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Historical materialism and international studies: theorising the politics of struggle in the everyday world

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Abstract

This forum brings together critical engagements with Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton's *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* to assess the prospects and limits of historical materialism in International Studies. The authors' call for a 'necessarily historical materialist moment' in International Studies is interrogated by scholars working with historical materialist, feminist and decolonial frameworks in and beyond International Relations (IR)/International Political Economy (IPE). This introductory essay situates the book in relation to the wider concerns of historical materialist IR/IPE and outlines how the contributors assess the viability of Bieler and Morton's historical materialist project.

Keywords

capitalism, crisis, decolonial approaches, feminism, geopolitics, historical materialism, international political economy, international relations theory

Introduction

In a *World Politics* article published in 1971, Robert Berki interrogated historical materialism's purported inability to extend its critique of capitalism to a critique of international relations.¹ Berki positioned Kenneth Waltz as his main interlocutor and documented how Waltz's 'internalist' critique of Marxism failed to capture the potential of historical materialist concepts to analyse 'a world community that consists of separate units'.² While Berki himself was not optimistic about Marxist political projects' capacity to overcome the 'dilemma' of achieving political and economic unity in an international

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system comprised of ‘separate national identities’, he recognised that Marxism could offer conceptual and political strategies to envision, and perhaps even forge, a world community freed from ‘group-identities’ such as ‘the state, the nation, the tribe, the family and even the class’.³

Attempts to theorise ‘the international’, or the question of ‘societal multiplicity’ as Justin Rosenberg has framed it,⁴ from a historical materialist perspective continues to produce some of the most vibrant theoretical and empirical contributions to the International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) literatures.⁵ Historical materialism in International Studies has long functioned as a key resource for unpacking and denaturalising entrenched assumptions in mainstream *and* critical currents, and it has – along with feminist and postcolonial approaches – produced some of the most substantial cross-disciplinary IR/IPE research with other branches of the social sciences, specifically with Geography and Sociology.⁶ Nevertheless, while there are common categories and theoretical occupations that unite most historical materialist currents in IR/IPE, it is difficult to conclude that a clearly identifiable framework for operationalising *a* historical materialist IR or IPE theory exists in the literature today.⁷

For many scholars, this is certainly a strength rather than a weakness, as historical materialism is often seen as a ‘portmanteau’ framework that houses a constellation of materialist approaches rather than a parsimonious theoretical template.⁸ Yet the lack of a coherent theoretical identity renders various currents of historical materialist scholarship vulnerable to repeated charges of economism, determinism and Eurocentrism – even when these currents do a significant amount of work outlining how they overcome/reject the very same pitfalls. Perhaps more importantly, this identity issue raises a more foundational question about the location and constituency of historical materialism in the academy, and specifically in International Studies: Who is historical materialist scholarship *for*?

Enter *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*.⁹ Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton’s book offers compelling answers to many of the above outlined issues, and thus presents an ideal resource to explore the wider limits and prospects of historical materialism in International Studies. From the outset, the book appears as an explicitly theoretical undertaking: It distils an ambitious range of contributions from historical materialist theorising into a coherent framework to analyse global politics and political economy, and does so in ways that emphasise the *relational* and *processual* aspects of historical materialism. But more so than providing a general theoretical framework, Bieler and Morton challenge International Studies scholars to reject ‘ontological dualisms’ – for example, states versus markets, agents versus structures – that have long shaped the study of IR and IPE, and situate social relations and social forces at the heart of their analysis in a concrete manner.¹⁰ In other words, this is a theoretical contribution that forces its interlocutors in IR and IPE to think about the relevance and purpose of their scholarship, and compels them to engage with the questions posed by historical materialist theorising in the process. Reclaiming the political purpose of Marxism as a theory *of* and *for* social movements,¹¹ the book invokes Max Horkheimer’s dictum that ‘[t]heory is theory in the authentic sense only where it serves practice’.¹²

The book’s conceptual apparatus is ultimately designed to explain how social relations of production and reproduction structure the conditions of existence for the popular

masses. The authors repeatedly emphasise that the key occupations of IR and IPE scholarship (e.g. war, competition, cooperation, ideology, etc.) must be studied in relation to both ‘the structuring conditions of capitalist social relations of production, as well as the strategies of various social class forces’.¹³ This is, however, no mere call to privilege class at the expense of other variables. Rather, Bieler and Morton urge their readers to understand class struggle in ‘a broad sense [that] goes beyond the traditional workplace and the mere confrontation between wage labour and employers’.¹⁴ In dialogue with the work of, *inter alia*, Silvia Federici, Nancy Fraser, Harry Cleaver and David McNally, the authors adopt an ‘expanded’ conception of class struggle and integrate race, gender, ecology and sexuality into their framework.¹⁵ The concrete result of this theoretical orientation is a series of empirical analyses that scrutinise IR/IPE concerns around inter-state conflict and globalisation from a materialist perspective, one which centres its analytical gaze on those who toil and survive in the ‘social factory’ of contemporary capitalism. Accordingly, while the book is structured around disciplinary debates in IR/IPE – and thus prioritises IR/IPE scholars and students as its main constituency – it simultaneously amplifies and attempts to theorise the struggles of subaltern social forces, that is, everyone who lacks ‘practical juridical links with the means of production’.¹⁶ The practical objective of the book is, therefore, to understand and inform, what Edward Said called, ‘the politics of struggle and power in the everyday world’.¹⁷

As impressive as the book’s theoretical and empirical achievements are, its ambitious scope also reveals tensions in the authors’ project of reconstructing a historical materialist IR/IPE. This forum brings together critical engagements that unpack these tensions and assess the wider implications of the authors’ call for a ‘historical materialist moment’ in IR and IPE.

Bob Jessop initiates the discussion by posing six critical questions that push the authors to refine their theoretical framework. In particular, Jessop zooms in on the relationship between class relations and class agency, the role of sense- and meaning-making in global capitalism and the questions of temporality and periodisation. The following two contributions from Ian Bruff and Sébastien Rioux focus on the theoretical and disciplinary investments that constitute the book’s rich analytical toolkit. Bruff highlights a tension between the book’s ambitious cross-disciplinary scope and its persistent attempt to engage with the International Studies community as its core academic audience. Retracing the authors’ intellectual trajectory and socialisation in the British International Studies community, Bruff suggests that this disciplinary anchor led the authors to produce a particular ‘literary sequencing’ of their argument,¹⁸ one that ultimately prioritises the book’s ‘IR/IPE’ identity at the expense of its potentially more productive cross-disciplinary appeal. Rioux examines how the authors’ engagement with the philosophy of internal relations allows them to overcome some of the shortcomings that continue to undermine other historical materialist currents in International Studies. Despite the authors’ success in disentangling certain binaries, Rioux suggests that the book reproduces other hierarchies ‘between class exploitation and forms of oppression such as gender, sexuality, nationality and race’, and links these issues to the lingering influence of Political Marxism on the book’s underlying conception of capitalism.¹⁹

The conceptual limits identified by Rioux are further analysed and elaborated upon in a series of interrelated interventions by Lara Montesinos Coleman, Aida Hozíć and

Victoria Basham. Constituting the first panel of a triptych on the authors' engagement with decolonial and feminist theorising, Montesinos Coleman dissects how the 'ontological starting point' of production renders the book ill-equipped to recognise and engage with forms of politics and knowledge that are 'ontologically incompatible' with modern (read: colonial) categories. Montesinos Coleman questions whether the book can speak *to* and *for* 'indigenous, peasant and worker movements' in the global South, whose praxis often incorporates 'Marxism, feminism and indigenous cosmovisions', not merely as fixed 'identities' or 'idioms', but as transient 'reference points' that are continually reshaped and reformulated in light of their particular struggles.²⁰

Aida Hozic's contribution opens up a new line of inquiry by reading the book through an explicitly feminist IPE lens. As Hozic sympathetically notes, the book offers a productive engagement with feminist theorising and shares feminist scholars' aim of eradicating 'false dichotomies of disciplinary knowledge production in IR and IPE'. Yet, Hozic warns that, in its attempts to unmask how social relations of production and reproduction undergird international relations, the book risks 'circling back to the state as the locus of politics'. Hozic highlights how feminist IPE has long recognised the centrality of a wider range of actors in shaping global politics – actors whose 'politics always *a priori* [transcend] the state', and who, 'by necessity, must operate simultaneously below and above states'.²¹ Victoria Basham furthers this intervention by interrogating the authors' discussion of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. Retracing the 'specific conditions under which patriarchy and capitalism began to work with and through one another' in dialogue with Carole Pateman's work, Basham pushes Bieler and Morton to integrate patriarchal ideas and relations more systematically into their analysis of capitalism. Hozic and Basham remind the reader that the current conjuncture calls not only for a historical materialist moment, but also for a feminist one. In Hozic's words, the 'necessary historical materialist moment' must capture the necessity to speak to those who participate in the struggles over 'abortion and family planning' and against 'gender-based violence and sexual harassment'.

Kevin Gray's contribution examines the authors' conceptualisation of the relationship between capitalism and geopolitics by focusing on the book's discussion of the 'rising powers' and Chinese capitalism. Gray suggests that the organisation of the book, and in particular, the separation of the analyses of capitalism, war and crisis into three distinct chapters, prevents the authors from fully operationalising their theoretical insights. Gray suggests that this detachment undermines Bieler and Morton's ability to explain key aspects of contemporary international relations, and highlights the book's silence on the interplay between the development trajectory of Chinese neoliberalism and increased geopolitical tensions between China and the United States.

Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis is a magisterial piece of work that offers an ambitious research agenda, analytical tools to design further empirical interventions as well as normative and theoretical insights that reach well beyond traditional IR/IPE concerns. The book forcefully repositions historical materialist scholarship in International Studies, not merely as a resource of critique deployed to reinforce other approaches, but as a key vector of theory production and empirical research in and of itself. The book stands as a testimony that International Studies cannot claim to understand and explain our contemporary moment without taking seriously the vital questions

and analyses posed by historical materialist scholarship. The onus is now on other scholars to take up Bieler and Morton's challenge, and reflect on who their scholarship is *about* and *for*.

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Notes

1. Robert N. Berki, 'On Marxian Thought and the Problem of International Relations', *World Politics*, 24(1), 1971, pp. 80–105.
2. Kenneth R. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001[1959]), p. 125; Berki, 'On Marxian Thought and the Problem of International Relations', p. 105.
3. Berki, 'On Marxian Thought and the Problem of International Relations', p. 105, pp. 96–7.
4. Justin Rosenberg, 'The "Philosophical Premises" of Uneven and Combined Development', *Review of International Studies*, 39(3), 2012, pp. 569–97.
5. The space precludes me from providing an extensive list, but see Adrienne Roberts' *Gendered States of Punishment and Welfare: Feminist Political Economy, Primitive Accumulation and the Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) and Benno Teschke's *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003) for two examples of historical materialist scholarship that destabilised established IR and IPE categories by centring their analyses on foundational materialist occupations such as the social relations of (re)production and class struggle.
6. See, *inter alia*, Susanne Soederberg, *Debtfare States and the Poverty Industry: Money, Discipline and the Surplus Population* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London: Pluto, 2015); Chris Hesketh, *Spaces of Capital/Spaces of Resistance: Mexico and the Global Political Economy* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017).
7. It's worth considering here how Coxian Gramscianism—arguably the most popular IR/IPE theoretical framework explicitly built on historical materialist concepts—has expanded its parameters in ways that prioritised cross-pollination with other approaches at the expense of its once-central historical materialist categories.
8. Adopted from Adam David Morton's discussion of the concept of passive revolution in 'The Continuum of Passive Revolution', *Capital & Class*, 34(3), 2010, p. 322. See also the contributions in Alexander Anievas (ed.), *Marxism and World Politics: Contesting Global Capitalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

9. Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). The title is abbreviated as *GCGWGC* throughout this forum.
10. *GCGWGC*, p. 11.
11. Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, *We Make Our Own History: Marxism, Social Movements and the Crisis of Neoliberalism* (London: Pluto, 2014).
12. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'Towards a New Manifesto?', *New Left Review*, 65, 2010[1956], p. 52.
13. *GCGWGC*, p. 46.
14. *GCGWGC*, p. 134.
15. *GCGWGC*, p. 150, 132.
16. Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 97.
17. Edward W. Said, 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community', in *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2001), p. 133.
18. See also Ian Bruff and Kathryn Starnes, 'Framing the Neoliberal Canon: Resisting the Market Myth via Literary Enquiry', *Globalizations*, 16(3), 2019, pp. 245–59.
19. See also Sébastien Rioux, 'The Fiction of Economic Coercion: Political Marxism and the Separation of Theory and History', *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*, 21(4), 2014, pp. 92–128.
20. See also Leonie Ansems de Vries, Lara Montesinos Coleman, Doerthe Rosenow, et al., 'Fracturing Politics (Or, How to Avoid the Tacit Reproduction of Modern/Colonial Ontologies in Critical Thought)', *International Political Sociology*, 11(1), 2017, pp. 90–108.
21. See also Aida A. Hozic and Jacqui True (eds.), *Scandalous Economics: Gender and the Politics of Financial Crises* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Author biography

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