The Grimly Comic Riddle of Hegemony in IPE: Where is Class Struggle?*

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This contribution reflects on the current state of ‘critical’ international political economy (IPE) by contesting the prevailing dominance of liberal pluralist analysis and its overriding commitment to defining the social as an arena of multiple, competing and individuated identities. While ubiquitously invoked, what exactly does the ‘critical’ prefix represent? My argument is that much ‘critical’ analysis in IPE is a liberal pluralist flag of convenience, which is anti-historical materialism. By contrast, an historical materialist critical theory of capitalist unfreedom and exploitation is presented through a focus on social class identity, forms of capitalist state and state power, the social function of ideology and the prehistory of the modern international states-system.

Facing, or effacing, class struggle?

While inveighing against the idealists of his day, Theodor Adorno attempted to draw attention in his *Minima Moralia* to the organic composition of capital which he saw increasingly under the control of technical experts acting as ‘new style managers’. These new style managers – or ‘organic intellectuals’ in Gramsci’s idiom (1971, pp. 5–6) – were held to account for obscuring the relation of owners and producers within the productive apparatus and thus subjective class identity. According to Adorno (1974, pp. 193–194), this led to ‘the grimly comic riddle’ of hegemony within studies of his day, namely, where is class struggle?

This riddle still persists. My aim in this article is essentially to draw attention to the presence of it within *critical* international political economy (IPE). Despite the ‘critical’ prefix, IPE persists in obscuring class identity to the extent that the query ‘where is class struggle?’ remains a valid concern in debates about hegemonic politics. My central claim is a simple one. The invocation of the ‘critical’ prefix within IPE is more often a container for a reconstituted liberal pluralism within which the normative aspects of class analysis are diluted and, increasingly, emptied.

What we are left with is what Louis Althusser (2003 [1966], pp. 7–8) described as ‘critical rationalist idealism’, for him associated with the ‘transcendental praxis’ of Kant, Hegel or Heidegger, for UK IPE associated with the ‘critical praxis’ of historical sociologists (Linklater, 1998), the ‘critical explorations’ of security studies theorists (Booth, 2005; Wyn Jones, 1999 and 2001) or ‘critical reflections’ on global governance (Wilkinson and Hughes, 2002). Focusing on the latter, we are presented with an ‘array of actors’ within an interrogation of global governance understood as ‘the various patterns in which global, regional, national and local actors combine to govern particular areas’ (Wilkinson, 2002, p. 2). While issue-based
interest groups linked to finance, the environment, human rights, labour, civil society and gender movements are brought into sharp relief, class(-relevant) struggle is not the main focus. A similar presentation of resistance to global governance focuses on a plurality of sites and scales in which there is a focus on the ‘thickening social density’ of transformations in the locations of governance across the themes of states, war and capitalism, post-conflict zones and global environmental, informational and financial regimes (Cochrane, Duffy and Selby, 2003). Yet, the result is a similarly sanitised view of global governance as a ‘differentiated and conflict-ridden arena of enquiry’ (Selby, 2003, p. 11), which – crucially – fails to recognise class relations prevalent within and across territorial scales. Where is class struggle? In Beate Jahn’s (1998, pp. 613, 617) significant distinction, we can thus set apart Critical Theory defined as liberal pluralist idealism and critical theory defined as a historically grounded inquiry into conditions of capitalist unfreedom and exploitation.

It is within the latter fold that I would situate my own work in what Antonio Gramsci (1977, pp. 10–13) called a ‘critique of capitalist civilisation’ that furthers the development of historical materialism. To outline this contribution, the discussion falls into four sub-sections: 1) pursuing a theory of social classes; 2) analysing various forms of capitalist state and state power; 3) tracing the role of ideology and the social function of intellectual activity within state–civil society relations; and 4) indicating how these issues link to understanding pre-capitalist social formations in the emergence of the modern international states-system. Prior to this, a stylised overview is offered of the historical materialist frame of reference that is drawn, in my own work, from Gramsci and presented *inter alia* in the work of Robert Cox. Subsequent to this, I highlight past, present and future research along the four paths just outlined within which my concern has been with facing, rather than effacing, class struggle.

**An overview of neo-Gramscian perspectives**

In the early 1980s, Robert Cox developed a critical theory of hegemony, world order and historical change in two seminal articles (Cox, 1981 and 1983). This work was situated within a historical materialist problematic of social transformation and drew to a large extent from the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Emphasis is placed on the construction of hegemony, which is initially established by social classes occupying a leading role within a state, but is then projected outwards on a world scale. Hegemony is understood as a class-bound expression of broadly-based coercion and consent, manifested in the acceptance of ideas and supported by material resources and institutions.

A good way into the theoretical neo-Gramscian construction is thus through the concept of hegemony. Neo-realist hegemonic stability theory argues that international order may exist provided it rests on one powerful state, which dominates all other states through its preponderance in military and economic capabilities. By contrast, the neo-Gramscian perspective developed by Cox broadens the domain of hegemony. It becomes more than simply state dominance. Within a world order, a situation of hegemony may prevail, ‘based on a coherent conjunction or fit
between a configuration of material power, the prevalent collective image of world order (including certain norms) and a set of institutions which administer the order with a certain semblance of universality' (Cox, 1981, p. 139). Hegemony is therefore a form of class dominance, but it refers more to a consensual order so that ‘dominance by a powerful state may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony’ (Cox, 1981, p. 139).

Hegemony within a historical structure is constituted through three spheres of activity. First, the social relations of production are the starting point for analysing the operation and mechanisms of hegemony (Cox, 1987, pp. 1–9). Production is here understood in a broad sense and ‘covers the production and reproduction of knowledge and of the social relations, morals and institutions that are prerequisites to the production of physical goods’ (Cox, 1989, p. 39). These patterns are referred to as modes of social relations of production, which engender social forces as the most important collective actors. By discerning different modes of social relations of production it is possible to consider how changing production relations can give rise to particular social forces that become the bases of power within and across states and within a specific world order (Cox, 1987, p. 4).

Put more explicitly, under capitalist social property relations the direct extraction of surplus is accomplished through ‘non-political’ relations associated with different forms of social power (see Marx, 1996 [1887], p. 577). In capitalist social forms surplus extraction is indirectly conducted through a contractual relation between those who maintain the power of appropriation, as owners of the means of production (bourgeoisie), over those who only have their labour to sell (proletariat), as expropriated producers (Wood, 1995, pp. 31–36). Thus, direct producers only have access to the means of production through the sale of their labour power in exchange for a wage, which is mediated by the purely ‘economic’ mechanisms of the market. The market does not therefore represent an opportunity but a compulsion to which both appropriators and expropriators (capital and labour) are subjected, through the imperatives of competition, profit maximisation and survival (Wood, 2002, pp. 96–98, 102). State and market thus only appear as separate entities due to the way production is organised around private property relations in capitalism (Holloway and Picciotto, 1977, p. 79). By neglecting the central importance of the sphere of production, critical theory in IPE (as liberal pluralist idealism) overlooks the historical specificities of capitalism and the vital internal links between state and market, with the former securing private property within civil society to ensure the functioning of the latter. The focus on capitalism as the ‘free’ development of social productive powers is then lost.

Additionally, critical liberal approaches tend to focus on ‘modular’ (diverse, fragmented, multiple) identities and associations within civil society. It is then assumed that such modular identities are adopted, traded or shed with ease, resulting in a banal politics of civility at the expense of a focus on a politics of social class protest that transgresses civility (Pasha and Blaney, 1998, p. 424). Individual civic responsibility can be identified as the motif of this focus on modular identities while also denying the possibility of any real change beyond the current neoliberal system of global capitalism to advocate ameliorative rather than transformative possibilities.
At best, a global capitalism with a human face is perceived while obscuring the continued relations of class exploitation inherent in capitalism.

The point, as E.P. Thompson (1968, p. 226) detailed, is not to constitute the social subject as a set of disaggregated individuals but instead to focus on those class relations that bear on life in a way often mediated ‘through the refraction of a particular system of ownership and power’. An understanding of social relations of production thus ensures that due regard is granted to new social relationships, institutions and cultural codes shaped by the inner compulsions of production. “Non-class” issues – peace, ecology, and feminism – are not to be set aside but given a firm and conscious basis in the social realities shaped through the production process’ (Cox, 1987, p. 353). Class struggle is thereby faced rather than effaced in this historical materialist conceptualisation of critical theory – as an inquiry into distinct capitalist relations corresponding to forms of property ownership, state power and unfreedom.

The second sphere of activity is forms of state. State power rests on the underlying configurations of social forces as classes. Therefore, rather than taking the state as a given or pre-constituted institutional category, consideration is given to the historical construction of various forms of state and the social context of political struggle. This is accomplished by drawing upon the concept of an historical bloc and by widening a theory of the state to include relations within civil society. An historical bloc refers to the way in which leading social forces within a specific national context establish a relationship over contending social forces. It is more than simply a political alliance between social forces represented by classes or fractions of classes. It indicates the integration of a variety of different class interests that are propagated throughout society, ‘bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity ... on a “universal” plane’ (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 181–182). The state is not unquestioningly taken as a distinct institutional category, or thing in itself, but conceived as a form of social relations through which capitalism and hegemony are expressed and within which the capitalist type of state maintains relative autonomy (Bieler and Morton, 2003).

Thirdly, world orders not only represent phases of stability and conflict but also permit scope for thinking about how alternative forms of world order might emerge (Cox, 1981, pp. 135–138). The construction of an historical bloc cannot exist without a hegemonic social class and is therefore a national phenomenon (Cox, 1983, pp. 168, 174). Yet, once hegemony has been consolidated domestically it may expand beyond a particular social order to move outward through the international expansion of a particular mode of social relations of production (Cox, 1983, p. 171; 1987, pp. 149–150). This can be further supported by mechanisms of international organisation through the governance of global capitalism. Overall, the aim is to break down over time coherent historical structures – consisting of different patterns of social relations of production, forms of state and world order – that have existed within the capitalist mode of production (Cox, 1987, pp. 396–398). Social class forces, as the main collective actors engendered by the social relations of production, operate within and across all spheres of activity.
Through the rise of contending social class forces, linked to changes in production, there may occur mutually reinforcing transformations in forms of state and world order.

1) An emergentist theory of class identity

One way of proceeding empirically is to conduct analysis in relation to the three levels of activity outlined above. Research may start through an emphasis on the socio-cultural hegemonic struggle between rulers and ruled in state forms leading to various avenues along which domination and resistance can be analysed. Here, Gramsci’s own criteria on the history of ‘subaltern classes’ can be taken as a point of departure when analysing alternative historical and contemporary contexts (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 52–55). The history of subaltern classes is intertwined with that of state–civil society relations and it is therefore important to try and unravel such contestations. One way of doing so is to identify the ‘objective’ formation of subaltern social classes by analysing developments and transformations within the social relations of production (Gramsci, 1971, p. 52). This advances an understanding of the ‘decisive nucleus of economic activity’ but without succumbing to expressions of economism (Gramsci, 1971, p. 161). For example, historical and contemporary research would need to incorporate, as much as possible, a consideration of the mentalities and ideologies of subaltern classes, their active as well as passive affiliation to dominant social forms of political association and thus their involvement in formations that might conserve dissent or maintain control (Gramsci, 1971, p. 52). Additionally, it can entail focusing on the formations that subaltern classes produce (e.g. trade unions, workers’ co-operatives, peasant associations, friendly societies, social movements) in order to press claims or assert their autonomy within the existing conditions of hegemony. Questions of historical and political consciousness expressed by subaltern classes can then be raised within this research strategy.

What this approach highlights is the process of class formation, whereby particular communities may experience new structures of exploitation and identify new points of antagonistic interest centred around issues of class struggle; even though class-consciousness – involving a conscious identity of common interests – may not have immediately materialised (Thompson, 1978). This means that class identity emerges within and through historical processes of economic exploitation.

As such this is an emergentist theory of class situated in particular historical contexts of struggle rather than mechanically deriving from objective determinations that have an automatic place in production relations. It is this emergentist theory of class that has been drawn upon in focusing on forms of resistance in the case of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Mexico and how the capitalisation of the land involved changing property relations and shifts from rank-based social ties and communal commitments of civil-religious hierarchies to cash derived from wage labour (Morton, 2002). It is therefore imperative to appreciate the common terrain occupied by the art of both domination and resistance, or structure and agency, within the theatre of class formation (Bieler and Morton, 2001 and 2004). Issues of subjectivity, identity and difference can then be raised
in ways that do not bypass issues of materiality, inequality and exploitation within a political economy approach.

2) Analysing capitalist forms of state and state power

The framework outlined so far is also amenable to analysing processes of structural change in the global political economy, the constitution of neoliberalism within particular forms of state and the rise of transnational class interests (Bieler, 2000; Ryner, 2002; van Apeldoorn, 2002). This method has also been adopted in examining the constitution of neoliberalism within forms of state with a focus on the social bases of the state in Mexico, meaning the specific configuration of class forces that supports the basic structure of state–civil society relations (Morton, 2003b). This has proceeded by analytically distinguishing between an accumulation strategy and a hegemonic project. An accumulation strategy defines a specific economic ‘growth model’ including the various extra-economic preconditions and general strategies appropriate for its realisation. The success of a particular accumulation strategy relies upon the complex relations among different fractions of capital as well as the balance of forces between dominant–subordinate classes, hence the importance of a hegemonic project. This involves the mobilisation of support behind a concrete programme that brings about a unison of different interests (Jessop, 1990, pp. 198–199, 207–208). An accumulation strategy is primarily oriented at the relations of production and thus to the balance of class forces, while hegemonic projects are typically oriented to broader issues grounded not only in the economy but the whole sphere of state–civil society relations. These are not to be regarded as separate realms but, similar to states and markets, two aspects of political action grounded in the same social relations of production. As Bob Jessop (1990, p. 201) highlights, ‘the crucial factor in the success of accumulation strategies remains the integration of the circuit of capital and hence the consolidation of support within the dominant fractions and classes’, i.e. the struggle over hegemony.

In Mexico, the conflicts of interest that eventually culminated in the accumulation strategy of neoliberalism, especially reflected in the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), were pursued while reconfiguring (if not undermining) the hegemonic project of the then ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) (Morton, 2003b). As a result, it has been possible to demonstrate how social forces within a form of state authored the globalisation of neoliberal restructuring, taking on board one of the main challenges to studies on globalisation (Panitch, 1994). Overall, this stance towards analysing capitalist forms of state and state power provides the conceptual apparatus to account for the strategic selectivity involved in state practices as a condensate of class relations, or the differential impact on the balance of social class forces, that shape the effectiveness of hegemonic strategies (Jessop, 1990, p. 301; Bieler, 2005). The fact that the ‘effect of isolation’, or the individualization of the social body, is itself an occlusion of class relations linked to techniques of power mediated through state practices, is also realised (Poulantzas, 1973, pp. 130–137). This is preferential to the ideological hypostatisation of social conflict, formalised within the category of an antagonistic but contingent society, where history is considered as a succession of articulatory practices discursively produced and formed (Morton, 2005a). Finally, it has also been possible to analyse
how the system of territorial states is being modified by processes linked to
conditions of globalisation as indicative of the current phase of capitalism. Much
heralded ‘transitions’ to democracy are one such feature of adjustments in the
political structures of state forms to the economic changes brought by capitalist
globalisation (Morton, 2005b).

3) The role of ideology and the social function of the
intellectual

Within this focus on class, ideology in the form of intersubjective meanings is
accepted as part of the global political economy itself. This is significant because
ideas, developed for example by key organic intellectuals, can play a crucial role
in forging a hegemonic project in times of structural crisis. The distinction between
a ‘base’ of productive forces and a ‘superstructure’ of ideological relations is thus
untenable. Turning again to E.P. Thompson, it is clear that forms of power such as
‘the law’ may be seen both as an instrument through which definitions of property
are imposed or maintained and as an ideology in active relationship to social norms
through which class relations are mediated. Productive relations are therefore in
part meaningful in terms of their very definition in law (Thompson, 1975, p. 261).

Ideology is thus not regarded as an additional independent variable alongside mate-
rial properties. Rather, a principal emphasis can be placed on the material structure
of ideology linked to publishing houses, newspapers, journals as well as libraries and
schools, right up to architecture, street layouts and street names (Gramsci, 1995,
pp. 155–156). Recall in this regard that it was not until after 1848 that certain gov-
ernments in Europe began to replan cities in order to facilitate the operation of
troops against revolutionaries (Hobsbawm, 1962, p. 129). The archetypal example
here was the hiring of Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809–1892) by Napoleon III
to ‘modernise’ Paris in the 1860s with the building of grande boulevards to accom-
modate new street cafés and single-function urban development. Richard Sennett
has summarised this as the transferance of an ecology of quartiers into an ecology

It is then through a ‘material structure of ideology’, involving architecture, street
planning and layout, that a particular constellation of social class forces may estab-
lish ‘historically organic ideologies’ that sustain validity within the consciousness
of people’s ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 376–377; see Bieler, 2001). A point
that may strike one whether standing on Avenue de la Grande Armée, one of
Haussmann’s 12 grand avenues radiating from the Arc de Triomphe, or facing El
Monumento de la Revolución in México City located on the Plaza de la República,
on or any, more humble but still symbolic, Via Gramsci in Italy.

Ideology in this sense is not merely epiphenomenal. Ideas ‘are anything but arbi-
trary; they are real historical facts which must be combated and their nature as
instruments of domination exposed ... precisely for reasons of political struggle’
(Gramsci, 1995, p. 395). This indicates an appreciation of the links intellectuals
(or architects) may have, or the wider social function they perform, in relation to
the world of production within capitalist society, to offer the basis for a material-
ist and social class analysis of intellectual activity.2
This cue has been taken up in order to raise meaningful questions about the role, or wider social function, of the intellectual within state–civil society relations in Latin America characterised by conditions of socio-economic modernisation. Specifically, it has entailed pursuing such questions through a detailed examination of the social function of the novelist, politician and social critic Carlos Fuentes as an intellectual in Mexico. Through a focus on his social function, it is possible to distinguish the role intellectual activity can play in the construction and contestation of hegemony in Mexico. Most crucially, this prompts consideration of the social basis of hegemony and the agency of intellectuals organically tied to particular social class forces functioning through state–civil society relations in the struggle over hegemony. Put differently, it is possible to grant due regard to the class function of intellectuals and the mixture of critical opposition and accommodation that has often confronted the intellectual within Latin America (Morton, 2003c).

4) Theorising the international states-system

Finally, on an historical level, Gramsci cast the uneven development of capitalism across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a series of ‘passive revolutions’; for ‘the complex problem arises of the relation of internal forces in the country in question, of the relation of international forces, of the country’s geo-political position’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 116). As a result, the history of Europe was presented as the history of passive revolution. Initially developed to explain the Risorgimento, the movement for Italian national liberation that culminated in the political unification of the country in 1860–1861, the notion of passive revolution was expanded to encompass a whole series of other historical phenomena. While rooted in his writings on the crisis of the liberal state in Italy, Gramsci linked the notion of passive revolution to transformations across Europe cast in the shadow of revolutionary French Jacobinism (Gramsci, 1971, p. 79). It can therefore be argued that these neglected writings by Gramsci directly contribute to current historical sociological debates on the uneven and combined development of the modern international states-system shaped by the mediation of international pressures (see the debates led by Lacher, 2005; Rosenberg, 2005; Shilliam, 2004; Teschke, 2003). The international dimensions of Gramsci’s writings on passive revolution should not be neglected in these debates as he linked capitalist expansion itself to the above processes of social transformation (Morton, 2005c). In stating that ‘in the international sphere, competition, the struggle to acquire private and national property, creates the same hierarchies and system of slavery as in the national sphere’, Gramsci explicitly articulated varied forms of passive revolution within the ‘uneven development’ of capitalism as ‘a world historical phenomenon’ (Gramsci, 1977, pp. 69–72). In his view that is why ‘the colonial populations become the foundation on which the whole edifice of capitalist exploitation is erected’ (Gramsci, 1977, p. 302).

Also discernible within this recourse to understanding modern state formation is an emphasis on the socio-cultural aspects of class rule. Among the multiple concrete historical specificities that occupied Gramsci were the terms of Italian and European state formation embodied in ‘the war between [capitalist] property rights and the feudal right of acquisition’ and the ‘class feeling’ and ‘pedagogic function’
of the modern state linked to capitalism which ‘begins the dissolution of traditional relations inherent in the institution of the family and in religious myth’ to inculcate ‘new, more complex and rigid norms and habits of order’ (Gramsci, 1975, pp. 62–64, 77, 113). Thus, Gramsci accorded attention to the new social identities and subjectivities made through the series of class struggles constitutive of European state formation and capitalist production shaping the modern international states-system.

Conclusion

A critical orientation to globalisation is said to involve deconstructing extant knowledge and practice as well as constructing new knowledge about transforming relations of class power (Mittelman, 2004, pp. 219–221). In addition, my argument has been that critical IPE in the UK and beyond has to be sensitive to facing, rather than effacing, processes of class struggle, in terms of focusing on the vertical capital–labour relation as well as the more common focus on horizontal relations between capitals (or inter-capitalist rivalry) (representative of the latter tendency here is van Apeldoorn, 2004). It is only by revealing class struggle along both lines that the grimly comic riddle of hegemony can be further contested in ‘critical’ IPE.

The focus on class analysis presented in this article is, of course, not without its weaknesses. One weakness worth casting out in conclusion is perhaps, from a historical materialist perspective, the lack of value theory in tracing the competitive struggle between capitals, thus neglecting a value-theoretic approach to the relation between appropriators and producers. Further work therefore needs to be done in recovering concepts such as the tendency of the rate of profit to fall in Gramsci’s writings and the manner in which surplus value is appropriated from producers within the vertical class relations of hegemony. After all, to cite Gramsci (1971, p. 402), ‘in economics the unitary centre is value, alias the relationship between the worker and the industrial productive forces’. That this is also largely neglected within the liberal pluralist idealism of critical theory in IPE is itself indicative of the growth and malaise of such ‘critical’ perspectives.

Notes

*I would like to thank both Jill Steans and Thomas Diez for their kind invitation to present the ideas expressed in this article to the International Relations Theory Group within the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the University of Birmingham (9 May 2005) as well as all those present on the day for further feedback. I am also grateful to Andreas Bieler and Graham M. Smith for further comments.

1 This implies internalising Gramsci’s method of thinking rather than reading Gramsci at face value. The contemporary use of Gramsci’s concepts is not unproblematic but a clear method has been emphasised, which holds that ideas can be understood both within and beyond their original context; see Morton (2003a).

2 Of significance here is a recent study of the formation and consolidation of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) in the context of US–European relations between 1945 and 1955; see Scott-Smith (2002).  

References


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