

Introduction: the continuing relevance of Marxism

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

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

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

The break-up of the Soviet bloc has, in a sense, wiped the slate clean. This event reopened the possibility of being able to argue in favour of Marx's ideas without having to defend the actions of governments that justify their behaviour with reference to them. Moreover, the disappearance of the Soviet Union has encouraged an appreciation of

Marx's work less encumbered by the baggage of Marxism-Leninism as a state ideology. The significance of this is underlined when it is realized that many of the concepts and practices that are often taken as being axiomatic of Marxism do not in fact figure in Marx's writings: these include the 'vanguard party', 'democratic centralism', and the centrally directed 'command economy'.

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

Compared to **Realism** and **Liberalism** (see Ch.5, Ch.6 and Ch.7), Marxist thought presents a rather unfamiliar view of international relations. While the former portray world politics in ways which resonate with those presented in the foreign news pages of our newspapers and magazines, Marxist theories aim to expose a deeper, underlying—indeed hidden—truth. This is that the familiar events of world politics—wars, treaties, international aid operations, etc.—all occur within structures which have an enormous **influence** on those events. These are the structures of a global capitalist system. Any attempt to understand world politics must be based on a broader understanding of the processes which operate within global capitalism.

In addition to presenting an unfamiliar view of world politics, Marxist theories are also discomfiting, for they

argue that the effects of global capitalism are to ensure that the powerful and wealthy continue to prosper at the expense of the powerless and the poor. We are all aware that there is gross inequality in the world. Statistics concerning the human costs of **poverty** are truly numbing in their awfulness (the issue of global poverty is further discussed in Ch.27). Marxist theorists argue that the relative prosperity of the few is dependent on the destitution of the many. In Marx's own words, 'Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality at the opposite pole'.

In the next section we will outline some of the central features of the Marxist approach—or historical **materialism** as it is often known. Following on from this, subsequent sections will explore some of the most important strands in contemporary Marx-inspired thinking about world politics. We should note, however, that given the

The essential elements of Marxist theories of world politics

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

Marx was an enormously prolific writer and his ideas developed and changed over time. Hence, it is not surprising that his legacy has been open to numerous interpretations. In addition, real-world developments have also led to the revision of his ideas in the light of experience. A variety of schools of thought have emerged, which claim Marx as a direct inspiration, or whose work can be linked to Marx's legacy. This chapter will focus on four strands of contemporary Marxist thought that have all made major contributions to thinking about world politics. Before we

richness and variety of Marxist thinking about world politics, the account that follows is inevitably destined to be partial and to some extent arbitrary. Our aim in the following is to provide a route map that we hope will encourage readers themselves to explore further the work of Marx and of those who have built on the foundations he laid.

Key Points

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

discuss what is distinctive about these approaches, it is important that we examine the essential elements of commonality that lie between them.

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

Another key element of Marxist thought, which serves further to underline this concern with interconnection and context, is the **materialist conception of history**. The central contention here is that processes of historical change are ultimately a reflection of the economic development of society. That is, economic development

is effectively the motor of history. The central dynamic that Marx identifies is tension between the **means of production** and **relations of production** that together form the **economic base** of a given society. As the means of production develop, for example through technological advancement, previous relations of production become outmoded, and indeed become fetters restricting the most effective utilization of the new productive capacity. This in turn leads to a process of social change whereby relations of production are transformed in order to better accommodate the new configuration of means. Developments in the economic base act as a catalyst for the broader transformation of society as a whole. This is because, as Marx argues in the Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general'. Thus the legal, political, and cultural **institutions** and practices of a given society reflect and reinforce—in a more or less mediated form—the pattern of power and control in the economy. It follows logically, therefore, that change in the economic base ultimately leads to change in the 'legal and political **superstructure**'. (For a diagrammatical representation of the **base–superstructure model** see Fig. 8.1.)

Class plays a key role in Marxist analysis. In contrast to Liberals, who believe that there is an essential harmony of interest between various social groups, Marxists hold that society is systematically prone to class conflict. Indeed, in the *Communist Manifesto*, which Marx co-authored with Engels, it is argued that 'the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' (Marx and Engels 1967). In capitalist society, the main axis of conflict is between the bourgeoisie (the capitalist) and the proletariat (the workers).

Despite his commitment to rigorous scholarship, Marx did not think it either possible or desirable for the analyst to remain a detached or neutral observer of this

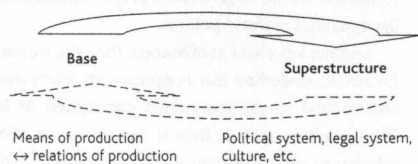


Figure 8.1 The base–superstructure model

Box 8.1 Indicators of world inequality

- More than 1.2 billion people live on less than US\$1 per day.
- In 1990 the average American was 38 times richer than the average Tanzanian. By 2005 this had risen to 61 times richer.
- More than 1.1 billion people lack access to clean water.
- Average incomes in more than 50 developing countries are now at a lower level than they were in 1990. In 21 countries a larger proportion of the people are hungry. In 14 countries a higher proportion of children are dying before reaching the age of 5, and in 34 countries life expectancy has decreased.
- Tariffs on manufactured goods from the developing world are four times higher than those on manufactured goods from other OECD countries.
- One-sixth of the world's adults are illiterate (two-thirds of the world's illiterates are women).
- In the developed world subsidies to agricultural producers are six times higher than overseas development aid.
- More than 10 million children die every year from easily preventable diseases.
- A child born in Zambia today is less likely to live past the age of 30 than a child born in 1840 in England.
- In Africa only one child in three completes primary education.
- In sub-Saharan Africa a woman is 100 times more likely to die in childbirth than women in high-income OECD countries.
- African countries pay out US\$40 million every day on debt repayment.

(Sources: World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, Jubilee Research)

great clash between capital and labour. He argued that 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'. Marx was committed to the cause of **emancipation**. He was not interested in developing an understanding of the dynamics of capitalist society simply for the sake of it. Rather, he expected such an understanding to make it easier to overthrow the prevailing order and replace it with a communist society—a society in which wage labour and private property are abolished and social relations transformed.

It is important to emphasize that the essential elements of Marxist thought, all too briefly discussed in this section, are also essentially contested. That is, they are subject to much discussion and disagreement even among those contemporary writers who have been influenced by Marxist writings. There is disagreement as to how these ideas and concepts should be interpreted and how they should be put into operation. Analysts also differ over which elements of Marxist thought are most relevant, which have been proven to be mistaken, and which should now be considered as outmoded or in

need of radical overhaul. Moreover, there are substantial differences between them in terms of their attitudes to the legacy of Marx's ideas. The work of the New Marxists draws far more directly on Marx's original ideas than does the work of the critical theorists. Indeed, the latter would probably be more comfortable being viewed as post-Marxists than as straightforward Marxists. But even for them, as the very term post-Marxism suggests, the ideas of Marx remain a basic point of departure.

World-system theory

The origins of world-system theory

The origins of world-system theory can be traced back to the first systematic attempt to apply the ideas of Marx to the international sphere, that is, to the critique of **imperialism** advanced by a number of thinkers at the start of the twentieth century (see Brewer 1990). The most well-known and influential work to emerge from this debate is the pamphlet written by Lenin, and published in 1917, called *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Lenin accepted much of Marx's basic thesis, but argued that the character of capitalism had changed since Marx published the first volume of *Capital* in 1867 (Marx 1992). Capitalism had entered a new stage—its highest and final stage—with the development of **monopoly capitalism**. Under monopoly capitalism, a two-tier structure had developed within the world-economy with a dominant **core** exploiting a less-developed **periphery**. With the development of a core and periphery, there was no longer an automatic **harmony of interests** between all workers. The bourgeoisie in the core countries could use profits derived from exploiting the periphery to improve the lot of their own proletariat. In other words, the capitalists of the core could pacify their own working class through the further exploitation of the periphery.

Lenin's views were developed by the Latin American Dependency School, the writers of which developed the notion of core and periphery in greater depth. In particular, Raul Prebisch argued that countries in the periphery were suffering as a result of what he called 'the declining terms of trade'. He suggested that the price of manufactured goods increased more rapidly than that of raw

Key Points

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

materials. So, for example, year by year it requires more tons of coffee to pay for a refrigerator. As a result of their reliance on primary goods, countries of the periphery become poorer relative to the core. These arguments were developed further by writers such as André Gunder Frank and Henrique Fernando Cardoso. It is from the framework developed by such writers that contemporary world-system theory emerged.

The key features of Wallerstein's world-system theory

In order to outline the key features of world-system theory, we shall concentrate on the work of perhaps its most prominent protagonist, Immanuel Wallerstein. For Wallerstein, history has been marked by the rise and demise of a series of world-systems. The modern world-system emerged in Europe at around the turn of the sixteenth century. It subsequently expanded to encompass the entire globe. The driving force behind this seemingly relentless process of expansion and incorporation has been capitalism, defined by Wallerstein as 'a system of production for sale in a market for profit and appropriation of this profit on the basis of individual or collective ownership' (1979: 66). Within the context of this system, all the institutions of the social world are continually being created and re-created. Furthermore, and crucially, it is not only the elements within the system which change. The system itself is historically bounded. It had a beginning, has a middle, and will have an end.

In terms of the geography of the modern world-system, in addition to a core–periphery distinction, Wallerstein

added an intermediate **semi-periphery**. According to Wallerstein, the semi-peripheral zone has an intermediate role within the world-system displaying certain features characteristic of the core and others characteristic of the periphery. Although dominated by core economic interests, the semi-periphery has its own relatively vibrant indigenously owned industrial base (see Fig. 8.2). Because of this hybrid nature, the semi-periphery plays important economic and political roles within the modern world-system. In particular, it provides a source of labour that counteracts any upward pressure on wages in the core and also provides a new home for those industries that can no longer function profitably in the core (for example, car assembly and textiles). The semi-periphery also plays a vital role in stabilizing the political structure of the world-system.

According to world-system theorists, the three zones of the world-economy are linked together in an exploitative relationship in which wealth is drained away from the periphery to the centre. As a consequence, the relative positions of the zones become ever more deeply entrenched: the rich get richer while the poor become poorer.

Together, the core, semi-periphery, and periphery make up the geographic dimension of the world-economy. However, described in isolation they provide a rather static portrayal of the world-system. In order to understand

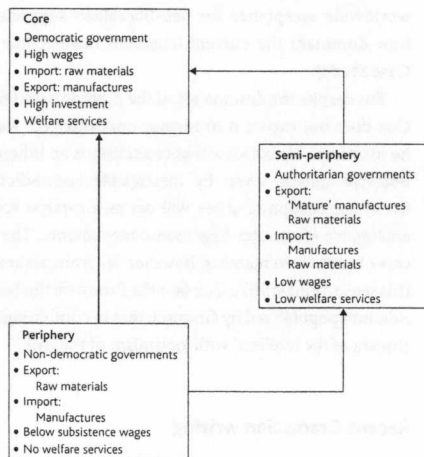


Figure 8.2 Interrelationships in the world-economy

the dynamics of their interaction over time we must turn our attention to the **temporal** dimensions of Wallerstein's description of the world-economy. These are cyclical rhythms, secular trends, contradictions, and crisis. It is these, when combined with the spatial dimensions, which determine the historical trajectory of the system.

The first temporal dimension, **cyclical rhythms**, is concerned with the tendency of the capitalist world-economy to go through recurrent periods of expansion and subsequent contraction, or more colloquially, boom and bust. Whatever the underlying processes responsible for these waves of growth and depression, it is important to note that each cycle does not simply return the system to the point from which it started. Rather, if we plot the end point of each wave we discover the **secular trends** within the system. Secular trends refer to the long-term growth or contraction of the world-economy. The third temporal feature of the world-system is **contradictions**. These arise because of 'constraints imposed by systemic structures which make one set of behavior optimal for actors in the short run and a different, even opposite, set of behavior optimal for the same actors in the middle run' (Wallerstein 1991a: 261). For Wallerstein, one of the central contradictions is 'under-consumption'. This refers to the situation where it is in the interests of capitalists to have well-paid workers so that they can consume the items that they produce. It is also in their interest to reduce wage levels in order to increase profitability. In practice it is not possible to fulfil both of these aims. The pressure of the capitalist system means that, to remain profitable, capitalist seek to reduce wages—though this also reduces consumption. Contradictions in the world-economy arise from the fact that the structure of the system can mean that apparently sensible actions by individuals can, in combination or over time, result in very different—and possibly unwelcome—outcomes from the ones originally intended.

In the context of the world-system, Wallerstein reserves the term 'crisis' to refer to a very specific temporal occurrence. Crisis constitutes a unique set of circumstances that can only be manifested once in the lifetime of a world-system. It occurs when the contradictions, secular trends, and cyclical rhythms combine in such a way as to mean that the system cannot continue to reproduce itself. Thus, a crisis within a particular world-system heralds its end and replacement by another system.

Controversially, Wallerstein argues that the end of the cold war, rather than marking a triumph for Liberalism,

indicates its imminent demise (Wallerstein 1995). This has sparked a crisis in the current world-system that will involve its demise and replacement by another system. Such a period of crisis is also a time of opportunity. When a system is operating smoothly, behaviour is very much determined by its structure. In a time of crisis, however, actors have far greater agency to determine the character of the replacement structure. Much of Wallerstein's recent work has been an attempt to develop a political programme to promote a new world-system that is more equitable and just than the current one (Wallerstein 1998, 1999, 2006). Even more contentious, particularly in the light of recent discussion of an 'imperial United States', is his claim that the American power is in rapid decline, and that its recent military adventures are a confirmation of such a decline (Wallerstein 2003, 2004). From this perspective, to focus on **globalization** is to miss out on what is truly novel about the contemporary era. Indeed, for Wallerstein, current globalization discourse represents a 'gigantic misreading of current reality' (Wallerstein 2003: 45). Those phenomena evoked by 'globalization' are manifestations of a world-system that emerged in **Europe** during the sixteenth century to incorporate the entire globe; a world-system now in terminal decline.

Recent developments in world-system theory

Various writers have built on the framework established by Wallerstein (Denemark *et al.* 2000). Christopher Chase-Dunn, for example, lays much more emphasis on the role of the inter-state system than Wallerstein. He argues that the capitalist mode of production has a single logic in which both politico-military and exploitative economic relations play key roles. In a sense he attempts to bridge

Gramscianism

In this section we discuss the strand of Marxist theory that has emerged from the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's work has become particularly influential in the study of International Political Economy, where a neo-Gramscian or 'Italian' school is flourishing. Here we will discuss Gramsci's legacy, and

the gap between Wallerstein's work and that of the New Marxists (discussed below), by placing much more of an emphasis on production in the world-economy and how this influences its development and future trajectory (see Chase-Dunn 1998).

André Gunder Frank (one of the most significant Dependency School writers) has launched a significant critique of Wallerstein's work, and of Western social theory in general. He argues not only that the world-system is far older than suggested by Wallerstein (Frank and Gills 1996), it is also an offshoot of a system that originated in Asia (Frank 1998). His work builds on that of Janet Abu-Lughod. She has challenged Wallerstein's account of the emergence of the modern world-system in the sixteenth century, arguing that, during the medieval period, Europe was a peripheral area to a world-economy centred on the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 1989). Frank argues that the source of the capitalist world-economy was not in Europe; rather, the rise of Europe occurred within the context of an existing world-system. Hence social theory, including Marxism, which tries to examine 'Western exceptionalism', is making the mistake of looking for the causes of that rise to dominance in the wrong place, Europe, rather than within the wider, global context in which it occurred.

Key Points

- World-system theory can be seen as a direct development of Lenin's work on imperialism and the Latin American Dependency School.
- Immanuel Wallerstein and his work on the modern world-system makes a key contribution to this school.
- Wallerstein's work has been developed by a number of other writers who have built on his initial foundational work.

the work of Robert W. Cox, a contemporary theorist who has been instrumental in introducing his work to an International Relations audience.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was a Sardinian and one of the founding members of the Italian Communist Party. He was jailed in 1926 for his political activities, and

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

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

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

Several important implications flow from this analysis. The first is that Marxist theory needs to take superstructural phenomena seriously, because while the structure of society may ultimately be a reflection of social relations of production in the economic base, the nature of relations in the superstructure are of great relevance in determining how susceptible that society is to change and transformation. Gramsci used the term **historic bloc** to describe the mutually reinforcing and reciprocal relationships between the socioeconomic relations (base) and political and cultural practices (superstructure) that *together* underpin a given order. For Gramsci and Gramscians, to reduce analysis to the narrow consideration of economic relationships, on the one hand, or solely to politics and ideas on the other, is deeply mistaken. It is the interaction that matters.

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

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

Robert Cox—the analysis of 'world order'

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

To explain Cox's ideas we would like to begin by discussing one particular sentence in his seminal 1981 article

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

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

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

One way in which theory can contribute to these emancipatory goals is by developing a theoretical understanding of world orders that grasps both the sources of stability

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

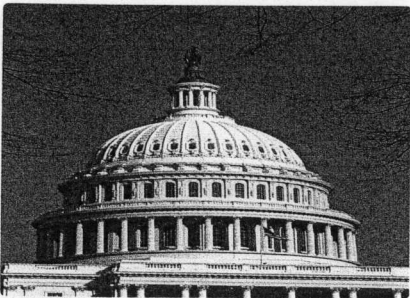
For the two hegemons that Cox analyzes (the United Kingdom and the United States) the ruling, hegemonic idea has been 'free trade'. The claim that this system benefits everybody has been so widely accepted that it has attained 'commonsense' status. Yet the reality is that while 'free trade' is very much in the interests of the hegemon (which, as the most efficient producer in the global economy, can produce goods which are competitive in all markets, so long as they have access to them), its benefits for peripheral states and regions are far less apparent. Indeed, many would argue that 'free trade' is a hindrance to their economic and social development. The degree to which a state can successfully produce and reproduce its hegemony is an indication of the extent of its power. The success of the United States in gaining worldwide acceptance for neo-liberalism suggests just how dominant the current hegemon has become (see Case Study).

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

Recent Gramscian writing

More recent Gramscian writing, including notable contributions by Mark Rupert (1995, 2000; Rupert and Solomon, 2005) and W.I. Robinson (1996, 2004), continue

Case Study The politics of neo-liberalism



A very good example of the hegemonic power of the United States, many Marxists would argue, is the success that it has had in getting neo-liberal policies accepted as the norm throughout the world. The set of policies most closely associated with the neo-liberal project (in particular reduction of state spending, currency devaluation, privatization, and the promotion of free markets) are, revealingly, known as the **Washington Consensus**. Many would argue that these are 'commonsense' policies and that those Third World countries that have adopted them have merely realized that such economic policies best reflect their interests. However, Marxists would argue that an analysis of the self-interest of the hegemon, and the use of coercive power, provide a more convincing explanation of why such policies have been adopted.

The adoption of neo-liberal policies by Third World countries has had a number of implications. Spending on health and education has been reduced, they have been forced to rely more on the export of raw materials, and their markets have been saturated with manufactured goods from the industrialized world. It does not take a conspiracy theorist to suggest that these neo-liberal policies are in the interests of capitalists in the developed world. There are three main areas where the adoption of neo-liberal policies in the Third World is in the direct interest of the developed world. First there is the area of free trade. We need not enter into arguments about the benefits of free trade, but it is clear that it will always be in the interest of the hegemon to promote free trade—this is because, assuming it is the most efficient producer, its goods will be the cheapest anywhere in the world. It is only if countries put up barriers to trade, to protect their own production,

that the hegemon's products will be more expensive than theirs. Second, there is the area of raw materials. If Third World countries are going to compete in a free trade situation the usual result is that they become more reliant on the export of raw materials (because their industrial products cannot compete in a free trade situation with those of the developed world). Again this is in the interest of the hegemon, as increases in the supply of raw material exports mean that the price falls. Additionally where Third World countries have devalued their currency as part of a neo-liberal package the price of their exported raw materials goes down. Finally, when Third World governments have privatized industries, investors from North America and Europe have frequently been able to snap up airlines, telecommunications companies, and oil industries at bargain prices. Duncan Green (1995) gives an eloquent description of the impacts of neo-liberalism on Latin American countries.

If neo-liberal policies appear to have such negative results for Third World countries why have they been so widely adopted? This is where the coercive element comes in. Through the 1970s and 1980s and continuing to today there has been a major debt crisis between the Third World and the West. This debt crisis came about primarily as a result of excessive and unwise lending by Western banks. Third World countries were unable to pay off the interest on these debts, let alone the debt itself. They turned to the major global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund for assistance. Although the IMF is a part of the United Nations it is heavily controlled by Western countries, in particular the United States. For example, the United States has 18 per cent of the votes, while Mozambique has only 0.07 per cent. In total the 10 most industrialized countries have over 50 per cent of the votes. For Third World countries, the price of getting assistance was that they would implement neo-liberal policies. Only once these were implemented, and only on condition that the policies were maintained, would the IMF agree to provide aid to continue with debt repayment.

Hence Marxists would argue that a deeper analysis of the adoption of neo-liberal policies is required. Such an analysis would suggest that the global acceptance of neo-liberalism is very much in the interests of the developed world and has involved a large degree of coercion. That such policies seem 'natural' and 'commonsense' is an indication of the hegemonic power of the United States.

'transnational state', existing alongside more traditional 'nation-states', a state-form that the author considers increasingly anachronistic. Indeed, on Robinson's reading, and in contrast with Cox's analysis of earlier periods, in the twenty-first century it is increasingly this transnational capitalist class, rather than any particular **nation-state**, that wields hegemonic power.

to display this characteristically Gramscian combination of pessimism and optimism—in their case, a search for plausible alternative futures within a capitalist system that both regard as increasingly globalized—as well as a central focus on the question of hegemony. Robinson's most recent work (2004) posits the formation of a transnational capitalist class and traces the emergence of a

Key Points

- Drawing upon the work of Antonio Gramsci for inspiration, writers within an 'Italian' school of International Relations have made a considerable contribution to thinking about world politics.
- Gramsci shifted the focus of Marxist analysis more towards super-structural phenomena. In particular, he explored the processes by which consent for a particular social and political system was produced and reproduced and through the operation of hegemony.

Hegemony allows the ideas and ideologies of the ruling stratum to become widely dispersed, and widely accepted, throughout society.

- Thinkers such as Robert W. Cox have attempted to 'internationalize' Gramsci's thought by transposing several of his key concepts, most notably hegemony, to the global context.

Critical theory

There are, without doubt, many overlaps between critical theory and Gramscian approaches to the study of world politics. As we saw in the previous section, Robert W. Cox refers to his own Gramsci-influenced approach as critical theory. Moreover, both Gramscianism and critical theory have their roots in Western Europe of the 1920s and 1930s—a place and a time in which Marxism was forced to come to terms not only with the failure of a series of attempted revolutionary uprisings, but also with the rise of fascism. Nevertheless, there are differences between them. Contemporary critical theory and Gramscian thoughts about International Relations draw upon the ideas of different thinkers, with differing intellectual concerns. In addition, there is a clear difference in focus between the two strands, with those influenced by Gramsci tending to be much more concerned with issues relating to the sub-field of international political economy than critical theorists. Critical theorists, on the other hand, have involved themselves with questions concerning **international society**, international ethics, and **security**. In this section we introduce critical theory and the thought of one of its main proponents in the field of International Relations, Andrew Linklater. In addition, we will briefly introduce Critical Security Studies, an approach to the study of security that draws on both critical theory and Gramscian influences.

Critical theory developed out of the work of the **Frankfurt School**. This was an extraordinarily talented group of thinkers who began to work with each other in the 1920s and 1930s. As left-wing German Jews, the members of the school were forced into exile by the Nazis' rise to power in the early 1930s, and much of their most creative work was produced in the United States. The leading lights

of the first generation of the Frankfurt School included **Max Horkheimer**, **Theodor Adorno**, and **Herbert Marcuse**. A subsequent generation has taken up the legacy of these thinkers and developed it in important and innovative ways. The best known is **Jürgen Habermas**, who is regarded by many as the most influential of all contemporary social theorists. Given the vast scope of critical theory writing, we can do no more here than introduce some of the key features.

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

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

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

Andrew Linklater has used some of the key **principles** and precepts developed in Habermas's work in order to argue that emancipation in the realm of international relations should be understood in terms of the expansion of the moral boundaries of a **political community** (see Ch.31). In other words, he equates emancipation with a

process in which the borders of the sovereign state lose their ethical and moral significance. At present, state borders denote the furthest extent of our sense of duty and obligation, or at best, the point where our sense of duty and obligation is radically transformed, only proceeding further in a very attenuated form. For critical theorists, this situation is simply indefensible. The goal is therefore to move towards a situation in which citizens share the same duties and obligations towards non-citizens as they do towards their fellow citizens.

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

Critical Security Studies

Critical Security Studies (CSS) is the name given to a trend in the study of security issues that has gained prominence in recent years (in particular through the work of Keith Krause and Mike Williams (1997), Ken Booth (1991, 2004) and Richard Wyn Jones (1995, 1999)). CSS combines influences from Gramscianism and critical theory with aspects of peace research and the so-called 'alternative defence thinking'. In contrast to much mainstream security thinking (in the West at least), CSS refuses to accept the state as the 'natural' object of analysis, arguing that, for much of the world's population, states are part of the security problem rather than a provider of security. Instead, proponents of CSS tend to argue that it is beholden on security analysts to place individual human beings at the centre of their analysis. Like Linklater, they regard their work as supporting and nurturing emancipatory tendencies, for it is only through emancipation that security can ultimately be assured.

Key Points

- Critical theory has its roots in the work of the Frankfurt School.
- Habermas has argued that emancipatory potential lies in the realm of communication and that radical democracy is the way in which that potential can be unlocked.

- Andrew Linklater has developed on critical theory themes to argue in favour of the expansion of the moral boundaries of the political community and has pointed to the European Union as an example of a post-Westphalian institution of governance.

New Marxism

In this section we examine the work of writers who derive their ideas more directly from Marx's own writings. These New Marxists have returned to the fundamental tenets of Marxist thought and sought to reappropriate ideas that they regard as having been neglected or somehow misinterpreted by subsequent generations. On this basis they have sought both to criticize other developments within Marxism, and to make their own original theoretical contributions to the understanding of contemporary trends. In this section we will introduce the work of two writers associated with this strand of Marxist thought: Justin Rosenberg and Benno Teschke, who have used key elements of Marx's writings to critique other theoretical approaches to International Relations and globalization theory.

Justin Rosenberg—capitalism and global social relations

The focus of Rosenberg's analysis is the character of the international system and its relationship to the changing character of social relations. His starting point is a critique of Realist International Relations theory. In particular, Rosenberg challenges Realism's claim to provide an ahistorical, essentially timeless account of international relations by analyses of the differences in the character of international relations between the Greek and Italian city-states. A touchstone of Realist theory is the similarity between these two historical cases. Rosenberg, however, describes the alleged resemblances between these two eras as a 'gigantic optical illusion'. Instead, his analysis suggests that the character of the international system in each period was completely different. In addition, he charges that attempts to provide an explanation

of historical outcomes during these periods, working purely from the inter-state level, is not feasible (as, for example, in Realist accounts of the Peloponnesian War). Finally, Rosenberg argues that Realist attempts to portray international systems as autonomous, entirely political realms founder because in the Greek and Italian examples this external autonomy was based on the character of internal—and in each case different—sets of social relations.

As an alternative, Rosenberg argues for the development of a theory of international relations that is sensitive to the changing character of world politics. This theory must also recognize that international relations are part of a broader pattern of social relations. His starting point is Marx's observation (Rosenberg 1994: 51) that:

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

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

In his more recent work Rosenberg has turned his critical attention to 'globalization theory' (Rosenberg 2000, 2006). He argues that globalization is a descriptive

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

Benno Teschke—social property relations

In a major contribution to the Marxist literature on international relations, Benno Teschke (2003) provides not only a critique of existing international relations theory, but also, through the concept of social property relations, a means of analyzing changes in the constitution and practices of actors in the international system. Teschke's work can be seen as building on Rosenberg's observation that social relations provide the starting point for an analysis of international relations, in particular through

presenting an analysis of how system transformation occurs, and describing the major transitions of the past millennium.

A social property approach examines the way in which class relations, forms of exploitation, and control of the means of production have changed in different historical epochs. Teschke argues that such an approach is 'applicable to all geopolitical orders' (2003: 47). A major claim of his analysis is that rather than one major change between the feudal and modern international system, there have been two major transformations—between feudal and early modern (dominated by absolutist monarchies) and between early modern and modern (capitalist states). Both these periods of change were gradual periods of transformation during which the international system comprised more than one type of actor: during the former transition a mixture of feudal and absolutist states; during the latter absolutist and capitalist states.

The practice of international relations was different during each of these three periods, reflecting the character of social property relations dominant in each epoch. Such an analysis leads to the claim that the significance of the **Treaty of Westphalia**, seen by most international relations theorists as the major transition to modernity, has been overstated. Instead, Westphalia constitutes the point at which absolutist rather than capitalist states became the key actors of the international system. The modern international system only started to emerge with the appearance of the first capitalist state (Britain). This capitalist state form reflected the development of capitalist property relations. Since the seventeenth century, the capitalist state has become the prominent state form. As a result, the practices of international relations have changed, reflecting, Teschke argues, developments in the character of social property relations.

Key Points

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

politics as a reflection of transformations in the prevailing relations of production.

- For Benno Teschke, the study of social property relations provides the means for analyzing the key elements of international relations, and the transitions between one international system and another.

Conclusion: Marxist theories of international relations and globalization

As outlined in the first chapter of this book, globalization is the name given to the process whereby social transactions of all kinds increasingly take place without account for national or state boundaries, with the result that the world has become 'one relatively borderless social sphere'. The particular trends pointed to as typifying globalization include: the growing **integration** of national economies; a growing awareness of ecological interdependence; the proliferation of companies, **social movements**, and inter-governmental agencies operating on a global scale; and a communications revolution which has aided the development of a global consciousness.

Marxist theorists would certainly not seek to deny that these developments are taking place, nor would they deny their importance, but they would reject any notion that they are somehow novel. Rather, in the words of Chase-Dunn, they are 'continuations of trends that have long accompanied the expansion of capitalism' (1994: 97). Marx and Engels were clearly aware not only of the global scope of capitalism, but also of its potential for social transformation. In a particularly prescient section of the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1967: 83–4), for example, they argue that:

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

According to Marxist theorists, the globe has long been dominated by a single integrated economic and political entity—a global capitalist system—which has gradually incorporated all of humanity within its grasp. Within this system, all elements have always been interrelated and interdependent. 'National economies' have long

been integrated to such an extent that their very nature has been dependent on their position within a capitalist world-economy. The only thing 'new' is an increased awareness of these linkages. Similarly, ecological processes have always ignored state boundaries, even if it is only recently that growing environmental degradation has finally allowed this fact to permeate into public consciousness.

The growth of multinational corporations certainly does not signify any major change in the structure of the modern capitalist system. Rather, they form part of a long-term trend towards the further integration of the global economy. Neither is international contact between those movements which oppose the prevailing political and economic order a new development. In fact, as even the most cursory examination of the historical record will amply attest, such movements, be they socialist, nationalist, or ecological in character, have always drawn inspiration from, and forged links with, similar groups in other countries. Finally, the much-vaunted communications revolution is the latest manifestation of a long-term trend.

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

Another danger of adopting an ahistoric and uncritical attitude to globalization is that it can blind us to the way in which reference to globalization is increasingly becoming part of the ideological armoury of elites within the contemporary world. 'Globalization' is now regularly cited as a reason to promote measures to reduce workers' rights and lessen other constraints on business. Such ideological justifications for policies which favour the interests of business can only be countered through a broader

understanding of the relationship between the political and economic structures of capitalism. As we have seen, the understanding proffered by the Marxist theorists suggests that there is nothing natural or inevitable about a world order based on a global market. Rather than accept the inevitability of the present order, the task facing us is to lay the foundations for a new way of organizing society—a global society which is more just and more humane than our own.

2 Questions

- 1 How would you account for the continuing vitality of Marxist thought?
- 2 How did Lenin's approach to international relations differ from that of Marx?
- 3 How useful is Wallerstein's notion of a semi-periphery?
- 4 Assess Warren's criticisms of world-system theory.
- 5 Evaluate Rosenberg's critique of globalization theory.
- 6 In what ways does Gramsci's notion of hegemony differ from that employed by Realist International Relations writers?
- 7 How has Linklater developed critical theory for an International Relations audience?
- 8 How do Marxist theorists view the notion of 'globalization'?
- 9 What do you regard as the main contribution of Marxist theory to our understanding of world politics?
- 10 How useful is the notion of emancipation used by critical theorists?
- 11 Do you agree with Cox's distinction between 'problem-solving theory' and 'critical theory'?
- 12 Assess Wallerstein's claim that the power of the United States is in decline.

2 Guide to further reading

Marx, K., and Engels, F. (1848), *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Bookmarks). An ideal introduction to Marx's thinking.

Morton, A. (2007), *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy* (London: Pluto Press). A discussion of the contemporary relevance of Gramsci.

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

Wallerstein, I. (1974, 1980, 1989), *The Modern World-System* (San Diego, Cal.: Academic Press). The most complete account of the world-system approach to the study of International Relations.

Wyn Jones, R. (1999), *Security, Strategy and Critical Theory* (Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner). The first three chapters provide an introduction to some of the key intellectual concerns of the Frankfurt School while the remainder outline Critical Security Studies.

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