



Marxist theories of international relations

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READER'S GUIDE

This chapter will introduce, outline, and assess the Marxist contribution to the study of International Relations. Having identified a number of core features common to Marxist approaches, the chapter discusses four strands within contemporary Marxism which make particularly significant contributions to our understanding of world politics: world-system theory; Gramscianism; critical theory; and New Marxism. The chapter argues that no analysis of globalization is complete without an input from Marxist theory. Indeed, Marx can be depicted as the *first* theorist of globalization, and from the perspective of Marxism, the features often pointed to as evidence of globalization are hardly novel, but are rather the modern manifestations of long-term tendencies within the development of capitalism.

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Box 10.2 Indicators of world inequality

- One-fifth of the world's population are living in extreme poverty.
- Average incomes in the richest 20 countries are 37 times higher than in the poorest 20—this ratio has doubled in the last 20 years.
- In the developed world subsidies to agricultural producers are six times higher than overseas development aid.
- Tariffs on manufactured goods from the developing world are four times higher than those on manufactured goods from other OECD countries.
- 70 per cent of the world's poor and two-thirds of the world's illiterates are women.
- In 34 countries in the world life expectancy is now lower than it was in 1990.
- More than 30,000 children die every day from easily preventable diseases.
- 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.
- One billion people lack access to clean water.
- African countries pay out \$US40 million every day on debt repayment.

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

historical materialism as it is often known. Following on from this, subsequent sections will explore some of the most important strands in contemporary Marx-inspired thinking about world politics. We should note, however, that given the richness and variety of Marxist thinking about world politics, the account that follows is inevitably destined to be partial and to some extent arbitrary. Our aim in the following is to provide a route map that we hope will encourage readers 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.

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 jour-

nalistic in character. He did not incorporate the international dimension into his theoretical mapping of the contours of capitalism. Given the vast scope of Marx's work, 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. That said, since his death many of those who have taken inspiration from Marx's approach have attempted to apply his theoretical insights to international relations.

Given that Marx was an enormously prolific writer, and given also that his ideas developed and changed over time in significant ways, it is not surprising that his legacy has been open to numerous—and often contradictory—interpretations. In addition, real-world developments have also led some of those influenced by Marx to revise his ideas in the light of experience. Hence a variety of different 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. These are world-system theory, Gramscianism, critical theory, and New Marxism. But before we move to discuss what is distinctive about these approaches, it is important that we first examine the essential elements of commonality that lie between them.

First, all the theorists discussed in this chapter share with Marx the view that the social world should be analysed as a **totality**. For them the academic division of the social world into different areas of enquiry—history, philosophy, economics, political science, sociology, international relations, etc.—is both arbitrary and unhelpful. Rather, 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. In his *magnum opus*, volume one of *Capital*, Marx's methodological solution was to start with the simplest of social relations and then proceed to build them up into a more and more complex picture. But however the need to address the totality of relationships in a social world is operationalized, there can be no doubt that 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 inter-

connection 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 diagrammatic representation of the **base-superstructure model** see Fig. 10.1).

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'. 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 great clash between capital and labour. Rather, in one of his most frequently cited

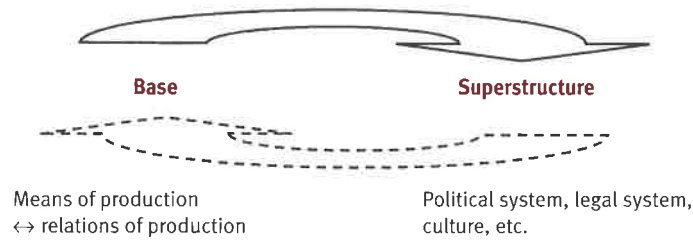


Fig. 10.1 The base–superstructure model

comments, 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**. It is clear from Marx’s own work, however, that this commitment is emphatically NOT a justification for the uncritical acceptance of some party line, or an excuse dogmatically to ignore facts which cast doubt on some long-cherished belief. Marx insisted on the deployment of solid evidence in order to support (and refute) arguments, and indeed pioneered the use of official statistics in social science writing. Nonetheless, Marx 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. So, for example, while proponents of the four strands of contemporary Marxism discussed in

the following sections would all share Marx’s classical commitment to emancipation, few would share Marx’s apparent belief that the replacement of capitalism by socialism is inevitable. 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.

Having considered what unites different Marxist approaches to the study of international relations, we will now turn to the task of examining their distinguishing features, as well as their major claims and contributions.

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.

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 such thinkers as Hobson, Luxemburg, Bukharin, and Hilferding, and Lenin at the start of the twentieth century (see Brewer 1990). Without doubt, 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 Marx's basic thesis that the economic mode of production ultimately determines broader social and political relations: a relationship usually summarized via the famous base–superstructure model. Lenin also accepted Marx's contention that history can only be correctly understood in terms of class conflict.

However, Lenin argued that the character of capitalism had changed since Marx published the first volume of *Capital* in 1867. Capitalism had entered a new stage—its highest and final stage—with the development of **monopoly capitalism**. Under monopoly capitalism, a two-tier structure had developed within the world-economy with a dominant **core** exploiting a less-developed **periphery**. Such a structure dramatically complicates Marx's view of a simple divergence of interests between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. 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—or bluntly, buy off—their own working class through the further exploitation of the periphery. Thus, the structural division between the core and periphery determines the character of the relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat of each country.

This summary of Lenin's theory of imperialism should alert us to two important features of the world-system approach to the understanding of

world politics. The first is that all politics, international and domestic, takes place within the framework of a capitalist world-economy. The second is the contention that states are not the only important actors in world politics, rather social classes are also very significant. Moreover, it is the location of these states and classes within the structure of the capitalist world-economy that constrains their behaviour and determines patterns of interaction and domination between them.

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 the work of Raul Prebisch was especially significant. He argued that countries in the periphery were suffering as a result of what he called 'the declining terms of trade'. Put simply he suggested that the price of manufactured goods increased more rapidly than that of raw materials. So, for example, year by year it requires more tons of coffee to pay for a refrigerator. As a result of their reliance on primary goods, each year countries of the periphery are becoming 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 can be seen to have 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 the dominant form of social organization has been what he calls 'world-systems'. History has witnessed two types of world-system: **world-empires**, and **world-economies**. The main distinction between a world-empire and a world-economy relates to how decisions about resource distribution—crudely, who gets what—are

made. In a world-empire a centralized political system uses its power to redistribute resources from peripheral areas to the central core area. In the Roman Empire this took the form of the payment of 'tributes' by the outlying provinces back to the Roman heartland. By contrast, in a world-economy there is no single centre of political authority, but rather we find multiple competing centres of power. Resources are not distributed by central decree but rather through the medium of a **market**. However, although the mechanism for resource distribution is different, the net effect of both types of system is the same, and that is the transfer of resources from the periphery to the core.

The modern world-system is an example of a world-economy. According to Wallerstein this 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). He argues that within the context of this system, specific institutions are continually being created and re-created. This state of flux not only extends to what are normally considered to be narrowly economic institutions such as particular companies or even industries. It is equally true for what are often thought to be permanent, even primordial institutions, such as the family unit, ethnic groups, and states. According to Wallerstein, none of these is timeless—none remains the same. To claim otherwise is to adopt an **ahistoric** attitude, that is, to fail to understand that the characteristics of social institutions are historically specific. For Wallerstein all social institutions, large and small, are continually adapting and changing within the context of a dynamic world-system. Furthermore, and crucially, it is not only the elements within the system which change. Wallerstein argues that the system itself is historically bounded. It had a beginning, has a middle, and will have an end.

The modern world-system has features which can be described in terms of space and time. The **spatial** dimension focuses on the differing economic roles

played by different regions within the world-economy. To the core-periphery distinction Wallerstein has (somewhat controversially) added another economic zone in his description of the world-economy, 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. For example, although penetrated by core economic interests, the semi-periphery has its own relatively vibrant indigenously owned industrial base (see Fig. 10.2). 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 spatial dimension of the world-economy. However, described in isolation they provide a rather static portrayal of the world-system. In order to understand 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

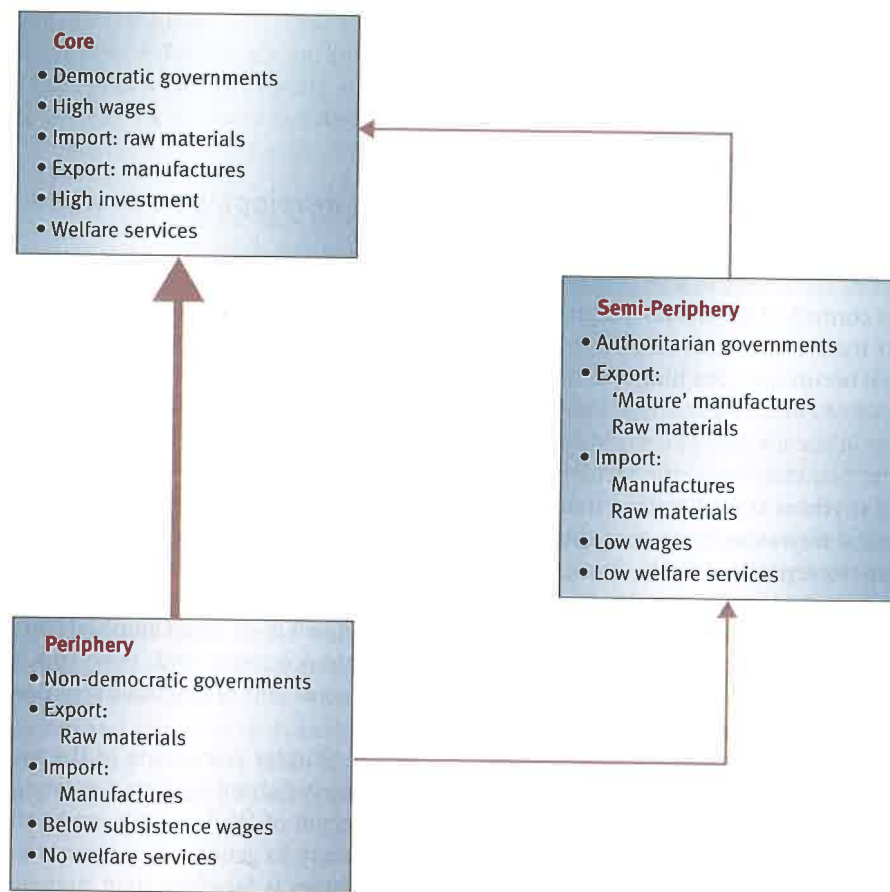


Fig. 10.2 Interrelationships in the world-economy

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' (1991a: 261). These constraints can best be illustrated by examining a problem that Wallerstein regards as one of the main contradictions confronting the capitalist world-system: under-consumption.

In the short term it is in the interests of capitalists

to maximize profits through driving down the wages of the producers, i.e. their workers. However, to realize their profits, capitalists need to sell the products that their workers produce to consumers who are willing and able to buy them. The contradiction arises from the fact that the workers (the producers) are also the potential consumers, and the more wage levels are driven down in the quest to maximize profits, the less purchasing power the workers enjoy. Thus, capitalists end up with shelves full of things that they are unable to sell and no way of getting their hands on the profits. So, although in the short term it might be beneficial for capitalists to depress wage levels, in the longer term this might well lead to a fall in profits because wage earners would be able to purchase fewer goods: in other words, it would

create a crisis of under-consumption. Thus, 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 everyday language we tend to use the word **crisis** to dramatize even relatively minor problems. However, in the context of the world-system, Wallerstein wishes to reserve the term to refer to a very specific temporal occurrence. For him, a 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, the secular trends, and the cyclical rhythms at work within that system 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). 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). 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 that is 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 the gap between Wallerstein's work and that of the New Marxists (discussed in a subsequent section), 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.