Debate

‘Critical' Political Economy, Historical Materialism and Adam Morton

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In response to Adam Morton's survey of 'critical' IPE in the January 2006 issue of this journal, I argue that we should resist the call to privilege the question of class struggle when considering the political economy of world order. This question, although not unimportant, draws upon an overly narrow and austere conception of historical materialism. Instead, I consider a more fulsome – but decidedly non-Marxist – tradition of historical materialism in order to move beyond the mono- logical tendency that continues to mar much Marxist historiography, especially when the question of class struggle is elevated as the principal lens through which our understanding of capitalism is organised. I do this by considering the importance of historical idealism in the work of Robert W. Cox, a key interlocutor of much so-called ‘critical' IPE. Although I agree with Morton that class struggle should not be effaced, I make the counter-claim that understanding the political economy of world order demands an attention to the formation of collective human subjectivities if we are adequately to grasp its contemporary dynamics.

‘Critical' political economy and historical materialism

Adam Morton has written a lively and provocative account of the current state of ‘critical' political economy within the UK. He worries that what passes for ‘critical' political economy should more properly be understood as ‘liberal pluralist idealism', and that it systematically refuses to recognise and explore the class structure and dynamics that collectively constitute capitalist ‘unfreedom and exploitation' (Morton, 2006, p. 63). To correct this deficiency he directs us to consider the question ‘where is class struggle?', for this question exposes most starkly the dynamics of capitalist social formations. Morton thus advances a variant of mono- logical Marxism, and in this short response I cast doubt on the attractiveness of this directive, even considered on its own terms. At one level, the question of class struggle is self-referential: it assumes the form (although not the precise content) of its answer without being able to account for why this question itself should be asked. But more importantly, it may not even be the most pointed question to ask today, in part because it assumes that the social structure of global order is predominantly organised around and through capitalism, understood primarily in terms of class struggle. To do this, I draw on a richer tradition of historical materialism than Morton allows to indicate how we might better frame our inquiry around questions concerning the formation of subjectivities rather than classes.

Morton organises much of his discussion around the work of himself and Robert W. Cox. I focus here on Cox’s work, because it illustrates a cardinal weakness of
Morton’s position. Cox has of course written some of the most insightful and provocative accounts of world order available within the tradition of political economy, but interestingly, when pushed to identify the label under which his work might be considered, he has been reluctant to settle on any one version. Rather, he accepts Susan Strange’s (1988, pp. 269–270) description of his work as eclectic, that of a ‘loner, a fugitive from the intellectual camps of victory, both Marxist and liberal’ (cf. Cox, 2002, p. 26). Now, if we want to consider Cox as an ‘historical materialist’ – Morton’s preferred inclination – we must acknowledge the very deep ambivalence he maintains towards the kind of monological Marxism advanced by Morton.

For Cox, critical political economy (aka historical materialism) is centrally concerned with developing a ‘historical mode of thought’ to investigate the structural and agential modalities characteristic of any particular period of history (Cox, 1996 [1981], p. 91). Class struggle can certainly insert itself into such a mode of thought, but it is not a privileged analytical lens, nor – judging by Cox’s own work – an overly privileged question. For example, his most recent work focuses on civilisational change, and the intersubjective understandings which frame, shape, promote or impede it. By piecing together the evolving nature of our collective human consciousness, his work exposes the necessary but not sufficient relationship between material practices and competing collective mentalités. What marks out Cox’s historical materialism in this sense is its infusion with a form of philosophical idealism – or, more properly, historical idealism – that takes seriously the interrelationship of forms of subjectivity with the actual human practices that sustain and challenge them. This particular fusion of idealism with materialism is the key to his careful distinction between synchronic and diachronic understandings of historical structures: the difference between the material practices which uphold or challenge a historical structure can be found in the subjectivities (and intersubjectivities) which inform the actual practices of historical agents at specific points in time; it is these subjectivities that generate contradictions in established institutions and patterns of behaviour. In other words, the mode of subjectivity is key to understanding material structures.

Here the value of historical materialism as an approach to understanding political economy is precisely that it allows us to prise open the intersubjective consciousness of historical agents to reconstruct their mentalités. But to arrive at this position, Cox builds on the work of thinkers without an intellectual debt to Marx and Marxism. For example, he begins with Vico’s brilliant insight that the human world can only be understood through the modifications of our own human mind (Vico, 1970 [1744], p. 62), and then follows R.G. Collingwood’s (1946, p. 242) injunction to construct webs of meaning that enable us to enter into the minds of historical participants and rebuild the world as they see it. It is fidelity to such a ‘historical mode of thought’ that signals Cox’s most mature work, whether exploring concrete institutions or civilisational encounters (Cox, 1996 [1977] and 2002). His work is thus historical because it insists on conceiving consciousness as integral to rather than derivative of social being: ‘mind is ... the thread connecting the present with the past, a means of access to a knowledge of these changing modes of social reality’ (Cox, 1996 [1981], p. 93). Class struggle can be a feature of this evolving social
reality, but the subjectivity that defines its core is open to many influences above and beyond class.

And this is the analytical and theoretical heart of the matter: if historical materialism (or ‘critical’ political economy) is to take seriously the question of subjectivity, then it must range wider and deeper than Marxist historiography allows. That is what many of us ‘non’-critical political economists in fact do: we pay attention to multiple and competing forms of collective agency in the contemporary period. Understood in this way, the source of Morton’s concern becomes clear: to protect a narrowly conceived and Marxist version of historical materialism from what I would argue is the logic and method of its own much broader tradition. But such a position cannot be sustained. Not only does it conflate historical materialism with its Marxist variant, thereby obscuring or ignoring the many contributions of pre-, post- and non-Marxist historical materialists. It also fails to address adequately the problem of a crude materialism that denies and obscures the force of agency organised other than along class lines.

Adam Morton and the poverty of materialism

The claim that Marxist historical materialism is crudely materialist – perhaps even reductionist – is of course itself partly a caricature; there are as many Marxisms as there are self-identified Marxists. However, within radical and Marxist international political economy (IPE), too often key forms of agency become identified solely with class relations understood objectively, thus falling prey to the precepts of what Pete Burnham (1994) identifies as ‘vulgar’ or ‘closed’ Marxism. And despite engaging with many of these debates elsewhere (e.g. Bieler and Morton, 2003), here Morton seems curiously wedded to such a caricature. Witness for example his claim that states should be considered a ‘condensate of class relations’ (Morton, 2006, p. 67). Or further, that the role of intellectuals should be understood through the prism of a ‘materialist structure of ideology’ (Morton, 2006, p. 68). But the very idea of a materialist structure of ideology reduces an intersubjective mentalité to an instrumental and rational consideration of the benefits that individuals and groups derive from adherence or resistance to a particular social order. The philosophical (read historical) idealism that is necessary to give complete form and substance to material structures thus gets written out of the picture, precisely because the residue of ideas which human consciousness works and reworks maintains no independent life in this analytical schema. For Cox such idealism is precisely the thought processes which initiate human historical activity or praxis; these thought processes are the ideational core of material structures, and are thus intrinsic to their formation, evolution and dissolution. The diversity of such thought processes prohibits the selection of only one such formulation because this produces a monochromatic reading of history, which is anathema to historical materialism in its more fulsome tradition.

The poverty of Morton’s materialism can thus be rendered as its refusal to recognise that idealism is an integral component of all material structures, not simply as an instrumental means of advancing particular interests but as a crucial determinant of how individuals imbibe and rework collective myths and images about their place within a changing world. Class and class consciousness when yoked together can
form one such ‘myth’ (cf. Augelli and Murphy, 1997). But these ‘myths’ come in many shapes and forms, and to privilege class struggle alone is to adopt an austere and truncated conception of historical materialism that is poorly suited to exploring the structure and topography of today’s political economy.

Historical materialism and political economy

Adam Morton has questioned our sometimes facile use of the term ‘critical’ with respect to IPE, and asked us to be more pointed and deliberate in its use. I agree, but add that we also need to be more reflexive in the way we usually associate historical materialism with a mostly Marxist-inspired tradition of thinking about political economy, critical or not. I do not wish to declare the end of class analysis, for such a call would be analytically myopic and morally vacuous. But we cannot confine ourselves to ask only one question, no matter how important this question may seem to some of us. This risks undermining the very real advances that political economy in toto has made since its renaissance in the 1970s, when scholars from a wide range of traditions brilliantly interrogated the contradictory structural features of world order.

If anything, Morton’s reflections should indicate how much conceptual work remains to be done to fashion a suitably historical and critical framework for understanding the global political economy. My own preferred theoretical route is to adopt a ‘historical mode of thought’ in the sense advocated by R.G. Collingwood (1946, pp. 213–215), to look at the inside of events – the motivations and self-understandings which stand at the root of all human activity – in order to ascertain both why something has occurred and what possibilities exist for further developments. This is a call to place the formation of collective subjectivities at the centre of ‘critical’ political economy. I would also argue that this is Cox’s position, as his interest in historical knowledge parallels Collingwood’s understanding of history as the pursuit of human self-knowledge. It is just this understanding of history, and of the historical aspect of historical materialism, that demands attention from contemporary political economists of all persuasions. In this vein, it is to be hoped that the debate opened up by Adam Morton’s reflections will lead towards a reconsideration of the appropriate place of history within the tradition of historical materialism.

Note

I would like to thank, for helpful comments on a previous version of this article, Richard Beardsworth, Robert O’Brien, Morten Ougard, Michael Williams and Kevin Young. Sadly, I cannot say that I have responded adequately to all of their insights, and so they must be absolved of any responsibility for the argument outlined above.

References


