Chapter 7

Marxist theories of international relations

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Framing Questions

- **Is the analysis of 'class' just as important as the analysis of 'state' for our understanding of global politics?**
- **Is globalization a new phenomenon or a long-standing feature of capitalist development?**
- **Is 'crisis' an inevitable feature of capitalism, and if so, does this mean that capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction?**

Reader's Guide

This chapter introduces, outlines, and assesses the Marxist contribution to the study of international relations. It first identifies a number of core features common to Marxist approaches and then discusses how Marx's ideas were internationalized by Lenin and subsequently by writers in the world-system framework. It then examines how Frankfurt School critical theory, and Gramsci and his various followers, introduced an analysis of culture into Marxist analysis, and, more recently, how new (or orthodox) Marxists have sought a more profound re-engagement with Marx's original writings. The chapter argues that no analysis of globalization is complete without an input from Marxist theory. Indeed, Marx was arguably the first theorist of globalization, and from the perspective of Marxism, the features often pointed to as evidence of globalization are hardly novel, but are rather the modern manifestations of long-term tendencies in the development of capitalism.

Introduction

When the **cold war** ended in the late 1980s with the defeat of communism and the victory of global 'free market **capitalism**', it became commonplace to assume that the ideas of Karl Marx and his numerous disciples could be safely consigned to the dustbin of history. Even if communist parties retained **power** in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, they no longer constituted a threat to the **hegemony** of the global capitalist system. Indeed, the way that these parties had been forced to adapt themselves to capitalism in order to retain power only served to underline the sense that, as far as the market was concerned, resistance was futile. The future was liberal and capitalist. Marxism had proven to be a dead end.

That was then. A generation later, things appear very different. Even if its mortal enemy appeared utterly defeated, the problems of capitalism have persisted. Not only do the regular crises that characterize capitalism continue to wreak havoc, but the ever-deepening crisis that is humanity's relationship with the natural world raises fundamental concerns about the sustainability of our current patterns of production and consumption. Of ever increasing concern, also, are the ethics of a world in which massive global corporations harvest information about the most intimate habits and behaviours of private individuals as part of their ingenious efforts to persuade the already sated to buy more of what they do not really need. This when even the most basic needs of many hundreds of millions of our fellow humans remain unfulfilled (**see Case Study 7.1**).

Case Study 7.1 The Naxalite Rebellion in India

Supporters of Naxalite group, People's War

India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world and a member of the BRICS organization. Yet it also remains the site of one of the world's longest-running peasant rebellions, strongly influenced by Marxist ideology. The term 'Naxalite' originates from the village of Naxalbari in Western Bengal. In 1967, a peasant uprising erupted in which landlords were attacked, land occupied, records burnt, and old debts cancelled. This uprising was a source of inspiration to revolutionaries across India, and in particular to students in the urban areas. Since then the term 'Naxalite' has been used to describe a variety of groups active mainly in rural India that draw inspiration from Marx and, in particular, the example of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party.

Ideologically, the Naxalite rebellion can be traced to splits in the Communist Party of India (CPI). In 1964, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) emerged from the CPI as a more radical offshoot determinedly committed to fighting the kind of protracted 'people's war' advocated by Mao; a revolutionary struggle based predominantly on the rural peasantry rather than the urban proletariat, the classic subject of Marxist agitation. The rebellion has gone through several waves or cycles, with periods of growth and enhanced activity by Naxalites prompting severe and invariably brutal clampdowns by the Indian security forces.

Naxalites view India as a semi-colonial and semi-feudal state, and in parts of the so-called 'red corridor' traversing some of the states of eastern India, they have sought to establish their own 'liberated areas' where landlords have been driven out, people's courts created, and programmes initiated to empower and mobilize the rural poor. These programmes have been accompanied by equally brutal purges of so-called 'class enemies' including landlords, rich peasants, government employees, and suspected informers.

In 2004, two of the main revolutionary groups combined to create the Communist Party of India (Maoist). A party statement describes its aim as 'to accomplish the New Democratic Revolution in India by overthrowing imperialism, feudalism and comprador bureaucratic capitalism … through the Protracted People's War'. However, since 2006 when the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described Naxalism as 'the greatest internal security threat to our country', the number of areas of activity of the Naxalites appears to have decreased significantly. Given, however, that the Naxalites have been pushed back in the past only to reappear, it seems likely that any setback will be temporary, particularly given the desperate levels of deprivation in many of those areas in which they have previously been most active, as well as the persistence of caste differences and discrimination against so-called 'tribal' populations.

Question 1: What is the Naxalite movement and why did it emerge?

Question 2: How does the Naxalite analysis differ from a traditional Marxist approach?

Not only that, but resistance to capitalism has continued and even taken on new forms. In many states, traditional 'moderate' left-centre political parties have either been radicalized in their opposition to the capitalist system (for example, the British Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn) or have been partially or wholly displaced by newer more radical parties (for example, Greece; **see Case Study 7.2**), many of which stress their green credentials. New social movements emerge with almost dizzying regularity. All the while, countless millions attempt to modify their own behaviour in order to try to take a stand against the relentless waste and commodification of daily life.

Against this background, Marx is back as an intellectual force to be reckoned with. This is not only because there are some uncanny parallels between his own times and our own—both periods of huge technological, socio-economic, and political turmoil and transformation (for Marx's life and times, see Liedman 2018). More fundamentally, Marx's forensic examination of both the extraordinary dynamism and inherent contradictions of capitalism has arguably never been improved upon. Its great strength is that it allows us to see how so many apparently different crises and instances of resistance, from the global to the most personal and local, link together. Thus, even if Marx and Marxism failed to supply a prescription that would guarantee progressive social change, as a diagnosis of what ails us, they remain essential tools for those who continue to strive for that goal.

Compared to **liberalism** and **realism** (**see Chs 6 and 8**), Marxist thought presents a rather unfamiliar view of international relations. While the former portray world politics in ways that resonate with those presented in the foreign news pages of our newspapers and magazines, Marxist theories aim to expose a deeper,

Case Study 7.2 Greece and the disciplining power of capitalism

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A core conclusion of Marx's analysis of capitalism was that it would be subject to recurrent crises. Such a crisis has engulfed the world economy since 2008. The impact of the crisis on Greece has been particularly severe, imposing serious hardship on the most vulnerable members of society. Events in Greece also provide a glaring example of the power of global capitalism to achieve its ends, or what Stephen Gill has described as 'disciplinary neoliberalism' (S. Gill 1995). David Harvey (2010: 10) has nicely summarized this process as 'privatise profits and socialise risks; save the banks and put the screws on the people'.

The experience of Greece, even when following the election of a supposedly radical government, underscores the practical difficulty—perhaps even impossibility—of posing a frontal challenge to the prevailing order. There, a heavily indebted government was put under extreme pressure by its fellow eurozone members to slash public spending. Predictably, this in turn led to dramatic cuts in wages and levels of social protection, as well as extremely high levels of unemployment. Greece experienced several years of austerity imposed by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the price for continuing to support the financing of the country. As a result of austerity measures, wages in Greece fell by more than a third, pensions were cut by nearly a half, the country's gross domestic product fell by a quarter, and unemployment rose to 26 per cent. The resulting crisis led to a fracturing of the traditional party system, eventually propelling the 'far left' Syriza to power in January 2015. Syriza came to power on an anti-austerity mandate that rejected the bailout conditions that had been imposed by the European Union. After the election, the Syriza government held further negotiations with the so-called 'troika' (the European Commission, European Central Bank, and the IMF). Following these negotiations, the terms demanded by the troika were put to the Greek people in a referendum on 5 July 2015. Sixty-one per cent of the voters rejected the package. This vote and the actions of the Syriza government appeared to be a beacon for anti-austerity movements globally, and evidence of active resistance to global capitalism. Yet just five days after the referendum, the Syriza government proposed a package of austerity measures identical to the ones that the outcome of the referendum had rejected. Why had this happened? The troika made it clear that failure to implement the austerity package would be incompatible with continued membership of the Euro and the European Union itself. Faced with the choice of implementing the neoliberal discipline of the eurozone or possible economic collapse outside the single European currency, Syriza chose the former. While Marxist-inspired critiques of capitalism abound, viable alternatives are seemingly in much shorter supply.

Question 1: What was the background to the election of Syriza in Greece in January 2015?

Question 2: What explains the decision of Syriza to proceed with austerity measures even after they had been decisively rejected in a referendum of the Greek people?

underlying—indeed hidden—truth. This is that the familiar events of world politics—wars, treaties, international aid operations—all occur within structures that have an enormous influence on those events. These are the structures of a global capitalist system. Any attempt to understand world politics must be based on a broader understanding of the processes operating in global capitalism.

In addition to presenting an unfamiliar view of world politics, Marxist theories are also discomfiting, for they argue that the effects of global capitalism are to ensure that the powerful and wealthy prosper at the expense of the powerless and the poor. We are all aware that there is gross inequality in the world, and that the gap between the richest and poorest is expanding at an accelerating rate (Oxfam 2018). Statistics concerning the human costs of **poverty** are numbing in their awfulness (global poverty is further discussed in **Ch. 26**). Marxist theorists argue that the relative prosperity of the few is dependent on the destitution of the many. In Marx's own words, 'Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality at the opposite pole.'

The next section outlines some of the central features of the Marxist approach—or historical materialism, as it is often known. Following from this, subsequent sections will explore some of the most important strands in contemporary Marx-inspired thinking about world politics. Given, however, the richness and variety of Marxist thinking about world politics, the account that follows is inevitably destined to be partial and to some extent arbitrary. Our aim is to provide a route map that we hope will encourage readers to explore further the work of Marx and of those who have built on the foundations he laid.

The essential elements of Marxist theories of world politics

In his inaugural address to the Working Men's International Association in London in 1864, Karl Marx told his audience that history had 'taught the working classes the duty to master [for] themselves the mysteries of international politics'. However, despite the fact that Marx himself wrote copiously about international affairs (see K. Anderson 2010), most of this writing was journalistic in character. He did not incorporate the international dimension into his theoretical mapping of the contours of capitalism. This 'omission' should perhaps not surprise us. The staggering ambition of the theoretical enterprise in which he was engaged, as well as the nature of his own methodology, inevitably meant that Marx's work would be contingent and unfinished.

Marx was an enormously prolific writer, and his ideas developed and changed over time. Hence it is not surprising that his legacy has been open to numerous interpretations. In addition, real-world developments have also led to the revision of his ideas in the light of experience. Various schools of thought have emerged that claim Marx as a direct inspiration, or whose work can be linked to Marx's legacy. Before discussing what is distinctive about these approaches, it is important to examine the essential common elements that connect them.

First, all the theorists discussed in this chapter share with Marx the view that the social world should be analysed as a totality. The academic division of the social world into different areas of enquiry—history, philosophy, economics, political science, sociology, international relations, etc.—is both arbitrary and unhelpful. None can be understood without knowledge of the others: the social world has to be studied as a whole. Given the scale and complexity of the social world, this exhortation clearly makes great demands of the analyst. Nonetheless, for Marxist theorists, the disciplinary boundaries that characterize the contemporary social sciences need to be transcended if we are to generate a proper understanding of the dynamics of world politics.

Another key element of Marxist thought is the materialist conception of history**.** The central contention here is that processes of historical change are ultimately a reflection of the economic development of society. That is, economic development is effectively the motor of history. The central dynamic that Marx identifies is tension between the **means of production** and **relations of production** that together form the economic base of a given society. As the means of production develop, for example through technological advancement, previous relations of production become outmoded, and indeed become fetters restricting the most effective utilization of the new productive capacity. This in turn leads to a process of social change whereby relations of production are transformed in order to better accommodate the new configuration of means. Developments in the economic base act as a catalyst for the broader

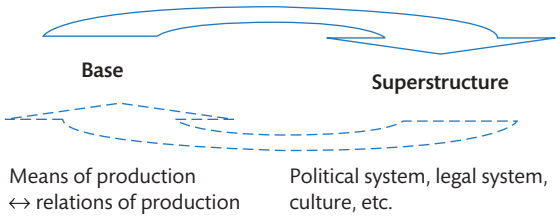

Figure 7.1 The base–superstructure model

transformation of society as a whole. This is because, as Marx argues in the Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general' (Marx 1970 [1859]: 20–1). Thus the legal, political, and cultural **institutions** and practices of a given society reflect and reinforce—in a more or less mediated form—the pattern of power and control in the economy. It follows logically, therefore, that change in the economic base ultimately leads to change in the 'legal and political superstructure'. (For a diagrammatical representation of the base–superstructure model, **see Fig. 7.1**.) The relationship between the base and superstructure is one of the key areas of discussion in Marxism, and for critics of Marxist approaches.

Class plays a key role in Marxist analysis. In contrast to liberals, who believe that there is an essential harmony of interest between various social groups, Marxists hold that society is systematically prone to class conflict. Indeed, in the *Communist Manifesto*, which Marx co-authored with Engels, it is argued that 'the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]). In capitalist society, the main axis of conflict is between the bourgeoisie (the capitalists) and the proletariat (the workers).

Despite his commitment to rigorous scholarship, Marx did not think it either possible or desirable for the analyst to remain a detached or neutral observer of this great clash between capital and labour. He argued that 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'. Marx was committed to the cause of **emancipation**. He was not interested in developing an understanding of the dynamics of capitalist society simply for the sake of it. Rather, he expected such an understanding to make it easier to overthrow the prevailing order and replace it with a communist society—a society in which wage labour and private property are abolished and social relations transformed.

It is important to emphasize that the essential elements of Marxist thought, all too briefly discussed in this section, are also fundamentally contested. That is, they are subject to much discussion and disagreement even among contemporary writers who have been influenced by Marxist writings. There is disagreement as to how these ideas and concepts should be interpreted and how they should be put into operation. Analysts also differ over which elements of Marxist thought are most relevant, which have been proven to be mistaken, and which should now be considered as outmoded or in need of radical overhaul. Moreover, they diverge substantially in terms of their attitudes to the legacy of Marx's ideas. The work of the new Marxists, for example, draws more directly on Marx's original ideas than does the work of the critical theorists.

Key Points

- Marx himself provided little in terms of a theoretical analysis of international relations.
- Marx's ideas have been interpreted and appropriated in a number of different and contradictory ways, resulting in a number of competing schools of Marxism.
- Underlying these different schools are several common elements that can be traced back to Marx's writings: a commitment to analysis of the social world as a totality, a materialist conception of history, and a focus on class and class struggle.
- For Marx and Marxists, scholarship is not a disinterested activity: the ultimate aim is to assist in a process of human emancipation.

Marx internationalized: from imperialism to world-systems theory

Although Marx was clearly aware of the international and expansive character of capitalism, his key work, *Capital*, focuses on the development and characteristics of nineteenth-century British capitalism. At the start of the twentieth century a number of writers took on the task of developing analyses that incorporated the implications of capitalism's transborder characteristics, in particular **imperialism** (see Brewer 1990). Rosa Luxemburg was a major contributor to these debates. Her 1913 book, *The Accumulation of Capital* (Luxemburg 2003 [1913]), argued that by analysing capitalism as a closed system, Marx had overlooked

the central role played by the colonies. In order to survive, Luxemburg argued, capitalism constantly needed to expand into non-capitalist areas. A 1917 pamphlet by Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, made similar arguments. Lenin accepted much of Marx's basic thesis, but argued that the character of capitalism had changed since Marx published the first volume of *Capital* in 1867 (Marx 1992 [1867]). Capitalism had entered a new stage—its highest and final stage—with the development of monopoly capitalism. Under monopoly capitalism, a two-tier structure had developed in the world economy, with a dominant core exploiting a less-developed periphery. With the development of a core and periphery, there was no longer an automatic **harmony of interests** between all workers as posited by Marx. The bourgeoisie in the core countries could use profits derived from exploiting the periphery to improve the lot of their own proletariat. In other words, the capitalists of the core could pacify their own working class through the further exploitation of the periphery.

Lenin's views were taken up by the Latin American Dependency School, adherents of which developed the notion of core and periphery in greater depth. In particular, Raúl Prebisch (1949) argued that countries in the periphery were suffering as a result of what he called 'the declining **terms of trade**'. He suggested that the price of manufactured goods increased more rapidly than that of raw materials. So, for example, year by year it requires more tons of coffee to pay for a refrigerator. As a result of their economies' reliance on raw material production, countries of the periphery become poorer relative to the core. Other writers such as André Gunder Frank (1967) and Henrique Fernando Cardoso (who was President of Brazil from 1995 to 2003), developed this analysis further to show how the development of less industrialized countries was directly 'dependent' on the more advanced capitalist societies. It is from the framework developed by such writers that contemporary world-systems theory emerged.

World-systems theory is particularly associated with the work of Immanuel Wallerstein. For Wallerstein, global history has been marked by the rise and demise of a series of world systems. The modern world system emerged in Europe at around the turn of the sixteenth century. It subsequently expanded to encompass the entire globe. The driving force behind this seemingly relentless process of expansion and incorporation has been capitalism, defined by Wallerstein (1979: 66) as 'a system of production for sale in a market for profit and appropriation of this profit on the basis of individual or collective ownership'. In the context of this system, all the institutions of the social world are continually being created and recreated. Furthermore, and crucially, it is not only the elements within the system that change. The system itself is historically bounded. It had a beginning, has a middle, and will have an end.

In terms of the geography of the modern world system, in addition to a core–periphery distinction, Wallerstein added an intermediate semi-periphery, which displays certain features characteristic of the core and others characteristic of the periphery. Although dominated by core economic interests, the semi-periphery has its own relatively vibrant indigenously owned industrial base (**see Fig. 7.2**). Because of this hybrid nature, the semi-periphery plays important economic and political roles in the modern world system. In particular, it provides a source of labour that counteracts any upward pressure on wages in the core. It also offers a new home for those industries that can no longer function profitably in the core (e.g. car assembly and textiles). The semi-periphery also plays a vital role in stabilizing the political structure of the world system.

According to world-systems theorists, the three zones of the world economy are linked together in an exploitative relationship in which wealth is drained away from the periphery to the core. As a consequence, the relative positions of the zones become ever more

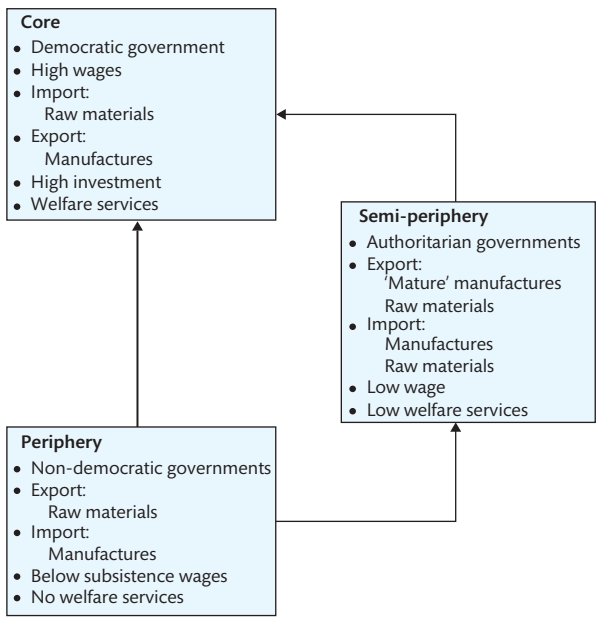

Figure 7.2 Interrelationships in the world economy

deeply entrenched: the rich get richer while the poor become poorer.

Together, the core, semi-periphery, and periphery make up the geographic dimension of the world economy. However, described in isolation they provide a rather static portrayal of the world system. A key component of Wallerstein's analysis has been to describe how world systems have a distinctive life cycle: a beginning, a middle, and an end. In this sense, the capitalist world system is no different from any other system that has preceded it. Controversially, Wallerstein (1995) argues that the end of the cold war, rather than marking a triumph for liberalism, indicates that the current system has entered its 'end' phase—a period of crisis that will end only when it is replaced by another system. On Wallerstein's reading, such a period of crisis is also a time of opportunity. In a time of crisis, actors have far greater agency to determine the character of the replacement structure. Much of Wallerstein's recent work has been an attempt to develop a political programme to promote a new world system that is more equitable and just than the current one (Wallerstein 1998, 1999, 2006; see also Wallerstein et al. 2013). From this perspective, to focus on **globalization** is to ignore what is truly novel about the contemporary era. Indeed, for Wallerstein, current globalization discourse represents a 'gigantic misreading of current reality' (Wallerstein 2003: 45). The phenomena evoked by 'globalization' are manifestations of a world system that emerged in **Europe** during the sixteenth century to incorporate the entire globe: a world system now in terminal decline.

Feminist Marxists have also played a significant role in theorizing the development of an international capitalist system. A particular concern of feminist writers (often drawing their inspiration from Engels's 1884 work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*) has been the role of women, both in the workplace and as the providers of domestic labour necessary for the reproduction of capitalism. For example, Maria Mies (1998 [1986]) argued that women play a central role in the maintenance of capitalist relations. There is, she argues, a **sexual** (or one could say **gendered**) **division of labour**: first, women in the developed world working as housewives, whose labour is unpaid but vital in maintaining and reproducing the labour force; and second, women in the developing world as a source of cheap labour. Women, she later argued, were the 'last colony' (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and von Werlhof 1988), a view that can be traced back to Rosa Luxemburg's claim regarding the role of the colonies in international capitalism (Luxemburg 2003 [1913]).

In the wake of the attacks of **9/11**, and the subsequent response by the US administration of George W. Bush, questions of imperialism returned to the political and academic agenda. A number of authors called for the creation of a new empire with the United States at its centre, supposedly recreating the stabilizing and positive role that Britain had played in the nineteenth century (Ferguson 2003). A number of Marxist-influenced authors responded with critiques both of empire and of US foreign policy after 9/11 (for example, Harvey 2003).

Key Points

- Marxist theorists have consistently developed an analysis of the global aspects of international capitalism—an aspect acknowledged by Marx, but not developed in *Capital*.
- World-systems theory can be seen as a direct development of Lenin's work on imperialism and the Latin American Dependency School.
- According to world-systems theorists, the three zones of the world economy—the core, periphery and semi-periphery—are linked together in an exploitative relationship in which wealth is drained away from the periphery to the core.
- Feminist writers have contributed to the analysis of international capitalism by focusing on the specific roles of women.

Gramscianism

Antonio Gramsci—the importance of hegemony

This section examines the strand of Marxist theory that has emerged from the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's work has become particularly influential in the study of international political economy, where a neo-Gramscian or 'Italian' school is flourishing. Here we shall discuss Gramsci's legacy and the work of Robert W. Cox, the contemporary theorist who did most to introduce his work to an International Relations audience.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was a Sardinian and one of the founding members of the Italian Communist