

## The Defining Tenets of Political Marxism

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Marxism, for a start, is a theory applicable to a great variety of fields of social inquiry. In other words, political science, sociology, anthropology, history, international relations, economy, geography, all have their own scholars who draw their basic assumptions from the work of Karl Marx. As a consequence, the broad definition of Marxist theory is in itself a huge field of studies. Even if we consider each academic discipline separately, it can easily be seen that their interdisciplinarity is so intense that it is still not possible to talk of Marxism as a whole. In such a small-scoped essay, it is a virtually impossible task. What shall be done, then, is to pick up a few influential Marxist scholars in the field of International Relations, and show how each one of them base their work on the others', sharing a same core set of assumptions.

As said before, the diversity of research in Marxism is enormous, which give lots of options for such a choice. For example, the work of the Leninist school with its particular understanding of imperialism, or the Neo-Gramscians' and their focus on hegemony building<sup>1</sup>. Still, the choice made reflects the most solid attempt in returning to classic historical materialism in our days. The present essay will focus on a branch of Marxism that can be traced back to Brenner's critique of 'Neo-Smithian Marxists' reaffirming the central importance of the advent of a specific set of property relations to the rise of capitalism. Hence, he brings the focus to the issue of the starting point of capitalism as being strictly dependent on that particular class configuration, and argues that the first place where it had a chance to develop was in British agriculture.

Justin Rosenberg builds on Brenner's work, taking his historical approach of the origin of capitalism to derive from that an account of the origin of the modern state, and the modern states-system. He sees as a capital point in this rise of modernity the separation between the economic and the political, or private and public spheres, the market and the state; which then goes on to affirm the existence of the 'imperialism of civil society', in opposition to the more traditional state-driven view of imperialism. At last, he uses this theoretical framework to deconstruct the idea of an anarchical state-system, which is one of the main starting points of the Realist and Neo-Realist schools of International Relations. It must be said, though, that Rosenberg never actually becomes a part of the Political Marxist tradition. Actually, most of his recent work is devoted to a development of Trotsky's 'uneven and combined development' thesis. He does share Brenner's critiques, nonetheless, and must be included due to his clear influence in Teschke's work.

Then, Teschke takes from Brenner and Rosenberg contributions to the field to give a more specific historical account of the rise of the modern system of sovereign states. More precisely, he adds to Rosenberg's argument the aspect of a truly historical process, linking the Brenner interpretation of capitalism's origin in agricultural Britain to its proper expansion through Europe and the rest of the World. In order to do that, he rebuilds the interpretation of balance of power, showing the coexistence of two different sets of balance: a traditional one, between the great continental dynastic powers in Europe, and one between them and England, that could use the State power in service of market interests. It must be said that there are other scholars that could be used to represent the consolidation of Political Marxism, most notably Ellen Wood. The choice for Teschke is a consequence of a more direct confrontation with classic International Relations theory.

<sup>1</sup> A more extensive list of different branches of Marxism in International Relations can be found on TESCHKE, 2008.

Having specified the authors and ideas which shall be here presented, and laid a brief introduction on each of them, we can now start the search for the main tenets of this specific branch of Marxist theory in International Relations. It shall start with a brief description of the World-Systems Theory, since Brenner's main arguments rise from the critique of that school.

### World-Systems Theory's Account of the Rise of Capitalism

The 'long sixteenth century' is defined by the historian Fernand Braudel as being the period of time correspondent to the rise of a world-economy dominated by Mediterranean cities. It is called 'long' for not coinciding with normal chronological limits, starting in 1450 and lasting until 1640 or 1620 (BRAUDEL, 1953, p. 73). This concept of the sixteenth century is accepted and adopted by Immanuel Wallerstein, in his study of the rise of capitalism, in what he calls a world-economy.

This world-economy, which is the basis for the development of the modern world-system, is defined by Wallerstein as the economic linkage of many different areas in the world, encompassing states, kingdoms and other kinds of political systems, as well as many types of social configurations - that is, based on different modes of property relations. Another kind of system would be the empire, where the economic linkage would be substituted for a political one. The main trait, then, is the role of market-driven trade in development, providing the optimized background for the accumulation of capital (WALLERSTEIN, 1974, p. 15-16).

As he argues, there was one essential condition to the establishment of such world-economy: '[t]he territorial expansion of Europe', which means not only the conquest of America in the early sixteenth century, but also conquests of territories in European continent itself in the previous centuries (for example, in the crusades against the Moors, in England's expansion to Wales and Scotland, or in the conquest of the Slavs by the Germans and Scandinavians) (WALLERSTEIN, 1974, p. 38-39).

In other words, it can be said that Wallerstein explains the rise of capitalism as a consequence of increased trade in the core of the system. In his view, this territorial expansion allowed the new world-economy to increase its overall production (based on an absolute increase of the surplus). The surplus produced on these recently integrated areas was exported to the core, and consisted mostly of agricultural products, precious metals and spices. These incoming products allowed the core to reduce its agricultural production, which led to the rural exodus and the growth of the cities, and consequently of manufactures (WALLERSTEIN, 1974, p. 98-99). It is important to stress that the surplus originated from these 'peripheral' areas is not necessarily a consequence of changes in the form of control of labour. Instead, Wallerstein states that some forms of labour suits best some specific areas, according to its specific production (WALLERSTEIN, 1974, p. 86-87). He seems to consider surplus as a natural consequence of production.

Similar views can be found in many other authors. For example, Blaut identifies in the European expansion to America the increase in capital accumulation (through the plantation system or the mining of massive amounts of gold and silver) that allowed capitalism to develop in Europe. Also, just like Wallerstein, he sees the rise of capitalism as a consequence of this territorial expansion (BLAUT, 1993, p. 188).

Therefore, we can see that the production is already deemed as market-oriented, or in other words, it has the main goal of producing a surplus that can be exchanged. In that, we can see a logical connection to Sweezy's argument of the decline of feudalism being a need of finding another mode of production that could result in larger amounts of capital accumulation (SWEETZY, 1980, p. 45). The presence of the market as an imperative part of the economy is the main connection between those authors' arguments, and will be mentioned again in Brenner's critique.

## Robert Brenner and the Critique to Neo-Smithian Marxists

Brenner criticizes scholars from the World-System Theory, such as Andreas Gunder Frank, Paul Sweezy and Immanuel Wallerstein (TESCHKE, 2008, 169-170). He identifies in their accounts of the origins of capitalism a reduced importance of the development of a new set of property relations (specifically, of capitalist property relations), which gives place to a focus on a market-driven productivity increase through trade demands and increasing specialization (as if they drew on Smith's 'natural tendency to trade and barter' - reason why he calls them 'neo-smithians'). His goal, then, is to revert this situation, returning the class relations to its privileged space in classical Marxism. In his words:

"(...) 'production for profit via exchange' will have the systematic effect of accumulation and the development of the productive forces only when it expresses certain specific social relations of production, namely a system of free wage labour, where labour power is a commodity. Only where labour has been separated from possession of the means of production, and where labourers have been emancipated from any direct relation of domination (such as slavery or serfdom), are both capital and labour power 'free' to make possible their combination at the highest possible level of technology." (BRENNER, 1977, 32)

He then goes on to state that this model of development, based on 'production for profit via exchange', actually takes for granted a given set of conditions that were not always present in the history of society, and specially not in pre-capitalist modes of production. Basically, these conditions refer to the freedom of movement of the workers from rural to urban areas (ie, from agriculture to industrial production)<sup>2</sup>, the actual need for constant innovation, and the systemic pressure for constant increase in productivity (BRENNER, 1977, 34). In other words, they seem to miss what is specific of capitalist market, applying these traits to any situation where commerce existed.

He justifies it arguing that the direct producers in pre-capitalist modes of production had access to means of production, which means that they could produce goods based only on their own subsistence, having no actual need of producing a surplus to be exchanged in the market. Therefore, the 'exploiter' class needed a military method of coercion to force the production of a surplus from which they could subsist themselves. Only after that, if there still was some exceeding production, it would be destined to trade. As a result, there was nothing in this specific mode of production that could lead to the rise of a market-oriented economy (BRENNER, 1986, 27).

The only possibility of that was a substantial change in those property relations, which first came in the development of English agriculture. There, landlords had gained control of huge properties and allowed capitalists to use it through hired workers for a rent (creating the classic relation of landlord, capitalist and wage labourer). Having to pay the rent to their landlords, those capitalists had, then, the incentive to produce not to their own subsistence, but to sell their products for a profit. The wage labourers, on the other hand, having no means of subsistence of their own, had no option other than selling their labour power as a commodity, being then vulnerable to economic ways of surplus production as described by Marx in *The Capital* (BRENNER, 1977, 75-76).

The scope of this essay does not allow a more detailed presentation on Brenner's extremely interesting argument. Considering those presented above as the essential points of his work, we shall move on to a brief discussion on Rosenberg's work.

## Justin Rosenberg's Account of Modern International Relations

Rosenberg draws on Brenner's view of the origin of capitalism to build a new approach on the concept of sovereignty that has been essential to the development of the modern state and states-system. He calls his method 'international historical sociology', for its focus on how class relations had an impact on the political structure, and, therefore, on the international sphere, throughout the last centuries.

Not surprisingly, he frames his work on the same chronological limits as Brenner, which is a consequence of them sharing the same understanding of the transition towards capitalism as a result of historically limited class-relations, and of the consequential shift it means in world politics, which he identifies with the advent of modernity itself. Its main effect, according to Rosenberg, is certainly the rise of a specific kind of sovereignty, which he defines as a product of the division between politics and 'economics' - or actually into a public and a privatized political sphere. This appears in Brenner's work, but is taken to its last consequences by Rosenberg. As there is no more need for coercion in the surplus extraction, the political sphere becomes distinct from a 'purely economic' one; state and market can exist separately. This specific kind of state that does not need to intervene in the privatized sphere of production is what he calls a sovereign state (ROSENBERG, 1994, 127-128). He actually goes on to say that this separation houses the rise of a new kind of empire, one that operates extensively on the private sphere (through the implementation of contracts) that he calls 'empire of civil society', in opposition to the imperialism conducted by states (ROSENBERG, 1994, 131).

A very important conclusion can be drawn from that: the study of International Relations cannot take for granted a model of sovereign states. That has to be understood from the social relations that are contained within each state, since the aforementioned division might not exist in every state (ROSENBERG, 1996, 8). Through that statement, he also draws on Trotsky's idea of 'uneven and combined development' (TROTSKY, 2008, 4-7).

From that follows Rosenberg's redefinition of anarchy and balance of power. The anarchy of the international system is the political equivalent of the free market, i.e., just like individual firms face no superior authority when allocating their resources, individual states have the same absence of restrictions when operating in an anarchical system. And in precisely the same way there is a mechanism (the 'invisible hand') that regulates the market absorbing surpluses through different levels of supply and demand, there is a similar one - the balance of power - that keeps the sovereign states from taking over each other.

As he puts it:

*"If the line of argument developed in this chapter is valid, then the balance of power is not just like the invisible hand. It is its other half, the equivalent in the public political realm of the alienated social form of the invisible hand in the private political realm of 'the economy'."* (ROSENBERG, 1994, 139)

Despite its brevity, this should be enough to make clear how Rosenberg draws on Brenner's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism to build upon that his own view of the international system, being able to give it some solid historic materialist foundations.

## Benno Teschke's Political Marxism

Teschke's main goal seems to be a deconstruction of the myth of the Westphalian Treaties after the Thirty Years' War as the foundational moment of modern sovereignty. In order to do that, he uses the framework set by Rosenberg, adding to it a greater sense of historicity. He returns to Brenner's delimitation of the origin of capitalism in British agriculture, and shows how the transformation pointed out by Rosenberg on the international system was not an automatic feature of market expansion, but actively brought upon the rest of the world by its first modern state - England.

<sup>2</sup> Or even, their expulsion from the first to the latter as a precondition to the birth of a mass of dispossessed wage-labourers.

The aforementioned separation between public and private (and therefore, the new conception of sovereignty) that lies in the heart of modernity rose first in England, placing it as the centre of economic development and setting the base of its supremacy in the eighteenth century. It also allowed for a new kind of political rationality, a typically modern or capitalist one, as opposed to a dynastical one, binded to pre-capitalist forms of surplus production and accumulation. Those two logics coexisted for some hundreds of years, and generated different models of power politics. The British foreign policy in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shows clear signs of its de-territorialization, positioning itself outside the traditional balance of power and at the same time, creating another one. In Teschke's own words:

“After 1713, British foreign policy no longer operated on the principle of ‘natural allies’ - the ‘old system’ which allied England, the Dutch republic and Austria against France - but on the fluid principle of rapidly changing coalitions which earned her the Continent the epithet ‘Perfidious Albion’. This nickname was (...) due to a failure to understand the logic of a post-dynastic foreign policy and active balancing in the context of an overwhelmingly dynastic system of states.” (TESCHKE, 2002, 33)

There were, than, two regimes of power-balancing operating in Europe in the eighteenth century. Absolutist states remained engaged on a system of territorial equilibrium, England sought to realize indirect interventions, subsidizing smaller powers while countering imperial-hegemonic ambition (TESCHKE, 2003, 260). How then did one of them fade out and the other prevailed? According to Teschke, the British ‘active balancing’ system eventually advanced to be not only a defensive stance on which it could defend its economic advantage, but went on to transform other European states, forcing them to adapt to its own new kind of property relations. They were played against each other for so long, that they were eventually ‘financially and economically exhausted’. These forced a lot of intense political crisis, which resulted in the creation of a mass of free wage labourers and the consequent rise of capitalist relations of production (TESCHKE, 2003, 263). As he concludes:

“The transposition of capitalism to the Continent and the rest of the world was riddled with social conflicts, civil and international wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions, but its essential mechanism was geopolitically combined and socially uneven development. This concept allows us to avoid the geopolitical competition literature’s mistake of externalizing military rivalry to a separate and reified level of determination, while at the same time avoiding economic reductionism. Post-1688 international relations were not a continuation of the succession of dominant great powers in an otherwise unchanging structure of anarchy, but expressed the unfolding of this gigantic human drama.” (TESCHKE, 2003, 266)

Thus, it is clear how Teschke uses Brenner's and Rosenberg's works to build his own interpretation of the expansion of capitalism and modernity from England to the rest of the European continent and the world.

## Conclusion

The works of Brenner, Rosenberg and Teschke, as shown, are complementary and even constitutive of each other. It should be noted how relevant their notion of modernity as a consequence of the rise of capitalist mode of production is, and how this latter is a result not of continuing trade and increased production, but of a specific set of property relations which represents a significant discontinuity with pre-modern logics of development. Market is not interpreted as an opportunity for trade which stimulates the constant increase of production through its ever-increasing demand; but as a specific trait of capitalist accumulation, where it appears not as an opportunity, but as a necessity. This is definitely the most basic and defining tenet of the Marxist account of International Relations found on their works. The separation of public and private spheres (therefore, state and the market), and the notion of ‘geopolitically combined and social uneven development’ are also important, but can be treated as consequences of their shared understanding of capitalism. 🌐

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<sup>2</sup> Or even, their expulsion from the first to the latter as a precondition to the birth of a mass of dispossessed wage-labourers.