscious which does not fold back upon the subject to convince the latter of its existence but one which establishes connections and rehabilitates, to some extent, recently discredited forms of collectivity. But, at the same time, this most recent attempt to posit a metanarrative of oppression which replaces class struggle, and the production of concrete subjects through and by this struggle, with the struggle of the appropriately vague multitude affirms, rather than subverts, Jameson’s depressing conclusion about the remit of relevance of contemporary art practice to social praxis. The overall implicit negation (as opposed to the occasionally explicit affirmation) of utopian vision and any possible visualisations of utopia in the selected works may have been an unconscious curatorial principle and, for the pessimists among us, foregrounds, and denotes, the show’s historical authenticity.

Together with the exhibition catalogue, which, like most exhibition catalogues, speaks about the deeper meaning of social structures more convincingly than the exhibition itself by simultaneously being and exposing dominant ideology, the absence of critical utopian vision from Documenta 11 matches the contemporary ascendance of forms of resistance marked by their ‘anti-’ stance, rather than the desire to think creatively about the realisation of possibilities in ways which enhance our understanding of how the present might relate to new conceptualisations of the future. Hence, one might be less surprised by one reviewer’s vehemently negative response to the first Documenta platform publication under the title *Democracy Unrealized*. Matthew Hyland identified the coming together of ‘decorously post-Marxist and “Radical Democratic” citizen activist positions’ that ‘were seen to share a utopian horizon beyond their obvious disagreement.’\(^{38}\) Hyland’s remarks, testifying to the symbolic relegation of utopia to discourse, were made more disturbingly

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meaningful once one had visited the show. His observation about the invocation of democracy in the conference and the publication opens however the way about rethinking what Documenta 11 achieved beyond its set and stated aims:

To put it another way, ‘democracy’ is a popular aspiration in neo-Collateral circles as it allows the ground of debate to be shifted from the material to the ideal without drawing attention to the switch. Thus even Immanuel Wallerstein uses demographic statistics to do with wealth distribution almost interchangeably with those regarding the formal right to ‘democratic’ representation, as if the passage from self-expression to appropriation of resources were automatic, or at most a merely technical problem.39

On a first level, then, Documenta 11 was yet another instance in which the shortcomings of the World Social Forum could be seen to become manifest: a great party, but one where the question ‘where to go next’ – in a literal geographical sense – can serve to displace the burning question ‘what to do next’. On another level, what Documenta 11 achieved was an inadvertently powerful demonstration of the limits of current structures for exhibiting art, in so far as such structures will inevitably – in the present historical conjuncture – call attention to the persistent recapitulation of even socially engaged art as spectacle. A problem that already makes the twenty-first century feel like the twentieth, one might add, but one to which the answer should be practised rather than proposed. And, to paraphrase a relatively well-known dictum, artists (and curators) make their history but not always, it seems, in circumstances of their own choosing. Documenta has usurped the function of a Salon des Refusées and it is getting more and more difficult to imagine what a counter-Documenta would look like today or in five years time, should there ever be a collective need or desire for one. This however seems unlikely if, as Iain Chambers stated in the Democracy Unrealized volume,

in the shift of language into a post-humanist landscape where no single subject, history or culture is able to authorize the narration, or the interpretation, there occurs a marked displacement from questions of property, origins and identity to more transitory differentiations in the heterogeneous becoming of the world.40

39 Ibid.
40 Chambers 2002, p. 175.
As familiar as such words sound in reminding us that everything that is solid continues to melt into air, it is unclear how the recurring dream (or, nightmare) of more, and perhaps increasingly, transitory differentiations can provide the impetus for long-term action that can actually change the world – for the better, that is.

References


Foster, Hal 1994, ‘What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?’, October, 70, Fall: 5–32.


In our essay ‘What’s Historical About Historical Materialism?’”, we drew two contrasts between the Darwinian theory of evolution (ET) and the Marxist theory of historical materialism (HM).\(^1\) We described the former as a ‘micro-theory’ and the latter as a ‘macro-theory’. We also argued that, in Darwinian theory, evolution is driven by exogenous forces, specifically, by natural selection induced by environmental factors; whereas historical materialism sees the transformation of a society from feudalism to capitalism and then to socialism as a consequence of an endogenous process, involving ‘contradictions’ between forces and relations of production and class struggle. Nolan has taken issue with both of these contrasts; his view is that the two theories are more similar than our account allows.\(^2\)

We noted in our essay that it may seem counter-intuitive to describe ET as a micro-theory and HM as macro; after all, the former is about the whole

\(^1\) Levine and Sober 1985.
\(^2\) Nolan 2002.
history of life, whereas the latter is about a small portion of the career of a single species. Our point in applying the terms ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ in this way was that HM segments human history into a small number of large epochs, and sets itself the task of explaining the transitions from each to the next, whereas Darwinian ET treats the history of life as the accumulation of a large number of small changes. Its job is to explain the innumerable transitions that populations have made from one array of trait frequencies to the next. Nolan apparently agrees with these points; what he faults, it seems, is only our use of the labels ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ to describe them.

Nolan emphasises an analogy that we had noted between the way ET understands the changes that occur within a single species or population and the way HM understands the changes that take place within a single human society. In each, the postulated process tends to increase a quantity of interest – fitness, in the case of ET, productive power, in the case of HM.\(^3\) We still maintain that this parallel exists, though we now notice that it conceals a disanalogy – increase in productive capacity plays a causal role in HM, leading one social formation to give way to another, whereas the increase in fitness that occurs in a selection process is an effect, not a cause. Indeed, there are plenty of selection processes in which fitness does not increase – a point which we wish we had emphasised more.\(^4\) In any case, the similarity between HM and ET that Nolan wishes to highlight is perfectly consistent with the macro/micro contrast we described.

Nolan also disagrees with our claim that ET is exogenous and HM endogenous. But, once again, his reasons appear to be purely terminological. According to Nolan ‘evolution is “driven” by random genetic mutation (plus recombination and drift) . . . the environment determines the direction (and reduces the speed) of evolution, but it does not “drive” it’.\(^5\) Nolan says that mutation ‘drives’ evolution, and natural selection does not, on the grounds that evolution can take place without selection, but not without the existence of variation, whose ultimate source is mutation. However, when we said that Darwinian theory holds that selection drives evolution, we only meant that selection provides it with its direction. If selection favours a longer wing or

\(^3\) Nolan 2002, pp. 150–1.

\(^4\) In this regard, see the discussion of frequency dependent selection in Sober 1993, pp. 97–9.

a sharper tooth in a population that exhibits the requisite variation, the
Darwinian expects the population to move in that direction. This is consistent
with Nolan’s point that it is possible in principle for evolution to take place
without selection. Mutation, since it occurs at random, does not ‘drive’
evolution in the standard sense of that term that we were using.

Nolan thinks that the micro/macro and the exogenous/endogenous
distinctions are ‘related’ – that micro-theorising is ‘associated with’ an emphasis
on exogenous causes, because ‘an emphasis upon exogenously driven change
makes macro explanations difficult . . .’. Similarly, macro-theories ‘are associated
with an emphasis on endogenous sources of change . . .’. We think that the
distinctions are independent of each other. HM sees the main transitions in
human economic forms as consequences of endogenous processes, but there
is no reason in principle why an environmental theory might not be offered
to account for large-scale transitions – Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*
provides a case in point. Similarly, Darwinian ET views the environment
outside the population, including both the physical environment and the
biotic environment constituted by other species, as driving the population’s
evolution, but Kimura’s neutral theory argues that the endogenous process
of random genetic drift is the pre-eminent determiner of molecular evolution.

Nolan says that we deny that ET can explain speciation and the large-scale
trends that have occurred in evolution. In fact, we do not. Our point was
only that large-scale trends are explained as the accumulation of changes
that occur at smaller scale. Conventional ET provides no additional layer of
‘macro-theory’, though the possibility of such a theory is an on-going subject
of investigation and debate. Just as a methodological individualist holds that
changes in the properties of a society can in principle be explained by changes
at the level of individuals and their interactions, so a conventional Darwinist
might assert that macro-evolutionary events must have micro-evolutionary
explanations. The point is correct, but it leaves open whether there can be
social theories or macro-evolutionary theories that fail to reduce to theories
at lower levels; we have discussed this possibility at length in *Reconstructing
Marxism*.\(^\text{10}\)

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\(^7\) See Diamond 1997.
\(^8\) Kimura 1983.
We value Nolan’s clarification of the distinction between the objects and the properties of those objects that ET and HM describes. These are depicted in the accompanying table, along with the objects and properties described in developmental biology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objects</th>
<th>Properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Darwinism</strong></td>
<td>populations and species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Historical Materialism</strong></td>
<td>societies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Developmental Biology</strong></td>
<td>organisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>phenotypes and genotypes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>feudalism, capitalism, socialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>zygote, juvenile, adult, senescence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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As Nolan emphasises, ET describes the phenotypic and genotypic changes that a species undergoes, just as HM describes the change in economic forms that a society experiences. A developmental biologist might likewise seek to describe the processes that propel an organism through a series of developmental stages. We suggest that HM is more like developmental biology than it is like ET. HM is a developmental theory in which the stages of development can be specified at the outset. ET does not have this form – there are no stages of development that a species (or life as a totality) must move through. The reason is that HM emphasises endogenous causes of historical change, whereas ET has species responding to the fortuitous selection pressures thrown up by the environment. One of Darwin’s most fundamental achievements was to see that understanding the changes that species experience requires a different kind of theory from the type required to understand the development of organisms. Marx’s HM was rooted in the older developmental paradigm, as were the other theories of history that preceded HM, which we discussed in our article.

**References**


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Introduction

Whatever attitude we take towards the kind of historical materialism defended by G.A. Cohen, and towards the analytical techniques that he used to defend it, the publication of *Karl Marx’s Theory of History* represented a watershed in discussion of historical materialism.¹ Cohen propounded a strong, though not unqualified, historical materialism, in which societies undergo a series of changes in form, from pre-class society to precapitalist class society to capitalist society. These changes are (functionally) explained by the propensity of these successive social forms to enhance productive power, given the level of productive power already in existence.²

The consensus that emerged during the debates that followed the book’s publication, however, was that such an ambitious doctrine could not be sustained. Perhaps under the barrage of criticism that the book received, Cohen himself subsequently developed doubts and reservations about the book’s central claims.³ Levine’s and Sober’s ‘What’s Historical

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¹ Cohen 1978.
³ Cohen 1988, pp. 109–79.
About Historical Materialism?’ was, it seemed to me, part of this process of reducing the explanatory ambitions of historical materialism.4

Levine and Sober argued that both natural selection and historical materialism are directional theories in that each asserts a ‘temporal asymmetry’ in which a given quantity (reproductive success for natural selection, productive power for historical materialism) tends to rise over time. Nevertheless, there are important differences between the two theories. One of these is that, in natural selection, change is exogenously driven by factors external to the theory, whereas, in historical materialism, change is endogenously driven by factors internal to the theory.

Because it is an exogenously driven process, natural selection is (and effectively must be) a micro-theory. Micro-theories explain changes within their units of analysis, and the unit of analysis of natural selection is the population or species. Natural selection, therefore, provides micro-evolutionary explanations of small-scale changes within populations or species, explanations that are, consequently, fine-grained. Because it emphasises endogenously driven processes, historical materialism (can be and) is a macro-theory. Macro-theories explain changes among their units of analysis, and the unit of analysis of historical materialism is the society. Historical materialism, therefore, provides macro-historical explanations of large-scale transitions between societies, explanations that are, consequently, coarse-grained.5

Levine and Sober went on to propose a ‘weak’ historical materialism, in which the social changes required for productive improvement may not occur if the social groups interested in the changes lack the capacities necessary for implementing them.6 They concluded by linking this ‘weak’ historical materialism with Cohen’s suggestion of a ‘restricted’ historical materialism, in which historical materialism can only (functionally) explain those phenomena that have an effect on productive power.7 Wright, Levine and Sober later endorsed these notions of a weak and restricted historical materialism.8

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4 Levine and Sober 1985.
5 Levine and Sober seem to think that this way of relating the two distinctions is my invention. In fact, they were the ones who connected the distinctions in this way (1985, pp. 315, 319). Moreover, the asserted connection reappears both in Wright, Levine and Sober (1992, pp. 54 and 78), and in Levine and Sober supra.
7 Levine and Sober 1985, p. 325.
In my critique of Levine and Sober, I distinguished between what drives a process and what directs it. I argued that both historical materialism and natural selection are endogenously driven but exogenously directed, and that this disposed of one reason for claiming that historical materialism is, in contrast to natural selection, a macro-theory. But I also argued that Levine and Sober’s use of the units of analysis argument to designate historical materialism a macro-theory (while designating natural selection a micro-theory) was anyway fatally undermined by their failure to distinguish between societies and social forms. I concluded that the two theories are structurally very similar; that, if anything, historical materialism has the more modest explanatory ambitions; and that, in principle, historical materialism’s explanations are no more coarse-grained, or no less fine-grained, than are those of natural selection.

My concern was not to defend an orthodox historical materialism, but to keep open the possibility of a significantly more ambitious historical materialism than that proposed by Levine and Sober. My strategy in criticising Levine and Sober was merely to show that historical materialism is more analogous to an established and very successful scientific theory, Darwinian natural selection, than they claimed. Thus my answer to the question that I posed in my title, ’What’s Darwinian About Historical Materialism?’ was ‘More than Levine and Sober would allow’.

So, although my article did not directly confront the notions of a weak and restricted historical materialism, the similarities with natural selection that I stress allow us to begin to formulate a response to these conceptions. Thus, if historical materialism must be restricted in its explanatory ambition (because it can only functionally explain those features that have an effect on productive power), then natural selection too must be restricted (because it can only provide an adaptationist explanation of those features that have an effect on reproductive success). And, if historical materialism must be weak (because

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9 Nolan 2002a.
10 If, that is, seeing a theory as emphasising an endogenously directed process is one reason for thinking that it is likely to be a macro-theory; but see note 5 above.
11 Elsewhere, I have tried to sketch the form of this more ambitious historical materialism by establishing a quasi-Darwinian mechanism for the theory’s central explanatory connection (Nolan 2002b). My espousal of this mechanism no doubt gives me added reason to emphasise historical materialism’s similarities with natural selection, and therefore to oppose Levine and Sober, but, as I noted (Nolan 2002a, p. 150, note 23), my critique of them is independent of my proposed mechanism.
the class capacities necessary to bring about the social changes required to enhance productive power may not be forthcoming), then natural selection too must be weak (in that the genetic variations necessary to bring about the phenotypic changes required to enhance reproductive success may not be forthcoming). But, of course, natural selection is not all that restricted and not all that weak.

**What’s exogenous (and endogenous) about historical materialism?**

In their response to my distinction between what ‘drives’ and what ‘directs’ a process, Levine and Sober argue that ‘when we said that Darwinian theory holds that selection *drives* evolution, we only meant that selection provides it with its *direction*, that this is a ‘standard’ use of the term ‘drive’, and that my disagreement with them here is ‘purely terminological’.

Now, it is true that when people refer to ‘driving’ a car, they standardly include the idea of directing the car. But there is also a clear distinction between ‘drive’ and ‘direct’, as anyone who drives a car without using the steering wheel to direct it will quickly discover. Perhaps this shows that even ordinary language philosophers sometimes need to go beyond ordinary language. So did Levine and Sober consistently mean ‘directs (as distinct from drives)’ whenever they discussed what ‘drives’ a process? Well, no, they did not. When, for instance, they said that historical materialism ‘conceives change *propelled along* by an internal necessity’,12 they might have meant ‘driven (as distinct from directed)’ or ‘driven *and* directed’, but they clearly did not mean ‘directed (as distinct from driven)’. And, given that they were contrasting the two theories in this respect, whatever ‘driven’ meant when they described historical materialism as being *endogenously* driven, it must also have meant when they described natural selection as being *exogenously* driven. In my opinion, their entire discussion of this issue is vitiated by a failure to consistently distinguish between what ‘drives’ processes and what ‘directs’ them.

The important point that I wanted to stress, however, was that, once we distinguish between drive and direct, then the consequent contrast

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12 Levine and Sober 1985, p. 321 (emphasis added).
between natural selection and historical materialism alleged by Levine and Sober, in which natural selection is exogenously directed while historical materialism postulates endogenously directed processes, collapses. The processes emphasised by each theory are endogenously driven but exogenously directed. Not only does this make historical materialism structurally more similar to natural selection than Levine and Sober argue, but it also undermines, I argued, the alleged differences in explanatory focus between the two theories. The differences between us are not, therefore, ‘purely terminological’.

I note that Levine and Sober do not explicitly disagree with my distinction between drive and direct. They clearly think, as I do, that natural selection conceives evolution as being exogenously directed, and they might agree with me that natural selection is endogenously driven (how else would we describe the role of mutation?). Where we would still disagree, however, is in our view of historical materialism. Levine and Sober (now) say that the processes postulated by historical materialism are endogenously directed, in contrast to natural selection, which is exogenously directed.

Levine and Sober ignore my, admittedly brief, argument that historical materialism is similar to natural selection in emphasising exogenously directed processes.\(^\text{13}\) They also ignore the textual reference I provided to show that Marx emphasised the importance of exogenous circumstances in historical-materialist explanations,\(^\text{14}\) contrary to their assertion that historical materialism ‘recognizes only endogenous causal factors’.\(^\text{15}\) For their part, Levine and Sober give no evidence from the writings of Marx or Engels, and I know of none, to think that they saw historical trajectories as endogenously directed. But, of course, whatever Marx or Engels thought, the crucial question is what historical materialism implies or entails.

When Levine and Sober outline historical materialism, they begin by (properly) emphasising the crucial role of productive development.\(^\text{16}\) But they then say that class struggle ‘generates the pattern and sequence historical materialism postulates’.\(^\text{17}\) Now, ‘generates’ is ambiguous, but they later clarify their meaning somewhat:

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\(^{13}\) Nolan 2002a, pp. 165–6.

\(^{14}\) Nolan 2002a, p. 165.

\(^{15}\) Levine and Sober 1985, p. 320.

\(^{16}\) Levine and Sober 1985, pp. 310–11.

\(^{17}\) Levine and Sober 1985, p. 311.
It is ever-changing relations (of correspondence and non-correspondence) between forces and relations of production that account, in the Marxian view, for the kinds of economic structures a society may have and for their sequencing.\textsuperscript{18}

And, in their reply to me, Levine and Sober say that

historical materialism sees the transformation of a society from feudalism to capitalism and then to socialism as a consequence of an endogenous process, involving ‘contradictions’ between forces and relations of production and class struggle.

So, in Levine’s and Sober’s account of historical materialism, the endogenous factors that direct the historical process are the changing relationship between productive forces and production relations, and class struggle.

But this surely involves a (not uncommon) misinterpretation of historical materialism. It is productive development, from foraging to farming/herding to industrial modes of production, which, at the most general level, ‘accounts . . . for the kinds of economic structures societies may have, and for their sequencing’.\textsuperscript{19} After all, if (miraculously) productive techniques had standardly shifted from foraging to industrial to farming/herding, then the ‘sequencing’ of economic structures would have been very different.

These very general categories – foraging, farming/herding, industrial – allow for enormous variation, of course; and what directs social change in this way rather than that way, for historical materialism, are differences in the kinds of productive techniques that are developed. Differences, for instance, between pastoralism and farming, with these, respectively, nomadic and sedentary modes of food production implying rather different social forms; or between irrigation agriculture and rainfall agriculture, and the more and less centralised social forms respectively implied by these different modes of food production.\textsuperscript{20}

Economic structures, in historical materialism, are explained by their role in enhancing productive power; relations of production are selected because of their (varying) capacity to improve productive power (just as phenotypic variations in natural selection are selected because they bring

\textsuperscript{18} Levine and Sober 1985, p. 319.
\textsuperscript{19} Levine and Sober 1985, p. 319 (emphases added).
\textsuperscript{20} Harris 1979, pp. 89–90, 99, 103–5.
about improvements in reproductive success). Correspondence between productive forces and economic structures, therefore, is the theoretically standard situation in historical materialism. But relations of production do not decide what direction history will take (just as phenotypic variations do not decide what direction evolution will take).21

It is when economic structures no longer enhance productive power, but persist because of vested class interests, that contradictions develop or intensify, and these contradictions are resolved by class struggle in favour of economic structures that better enhance productive power.

So, the contradiction between productive forces and relations, and class struggle, may be thought of as (part of) what drives social change. Thus Marx and Engels say that ‘class struggle is the immediate driving power of history’.22 But these endogenous factors do not determine what direction societies move in, whether towards this social form or that social form. Social change is directed by the trajectory of productive development, and that is not fundamentally determined by class struggle.

In fact, Levine and Sober also (and inconsistently) offer just this orthodox account of historical materialism:

In the orthodox view, these struggles are inexorable and their outcomes, ultimately, predictable. That class which is best suited, at a particular level of development of productive forces, for further developing productive forces will ultimately prevail; or, in other words, there will be selection for that set of production relations which is optimal for further developing productive forces . . . orthodox historical materialism is a theory of historical inevitability, of an inexorable sequence of epochal stages.23

But the ultimate outcomes of class struggles are ‘predictable’ and ‘inevitable’ (to the extent that they are predictable and inevitable), precisely because class struggle does not direct the historical process. Class struggle ‘merely’ brings about the social changes required ‘for further developing productive forces’.24

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21 Although, for each theory, limitations in the kinds of (genetic or cultural) variations available may preclude certain evolutionary or historical directions.
22 Cited in Cohen 1988, p. 16 (emphasis added).
23 Levine and Sober 1985, p. 311.
24 This may raise philosophical problems concerning historical inevitability and human agency (Cohen 1988, pp. 51–82). But these problems are evaded rather than solved by saying that class struggle directs the historical process.
And Levine and Sober even go on to say that what decides the ‘direction of change’ is that ‘economic structures change to maximize the level of development of productive forces’, and that class struggle is the ‘means through which change is achieved’.  

These statements confirm my view that Levine’s and Sober’s account of historical materialism is flawed by their failure to distinguish between what drives and what directs historical processes for that theory. If class struggles direct historical trajectories, then social change will take the route set by the unpredictable outcomes of such struggles. If, on the other hand, historical change is directed by the tendency to develop productive power, then changes in productive techniques (and their associated social forms) will take the route that will, given local environmental conditions, enhance productive power.

I italicise the phrase ‘given local environmental conditions’ here in order to stress that the environment is the crucial variable. Productive development is so dependent upon environmental resources that if, as Levine and Sober say, ‘the direction of change’ (and here they presumably do mean direction) is set by the tendency to ‘maximize the level of development of productive forces’, then what they fail to infer, but can hardly deny, is that, for historical materialism, social change is exogenously directed. Developing productive power in different environments requires that appropriate productive techniques (and therefore relations of production) are developed in order to use the different resources available in those environments.

This point is important because it enables a materialist theory of history to explain different trajectories, or different rates of movement along those trajectories, in terms of different environmental characteristics. The fact that most of the easily domesticated animal and plant species originated in Eurasia may help to account for the earlier and more rapid development of agriculture in Eurasia compared to the Americas or sub-Saharan Africa. This lack of domesticable animal species in the Americas may also help to explain why early agricultural villages in Mesoamerica took much longer to become fully sedentary than agricultural villages in the Near East, as proto-agriculturalists in Mesoamerica continued hunting (and thus a semi-nomadic lifestyle) as a means of obtaining animal protein. The fact that agriculture
did not develop in Australia (before the arrival of Europeans with an already developed agriculture) may be largely explained by the extreme aridity of Australia, and the almost complete lack of domesticable animal and plant species.²⁸

An historical materialism that ‘recognises only endogenous causal factors’ simply could not offer explanations of this sort. Differing historical trajectories would simply be explained in terms of the varying outcomes of class struggles in different parts of the world. This would not be a general theory of history. It would merely be a version of mainstream historiography that, because of its emphasis upon class and class struggles, had a leftist flavour.

**The first micro/macro distinction**

Levine and Sober say that I seem to agree with their designating natural selection a micro-theory and historical materialism a macro-theory: ‘what he faults, it seems, is only our use of the labels “micro” and “macro” to describe them’. But I did not fault their use of the labels ‘micro’ and ‘macro’, I faulted their use of the labels.

What Levine and Sober argued, and what I disagreed with, was that historical materialism (is a macro-theory in that it) mainly provides explanations of changes *between* its units of analysis, between, that is, societies. These explanations are, therefore, of large-scale transitions, and they are, consequently, *coarse-grained*. In contrast, natural selection (is a micro-theory in that it) mainly provides explanations of changes *within* its units of analysis, within, that is, populations or species. These explanations are, therefore, of small-scale changes, and they are, consequently, *fine-grained*.²⁹

Deleting the parenthesised clauses from the above paragraph, and thereby any reference to the terms micro and macro, would still leave the substantive disagreement, a disagreement that is, therefore, quite independent of the ‘use of the labels “micro” and “macro”’. Levine and Sober claim that the similarity between the two theories that I want to emphasise is ‘perfectly consistent with the macro/micro distinction we described’. Even if this is so, however, and whatever validity the distinction might have in other contexts, I simply do not think that their distinction

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²⁹ Levine and Sober 1985, pp. 314, 318.
describes a real difference between natural selection and historical materialism. Moreover, I doubt that the distinction is actually consistent with my arguments. I want to deny that historical materialism’s explanations must be large-scale and ‘coarse-grained’ in comparison to the small-scale and ‘fine-grained’ explanations of natural selection, and Levine and Sober base those contrasts upon the micro/macro distinction.\(^{30}\)

Why do I want to deny this? Well, in a passage that is approvingly quoted by Wright, Levine and Sober in a different context,\(^{31}\) Jon Elster points out that adding more detail improves our understanding of and increases our confidence in an explanation:

\[\ldots\text{a more detailed explanation is }\ldots\text{ an end in itself. It is not only our confidence in the explanation, but our understanding of it that is enhanced when we go from macro to micro, from longer to shorter time-lags.}\]

\(^{32}\)

This fine-grained/coarse-grained contrast between the two theories implies, therefore, that historical-materialist explanations are inferior in these respects to the explanations provided by natural selection. But I see no good reason to believe that this must necessarily be the case.

Levine and Sober accuse me of misrepresenting their position regarding natural selection’s capacity to explain speciation and other large-scale evolutionary trends. Now, I do not think that I did misinterpret them, but I am pleased that they insist that natural selection does explain speciation and other large-scale trends. In terms of their original distinction between micro- and macro-theories, this means that the difference in explanatory focus between natural selection and historical materialism originally alleged by Levine and Sober, in which natural selection explains changes within its unit of analysis (the population or species) while historical materialism explains transitions between its units of analysis, is significantly reduced; natural selection, too, explains changes between its units of analysis. Levine and Sober would probably want to say that, in contrast to historical materialism, these large changes ‘are explained as the accumulation of changes that occur at smaller scale’.\(^{33}\) But this would be irrelevant to the point being made. And, anyway, Levine and Sober give no good reason to think that historical

\(^{30}\) Levine and Sober 1985, p. 314.
\(^{31}\) Wright, Levine and Sober 1992, p. 122.
\(^{32}\) Elster 1986, p. 5.
\(^{33}\) Levine and Sober \textit{supra}; see also Levine and Sober 1985, p. 315.
materialism could not also explain transitions between its units of analysis through an accumulation of small changes, using equally fine-grained (or coarse-grained) explanations.\textsuperscript{34}

In my original critique, however, I tried to go further than merely reducing the force of the alleged disanalogy. I argued that Levine’s and Sober’s claim that, in relation to their respective ‘units of analysis’, natural selection is a micro-theory while historical materialism is a macro-theory, relied upon their confusing societies and social forms. Once that confusion was cleared up, the alleged difference between historical materialism and natural selection disappeared. Natural selection explains changes in the (genotypic and phenotypic) characteristics of populations (and species). Historical materialism explains changes in the forms (economic structures, political superstructures) of societies.\textsuperscript{35} If the population is the unit of analysis of natural selection, then the society is the unit of analysis of historical materialism. Therefore, both natural selection and historical materialism explain changes \textit{within} their units of analysis. Both theories are, therefore, in Levine’s and Sober’s original sense, micro-theories.

Thus, the units of analysis argument provides no basis for claiming that natural selection explains small-scale phenomena, while historical materialism, in comparison, explains large-scale phenomena. No basis, consequently, for saying that natural selection’s explanations are fine-grained while historical materialism’s are coarse-grained, with the implication that historical materialism’s explanations are inferior in this respect to those of natural selection. If historical materialism’s explanations \textit{are} inferior, they are so for other reasons.

I noted that the units of analysis argument, and indeed the very concept of units of analysis, disappeared from two subsequent versions of Levine’s and Sober’s article.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, in their reply to me, Levine and Sober concede my argument that we need to distinguish between societies and social forms, that the society is historical materialism’s analogue of the population (or species) in natural selection, and that historical materialism explains (historical)

\textsuperscript{34} I suspect, however, that Levine and Sober would want to deny that historical materialism explains large-scale transitions by an accumulation of smaller-scale changes. They would probably argue that historical materialism explains large-scale transitions teleologically by their contribution to bringing about a classless society (or, perhaps distinctly, by their contribution to a long-term development of productive power).

\textsuperscript{35} Nolan 2002a, pp. 153–5.

\textsuperscript{36} Nolan 2002a, p. 154, note 42.
changes within societies (rather than between societies) ‘just as’ evolutionary theory (primarily) explains (evolutionary) changes within populations and species.

Given this, and as Levine and Sober do not even refer to the units of analysis argument in their reply, they have clearly abandoned that explication and justification of the micro/macro designation of natural selection and historical materialism. So they no longer think that natural selection is a micro-theory while historical materialism is a macro-theory in this original sense.

It is surprising, therefore, that they think that the disagreement between us here is merely verbal. It would have seemed more appropriate had Levine and Sober acknowledged that their original distinction was either misconceived or misapplied.

The second micro/macro distinction

Have Levine and Sober attempted to provide another basis for the small-scale/large-scale and, thus, the fine-grained/coarse-grained contrasts? Well, not really. They resurrect the terms micro and macro, which had disappeared from the third version of the article, but now define them rather differently. Natural selection (is a micro-theory in that it) mainly provides explanations of (a large number of) small-scale changes in the history of life, explanations that are, consequently, fine-grained. In comparison, historical materialism (is a macro-theory in that it) mainly provides explanations of (a small number of) large-scale changes in human history, explanations that are, consequently, coarse-grained. This same contrast did, of course, appear in their original paper, but as an entailment or implication of their original (units-of-analysis based) distinction.

Levine and Sober admitted that it is ‘counterintuitive’ to say that natural selection, a theory concerned with the origin of all species and the whole history of life, is a micro-theory that explains small-scale changes, while historical materialism, a theory concerned only with the comparatively short

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37 Wright, Levine and Sober 1992, pp. 54–6.
38 I have parenthesised the micro/macro phrases again in order to forestall the accusation that my disagreements with this second micro/macro distinction are purely verbal. The fine-grained/coarse-grained contrast does not actually appear in Levine’s and Sober’s reply to me. Perhaps it has gone the way of the units of analysis argument. If so, does anything of any significance now follow from the micro/macro distinction?
lifetime of one species, is a macro-theory that explains large-scale changes. The unit of analysis concept and its associated argument was their attempt to support these counterintuitive claims.

I noted in my critique that, given the absence of that concept and argument in subsequent versions of the paper, the claims were not only counterintuitive but now also unsupported. If the units of analysis argument had a point, it was to support these counterintuitive claims. Now that argument has gone, what argument has replaced it?

The only support that is offered for this small-scale/large-scale contrast, though it is never stated explicitly, is a distinctive approach to measuring the relevant explanatory claims. The within-society explanatory claims made by historical materialism are measured against the 50,000 years of human history, while the within-population (or species) explanatory claims made by natural selection are measured against the 3,500,000,000 years of life on earth. Thus, the former are large-scale, because transitions between social forms appear large in human history, while the latter are small-scale, because changes within any particular species appear small against the history of life as a whole.

Now, it is acceptable to describe the (evolutionary) changes within populations and species that natural selection is (perhaps) primarily interested in as small-scale compared to the large-scale changes that also occur in evolution. And perhaps explanations of the former are fine-grained compared to explanations of the latter. It is also acceptable to describe the (historical) changes between social forms that historical materialism is primarily interested in as large-scale compared to the small-scale changes that also occur in human history. And perhaps explanations of the former are coarse-grained compared to explanations of the latter.

But it does not follow that (evolutionary) changes within populations and species (taking place over evolutionary time) are small-scale while the (historical) changes within societies (taking place over historical time) are large-scale compared to each other. This would only be the case if the two types of changes were measured against a common, or similar, scale. But they are not. The within-society historical changes are measured against human history, while the within-population (or species) evolutionary changes are measured against a different scale.

39 Levine and Sober 1985, p. 314; see also Levine and Sober supra.
40 Levine and Sober 1985, pp. 314 and 318.
41 Nolan 2002a, p. 154, note 43.
against the history of life as a whole. This counterintuitive procedure needs to be argued for, and Levine and Sober simply do not argue for it.

There are, after all, some fairly obvious alternatives to this procedure, at least one of which seems more intuitively acceptable. One could, for instance, argue that comparing evolutionary and historical changes in this way is meaningless because there is a fundamental incommensurability between the two processes.

Another option would be to argue that the two processes are commensurable, but if within-society changes are measured against the course of human history, then within-population (or species) changes need to be measured against the lifetimes of the relevant species, rather than against the history of life as a whole. In my view, it is this alternative that is appropriate, and that alone could justify the sorts of contrasts between the explanations of natural selection and those of historical materialism that Levine and Sober want to draw. But this way of measuring would not, of course, sustain the small-scale/large-scale contrast that Levine and Sober are committed to.

Levine and Sober offer nothing else to support the small-scale/large-scale and, therefore, the fine-grained/coarse-grained contrasts except dubious distinctions between the ‘events’ that natural selection supposedly explains and the ‘epochs’, ‘trends’, or ‘transformations’, that historical materialism supposedly explains.42

To the extent that these terminological distinctions rely upon this unargued use of the entire history of life on earth as the appropriate scale against which to measure the explanations of natural selection in order to compare them with the explanations of historical materialism measured against the history of the human species, then they are no more well-founded than is that comparison.

And, without this unargued procedure, they are no more than merely verbal distinctions. It is common within historiography to describe historical changes taking place over a few centuries at most as ‘epochal’ changes. And it may well be common among evolutionary theorists to describe an evolutionary change taking place over many thousands of years as an ‘event’. But to use these linguistic habits to construct an argument that these evolutionary ‘events’ are small-scale while these ‘epochal’ historical changes are large-scale in

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42 Levine and Sober 1985, pp. 317–18; Levine 1987, p. 96; Wright, Levine and Sober 1992, p. 54; Levine and Sober supra.
relation to each other is to mislead ourselves with words that were not chosen for that comparative purpose.

As I pointed out, Levine and Sober admit that some of these historical epochs are relatively uncontroversial within mainstream historiography. And, within mainstream archaeology and anthropology, similar (perhaps even compatible) classifications of social sequences (such as that from bands, to villages, then chiefdoms, and then to state-level societies) are even less controversial. Could any theory of history not focus its primary attention upon these large-scale transitions?

Given the amount of evidence that is typically available to the historian of, say, the many transitions from precapitalist to capitalist social forms, compared to the theorist of evolutionary changes within species, it is odd that Levine and Sober should regard explanations of the former as ‘coarse-grained’ and explanations of the latter as ‘fine-grained’. I would have thought that one problem that any attempt to theorise history faces is that the explanations need to be very fine-grained indeed in order to cope with the amount and variety of evidence available. Perhaps Levine and Sober could provide some typical examples of these fine-grained evolutionary explanations and these coarse-grained historical explanations to allow us to compare them?

Another disanalogy?

Levine and Sober say in their reply that they notice a new disanalogy between the two theories. In historical materialism,

increase in productive capacity plays a causal role . . . leading one social formation to give way to another, whereas the increase in fitness that occurs in a selection process is an effect, not a cause.

Now, I would agree that some formulations of historical materialism might, or might seem to, justify this assertion. But, if historical materialism is formulated as it can and should be formulated, then there is no disanalogy here.

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43 Nolan 2002a, p. 158.
45 And could not these within-society transitions be interpreted as changes in the relative frequency of certain kinds of social relations, much as within-population evolutionary changes, as Levine and Sober point out, are changes ‘from one array of trait frequencies to the next’.
The issue can be clarified by asking what is meant by ‘increase in fitness’ and ‘increase in productive capacity’. If ‘increase in fitness’ means a between-generation increase in (average) reproductive success (and Levine and Sober seem to mean this), then that is indeed ‘an effect, not a cause’. If, however, ‘increase in fitness’ means an increase in reproductive success for some organisms produced by a new variation, then that is a cause (of the increased representation of that variation in subsequent generations).

Similarly, for historical materialism, if ‘increase in productive capacity’ means a long-term increase in (average) productive power (and Levine and Sober seem to mean this), then that is (contrary to what Levine and Sober say) an effect rather than a cause. If, however, ‘increase in productive capacity’ means an increase in productive power for some people conferred by a new productive technique (and its associated relation of production), then that is a cause (of the increased subsequent representation of that technique and relation of production in that society).  

To put it slightly differently, increases (and/or decreases) in reproductive success caused by differences between particular (genetically-based) phenotypic variations explain why some phenotypic variations spread within a population at the expense of others. Any long-term rise in reproductive success, however, is merely a (possible) effect of the continuous operation of this process, and thus is not explanatory.

Similarly, increases (and/or decreases) in productive power caused by differences between particular (culturally-based) productive techniques explain why some productive techniques (and social relationships) spread within a society and region at the expense of others. Any long-term rise in productive power, however, is merely a (possible) effect of the continuous operation of this process, and thus is not explanatory.

Immediately after noting this new ‘disanalogy’, Levine and Sober add another remark, as if it was evidence supporting the disanalogy claim: ‘Indeed, there are plenty of selection processes in which fitness does not increase – a point we wish we had emphasised more’.

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46 Although the precise mechanisms involved in each theory are likely to be rather different. For accounts of three different mechanisms for historical materialism, see Carling 2002; Cohen 1988, pp. 83–106; and Nolan 2002b. For a discussion of their favoured mechanisms in relation to some important historical evidence, see Carling and Nolan 2000.
Levine and Sober seem to think that this point supports their suggested effect/cause disanalogy between increasing reproductive success and increasing productive power. They presumably think this on the assumption that, for historical materialism, long-term increases in productive power are a necessary and inevitable cause rather than a possible effect. So, they presumably conclude, historical materialism, but not natural selection, would be falsified if there were many situations in which its ‘quantity of interest’ did not increase.

I have just explained why I think that assumption is mistaken, so I am unimpressed by the conclusion that Levine and Sober seem to draw from it. In my original critique, I too pointed out that, in natural selection, fitness does not always increase, and I referred to a discussion of the matter by Sober. But, in my opinion, this simply shows how mistaken are those criticisms of historical materialism that merely point to some periods of history in which there was (allegedly) productive stagnation or regress.

**Conclusion**

The disagreements between my views and those of Levine and Sober, both in their original and their present, revised, forms, are substantial and significant. I think that there are two important issues at stake.

The first is the ability of historical materialism to explain the differences that have actually occurred in the direction (and the rate) of social change in different regions of the world. A theory that denies that differing environmental (that is, exogenous) factors are decisive in determining these different directions cannot even begin to explain them, and is hardly a materialist theory in any significant sense.

The second issue is whether historical materialism’s explanations can be as fine-grained as those of natural selection, or are necessarily coarse-grained,

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49 In fact, a comparison with natural selection is particularly helpful at this point. Critics tend to leap to the conclusion that historical materialism is falsified if its ‘quantity of interest’, productive power, does not always increase. But nobody leaps to the conclusion that natural selection is falsified if its ‘quantity of interest’, reproductive success, does not always increase. What justifies these different standards? Indeed, not only does reproductive success not always, or even usually, increase over the long term, it often declines (most, presumably all, species go extinct). If this does not threaten natural selection, then why do occasional decreases in productive power threaten historical materialism?
given the kind of theory that historical materialism is. If they are coarse-grained, then historical materialism’s explanations can never be as convincing and well-established as those offered by natural selection.

If Levine and Sober are right, then historical materialism is a theory that can only provide coarse-grained explanations of historical transitions, explanations that are, moreover, quite indifferent to environmental differences between the regions in which the transitions take place. What reasons would there then be, other than sentimental ones, for taking historical materialism seriously?

References


Two Modes of Capitalist Incorporation

The anti-globalisation movement that took shape in the campaigns against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment before achieving world notoriety in Seattle, has rekindled all the debates within the Left that animated it during the twentieth century. Although the contemporary, ‘global’ Left has moved beyond the fixation on conquering national state power, its concept of politics has suffered from the fact that so far, very little is on offer in the way of a framework analysing power struggles among social forces in the global arena and identifying their focus, if the state no longer can be that focus. The two books that I consider here, can be fruitfully discussed in this light. Gowan discusses what he labels the ‘Dollar-Wall Street Regime’, which denotes the set of monetary mechanisms by which the United States seeks to reinforce and deepen its hold on the rest of the world. As a result, the benefits of the ‘régime’ will accrue to the rich in the United States, whereas the risks and costs can be passed on abroad. The author rightly qualifies this as a ‘gamble’, and if there is anything about this book that has meanwhile been vindicated, it is indeed the title. The suicide attacks on the symbols of the Dollar-Wall Street Régime, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, on 11 September 2001, have dramatically demonstrated the stakes that are being played for here.

Deacon, on the other hand, is concerned with ‘the globalization of social policy and the socialization of global politics’.¹ By socialisation, Deacon means the rise of the social (cohesion, interdependence, collective responsibility) relative to the political and the economic. This use of the term socialisation comes close to Polanyi’s concept

¹ Deacon 1997, p. xi.
of ‘social protection’, by which he means the action that a liberal society organised around a ‘self-regulating market’ has to take to prevent such self-regulation destroying its human resources, the natural substratum on which it rests, and its monetary system – given that labour, land, and money in the end can not be considered to be commodities in the same sense as goods really produced for the market. In Deacon’s perspective, the globalisation of social policy comprises supranational regulation, supranational redistribution, and supranational provision, in order to sustain social protection and welfare objectives beyond the state framework in which their twentieth-century development has taken place. The socialisation of global politics is evident in the fact that, at G7/G8 meetings, social and environmental issues now are paramount. Hence, ‘there is now the opportunity for the emergence of an effective global politics that will be concerned not so much with the protection of national sovereignties but rather with intervention in the global economic system to improve the well-being of the world’s population’. Multilateral institutions are, accordingly, at the centre of this study, and Deacon tries to uncover, not the disruptive, piratical side of the internationalisation of capital that Gowan is concerned with, but the protective, ‘socialising’ aspect.

Let me briefly expand on this notion of socialisation. The concept of socialisation, whilst not much used these days, actually is central to the Marxist critique of political economy. In particular, it helps to understand how, in the evolution of the capitalist mode of production, structures are created which tend to drive beyond their subsumption to private capital accumulation. It is here that we have to look for the foundations of a different mode of production, which Marx calls, in Capital, Volume III, the ‘associated’ one. Of course, it then depends on the actual political struggles triggered by this structural shift, and on the actual width and depth of its incidence, which actual type of society will emerge on the basis of the associated mode of production. Socialisation [Vergesellschaftung, literally ‘societisation’], as the process of objective unification of the commodified elements of capital accumulation, though, is a necessity in order for capital to expand. Thus, a firm, or ‘particular capital’ in Marx’s terminology, suspends the operation of the market wholly or partly within its own

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2 Polanyi 1944.
3 Deacon 1997, p. 4.
4 Marx 1981, pp. 569–72. It is often forgotten that Marx never spoke of capital-ism; that term, though occasionally used by Engels, was only brought in vogue by Werner Sombart, who fancied himself to be ‘completing’ Marx’s work but in fact added a totalising systems perspective alien to historical materialism. Capital-ism as a comprehensive reality, absorbing society entirely within itself, supposedly must fall apart first before an equally comprehensive system, socialism, can takes its place; whereas, if one follows Marx’s idea of capital as a discipline over the forces of production which at some point loses its capacity to drive their further development forward and becomes superfluous, the very idea that capitalist discipline can be superseded in certain areas of social life through de-commodification (say, health care or education, or the rail network) opens up a huge arena of real political advance without the prior general collapse (Marx 1973, p. 415). On Sombart and capitalism, see Rehmann 1998, p. 243.
sphere. It is not the market that rules here, but the (occasionally enlightened) despotism of the employer. Only thus can the optimal combination of productive forces be obtained and operated, through which the firm must realise a competitive advantage at the level where the market does work. But socialisation of labour within the firm also creates a space in which the balance of power between capital and workers becomes subject to processes of struggle and negotiation, no longer subject to the equilibration of values in the market – at least, not directly. Of course, one way of engaging in such struggles is to allow market forces a wider latitude again within large firms, as neoliberal tycoons such as Ross Perot did when he joined the General Motors’ board of directors and found that there were ‘tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of people at General Motors who are quite insulated from the harsh realities of the competitive marketplace’.\(^5\) On the other hand, the suspension of market forces and their replacement by ‘political’ struggles, can also spill over from large companies as socialisation spreads from the organisation of the division of labour within the firm, to relations between firms (growth of financial groups around certain banks), state involvement, and so on. The consequence of socialisation spilling over in that sense, is the politicisation of spheres which were before the preserve of capital. To detect where such processes of socialisation are operative is therefore key to the identification of arenas of political action. And, even if, in the contemporary neoliberal universe, the discipline of capital has apparently restored the sovereignty of the market completely, new forms of socialisation – often involving instances of ‘private authority’ such as rating agencies and management consultancies – continue to open up such arenas for action.

I have argued elsewhere that socialisation is embodied in a new social stratum, the managerial cadre. This cadre, like the process in which it is formed, is subordinate to capital, but it develops in a different role within the overall exploitation of society and nature, and on a different time-scale. If a new society will emerge from the capitalist one, the managerial cadre will play a crucial role in shaping it, as all prior attempts at transcending capitalism wholly or partially have demonstrated – with the strength of democracy deciding its ultimate political orientation.\(^6\)

**Unity and diversity in capitalist policies**

The way Gowan writes about the globalisation of US financial hegemony, is ‘beyond politics’. There is no way in which one can imagine that countervailing forces can have an impact – short of flying into the Twin Towers. As societies are opened up and re-engineered as stock-market-centred economies with convertible currencies to

\(^5\) Quoted in *Newsweek*, 17 June 1985.
\(^6\) Van der Pijl 1998; see also Duménil and Lévy 1998.
allow their wealth to be siphoned off by hedge funds and other transnational investment operations,

[t]hose states and social systems that try to resist these transformations will find themselves increasingly shut out from the US market and from its allied EU market, and subjected to hostile economic statecraft. The most internationally competitive of their productive sectors, fearing such exclusion, can thus also be turned into supporters of globalization and neo-liberalism.  

Hostile statecraft, as we meanwhile know from NATO’s war against Yugoslavia, can also take more vicious forms.

Gowan’s book is strongest where it seeks to demystify the technicalities of financial markets; it is weakest in its political aspect – there is no class analysis. On the positive side, Gowan shows that the term ‘capital markets’ obfuscates a distinction between (i) capital markets proper, in which funds for (among others) productive investment are obtained, and (ii) secondary securities markets, in which instruments to claim royalties on future profits are being traded. In chapter after chapter, a fascinating analysis of the financial innovations of the 1980s and 1990s unfolds. The role of hedge funds in the American strategy of prying open hitherto closed states, such as those of East Asia, is made transparent along with the mechanisms of this and other new financial instruments. Much of the supposed growth of capital markets is indeed not related to the activities of productive investors, but confined to the ever-more intricate circuits of money-dealing capital that have sprung up around these securities markets. But the actual class structure surrounding these circuits is left largely unexplored, so that the politics of American/Western expansion must often be derived from an assumed malignant intent. There is material in the book to support the thesis that there are different fractions of the capitalist class and its managerial cadre at work here – money capitalists, notably, who face the ‘employers of capital’, those managing actual enterprises. The latter adopt a longer time-horizon than the former, who have a preference for liquidity and short-term investment. Here, the concept of capital fraction, and class fraction, and the way their mutual contradictions and conflicts are played out, would have been useful. The capitalist class must constantly adjust to the conjuncture of resistance to its discipline, and it is in the process of reconfiguration around new forms of exploitation that the fractional dividing lines become manifest, exposing the rule of capital to social and political struggles. What capitalists and managerial cadre do at the World Economic Forum and comparable meetings, is to debate strategies to maintain cohesion and consensus, but this aspect plays no part in Gowan’s analysis. There are occasional references to policy-planning bodies, such

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7 Gowan 1999, p. viii.
as the Transatlantic Business Dialogue (TABD), set up at Seville in Spain in November 1995, to allow the elaboration of joint strategies. But Gowan does not employ the theoretical potential of Marxism in this respect and certainly does not develop it.9

What is also lacking in Gowan’s distinction between money-capital and the employers of capital, is the socialisation of money-capital. Thus, he sees money-capitalists as capable of ‘playing a planning role in capitalist development’.10 But this, in my view, is misleading. What they ‘plan’ is to take as much out of the real economy as they can, to substitute short-term gain for long-term considerations; hence the fantastic growth of income differentials in the low-growth, long-hours real economy.11 ‘Planning’, as an expression of the socialisation of labour and capital (and this is the only form of planning that is relevant here, otherwise we are talking about any form of intentional action), does occur in the financial sector, for example, in the case of the insurance industry with its increasing awareness of long-term environmental risks, or the social concerns of some pension funds. Here, a long-term perspective creeps in as a result of the socialisation of money-capital itself; fund and company managers in this area adjust their perspective accordingly and develop different definitions of prosperity and success from the short-term traders.

Deacon’s concern is how a globalisation of social protection can be achieved, and whether it is being achieved, however limited. There is no question that he would oppose the current rampage of piratical capital across the globe, and he also does acknowledge the centrality of the US in backing it up (which does not imply he is generous to those taking this as their point of departure – thus he at one point dismisses Gowan on the basis of earlier articles as a ‘fundamentalist’).12 However, he does display a greater sensitivity to the contradictions that undermine the thrust of these forces and highlights the differences within multilateral institutions to which states have delegated the management of certain aspects of the global political economy. In my view, he is better able to understand the multilateral institutions (both the Bretton Woods institutions – IMF and World Bank, the UN-affiliated organisations such as the ILO or the FAO, European institutions, and actual global institutions such as the WTO) as instances of socialisation, and hence, locations in which a managerial cadre is operative, and as arenas in which political struggles take place that can mitigate or suspend the discipline of capital. True, these are not (at least not in this sense) terms Deacon would use. But his awareness of the different mind-set, or just reservations to neoliberalism on the part of some multilateral organisation cadre, depending on whether they can be considered to belong to certain strands of expert opinion (‘epistemic

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9 Incidentally Deacon does employ the concept of fraction, if not systematically.
11 Sennett 1998, pp. 50 and 54.
communities’), transpires clearly. ‘It is as members of epistemic communities that we are interested in the pronouncements within these organizations’, he writes.\(^{13}\) And, while their mandate will usually be written according to the neoliberal agenda of the US, a political process has developed in which the organisation cadre have created a sphere of policy formation of their own concerning welfare.

Human resource specialists [of international organizations] have a degree of autonomy . . . which has increasingly been used to fashion an implicit global political dialogue with international NGOs about the social policies of the future that go beyond the political thinking or political capacity of the underpinning states.\(^{14}\)

Deacon also acknowledges ‘the creation of a globalized new professional middle class, who regardless of their country of origin, tend to speak a common language and share common assumptions’,\(^{15}\) which points to an awareness of I would call the rise of a transnational managerial cadre. Certainly, the technocratic orientation of many in these ‘epistemic communities’ tends to make them impervious to democratic accountability, and Deacon notes for instance that ‘the reliance on consultancy firms leads to a curious phenomenon: the effective depoliticization of globalized social policy’.\(^{16}\) Yet, within the organisations, there are variations, crosscurrents, and departures from the neoliberal mainstream. The World Bank Environment Department is home to ‘heretics’, the ILO and to some extent, the EU, the OECD directorate that deals with human resources and labour, UNICEF and the UNDP as far as the straight UN organisations are concerned, and the Council of Europe, all, in one way or another, deflect the outright application of neoliberal policies, and the cadre active in them, in that sense, must be considered as potential allies of forces seeking to resist such policies. In brief, the fact that the global political economy is co-managed by multilateral organisations (which, paradoxically, is a consequence of its being driven by private capital accumulation), subverts the image of the Dollar-Wall Street steamroller evoked by Gowan.

But not only does Gowan tend to overrate the strategic, intentional side of events and the control exercised by the US (which, in later chapters, is modified, however), he also tends to attribute too much power to the American government. The critical decision of the Nixon administration in 1971 to suspend gold convertibility of the dollar, which entailed the abandoning of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, can also be read as dictated by objective constraints partly created by protagonists in the private sector. Rather than a cynical ploy, the erosion of central bank/national

\(^{13}\) Deacon 1997, p. 58.
\(^{14}\) Deacon 1997, p. 61.
\(^{15}\) Deacon 1997, p. 180.
\(^{16}\) Deacon 1997, p. 143.
state control of international finance then becomes a consequence of the (prior) growth of a London-based Euro-dollar market, which, as Gary Burn has shown, was the unintentional outcome of US attempts to control an outflow of dollars which was undermining its balance of payments position and monetary policy – even if, from an early date, city merchant bankers and insurance directors recognised the opportunity of bringing back the days of ‘the merchant adventurers’.17

Under the new circumstances, the circulation of money-capital was internationalised whereas, before, the circuit of money-capital had been safely contained within national states, subject to state control (‘financial repression’); whilst the effective basis of a currency’s value came to depend on that state’s ‘creditworthiness in private international financial markets’.18 With the dollar continuing as factual reserve currency, tied no longer to gold but to ‘credibility’, the US continued to enjoy the privileges of being home to that currency (seigniorage) – absolving it from the balance of payments constraints other states face. But all this really came into its own only in the 1980s, under Reagan, rather than under Nixon. What is missed by Gowan is the recognition that, from Nixon to Reagan, a qualitative shift occurred which reflected a reconfiguration of the hegemonic bloc towards transnationally active forces under Carter. As Stephen Gill writes,

Whereas Nixon’s apparently defensive tactics partly sought to protect American national capital, and to an extent American workers, from the effects of international competition, Reagan’s policies were more offensive, more market-based, and involved an attack on organized labour. Reagan’s policies also facilitated a growth in concentration within certain sectors of the American economy, so that its bigger corporations were better able to compete internationally. Thus, though perhaps not consciously intended, Reagan’s policies none the less reinforced the tendency towards transnational hegemony.19

The transformation, then, was from a situation in which capitalist classes acted primarily through their respective states (the US, first of all), to one in which a transnational fraction of the global capitalist class acted through multilateral institutions (with states caught up between this influence and the residual, sometimes considerable influence of national fractions of capital). Once this shift had occurred, however disjointedly and incompletely, the Anglo-American nexus assumed a new quality, as it came to rely more heavily on its influence in multilateral institutions, and hence, dependent

17 Burn 1999. The term ‘merchant adventurers’ was used in correspondence between City magnates to describe their entry into a new, unregulated arena of international finance and is quoted in Gary Burn’s doctoral dissertation which he is currently rewriting for publication.
18 Gowan 1999, p. 23.
on the array of forces which is not necessarily committed to the neoliberal line. Certainly, American national interest was crucial all along, but it operated in a setting which marks off Reagan and the post-Reagan era from the Nixon period; that of transnational capital set free from national constraints. As a consequence, the nature of rivalry also changed – from peripheral rivalry between nationally configured ruling-class blocs, to fractional rivalries within a transnationally unified ruling class. Only thus can we explain for instance that France and Germany were vehemently opposed to going to war against Iraq in early 2003, and yet at the same time are going to great lengths to use the domestic public support thus won, to push through neoliberal reforms along Anglo-American lines.

**Incorporating Eastern Europe**

Nowhere has this become more evident than in Eastern Europe after the collapse of ‘state socialism’. Gowan’s analysis here becomes more sensitive to rifts among the Western states, in a way which was not evident in his earlier work, to which Deacon refers.

> To see the West as unified in its approach... is mistaken. Disagreements between fractions of capital and the organizations that most reflected their interests (IMF for the USA, EU for Germany) and within and between the teams that made up the human resources specialists in these organizations was to become all too evident. The West may, as Gowan suggests, be intervening to win the East for capital; this is not in doubt. The important point is: for what kind of capitalism with what measure of social policy?\(^\text{20}\)

However, on the first aspect, geopolitical rivalry, Gowan’s book has moved forward clearly and convincingly. He shows that the break-up of Eastern Europe and the USSR was part of a US strategy under Bush Sr. to prevent a coalescence of the EU and the former Soviet bloc, which, with NATO withering, would have marginalised the Americans from the continent. Such a vision was held by Mitterrand, whose New Year’s address of 1990 evoked the Gaullist image of Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals two weeks before Jeffrey Sachs’s famous shock therapy article was published.\(^\text{21}\)

The Sachs plan and US objectives combined to undermine the supranational ambitions of the EU and its Common Agricultural Policy by casting Europe’s net to include the East-Central European countries but not Russia, push Germany into subscribing to support the export-led transition in East-Central Europe and make NATO the guarantor of this transition. By carefully playing to West Germany’s own ambitions to reunify

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\(^{20}\) Deacon 1997, p. 95.

\(^{21}\) Gowan 1999, p. 240.
with the East and support its aim to restore its pre-war sphere of interest, the US was able to outmanoeuvre any French attempts to unify the EU against the American strategy.\textsuperscript{22} In a too short final chapter, the forward push of NATO and the EU in the former Soviet bloc, culminating in its attacks on Yugoslavia, is discussed. Although the Kosovo War came after the book was printed, the chapter easily survives as a source of insight because it identifies the key moments of the eastward push of the West and is fully vindicated by what happened afterwards. The neoliberal push by the US and Britain and the geopolitical sealing off of the German attempts to link up with Russia are key here and actually have recently been crowned by the Bush-Putin agreements on strategic armaments.\textsuperscript{23}

Now, things are different with respect to Deacon’s second objection to Gowan’s approach – which capitalism is to be introduced into the newly opened region? Deacon does not differ from Gowan in his basic assessment of what was the nature of the policy applied to Eastern Europe, and by whom. ‘In 1989,’ he writes, ‘the high point of neo-liberal economic thinking in the USA and Britain conspired with the anti-socialist sentiment of post-revolutionary Eastern Europe to knock the careful consideration of alternative social policies almost off the agenda. . . . The social structures were to become, or so it seemed, fluid’.\textsuperscript{24} He then focuses on how a more moderate inflection of the initial neoliberal thrust was achieved in those countries in which multilateral institutions with an interest in social protection and, for example, trade unions, joined forces. Gowan, incidentally, adds an important insight here when he proceeds to unravel not just the Sachs recipe, but also the attendant notion of ‘civil society’ which was floated to propagate the rolling back of the state-socialist structures, and with them, social protection. In Gowan’s view, the concept of civil society belongs organically to the world of the 1970s, in which liberal democracy matched the capitalist organisation of society by a welfare-state structure and a range of forces with an interest in social protection which could be articulated and express themselves in addition to parliamentary representation. Neoliberalism, however, developed in the response to the so-called ‘ungovernability’ which such a rich mixture of interest articulation was deemed to have produced. The label of civil society was then pasted on its opposite, the atomisation of society and the attack on the welfare state and the state \textit{per se}. Civil society now became ‘a mixture of big business charitable foundations and self-help institutions for the deserving poor on one side and archipelagos of unaccountable quangos for managing a depoliticized, privatized, publicly passive individual consumer on the other’.\textsuperscript{25} In the end, as events in Russia illustrate, democracy

\textsuperscript{22} Gowan 1999, p. 241.
\textsuperscript{23} I have written on the frictions in the Western alliance up to the Kosovo War in van der Pijl 2001, which relies on Gowan’s analysis.
\textsuperscript{24} Deacon 1997, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{25} Gowan 1999, p. 249.
was allowed to be sacrificed in the transition, something which *The Economist* thought was necessary because the Russian Parliament used its powers to block reform. After the entire East was won for capital, democracy was only an option.

The real evolution of society in the countries of the former Soviet bloc has been one of the demobilisation of the population, falling participation rates in elections, on top of a catastrophic impoverishment and malnutrition for the larger part of the people. Food aid from surplus stocks had the paradoxical effect of increasing the misery by decimating domestic food producers; branded consumer goods from the West did the same to local industry. Not unexpectedly, perhaps, the former Communist parties have held their ground electorally, except where these parties (as in the case of Poland and Hungary) already before the collapse pursued policies that contradicted their socially protective and egalitarian principles. The Hungarian Communists who inaugurated the transition, under premier Horn, also were the first to call in the IMF. New social-democratic parties failed to establish a foothold because they did not appeal to any socialist values. The only exception is the Czech Republic, where the Communists did not adjust at all to the changed circumstances, and the Socialists did develop a leftist posture and actually established a trade-union base.

In these sections on post-transition Eastern Europe, the two books move very close to each other. But their complementarity does not of course suspend the basic differences of their starting points, and these resurface once the question is asked: where do we go from here?

**The politics of critical theory**

All critical social analysis contains, implicitly or explicitly, an agenda for action. Capitalist development is accompanied by socialisation, shaping social forces along with the crystallisation of socialised structures on which globalising capital accumulation rests. Hence, the relative balance between the moments of the private and the social, the fragmented and the collective, should ideally be recognised in the analysis. Only thus, the forces between which the inherent contradiction between social production and private appropriation will be played out, can be identified, and the subjectivities through which people can attach themselves to social struggles in their concrete development, be backed up by an adequate analysis of the force-field into which they are mobilised.

By this standard, then, I would argue that Gowan’s book, for all its merits in elucidating the workings of the financial markets and their connection to US policy

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26 Gowan 1999, p. 234.
27 Gowan 1999, p. 266.
29 Gowan 1999, p. 269.
as well as his radical critique of the transition in Eastern Europe, only offers an implicit agenda for action: one that is very much confined to a straight rejection, *en bloc*, of the capitalist world economy and power structures. But, as a result, one is left with a sense of powerlessness against the ruthless cynics in control of all the levers of the global political economy. A catastrophic collapse, then, remains the only way out – which is hardly a consolation in a world already exhausted by the discipline of capital, and armed to the teeth with ‘weapons of mass destruction’, which are overwhelmingly in the hands of those who have demonstrated, in the past and the present, that they will go to any length to defend their privileges. So if, to use Hardt and Negri’s term, ‘the multitude’ rises in anger, it better be quick to seize the levers of mass destruction once it rises.30

One might object and say that this criterion would delegitimate factual studies about important aspects. But, let us take Deacon as an alternative here. Deacon’s book is, without doubt, much less militant and radical in tone than Gowan’s. It is not really exciting reading and it did little to soothe my deep concerns about the ravages wrought on the world by capitalist piracy. However, in the end, I must admit that Deacon’s self-conscious social democracy – ‘reformism’ (not to be confused with ‘Third-Way’-style neoliberalism by a hijacked Labour Party) – offers a more positive perspective on the chances for adjustment. *Contra* Gowan, Deacon argues that the idea that nothing can be gained from engaging with the Bretton Woods institutions and other international organisations, is mistaken. He, incidentally, also ascribes this position to Robert Cox. But, here, Deacon becomes slightly entangled in obviously unfamiliar notions, failing to acknowledge that Cox merely claims that a war of movement (Gramsci’s term for a strategy of straightforward take-over) is impossible in the case of multilateral organisations (which seems rather obvious); whereas the opposite, a ‘war of position’ (a more protracted advance with emphasis on achieving intellectual hegemony) is certainly a possibility. This then is also Deacon’s position:

The empirical evidence of this book suggests . . . that a war of positions [*sic.*] . . . IS being fought within and between international organizations; that through the support given to labour movements and their representatives in ministries of labour . . . a connection to local social forces can be developed; and that international [NGOs] and their complex connections to local civil society are part of this war of positions.31

30 Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, in my view, achieves a complete removal of the terrain of politics from the global confrontation between an undifferentiated ‘multitude’ and an equally undifferentiated ‘Empire’. This only can lead to the ‘fix it or nix it’ approach in the anti-globalisation movement in which the capitalist regulatory infrastructure is either converted into a vehicle of populist redemption, or destroyed.
31 Deacon 1997, p. 218.
The reformism of Deacon, in my view, is valid and realistic because his own analysis shows where the fault-lines and often subtle differences within the social structure of multilateral organisation policy can be detected (even if he had not said anything about the need for further political intervention). But he does specify his politics, rejecting (a) a socialist fundamentalism which dismisses the advantages of a socially regulated capitalism over an unregulated one; (b) postmodern relativism with its celebration of diversity, against which he juxtaposes socialist values, and (c) the position of epistemic communities of experts who want to confine debate to their own sphere rather than draw in social movements as they have formed in transnational power struggles.32 This latter aspect is especially important, because it identifies the danger of a technocracy divorced from democracy, which in itself can also lead to authoritarian solutions. Deacon’s own proposed solutions (global redistributive taxation, transnationally co-ordinated welfare policies, and recourse to supranational justice) may be left aside here, because they are, in my view, less important than the basic quality of his analysis which allows one to see the inherent contradictions of capitalist development and the arenas in which countervailing forces develop and can be articulated.

It is one thing to write a provocative book on capital pushing to the limit, another to actually highlight where the limits within contemporary capitalism become apparent and can be acted upon. Maybe the course to follow for a reader in this case, is to study these two works in combination. That, paradoxically, will bring out the best in each of them.

References


Cultural studies, over the past couple of decades, has become happily ensconced as the discipline *du jour* in many European and North American universities. In the United States, a few prominent ‘cultstuds’, as Thomas Frank has labelled them, have achieved celebrity status, with salaries to match.¹ As a discipline, despite its avowed distaste for ‘grand narratives’, cultural studies has been oddly totalising, subsuming virtually all human practices under the sign of ‘culture’. Everything from sex to serial homicides, from contagions to quantum physics, is said to be ‘socially constructed’ and, therefore, *ipso facto* cultural. Needless to say, politics and economics have not fared very well against such imperial ambitions. In the dominant postmodern version of cultural studies, politics becomes redefined as culture. Cultural politics, the bane of the Right in the American ‘culture wars’, is all about (and nearly always only about) individual and group identities. Economic analysis, in any recognisably radical or Marxist form, simply disappears from sight. Although routinely included in the trinity ‘race, class, gender’, class is hardly ever given serious consideration. As the American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant observes, ‘discussions of the politics of sex and bodily identity have become so fascinating and politically absorbing, a concern with the outrages of American class relations has been made to seem trite and unsexy’.²

Even for those sympathetic to its broader aims, it becomes difficult to ignore the theoretical flabbiness of culturalism’s more ambitious claims. To inflate ‘culture,’ as Terry Eagleton has argued, to include war, famine, debt, environmental pollution and a host of other pressing concerns, is to so expand the term to the point of meaninglessness.³ Two recent books, with varying degrees of sympathy, have attempted

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¹ Frank 2000, pp. 276–306.
³ Eagleton 2000, p. 131.
to claw back some of the ground lost to culturalism by reasserting the independence of politics and economics.

In her introduction to *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, Jodi Dean sets out an alternative theoretical programme which, she believes, avoids the reductive strategy of both traditional political theory, which focuses primarily on the state, and cultural studies, which ‘risks non-intervention by presuming its political purchase in advance’. According to Dean, ‘decentering the state’ has opened space for the analysis of ‘the political everything’ inscribed in everyday social practices. Dean offers four methodological frames to guide inquiries into ‘the political everything’: (i) a Foucauldian inspired ‘problematisation of the political,’ i.e., questioning what is political and what is not; (ii) pluralisation: not assuming that politics is centred in the state but is dispersed across a wide range of activities and social spaces; (iii) contextualisation: appreciating the ways in which activities and spaces are actively depoliticised; (iv) specification: drawing out the connections between specific experiences of oppression, harm and need and larger structures, relations and processes of power.

Dean contends that this heterodox framework opens up greater opportunities for political engagement and action. This may be, but it also holds the danger of inflating politics in the same way that cultural studies has inflated culture. ‘Decentering the state’ might open up areas of social life once considered beyond the ken of political analysis, but it may also drain politics of any coherent focus. Instead of the politicisation of culture, we may well end up with the culturalisation of politics – in which things cultural become a substitute for and diversion from the ‘trite and unsexy’ business of class politics.

The various contributions to the volume in fact pull in both these directions. Several authors suggest that politics can only be redeemed by moving more decisively toward the cultural. In an otherwise interesting essay on capital punishment as a form of mass forgetting, William Connolly rarely ever departs from the philosophical and cultural terrain. Little reference is made to the class and racial dimensions of capital punishment and then only in the context of a dubious reference to an ‘African-American underclass in the inner cities where most visible acts of violence occur’. A similar bent toward the cultural is evident in several other contributions. In a critique of right-wing communitarianism, one author plumps for a politics of ‘subversive disruption and parodic deconstruction’. Another attempts to turn the tables on the political Right through a ‘rereading of the canon (Tocqueville and Machiavelli, in particular) against neoconservative warriors . . .’ Cultural politics, it is argued, has become a necessity

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4 Dean (ed.) 2000, p. 11.
5 Dean (ed.) 2000, p. 9.
6 Connolly 2000, p. 35.
7 Reinhardt 2000, p. 102.
8 Cruikshank 2000, p. 64.
for the Left for the reason that culture has breached the boundary between public and private, the personal and the political, the cultural and the governmental. Another essay on the cultural turn in Marxism reprises the ideas of the early Frankfurt School arguing for their contemporary relevance as pioneers for ‘the overall possibility of radical transformation through culture’. It does not seem to have occurred to the author that the turn away from political economy by the Frankfurt School might be judged one of its greatest failings, rather than a strength to be celebrated.

There is, in several other contributions, however, an implicit tug in the opposite direction. In a prescient essay, written well before the attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York, Lauren Berlant contends that the structural violence of American capitalism has become submerged in an ideology of national sentimentality: ‘Sentimental politics makes these confusions credible and these violations bearable, as its cultural power asserts the priority of interpersonal identification and empathy for the vitality and viability of collective life’. For the American public, the state and its constitutional apparatus has become the main vehicle for repairing the hidden pain of racism and class exploitation. The absence of social pain has become the very definition of freedom. The cultural landscape has become littered with confessional television programming in which individuals ‘share their pain’ and politicians conduct ceremonials of national feeling and healing. ‘Meanwhile, exploitation only appears as a scandalous nugget in the sieve of memory when it can be condensed into an exotic thing of momentary fascination, a squalor of the bottom to be read in its own actual banality’. The politics of personal pain has become the bread and butter of identity politics. This compromise with national sentimentality, Berlant argues, has resulted in identity politics becoming hostage to a legal and constitutional framework which recognises only certain forms of suffering as legitimate. This fact has made it difficult for oppositional politics to address the deeper wounds of class society. In the ‘what is to be done’ part of her essay, however, Berlant (somewhat undialectically) declares that ‘psychic pain experienced by subordinated populations must be treated as ideology, not as a prelapsarian knowledge or condensed social theory’.

Marx’s writings are replete with references to haunting, spectres, and phantoms. The occult character of the commodity-form lay for Marx in its capacity to mask and invert the social relations concealed behind its surface appearances. The ghost story of the commodity is, as Avery Gordon has observed, one based on a ‘dialectics of visibility and invisibility involv[ing] a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows’. In America, where the disenchancing work of capitalism

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9 Grant 2000, p. 141.
10 Berlant 2000, p. 45.
11 Berlant 2000, p. 42.
can be seen in its most extreme forms, so much is also repressed, lying somewhere in the shadows, present but invisible. One of the challenges facing any politisised analysis of culture is to chart the ways in which these dreamworlds (and nightmares) become emotionally palpable within the ‘structures of feeling’ which permeate ordinary life.

Linda Zerilli examines the contested place of the Statue of Liberty in the construction of the American Dream – from its origins in the late nineteenth century as a symbol of freedom for immigrant workers to the triumphalist (but mistaken) notion that the American statue was the inspiration for the Goddess of Liberty erected during the Tiananmen Square rebellion of 1989. Zerilli demonstrates that the battle over the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty for American citizenship, was largely fought out in class terms. The money needed to complete the statue was raised through working-class subscriptions. Politically, ‘the immigrant and working class energies that finally rescued the statue from oblivion were inspired by the revolutionary spirit that the Founders cherished but deeply feared’. This fear ultimately led America’s rulers to embrace the statue as part of an effort to fabricate an imagined national community. In the aftermath of the Haymarket Riot of 1886, during America’s first great red scare, Lady Liberty was shown on the front page of the Evening Telegram holding her nose against the stench of the (radical) immigrant ‘dregs of Europe’. Zerilli argues that, despite its working-class provenance, the Statue of Liberty was ‘a commodity at origin’. Displayed in pieces at various trade exhibitions before completion, the statue ‘in all her fragmented, fetishistic glory are testament to the imbrication of commodity culture and liberal nationalism’. The fetish-symbol that the statue was to become, she concludes, enabled it to ‘conceal the violence at the origin of the social bond’.

In two later essays, one dealing with the place of conspiracy theories in American political culture and the other with the daily lives of West Virginia mining families, the authors explore the ways in which the marginalised, exploited, and the vulnerable have been expunged from public view. The inhabitants of this shadow-world can be found in Appalachian ‘hollers’, black inner-city ghettos, Native-American reservations, and migrant labour camps. For them, the American Dream has become a nightmare. When not working, many are consumed by stories of strange happenings and conspiracies; they are drawn to tales of trauma and monstrosity; they are haunted by suspicion of things left out and hidden from sight. These fears spring, according to the authors, from a specific form of alienation: the desire to become an acknowledged part of the public world; to break free, by means of trauma and spectacle of the invisible world to which they have been consigned. The suspicions which haunt them,

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15 Zerilli 2000, p. 175.
16 Zerilli 2000, p. 177.
the sense that things are not quite right, ‘voice a warning or an announcement, in which those most vulnerable track the latent horrors of class exploitation, racism and sexism half-buried beneath the surface of the floating dream world’.\textsuperscript{17}

This type of investigation is certainly welcome as an antidote to the postmodern conceit that the contemporary world is all transparency and glossy surfaces – in effect, that what is real is rational. It would have been helpful, however, if the authors could have drawn a more explicit connection between the process of abstraction and alienation which results from the commodification of labour-power and the type of alienation involved in exclusion from the public sphere. The transformation of concrete into abstract social labour involves, among other things, the complete alienation of the concrete, embodied, personality of the worker. Moreover, Marx clearly saw a connection between the illusion of equality inherent in the exchange relation between the capitalist and the worker and the form of abstract citizenship peculiar to bourgeois society.\textsuperscript{18}

Thus, the kind of self-abstraction necessary to enter the bourgeois public sphere is ultimately rooted in the self-abstraction experienced by workers in the productive sphere. Is it any wonder that these fetishistic forms should give rise to all sorts of fantasies on the part of those whose labours come back to haunt them in the guise of increasingly elusive forms of global capital; or that those whose lives remain publicly invisible should suspect conspiracies lurking somewhere behind the façade of a public sphere which conceals class inequality beneath the apparent equality of citizens?

There is, however, a larger conceptual problem arising from the triangulation of culture, politics, and economics. As noted earlier, the inflation of any one domain at the expense of the others results in a kind of theoretical monism which explains everything (and therefore nothing) on the basis of a single, all-embracing, concept. But then, to insist too strongly on the separateness of each sphere is to risk downplaying their reciprocal connections. There are political correlates to both positions. For the first, the danger is being unable to distinguish with any precision between alternative political strategies. If everything is political or cultural then it becomes almost impossible to say where the commanding heights of power lie and how best to challenge them. For the second, the political danger is to take for granted the very separations between culture, politics and economics which capitalism itself has put in place, and then to construct a political programme which reproduces them.

If Cultural Studies and Political Theory is an example of the former, Culture and Economy After the Cultural Turn comes closer to the latter. The tone is set by Larry Ray and Andrew Sayer who contend that the cultural turn has blurred the asymmetric logics and purposes of different forms of social action. Culture is about ‘signifying practices’,

\textsuperscript{17} Stewart 2000, p. 255.
\textsuperscript{18} Marx 1967, p. 680. I try to develop some of these ideas for contemporary global capitalism in Mooers 2001.
while economic action is essentially instrumental. Culture is a domain which comprises a range of extra-economic goods, including practical morality, which often run counter to the logic of economic rationality. Markets and other forms of economic activity are primarily about external goals to do with provisioning. This insistence on demarcating culture and economy is intended as a challenge to both those who claim that the cultural and economic spheres have become ‘de-differentiated’ in favour of the cultural, and those, like Fredric Jameson, who argue that ‘de-differentiation’ has resulted in the complete subordination of culture to capitalism. The cultural turn, according to Ray and Sayer, has resulted in a monistic relativism which views culture in purely instrumental terms as a ‘stylization of life’ and markets as morally neutral. Against this perspective, they wish to reassert a ‘new version of moral economy’\(^\text{19}\) in which a balance is struck between extra-economic goods and market imperatives.

The Weberian provenance of these claims becomes clearer in Nancy Fraser’s exposition of what she calls ‘perspectival dualism’. Fraser proposes a reconciliation between identity politics – or the ‘politics of recognition’ – and a ‘politics of redistribution’. The problem with both identity politics and class analysis is that they seek to reduce cultural and economic injustices to causes originating in only one sphere. Perspectival dualism demands that the causes of each form of injustice be treated as ‘primary and co-original’.\(^\text{20}\) This does not imply that there is no relationship between what she terms ‘misrecognition’ and ‘maldistribution’. On the contrary, nominally economic matters often have a cultural dimension and vice versa. Such a framework, Fraser argues, would allow the Left to finally get to grips with both the concerns of identity politics, in which gender and racial oppression take centre stage, and those of political economy, in which question of class inequality takes precedence.

The divorce of issues of recognition and distribution has resulted in a telling convergence between neoliberalism and postmodernism. In an insightful essay, John O’Neill argues that postmodern moral relativism has led to the widespread assumption that respect for difference entails a refusal to make distinctions of worth. Thus, normative judgements regarding worth are reduced to the ratification of virtually any claim for recognition, regardless of its intrinsic merits. The proliferation of recognition claims, O’Neill contends, is linked to an essentially market-based model of desire which equates worth with appearances. Marxism has always insisted that recognition be linked to social-property relations: ‘the argument from recognition to equality is one that runs through socialist thought . . . social equality is a condition for proper judgements of real worth’.\(^\text{21}\)

Russell Keat presses the argument in a quite different direction. He doubts that there is any real alternative to the market and claims that the best that we can do is

\(^{19}\) Ray and Sayer 1999, p. 12.
\(^{20}\) Fraser 1999, p. 31.
\(^{21}\) O’Neill 1999, p. 87.
to set proper limits to market rationality. Keat attempts to turn the tables on neoclassical economics with the claim that consumers are not always the best judges of what is good for them. To promote the critical capacities of consumers, it is necessary to preserve non-market forms of activity in order to take maximum advantage of all that the market has to offer. A non-commodified cultural realm which addresses questions about the nature of human goods and well-being thus becomes the precondition for market success.

This, it seems to me, is where some of the conceptual problems with ‘perspectival dualism’ become more visible. For theorists influenced by Weber, markets tend to be seen as the outcome of technical rationality rather than the commodification of labour-power and the production of surplus-value. The issue here is that the specifically capitalist form of ‘instrumental rationality’ which underpins competitive accumulation becomes generalised as the universal form of economic rationality. The tendency is to view culture as the home of social and normative factors and the economic as a desocialised realm of technical/instrumental action. Culture comes to be seen as extrinsic to capitalism, the tonic that will tame the savage beast. But to view culture in this way is to drastically underplay the internal relation between culture and capitalism. Capitalism has certainly expanded access to cultural goods, in ways that would be unimaginable under any other mode of production. But, at the same time, it has significantly devalued these social goods by limiting their scope and by submitting them to colonisation by capital.22

New economies of desire linked to new forms of identity and the social spaces in which to express them have indeed flourished under contemporary capitalism. But these changes have unfolded not according to some separate social logic but hand-in-hand with the expansion of capitalist commodification. Identity politics should not be seen as speaking to a set of issues that have nothing to do with capitalism but, on the contrary, everything to do with it. Capitalism constitutes the condition of possibility for emergence of contemporary forms of identity. As Rosemary Hennessy argues, ‘more flexible gender codes and performative sexual identities are quite compatible with the mobility, adaptability, and ambivalence required of service workers today and with the new more fluid forms of the commodity’.23

‘Perspectival dualism’, by granting equal weight to class inequality and the desire for recognition, perpetuates the very logic it seeks to overcome. The primacy of class is lost as it takes its place once more alongside other cultural forms of struggle.24 Hitching a ‘politics of recognition’ to a rather old-fashioned form of social-democratic

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22 As Ellen Wood observes: ‘social identities seem much more “open” in this sense. So the separateness of the economy may appear to give a wider scope, a freer hand in the world outside it. . . . But, in fact, the economy of capitalism has encroached upon and narrowed the extra-economic domain’, Wood 1995, p. 280.
24 Hennessy subjects Fraser to critique on this point at greater length. See Hennessy 2000, pp. 221–32.
redistribution obscures more than it reveals. The problem with capitalism does not lie with the ‘maldistribution’ of market shares but with the nature of its specific relations of production. To grant ontological status to the new forms of identity which have arisen, as Fraser seems to do, is to reify and dehistoricise them in a way which elides their roots in the deep structures of capitalism. It is also to misjudge the kind of politics required to overcome the specific forms of oppression to which these expressions of identity are responding.

The best contributions are those which owe the least to ‘perspectival dualism’. In a superb essay, Nigel Thrift argues that ‘the cultural turn in the social sciences and the humanities now has a direct line into, and indeed is part of, the cultural turn in capitalism’. In the late 1990s, corporations whipped themselves into a frenzy – spending over $30 billion on staff training – in an effort to win the hearts of minds of their workers through the deployment of faddish new organisational theories which included everything from corporate branding to new-age mysticism. Managerial staff in particular, who are treated increasingly like workers, are expected to devote body, mind and soul to the corporation.

Managerialist and radical academics have colluded in popularising the idea that human subjectivity is akin to a loose collection of marbles, to be traded in at will. The ‘decentred’ self, becomes the mere sum of its fragmented parts, formed out of the ‘disciplinary practices’ of omnipotent but vaguely defined social forces. The only people who seem to enjoy anything resembling a stable identity are all on the side of the powerful, lording it over a somnolent working class. What is politely called ‘human resource management’ is all about using culture to break down workers’ attachment to unions and other forms of independent organisation. But, as Paul Thompson and Patricia Findlay point out, even though the subjectivity of workers may have disappeared from the academic literature, workers’ resistance is alive and well, albeit in less visible forms. The general response to managerial culture tends to be ‘distancing behaviour, cynicism, deep acting and resigned behavioural compliance rather than value internalization’.

In Britain, the Left’s ‘cultural turn’ was accompanied by the view that a declining working class was a spent force for changing society. In the late 1980s, former Marxists like Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques began trumpeting the idea that we had entered ‘New Times’ in which older verities of class struggle had been superseded by new forms of identity with social movements to match. While it would be unfair to blame the originators of ‘New Times’ for the nasty blend of neoliberalism and communitarianism which now prevails under the Blair government (Hall has been loudly critical of New Labour), the jettisoning of class certainly helped oil the slippery

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26 Thompson and Findlay 1999, p. 177.
slope toward the Third Way. Socialism and class conflict are now out, while ‘inclusion’ and ‘social cohesion’ are in. But, as Stephen Driver and Luke Martell point out, this may have less to do with any ‘cultural turn’ than with a wholesale shift in political values such that Labour becomes increasingly indistinguishable from Conservatism.27

Even so, it is not necessary to deny that such political developments are in some sense related to broader cultural changes. The point is rather to show how these changes are linked to deeper changes in capitalism itself. In an era when capitalism was less sure-footed, cultural warriors like Matthew Arnold worried that the degraded condition of workers might result in the overthrow of bourgeois society itself. Culture and state education were called upon to ‘civilise’ workers and to school them in the virtues of representative democracy.28 These fears were largely misdirected. New, even anti-bourgeois cultural movements were a threat to capitalism only insofar as they were allied to revolutionary political movements, as they were briefly in the run-up to the Russian Revolution. Once that connection was cut, the avant garde quickly became absorbed into the ‘high-art’ world of the bourgeois art market. Today, even radical cultural gestures are quickly subordinated to the logic of the market.

This fact signals a double irony. The attempt to keep culture and economy neatly separated in the name of some greater political good is like trying to close the stable gate after the horses have escaped. Because culture-as-commodity is now dominant, capitalism can tolerate, even celebrate, cultural difference without fear that its more ‘transgressive’ expressions will get out of hand. For similar reasons, those who seek to collapse politics into culture do so at a time when culture (with the possible exception of nationalism) has lost a good deal of its political potency. Both opponents of and apologists for capitalism have cast culture in a political role it is ill-suited to play. The last time capitalism was subject to serious challenge, in the 1960s and 1970s, movements arose in which culture became ‘the very grammar of political struggle’.29 But what distinguished these movements from later developments is that culture remained subordinate to broader, sometimes socialist, political goals. Today, global capitalism is being challenged anew. Let us hope that the new grammar of this struggle includes a re-politicised cultural sphere as well.

27 Driver and Martell 1999, p. 256. Driver and Martell’s target seems to be the astonishingly muddled piece which precedes their own, by Mary Evans, ‘The Culture Did It: Comments on the 1997 British Election’. Its main arguments are: that the rise of identity politics and the feminisation of culture and economy have made old-style Tory rule unviable; that the key to the Labour victory was a ‘reconceptualization of gender and politics’ (p. 230) – though this did not seem to extend to single mothers; a rejection of ‘models of the management of the market economy . . . largely derived from male experience’; and that, as far as women are concerned, ‘the government appears to be engaged in the kind of emancipatory programme which would have been endorsed by Engels . . . ’ (p. 242).

28 Lloyd and Thomas 1998, pp. 115–44.

References


Meghnad Desai’s Vision of Capitalism: Neoliberalism or Marxism?

Meghnad Desai’s *Marx’s Revenge* is, basically, an attempt to persuade us that Marx had more in common with neoliberalism than is often imagined. It attempts to update the arguments of Bill Warren’s posthumously published *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism* (1980) for the neoliberal era. There is an undoubted superficial similarity between the two books, as both seek to re-assert Marx’s emphasis on the progressive nature of capitalism. While Warren’s book certainly exaggerated its claims, it was also characterised by some insights and analytical rigour. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Desai’s book. Anthony Giddens’s woeful *The Third Way* was rightly dismissed for being shallow, but, in comparison to *Marx’s Revenge*, Giddens’s work is a model of theoretical synthesis, academic rigour and bold political engagement.

The first question that needs to be seriously addressed is: what is the actual purpose of Desai’s book? In briefly surveying 150 years of global capitalism and some of its leading thinkers, the discussion of (among others) Smith, Lenin, Schumpeter, Hayek, Polanyi, Keynes and Marx is completely superficial. The sketchy, impressionistic references to these theorists are too brief to be read in their own right, and, moreover, do not fit clearly into the book’s argument. Desai’s historical analysis is similarly superficial, and far better accounts can be found in other books, which also attempt broad historical and theoretical synthesis – for instance, David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) or Giovanni Arrighi’s *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994). Needless to say, Desai does not even begin to address the issues discussed in these important works.

Insofar as one can be found, the book’s central argument is the claim that:

> If it came to a choice between whether the market or the state should rule the economy, modern libertarians would be as shocked as modern socialists (social democrats et al.) to find Marx on the side of the market. (p. 3)

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1. The main contemporary overtly Warrenite thinker, John Sender (see Sender 1999), remains upbeat about capitalism in the periphery, but even he accepts that the neoliberal era has not been conducive to enhancing capitalist development in Africa.
Moreover, according to Desai, Marx was right to be on the side of the market, and it is the task of progressive politics today to recognise the superiority of market over state. Desai then (loosely) elaborates on these contentions by making three further arguments concerning capitalism. First, that international trade is good for poor countries. Second, workers have an interest in being exploited by capitalists, as high profits guarantee employment. Third, states are inefficient and markets efficient. I will address each of these in turn. His fourth argument, concerning socialism, will be touched on in the conclusion.

International trade

Desai’s arguments concerning the efficiency of world trade are quite simple. International trade leads to specialisation and therefore promotes efficiency, which thus promotes increases in productivity. As each country adopts its comparative advantage, so world and national output increases for everyone. Desai appears to accept that this is not necessarily a ‘win-win’ situation and that it may be accompanied by increasing inequality (though he never explains why this is the case). But, in true Third-Way style, he argues that this does not matter, as ‘[t]he modern world is unequal, but affords a higher level of consumption’ (p. 21) and that ‘[c]ommerce and private property led to inequality, but also prosperity, giving adequate living standards to the masses’ (p. 25).

Participation in international trade is, therefore, regarded as being preferable to autarchy, which may lead to more equal societies, but where the equality that exists amounts to a sharing of poverty. This point has been made before, and far more effectively, for instance by Gavin Kitching, though, in Kitching’s case, this was rightly linked to the question of production rather than trade. At a most basic level, Desai is correct. The countries that participate more in international trade tend to be richer than those that participate less. Autarchy is, indeed, a recipe for disaster – a point even a ‘Third Worldist’ like Castro (who wants the US to end its trade boycott) would concede. But Desai turns this correlation into a causal connection, and, in the process, fetishises trade as a major cause of economic growth. Thus, at no point does Desai refer to recent debates over the relationship between trade openness and economic growth. Those studies that claim that there is a link have not been very convincing. Indeed, the data in these reports can often be used to undermine their own arguments. For instance, the Bank’s 1993 report, The East Asian Miracle is supposed to prove that

\[2\] Kitching 1982. See also Kitching 2001, an important book, which deserves a wide readership. However, this too tends to take a pro-free-trade position in abstraction from unequal structures of production, as well as a hopelessly optimistic position concerning global finance.

the most successful East Asian developers were those whose policies were most ‘market-friendly’. In fact, the World Bank’s own data suggest that ‘inefficient’ Brazil and India are more market-friendly than South Korea and Taiwan – which, in itself, undermines the contentions of much of the report’s previous 300 pages.

The key point is, however, that, even if there is some link between openness and growth, it is not the case that the former causes the latter, and it is more likely that the strong inward orientation of many of the poorest economies of the world is a reflection, rather than a cause, of slow rates of economic growth.5

An alternative explanation for increases in productivity – and one that is surely far more compatible with Marx’s account – thus focuses less on trade per se (and the argument over whether this is a good or bad thing) and more on trade inequalities as a reflection of unequal structures of production. Marx explained this first as the outcome of the development of capitalist social relations of production, and the passage from absolute to relative surplus-value (which I return to below). Once this has taken place, development becomes cumulative, as one round of accumulation finances further rounds within the same location. It is on this basis that capital concentrates and centralises in certain areas, irrespective of a country’s level of integration into the world economy. Global free trade, therefore, does not on its own guarantee economic growth. Rather, uneven development is the norm, and it is a product of the normal workings of capitalist competition. Anwar Shaikh effectively summarises this alternative view:

It is only by raising both the level and the growth rate of productivity that a country can, in the long run, prosper in international trade. . . . [This] will not happen by itself, through the magic of free trade. On the contrary, precisely because free trade reflects the uneven development of nations, by itself it tends to reproduce and even deepen the very inequality on which it was founded. It follows that success in the free market requires extensive and intensive social, political, and infrastructural support.6

Desai’s admiration for the previous period of globalisation – 1870–1913 – belies the reality of a period of particularly acute uneven development, colonisation, the imposition of forced labour régimes, massive famine, and, ultimately, war.7 In the current period, we also see an intensification of uneven development. The share of developing countries in world trade stood at 27.7 per cent in 1995, but down from 33 per cent in 1950 – the period of what Desai calls ‘national capitalisms’. This share is also unequally distributed: the share of the first-tier newly industrialising countries (of which more below), increased from 2 per cent in 1970 to 10.4 per cent in 1995; in Latin America,

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6 Shaikh 1995, p. 75.
7 On some of these well documented issues, see, most recently, Davis 2001.
over the same period, the share fell from 5.5 per cent in 1970 (and 12.1 per cent in 1950) to 4.4 per cent; in Africa from 2 per cent (and 5.3 per cent in 1950) to 1.5 per cent in 1995.\footnote{Hoogvelt 2001, p. 73.} Much the same point can be made about economic growth in the global era. Average rates throughout the world are far lower now than they were in the 1950s and 1960s. OECD, Latin American and sub-Saharan African countries have pursued the most open trade policies over the last twenty years and have all experienced lower rates of growth; East and South-East Asia performed well for a time (but this often was due to state intervention, I argue below), but went into recession in the more open 1990s; while South Asia had high rates of growth but least pursued policies of trade liberalisation, deregulation and lifting restrictions on capital controls.\footnote{See Weeks 2001, pp. 269–74.}

Integration into the world capitalist economy is clearly not the same thing as the development of capitalist relations of production. Competition in the world economy is intrinsically unequal and the move towards global free trade has intensified uneven development. Thus, against Desai, my argument is that capitalism takes a variety of forms throughout the world, and uneven development means that dynamic development in some countries, regions, and sectors, is also accompanied by (relative) marginalisation elsewhere. As Weeks argues, ‘[i]nherent in the progressiveness of capitalism on a world scale is the simultaneous destructive impact of capitalism in particular regions’.\footnote{Weeks 1997, p. 106.}

Uneven development is, therefore, not a residual category to be overcome by ‘full implementation of capitalism’, but an intrinsic part of the dynamism of capitalist social relations. This view of uneven development does not mean that the development of a dynamic capitalism in previously marginalised areas is impossible, but neither does it mean that it is inevitable. What is clear is that the development of a dynamic capitalism will not occur simply through integration into the global economy. I return to this question below.

**Capitalist exploitation and the working class.**

Desai’s excessive focus on the importance of international trade in isolation from capitalist social relations clearly marks him out as a ‘market fetishist’. In fairness, he does examine capitalist social relations through a detailed analysis of the labour theory of value (see Chapter Five). This discussion relies rather too much on debates within the quantitative Marxist tradition, but more important here is how he uses Marx’s theory of value.
Desai’s basic contention is quite simple. Drawing on Marx’s labour theory of value, he uncontroversially argues that workers are exploited in capitalist society. But he then departs from the script – workers have an interest in being exploited as it leads to an improvement in their living standards. Thus:

If employability depends on high profitability, workers would want to co-operate with employers in keeping profits high. This goes directly against the doctrine of antagonism between capital and labour. If workers know the rule ‘no profits, no employment’, then they will struggle, not for a higher share of wages in total output, but with that share that maximizes their chance of employment. (pp. 65–6)

Although never quite explicitly drawing out the full implications, Desai (see for instance, pp. 141–2) does make some progress towards an interesting discussion. This is the paradox that workers are more exploited in the advanced capitalist countries where relative surplus-value is extracted, but, at the same time, they enjoy higher living standards through access to a larger amount of use-values. One potential interpretation of this irony is indeed that workers have an interest in being exploited (in terms of relative surplus-value) as it will lead to an improvement in living standards. But to assert that this is what workers should do is to confuse an analytical point with a historical trend (and it rests on a very narrow definition of living standards into the bargain). Capitalism’s tendency to develop the productive forces is not spontaneous or ‘natural’, but is in part a product of the history of class struggle. The struggle for workers’ rights has forced capitalists to extract relative surplus-value through investment in new technology, which raises labour productivity, rather than extract absolute surplus-value through low wages. This will have all kinds of contradictory effects – not least of which will be overaccumulation and unemployment, which, in turn, will impact on demand –, but these are part of the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production.

Desai, on the other hand, reads history backwards. Rather than increased access to use-values being the product of class struggle, it is deemed to be an ahistorical fact and, therefore, workers should wait for capitalists to invest in new technology so that productivity will increase – despite the fact that workers in richer countries did no such thing, and the move from absolute to relative surplus-value was historically dependent on social forces. Presumably, on this basis, Desai can sit easily with Tony Blair’s opposition to an extension of workers’ rights and his growing closeness to the hard Right in European politics. Certainly, Desai’s technocratic approach to the theory of value is compatible with the Third Way’s technocratic approach to politics. Here,  

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Desai repeats the old claim made by employers that high profits are required in order to promote an ‘efficient’ economy. Marx was fully aware that this was indeed a fact, but, for him, it was a social reality, which emerged out of the construction of historically constituted social relations.

**State inefficiency versus market efficiency**

The central point of Desai’s argument is that states are inherently inefficient, while markets are efficient. In a typically sweeping and unsubstantiated aside, he even makes the astonishing claim that Marx would have supported the Thatcherite privatisations of the 1980s (pp. 255–6).

What Desai appears to be claiming is that the state acts as a fetter on market expansion, and progress is best achieved by removing such constraints. How this differs from neoliberalism is unclear. Indeed, such is his loathing for the state that it is sometimes unclear how Desai provides justification for the existence of any state. It certainly leads him to make passing remarks which, lacking any evidence, read like articles of faith in the efficiency of the market. For instance, he blames the Latin-American debt crisis of the 1980s solely on the development of inefficient public-sector projects (p. 288), and praises private-sector debt relief in comparison to public-sector debt (p. 312). In fact, much of the debt built up in Latin America in the 1970s and early 1980s was private-sector debt, but this did not stop international financial institutions from pressuring Latin-American states into taking responsibility for both forms of debt in the 1980s. Capitalist states bailing out ‘private-sector’ failings is, of course, a very common occurrence and Desai’s superficial reading of the debt crisis is absurd. Private bank lending to Latin America from 1974–82 is a classic example of irrational lending, as are the financial crises of the last ten years. His contrast of a forgiving private sector compared to an unforgiving public sector (p. 312) should also be seen in this light. Such a stark contrast also ignores the fact that banks found it profitable to invest in supposedly more credit-worthy Latin America than in far poorer Africa, leaving the latter no choice but to turn to public-sector mechanisms.

13 Desai’s enthusiasm for the private sector knows no boundaries, nor logical consistency. For instance, he claims that the Great Depression in 1931 was ‘a rare and unique experience in which an agricultural oversupply (thanks to Soviet collectivization and dumping by Russian farmers) played a significant part’ (p. 301). This sweeping assertion is made after Desai earlier (rightly) claims that the collectivisation process led to enormous cuts in output (pp. 169–70). One is left wondering how this led to oversupply on the world market and the Depression. Clearly, Desai wants to blame the state for everything – both cuts in production and too much production in one and the same place.
Desai’s increasingly slender case for the efficiency of the market over the state then comes to rest on a few passing references to East Asia. He argues that the (former) miracle economies in the region,

were open, export-orientated economies which penetrated markets all over the world by their competitive pricing. . . . They had avoided the statist pattern of many other Asian economies. The state played a large role, but it went with the grain of the market rather than impeding it. They subjected their industrialists to the objective test of export competition. (p. 267)

In making this argument, Desai also cites in a footnote the work of Alice Amsden on South Korea and Robert Wade on Taiwan (p. 339, n. 12).\textsuperscript{14} Desai’s case for market-friendly intervention is actually strongly opposed by these writers, who both emphasise the way in which intervention was deliberately ‘market-distorting’.\textsuperscript{15} Amsden, for instance, argues that the South Korean state deliberately got prices wrong. In practice, this meant that the state targeted selected industries through its control of credit (banks were nationalised in the 1960s), and rewarded exporters who made losses in the world market by allowing them to sell expensively in the protected domestic market. The implication of this analysis should be clear – left to Desai’s market forces, unprotected manufacturers would have made losses in the world market and therefore gone bankrupt.\textsuperscript{16} If South Korea’s state had really adopted market-friendly policies, its main export would still be rice. If anything, these points can be made even more strongly for the Taiwanese case. Such ‘interventions’ were profoundly rational from the viewpoint of developing East Asian capitalism as states there were fully aware of the need to counteract the hierarchies of the world market.

Ultimately, Desai betrays a ‘market fetishism’ in which capitalism is essentially regarded as a ‘free market, free trade’ economy, and the state is seen as a hindrance to its expansion. Marx is even said to share Hayek’s view that the economy is ‘a self organizing process’ (p. 198), and that ‘cycles are endemic to capitalism, but they are self-correcting and self-sustaining’ (p. 301). He concludes that this Marxist-Hayekian notion shares the view that ‘there is no need for overarching governance of the market’ (pp. 301–2). One must ask the question: if capitalism is self-adjusting then why does Desai speak so highly of the World Trade Organisation (p. 311), whose existence suggests that capitalism does need some forms of regulation? Much the same point could be made about the IMF, World Bank and just about any public – national or multilateral – institution. These are not insignificant questions – the existence of a (non-competitive) state in the context of a world composed of utility-maximising

\textsuperscript{14} Amsden 1989 and Wade 1990.
\textsuperscript{15} Amsden 1994 and Wade 2001.
\textsuperscript{16} Kiely 1998.
individuals sounds like a contradiction in terms. Certainly, the World Bank has to deal with these contradictions when it calls for states to reform themselves in the name of good governance, for, if states are simply composed of self-interested individuals, then there is no prospect for reform. On the other hand, if individuals in the state are prepared to reform it in the name of the common good, then this shows that individuals act in non-self-interested ways. The problem for neoliberalism is that, if people act in ways beyond their self-interest, and for a collective interest, the case for the efficiency of the private over the public sector also collapses.

For Marx (and indeed Weber and Durkheim), ‘market fetishism’ takes for granted the appearance of separate political and economic ‘spheres’. The notion that state and market can be rigidly separated in the real world abstracts from the fact that these are forms of appearance of capitalist social relations. Thus, Marx argued that ‘[t]he formation of the political state and the dissolution of civil society into independent individuals . . . is completed in one and the same act’. In Part 8 of Capital, he outlines the way in which state activity provided the basis for the emergence of ‘generalised commodity production’ or ‘market society’. These measures included abolition of feudal tenure, anti-vagrancy laws, facilitation of enclosures, modern taxation and colonial policy. Such methods ‘all employ the power of the State, the concentrated and organised force of society, to hasten . . . the process of transition of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode. . . . Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power.’ Marx, like Polanyi in the twentieth century, was thus fully aware of the internal relationship between state and market and how one is the precondition for the other. Indeed, Desai’s conversion to neoliberalism is already out of date, as the World Bank now places far more emphasis on creating appropriate institutions for development. The World Bank’s utilisation of the concept of social capital may still be too narrow, but it is an improvement on its outlook in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Desai’s work.

**Conclusion**

Unlike Desai, Marx was fully aware of how capitalism, or the ‘market society’, was a product of historically constituted social relations, in which the state was an intrinsic part. In showing how these relations historically emerged, he also showed how the

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17 Marx 1977, p. 56.
19 Desai briefly discusses Polanyi, asserting, without any evidence, that he was Eurocentric. This name-calling is a common strategy these days for dismissing an argument without addressing its content.
20 Fine 2001, Chapters 8 and 9.
market concealed relations of exploitation. He also argued that the social relations that emerged in north-west Europe and the United States would not necessarily emerge in similar ways in other parts of the world. He was also fully aware that the earlier developers constructed a world market, which reflected their interests more than others. While he never argued for autarchy, Marx’s methodology for understanding the dynamics of capitalist development in the core leads one to suggest that he did not believe that a simple incorporation into the world economy would lead to capitalist development. His statements on slavery, and later arguments on the impact of colonialism in India, support this contention. Desai’s discussion of Marx is therefore completely wide of the mark. So, too, I have suggested, is his optimism concerning the prospects for ‘market-led’ capitalism in the global era.

What, then, of his discussion of socialism? His argument is that ‘socialism outside capitalism’ is dead, while he takes a more agnostic stance on ‘socialism within capitalism’. In part, he does this because he is so optimistic about the prospects for capitalism and its tendency to develop the productive forces. But such a narrow focus on developing the productive forces puts Desai into the very same rationalising framework as the CPSU under Stalin. In this framework, there is no focus on the irrationalities that such production involves – massive overproduction alongside poverty, underproduction of high-cost medicines, socially useless products such as luxuries and armaments, overwork for some but unemployment and poverty for others, hierarchies in the labour process, and so on. When these factors are considered, then we move away from a purely technocratic calculation of living standards. This does not mean we necessarily stop developing the productive forces, but neither does it mean that we simply focus on this one question. Unlike Marx (and indeed Weber), Desai fails to see that the rationalisation of the market, represents a deeply irrational mode of existence. Desai actually shares with Stalin a conception of socialism that the latter believed represented the most effective means of developing the productive forces. However, unlike him, Desai sees the naturalised, ahistorical, asocial market as the best means of achieving this, and, in this respect, the late Peter Bauer has found his true heir.

References


22 Environmental destruction would be another factor. Desai (p. 312) discusses this but his treatment of it is purely neoclassical. For a critique of this perspective see Jacobs 1991.


Marx, Karl 1977, Selected Writings, Oxford: Oxford University Press.


Victor Serge: The Course Is Set on Hope
SUSAN WEISSMAN
London: Verso, 2001

Reviewed by IAN BIRCHALL

It is often said that ‘the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning’. Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs, a mass of other germs and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious socialist revolution ought not to forget it. (p. 234)

The question as to whether Bolshevism led to Stalinism is a crucial one for those aspiring to rebuild the socialist movement. If, as thinkers of the triumphalist Right argue, Stalinism was already inherent in Lenin, Marx and even Babeuf, then the whole project of radically transforming the world is radically flawed. And, even if the determination is not so inexorable, the question of identifying where Bolshevism went wrong is pregnant with lessons about the forms of organisation that should be adopted in the future.

The life and work of Victor Serge deserves to be at the very centre of this debate. After revolutionary experiences in France and Spain, Serge (born in 1890 in Belgium of a Russian family) went to Russia in 1919. He lived through some of the darkest days of the Civil War, worked in the Comintern apparatus and threw himself wholeheartedly, if never uncritically, into the revolutionary struggle. In the mid-1920s, he was in Berlin, Prague and Vienna, still desperately hoping that the Revolution might be saved by escaping from its isolation. He returned to Russia and became a leading activist in the Left Opposition, eventually being deported to Orenburg, and released to the West just before the trials and purges reached their bloody climax. Here, he worked tirelessly to expose the lies about Stalinism so widely accepted by liberal opinion as well as in the working-class movement. With the German occupation of France, he was forced to take refuge again, this time in Mexico, where he died in 1947. Throughout his adult life he wrote copiously – journalism, pamphlets, historical and political studies, novels and poems, as well as one of the great political autobiographies of the century. And the bulk of that writing gravitates around the vital questions: What was the Russian Revolution? Where did it go wrong? What can be saved from it for the future?
Yet, despite his almost unique qualifications to speak on these matters (few others who followed his trajectory survived to tell the tale), Serge has been largely marginalised from the literary and intellectual history of his century. I recall, about twenty years ago, attending a conference on the ‘sociology of literature’ and being addressed by a leading exponent of the then fashionable ‘poststructuralist’ school, who declaimed vehemently against the existence of the literary ‘canon’. In discussion, I raised the case of Serge as an example of a writer excluded from the canon. The speaker, who would undoubtedly have blushed purple with mortification had she been caught out in ignorance of one of Virginia Woolf’s minor novels, gazed at me in bemusement and enquired ‘Who?’

There are good reasons for Serge’s marginalisation. The Right could make only very limited use of his work, since, on breaking with orthodox Communism, he refused to play the required part by denouncing ‘the god that failed’ and continued to intrinsigently defend what was positive in the Revolution. For the Stalinists, he had committed the unforgivable sin of speaking the truth about Russia; there could be no question of debate with him: if he could not be physically silenced, then he must be resolutely ignored. And on top of all this, Serge had had the temerity to disagree with Trotsky, for which he received not only some deserved and legitimate criticism, but also some quite illegitimate abuse. Trotsky’s epigones, always eager to imitate the master in splitting and denunciation because his gifts for unifying and organising were too difficult for them to copy, carried on the job. Serge was a witness rather than a leader or an organiser; he had no political followers to defend his legacy. If he never, quite, disappeared beneath the waters of oblivion, it was because a handful of individuals – in the English-speaking world one thinks of Peter Sedgwick and Richard Greeman – fought hard to keep him afloat.

So today, fifty-four years after Serge’s death, Susan Weissman’s book is only the second book-length study to have been devoted to Serge’s work. The first, Bill Marshall’s excellent study of the novels,1 concentrated on the literary achievement. Weissman has devoted her attention to Serge’s political thought, and especially to his long series of reflections on the Russian experience. When Richard Greeman’s long-awaited biography of Serge completes the triptych, we shall have a solid basis on which to understand Serge the man, the thinker and the writer.

What Serge studies lack in quantity, they make up for in quality, and Weissman is eminently suited to deal with her subject. This is not a run-of-the-mill academic study, knocked up in a couple of years to meet the demands of a research quantifier. It is, in a very real sense, a life-work, the product of an obsession stretching back over two decades to her own ecstatic discovery of the Memoirs (p. xi). Weissman has been

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befriended by Serge’s children, Vlady and Jeannine; she has travelled to Mexico, France, Belgium and Russia, and consulted the large quantities of unpublished writing as well as interviewing some of the survivors who knew Serge personally. She is able to deploy a considerable erudition in situating Serge in his historical context. She is familiar with the extensive scholarly work on postrevolutionary Russia, but she also knows the peculiar world and way of life of the far Left, and is able to treat it with an empathy quite foreign to most academic historians. Her bibliography – while necessarily incomplete – is the most comprehensive yet and will be a valuable source for future researchers. There is also a splendid selection of photographs of Serge and drawings by his artist son Vlady.

Weissman has not attempted a complete study of Serge’s life. His early anarchism is touched on very lightly, and his experiences in Central Europe are given a fairly thin treatment. The first part of the book deals with the Russian experience, from his arrival in 1919 to his exile in 1936; the second covers the final years of isolation, from Belgium 1936 to Mexico 1947. Serge’s individual history is integrated with that of his contemporaries, so that he becomes what he would surely have wished to be, the voice of a lost and murdered generation (p. 137).

Serge’s critique of Stalinism is based not on the abstract norms of liberal democracy or socialist utopianism but on the way in which the rising bureaucracy crushed and destroyed the potential revealed in the first few years of the Revolution. Serge’s writings on the early years of the Revolution fall into two categories. There are the articles and pamphlets written in the heat of struggle, full of proselytising enthusiasm, urging revolutionaries throughout the world, from whatever tradition they might originate, to rally to the defence of red Russia. And there are the books and articles of later years, in which Serge, with a retrospective suspicion born of bitter disappointment, searched for clues as to where the Revolution had gone wrong. Yet, despite this suspicion, he always maintained that the original impetus of October must be the base of any renewed revolutionary movement. As he wrote in 1933, having abandoned any hope that Stalinised Bolshevism could be reformed, ‘I sympathize with all who go against the current, looking to preserve the ideas, principles, and the spirit of the October revolution’ (p. 143).

Although Serge undoubtedly expressed private doubts and misgivings from the very beginning of his time in Russia, there can be no doubt as to his sincerity in defending the Revolution. His political background – individualist anarchism and

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After leaving Germany in late 1923, Serge spent nearly two years in Prague and Vienna, where one of his special interests was the Balkans. Yet the bibliography lists only a few articles from this period, some written under Serge’s old German pseudonym of ‘R. Albert’. It seems unlikely that a writer as prolific as Serge wrote so little, and there may well be more writings on the fascinating and still highly relevant subject of the Balkans to be discovered. A clue to authorship is Serge’s rather irritating habit of ending sentences with three dots . . . perhaps a way of noting that there is always more to be said.
then syndicalism – was quite alien to Bolshevism, yet, as Lenin noted in the postscript to the incomplete *State and Revolution*, ‘it is more pleasant and useful to go through the “experience of the revolution” than to write about it’.3 Serge was not the sort of sectarian who would stand aside until the Revolution developed through the channels he had predicted.

Moreover, Serge was well aware that the Revolution, once embarked upon, could not simply call it all off and return to the status quo. Drawing on the example of the savage counterrevolution in Finland in 1918, he argued that White Terror would necessarily be far more ruthless than Red Terror:

The total extermination of all the advanced and conscious elements of the proletariat is, in short, the rational objective of the White Terror. In this sense, a vanquished revolution – regardless of its tendency – will always cost the proletariat far more than a victorious revolution, no matter what sacrifices and rigours the latter may demand. (p. 35)

Many of Serge’s defences of the Revolution had a particular target. Articles and pamphlets were directed at the *Vie ouvrière* grouping of Monatte and Rosmer (who had been among the few to oppose World War I from the first day), at the closely associated *Cahiers du Travail* of Marcel Martinet,4 and at the *Clarté* grouping of Barbusse. In 1920, the majority of the French Socialist Party voted for affiliation to the Communist International, thus creating a Communist Party stuffed out with careerists, parliamentary opportunists and former supporters of the War. Serge’s task was to persuade as many as possible of the authentic revolutionaries and internationalists in France to join the new party, so that at least a revolutionary minority would be able to fight from within.

If we draw together Serge’s contemporaneous and retrospective accounts of the early years of the Revolution, there are indeed discrepancies, but also continuities. Certainly, a close reading of Serge makes it impossible to hold the position implied in some Trotskyist historiography that everything in the Leninist period was a model of correctness, and that the seeds of evil were planted only with the accession of Stalin. Such a defensive stance was understandable when the Left Opposition was besieged by Stalinism, and where any admission of error would seem like a concession to the enemy, but it did little to elucidate the real nature of the process.5

In fact, the discrepancies between Serge’s contemporaneous and retrospective accounts can serve as a means of illuminating some of the contentious issues. Thus, in 1939, Serge wrote that the gravest error committed by the Bolsheviks was the establishment of the Cheka (Extraordinary Commission for the Repression of

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3 Lenin 1964, p. 492.
4 Martinet, poet, novelist and cultural editor of *L’Humanité*, is another figure written out of the literary canon. It is hoped that an anthology of his writings will soon appear in English.
5 In this respect Cliff 1978 is exemplary in breaking with the tradition of defensive Trotskyism.
Counter-Revolution, Speculation, Espionage and Desertion). Certainly, it would be a bold – and dangerously foolish – historian who argued that every act of the Cheka was justified. As Serge recounts, in January 1920 the Bolsheviks abolished capital punishment; the night before the decree was issued, up to five hundred suspects were pre-emptively shot in Petrograd and Moscow (p. 37).

The Revolution suffered from an acute shortage of experienced and politically reliable cadre in all departments. (Hence a man of Serge’s talents found himself working simultaneously as journalist, teacher, schools inspector, translator, gun-runner and commissar in charge of archives, etc. (p. 23).) Nowhere did this problem have such disastrous consequences as in the case of the Cheka. If the head of the organisation, Dzerzhinsky, was, in Serge’s estimation, ‘incorruptible’, the same could not be said of his underlings. As Serge pointed out ‘the Cheka inevitably consisted of perverted men tending to see conspiracy everywhere and to live in the midst of perpetual conspiracy themselves’ (pp. 36–7).

Yet, as Weissman shows:

From 1919 to 1921 Serge was not publicly critical of the Cheka. Under the conditions of civil war it appeared to be a tragic necessity. Privately, Serge interceded frequently on behalf of its victims, but his writings of the period contain no public condemnation. (p. 37)

And, as Serge makes clear in one of his pamphlets on the Civil War, terror was not something imposed from above by power-hungry leaders, but grew naturally from the necessities of the Civil War: ‘we are brought back to the question of the terror, which is the logical conclusion of these measures. I believe that I have seen the birth of the terror during these anxious days’.

In short, we might reasonably conclude that, while the actual Cheka was undoubtedly guilty of appalling injustices, some of which might have been avoided if its power had been somewhat constrained and its personnel more effectively selected, nonetheless some such body was an unavoidable necessity in the face of the counterrevolution.

Something similar may be said about the suppression of the Kronstadt rising, which became the subject of bitter debate between Serge and Trotsky in the 1930s. Trotsky, forced into defensiveness by isolation, was unwilling to criticise even those aspects of the episode which clearly deserved criticism, and some of his followers continued this approach with quite inappropriate enthusiasm. Serge was right to challenge this complacency. Yet, at the time, as with typical honesty he recounts in his Memoirs, he was in the same camp as Trotsky:

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6 Serge 1997, p. 25.
7 For a full treatment, see Weissman’s essay and documents in Cotterill (ed.) 1994, pp. 150–91.
After many hesitations, and with unutterable anguish, my Communist friends and I finally declared ourselves on the side of the Party... the country was absolutely exhausted, and production practically at a standstill; there were no reserves of any kind, not even reserves of stamina in the hearts of the masses.\(^8\)

On the basis of Serge’s testimony, and from the comfort of retrospective judgement, it seems possible to draw two conclusions. First, that Kronstadt was certainly not Bolshevism’s ‘finest hour’, but a lamentable necessity compounded with unnecessary lies and brutality. Second, that, in the historical circumstances, the rising could only open the way to further attacks on such gains of the Revolution as survived; it certainly held no potential for raising the struggle to a higher level. As Serge noted, the anarchist slogan of ‘The Third Revolution’ belonged to the realm of ‘infantile illusions’.\(^9\)

Until the mid-1920s, in Russia and then in Central Europe, Serge was guided by what he later referred to as a ‘double duty’ (p. 143) – defence of the Revolution both against its reactionary enemies outside and against the dangers of corruption from within. By the time Serge returned to Russia at the end of 1925, it was the latter which were becoming more serious, and Serge at once aligned himself with the Left Opposition.

Weissman gives a detailed account of the development of the Left Opposition and Serge’s rôle within it. Challenging Pierre Broué’s view that Serge’s part in the Left Opposition was ‘marginal’, she insists that although he was not a theoretician, he was a key figure in the Opposition:

As a spokesman, pamphleteer and revolutionary novelist, however, no one else in the Left Opposition was more valuable than Serge. Serge was an unorthodox member but the Left Opposition was not monolithic. Serge was an excellent example of its capable militants. (pp. 88–9)

And as she points out, after Trotsky’s exile, ‘by 1929 only three well-known Oppositionists in the entire USSR remained at liberty, albeit precarious: Andrés Nin in Moscow and Alexandra Bronstein and Victor Serge in Leningrad. They were under surveillance, as were the wives of Oppositionist deportees’ (p. 119).

Not that Serge was always happy about the direction that the Opposition took. In particular, he was very dubious about the alliance between Trotsky and Zinoviev. Serge regarded Zinoviev as ‘Lenin’s biggest mistake’.\(^10\) He had seen Zinoviev at work in the Comintern, and even if, as Weissman claims, ‘he admitted Zinoviev’s internationalism was sincere’ (p. 91), he knew too that Zinoviev was a bureaucratic voluntarist who believed that the international revolution could be spread by manoeuvre

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\(^8\) Serge 1967, p. 128.  
\(^9\) Ibid.  
\(^10\) Serge 1967, p. 177.
and putsch, like the disastrous Estonian adventure of December 1924. The accounts given by Serge, Rosmer and others make it clear that Zinoviev played a key rôle in paving the way for Stalin, both domestically and internationally. As Weissman points out, ‘Zinoviev and Kamenev were forced to realize that that their own policies had enabled the growth of a nascent bourgeoisie and allowed bureaucratic manoeuvring to destroy the Bolshevik Party’ (p. 91).

Nonetheless, Serge remained a loyal activist of the Opposition. While he never idolised Trotsky as infallible, he also never fell into the trap of some liberals and anarchists by suggesting that there was no real difference between Stalin and Trotsky. Serge knew which side he was on, and he stood by it, whatever the price.

Of course, the price was inevitably paid – arrest, imprisonment and deportation to Orenburg. For all too many oppositionists, that is how the story ended, with the final dénouement of a bullet. Serge’s release and escape to the West came just before the repression reached the frenzied levels of the late 1930s, a situation in which he would have inevitably perished. Serge’s release owed much to the vigorous campaign waged in France; this has been studied in detail by Richard Greeman, and Weissman’s account draws on his work.

Two points emerge from this small victory won just before midnight in the century. First, that campaigns for the release of political prisoners are worth fighting because they can and do win. Even the most bloodthirsty dictators are not immune to the pressures exerted by a noisy and tenacious lobby.

But, second, it is also important to place the episode in its historical context. The Comintern had just lurched away from the disastrous ‘Third Period’ into the Popular Front; Stalin was establishing an alliance with France, and for that he needed the support of the French Left. Now, the Stalinist Popular Front had a fundamental strategic rule: almost any compromise was permissible with forces to its right, but any force to its left must be attacked with total ruthlessness. Unfortunately, the French Left did not break down into such simple categories – while the campaign for Serge was originally launched by intransigent elements from the far Left like Magdeleine Paz, Parijanine and Martinet, independent individuals like Gide, Rolland and the surrealists were affected by their agitation and Stalin could not risk seeing the whole Left outside of the Communist Party turn against him on what must have seemed a secondary issue.

But, although Serge had escaped Russia, he had not escaped Stalinism. As Stalin crushed the last remnants of opposition, he attracted to his side all that was most servile in the worlds of academia and journalism, those ‘intellectuals’ who longed to

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11 Rosmer 1987, pp. 236–8; Rosmer 2000b.
12 Greeman 1994.
13 I recall the late Tony Cliff citing the Serge Affair in order to encourage a campaign for the release of Kuron and Modzelewski in Poland in 1966.
find themselves on the winning side (the same sort of reptiles as have flocked to George W. Bush since 11 September). And, behind the public adulation of the dictator among left and liberal circles that extended far beyond the explicitly Communist milieu, Stalin’s agents were able to practice infiltration and even murder with impunity. Those who, like Serge, continued to speak out against Stalinism showed a courage and determination almost unimaginable to those of us who have lived in easier circumstances.

The isolation of the anti-Stalinist Left had further consequences. Small circles of oppositionists, lacking any significant roots in the real working-class movement, necessarily turned in on themselves. Secondary questions were elevated to points of principle. Stalinist agents were able to infiltrate the Trotskyist movement, but the harm they could do was surpassed by the damage wrought by an atmosphere in which every comrade was suspicious of others.

Despite the determination of the pioneer Trotskyists, Trotskyism, as Serge sadly noted, ‘was displaying symptoms of an outlook in harmony with that of the very Stalinism against which it had taken its stand’ (p. 226). Although, initially, it appeared that Trotsky and Serge ‘were on the same wavelength’ (p. 196), divergences between the two began to appear more and more strongly, leading to a break, which, in retrospect, seems both unfortunate and unnecessary. Trotsky, forced into defensiveness by isolation and defeat, was not immune from sectarian reflexes. Lenin, the supreme organiser, had known when to split and when to hold together; Trotsky was much weaker on the latter skill. As a result, the nascent Fourth International lost some of its best potential cadres. Trotsky broke with the political wisdom of Marguerite and Alfred Rosmer in favour of the get-rich-quick opportunism of Molinier; later, he alienated Serge, criticising his ‘artistic and psychological’ approach for being insufficiently political (p. 230) – a rather philistine response from someone who elsewhere showed extreme sensitivity to the artistic vision, and moreover somewhat impudent, since Trotsky had apparently never read Serge’s novels.

Serge’s alternative therefore deserves serious consideration, rather than the mere denunciation he received from Trotsky and followers:

What should be done? The solution, I believe, lies in an alliance with all the left-wing currents of the workers’ movement (its platform: the class struggle and internationalism); in free, comradely discussion of every issue, without abuse and mutual recriminations; in the creation of an International Bureau of committees and similar bodies – such a Bureau to be composed

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{14} Cotterill (ed.) 1994, pp. 22–112.} \]
\[ \text{\textsuperscript{15} Trotsky, Rosmer and Rosmer 2000, pp. 137–42.} \]
\[ \text{\textsuperscript{16} Greeman 1999.} \]
of the representatives of local movements and to work towards concrete goals; one must abandon the idea of Bolshevist-Leninist hegemony in the left-wing workers’ movement and create an international alliance, which would reflect the real ideological tendencies of the most advanced sections of the working class (I am convinced that in such an alliance the Bolshevik-Leninists would have a greater influence than in their own high and mighty International). (pp. 232–3)

Yet, if Serge was right that the founding of a new International in the unpropitious circumstances of 1938 was doomed to failure, he cannot be granted victory in the debate. In the harsh climate of the late 1930s, an organisation of the sort proposed by Serge, however attractive it might appear in principle, had little chance of survival. The broader ‘centrist’ organisations which seemed closer to Serge’s conceptions – the Parti Socialiste Ouvrier et Paysan of Marceau Pivert or the British Independent Labour Party – did not survive World War II or emerged from it much weakened. The tiny band of followers drawn together by Trotsky did keep their organisation intact. After the War, it is true, the leadership of the International gave the impression of a bunch of people trying to navigate themselves around the Paris Métro armed with a map of the London tube. But, from the school of Trotskyism graduated many of those who made a serious attempt to develop Marxism to meet the needs of a new and unexpected world – Dunayevskaya, Draper, Cliff, James, Castoriadis.

Serge had the good sense to recognise his own limitations, and rather than set up a tiny sect of ‘Sergeists’ he confined himself to his rôle as writer and witness. He never abandoned his admiration for Trotsky the man – he collaborated with Natalia Sedova on a book about Trotsky – and he worked with Trotsky’s followers when possible, as for example in the International Federation for Independent Revolutionary Art.

Serge’s memoirs end with his arrival in Mexico, and so the final section of Weissman’s book, on the Mexican years, provides material that will be unfamiliar to most admirers of Serge. She describes in some detail the complex problems of Serge’s escape from Nazi-occupied France, as he entered the nightmare world of the asylum seeker:

Serge had to get to Portugal through Spain. Since the Franco government did not recognize Mexican documents, Serge would require an exit permit from France plus Portuguese and Spanish transit visas. The paper chase became a labyrinth. (p. 259)

17 I owe the image to the late Tony Cliff.
18 For a discussion of this, see Callinicos 1990.
19 Serge 1999.
Without the heroic efforts of Dwight and Nancy Macdonald, Serge might never have made it to Mexico.

But, even there, he was not safe. In 1943, he was addressing a memorial meeting for two Polish socialists and an Italian anarchist killed by Stalinists. As Serge was speaking, a company of about one hundred Communists laid siege to the hall, broke down the iron door and burst into the centre looking for the speakers to beat them up. Armed with clubs of bits of broken furniture, as well as knives and guns, they formed a strong-arm squad, evidently recruited off the streets, probably hired and led by some Communist Party militants. (p. 181)

Trotsky was dead, but Stalin’s apparatus had not given up its hunt for anyone who might defy it. Serge died in 1947, ostensibly of a heart attack, but, as Weissman points out, there are grounds for thinking he may have been murdered, although at this date it is unlikely that any firm evidence will be produced.

Weissman’s portrait of Serge is overwhelmingly positive, even though she does not cover up his weaknesses, such as the ‘irresponsibility’ (p. 216) of which he was accused by Elsa Poretsky, the widow of Ignace Reiss. But what comes through most strongly is Serge’s moral integrity; his determination, courage, self-sacrifice and ‘refusal to make a career’ (in the old revolutionary-syndicalist phrase) make him into an exemplary representative of revolutionary politics in the bitter era of Stalinism.

The story Weissman tells is a profoundly sad one, with the defeat of a revolution as backdrop to Serge’s own suffering, poverty, imprisonment and repeated exile. Yet she is absolutely right to take as her subtitle a line from one of Serge’s poems: ‘The course is set on hope’. The poem, which she quotes in full at the end of the book, is no exercise in facile optimism. It is a roll-call of Serge’s dead comrades, deaths from Spain to Hong Kong, a memorial to the individual tragedies of forgotten rank-and-file soldiers of the revolution. But Serge never lost his ultimate faith in the eventual triumph of the revolution; as he asked, ‘How many times does a child fall before he learns to walk?’ (p. 240). In Birth of Our Power he wrote:

If we are beaten, other men, infinitely different from us, infinitely like us, will walk, on a similar evening, in ten years, in twenty years (how long is really without importance) down this rambla, meditating on the same victory; they will think of us, who will perhaps be dead. Perhaps they will think about our blood. Even now I think I see them and I am thinking about their blood, which will flow too. But they will take the city.\(^{20}\)

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I trust that I have now said enough to convey that this is an important and valuable book on an important and valuable topic, and that it should be read. If I use the rest of this review to set out some reservations, it is with the intention, which I think is not alien to either Serge or Weissman, of using Serge’s work to promote the sort of debate, hopefully rigorous but hopefully also fraternal, that we need in order to achieve the clarity so important for any future revolutionary movement.

First, despite the obvious scholarship of the author, the presentation of the book is all too often sloppy. The Cuban painter Wifredo Lam becomes Wilfredo (p. 254), Victor Brauner becomes Brainier (p. 254). Jean Malaquais sometimes appears as Malaquaise (p. 326), and De Gaulle’s RPF as the RAP (p. xii). Serge is credited with coining the phrase ‘concentration-camp universe [univers concentrationnaire]’ in 1946, when it was the title of a series of articles (later a book) which David Rousset began to publish in 1945 (p. 204). We are told that Serge took part in the ‘founding conference’ of the Fourth International (p. 231), though he had broken with Trottsky long before 1938.21 Alfred Rosmer is said to have written in 1920 that Serge was ‘the best possible guide’ in Russia (p. 100) – but the source given is a book published in 1953. Weissman gives many references to the English translation of the Memoirs; which is substantially abridged from the French original (by about one eighth), but this fact is not mentioned in the bibliography, but only in passing in an endnote (p. 303). References are given to the Spanish translation of Serge’s book on the Chinese Revolution, although the existence of an English translation is noted. There are some irritating repetitions. The death of Chadeyev is recounted twice (pp. 90 and 107), and Serge’s letter to Malraux, asking for assistance to return to Europe, is discussed no less than three times (pp. xii, 182 and 257). (One would have hoped that such repetitions would have been revealed during indexing, unless that task was done, as is now fashionable, by machine.)

French accents appear or disappear with such bewildering randomness that one wonders if the text contains a coded message from Al-Qaida. There are mistakes in all books, but there are just too many here, and they undermine the reader’s confidence in what should stand for many years as an important work of reference. It is a pity that a publishing house with Verso’s reputation was unable to supply a copy editor who could have eradicated at least some of the errors. Hopefully, there will soon be a corrected paperback edition.

Second, there are a number of points of interpretation on which my own position differs substantially from Weissman’s. In her account of Serge’s 1932 book Literature and Revolution,22 she stresses that Serge’s analysis of culture was ‘deeply influenced’

21 Weissman clearly means the International Conference for the Fourth International, held in Geneva in July 1936, where Serge was elected to the International Bureau, although he does not seem to have been present at the Conference.
22 Serge 1976. It is hoped that an English translation of this interesting little book will be published in the not too distant future.
by that of Trotsky. She thus largely ignores the striking originality of Serge’s work. True, he accepted Trotsky’s general arguments about the impossibility of a proletarian culture. But, whereas Trotsky always referred to the efforts of the ‘Proletcult’ with hostility and contempt, Serge treated them with affection and sympathy. He identified cultural tasks to be accomplished in the age of the proletarian revolution, tasks which could not be achieved by the bourgeois culture inherited from the old world, but also could not be left until the emergence of a socialist culture:

Several generations of workers will probably not know other times. They will be mainly occupied with the struggle. They will know much destruction and suffering: the world must be remade. But, like the armies of ancient times, they will have their bards, their story-tellers, their musicians, their philosophers. . . . In this historically limited sense there will be, there is already, a culture of the militant proletariat.23

In discussing Serge’s own literary work, Weissman seeks to draw a sharp dividing line between his journalism and his ‘literary work’ proper. Here, she speaks with the authority of Serge himself, who wrote at the beginning of The Case of Comrade Tulayev that ‘the truth created by the novelist cannot be confounded, in any degree whatever, with the truth of the historian or the chronicler’.24 Nonetheless, I think it is arguable that she both belittles Serge’s journalism and neglects the important connections between the journalistic and the literary achievement. She argues that ‘Serge believed the needs of the revolution precluded “serious writing”’ (p. 110). She gives no source for the words in inverted commas and it is an odd phrase. Every sentence that Serge wrote in his entire life was profoundly ‘serious’ (notwithstanding his frequent effective use of humour and irony). Indeed, in the very passage she draws on, Serge makes it clear that ‘literature’ was to be seen as a luxury while the fate of the Revolution hung in the balance.25

Thus Weissman considers that the ‘discrepancy’ between sensibility and opinion renders Serge’s writings on the Germany26 in 1923 of little value (p. 110). But despite Serge’s own disparaging comments, these articles are full of sharp and illuminating observations, which bring to life the crisis of that fateful year. Serge does not simply present the dreary and abstract statistics of hyperinflation, but constantly reminds us what it meant for a worker with children who wanted to buy an egg. Serge’s gift was to take a concrete detail of lived experience, and to show its full meaning in understanding a whole social conjuncture. In a report from Berlin in 1923 Serge notes: ‘There are hardly any new books appearing’. The reason:

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23 Serge 1976, p. 120. See also Birchall 1997.
24 Serge 1993, p. 5.
Think, write, read? We have to eat tomorrow. This evening we must spend the paper money which we were paid this morning, for fear it will be worth nothing tomorrow. On Sunday evenings near the approaches to the railway stations you can see elderly intellectuals coming back from the suburbs bent under the weight of sacks of potatoes.27

Serge stands alongside Orwell and John Reed as one of the great journalists of the twentieth century, and Weissman herself pays tribute to Serge’s ‘eye for penetrating detail, his descriptive depth, and his ability to sum up a figure’s character through a physical description’ (p. 92). But these are qualities that belong equally to his journalism and his literary work; without the apprenticeship of journalism, Serge would not have become the fine novelist he was. As Weissman herself argues, ‘Serge did not write in a customary “scientific” style, but in a literary-autobiographical-political one that transcends the boundaries of both traditional social science and conventional literature’ (p. 184).

Third, Weissman gives a rather thin treatment to the influence of Serge’s early anarchism on his political development. Yet this is perhaps the most relevant theme in Serge’s work at the present time. With the rise of the anticapitalist movement, the question of co-operation and dialogue between Marxists and anarchists is very much back on the agenda. Serge, always an advocate of such dialogue, has much to teach us in this respect.

It is often assumed that anarchism is somehow more ‘democratic’ than the centralism of Bolshevisim. As far as Serge’s early anarchism is concerned, nothing could be further from the truth. In his anarchist journalism from before the days of his imprisonment in 1913, Serge was a thorough-going élitist.28 He showed a contempt for the working class which he only lost when he saw workers in action, first in Barcelona, then in Petrograd.

Thus, writing of a robbery in ‘Tottenham’ (Tottenham), he dismissed any appeal for sympathy on behalf of ‘innocent’ victims of the bandits: ‘those who were pursuing them could only be “decent” citizens, believers in the State and Authority; oppressed perhaps, but oppressed who, by their criminal cowardice, perpetuate oppression’.29 We might well deduce from this that Serge would have sympathised with the Black Bloc and perhaps even with Osama bin Laden. Perhaps the main lesson to draw from Serge’s earliest phase is never to give up on anybody. People change under the impact of events, and even the most anti-democratic anarchist can be transformed by the experience of mass struggle.

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27 Serge 2000, p. 205.
28 For a consideration of the élitist element in Serge’s thinking see Sedgwick 1984.
Serge’s experience of syndicalism in Barcelona was certainly much more healthy. At the time of his arrival in Russia, the Bolsheviks were anxious to draw revolutionary syndicalists into the newly formed International. Yet, at the Second Congress, clearly divergent approaches emerged. Paul Levi argued that the anti-authoritarians were backward and could be ignored, while Zinoviev, in a patronising speech notable for its triumphalism and ultimatist style, dismissed the syndicalists as bearers of bourgeois ideology.

Lenin and Trotsky adopted a very different strategy. Rather than denouncing the syndicalists, they sought to draw them closer by indicating what they had in common with Bolshevism. Lenin saw the syndicalist concept of the ‘active minority’ as being close to the idea of the party as the most advanced element in the class, while Trotsky said that he had more in common with syndicalists who really wanted to tear the bourgeoisie’s head off than with the likes of Scheidemann, who might have a formally correct position on the rôle of the party.

Serge’s attempts to maintain dialogue with the anarchists were therefore very much in keeping with the position of Lenin and Trotsky, rather than with that of the more sectarian Bolsheviks. He did not have the most high-profile position; it was the veteran syndicalist Rosmer who spoke at Kropotkin’s funeral and had the thankless task of trying to organise the Red International of Labour Unions. But he did his best to maintain dialogue until events after Kronstadt rendered this virtually impossible.

Weissman seeks to rebut Sedgwick and others who saw syndicalism as an important element in Serge’s political thought. She writes:

> Unfortunately Stalinism has distorted Marxism to such a degree that when democratic workers’ control is put forward, it is immediately attributed to a syndicalist or anarchist throwback. As argued in this work, Serge’s influences after 1917 were Marxist, and it was his lifelong project to rescue Marxism from its Stalinist deformation and restore in the public perception the synonymity of Marxist socialism and democracy. (p. 50)

In one sense, Weissman is absolutely right. Workers’ democracy is at the very core of the Marxist project. But there is also a danger of slipping into a scriptural attitude to Marx. Marx was not superhuman and did not have the powers of prophecy. In his lifetime, trade-union struggle was still in its infancy, and he had only limited examples to draw on. The pre-1914 revolutionary-syndicalist movement internationally was based on a rich experience of working-class struggle in terms of tactics and strategy,

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not all of which could be logically deduced from the first principles of Marxism. To deny that is to deny that socialism must come from the lived experience and self-emancipation of the working class.

Therefore, Serge was wise in his belief that the anarchists and syndicalists should be drawn towards Bolshevism, not simply on the pragmatic grounds that they would provide useful allies, but also because they had their own distinctive contribution to make to the struggle. Serge himself perceived this contribution in essentially moral terms:

Anarchist philosophy, which appeals to individuals, imposes on them attitudes in their private life and their inner life, proposes a morality, which is something that Marxism, a theory of class struggle, does not do to such a great extent. Armed with the spirit of free enquiry, more liberated than anyone else from bourgeois prejudices with regard to the family, honour, propriety, love, from worrying about ‘what people will say’ and ‘what is expected’, militants who see anarchism as ‘an individual way of life and activity’, in the well-chosen phrase of some of the French comrades, will resist reaction in behaviour with their common sense and their courage in setting an example. While others become officers, functionaries, judges, sometimes joining the privileged élite, they will remain simply men, free workers, who can perform in a stoical fashion all the tasks that are necessary to plough up the old land, but who will never be intoxicated by rhetoric, or by success, or by the lure of profitable careers.35

Historically, it has been the case that all attempts to exclude morality from Marxism have seen it return, in one form or the other, by the back door.36 Serge’s posing of the issue in this way is a useful contribution to the debate about the place of morality in Marxism.

The other theme which Serge associates with anarchism is authority. Even after becoming a Bolshevik, Serge remained an anti-authoritarian, and tried to integrate his hatred of authority into the Marxist theory of exploitation:

I think I can state it as axiomatic that the exercise of authority is one of the most pernicious forms of the exploitation of man by man. For whoever carries out the will of another is exploited by another. And in such a matter, use is inseparable from abuse.37

There are, of course, profound dangers in the anarchist preoccupation with authority. If class society is defined in terms of authority rather than exploitation, then the

35 Serge 1997, p. 118.
36 For some interesting observations on this point, see Sartre 1983, pp. 358–60.
37 Serge 1997, p. 115; italics in the original.
historical development and crisis-prone nature of the system is ignored, and one moment is as good as another for changing it. Yet it is also true that the average worker’s daily experience focuses on authority at least as much as on exploitation; her anger at the end of a day’s work is directed at the supervisor or line manager rather than at the falling rate of profit. Revolutionary politics must be based on working-class experience as well as on theoretical analysis, and, in this respect, Serge was quite right to seek to integrate the question of authority into Marxism.

Finally, while Weissman quite rightly makes the case for the importance of Serge as a witness and chronicler of the destiny of the Russian Revolution, she claims too much in trying to conscript him as a theoretician, and in particular as an advocate of the ‘bureaucratic-collectivist’ analysis of Russia to which she herself adheres. Thus, Serge is commended for believing that ‘the Soviet Union was neither capitalist nor socialist’ (p. 8). That, even if it were true, would be only the very beginning of wisdom. If a strange beast wandered over Exmoor, and a consultant zoologist pronounced that it was neither mammal nor reptile, we should be justified in considering that her report was as yet incomplete. If Russia was neither capitalist nor socialist, then what dynamic drove its rulers to behave as they did?

Serge, Weissman tells us, avoided ‘slogans’ and ‘catchwords’ such as ‘state capitalism’ and ‘degenerated workers’ state’ (p. 10). Anyone who, like myself, has attended all too many meetings where the rival analyses of Russian society did not serve as tools of scientific enquiry, but rather functioned like the rosettes of opposing football supporters to inflame passion and division, will have some considerable sympathy with this approach. Yet Serge, despite his hatred of sectarianism, understood the significance of the debate. In The Case of Comrade Tulayev, there is a poignant scene where three old comrades, expecting arrest at any moment, walk through the snow and for a moment forget their fears in a snowball fight. Then one of them, Wladek,

 returned to serious matters:

‘You know, my nerves are all to pieces, I admit – but I am not as afraid as I might be. Come what may, my death will fertilise Socialist soil, if it is Socialist soil . . .’

‘State capitalism,’ said Philippov.38

For those murdered by Stalin, this was no scholastic debate; they needed to know what it was that was crushing them.

Serge’s main contribution to the debate, in Weissman’s view, was in his use of the term ‘totalitarian’ to describe Russian society (p. 48). The term was subsequently widely used by Cold-War intellectuals to indicate vicious anti-working-class dictatorships

38 Serge 1993, p. 80.
which opposed the USA and the free market, distinguishing them from vicious anti-
working-class dictatorships that supported the USA and the free market, which were 
labelled authoritarian, despotic or whatever. (In recent years, the USA has changed 
allies so rapidly that such distinctions have become useless.) Weissman makes it clear 
that Serge’s use of the concept was somewhat different.

 Nonetheless, one feels that ‘totalitarian’ is not so much a ‘catchword’ as a ‘miss-
word’, for it tells us relatively little about the nature and dynamics of the society to 
which it is attached. Indeed, at one point, Weissman concedes that ‘one could also 
argue that capitalism is totalitarian’ (p. 48), which throws the whole argument back 
into the melting-pot.

 There is an important reason why totalitarian is an unsatisfactory term for analysing 
the Russian reality. If we look at the utopian writings of pre-1914 socialism, from 
Morris to Bogdanov, from Bebel to Lafargue, we see that, following The German Ideology 
and the French utopians, they all conceived socialism not as a set of economic and 
political policies and institutions, but as a total transformation of the human condition. 
Trotsky’s postrevolutionary writings on culture and everyday life stand in the same 
tradition. Of course, there was a huge gulf between the brutal totalitarianism-from-above of Stalin and Hitler, and the self-emancipatory totalitarianism-from-below of 
the authentic socialist tradition. But the fact that there were some parallels helps to 
explain the credibility that Stalinism and even Nazism managed to win; they presented 
an echo, albeit vilely distorted, of a long-standing aspiration of the working-class movement.

 Weissman draws parallels between Serge and other theoreticians of a non-capitalist, 
non-socialist Russia, such as Shachtman (p. 281) and Ticktin (p. 298). She commends 
his account of the Russian economy in the 1930s as ‘a rigidly regulated society that 
paradoxically was out of control’. He gave ‘a picture of unrelenting gloom, with 
inhuman production-line speeds and working conditions’ (p. 126).

 Now, obviously, he was right to point to the waste, irrationality and monstrous 
inefficiency in the Russian economy. The much-vaunted planning was a myth – there 
was merely, in Weissman’s words, ‘a race to fulfil – and overfulfil – targets regardless 
of dislocations or hardships’ (p. 127). As Serge reminds us, planning is inseparable 
from conscious democratic control: ‘In every case, finally, when confronted with a 
planned economy, we should pose the question: “Planned by whom? Planned for 
whom? Planned with what end?”’ (pp. 273–4). Those who did the work suffered 
appallingly – as Serge pointed out, those over forty in 1936 were unanimous in affirming 
that they had lived better before the Revolution (p. 127).

39 For a critique of such theories see Binns and Haynes 1980.
Yet two provisos must be made. First, despite the brutality, waste and inefficiency, the system worked. If Russia never carried out its promise to overtake the USA, it did become a modern technological economy. Until the 1980s, it was a serious military rival of the USA, and in 1957, with the *Sputnik*, it was briefly ahead of the USA in what was to become a crucial field of communications technology. If the state-capitalist economy finally collapsed in the late 1980s, it had had a good run for its money.\(^{40}\)

Serge, who despite his sufferings and the rigour of his criticism, always strove for intellectual honesty, knew that Russia’s achievements as well as its failings should be recognised. In 1946, he wrote to René Lefèuvre, the editor of *Masses*. He was sharply critical of reports of conditions in the USSR by W. White published in *Masses*, because they were inadequately documented and did not put the situation in a proper context; thus it was unreasonable to compare living standards in Russia and the USA, since the War had had such a different impact on the two economies. He insisted that it was only honest to note that food supplies for all social categories had recently improved in Russia, and he warned against allowing a left-wing journal to be conscripted into a pro-American and anti-Russian campaign: ‘if the Soviet regime must be criticised, let it be from a working-class and socialist point of view’.\(^{41}\)

And, second, the inefficiency and brutality of the Russian system had their parallels in the early stages of Western capitalism. If the Russian experience was worse because more ground had to be covered in less time, the two processes were not qualitatively different. As Weissman notes (p. 129), Serge, describing the impact of the first Five Year Plan in *Russia Twenty Years After*, recognises this essential similarity between Stalinism and Western capitalism:

> Who can fail to recall, with this picture before him, the pages of *Capital* where Marx describes the relentless mechanism of primitive capitalist accumulation? One is tempted to speak of a primitive socialist accumulation, just as cruel as the other, just as anti-socialist in its methods and in the treatment inflicted upon man.\(^{42}\)

Serge saw the category of ‘totalitarianism’ as being applicable to both Stalinism and Nazism (pp. 270–1). On one level, the comparison is unexceptionable. The régimes of Stalin and Hitler were the two greatest barbarities of the twentieth century, and there is no calculus of oppression enabling us to define one as worth than the other. Yet the roots of Nazism in capitalist production are obvious. This was a point Serge made in 1941, in correspondence with Dwight Macdonald, who was arguing that fascism was ‘decisively different, economically, from capitalism’. Serge responded by citing

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\(^{40}\) See Harman 1990 for an analysis of the final demise of state capitalism.

\(^{41}\) Serge 1984, pp. 123–5.

\(^{42}\) Serge 1996, p. 177.
the work of Daniel Guérin, which he summarised as saying that ‘big capital gives birth to fascism, which creates an economy that finally is turned over to big capital’ (p. 262). During his years in Germany, Serge had observed that Henry Ford was financing Hitler as early as 1923. However, in 1943, Serge sent a letter to the journal Mundo entitled ‘Is the Nazi Economy Capitalist?’, a question which, according to Weissman, ‘he danced around without directly answering’.

That Serge should see parallels between Stalinism and Nazism is scarcely surprising. Both were the products of failed revolutions. Just as Serge had seen the enormous potential of the early years of the Russian Revolution, so too he had been in Germany in 1923, when revolution seemed an imminent possibility; he had observed revolutionary leadership on the streets:

> All day, until midnight, at busy cross-roads, groups of men are discussing. The unemployed. I’ve often listened to their discussions: the Communist, the Social Democrat and the National Socialist are usually all there; and the Communist has the best of the argument.44

In the end, the Nazis had won. But the two defeats were very different – in the one case, a revolution corrupted and bureaucratised from within, in the other, a reactionary backlash to a revolutionary movement that had wounded but not killed its enemy.

This raised a second question which has often caused problems for devotees of the ‘bureaucratic-collectivist’ analysis – the nature of the Stalinist parties outside Russia. Serge had no illusions about their benevolent nature – in Mexico, Communist Party members tried to kill him. In 1945, he wrote a letter to Politics criticising ‘Dwight Macdonald’s ingenuousness . . . for imagining the Communist parties could be reformed’ (p. 268).

Yet Serge never took the next step of claiming that the Stalinist parties were external to the working-class movement. This position was adopted, not only by some revolutionary-socialist groupings, but also by Cold-War witch-hunters who sought to equate Communists and fascists. Yet anyone with elementary experience of a trade-union branch knows that the rôle played in the labour movement by Stalinists and by fascists is fundamentally different, and that the strategy to be adopted towards them is likewise fundamentally different – exclusion for fascists, the united front for Stalinists.

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44 Serge 2000, p. 127.
45 Thus Shachtman’s Workers’ Party at its 1946 convention adopted a resolution stating: ‘The Stalinist parties are fundamentally different from all the traditional working class parties, not only from those that are revolutionary socialist in character but also from those that are reformist, centrist or anarchist. The Stalinist parties are the parties of bureaucratic collectivism’ (Matgamna (ed.) 1998, p. 485).
Serge had seen quite enough of the labour movement at its high points of struggle not to fall into this particular trap. Only a year before his death, he wrote a letter to René Lefevre in France, in which he insisted:

The PCF [French Communist Party] still has an influence on a large part of the working class. We must be able to win to our cause elements who today are following the Stalinists. . . . We cannot adopt a purely negative attitude towards the PCF. We shall get nowhere if we seem more concerned with criticising Stalinism than with defending the working class. The threat of reaction is still there and in practice we shall often have to work alongside Communists.46

That Serge could write this may reassure us that, had he lived, he would not have found his way into the camp of Cold-War anti-Communism, ending up as a contributor to The God that Failed or the CIA-financed Encounter and Preuves. Serge, despite everything, still looked to the working class as the agent of social transformation, and hence Weissman is absolutely right in her fundamental claim that for Serge the course was set on hope.

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Hegemony: Archaeology of an Unarticulated Dialogue

Jeremy Lester’s extended reflection on the concept of hegemony and the debates surrounding its evolution is organised around three major concerns. Picking up the thread of the Gramscian distinction between East, where ‘the state was everything [and] civil society was primordial and gelatinous’, and West, where a ‘proper relationship’ revealed a complex and ‘sturdy structure of civil society’ behind the coercive force of the state, it traces the contours of hegemony, firstly, along the lines of a dialogue between the Left, East (Russia) and West. This is presented as a kind of dialogue of those who will not hear, a ‘dialogue of negation and reciprocal exclusivity’, whose negation (or transcendence) is necessary to prepare ‘the shared hegemonic task . . . a qualitatively rejuvenated critical project of socialist modernity’ (p. 181).

Secondly, the book offers a rejoinder to those, such as Laclau and Mouffe, who would instrumentalise Gramsci’s account of hegemony as the pivot of their own post-Marxist trajectory and, in particular, to those who would have us read Gramsci himself as a post-Marxist. Thus, it tries to mount a Marxist defence of Gramsci’s interpretation and usage of hegemony and of their continuing relevance today. Finally, locating the possibility for success of a hegemonic socialist project within the parameters of modernity, the logic of Lester’s argument commits him to a defence of modernity, understood as the beginning of a reflexive process of dialogue and critique, expressed in an experience of disorientation and contradiction, grasped through a self-consciously ironic dialectic of unity and disunity, and emergent in ‘a very distinctive kind of new, enlarged public space in which political contestation and the search for new forms of legitimacy can now take place’ (p. 25). Where both the ‘pre-modern nationalism’ prevalent in the Russian Left and the ‘postmodern apoliticism’ current in the Western Left convey a subaltern avoidance of reasoned engagement, an ‘anti-hegemonic . . . escapism’, the reciprocity of modernity constitutes the very possibility of the dialogic.

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1 Gramsci 1971, p. 238, cited at p. 76.
‘transcendence of contradictory tensions’ and thus an ‘unavoidable existential condition of socialist hegemony’ (pp. 181, 182).

The project is a timely one. When his writings first gained currency in the English-speaking world in the 1960s and 1970s, it was in large measure because Gramsci’s conception of hegemony seemed to afford a measure of intellectual discipline in the study of the processes whereby the oppressed and exploited are constituted ideologically and politically as subaltern, a terrain then befogged by broad-brush deployments of ‘false consciousness’ when it was not simply spirited away through the magic of social-scientific positivism. Although this terrain has been staked out in a number of works of historical-materialist scholarship (of which Lester offers a useful, albeit inevitably partial, survey), a couple of decades of cynically subjective postmodern playfulness have done much to throw this work of exploration, and with it the concept of hegemony itself, into clichéd obscurity. So it is well-nigh time that the Marxist credentials, and the revolutionary-communist thrust, of Gramsci’s concept were forcefully reasserted. And, in order that this can be effectively accomplished, the Marxist debates over hegemony in the Russian Revolution, the archaeological layer upon which Gramsci articulated his conception, must be disinterred.

Lester’s study is thus well conceived, but its execution is more problematic. The mere fact that he devotes a chapter to the Russian origins of hegemony represents progress, but the chapter does not reflect an independent research effort and Lester is not well served by the available English-language literature on the subject. Although a cursory check of the reference index to Lenin’s works turns up no less than half a page of incidences of the term, the editors of Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks express perplexity at Gramsci’s attribution to Lenin of responsibility for the theorisation of hegemony since, they write, ‘the word hegemony as such does not figure prominently in Lenin’s work’.

Although the concept of hegemony is indeed traced in the Prison Notebooks to Lenin, and although the Bolshevik understanding of hegemony is there sharply contrasted to Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, Laclau and Mouffe see fit in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy to trace the logic of its evolution in Russian Marxism with primary reference, not to Lenin, but to Plekhanov and Trotsky, that is, the two foremost critics of the hegemonic conception of Bolshevism. And, although the notion of hegemony shaped Lenin’s understanding of socialist consciousness since at least the writing of What Is to Be Done?, Perry Anderson, by treating it as nothing more than a strategy for bourgeois-democratic revolution, would relegate it to an outmoded phase of Lenin’s intellectual development. There is, in this literature, to my knowledge, no reflection upon the fact that hegemony could be characterised, during Lenin’s lifetime, as the central idea of Leninism by no less prominent a Bolshevik

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2 Gramsci 1971, p. 381n.
3 Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 48–54.
than Grigorii Zinoviev – no theorist, to be sure, and arguably self-serving but, more significantly in the present connection, both intimately familiar with Lenin and his work and head of the Communist International during Gramsci’s sojourn in Russia.⁵

Judged by these standards, Dialogue of Negation has the not inconsiderable merit of giving credence to Gramsci’s own estimate of the genealogy of his concept and, thus, of taking Lenin, along with Plekhanov, as a central figure in tracing the roots of hegemony in Russian Marxism. But Lester’s treatment of the relationship between Gramsci’s conception of hegemony and its ‘Leninian’ roots is subject to a persistent equivocation. Invoking the Gramscian desideratum of a unified conception of the social world, he situates the conception of hegemony at the intersection of economics (the relation between worker and productive forces), philosophy (praxis, the relation of will to the economic structure), and politics (the relation of the state, centralised will, and civil society). Here, the notion of consent emerges as central – ‘in its optimal form, hegemony is primarily a means for acquiring the consent of the masses through their self-organization in a range of activities and institutions situated within civil society’ – and the struggle for hegemony consists in the formation of ‘a national-popular will . . . which binds together a historical bloc of forces’ (p. 69). Relations of power are understood as broadly diffused, rather than concentrated in the state apparatuses and the task of mediating these relations is correlative devolved throughout society as a whole. The state, shaped by responsibilities of a universalising and hence an ethical character, is not merely the organisation of repression but also an organisation of constructive consensus. Thus, in an effective challenge to hegemonic rule, the spontaneous feelings of the masses must be transcended in a more authentic consciousness and new active and expansive forms of consent instantiated in popular forms of participation. This supposes an expansive form of party politics where unity emerges from multiplicity only ‘through the friction of the individual members’ and action is grounded in the everyday lived experience of the participants; it supposes a broader ‘counter-hegemonic historical bloc’ where active forms of consent are derived, not through co-optation and assimilation, but only through ‘a genuine process of interest articulation’ (p. 74).

Once the concept of hegemony is thus interpreted through the notion of consent and the contrast between coercion and consent, it is all too easy to abstract Lenin’s deployment of the concept from the context of his own reading of the strategic problems and theoretical debates of Russian Marxism and read it, as Lester does, through the grid of Plekhanov’s Second-International Marxist orthodoxy, as nothing more than a kind of institutional Realpolitik of revolution, that would sanction the crudely instrumental utilisation of allies – indeed, of the workers themselves. This procedure is nicely congruent with the conventional wisdom according to which Lenin conceived

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the Marxist vanguard party as an élite of bourgeois intellectuals and yields a Lenin who fits perfectly into the grid of an opposition between the mechanically coercive statism of the East and the organically consensual civil society of the West. Lester constructs an opposition along these lines between Leninist hegemony – centred on and sometimes reduced to the coercive apparatus of the state (pp. 86–7) – and Gramscian hegemony – suffused along intricately detailed pathways through the whole of civil society. As Lester readily acknowledges, however, Gramsci’s politics were not simply consensual, nor were Lenin’s politics, as he concedes rather more reluctantly, simply coercive. Lenin certainly supposed, in light of the threat represented by the repressive apparatuses of the state, that the issue of seizing state power was crucial to the formulation of revolutionary strategy; but, although the exploratory purpose and allusive style of his notebooks engendered a fecund variation of perspective and formulation concerning the operation of the state, there is no evidence that Gramsci disagreed. Thinking through the logic of the process of transition to a classless society, Gramsci demonstrated a thorough appreciation of the need to set about establishing hegemony, not only politically, but also culturally, not only from the top down, but also from the bottom up; but one encounters a similar awareness of the organic character of the transition process in Lenin, albeit constrained by the circumstances of civil war and imperialist encirclement to a work of bricolage. Gramsci’s politics were coercive (or instrumental) enough to sanction the use of revolutionary force and Lenin’s politics consensual (or organic) enough to encompass a concern with the cultural aspects of a worker-peasant alliance. If distinctions are to be drawn here, they have to do with differences in background and temperament and in the exigencies of political circumstance, differences of emphasis within a common political project that required recourse to both consent and coercion.

Of course, what Lester is concerned to do through this opposition between Leninist and Gramscian hegemony is to provide a conceptual framework for a strategic choice between democracy and dictatorship in the struggle for socialism. Thus, in a chapter one wishes were longer on Gramsci’s reception in Russia, Russian interest in Gramsci appears linked to de-Stalinisation and, later, to perestroika and Lester underlines affinities between Gramsci and Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘dialogism’, according to which ‘all human history is a perpetual struggle between monologue and dialogue’ (p. 101). But to frame the issues of socialist strategy as a choice between democracy and dictatorship, dialogue and monologue, is equivocal, because neither dictatorship nor democracy can be understood, in historical-materialist terms, in abstraction from the relations of class society and the logic of the class struggle. The point is not simply that political ideas, institutions and practices must be understood in their social context but that the logic of class struggle can itself shift the meaning of these political categories and thus transform the terms in which strategic choices are posed. Thus, depending upon the class that rules, the balance of class forces and the circumstances of the class
struggle, both democracy and dictatorship assume various forms (for example, parliamentary democracy, democracy of the Commune or soviets; dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, dictatorship of the proletariat) and, when such variation in form is taken into account, dictatorship and democracy need no longer be seen as necessarily antithetical. Lenin’s call for a revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, as well as his claim that proletarian dictatorship is, or at least can be, more democratic than bourgeois democracy might be cited in this regard, but perhaps an illustration from more recent political history will suffice.

When the people of the barrios of Caracas rose in April 2002 against the pro-imperialist coup that briefly removed the democratically elected Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez, from office, they seized the television stations that, after having legitimated the coup, proceeded in its aftermath with programming as usual, and obliged them to report news of resistance to the coup. They did so, in at least one meaning of the term, ‘dictatorially’, that is, they imposed their will upon the owners of the television stations by force, without seeking to gain their consent by persuasion and without regard to the authority of the law. And, yet, such ‘dictatorial’ measures – suppressing freedom of speech – were, arguably, indispensable to the restoration of ‘democratic’ rule. One need not be insensitive to the rhetorical force of the language of democracy in order to suggest that violence is done to the texture and the logic of the political struggle of the masses by the attempt to squeeze them analytically into an exclusive alternative of democracy or dictatorship. Such a perspective occludes, rather than clarifies, a whole series of questions that arise in historical materialism about the relation between class power (the question of dictatorship) and the apparatuses through which it is exercised (the question of democratic – and non-democratic – political forms). The point is not to suggest that the interaction and variation of political forms is unaffected by the democratic or undemocratic political leadership and culture of popular movements, but precisely that this effect is exerted, in historical-materialist terms, within the class struggle, that is, not upon a choice between democracy and dictatorship in the abstract, but upon varying conjunctions of democratic (or non-democratic) political institutions with the power, the rule (the dictatorship) of one or another social class.

The equivocation in Lester’s handling of the distinction between coercion and consent, democracy and dictatorship also surfaces in his explication of Gramsci’s account of the relation between the state and civil society. Lester seeks to defend the coherence of Gramsci’s account against Anderson’s contention that, suggestive though the Prison Notebooks’ exploration of this relation may be, it is nonetheless vitiated by the unresolved tensions between three different and contradictory models. Thus, he reads those formulations in which Gramsci expands the notion of the state to comprise

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both political society and civil society, not as expressions of a distinct model, but as designating the mutation, under fascism and dictatorship, of the normal balance of state and civil society. But this is wrong: Gramsci uses such formulations, not only and not even primarily in conjunction with the phenomena of fascism, but also and more fundamentally with respect to ‘the general notion of the State’ and even to the ‘night-watchman state’ of bourgeois liberalism. The contradictions of Gramscian terminology cannot be gainsaid but it is not very helpful to regard them – here Lester is right as against Anderson – as an index of competing theoretical models. They are more usefully understood, in my view, as the product of a dogged attempt to grasp at once both the distinctiveness and the connection of two facets of the civil society/state relation, the functional unity of the superstructures in reproducing the contradictory cohesion of capitalist societies and the variation in the institutional arrangements whereby this function is performed; in particular, the historical and political construction and reconstruction of the boundary and the distinction between public and private. While variations in the functional requirements of reproduction exert a formative influence upon institutional arrangements, the influence is neither simple nor unilateral; it is mediated by the complex, uneven and contradictory logic of the class struggle. In Gramsci’s concern to evoke this process in its multifaceted complexity, the terminology of the state is sometimes predicated on the function, sometimes of institutions and sometimes of the process as a whole. It is not only the exploratory character of his *Notebooks* and the circumstances of their composition that make it difficult to fault Gramsci for the inconsistency of his terminology; when Althusser, specifically acknowledging Gramsci’s efforts, sought to treat in a more systematic fashion the role of the superstructures in reproducing the conditions of production, his care to predicate the terminology of the state consistently on the function of reproduction earned him the opprobrium of ‘functionalist’ and even ‘totalitarian’. In his haste to rescue Gramsci from the accusation of incoherence (and, of course, the obligatory charge of totalitarianism), Lester compresses the various facets of the superstructural process into a narrow model of normality and thereby, in effect, conflates issues concerning the institutional autonomy of civil society from the state (pluralism versus totalitarianism in the organisation of the apparatuses of class rule) with issues concerning the logic of struggles around the function of reproduction (structural and strategic cohesion in the deployment of ruling class power). The result is persistent equivocation as to the location of struggles over state power and their significance within the process of revolution; the Gramscian war of position figures as a judicious balance between the ‘Bolshevik model’ and the evolutionary politics of Bernsteinian social democracy (p. 67) but, while such a balance may seem judicious within the limits of normality,

7 Gramsci 1971, pp. 263 and 261–2.
8 See Althusser 1971.
it is not clear that it is even coherent, let alone judicious, to assume that the logic of the class struggle must respect those limits.

A similar tension runs through Lester’s discussion of ‘passive revolution’. Gramsci used this term to designate processes of historical transformation in which the social tensions and upheavals of transition are absorbed, managed, steered and configured into forms that reconsolidate and renew the power of the hitherto dominant groups. He linked the passive character of the revolution with a failure of hegemony on the part of a leading revolutionary group unwilling or unable to unleash an independent movement of the popular masses. While the term figured principally in Gramsci’s critical analysis of the Italian Risorgimento, the notion of passive revolution served him as a device for examining two distinct though related aspects of the struggle for hegemony: first, the problem of seizing the strategic initiative, comprising such considerations as aligning oneself in relation to allies and enemies, (potentially) revolutionary or counterrevolutionary forces, and identifying (and establishing hegemony over) the key issues and institutions around which the struggle for power will be fought out and alliances formed or broken; second, what might be termed the problem of education, involving the cultivation among the popular masses of the kind of organisational ability and capacity for critical reflection necessary for their emergence as independent actors in the revolutionary process.

Lester reads passive revolution as an expression of the merely passive consent of the popular masses to bourgeois rule, a passivity resting upon the unexamined prejudices of common sense and the contradictions that arise when plebeian experience is grasped only through the categories of the dominant ideology. Challenging the ‘passive practices’ that convey bourgeois hegemony requires a counter-hegemonic force, embodying ‘active consentient ideals in [its] own internal structures’, to foster ‘anti-passive practices’ and thus prefigure ‘a future state in miniature’ (p. 74). The requirement is replicated in the broader historical bloc as a practice of expansively articulating a diversity interests so as to ‘promote the full development of all interests within the bloc’ (p. 75), rather than merely absorbing and neutralising some, thus ensuring their subordination to others. The structural-strategic aspect of the struggle for hegemony is thus read in terms of its cultural-educational aspect and thereby effectively assimilated to the latter.

The issues posed by Gramsci’s account of passive revolution parallel those arising in the Russian Marxist debates whence the concept of hegemony emerged and assumed an initial shape. Indeed, the emergence of social democracy in Russia was essentially bound up with the assertion of the hegemony of the proletariat in the impending bourgeois-democratic revolution. This assertion was initially formulated by Plekhanov as a critique of populist faith in the socialist potentialities of the peasantry. In the context of this debate, the independent growth of working-class consciousness and organisational capacity and the strategic leadership of social democracy simply
presented themselves as two different ways of expressing the same thing. But, when a tendency arose, in conjunction with the growth of a liberal opposition, to constrain social-democratic politics within the narrow limits of trade unionism, the reassertion of proletarian hegemony would throw into relief the distinction between the strategic and the educational aspects of hegemony. And, in the course of the 1905 Revolution, this distinction would come to structure the political opposition between the Bolshevik and Menshevik wings of Russian social democracy. The Mensheviks, conceiving the hegemony of the proletariat in the bourgeois-democratic revolution as a process of proletarian self-emancipation, subordinated their strategy to a project of organising fora of self-government where, through direct participation, the workers themselves could cultivate the virtues requisite to their future political rule. Regarding as irresponsibly utopian such hothouse experiments, conceived in abstraction from the inevitable violence of counterrevolution, Lenin conceptualised the political consciousness of the proletariat – and consequently the process of its self-emancipation – in terms of the strategic exigencies of the democratic revolution – crucially, the struggle over state power. Correlative with this, the struggle for hegemony was reformulated as a struggle between two paths in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, a thoroughgoing demolition of the feudal, patriarchal and absolutist legacy of tsarism, driven by an alliance of proletariat and peasantry, and a transition – strikingly similar in conception to Gramsci’s passive revolution – dominated by a landlord-bourgeois coalition, in which the revolutionary energy of the masses, lacking focus, is diverted into half-measures that coexist with and prolong the heritage of oppression. These contrasting approaches to the struggle for hegemony yielded opposing readings of the soviets: both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks knew them as organising committees for a general strike, but, where the former conceived of them as the site of a kind of proletarian model parliament, Lenin attributed to them the potential of embodying an alliance of workers and peasants and assuming state power. Thus, in 1905, when the Bolsheviks sought to organise insurrection through the soviets, the Mensheviks supposed that a focus on insurrection would undermine the process of working-class self-education. Later, these differences would deepen.

The dispute between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks over hegemony in the democratic revolution enables us to understand that much is at stake, both politically and theoretically, in just how the concept of hegemony is deconstructed and how its different aspects are articulated. Absent an account and appreciation of this dispute, Lester’s discussion of passive revolution equivocates persistently between a Menshevik and a Bolshevik reading of Gramsci, equivocates, that is, over the relative position in the struggle for hegemony of the strategic leadership of a modern prince and the practical self-education of the subaltern masses. Does the hegemonic complexity so richly evoked by Gramsci signify primarily the necessity of a leadership capable of charting a course and drawing an alliance of diverse forces together across a web of
social-structural contradictions, or the threat to the intricately moving totality of human consciousness posed by the unilateral assertion of vanguard authority? It may be suggested that ambiguity on such issues is already there in the *Prison Notebooks*. But, where an author must write circumspectly with one eye to his fascist jailers – never more so, one imagines, than when he must evoke questions of the seizure of power – and yet manages to signal the alignment of his ideas with those of ‘Ilich’, more than ordinary caution is called for in seeking to draw implications from his ambiguities.⁹

The co-ordinates of Lester’s equivocation derive from a very different discursive situation and trajectory. He does deploy a structural-strategic understanding of hegemony to good effect in criticising Laclau and Mouffe’s attempt to disengage the struggle for hegemony from its moorings in historical-materialist analysis of the structure of class society. The post-Marxist conception of hegemonic struggle as the process of discursive articulation of an irreducible plurality of subject identities, he argues, effectively reduces class to just another contingent form of personal identity and thus renders inconceivable the systemic character of capitalist exploitation. The extraction of surplus-value – exploitation – is not an expression of personal identity but an essential feature of the capital relation, which is thus inherently antagonistic. An ascertainable effect of the antagonistic class system inherent to this relation, a condition of its reproduction, is the requirement that the dominant class exercise effective control over the principal levers of coercion in society, that is, over the state. And, since ‘the ultimate aim and effect of the hegemonic process is necessarily bounded within the framework of a given system’s essential constitution and reproduction’ (p. 132), the working class is structurally basic to the hegemonic struggle and the state is strategically central to it. The ‘radical’ pretension of the post-Marxist democratic project, Lester suggests, relies implicitly, but necessarily, upon the results of essentialist analyses of exploitation and oppression – notably those produced by historical materialism – while explicitly repudiating the theoretical premises of those results.

But, as he pursues the discursive themes of post-Marxism back to their postmodernist breeding-grounds, Lester, seemingly unable to find anything in the political landscape with which to articulate the structural-strategic categories of class and state, becomes entangled in the terms of the fashionable debate over globalisation and postmodernity. While the project of resting a counter-hegemonic opposition strategy upon the notion of postmodernity is pithily dismissed as ‘bordering . . . on outright submission’, the notion may nonetheless serve as ‘a means of understanding and conceptualizing some of the key changes that have affected the world we currently inhabit’ (p. 144). There follows a rather lugubrious review of postmodern meditations on the unprecedented pervasiveness, depth and multidimensionality of the hegemonic

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domination of contemporary consumer capitalism. The homogenising logic of cultural
globalisation, though still adapting ‘the cultural myriad of the modern world’, augurs
a managed culture of decontextualised amnesia (p. 159). Eroded from within by
regionalist fragmentation and from without by the globalisation of the transnational
corporations, the intertwining of economic, social, cultural and political functions in
‘the coordinated space of the nation state is now beginning to break apart’ and with
this ‘the old notion of a clearly delineated centre’, strategic correlate of the modernist
notion of hegemony, loses its referent (p. 156). At the same time, the increasingly
fragmented, disordered, anxiety-ridden and insecure state of social life foreshadows
nothing but the spectre of apocalypse. The seamless world of postmodern capitalism
leaves no political space whence a challenge to its hegemony might be articulated.
Lester sees no alternative for the ‘left’ but to wage ‘some kind of “guerrilla warfare”
within the old terrain of the nation state’ (p. 160) but with the same ‘commitment to
principles of universalism’ that informed Gramsci’s ‘national-popular orientation’ (pp.
163, 162).

Lester does still insist upon the need for structural analysis of class relations
and he still calls for ‘a centred, not a de-centred, social strategy’ but this is coupled,
symptomatically, with a rehearsal of the now fashionable invocation of a new
‘utopianism, albeit shorn of some of its old-type messianism’ (p. 143). This is
symptomatic because the insistence upon structure and the call for strategy find no
echo in the terms of his analysis, which is organised around a classless opposition
between international corporations and consumers, on the one hand, and the nation-
state and its citizens, on the other. Cast in these terms, the defining problem of strategy
is whether it should be centred or de-centred. But, if any clearly delineated centre
really is breaking up, how could recourse to a centred strategy be anything other than
wishful thinking? Indeed, how could strategy amount to anything other than a
paedagogy of enlightened utopianism? But the state, ‘the bourgeoisie organised as
the ruling class’, has always operated through a variety of arms and ruling classes
can be rather astute, when circumstances shift or when they are pressed, in shifting
the locus and reorganising the shape and distribution of their power. That such a
movement is now well underway should come as no surprise, but such movements
have nothing to do with the postmodern discourse of decentring. The real problem
of strategy does not concern whether it should be centred, but what it should be
centred upon, a point that is by no means inconsistent with wide scope for local
initiative and one that is well understood by people who are really engaged in guerrilla
warfare. And, in capitalist society, the shape and movement of this centre cannot be
located and deciphered without reference to the ‘uninterrupted, now hidden, now open’10
workings of the logic of the class struggle, that is, without the instruments of

10 Marx and Engels 1973, p. 68.
class analysis. If notions of postmodernity can be pressed into service in addressing this problem, it will only be when they are articulated with the categories of class analysis and thereby transformed.

Here, too, a probe into the history of Russian Marxism, this time into Lenin’s analysis of imperialism, may be suggestive. Capitalist globalisation was not, for Lenin, a seamless web and neither, therefore, was capitalist hegemony. It set in motion an inevitably complex and contradictory restructuring of the constellation of class (and national and popular) forces in accordance with the uneven logic of imperialism: the consolidation of monopoly intensified competition, squeezing small capital, bringing the powers of finance to the fore and arousing a petty-bourgeois-democratic opposition; the global extension of capitalist social relations of production propelled the subjugation of weaker countries by imperial powers, heightening national and colonial oppression and preparing the ground for movements of resistance, and set the powers themselves on a collision course; the influx of super-profits from overseas dependencies nourished the growth of social parasitism and reaction and, by feeding a labour aristocracy, fragmented and split the working-class movement. Revolution was not conceivable as single combat between capital and labour but only as the complex, uneven, contradictory confluence of heterogeneous and shifting currents, class struggles, petty-bourgeois protests, contentions among the rulers, peasant risings, nationalist movements, colonial revolts, and so on.

Understood in this context, the ‘variegated and discordant, motley and outwardly fragmented’ patterns of resistance desperately mounted amidst the encompassing hegemonic domination of wartime by ‘sections of the petty bourgeoisie and of the backward workers’ imbued with ‘reactionary fantasies’ and ‘the crudest prejudices’\(^\text{11}\) provided no indication that power had become decentred; the very fragmentation of resistance was grasped, instead, as the spontaneous form of appearance of the shifting structure of social contradictions and as constitutive of the arena of struggle indispensable for the organisation of a hegemonic political project. Within this arena, the struggle for hegemony was not to be conceived around an alternative vision but around the struggle for power as the inner truth of the outwardly discordant diversity of proletarian and popular resistances to capital; and it was not to be articulated through a utopia but through engagement with, and immanent critique of, the pressing issues of each moment. That is to say, it is around a struggle for power informed by concrete analyses of the constellation of social forces and the contours of political power that the extant (material and discursive) fragments of resistance can be woven into the fabric of a hegemonic political project. Without bringing into play elements of a concrete analysis bearing upon the global (re)alignments of class and popular forces, Lester is driven back upon the abstract opposition between the internationalism of capital and the

\(^{11}\) Lenin 1964, p. 356.
form of the nation-state. Whence his persistent equivocation over issues of state power, traced above, and a corresponding inability to frame current redeployments of power in terms of class struggle. Whence also his equivocation over the articulation of the strategic and paedagogical aspects of the struggle for hegemony and a corresponding inability to conceive hegemony in terms yielding some grip on the possibilities and constraints of political strategy.

The theory of imperialism does not, of course, amount to a concrete analysis of the current conjuncture of class struggles – that can only be a matter for the present – but it may serve to point up the fact of the uneven, indeed increasingly uneven, development of capital: the division between oppressed and oppressor countries and nations has changed in shape but not in substance and resistance to the bipolar logic of accumulation remains endemic, intense and, on occasion, dramatic – albeit ‘variegated and discordant, motley and outwardly fragmented’ – throughout the underdeveloped outreaches of the global order where the hegemony of capital cannot be enforced without unleashing the war engines of imperialist intervention; while conditions of social peace that might recall the example of Carthage are imposed in the East, old and some new forms of repression and reaction are mobilised against the anticipation – and the reality – of new modes and fronts of opposition in the imperialist centres of the West; and even those who are quite certain that the tendency to conflict between imperialist powers, perhaps the most contentious element of the theory, has been held in check for a long half century by something more durable than the threat represented by ‘actually existing socialism’ might do well to ponder the possibilities implicit in the proposed US National Missile Defence system, no passing fancy of unschooled Texan upstarts, but the current form of a project pursued across three decades under the administrations of four US presidents in the teeth of the near unanimous opposition, not only of erstwhile adversaries, but of nominal friends and allies.

Perhaps this reference to the theory of imperialism can also serve to suggest that the arena in which a hegemonic political project can be articulated must invite dialogue, not only between East and West but also, and perhaps more urgently, between North and South. Such a dialogue was initiated in Moscow in 1919. In Seattle and in Porto Alegre, in Chiapas and in Quebec City, in Genoa, where a Russian contingent was present, and in Prague, in Johannesburg and Havana, Jakarta and Buenos Aires, the political space where this dialogue can be renewed is perhaps once again emergent, that is, being seized.

References


Subaltern Studies emerged in 1982 as a radical challenge to existing models of history-writing. It aimed ‘to overturn the existing historiography of modern India and to establish the centrality of subaltern aspirations and actions in the historical process’ (Arnold 2000, p. 38). The new subalternist paradigm sought to recover the voices and struggles of those that were written out of history by élite-centred historiographies, whether colonial or nationalist. However, while the early volumes were ‘full of references to “subaltern classes”, evocations of [the Italian Marxist, Antonio] Gramsci, and the use of much Marxian terminology’ (Sarkar 2000b, p. 300) the scope, focus, and audience of the project changed with its gradual embrace of a postmodernist theoretical paradigm through the 1990s. In the process, Subaltern Studies has been transformed from an Indian phenomenon to a global institution, from a collection producing Marxian histories of colonial India to one featuring poststructuralist readings and crossing temporal, regional, and disciplinary boundaries (p. vii).

The greatest achievement of Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial lies in its ability to map critically this transformation, to ‘trace the trajectory of Subaltern Studies from the Marxism of its inception to its current postmarxist contours’ (p. vii). The anthology gathers a diverse number of commentaries by subalternists and their critics that were published outside the school from 1982–2000; only Ranajit Guha’s essay (2000 [1982]) was originally published in Subaltern Studies. Vinayak Chaturvedi’s selection of texts is excellent, producing an overview of the most hotly debated topics around the school, including the subalternists’ conceptualisation of the peasantry and ‘history from below’, problems and developments in their model of subjectivity, and

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1 Following Callinicos 1989, I use the term ‘postmodernist’ to describe literary/aesthetic, philosophical, and economic theories that identify current shifts and innovations in art, culture, notions of self/nation, and relations of production/consumption as belonging to an epoch of ‘postmodernity’ – one that is fundamentally different from capitalist modernity.
2 See also Vanaik 1997, p. 180.
3 Chaturvedi 2000 advocates reading Mapping Subaltern Studies, alongside the original series. The anthologies edited by Guha and Spivak 1988, and Guha 1998, are useful, but the selections are tilted in a postmodernist direction. For a consideration of work on subalternity outside South Asia, see Ludden 2002.
the ideological underpinnings of the new historiography. Further, by revealing the trajectory of *Subaltern Studies*’ transformation through the prism of secondary texts written over two decades, *Mapping Subaltern Studies* invites the reader to witness the changing and dialectical relationship between theoretical schools (Marxism, postmodernism, postcolonialism), *Subaltern Studies* itself, and individual contributors (especially Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rosalind O’Hanlon, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Sumit Sarkar), with each element transforming the other in decisive ways.Æ

My aim here is to outline a Marxist understanding of the category of subalternity by contextualising and elaborating upon the main essays in *Mapping Subaltern Studies*. I begin by contrasting Gramsci’s use of the term and that of the subalternists – both Marxian and postmodernist – in order to reveal the fundamental shift from Marxism and class analysis that *Subaltern Studies*, as a whole, represents. While Gramsci explicitly linked subalternity to the structures of capitalism, emphasising both the possibilities and limitations of subaltern action, *Subaltern Studies* has always maintained a strict dichotomy between subaltern and élite spheres, asserting the complete autonomy of the subaltern. Next, I examine the specific differences between the early-Marxian and late-postmodernist phases. I argue that the postmodernist intervention of the late 1980s and early 1990s ‘corrected’ the theoretical ambiguities of the school by directly challenging its essentialist and/or its residual Marxist tendencies. However, the postmodernist method of defining the subaltern by its difference and of insisting on the impossibility of representation has not only resulted in a new essentialism, but has even turned *Subaltern Studies* away from its focus on the subaltern.

The weakness of the category of subalternity, in either its Marxian or poststructuralist versions, emerges from its attempt to invoke the peasantry as the revolutionary class in the place of the proletariat and, as a consequence, to displace classical-Marxist notions of objective class position with concepts of experience, community, and power. Ultimately, the peasant-centred category of subalternity has done little more than to say, as it were, ‘They cannot represent themselves; they cannot be represented’, twisting Marx’s famous phrase about peasants, ‘They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented’.Æ Like the peasant in classical Marxism, the subalternists’...
subaltern is always already cut off from being able to transform the structures in which he is caught. Whereas classical Marxism deliberately theorises the peasant thus, however, the subalternists are forced into that position because of their fundamental dismissal of the materiality of class and of capitalist modernity itself. The result is a historiographical and political failure, an inability to trace the structures that produce the oppressed subaltern, and, consequently, a blindness towards the means by which the subaltern can ever rid herself of her subalternity. The postmodernist rejection of the possibility of representation itself has strengthened this deterministic tendency, already present in the early Subaltern Studies. Subalternists today are so focused on demonstrating the ‘silence’ of the oppressed that, in a vicious self-fulfilling prophecy, they render her voice impossible to hear.

**Gramsci and subalternity**

Early Subaltern Studies was shaped by the radical historical and intellectual contexts of the 1960s and 1970s. The global Left’s enthusiasm towards mass-democratic and anticolonial struggles and its growing scepticism towards Stalinist theory and practice was reflected, in India, in the support for the (failed) Maoist uprisings and the movements for democracy and civil rights, on the one hand, and an antipathy towards the official left parties for their betrayals in the face of Indira Gandhi’s authoritarianism, on the other. Produced within this specific context, Subaltern Studies sought to maintain an ideological position in which ‘sharp criticism of orthodox Marxist practice and theory was still combined with the retention of a broad socialist and Marxian horizon’ (Sarkar 2000b, p. 300).

This task entailed adopting a term, ‘subaltern’, that guarded against economic reductionism without losing the radical-historical emphasis on subordination and resistance (Sarkar 2000b, p. 301). In this project, the early subalternists paid close attention to the new social histories of British Marxists such as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and E.P. Thompson. A further influence was the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, from whom, in fact, subalternists borrowed the category of ‘subaltern’.⁶ Subalternists were drawn to these historians because their ‘reconstructions of the historical experiences of workers, peasants, and “common people”, revolutionized the study of history the world over’ (Chaturvedi 2000, p. ix). Gramsci, Thompson, and others maintained strong links to Marxist notions of class and a historical-materialist ideology, as bearers of an authoritarian, Enlightenment discourse. For instance, see Said 1979 and Mohanty 1991.

⁶ According to Ludden 2002, by 1700 the word ‘subaltern’ denoted ‘lower ranks in the military, suggesting peasant origins’, and by the early nineteenth-century, English novelists and historians were writing about military campaigns from a ‘subaltern perspective’. Gramsci tried to ‘weave ideas about subaltern identity into theories of class struggle’.
mode of understanding social relations even as they broadened their focus to include communities and collectives outside of the ‘the rigidities of economistic class analysis’ (Sarkar 2000b, pp. 304–5). Indian Marxists became eager to apply these methods to researching other spaces of uneven capitalist development and failed social revolution: colonial and postcolonial India (Arnold 2000, p. 45).

Gramsci, in particular, provided the key theoretical paradigm for the early subalternists; their early monographs and volumes contained ‘[f]ragmentary episodes illustrating the autonomous politics of the people’ that were in strict accordance with Gramsci’s concept of a subaltern-centred historiography and his ‘methodological criteria’ as outlined in ‘Notes on Italian History’ (Chaturvedi 2000, p. x; Sarkar 2000b, p. 305). However, as Sumit Sarkar writes, ‘certain conceptual ambiguities and implicit tensions [existed] within the project from the very beginning’, especially around the bifurcation of élite and subaltern domains, of the worlds of domination and autonomy (pp. 302–7). These tensions led Subaltern Studies away from the Gramscian position that subaltern histories always needed to be ‘contextualized within specific social relations and material modes’ (p. 320, n. 16). The formal affiliation with Gramsci remained, but the ideas were transformed. ‘Gramsci’ effectively became the name for everything subalternists wished to emphasise through the category of subalternity (non-economic relations, autonomy from élite spheres, non-Western practices, peasants/tribals), whereas ‘Marxism’ represented the left-historiographical orthodoxy (economism, determinism, Eurocentrism, the proletariat). Thus, for David Arnold, unlike Marxists, ‘with their confident assumption of the imminent demise of the peasantry in the face of rural and industrial capitalism . . . Gramsci presents the peasantry as a living force, politically as well as culturally and socially’ (Arnold 2000, p. 24).

Contemporary academics often portray Gramsci in this way, as the forerunner of the modern ‘cultural critic’ who denounces the Enlightenment, rationalism, and historicism. The fact remains, however, that Gramsci – a militant who led the Turin factory-council movement and founded the Italian Communist Party – sits squarely within the theoretical and political tradition of classical Marxism. His studies of religious tradition, national formation, and subaltern agency were always situated in the context of Italy’s uneven capitalist development. Therefore, when Gramsci sought to ‘direct attention to the various forms of “primitive” revolt among the exploited and oppressed – populism, social banditry, expressions of millenarianism and mysticism in the countryside’ it was in order to reveal both the dynamism and the limitations

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7 Sarkar gives Thompson too much credit, however. Thompson’s rejection of the base-superstructure dialectic and his paradigm of ‘class struggle without class’ is partly responsible for the tendency in ‘histories from below’ towards uncritical valorisations of popular experience.

8 See also Ahmad 1996, p. 225. See also p. 247.

of the spontaneous activities of workers and peasants. Further, Gramsci’s analysis of subaltern consciousness was always linked to the political imperative of transforming that consciousness. Thus, it was the task of Marxists to link with these many expressions of resistance, ‘not in order to restrict scientific activity and preserve unity at the low level of the mass, but precisely to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass’. Attempting neither to romanticise the actions of the subaltern nor to characterise Marxists as self-sufficient centres of knowledge, Gramsci imagined a dialectical movement in which popular struggle educated Marxists and they, in turn, honed and directed the movements towards progressive, socialist ends.

The difference between Gramsci and the subalternists can be clearly seen in Gramsci’s discussion of methodology in the first part of his ‘Notes on Italian History’. For Gramsci, ‘the historical unity of the ruling classes is realized in the State’, while ‘[t]he subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they become a “State”’. Thus, their fragmented histories are ‘intertwined with that of civil society and thereby with the history of States’. The historian must study every juncture of subaltern-elite spheres, including ‘the objective formation of the subaltern social groups’ alongside changes in capitalism, their relationship to élite, reformist political groups, and ‘the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce’ (whether ‘to press claims of a limited and partial character’ or to ‘assert [their] autonomy’). As Sarkar notes, even a brief reading of these lines reveals that for Gramsci, ‘subaltern “social groups” are emphatically not unrelated to “economic production”’, and there is a clear indication of ‘an enormous range of possible meanings of “autonomy”’ (Sarkar 2000b, p. 305). ‘Above all’, Sarkar continues, the emphasis is ‘not on distinct domains of [élite and subaltern] politics, but interpenetration, mutual (though obviously unequal) conditioning, and, implicitly, common roots in a specific social formation’ (ibid.). The possibilities and betrayals of reformism, the presence of uneven and mixed class consciousness, the continuing question of building subaltern self-activity towards ‘unification’ and ‘realisation’ in a new state: these are at the core of Gramsci’s concept of subalternity.

Gramsci’s concluding thoughts on methodology, frequently cited in subalternist texts, reveal precisely how Gramsci can valorise subaltern self-activity and resistance even as he sees the domain of subalternity as being delimited by the economic and political structures of the dominant classes:

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12 See Gramsci 1996.
14 Ibid.
The history of the subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continuously interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups. . . . Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only ‘permanent’ victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately. . . . Every trace of independent initiative on the part of the subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian.\footnote{Gramsci 1996, pp. 54–5.}

The ‘interpenetration’ of the subaltern and élite domains is, once again, quite evident. The striking lines, that subalterns are ‘always subject’ to ruling-class activity ‘even when they rebel and rise up’, describes how, for Gramsci, their self-activity is always circumscribed by dominant structures, not only during periods of complete subordination, but also during moments of insurgency. This formulation serves as a restriction on any uncritical valorisation of subaltern resistance. Indeed, the ‘incalculable value’ of recording subaltern upheavals lies precisely in that they are so rare. At the same time, the remainder of the sentence simultaneously places a limit on the ability of those dominant structures to completely determine subaltern activity and reveals a new possibility for it: ‘only “permanent” victory breaks their subordination’. Gramsci holds onto the possibility that the subaltern can nullify his conditions of subordination by displacing the ruling classes.

The Gramscian historian, then, must ‘record, and discover the causes of, the lines of development towards integral autonomy [i.e., unification through revolution], starting from the most primitive phases’, and must note every disruption of the hegemony of ruling-class ideology on popular consciousness.\footnote{Gramsci 1996, p. 52.} For Gramsci, each moment of subaltern struggle, shaped by the structures of capitalism, is a mark of both subalterns’ subordination under élites and their revolutionary potential. However, the subalternist rejection of the centrality of capitalism and the common social roots of élites and subalterns leads to representation of the subaltern as being either completely subordinated to élites or completely autonomous from them. Far from linking together the different historical moments/fragments ‘towards integral autonomy’, the subalternists view each fragmentary moment as self-sufficient and unrelated. This is what constitutes their move away from Gramsci’s subalternity.
Subaltern Studies and Gramsci

Guha’s foundational essay, ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’ (2000 [1982]) uses Gramsci in an attempt to remain close to Marxism, only to be pushed toward non-Marxist views by the force of its definition of subalternity. ‘On Some Aspects’ contains a deep contradiction. On the one hand, it attempts to establish a new theoretical paradigm of subalternity, rigorously defends subalterns’ unique autonomy in action, and, thus, implicitly rejects Gramsci’s constant deferral of such ‘integral autonomy’ to the moment of revolution. On the other hand, the article does little to actually establish a new paradigm, since the strengths of its analysis of the Indian nationalist movement are mainly derived from classical-Marxist categories of class. Guha, problematically, insists on the necessity of a category that crosses class lines while demanding that historians, in practice, reveal the class antagonisms amongst subalterns at each particular moment.

An important passage towards the conclusion of Guha’s piece illustrates the importance of Marxist categories for Guha throughout the essay. Explaining the inadequacy of ‘initiatives which originated from the domain of subaltern politics’ during the anticolonial movement, Guha writes:

The working class was still not sufficiently mature in the objective conditions of its social being and in its consciousness as a class-for-itself, not was it firmly allied yet with the peasantry. As a result it could do nothing to take over and complete the mission which the bourgeoisie had failed to realize. The outcome of it all was that the numerous peasant uprisings of the period, most of them massive in scope and rich in anti-colonial consciousness, waited in vain for a leadership to raise them above localism and generalize them into a nationwide anti-imperialist struggle. (Guha 2000, pp. 5–6)

Guha does not simply replace ‘subaltern’ with ‘working class’ and ‘peasantry’ but also accepts central principles of Marxist historiography, including the primary role of the class-conscious proletariat to ‘complete the mission’ of the bourgeoisie and, crucially, to provide revolutionary leadership to an active but ‘fragmented’ peasantry that is mired in ‘localism’. Further, like Gramsci, Guha also emphasises that élite and subaltern domains were not ‘hermetically sealed off from each other’ during the colonial period, and that there was ‘a great deal of overlap arising precisely from the effort made from time to time by the more advanced elements among the indigenous élite . . . to integrate them’ (Guha 2000, p. 5). With his precise use of class categories – unavailable within the current discourse of subalternity – Guha is engaging in debates around national liberation and cross-class alliances that echo the writings of V.I. Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Leon Trotsky on the subject.17

Guha’s own definition of the élite/subaltern paradigm in his ‘note’ at the end of the essay, however, confuses the issue and opens the door to non-Marxian interpretations. At first, Guha seems insistent on maintaining class as the analytical category and subalternity as the descriptive one. Recognising potential class clashes – that ‘the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants . . . could under certain circumstances act for the “élite”’ – Guha argues for a rigorous historical specificity in the application of the term ‘on the basis of a close and judicial reading of [the] evidence’ (Guha 2000, p. 7). But Guha’s note gives no account of the usefulness of the category of subaltern if it is to be constantly qualified by reference to Marxist definitions of class in each particular analysis. Further, according to this definition, ‘subaltern’ only seems to apply to economically oppressed classes, not all formations of the oppressed (women, lower castes, etc.). Yet, not only have later subalternists failed to recognize Guha’s caution against the conflation of class interests under ‘subalternity’, but they have uncritically expanded the term to include other categories of oppression.18

Guha’s definition of subalternity thus paved the way for a larger break from Gramsci – even before the postmodernist turn. The early subalternists read Guha as ‘correcting’ Gramscian determinism, leading them to minimise the limits that Guha himself had placed on peasant autonomy. For instance, citing ‘Notes on Italian History’, David Arnold writes that Gramsci gave ‘little evidence of autonomy in peasant movements. “Subaltern groups”, we are reminded, “are always subject to the authority of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up”’ (Arnold 2000 [1984], p. 34). In contrast, Guha’s account of peasant uprisings identify ‘the subaltern domain of politics as including a wide variety of generally autonomous modes of thought and action’; along with Thompson and Raymond Williams, Guha has rejected the ‘deterministic streak’ in Gramsci’s writing and has ‘reasserted the historical, humanist, and dialectical nature of his basic . . . position’ (Arnold 2000, pp. 35–6). As I have argued, however, it is precisely the subalternists’ undue emphasis on peasant ‘autonomy’ that leads them towards a non-dialectical understanding of peasant struggle that refuses to contextualise it within capitalist relations of production.

18 Compare my reading of Guha with Callinicos 1995. Callinicos correctly argues that, despite what Aijaz Ahmad and Edward Said have suggested, Guha is not a poststructuralist; he has a greater affinity to Marxists like E.P. Thompson than to postmodernists like Homi Bhabha (Callinicos 1995, p. 109). In making his case, however, Callinicos underemphasises Guha’s own contradictory relationship with classical Marxism, which is precisely due to his Thompsonian inclinations. The classical-Marxist critique of ‘history from below’ is necessary here because it allows one to explain why postmodernism was able to appropriate the category of subalternity so easily.
Gyanendra Pandey provides an extreme example of how postmodernism has shifted the definition of subalternity: he openly ignores Gramsci’s Marxist paradigms and effectively turns him into a postmodernist. Quoting the ‘Notes on Italian History’, once again, Pandey provides the following partial citation to illustrate the importance of the historical fragment: “‘The history of subaltern groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic . . . Every trace of independent initiative on the part of the subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian . . .’” (Pandey 2000, p. 282). The quotation completely distorts Gramsci’s ideas of the fragment, omitting the lines that contextualise subaltern actions within the hierarchy of classes under capitalism (e.g., ‘Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups . . .’). Pandey implies that Gramsci supports the postmodernist valorisation of historical fragments over historical totalities (Pandey 2000, p. 296), but it is Gramsci himself who seeks to reconcile fragmented subaltern histories within a larger historical totality. Pandey caricatures Marxist histories as naively believing that the ‘existence of particular social and political structures’ and the ‘institutions of new forms of production relations and extractions of surplus automatically produce working-class consciousness, or peasant struggles, or nationalism’ (Pandey 2000, p. 295). However, Gramsci’s own writing reveals that Marxists can hold onto the notion of ‘lines of development towards integral autonomy’ for subaltern struggles even while recognising the uneven trajectories of these lines.

Pandey’s fragmentary and incomplete use of Gramsci points to that of the subalternists as a whole – whether they bury their differences with Gramsci or, like Chakrabarty, openly disagree with him. That subaltern histories are ‘fragmented’ and ‘episodic’ is accepted, that every piece and episode of subaltern history is of ‘incalculable value’ is recognised (though moments of insurgency are valorised over day-to-day life), and the essays and monographs that Gramsci calls for are duly published. An important result of this work has been that the resistance and agency of those written out of history is recorded, a certain élitist emphasis on writing over orality is challenged, and ‘actually-existing’ consciousness is taken as the legitimate focus of study. However, the subalternists omit the two limits that Gramsci places on subaltern activity: its determination by ruling-class activity and its potential for obliterating subalternity. If, for Gramsci, subaltern activity points to both its limits and its possibilities, for the subalternists, it points to itself, because Gramsci’s idea of the subalterns’ ‘lines of development’ requires linking the subalterns’ ‘autonomous’ domain of activity to the capitalist state itself. The rejection of determinism of any kind is inevitably linked with the rejection of revolution; as Sarkar puts it, without the idea that élite and subaltern classes share ‘common roots in a specific social formation’, ‘the subaltern would logically always remain a subaltern’ (Sarkar 2000b, p. 305).

19 The ellipses are Pandey’s.
The postmodernist turn: a closer look

The postmodernist intervention in *Subaltern Studies* began in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a critique of its positions on representation and subjectivity. Postmodernists argued, correctly, that the theory of subalternity developed in the early 1980s exhibited a tendency towards essentialism, a romanticisation of the subaltern as the ideal subject whose suppressed voice had only to be uncovered to be heard. Such a theoretical paradigm was associated with the Western Enlightenment; it did not recognise the constructedness of ‘whole’ subjectivities and the inherent violence of the act of representation. The attempt to rescue ‘true’ subaltern voices from the wreckage of élite histories could only lead to their appropriation by élites and, thus, a re-inscription of subalterns into Enlightenment-colonial forms of coercive knowledge. Rather, subalternists should employ a ‘postfoundationalist’ and ‘post-Orientalist’ methodology that would renounce notions of totality and determinism and would acknowledge the historical importance of the fragment, the possibility of agency outside of class identities, and the discursive processes by which subaltern voices were suppressed and remained unrecoverable. In a cutting statement that reaffirms the postmodernist stance on representation even as it challenges the political and professional hubris of the élite intellectual, Spivak has written: ‘The ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock-in-trade’.

Despite the decisiveness of their critique, the postmodernists confronted and resolved the ambiguities of *Subaltern Studies* in a sympathetic manner, transforming themselves, in the process, into the school’s dominant theorists. Essays like Rosalind O’Hanlon’s (2000 [1988]) fiercely challenged the subalternists’ theoretical orientation, only to end by reframing the project in postmodernist terms. Thus, contemporary accounts can reread even the early subalternists as unconscious poststructuralists. For instance, Spivak argues (in a patronising manner) that, although Guha uses ‘essentializing’ and ‘slightly dated’ dialectical language in ‘On Some Aspects’, his paradigm of subalternity avoids essentialism by constructing an ‘identity-in-differential’ definition of ‘the people’, i.e., the potential location of the essence. Guha’s call for the historian to gauge ‘the specific nature and degree of the deviation from the ideal and situate it historically’ might seem ‘essentialist and taxonomic’, but since subalternity is necessarily defined ‘as a difference from the élite’, as a non-specific entity whose identity is defined differently at various historical moments, Guha’s subalternity avoids ever being

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23 Spivak 1999, p. 255. Contrast this with Spivak 1990 [1985], p. 342, in which she coins the term ‘strategic essentialism’ in order to register the political importance of the subalternists’ project.
a definite essence. Spivak then rephrases the subalternist project in classically deconstructionist prose: *Subaltern Studies* 'articulates the difficult task of rewriting its own conditions of impossibility as the conditions of its possibility'. In other words, the attempt to read the unreadable, to hear the inaudible – in short, to confront the 'conditions of impossibility' – does not allow an actual comprehension of the 'truth' of subaltern life, but, in revealing the futility of all representation, becomes 'possible'.

By the early 1990s, *Subaltern Studies* had grounded itself in a postmodernist discourse whose distinguishing feature was its hostility to viewing class relations as determining the structure of society. Gyan Prakash, for instance, argued that '[W]e reinscribe the effects of capitalism’s foundational status by writing about histories that remained heterogeneous with the logic of capital' (Prakash 2000b, p. 230). Marxist historians’ emphasis on capitalism, in other words, helped to do the work of capital by limiting possibilities. In fact, Marxism had always been complicit with Eurocentric and elitist discourses: '[L]ike many other nineteenth-century European ideas, the staging of the Eurocentric mode-of-production-narrative as History should be seen as an analogue of the nineteenth-century territorial imperialism' (ibid.). Marxist historiography, thus, became indistinguishable from imperialist historiographies (and imperialism itself) because it always sought to analyse fragmented records of the lives and struggles of the oppressed within the larger framework of history. Postmodernist historiography, in contrast, would avoid appropriating subaltern agency within a ‘totalizing’ history by reading each fragment of subaltern history in terms of how it ‘disrupted the signifying chain’ of imperialist discourse.

However, postmodernism’s deconstruction of totalities and class analysis as Eurocentric and its dismissal of representation itself produced, ironically enough, a new essentialism within *Subaltern Studies*. First, the insistence on complete subaltern autonomy from societal structures, already present in the earlier volumes, now gained theoretical support through a paradigm that saw society as always already fragmented and consisting of discrete entities. The unintended result of this ‘detachment from socio-economic contexts and determinants’, was that subaltern subjects became reified and gained fixed identities (Sarkar 2000b, p. 304). Indeed, a new universalism is inherent in the postmodernist definition of subalternity, as the subaltern becomes, like God or the Other, a signifier whose essence *is* that its meaning is ‘always already’

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25 Prakash’s essay, ironically, was a response to the charge by O’Hanlon and David Washbrook 2000, that *Subaltern Studies* could not ride the horses of Marxism and poststructuralism at once. Prakash is, of course, firmly seated on the poststructuralist horse; his assessment of Marxism above exactly echoes that of Foucault 1973, pp. 261–2. The full exchange is reprinted in *Mapping Subaltern Studies*.

26 Callinicos 1995, p. 109. Callinicos discusses the absurdity of this method of historiography, such that, for instance, Bhabha can conceptualise the 1857 Indian Revolt, ‘the greatest single rebellion against British imperialism in India’ as merely ‘an “interruption” of the signifying chain’ (p. 106). See Bhabha 1994.
deferred. Often tinged with postmodernism’s Third-Worldist tendencies, this Other has become idealised as either the supremely silent victim of Western élites and/or the heroic subject whose subversive actions lie outside of the comprehension of élite, Western knowledge.

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s contribution exemplifies how postmodernism’s rejection of the limitations on subaltern action is directly linked to its development of a new essentialism. Against the ‘monomania’ of those like Gramsci who read ‘what went on inside the minds of the oppressed’ only in order to understand these fragments in terms of the capitalist state, Chakrabarty seeks a historiography in which the historian stays ‘permanently . . . with what is fragmentary and episodic’ without attempting to force these fragments into a larger narrative (Chakrabarty 2000, pp. 274–5). But, instead of explaining why such a historiography would better serve the interest of writing subaltern histories, Chakrabarty simply describes subalternist historiography as a form of absolution for the élite historian. Middle-class intellectuals need to ‘allow the subaltern position to challenge our own conceptions of what is universal, to be open to the possibility of a particular thought-world . . . being rendered finite by the presence of the Other: such are the utopic horizons to which this other moment of Subaltern Studies calls us’ (Chakrabarty 2000, pp. 275–6). If we ‘go to the subaltern in order to learn’ how to imagine a new kind of knowledge, if we allow ‘the Other’ to challenge us, we can realise our own finitude (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 274).27 Beneath the religious/romantic language of the passage, though, lurks the familiar subalternist defence of subaltern autonomy against Gramscian determinism: ‘The subaltern here is the ideal figure of he who survives actively, even joyously, on the assumption that the effective instruments of domination will always belong to somebody else and never aspires to them’ (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 276). Like Prakash, Chakrabarty rejects the determining influence of capitalism and the state on subaltern action; consequently, he celebrates the subaltern’s ‘joyous’ isolation and actively defines him as not even desiring state power. If Gramsci defines the conquest of state power as the ultimate moment in which the subaltern transcends subalternity, Chakrabarty transforms the subaltern’s distance from state power into his lack of desire for it.

The most paradoxical consequence of the new essentialism is that it reproduces the biases of a Eurocentric, élitist historiography – that which Subaltern Studies was meant to dismantle. The ‘assertion of difference’ produces an essentialism that ‘restore[s] some of the fondest shibboleths of colonial ideologues’ (Chandavarkar 2000, p. 66): subalternist views of peasant consciousness, for instance, are ‘sometimes not dissimilar from the “oriental peasant mentality” postulated by the contemporary district officer’

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27 Chakrabarty acknowledges his debt to Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas at this juncture. See Chakrabarty 2000, p. 279, n. 9. The work of these two philosophers self-consciously takes up a religious tone in discussing the Other.
Invoking, at once, the European enterprise of ‘discovery’, the Western epic tradition, and *Robinson Crusoe*, Chandavarkar notes that, with this new essentialism, ‘the postmodern odyssey beach[es] its crew on familiar shores’ (p. 65). In this context, ‘critiques of Western-colonial power-knowledge’ have become the central focus in *Subaltern Studies*, with non-Western “community consciousness” as its valorised alternative’ (Sarkar 2000b, p. 300). Eurocentrist discourse reappears in late *Subaltern Studies* as the subaltern is either rendered invisible by being ‘non-representable’ or he is held up as the epitome of Third-World oppression.29

For all of its useful criticism of the pitfalls of mapping subalternity, then, the postmodernists’ intervention in *Subaltern Studies* has only exacerbated the problems of elite ventriloquism and essentialism. Postmodernist historiography has consistently manifested an inability to show how elite formations (the state, economic and political forces, political parties) impacted and changed subaltern consciousness whether in communalist or radical directions.30 A viable theory of subalternity would have to centre around the question of how subaltern consciousness, containing both progressive and backward ideas, has changed within different historical circumstances, and how the historian might maintain a close analysis of peasant agency and yet discuss its relationship to the capitalist state. Addressing these questions, however, presupposes an acknowledgement that the space of ‘the people’ does interact with that of ‘the elite’, that some adequate representation of the subaltern is both possible and necessary, and that one can strive for a ‘fully just world’ that is not ‘forever deferred’.31

**Conclusion: Marxism and subalternity**

*Subaltern Studies* needs to develop a closer relationship with Marxism in order to move beyond constructing subalternity as absolute difference. While a full Marxist alternative to subalternity cannot be discussed here, a few preliminary points can be made. First,
*Subaltern Studies* needs to acknowledge that its main interest is in the peasantry, to differentiate between peasants more carefully, and to develop a vocabulary with which to engage with the changing structures of capitalism and imperialism. Next, in order to reject essentialism, it needs to recognise the difference between assessing the social weight of a class and judging the political character of a particular action. Finally, subalternists need to discard the simplistic association of class analysis with Eurocentrism because only an engagement with the global, differential nature of capital can allow for an adequate assessment of the agrarian question, whether in colonial or postcolonial times.

According to Tom Brass, the subalternists do not, in fact, escape the binds of social class but simply valorise the peasantry over other classes. More particularly, Brass claims, their peasant is a far a more docile creature than that of classical Marxism. *Subaltern Studies* implicitly follows other peasant histories and theories (like the ‘moral economy’) in providing for the study of ‘the nature and object of individual or collective action’ undertaken by the historically non-radical middle peasant (Brass 2000, p. 129). For Brass, it is precisely the valorisation of this middle-peasant subject position that lies at the root of the subalternists’ and peasant historians’ shift away from Marxism. Rather than seeing – as Lenin and the Bolsheviks did – that capitalism impacted rich and poor peasants differently and engendered the basis for a progressive, anticapitalist revolt in the countryside, historians like A.V. Chayanov and James C. Scott emphasised that peasants were against capitalism because they preferred the security and comfort of the patron-client relations of the precapitalist state (Brass 2000, p. 130). Accordingly, Scott calls attention to the importance of ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’ against modernity – ‘foot dragging . . . dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, and sabotage’ – over mass upheavals and revolutionary actions against capitalism (ibid.). The stage was already set, then, for an anti-Marxist postmodernism to replace ‘the economic’ with ‘the cultural’, ‘class’ with ‘subaltern identity’, and ‘revolution’ with ‘resistance’ (Brass 2000, p. 132), as the actions of the middle peasant were specifically geared towards less radical ends. The political consequence of not differentiating between peasants in struggle is that there remains no distinction between the reactionary political content of the struggle of ‘incipient/actual agrarian capitalists’ against a system that seeks to restrict their growth and the fight of poor peasants against the same capitalist modernity (Brass 2000, p. 141). Analysing the specific place of peasants within capitalism in a given instant is the only way to avoid an uncritical essentialism when discussing peasant agency.\(^{32}\)

However, many critics of Marxism conflate its theoretical understanding of the peasantry as a non-dominant class with a political assessment of its action or

\(^{32}\) See Ludden 2001 for further discussion of the limitations on agrarian historiography produced by the subalternist unwillingness to examine class differentiation among subalterns.
consciousness in a given historical situation. Marx’s own writings, in fact, contest such a reading. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, an analysis of the peasantry’s weakness as a social class is coupled with a *historical* instance in which the French peasantry was particularly reactionary, supporting Louis Bonaparte and ending the 1848 revolution. In his writings on the Paris Commune of 1871, however, Marx celebrates the radicalism of that same French peasantry, betrayed and heavily taxed by their post-1848 government, even as he emphasises the primary role of the French proletariat in the struggle. The objective position of the peasantry had not changed, but the historical context had transformed Marx’s treatment of their actions. Arguing against essentialisms of all kinds, Marx writes in *The Holy Family*: ‘If socialist writers attribute [a] world-historical role to the proletariat it is not because they believe . . . that the proletariat are gods but because they see the proletariat as occupying a specifically powerful place within the structures of capital’.

Finally, it is by emphasising the differentiated development of capitalism in its spread across the world that one can give an appropriate context to the various pressures within the peasantry. Contemporary *Subaltern Studies* implies that to see capitalism as foundational is to reduce the difference between, say, late-nineteenth-century peasants in South Asia and peasants in Britain. However, to recognise the globality of capitalist modernity is not only to account for the similarities between these groups of peasants as they faced an encroaching capitalism (the loss of their land, culture and livelihood). It is also to be able to describe how this socio-economic force expressed itself in completely different ways in different contexts, contributing to the oppressive systems already established for centuries and helping to determine, therefore, the particular shape of peasant agency. Marx began to gain some insight into the simultaneously differential and global nature of capitalism as he wrote, in an 1853 article on India: ‘The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked’.

Rooting subalternity in the differential impact of global capitalism rather than in postmodernist difference, as Vinay Bahl suggests, would allow for histories that remained committed to representing the oppressed and their shaping of the world even as they recognised how the world itself continuously shaped and limited those actions. Paradoxically, only such a historiography could begin to imagine the subaltern’s liberation from the condition of subalternity; seeing subalternity as the product of socio-historical forces and not as an essential *difference*, such history-writing would recognise and shore up the moments of struggle that point toward the transformation

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34 Cited in Lukács 1971, p. 20.
35 Marx 1968, p. 130. See Ahmad 1992 and Jani 2002 for a full discussion of Marx’s controversial articles on India.
36 Bahl’s essay is described in Ludden 2002.
of the subaltern. By providing a detailed discussion of these themes, *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* provides a strong basis for developing this kind of historiography.

**References**


The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela
FERNANDO CORONIL

Reviewed by NEIL LARSEN

‘A Different Second Nature’
Fernando Coronil’s The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela, first published in 1997 and researched and written over an extended period beginning in the 1970s, ‘missed’ the election of Hugo Chávez as president of Venezuela, and the subsequent revolutionary upheaval in Venezuelan society, by only a year. It is a measure of the book’s intrinsic importance and interest that this unfortunate, if unavoidable lack of timing makes its reading no less provocative and engaging six years after its first appearance. An external factor in the book’s favour is the chronic lack of attention paid to modern Venezuela by Latin-Americanism – at least until the recent upsurge of chavismo. As Coronil himself notes (pp. 367–8), this relative neglect stems, ironically, from a tacit perception of Venezuela as ‘exceptional’ for what is purportedly its non-violent, prosperous and ‘democratic’ history during the better part of the last century. The events that saw, in a matter of months after Chávez’s first electoral victory in December 1998, the complete collapse of Venezuela’s political élites and their decades-long hold on the Venezuelan state seem to have ended all that. But the question remains whether the deeper-lying myth here – that a stable and unexceptional form of modernity requires only a level of national income sufficient to underwrite a real middle class and that Venezuela enjoyed and potentially can still enjoy this unexceptional modernity thanks to its oil revenues – has itself been unseated by chavismo, at least in the minds of those who created and who reproduce the belief in Venezuelan exceptionalism. It is precisely this myth that The Magical State itself aims, critically, to unseat. As Coronil himself has written in a recent preface to the Venezuelan edition of his book,

Chávez finally brought down the political system whose constitution and crisis I examine here. Other books will no doubt account for this significant change. I simply want to note that, just as my interpretation has highlighted transformations and continuities from the century just past, I hope it can
Coronil provides a richly detailed and critical account of this myth’s historical genesis and attenuation in the second and third parts of *The Magical State*. Part II (‘Venezuelan Counterpoint: Dictatorship and Democracy’) recounts the formative period of Venezuela’s ‘petrostate’ and describes what is, to students of Latin-American history, a familiar oscillating movement between open, military dictatorship (here the régimes of generals Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–35) and Marcos Pérez-Jiménez (1948–58)) and a series of ‘democratic’ régimes that forged what was, until 1998, a revolving-door arrangement between Venezuela’s two traditional ruling parties, the social-democratic Acción Democrática (AD) and the Christian-democratic COPEI. Against the once standard teleology that saw in this period the gradual but relentless transition from closed to open forms of modern polity, *The Magical State* emphasises precisely those conjunctural moments – always linked to oil – that complicate the master-narrative. Thus it was precisely the repressive, ‘nineteenth-century’ caudillo-style rule of Gómez, situated by mainstream historiography in Venezuela’s pre-modernity, that, Coronil argues, effectively begins the modern period by initiating the state control of oil revenues. The coming to power of civilian and ‘democratic’ governments at various intervals after the demise of *gomecismo* were themselves, as Coronil stresses, often putsch-like affairs, impossible without significant military backing. And, above all, there is the fact that, in the end, what Coronil terms the ‘two bodies’, natural and social, of the Venezuelan petrostate established and consolidated a myth-like hold on the Venezuelan political imaginary that has been essentially indifferent to whether the holders of state power don a uniform and/or win an election.

Coronil provides what is effectively a theoretical summation of the period by laying bare, not the absolute falsehood of its modernising teleology, but the outlines of a historically unorthodox, concretely Venezuelan form of modernity:

The Venezuelan case shows the historical development not of classic market ‘spontaneity’ but of a different second nature – the ‘spontaneous’ recognition of the need to control state intervention as a result of the formation of a capitalist society whose major source of monetary wealth rests not on the local production of surplus value but on the international capture of ground-rent. Rather than view this as an anomaly, what needs to be accounted for in each case is the historical nature of apparently spontaneous political behavior. (p. 227)
Part III (‘The Petrostate and the Sowing of Oil’) – for this reviewer, the book’s most sustained and original contribution – delivers, in rigorous fashion, an acute sense of the ‘historical nature of apparently spontaneous political behavior’. Here, the period in question is the first presidency of AD’s Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974–8), followed by the COPEI administration of Luis Herrera Campins (1978–82) – what was to have been, if the myth had held, the apotheosis of the petrostate, thanks to the fantastic increase in oil revenues brought about by the founding of OPEC and the subsequent quadrupling of oil prices. On the basis of extensive field-work and on-site research, some of it in the form of interviews, Coronil here presents three carefully chosen case studies: the failed attempt to produce a ‘Venezuelan car’ through ‘local content’ regulations imposed by the Venezuelan state on foreign auto-manufacturers; the even more spectacular and paradoxical failure of the Pérez and Herrera Campins administrations to bring to completion a plan to build and service Venezuelan-made tractors; and the inconclusive corruption scandal – possibly reaching all the way to the presidency – surrounding the murder of lawyer Ramón Carmona in 1978. Impeccable in their documentation, these three conjunctural readings synthesise a Geertzian ‘thickness’ of description with both a narrative flair and depth of class analysis that at times recalls Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire – a work that, not coincidentally, given its preoccupation with an earlier ‘magical state,’ supplies The Magical State with a kind of literary and theoretical-critical model.

Here, the political economy of oil export and a state-centred, rentier modernity are traced down to the level of their most intricate, chilling and paradoxical ramifications. In detailing the story of how, for example, the Venezuelan state went so far as to create a joint-venture – ‘FANATRACTO’ – and build a gigantic tractor factory in a relatively remote area of the country, and then promptly abandoned the scheme, closing the factory without building a single tractor in it, Coronil tells the story, equally bizarre, of Manuel Quijada, appointed by the incoming COPEI administration of Herrera Campins in 1978 as Minister of Development, with direct responsibility for FANATRACTO. A former left-wing insurgent without political ties to either AD or COPEI, Quijada lost no time in delivering the coup de grâce to the tractor-building scheme. Quite apart from his personal ties to Herrera Campins (and familial ties to a tractor-importing venture) Quijada’s reasons for withdrawing support from FANATRACTO were a question of conscious principle. Coronil cites a speech delivered by then-minister Quijada to the Association of Venezuelan Industrialists in which he justifies his opposition to the granting of tariff-protections to local businesses (a protectionist concession vital to the fortunes of the FANATRACTO state-led joint venture) on the grounds that it would lead to the creation of ‘corrupt cliques and unwarranted privileges’ (cited in Coronil, p. 305). ‘Although Milton Friedman could have subscribed to these statements,’ writes Coronil,
it would be a mistake to see Minister Quijada as a follower of Chicago School economics. For Quijada’s world, these words expressed a different meaning: they were less an endorsement of liberalization than a rudimentary critique of capitalism. Just as Proudhon, the staunch critic of the institution of private property, regarded property as a counterweight to the state […] Quijada was critical of capitalist privilege in Venezuela, viewing liberalization as a means to counteract its institutionalization. (p. 305)

Here, and in similar moments of conjunctural analysis and insight, Coronil both pinpoints and gives theoretical illumination to a reality crucial to the understanding of the neoliberalisation of Latin-American political economies: the fact that, although in response to withering international financial pressures, it is the state itself in Latin America that dismantles the policies of import substitution and national industrialisation, not out of a conscious will to ‘open’ local economies to the looting sprees of finance capital (the effective reality and consequence of neoliberalisation) but rather under the firmly held (and delusional) belief that the (non-imperial) state can exert a decisive element of control over ‘free-market’ liberalisation. This, in better known and more spectacular instances, is the paradox of the conversion of erstwhile Marxist and dependency theorist Fernando Henrique Cardoso to neoliberal head of state in Brazil, or of the Argentine electorate’s astounding elevation of ‘Peronist’ and arch-neo-liberal Carlos Menem to power not just once but twice between 1989 and 1999. Here, indeed, the ‘magical state’ is at work, in its most dire and sinister form. Coronil adds a key but easily overlooked chapter to this catastrophic story.

**Lawyer’s fees, beetroot and music**

Parts I (‘The Nature of the Nation: State Fetishism and Nationalism’) and IV (‘Black Gold, Money Fetishism and Modernity’) comprise work evidently written more recently and attempt a more abstract, meta-theoretical reflection on the problems dealt with on a conjunctural plane in Parts II and III. Here, in my view, the book weakens considerably, and, in a manner that has become all too typical of contemporary Latin-Americanist scholarship in the US, shows more concern with situating itself in relation to current academic ‘vanguards’ than it does with drawing the full theoretical implications of its considerable strengths on the empirical level.

Chapter One, ‘History’s Nature,’ is the most problematic in this respect. Here, Coronil tries to settle accounts with the classical-Marxist critique of political economy that – especially in the case of Marx’s theory of ground-rent in Volume III of *Capital* – has, as the author tacitly acknowledges, underpinned a good deal of the theoretical edifice of *The Magical State*. Coronil’s argument here, as best I can make sense of it, is that a ‘neglect of nature’ and a corresponding neglect of geographical space and
its own ‘social’ laws and complexities, limits, if it does not vitiate the theoretical purchase of *Capital* when it is a matter of understanding the role of peripheral formations such as Venezuela in the formation and reproduction of global capitalism. A further symptom of this theoretical slippage is, for Coronil, an ‘exclusive focus on labor’ in Marx as well as in Marxist-dominated attempts to theorise peripheral social formations. Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* is cited repeatedly in support of the view, here, that the relative underplaying of spatial and geographical categories in historical materialism – among them the ‘land’ itself – has robbed the latter not just of its full political force but, in Coronil’s extrapolation of Lefebvre, has rendered the heavily extractive economies of Latin America, with their often exclusive dependence on ‘natural’ forms of wealth, dangerously invisible to Marxist theory. In Coronil’s words:

What can be called the international division of nature provides the material foundation for the international division of labor: they form two dimensions of a unitary process. An exclusive focus on labor obscures from view the inescapable fact that labor is always located in space, that it transforms nature in specific locations, and thus that its world-wide structure involves as well a global division of nature. (p. 29)

This is, doubtless, not the occasion to enter into a full-blown debate regarding Lefebvre’s argument for ‘spatialising’ historical materialism, or, for that matter, regarding more recent and cognate arguments advanced by Marxist geographers such as David Harvey. But, at first glance, such arguments have always struck me as either trivial or as non-sequiturs, bespeaking enormous confusion about the most elementary logic of historical-materialist thought. As the term itself implies, historical materialism concerns the *history* of matter, matter in *time*. As a dialectical mode of thought (and I set aside here the purely terminological/philological question as to whether Engels’s coinage – ‘dialectical materialism’ – deserves or not to be retained) historical materialism privileges a knowledge of *process*, of ‘becoming’ over ‘being.’ As to whether or not history as the process of the real takes place in space, one would have to be deluded indeed to claim that it did not, but even more deluded to claim that Marx at any point imagined history as taking place anywhere else. One can certainly insist that the scope of historical materialist inquiry not be restricted to certain spaces – metropolitan Europe, say – and not others, and there are no doubt good reasons for being cautious about Marx’s vulnerability to ‘Eurocentrism’ in this respect. But, to argue that historical materialism neglects the spatial as a category, as if space and time, geography and history, were two equally weighted but mutually detachable entities that could be emphasised, one over the other, in differing relative proportions is, in effect, to argue

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2 See Harvey 2000.
that the dialectical ‘privileging’ of the processual needs to be rectified by giving greater attention to the static. This is, in one sense, like asking Marxism to revert to the pre-dialectical standpoint of the early bourgeois (and European) Enlightenment, for which the ‘nature’ so honoured here by *The Magical State* served to mystify what were precisely the *historical origins* of capitalist modernity.

I have to confess here that, after reading over many times the concluding sentence in the passage from *The Magical State* just quoted – ‘An exclusive focus on labor obscures from view the inescapable fact that labor is always located in space,’ etc. – I come to the conclusion that it is either beside the point, since *Capital* and the labour theory of value are precisely not guilty of an ‘exclusive focus on labor’ (to suggest they are is to ‘neglect’ the inalienable centrality of the concept of use-value, and its natural basis, in Marx’s thought); or that it is itself a logically meaningless sentence, since labour would not be labour if it did not take place, and it would not take place if it were not ‘located in space’. One cannot ‘obscure from view the inescapable fact’ that labour is located in space unless one is willing to ‘obscure from view’ the very category of labour itself. It simply makes no sense to counterpose ‘labour’ and ‘space’. And to point out that labour, in fact, takes place in many different kinds of spaces is so obvious as to be a triviality – ‘neglected’, for that reason no doubt, by *Capital*.

It is useful and revealing, in this regard, to re-read Marx’s brief and unfinished chapter on ‘The Trinity Formula’ in *Capital*, Volume III (Chapter 48), especially since so much importance is attached to it in *The Magical State*. In it, Marx reveals the severe illogic – and mystification – concealed in the common-sense formula of vulgar economics, according to which the ‘social production process’ is divisible into three parts, in each of which an elementary form of wealth is linked to a corresponding form of revenue: 1) ‘capital-profit’ (or, in another version, ‘capital-interest’); 2) ‘land-ground-rent’; 3) ‘labour-wages’. ‘If we now look more closely at this economic three-in-one,’ Marx continues,

we find, firstly, that the ostensible sources of wealth annually available belong to completely disparate spheres and have not the slightest analogy with one another. Their mutual relationship is like that of lawyer’s fees, beetroot and music.3

The burden of Marx’s thinking here, as throughout the final, seventh part of *Capital III*, is to prove that, contrary to the thinking behind the ‘Trinity formula’, ground-rent is not a form of wealth arising spontaneously from nature, or the land, but a surplus-profit, i.e., a deduction from that part of the total social product represented by surplus-value. On this point itself, Coronil is quite clear, at least in Parts II and III of *The Magical State*. But the argument advanced in ‘History’s Nature’ regarding the

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'neglect' of nature/space in *Capital* effectively reverts to the standpoint repudiated (and lampooned) here by Marx. The 'category mistake' is, in both cases here, the same: ‘a social relation, conceived as a thing’ (i.e., ground-rent, or, more generally, value itself) ‘is placed in a relationship of proportion with nature’.⁴ Or, as Marx puts it, laconically, a few pages earlier: ‘Value is labour. So surplus-value cannot be earth.’⁵

These logical conundrums form a kind of pattern in ‘History’s Nature’. Thus, for example, regarding what is purportedly a need to rethink the category of the commodity from the standpoint of the periphery, Coronil quotes *Capital*, Volume I as follows:

> The existence of things *qua* commodities and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom.

To which he adds: ‘While it is true that the value-relation between commodities has nothing to do with their physical properties, their existence qua commodities cannot be separated from their physical properties’ (p. 60). Here, again, I am not sure how to read such a sentence. In keeping with the general line of Coronil’s argument, it appears to suggest that the labour theory of value, while correct in itself, nevertheless draws attention away from the ‘physical’, – i.e., ‘natural’ and ‘spatial’ – properties of commodities. But if this is its meaning, then the sentence is transparently false. Marx insists repeatedly, throughout all of his writings on political economy, that exchange-values must be embedded in actual material things, in use-values. By the same logic, nature itself is deemed to be the necessary condition, the ‘body’ upon which all value-creating labour must itself labour. (To cite, once more, Chapter 48 of *Capital*, Volume III: ‘Value is expressed in use-value, and use-value is a condition for the creation of value; but it is foolish to counterpose a use-value, the earth, on the one hand, and value on the other. . . .’)⁶ If this is what is meant by saying that ‘their [i.e., commodities’] existence qua commodities cannot be separated from their physical properties’, then well and good – but how then make sense of what appears here to be, given the form of the sentence itself, a call to rectify an apparent weakness (‘neglect of nature’) in Marx? Are we to understand *The Magical State* as arguing, as it indeed sometimes seems to be doing,⁷ that ‘nature’ must be accorded a more active role, analogous to that of labour in *producing* wealth? If so, then Coronil would seem to fall under the power of the myth he elsewhere exposes: that of the capacity of a ‘natural’ resource – oil, in this case – to ‘produce’ wealth on its own, independent of

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⁵ Marx 1991, p. 954.
⁷ See, for example, p. 32, on which Coronil speaks, in passing, of the ‘production of natural wealth’. It stands to reason that *natural* wealth is not wealth produced by human beings, but wealth in its spontaneous, natural form. Who or what, then, can be the ‘producer’ of this wealth, if not nature itself?
labour, and – more pointedly – of the mediating processes of the production and circulation of value on a global scale.

The outwardly equivocal structure of the writing – and thinking – I have scrutinised here is redolent, in fact, of a recent and much touted tendency, particularly within US-based Latin-Americanism, in which there is a claim to have discovered a peripheral, or Latin-American mode of critique, to be distinguished from historical materialism, *inter alia*, by its sheer spatial – and cultural – ‘difference’. Work by the philosopher Enrique Dussel, and by a variety of competing mouthpieces for a so-called ‘Latin-American Subaltern Studies’ (Walter Mignolo, Alberto Moreiras, John Beverley and Ileana Rodríguez prominent among them) has, of late, purported to be such a mode of critique, allied with Marxism but, at the same time, conscious of the need to reason from a *local* standpoint outside the latter’s reputed ‘Eurocentrism’. Coronil’s fairly casual invocation of the ‘subaltern’ in *The Magical State*, particularly in its concluding chapter – unremarkable in itself –, suggests a certain will to affiliation here. At one point, in castigating the tendency in world-systems type historicisms to assign peripheral national formations a merely subordinate, sub-metropolitan place at the global table, he cautions against an opposing tendency to ‘uplift the periphery by semantic fiat’ (p. 74). The phrase captures perfectly what I view as the fatal conceptual flaw in Dussel, Mignolo and the ‘Latin-American Subaltern Studies’ faction in the US academy. But Coronil himself, in the no doubt friendly and well intentioned but ill-considered disputes with *Capital* examined above, seems to me to fall back on this same technique of ‘semantic fiat’. At any rate, it is difficult to know how else to make sense of Coronil’s stipulations regarding nature and space in, and against, *Capital*. The danger seems to lie, not in its theoretical content *per se*, but in attributing to *Capital*, as a non-peripheral theoretical source, any final authority over a Latin America that ought to have a right to its own Marx. *The Magical State* wants it both ways here: to work within an effectively Marxist framework when engaged in concrete, conjunctural analysis; and to claim still another kind of ‘semantic fiat’ when the matter of its own, public ‘theoretical’ affiliation comes to the fore.

But, unlike most of the work of ‘Latin-American Subaltern Studies’, which, in this reviewer’s experience, shows no inclination whatsoever for – and indeed could not withstand the test of engagement with – concrete historical reality,* The Magical State* adds, in crucial ways, to our knowledge of Latin-American history, society, politics and culture. One hopes that, in on-going and future work, Coronil will leave the pursuit of what Marx, in *Capital*, Volume III, calls ‘yellow algorithms’ to lesser lights and pursue further the rich vein of critical-conjunctural analysis – informed but not dogmatically indebted to Marxian categories – that is the intellectual core of *The Magical State*.

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8 See Rodríguez (ed.) 2001.
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**Errata:** due to an error, the following two Notes were not included in our last issue. Our apologies.
Back Issues

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 1
Ellen Meiksins Wood on the non-history of capitalism • Colin Barker on Ellen Wood • Esther Leslie on Benjamin’s Arcades Project • John Weeks on underdevelopment • Tony Smith on theories of technology • Michael Lebowitz on the silences of Capital • John Holloway on alienation • Peter Burnham on globalisation and the state • Fred Moseley on the US rate of profit • reviews by Matthew Beaumont on Bloch • Benno Teschke on Guy Bois • Peter Linebaugh on Robin Blackburn

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 2
China Miéville on architecture • Gregory Elliott on Perry Anderson • Andrew Chitty on recognition • Michael Neary & Graham Taylor on alchemy • Paul Burkett on neo-Malthusian Marxism • Slavoj Zizek on risk society • reviews by Geoff Kay on Freeman & Carchedi • Ben Watson on Adorno and music • Mike Haynes on the Russian Revolution • Elmar Altvater on David Harvey • Martin Jenkins on Althusser and psychoanalysis • Esther Leslie on Benjamin

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 3
Symposium on Leninism and political organisation: Simon Clarke • Howard Chodos & Colin Hay • John Molyneux • Alan Shandro • Jonathan Joseph • Peter Hudis • John Ehrenberg • Plus Paul Burkett on Ted Benton • Werner Bonefeld on novelty • reviews by Michael Lebowitz on Felton Shortall • Gareth Dale on East Germany • Adrian Budd on Kim Moody • Giles Peaker on John Roberts • Chris Bertram on analytical Marxism • Ken Hammond on Vietnam

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 4
Symposium on Brenner and the world crisis, Part 1: Alex Callinicos • Guglielmo Carchedi • Simon Clarke • Gerard Duménil & Dominique Lévy • Chris Harman • David Laibman • Michael Lebowitz • Fred Moseley • Murray Smith • Ellen Meiksins Wood • Plus Hal Draper on Lenin • Tony Smith on John Rosenthal • reviews by Rick Kuhn on Australian trade unionism • Charles Post on Terence Byres • Edwin Roberts on pragmatism and American Marxism • Alan Wald on Michael Löwy • Matt Worley on British Communism

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 5
Symposium on Brenner and the world crisis, Part 2: Werner Bonefeld • Alan Freeman • Michel Husson • Anwar Shaikh • Tony Smith • Richard Walker • John Weeks • Plus Geoff Kay on abstract labour and capital • Craig Brandist on ethics, politics and dialogism • reviews by John Gubbay on Erik Olin Wright • Alan Johnson on the Third Camp • Sean Sayers on Marx on Russia • Adrian Haddock on Andrew Collier • Gregor Gall on organised labour • Greg Dawes on postcolonial theory

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 6
Alan Shandro on Marx as a conservative thinker • Patrick Murray on abstract labour • Deborah Cook on Adorno and Habermas • Andrew Kliman on intrinsic value • Felton Shortall vs. Mike Lebowitz on the limits of Capital • Fine, Lapavitsas & Milonakis vs Tony Smith on Brenner • reviews by Mike Cowen on James C. Scott • Alan Carling & Paul Nolan on Jared Diamond • Jonathan Joseph on Derrida • Ian Birchall on Romain Rolland

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HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 7

Tony Burns on ancient Greek materialism • Chik Collins on Vygotsky and Voloshinov • Paul Wetherly on Giddens • Patrick Murray on abstract labour, part II • Geert Reuten on Patrick Murray • John Kelly vs. Gregor Gall on class mobilisation • reviews by Noel Castree on Manuel Castells • Paul Blackledge on Perry Anderson • Paul Jaskot on art history • John Roberts on Adorniana • Andrew Hemingway & Paul Jaskot on T.J. Clark • Larry Wilde on human nature • Paul Jaskot on Marxism and art history • an interview with Slavoj Zizek

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 8

Focus on East Asia: Paul Burkett & Martin Hart-Landsberg on East Asia since the financial crisis • Michael Burke on the changing nature of capitalism • Giles Ungpakorn on Thailand • Vedi Hadiz on Indonesia • Daéoup Chang on South Korea • Raymond Lau & Dic Lo on China • Jim Kincaid on Marxist explanations of the crisis • Joseph T. Miller in Peng Shuzhi • Paul Zarembka & Sean Sayers debate Marx and romanticism • Ted Benton & Paul Burkett debate Marx and ecology • reviews by Walden Bello, Alex Callinicos, Paul Burkett, Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 9

Peter Gowan, Leo Panitch & Martin Shaw on the state and globalisation: a roundtable discussion • Andrew Smith on occult capitalism • Susanne Soederberg on capital accumulation in Mexico • David Laibman on the contours of the maturing socialist economy • John Rosenthal on Hegel Decoder: A Reply to Smith’s ‘Reply’ • Jonathan Hughes on analytical Marxism and ecology • reviews by Alex Callinicos, Warren Montag, Kevin Anderson and Tony Smith

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 10:1

Ellen Meiksins Wood on infinite war • Peter Green on “the passage from imperialism to empire”: a commentary on Empire by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri • John Holloway: Going in the wrong direction: or, Mephistopheles: not Saint Francis of Assisi • Ray Kiely on actually existing globalisation, deglobalisation, and the political economy of anti-capitalist protest • Enzo Traverso on Bohemia, exile and revolution • interventions by Patrick Murray: reply to Geert Reuten, and Paul Burkett: analytical Marxism and ecology • reviews by Erik Olin Wright and Harry Brighouse, Paresh Chattopadhyay, Chris Arthur, John Foster, Alex Law, Thomas M. Jeannot and Richard Saul

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 10:2

Paris Yeros on Zimbabwe and the dilemmas of the Left • Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch on gems and baubles in Empire • Marcus Taylor on neoliberalism in Chile • Sean Creaven on Bhaskar’s Dialectic and Marxism • Paul Nolan on Darwinian aspects of historical materialism • interventions by Jason C. Myers on ideology after the welfare state, Tony Smith on Hegel, and Robert Albritton with a response to Chris Arthur • film review by Mike Wayne on Robert Guédiguian’s La ville est tranquille • reviews by Milton Fisk, Ian Birchall, Dave Beech, and Gregor Gall

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 10:3

Giovanni Arrighi on lineages of empire • Ellen Meiksins Wood on landlords and peasants, masters and slaves: class relations in Greek and Roman antiquity • Peter Thomas on philosophical strategies: Althusser and Spinoza • archive: Richard B. Day on Pavel V. Maksakovskoy’s Marxist theory of the cycle and Pavel V. Maksakovskoy on the general theory of the cycle • intervention by Neil Davidson: Stalinism, ‘nation theory’ and Scottish history: a reply to John Foster • reviews by Ian Birchall, Ian Buchanan and Simon Bromley

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 10:4

Symposium on Marxism and fantasy: China Miéville • Mark Bould on the dreadful credibility of absurd things • Stuart Elden on Lefebvre, Rabelais and intellectual history • Ishay Landa on Tolkien’s political unconscious • Mike Wayne on utopianism and film • Anna Kornbluh on
for the love of money • Alex Law and Jan Law on magical urbanism • Ben Watson on Adorno, Tolkein, Burroughs • commentary by Ana Dinerstein on the battle of Buenos Aires: crisis, insurrection, and the reinvention of politics in Argentina • archive: Jurriaan Bendien • Ernest Mandel: anticipation and hope as categories of historical materialism • interventions: Carl Freedman with a note on Marxism and fantasy • Fredric Jameson on radical fantasy • Steve Shaviro on capitalist monsters. reviews by Neil Maycroft, Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Mike Haynes, and Tony Smith

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 11:1
Alfredo Saad-Filho on the political economy of Lula’s election • Maria Turchetto on Hardt and Negri • George Liodakis on the role of biotechnology in the agro-food system • Paul Paolucci on the scientific and the dialectical method • Sean Sayers on creative activity and alienation in Hegel and Marx • Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul Burkett on development, crisis and class struggle in East Asia • Dan Bousfield on export-led development and imperialism • Jim Kincaid on underconsumption versus the rate of profit • Christopher J. Arthur on the Hegel-Marx connection • Tony Smith on the homology thesis • Christopher J. Arthur once more on the homology thesis • reviews by Scott MacWilliam, Ian Birchall and Pete Glatter

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 11:2
Tony Smith on globalisation and capitalist property relations: a critical assessment of David Held’s cosmopolitan theory • Paul Cammack on the governance of global capitalism: a new materialist perspective • William Brown on the World Bank, Africa and politics: a comment on Paul Cammack’s analysis • Simon Pirani on class clashes with party: politics in Moscow between the civil war and the New Economic Policy • Glenn Rikowski on alien life: Marx and the future of the human • Interventions: James Gordon Finlayson on the theory of ideology and the ideology of theory: Habermas contra Adorno • Deborah Cook with a response to Finlayson • Alex Callinicos on egalitarianism and anticapitalism: a reply to Harry Brighouse and Erik Olin Wright • reviews by Enzo Traverso, Chik Collins, Craig Brandist, Christopher Arthur, and Bob Jessup