

After the crisis: global capitalism and the critique of political economy¹

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Abstract

Since the global financial crisis of 2008-9, neoliberalism has proved to be remarkably resilient. Alternatives in economic policy and political philosophy alike have found little resonance, despite street protests and insurgent parties of left and right in countries hit hardest by austerity. This essay focuses on Marxist and related analyses. It is argued first that Marxism has suffered from a separation between its analysis of capitalism as an economic system, and contemporary critiques of the political and social order, notably over the question of class. Marxist analyses of class have thus far failed to reconcile the traditional view of a two-class society with the complex social differentiations evident in capitalism. It is suggested that the unity of the working class arises not from its subordination to capital as such, but from the directly social character of the labour process in its material (use-value) aspect. In order to challenge capitalism, its critics need to explicitly propose an alternative social order based on equality, social justice, collective action and internationalism.

Key Words: Global Capitalism, Marxist Political Economy, Class Theory and Class Politics, Banking Crisis of 2007-2008

Introduction

The banking crisis of 2007-8 and the subsequent global turmoil have provided fertile ground for a resurgence of critical analyses of capitalism, after the calm and complacency of the “great moderation” (as Federal Reserve chair Ben Bernanke called it). Within the fields of political economy (PE) and international political economy (IPE) critics of all kinds have sought to explain why the crisis occurred, and to advance proposals for responding to it in ways that conform to their own political and ideological preferences. Yet these efforts appear increasingly ineffectual, as the world returns to ‘business as usual’. Of course, detailed changes have taken place. Debts have been reduced significantly in some countries, albeit very unevenly: in the private sector this has entailed retreats by many institutions from more risky markets, while in the public sector the markets as a whole have enforced austerity in a highly selective manner, hitting especially sovereigns that are considered peripheral, whether within Europe or globally. Re-regulation of finance has proceeded much more slowly, especially at the global level (e.g. the Basel III standards), and is still being hotly contested; predictably, the focus on the regulation of too-big-to-fail banks has led to the shadow banking sector (including hedge funds, private equity, peer-to-peer, etc.) mutating and expanding to fill the resulting lending gaps. And to many people’s surprise, the China juggernaut rolls on, increasingly embedded in most of the major advanced-country business and financial centres.

This is emphatically not what was expected by Keynesians, Minskyans, institutionalists and the various types of Marxists. When the G20 made its dramatic entry on the stage of global summitry in 2008 courtesy of Gordon Brown, many of us thought that the time had come for significant modifications, at the least, to the neoliberal playbook established since the Third World debt crisis of the 1980s and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 (e.g. Radice 2009). Surely it was now clear that the strategy of combining rule-based macro policy with privatisation, financialisation and deregulation had merely papered over the cracks of an increasingly unstable global capitalism? True, some parts of these four

components in the playbook do seem to have been rewritten, the best example being the remarkable persistence of public ownership, which goes well beyond the immediate case of bank bail-outs and includes more stable leading economies like Norway, the USA and Singapore, as well as the resource-rich new capitalisms of the former Soviet Union and supposedly reformed ones in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Then there is the question of democracy. Most critical tendencies in PE and IPE were always pretty cynical about the mainstream's insistence that free markets went hand in hand with democracy, but we did think that political elites would come under severe pressure from below as and when the crisis hit the living standards and employment security of broad sections of their citizenry. The Arab Spring seemed an obvious case in point, and the more recent signs of revolt among not only the usual suspects (the poorest and most exploited strata), but also the global 'new middle classes'. Spontaneous street protests and the rise of new political parties of both left and right (especially in Europe) have been heralded as symptoms of disenchantment with conventional representative democracy, prone almost as much as authoritarian régimes to corruption and incompetence of all kinds.

The problem is that while the causes of the crisis may appear to be well understood, the consequences remain largely beyond reach, both in terms of analysis and in terms of political practice. Critical analyses seem trapped between support for reformist efforts to shore up the economic and political system, and a revolutionary rhetoric that has no purchase beyond the extra-parliamentary fragments. If by 'critical' we mean focused on possible change, this is indeed disappointing. As regards capitalism as a *global* phenomenon, the problem specifically confronts critics within IPE, which raises the question of how IPE itself is located in critical thinking. Hay and Marsh (1999) once argued that the future of IPE required "putting the 'P' back into IPE", meaning that the field was then conceptually shaped too much by economics. Now, I think rather that IPE needs to be the PE of I, i.e. that we should treat IPE as the study of international aspects of the political economy of capitalism. In this paper, I am concerned with the Marxist critique of political economy, but this applies equally to Keynesian, institutionalist or other heterodox approaches.³

In the next section I begin by looking at key elements of the Marxist critique in abstraction from the existence of many nation-states within capitalism, with the working assumption that this state form is, for the purposes of that critique, a matter of historical contingency (von Braunmuhl 1978). I argue that Marxist theories of accumulation and crisis have generally focused on the realm of market exchange, with both production and politics either ignored or taken for granted. This problem has been vitiated by the incorporation into much 20th-century Marxism of the ontological separation of economics and politics that is at the heart of the liberal tradition. The task is therefore to re-integrate Marxist economics with the analysis of class relations, production, politics and the state.

The following section then focuses on Marx's relational concept of class. In the 1960s, mainstream sociology argued that the working class was declining in numbers and influence, and the acceptance of this by socialists - however reluctant - fuelled the thesis that radical change could now only come from social movements focused on sources of injustice and oppression other than class. But the premise of decline was based on a mistaken identification of the working class with manual workers in industry, rather than all those whose subsistence is based upon the sale of their labour power. More generally, to accept the political significance of all forms of oppression, and the manifold divisions among the working class in Marx's sense, is not to deny the existence of common interests and the possibility of a politics based upon them. Analytically speaking, our starting-point should be the dual nature of labour in capitalism as at once abstract and concrete, or what Walton and Gamble (1972, ch.2) called the dialectics of labour.

The final section returns to what is surely the eventual *purpose* of critical IPE, namely the transformation of capitalism into a radical alternative - and on a global basis, not merely in our still-separate national states. In the last thirty years, neoliberalism has entailed privatisation, globalisation, financialisation and attacks on unions and the welfare state. But it has also offered concepts of citizenship and statehood that are intended to embed solidly bourgeois values and ideals among workers, while undermining the material and social basis for solidarity through the promotion of a toxic mix of individualist consumerism and social, ethnic, national and religious exclusivisms. A realistic alternative has to challenge this consensus on all fronts, working to promote alternative ways of organising social production based on equality, solidarity and democracy; a class politics that is open, flexible and inclusive - and also determinedly internationalist.

Reinterpreting the Marxist critique of political economy

Hostility to Marxist analyses of capitalism has often been on the grounds of its economism, essentialism and determinism. For much of the Marxian tradition such charges are well-founded, but part of the problem is that mainstream critics - whether neoclassical economists, Weberian sociologists or liberal IR specialists - mount their attacks from their own ontological, epistemological and methodological standpoints, and are unable or unwilling to entertain the possibility that meaningful statements about the social order can be constructed on radically different foundations. In addition, there is a strong positivist and scientific strand in Marxism that originates in the influential interpretations of Marx by Engels and the first generation of Marxist scholars in the fifty years after Marx's death; and unfortunately the emergence of the critical tradition of Western Marxism in the 1930s focused on issues of theory, method and practice in the contexts of philosophy, history and politics, leaving the study of economic phenomena very largely untouched.

As a result, the Marxist critique of political economy became predominantly a Marxist economics, in which the purpose and target of Marx's own inquiries - a critique of political economy - were largely ignored in favour of the analysis of the *functioning of capitalism*. The focus in this tradition was on topics such as the transformation problem, accumulation and crisis; key constitutive theoretical concepts such as value, capital, class and the relations of production were largely taken for granted, and the eventual purpose was to prove empirically the thesis that capitalism was inherently unstable, crisis-prone and destined eventually to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. Within such scenarios the social processes of class struggle and the contestation of capital's power formed a largely distinct terrain of theory and practice, that of politics. As a consequence, Marxism could be said to have succumbed to the same disciplinary fragmentation that has afflicted the mainstream social sciences since the late 19th century.

More recently, however, some interpretations of Marx and Marxism have sought to re-integrate analytically the spheres of labour, production, politics, ideas and the social order. The publication of the *Grundrisse* and the 'missing chapter' of *Capital* (Marx 1976) encouraged greater attention from the early 1970s on the neglected topics of labour and production, because of the emphasis laid in them on the socialisation of labour as capitalism evolved. At much the same time, discussion of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (notably in critical IPE) opened up debate on the politics of class politics and political hegemony (see Radice 2013), while the decay of the Soviet system and the western left's attempts at renewal both led to serious questioning of the classic Leninist theory of the state.

However, forty years on the fruits of these endeavours seem to have largely withered on the vine. Studies of the capitalist labour process have been undertaken largely within organisational sociology and critical management studies, rather than the critique of political economy; in other respects labour has been analysed in relation either to the market for labour-power (questions of wages, unemployment, etc.) or to the redistribution of income through the state. Discussions of politics, the state and the social order have had little impact on the work of Marxists working within economics as a

profession, the focus remaining very much on the classical issues referred to earlier; reciprocally, Marxist work in the fields of politics, sociology and international relations has largely analysed society and the state as standing outside, and trying to shape or react to, the contradictory dynamics of the capitalist economy.

For those still trying to find ways of developing a more fully-integrated critique of the present social order, Marx's *Capital*, and especially *Volume I* (the only part actually edited by its author) still provides the best starting point. It should be seen not as an extended essay on the functioning of capitalism, but rather, as the subtitle suggests, as an immanent critique of the hegemonic ideology that justifies and helps to reproduce it - that is, classical political economy. The opening chapters are built on the philosophical and political foundations of Marx's early writings, but now he uncovers how, in capitalism alone among historical forms of society, the generalised production of commodities for the market conceals a social order based on class division and exploitation beneath a veil of free and equal exchange of commodities.

The dynamics of exchange as studied by political economy - values, prices, money, profits, wages, output, etc. - are profoundly shaped by this structured social inequality, which constitutes at the heart of social reproduction a fundamental antagonism between owners and workers. Furthermore, the veil of exchange and money, or what Marx calls the fetishism of commodities, *separates and naturalises* the realm of 'economics', the production and exchange of goods and services, from the realm of politics, society and culture, within which property seeks to contain politically the scope of collective action by citizens. This separation of economics from politics, so necessary for the protection and reproduction of property rights, is enshrined within classical political economy and its successors in the liberal precept of the natural antinomy of market and state. Politics under capitalism thus centres on configuring the distinct but co-constituted roles of market and state as enforcers of the hegemony of capital, while the undifferentiated citizenry are idealised as free-thinking, free-trading individuals, possessed of inalienable rights and able to pursue their independent purposes as they choose.

Marx's critique sought to unlock the secret of inequality and exploitation that lies behind this harmonious vision. Inequality and exploitation are not merely the result of the legacies of feudalism or the (perhaps correctable) inadequacies of the less fortunate; they are rooted in the relations of production that he identifies. Within the 'hidden abode' of production, workers face capitalists as merely the bearers of the commodity that they have sold - their capacity for labour, and for *surplus* labour beyond the length of time needed to produce the value equivalent of their means of subsistence and reproduction. But just as important, the exchange of labour-power for wage leaves undetermined the *extent* and the *nature* of the work undertaken. It is necessarily within civil society and through the actions of the state, including the law, that the terms of engagement between capital and labour are constructed and contested. Furthermore, in households, in communities and in state institutions work is undertaken outside the immediate control of private capital, which has to find other ways of enforcing the subordination of those workers. In short, class struggle lies at the heart of how capitalism is shaped in history: whatever capitalists may wish for, however they articulate their class interest as natural and universal, they face both within and without the workplace the need to impose their will upon the people.

Class theory and class politics⁴

It is, however, evidently a very long haul to get from abstract critical concepts developed some 150 years ago by Marx to an understanding that can inform a critical analysis of global capitalism today, let alone provide the basis for a viable political challenge to our current world of division, inequality and exploitation. If Marx's relational concept of class identifies not market / state but capital / labour as the fundamental antinomy in capitalism, and one that contains the seeds of a possible social transformation, how can it be operationalised? Put simply, in the Marxist tradition the dominant theme has been that

capitalist relations of production constitute the two contesting classes, and the general content of their material interests: the challenge for socialists is to build a politics in which workers become not just a 'class in itself', based on their structural position as sellers of labour-power, but a 'class for itself', aiming to overthrow the existing order and constitute a classless society. Discussion of socialism within the framework of historical materialism usually centres not on the construction (in thought or in the world) of idealised alternatives, but the development of social and political movements aimed at improving the conditions of the working class within capitalism, leaving the building of a new social order until that class is ready to undertake it.

Clearly, the existence and composition of the working class, and its consciousness of its conditions and its potential, is absolutely central to this purpose. It is therefore hardly surprising that mainstream social scientists, with their belief systems structured around support for the existing order, have sought to deny the existence and social significance of class in the Marxist sense. The development of representative democracy and universal political rights, improvements in economic conditions, and the collective provision (whether private or public) of some social and other needs, have always been accompanied by the insistence that class struggle has thereby become outmoded, and that capitalism provides opportunities for all. Alongside the obvious question of persistent poverty (relative and absolute), social inequality, and anti-democratic forms of political rule, the questions still remain: is there really a single working class, what are its interests, and does it constitute a collective agency for social change?

Leaving aside earlier periods, in the 1960s and 1970s political and industrial sociologists mounted a determined challenge to the Marxist view of the working class (for a thorough survey see Crompton 1993). First, empirically the traditional industrial working class was said to be in decline, giving way to a growing new middle class of white collar workers: social mobility, consumerism and economic security were leading to changes in culture and values, including a family-centred individualism in place of a workplace- and community-based collectivism. Second, the old power of capital based on privately-owned, profit-oriented businesses had been weakened in two ways. On the one hand, a growing public sector had extended into the production of a significant range of goods and services, financed by tax revenues and public debt. On the other hand, professional managers had apparently accrued power within the largest corporations, with family owners being displaced by shareholding institutions such as pension funds that ultimately belong to working people. The overweening power of money capital also appeared to have been tamed by state regulation, active monetary policy and the weight of government borrowing in financial markets.

However, both these sets of arguments have been significantly weakened under the neoliberal form of capitalism that has come to predominate in the last thirty years. Within the very heterogeneous middle classes, lower-grade service-sector and white-collar workers have been increasingly subjected to the same tendencies of deskilling and subordination that Marx observed already for workers in modern manufacturing industry in the 1860s, tendencies which have also affected the lower reaches of the professions (law, accountancy, medicine, engineering, teaching, etc.). Small proprietors in agriculture, industry and distribution (the traditional petty-bourgeoisie) increasingly find their apparent independence compromised in practice by the market power of large corporations. At the same time, capital is increasingly back in command of big business, its power restored by privatisation (taking over public provision), financialisation (the cult of share value and the rise of private equity) and the realignment of managers' interests with those of owners (stock options, ever-growing income disparities and new IT-based management systems) (see Soederberg 2010). Objectively, the working class, defined as those who must sell their labour-power, has also been boosted in numbers by the headlong decline of peasant subsistence production and the urbanisation of the global south.

A second set of arguments against the Marxist thesis of the working class as agent of change relies on the persistent heterogeneity of labour. Against the idea that deskilling and technological change reduces the working class to an undifferentiated mass of general labourers, history clearly tells us that these same forces of change create new occupations and new hierarchies of skill, and thereby recompose the vertical and horizontal divisions of labour both within the workplace and at the social level. Tendencies towards the internationalisation of production, and the growing economic and technological integration of national economies at radically different levels of development, likewise make for increased heterogeneity, even within any given national economy. Nevertheless, the spatial lengthening and increased complexity of supply chains make for more powerful interconnections between firms and sectors, deepening the socialisation of production as a whole, and bringing more and more of the world's working people into the ambit of global capital.

A third challenge to the traditional Marxist view came from the rising interest in the political economy of gender and race in the 1970s, linked to new social movements that focused on these issues. Forms of social differentiation, hierarchy and economic inequality evidently existed that could not be dismissed as mere epiphenomena of the struggle between capital and labour in general, or as the consequence of capital's continual efforts to divide and rule. Such forms of oppression pre-existed capitalism, were present within workers' organisations, and would surely not disappear automatically with capitalism's demise. The new political economy of gender in particular focused on social reproduction, both in the household and through the disproportionate presence of women in sectors such as health, welfare and education, many of whom while being wage-labourers were not (in Marx's terms) producing surplus value because they did not work for capitalists. In this regard, neoliberalism has changed little, for while the sphere of social reproduction has certainly provided new opportunities for capital accumulation as a result of the privatisation or outsourcing of public provision, work within households not only remains a vital indirect source of profit by its free contribution to the reproduction of labour-power, but also is still overwhelmingly performed by women.

Given all these sources of division, in what sense can we still conceive of a singular working class? Only by returning, I think, to one of Marx's most original concepts: that just as the commodity is at one and the same time a value and a use-value, so labour within capitalism is performed both as the capitalist production of value and surplus-value, and as a labour process in which men and women transform the materials provided by nature into useful goods and services. As the source of value under the direct rule of capital, workers are divided from each other both by hierarchy within the enterprise and by competition between them, but this does not remove the need for their creative engagement with nature and each other. In this very important respect, they are no different from those who work in households, communities or formal places of work outside the private sector. The social and creative character of human labour transcends the historical limits of capitalism; therein lies the potential for workers as a whole to recognise their common interests.

Beyond global capitalism: agents of change?

Fair enough; but we saw at the outset that in the context of the deepest crisis to hit global capitalism since the 1930s, there has been little sign of a socialist alternative. To the huge disparities that exist in social conditions and life-chances within any given capitalist country, in today's actually-existing capitalism we have to add the further disparities between countries and regions: not only in social conditions and life-chances, but in ideologies, cultures and forms of political rule. Even the ever-growing threat of climate change, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the very existence of humanity, has not led to unity, but rather to jockeying for position over the distribution of the likely costs and benefits of mitigating the threat.

In most countries there has undoubtedly been a political retreat of openly working-class institutions - not only trade unions and left political parties, but in a longer perspective a wider panoply

of collective endeavours by workers. The revival of liberal politics has certainly been a major factor, with dominant media challenging the legitimacy of collective worker organisations and denying equal access to dissenting voices of all kinds. For many years, some have argued that the assumption of extensive social welfare functions by states has served in the long run to disempower workers, despite state welfare provision being very largely a reluctant response by political élites to those workers' demands. But in any case, as incomes stagnate and inequality grows, it is hard to see how workers are 'empowered' merely by being employed for wages.

In addition, more recently public support for the welfare system as a whole, certainly in the UK and the USA, has fallen steadily as a result of a relentless campaign by neoliberal politicians and their media supporters to blame the poor - whether employed or not - for their own condition (Clark 2014). This is coupled with equally relentless attacks on those who deliver public welfare services: by caricaturing them as incompetent and overpaid, the way is opened for the privatisation of public service provision, and subsequently cuts in the providers' pay, pensions and working conditions. In the UK this is despite the well-documented failings of privatised companies in energy and transport, and more recently in health, education, prisons and welfare: in the case of the railways a huge majority of citizens support re-nationalisation.

An important factor supporting this retreat of welfare and public provision, but less prominent in critical analysis, has been the growing embeddedness of individualism in our social and cultural practices. Capitalist enterprises have become ever more adept at extending the reach and tempo of the consumerist treadmill, postponing ever further the advent of satiation and thus the potential for leaving the realm of necessity. Billions of new mass consumers across the globe have fuelled the extension of mass production to new regions, and to new strata within them. Apparently declining real incomes in some core capitalist countries - first the USA, now in the UK and austerity Europe also - have been rendered politically manageable in part by falling prices of goods such as clothing and electronics, as a result of falling production costs. And not surprisingly the average Chinese citizen, after millennia of exploitation and oppression as a peasant producer under emperors and red emperors alike, prefers to be an urban wage-labourer with some chance of social advance.

Bringing the international back in, we face a mountain to climb in constructing a movement based on the working class in the sense offered earlier. The globalisation of production has certainly created the material basis for such a movement, because as noted the socialisation of labour no longer stops at national borders; indeed, those same borders no longer restrict the aspirations of countless millions for a better life. But a key element in neoliberalism has been the rise of the competition state (Cerny 1997), with a relentless emphasis on the need to fight for 'our' national share of the world market, thereby reproducing the national fragmentation of what might otherwise be understood as a global working class. To this must be added, as noted earlier, the drumbeat of ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural exclusivisms.

The conclusion so often drawn on the left has been that we must accept the political framework of the modern nation-state, and that only within that framework can any radical (let alone overtly socialist) alternative be advanced with any hope of success. But throughout the neoliberal period, the left has been consistently outflanked by the *realpolitik* of globalisation. At present, it seems all too likely that the current inter-bloc negotiations on trade and investment regulation, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, will usher in a further reduction in the powers of nation-states, or indeed trading blocs like the EU, to direct economic and social development in any direction other than that laid down by corporate interests in industry, trade and finance.

Instead, we have realistically to start from the active recognition of common global purposes, underpinned by the revival of popular democracy at all levels. We know very well that the neoliberal

state can no longer expect the support of its citizens: declining electoral participation and the rise of a new politics of exclusion and scapegoating attest to this across the so-called advanced democracies, while the 'end of history' fantasy of universal electoral democracy is increasingly belied by the dogged persistence of authoritarianism and worse across the globe. But at the same time, we can find in every corner of the globe 'communities of purpose' of all kinds, which in their widely-varying ways campaign for economic justice, equal rights or environmental sustainability. Such communities include not only new-style groups and networks of activists, but also, surely, many more traditional political parties, trade unions and 'single-issue' campaigns. A recent UK example is the trade union Unite's strategy of building community branches, organising on issues such as low pay, fuel and food poverty and welfare rights (Taylor 2014). We have no alternative but to try, by all possible means consistent with our values and purposes, to reshape the politics of the left towards bringing such initiatives together. As and when we do, we will find that a global working class really does exist, beneath the appearance of its manifold differences.

Notes

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³ On Keynesian approaches see Radice (2014a), chs. 1, 4 and 11.

⁴ This section summarises arguments made more fully in Radice (2014b), where detailed references can be found.

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