This rejoinder to Randall Germain’s promotion of a ‘non-Marxist’ historical materialism focuses on a number of weaknesses revealed by his ‘resistance’ to the recovery of the concept of class in international political economy. Most notable is the binary line he draws throughout his argument between class identity, on the one hand, and the formation of collective subjectivities on the other, which results in the very effacing of class in IPE that was so central to my original concerns. Flowing from this, my rejoinder reveals a series of unquestioned answers he provides from his philosophically idealist posture as well as a series of unanswered questions that are left hanging for future debate.

‘Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water. His whole life long he fought against the illusion of gravity, of whose harmful results all statistic brought him new and manifold evidence’. (Marx and Engels, 1976, pp. 1845–1846 emphasis in original)

Randall Germain’s (2007) response to my overview of the state of debate in international political economy (IPE) (Morton, 2006) provides me with an opportunity to further my argument in two principal ways: first, in terms of my central claims related to the effacing of class struggle within ‘critical’ perspectives in IPE; and second, in relation to the fundamental misconceptions and/or wilful misrepresentations of historical materialist theory evident within Germain’s reply. My aim is to raise such circumspection based on a two-pronged line of reasoning linked to a series of reservations about the unquestioned answers evident within Germain’s response and his problematic articulation of a ‘non-Marxist’ historical materialism. This will then lead me to reflect in conclusion on a further series of unanswered questions prompted by his reproach.

The main section, to follow, on unquestioned answers will probe the merits of Germain’s casting of the relationship between subjectivity and class identity; the focus on social being and social consciousness evident in the scholarship of Robert Cox; and wider issues of state theory. Far from a ‘monological Marxism’, it should be clear that my earlier argument draws from an array of thinkers broadly shaped by the varied canon of historical materialism: Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, Louis
Althusser, E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Nicos Poulantzas, Robert Cox and Bob Jessop. Exploring this agenda further will lead me to conclude that there exists a set of unanswered questions within ‘non-Marxist’ historical materialism based on unexplored and under-theorised notions. Overall, it is argued that Germain collapses into a position of philosophical idealism, meaning a subjective account of history based on the progression of philosophical thought rather than specific conditions of historical development. This offers little advance beyond the ideas criticised by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology*. So much so, that Germain’s ‘non-Marxist’ historical materialism can be revealed as a ‘conceptive ideology’ that attempts to conjure the ‘trick of proving the hegemony of the spirit in history’ through an elision of class identity (see Marx and Engels, 1976 [1845–1846], pp. 60, 62).

**Unquestioned answers**

To start, Germain organises his response around Robert Cox’s (1996 [1981], p. 91) concern with investigating a ‘historical mode of thought’ central to the constitution of historical structures of world order. This notion has been productively deployed in Germain’s approach to ‘the international organisation of credit’ and his analysis of specific sets of social practices that have shaped finance across time, centred in a perspective inspired by Fernand Braudel (Germain, 1996, p. 202 and 1997, p. 5). On a wider plain, he also draws insights from Giambattista Vico and R.G. Collingwood to argue that Cox’s method of analysing historical structures of world order, through a historical mode of thought, results in ‘conceiving consciousness as integral to rather than derivative of social being’ (Germain, 2007, p. 128). But this is a fundamentally idealist representation of the arguments at stake. To be pithy, on the first page of *Production, Power and World Order*, Cox’s statement is that ‘Production creates the material basis for all forms of social existence, and the ways in which human efforts are combined in productive processes affect all other aspects of social life’ (Cox, 1987, p. 1). To be more subtle, there is a sustained reflection in Cox’s work on the relationship between social being and social consciousness through the thought of Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* and E.P. Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory*. Note this favourable citation of the latter:

‘Changes take place within social being, which give rise to changed experience: and this experience is determining, in the sense that it exerts pressures upon existent social consciousness, proposes new questions, and affords much of the material which the more elaborated intellectual exercises are about’ (Thompson, 1978, p. 200 as cited by Cox 1996 [1992], p. 169, n. 11, emphases in original).

There is an encounter here between social being and social consciousness and it is this that leads to the diversity of social identities that at the same time obtain a class relevance through processes of exploitation. In short, ‘“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). By contrast, Germain (2007, p. 127, emphasis added) wants to ‘better frame our inquiry around questions concerning the formation of subjectivities rather than classes’, thus drawing a binary line between class identity and the formation of collective human subjectivities, holding them as empirically separate realms.
It would be mistaken to deny different interpretive readings of Cox. There is nevertheless a clear focus within his ‘historicist Marxism’, to quote directly, on ‘class struggle as the heuristic model for the understanding of structural change’ (Cox, 1996 [1985], pp. 57–58). Yet Germain’s construal is much more one-dimensional and settled. According to Germain (2007, p. 128), Cox’s project is a focus on ‘subjectivities that generate contradictions in established institutions and patterns of behaviour’, so that ‘the mode of subjectivity is key to understanding material structures’. The unquestioned answer of philosophical idealism leads precisely, then, to the effacing of class struggle; a very act of effacement that is also present in the earlier arguments proposed by Germain in his study of states and global finance in the world economy. The entries of social class formation, class conflict, class consciousness, class structures and global classes are all evident in the index and substance to *Production, Power and World Order* but they get no such representation in *The International Organisation of Credit*. This, surely, is the meaning behind my concern about the effacing of class struggle from critical IPE debate.

This leads me to reflect on a second set of unquestioned answers provided by Germain revolving around my ‘reductionist’ theory of the state as a condensate of class relations and my focus on the social function of intellectuals. The former is directly drawn from the state theories of Nicos Poulantzas and Bob Jessop, neither easily dismissed as ‘monological Marxists’. In drawing from both, I stated (Morton, 2006, p. 67) that my:

‘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’.

This complex sentence is not easily dismissed as reductionist. The overall problem is that, as Marx detailed in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, ‘state power is not suspended in mid-air’, or as Gramsci put it, ‘the state is not agnostic’, it is representative of contradictory policies pursued by classes in formation and classes in struggle within a certain relation of forces (Gramsci, 1985, p. 191; Marx, 1979 [1852], p. 186). This is what Poulantzas means when he refers to the state as a social relation: it is a material condensation of the balance of forces in class struggle (Poulantzas, 1978, pp. 158–160). As Jessop (1985, p. 131) clarifies, this relational perspective enables an appreciation of how forms of state develop through distinctive processes according to the historically peculiar material condensation of political relations and how forms of state change according to specific periodisations within capitalism. This theory of the state is central to understanding how hegemony is inscribed within the framework of state forms as a material condensation of forces in struggle and how struggles over hegemony also obtain through the articulation of discourses that retain a class relevance. And it is this emergentist theory of class that has afforded my insights into the historical sociology of the states system or the constitution of neoliberalism; practices of resistance; the role of ideology in the ‘transition’ to democracy; and the social function of intellectuals in Mexico.¹ This work offers much more than a ‘monochromatic reading of history’ (Germain, 2007, p. 129).
Finally on the theme of unquestioned answers, Germain (2007, p. 129) argues that the poverty of my materialism stems from a ‘refusal to recognise that idealism is an integral component of all material structures’. His major oversight here, however, is linked to a dismissal of my very specific recourse to Gramsci’s notion of the ‘material structure of ideology’. This refers to a series of state-impelled practices and designations to which Gramsci drew attention and which he regarded as linked to the wider class realisation of hegemony in a variety of ways. Cultural aspects of capillary power, from literature to architecture, play a significant role within Gramsci’s conception of the ‘material structure of ideology’ and facilitate an assessment of the forces of agency in society and the internal relation of ideas as material social processes (see Bieler and Morton, 2001 and forthcoming). At the same time, Gramsci’s stance derived from a critique of both philosophical idealism (intellectually shadow-boxing with Benedetto Croce) and the equally problematic assembly of an extrinsic account of history based on objective economic forces (intellectually shadow-boxing with Nikolai Bukharin). This is the value of unravelling Gramsci: viewing the ‘philosophy of praxis’ as a transcendence of both poles of idealism and materialism (Morton, 2007).

Conclusion: unanswered questions

This brings me to conclude that there also exists a series of unanswered questions stemming from the ‘non-Marxist’ theory of historical materialism under scrutiny. Germain refers to a collective ‘us’ grappling with attention to multiple and competing forms of individuated agency. While unclear as to such a grouping, I am troubled in IPE by something Raymond Williams (1980, p. 39) long ago articulated: an antipathy towards recognising determinations in any shape or form and the acceptance of total contingency when attempting to assess forces in struggle over hegemony. For the project of ‘non-Marxist’ historical materialism, unanswered questions therefore remain: where is the dialectical focus on agency and structure? What principal measures are offered for establishing the contemporary relevance of past ideas (Vico, Braudel) to present circumstances? How is class to be considered? What is the theory of the state? How is capitalism conceptualised? What place is there for a theory of uneven development shaping accumulation on a world scale?

Without bringing closure to debate, ‘theories of imperialism and dependency and of the state and class should all become part of the armamentarium of the political economist’ (Chilcote, 2000, p. 6). In this vein, David Harvey (2005, p. 202) has recently made the injunction that ‘if it looks like class struggle and acts like class struggle then we have to name it for what it is’ and ‘respond to it in class terms’. By contrast, the philosophical idealism at the heart of ‘non-Marxist’ historical materialism underlines a concepitive ideology that effaces issues of class (-relevant) struggle within a seemingly shapeless world. The thinker, after all, is also caught up in conditions that are a product of social development. It remains for ‘Marxist’ historical materialism to continue to elaborate the point that social consciousness is not simply a product of the economic ‘base’ of social development and that the forms of appearance of social being are not simply subjective processes. This task itself is also linked to facing rather than effacing class struggle in IPE.
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1 See Morton (2006) for full bibliographical references.

References


