

## The antinomies of political Marxism: a historicist reply to critics

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# **The Antinomies of Political Marxism: A Historicist Reply to Critics**

## **1) Introduction: The Antinomy of Political Marxism**

Robert Brenner's and Ellen Wood's original and influential body of writings stands as one of the most significant contributions to Marxist historiography and theory and to the fields of History and Social Theory in general.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Political Marxism (PM) has also proven highly controversial in a wide variety of academic debates and intellectual fields. Cutting through these controversies, we argued in our opening article to the symposium that, while PM's research programme continues to proliferate, its intellectual definition as a unified and formalised theory of and method in history and the social sciences has become decreasingly identifiable. It was in the spirit of recognising PM's extraordinary and long-standing contribution to critical academia – and self-consciously writing from within the intellectual and political horizons of PM – that we suggested to draw our attention back to a constitutive contradiction –

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<sup>1</sup> Brenner, 1977, 1985a, 1985b, 1993, 2006 ; Wood 1981, 1995a, 1996; Patriquin 2012.

an antinomy - at the very heart of PM, which reaches right back to the foundational articles by Brenner and Wood from the 1980s. We advanced three major arguments:

First, PM is afflicted by two incompatible methods of historical analysis: one privileges distinct politically-constituted social property relations, which generate their own determinate 'rules of reproduction' (henceforth: *rules*) on both sides of the class-divide, whose structural constraints govern and limit individual and collective class agency; the other conceptualises social property relations as socio-politically and legally-culturally contested class relations in historically open-ended ways – as lived social praxes, embracing a historicism that centers agency, specificity, and unintended outcomes.

Second, we suggested that both readings of PM, the structuralist and the historicist, co-existed side by side from the start in the works of Brenner and Wood, leading over time to ever stronger commitments to the structuralist version - capitalism defined as market-dependency – in which capitalist *rules* became more strongly defined as 'imperatives' and 'compulsions'. This slide towards structuralism downplayed the agency of social actors, especially in accounts of the history of capitalism. It also disabled the task of historicization by progressively equating capitalism economically with reproduction in the market; i.e. market-subjection, while leading to functional accounts of politics

and international politics and other non-economic dimensions of social reproduction and class-agency. We suggested that this slide towards structuralism squandered the original insight of the *Brenner I Debate*, which demonstrated how certain pan-European structural pressures – demographic decline, commercial opportunities, military rivalry – were refracted through specific socio-political balances of class forces in different regions, and generated differential responses, which explained spatio-temporally varying outcomes in class relations, economic development, and state-building across Europe. This emphasis on specific trajectories was downplayed in the Brenner II Debate, in which Brenner re-asserted and prioritised system-wide trends, and the failed attempts by advanced capitalist states (US, Japan, Germany) to overcome structural contradictions tied to a declining profit rate.

Third, to rectify this slide towards structuralism and economism and to re-assert the centrality of the insights of the *Brenner I Debate*, we suggested retrieving the Thompsonian and Hegelian-Marxist roots of what we call a ‘radical historicism’ to close this constitutive theoretical gap at the center of PM, to re-align and secure the work of historicization with an adequately re-formulated agentic method of analysis, and to carry the promise of PM into the future.

We would like to thank the contributors to this debate for reflecting constructively on this central structuralism/historicism antinomy at the heart of

PM, which helps us to sharpen and clarify our argument. Charles Post, Xavier Lafrance, and Mike Zmolek largely reject the existence of such a *problematique* and insist that PM's structuralist credentials, most centrally articulated in the *rules*, are fully compatible with its historicist inclinations. Xavier Moreno Zacaes broadly sides with the historicist wing of PM, yet seeks a middle ground, identifying a fluid spectrum between both methods, rather than a categorical distinction that requires re-convening PM on new methodological principles. Heide Gerstenberger recognises the problem of reification we highlight yet insists on the importance of keeping strong theoretical foundations as a requirement for productive readings of history. Jessica Evans detects an abandonment in our radical historicism of her understanding of PM and suggests amalgamating PM's theoretical insights with the theory of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD), as a different way to retrieve agency. Pedro Dutra Salgado, finally, shows how an agency-centric radical historicism can overcome some of the critiques of Eurocentrism levelled against PM as a whole.

In this response, we begin first by addressing the various concerns that flow from these positions, starting with the idea that we have inflated the antinomy between structuralism and historicism within PM. Section 2 addresses more specifically the critique that we misread Brenner's work by exaggerating its structuralist nature and the problems this poses for his historical work.

Section 3 turns to the more theoretical issues in PM, to highlight that both Wood and Thompson were acutely aware of the problem we raise, contrary to what Post, Lafrance and Zmolek contend. In pushing against structuralist readings of history, they took vital strides towards resolving the antinomy, but, as we show, ultimately ended up with unsatisfactory solutions by trying to have it both ways. From there, section 4 revisits the claim that we misunderstood the contemporary history of capitalism. In particular we address Post's claim that the strong convergence under neoliberalism towards an unadulterated form of capitalism demonstrates the significance of PM's *rules* and the power of structuralist readings of capitalism. Section 5 reflects on our suggestion to reconceptualise capitalism from a historicist perspective. We challenge the idea that such a move leaves us with a vacuous concept of capitalism that simply describes history in all its diversity. Section 6 and 7 focus on the critiques raised against our own approach, radical historicism. First, we reflect on what type of theory is possible within a historicist approach to highlight how historical comparisons can serve as anchors to frame history and do the work usually ascribed to structuralist theories. Secondly, we argue that the notion of agency is vital to this project because of the ways in which it forces us to specify problems and explanations in historical terms.

## **2) Brenner's 'Rules of Reproduction': Where are the Limits of the Limits?**

A first set of critiques to our initial article revolves around our interpretation of Brenner's work, which some contributors to the symposium, regard as unfair to Brenner, and PM more generally. Zmolek, Lafrance and Evans find problematic that we criticised PM for reifying history when this approach was based precisely on a desire to avoid the problems of structuralism. It may be useful from the start to reiterate that we used Brenner as our focal point for critique, not because his reading of capitalism is a crude structuralist one, but on the contrary because of its great historicist insights. So when Evans, Lafrance and Zmolek criticise us for not seeing that PM was actually intent on avoiding these structuralist traps, they miss the fact that we singled out Brenner precisely because of his historical commitment. What is interesting to us are the reasons why the historical turn, Brenner greatly contributed to, has often proven difficult to sustain. In that respect, our initial article was born out of a reflexive attempt to explore issues that we, as Political Marxists and as Marxists more generally, felt remain stumbling blocks. Both of us owe an immense debt to Brenner and Wood and conceived our contribution as a direct elaboration of the historicist

lessons of PM (and Marx). We see it as an attempt to bring these innovations of PM to their logical conclusions.

But what then is this reifying moment? Zmolek, in particular, asks us for 'textual evidence' to demonstrate that Brenner did indeed set out to reify *rules*. We, of course, do not assume that Brenner did so consciously (who would?). The problems of the historical turn were largely perpetuated by ambiguities in the relationship of theory to history that allowed historically minded scholars to perpetuate, even if unwittingly, structuralist reasonings. There is no question that Brenner had gradually stylised his conception of capitalism. His commitment to historicism in the *Transition Debate* ran in parallel to the analytical elaboration of a more structuralist register, which suggested that social property relations would generate specific *rules* on both sides of the class-divide for modes of production/exploitation. In the process, his category of 'politically constituted social property relations' would take on a new form. Brenner had initially designed this notion to distance himself from the economism inherent in the term 'mode of production' and the suggestion that the history of modes of production could be read in terms of the playing out of some de-subjectified deep 'laws of motion' such as the 'falling rent of feudal levy' or the 'tendency of a falling rate of profit'. As he argued, these tendencies



or laws remain ghost-like abstractions, unless they are refracted through class agency and class conflict.

Still, the analytical clarification of the relation between property relations and *rules* led ultimately to certain rigidities, which the emphasis on class conflict was initially meant to circumvent. This became clear in Brenner's contention that social property relations either set limits to or directly prescribe specific forms of rationality for classes in the production process:

'Social-property systems, once established, tend to set strict limits and impose certain overall patterns upon the course of economic evolution. They do so because they tend to restrict the economic actors to certain limited options, indeed quite specific strategies, in order best to reproduce themselves – that is, to maintain themselves in their established socio-economic positions'.<sup>2</sup>

In some formulations, rationality - individual and collective - was quite explicitly equated with an innate self-interested behaviour oriented towards the maximisation of material reproduction. At times, this looked like an anthropological assertion that was only historicised by the structures of

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<sup>2</sup> Brenner 1985b, p. 213

property relations, which diverted this stable anthropological minimum – utility maximisation - towards different economic courses of action.

‘Property relations, once established, will determine the economic course of action which is rational for the direct producers and exploiters. Since this is so, the property relations will, to a large degree, determine the pattern of economic development of any society; for that pattern is, to a very great extent, merely the aggregate result of the carrying out of the rules for reproduction of the direct producers and exploiters.’<sup>3</sup>

The result were relatively structuralist templates for conceptualising feudalism and capitalism. Schematically speaking, feudal property relations, constituted by direct producers in possession of their means of subsistence (peasants) and a non-producing class of exploiters (lords), generated peasant *rules* included safety-first considerations, subsistence farming, high rates of reproduction, product diversification rather than specialisation, market-averse behaviour, village solidarity and resistance against lordly exactions, etc. In contrast, lordly *rules* included re-investment in the means of coercion to press

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<sup>3</sup> Brenner 1986, p. 26.

surplus from direct producers, political accumulation (inter-lordly community building), conspicuous consumption, and feuding amongst the lordly class.

Capitalist property relations, in turn, constituted by dispossessed abstract labour and capitalists in possession of the means of production, generated *rules* for capitalists, which prescribed re-investment in the means of production, specialisation, technological innovation, rationalisation, and competitive production at the socially necessary rate with a view to maximise the price/cost ratio, i.e. rational market behaviour. Labour *rules* included resistance to the intensification of labour, wage repression, and the lengthening of the working day, etc. For Brenner, then, the structures of property relations provide the determining input, conceiving agents as rational throughputs, while the aggregate of conflicting rationalities would define output – differential development.

What Brenner had magisterially handled in his historiographical studies – the comparative analysis of the conjunction of patterns of reproduction with moments of qualitative transformations leading to differential socio-economic and political developmental trajectories – thus turned into a theoretical problem. For the emphasis on *rules* could not be reconciled with this type of contrasting historicization which brought out the historically specific agency of classes-in-contestation that failed to conform with feudal or capitalist forms of

individual and collective rationality. By assigning particular *rules* to particular social property relations – feudal and capitalist - Brenner assumed that property relations would dictate particular forms of rationality, which defined the strategies of reproduction on both side of the class-divide. Here, structural imperatives would impose and de-limit what actors could do – indeed: found it in their interest to pursue. In other words, by prioritising structural logics and deriving agency from them, Brenner had converted the promise of PM – namely the emphasis on ‘lived agency’: how agents react when confronted with structural imperatives – back into a structuralism that seemed to echo his earlier engagements with ‘Rational Choice Marxism’: *rules* prescribe and almost reify forms of rationality. In the end, they denote a synchronic category, which grates with social agency as a diachronic category. It appeared that the category of ‘rules of reproduction’ was reserved for periods of normalcy (as Post now re-states), to be replaced by the idea of specific agency and unintended consequences for periods of crises and transformation.

Despite this critique, Zmolek still contends that, in making these points, we fail to appreciate the difference between theoretical and empirical work. Given that Brenner demonstrated a keen historicist feel in his historical work, he asks, does that not demonstrate that the theoretical stylisation can be useful without leading to the type of reifications we bemoan. This is a common defense

for theorists who argue that theory does not predetermine anything and that it ultimately comes down to how we account for history. Yet this is selling theory short. For what exactly is the purpose of theory if we assume that it should not organise our historical analyses? If theory is necessary to frame history and interpret it, then one has to expect theoretical framings to have concrete effects. We have given some examples in our initial contributions of such problematic conclusions drawn by Brenner and other PM scholars on theoretical grounds that directly impacted their reading of the history of capitalism, which we revisit below in section 4.

The problem is recurring: How to reconcile the generality of a structural account of property relations with the specificity of lived agency within them. Lafrance and Post both argue that structures help us understand the limits within which historical diversity takes place. Yet the ‘limits of the limits’ of courses of action can never be theoretically pre-judged and pre-established once and for all, nor can they be elastically inflated to ultimately unspecifiable outer borders of the possible. What PM’s historical work demonstrates is that agency keeps escaping its conceptualisation. Ultimately, the postulated functional correspondence between property relations and *rules* is too narrowly and too abstractly conceived to grasp concrete socio-economic, legal-political, cultural-moral, and military-geopolitical activity – human agency.

The problem of this limit is clearly exemplified in Post's attempt to generalise the notion of *rules* defending its usefulness not only for capitalism but also for feudalism. In contrast to Post who proceeds as if this issue was settled, there is very little agreement not only amongst medievalists, but also amongst Marxist medievalists, on the concept of feudalism.<sup>4</sup> Depending on the preferred definition, the concept's spatio-temporal applicability will vary dramatically. Whether we conceptualise feudalism primarily as a military-political form of domination, based on a reciprocal relationship between lord and vassal, anchored in fealty and military service in exchange for the conditional possession of a grant of income-producing land (a fief), as Weberians tend to suggest; or whether we understand feudalism more in classic Marxian terms as a mode of production in which direct producers, peasants, are compelled to hand over a part of their produce or labour in the form of feudal dues to lords through mechanisms of 'extra-economic coercion' within a manor, a *seigneurie*, or a lordship in return for protection (from other lords), the geographical and chronological parameters of its historical reach will differ.<sup>5</sup> Chris Wickham's distinction between a 'peasant-mode' and 'feudal-mode' societies, for example, excises most of the European early Middle Ages (400-

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<sup>4</sup> Reynolds 1996, pp. 1-14.

<sup>5</sup> Weber 1978; Bloch 1961, pp. xviii-xix and pp. 441-47; Brenner 1987; Wickham 2005, p. 61.

800) from the grasp of the notion.<sup>6</sup> Marc Bloch restricts the category of feudalism to the ‘two ages’ in Western Europe, comprising the period from 850 to 1240.<sup>7</sup> Yet, even within this temporally circumscribed period, problems emerge for PM: If feudal property relations, as Brenner suggests - and as we agree - are ‘politically-constituted’, should the feudal rules in highly centralised and hierarchical polities like post-Norman Conquest England and Sicily not significantly differ from those in relatively fragmented feudal monarchies/empires like 12<sup>th</sup> Century France or Germany? And if we choose to be generous with the concept’s reach, can late 18<sup>th</sup> Century pre-Napoleonic Prussian lord-peasant relations, still based on serfdom and unfreedom, yet institutionally shaped by ‘enlightened Absolutism’, policies of peasant protection, and cameralism, be captured by the same half-a-dozen rules of reproduction as Carolingian 9<sup>th</sup> century lord-peasant relations? Looking outside Europe, did the Tokugawa shogunate in Japan and the Zhou Dynasty in China qualify as feudal societies subject to the same rules of economic and technological development as medieval Western Europe?

Abstracting out a small set of *rules* that derive from under-defined sets of property relations, elevating these syncretistically to epoch-defining concepts –

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<sup>6</sup> Wickham 2005, p. 571.

<sup>7</sup> Bloch 1961.

ideal-types – that are meant to capture general patterns over centuries, and vaguely subsuming spatio-temporal specificities under their encompassing explanatory pretences, is precisely the opposite of what Thompson advocated – recall his lampooning of Grand Theory and general abstractions as a ‘Concorde of the Global Air’.<sup>8</sup> They replace the actual study of specific property relations and their inter-subjective conflicts with space-time invariant over-arching determinations that relegate history to a second-order register. ‘The definition cannot give us the real event.’<sup>9</sup>

More concretely, even within Bloch’s narrower time-frame, were exactly are the ‘limits of the limits’ of feudal agency? For we can find multiple instances of class agency that transcend and alter the *rules* envisaged for peasants and lords.<sup>10</sup> When the institutions of public power in the late Carolingian Empire dissolved and became replaced by the highly fragmented regime of banal lordships in 10<sup>th</sup> Century *Francia*, this new class of banal seigneurs started to levy extraordinary charges on peasants and to convert free, allodial peasants into serfs. Peasants, in turn, formed their resistances, as Thompson would expect, not in some kind of cultural or ethical vacuum, but by articulating their

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<sup>8</sup> Thompson 1978, p. 238.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson 1978, p. 248. This is not to say that Post, Lafrance and Zmolek are not excellent historians. It is to say that when they are historians, they are no longer covered by PM’s RoRs, and, inversely, when they insist on RoRs, they are no longer good historians.

<sup>10</sup> Bloch 1961.



grievances through the medium of time-honoured 'good customs' against which the arbitrary exactions of banal *seigneurs* were brandished as 'bad customs', partly informed by Catholic doctrine. Perhaps more surprisingly, ecclesiastical lords, bishops, rather than exacerbating the 10<sup>th</sup> Century anarchy of political accumulation, i.e. inter-lordly feuding, started to innovate practices of peace-making that specified protections from combat for distinct persons (peace of God), followed by the prohibition of combat in terms of time and space (truce of God), followed by a more general injunction that 'Christians shall not kill Christians'. The threat of excommunication to offenders was the main guarantee for compliance.<sup>11</sup> Why, furthermore, did knights and the noble class develop from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century onwards a specific Christian chivalric code, which further codified as Marc Bloch reminds us 'rules of conduct' for members of the lordly class – dubbed knights – which were superimposed on pre-existing political-moral rules of conduct deriving from the vassalic oath and its commitments to fealty and service?<sup>12</sup> This code of chivalry started with the blessing of coats and arms and entailed commitment to the pursuit of virtues like generosity, glory, piety, the appropriate treatment of women, the protection of the poor, etc. Even when this 'moral code' was more observed in

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<sup>11</sup> Bloch 1961, p. 412-420; Duby 1980, p. 123-33; Teschke 2003, p. 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> Bloch, 1961, p. 316-19.

its breach than in its compliance, we are still asked to explain its presence as a phenomenon outside the immediate feudal *rules* specified in structuralist versions of PM.

While the foregrounding of structured class-antagonisms at the heart of the feudal relation of exploitation remains useful, writing the history of ‘feudalism’ needs to reach decisively beyond these generalities to capture class consciousness and class strategy on both sides of the class-divide; i.e. historical specificities. Brenner’s *rules* remain therefore an abstraction – a violent abstraction. While his historical comparisons were useful to characterise feudal social practices and, more specifically, what was new about capitalist practices of production, they ended up reifying history when used as a means to capture the essential dynamics of large historical periods. We would suggest therefore to return to the promise of PM I, meaning: rather than abstracting out rationalities which prescribe what actors ‘ought’ to have found rational for maximising their own reproduction, we need to re-concretise agency by re-emphasising agential power and specificity, including agency which may appear ‘irrational’ from a rules-of-reproduction perspective. In other words, we need to switch register from the historical abstraction and analytical exposition of thin sociological models to the social specification of situated agency – and this involves the incorporation of all aspects of life which impinge on subjectivities:

consciousness. Subjectivity cannot be simply 'read off' structural configurations of socio-political relations in the sense of cause and effect, as situated agents – individually and collectively – draw on and develop repertoires of experiences, which do not simply reproduce and re-enact existing power relations, but attempt to contest, modify, circumvent and 'escape' structural imperatives. In the process, innovation – or indeterminacy - is a constant possibility. Social agency is therefore not something that enters the historical analysis from without – as a static and pre-defined agential rationality – but something that requires constant historicisation and specification in relational contexts from within. Agents 'interpret' structural imperatives in historically distinct ways.

### **3) Wood and Thompson: Deepening the Antinomy**

This leads us to the more general issue of whether structuralism is compatible with historicism. According to Lafrance and Post, these two aspects of PM go hand in hand. Far from generating a tension or problem at the heart of PM, they are constitutive of what makes this approach distinctive. To respond to this claim we go back to the theoretical foundations of PM as an approach, which were largely laid down by Ellen Wood in dialogue with Thompson's work.

As we argue, both were clearly aware of the tension that existed but were unable to solve it. This will help dispel the impression, given by Post, Lafrance and Zmolek, that we have identified an intellectual non-problem in the PM literature.

The entry-point for clarifying Wood's commitment to historicism is her re-definition of the concept of capitalism and its implications for her method. Wood started by emphasizing the phenomenological nature of the separation between the political and the economic.<sup>13</sup> According to her, capitalism is distinctive because *it gives the impression* of a separation of the political and the economic. As Wood argued, Liberalism had reified the spheres of the political and the economic as if they were distinct social realms by nature, rather than a product of a distinct historical social construction. This had led many to treat political and economic issues in abstraction from one another. As a result, Liberals had constructed these realms in problematic ways by presenting the economic as a sphere where power was absent, thus assuming that capitalism was driven foremost by concerns of accumulation and profit. Capitalists were thus presented as producers operating on the basis of contractual relationships that were devoid of explicit power. By contrast, the political was confined to the sphere of politics and restricted in many cases to the state.

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<sup>13</sup> Wood 1995a.

Wood challenged this view, opening up these categories in order to grasp the legal and political structures, which shaped the economy. In this context, the emphasis on the P in M was decisive as it led to a redefinition of the concept 'mode of production' in a socio-political and thus anti-economistic direction. Whereas many Marxisms had defined a mode of production as comprising an economic base, with its own 'laws of motion' in opposition to extraneous social factors and a derivative or corresponding political super-structure, she reminded us that this rigid separation in orthodox versions of Marxism between economic objectivity – which did all the explanation - and socio-political subjectivity – which was relegated to the sphere of history and contingency – reproduced in fact the 'bourgeois ideology' of classical political economy which 'discovered "the economy" in the abstract and began emptying capitalism of its social and political content'.<sup>14</sup> This reproduced, rather than re-conceptualised, the liberal myth of the self-regulating market governed by the 'invisible hand'.

Wood suggested that 'for Marx, the ultimate secret of capitalism is a *political* one', since 'he treats the economy itself not as a network of disembodied forces but, like the political sphere, as a set of social relations'.<sup>15</sup> In fact, she turned the base-superstructure model around, by arguing that 'the

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<sup>14</sup> Wood 1995a, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Wood 1995a, p. 21.

productive base itself exists in the shape of social, juridical, and political forms – in particular, forms of property and domination’.<sup>16</sup> The relation between base and superstructure could not be conceived in terms of an ascending sequence proceeding from an economic structure to various epiphenomenal levels of the superstructure, but the economic had to be re-defined as socio-political from the outset. This requires ‘a conception of the “economic”, not as a “regionally” separate sphere which is somehow “material” as opposed to “social”, but rather as itself irreducibly social – indeed, a conception of the “material” as constituted by social relations and practices. Furthermore, the “base” – the process and relations of production – is not just “economic” but also entails, and is embodying, juridical-political and ideological forms and relations that cannot be relegated to a spatially separate superstructure.’<sup>17</sup>

Lafrance sees this opening as proof that there is no problem in PM since the argument that the political-economic separation is only apparent demonstrates that there can be no economism in PM. The economy is always understood in political terms. But this very point has problematic implications for his adherence to the *rules* of capitalism. For Wood’s conclusion was that the superstructure never simply reflects production, but that it directly enters into

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<sup>16</sup> Wood 1995a, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Wood 1995b, p. 61.

and constitutes the relations of production. Taking this line of thought a step further, this led ultimately to the reconceptualization of the category mode of production as a mode of exploitation, framed in terms of class power:

‘A mode of production is not simply a technology but a social organization of productive activity; and a mode of exploitation is a relationship of power. Furthermore, the power relationship that constitutes the nature and extent of exploitation is a matter of political organization within and between the contending classes.’<sup>18</sup>

And since modes of production are not defined as economic phenomena – somehow outside of or preceding society and politics - but as socio-political relations, PM was able to draw the strategic lesson by alerting us to those aspects in which they are ‘actually contested: as relations of domination, as rights of property, as the power to organize and govern production and appropriation. In other words, the object of this theoretical stance is a practical one, to illuminate the terrain of struggle by viewing modes of production not as abstract structures but as they actually confront people who must *act* in relation to them’.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wood, 1995a, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Wood 1995a, p. 25.

Given these reformulations, it is not only misleading to claim the early Wood for a structuralist reading of PM, it is precisely such distortions that allow many critics of PM to refer to its conception of capitalism as economic or platonic, when the entire emphasis of PM – hence its name – is directed towards the re-socialisation and re-politicisation of capitalism as a contested relation.<sup>20</sup> As Wood saw it, Marx's critique of political economy was 'intended to reveal the political face of the economy which had been obscured by classical political economists'.<sup>21</sup> Its key implication was that if modes of production are conceptualised as dynamic sets of social relations – emphasising contested processes, rather than structural logics – then the research programme ahead demanded not only a radical historicisation of the origins of capitalism, but *a fortiori* of its further course, expansion and development: in fact, a radical historicisation of the 'lived' social processes of all 'modes of production' – a turn towards historical specificity and agency.

While our critics systematically downplay the problem that historicism poses for structuralist readings of capitalism, it is striking that Wood (and Thompson) were highly aware of the issue. Indeed, Wood's radical reading of Marx involved an attempt to bridge the gap between theory, and its demand for

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<sup>20</sup> Rioux 2013; Anievas and Nisancioglu 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Wood 1995a, p. 20.



conceptual rigor and objectivity, and history, as the reality of lived, conscious and subjective processes. This theory-history gap had assumed in the Althusserian tradition the form of an unbridgeable dualism between an abstract and ahistorical structural theoreticism – a theory without subjects – and an a-theoretical historical empiricism, which stressed contingencies – a history without theory. In her discussion of E.P. Thompson, this dilemma meant for Wood rising to Marx’s challenge of ‘how to encompass historical specificity, as well as human agency, while recognizing within it the logic of modes of production’.<sup>22</sup>

Wood developed the notion of ‘structured process’ to overcome this hiatus by re-conceiving the concept of class. According to her, class formation could not be mechanically and logically derived from class position in the antagonistic production process. Rather, class situations are only converted into class formations through the active and lived experience of class struggle, as agents interpret their location in non-causal and open-ended ways. In this sense, class struggle precedes class, as ‘objective determinations do not impose themselves on blank and passive raw material but on active and conscious *historical* beings’.<sup>23</sup> This account of class formation as structured process led

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<sup>22</sup> Wood 1995b, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> Wood 1995c, p. 80.

Wood to acknowledge a moment of theoretical openness and indeterminacy, citing Marx's *Feuerbach Theses* to the effect that historical materialism does not stress "matter", but "human, sensuous activity",<sup>24</sup> which could only be closed by inviting 'historians and sociologists to explore what these "structures" do to people's lives, how they do it, and what people do about it – or, as Thompson might put it, how the determining pressures of structured processes are experienced and handled by people'.<sup>25</sup> By shifting, although with various emphases, the explanatory weight away from structures towards agents, she contended that the history of a mode of production is the history of its developing class relations – a dynamic process not reducible to any pre-constituted logic or imperative. Rather than hypostatizing class identities aprioristically, the category of agency could only function – receive content - through its empirical investigation. For Wood, it was this dynamic resolution of the theory-history tension, conceiving the theoretical category of agency as historical, relational, and active, rather than as logically deduced, objectified and passive, which overcame the gap between structure and process without falling into the trap of theoretical rigidities. Concluding with a memorable and frank statement on the problematique, Wood suggested that

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<sup>24</sup> Wood 1995b, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> Wood 1995, c, p. 97.

‘neither Marx nor Thompson nor anyone else has devised a “rigorous” theoretical vocabulary to convey the effect of material conditions on conscious, active beings – beings whose conscious activity is itself a material force – or to comprehend the fact that these effects assume an infinite variety of historically specific empirical forms. But it can surely be no part of theoretical rigour to ignore these complexities merely for the sake of conceptual tidiness or a framework of ‘structural definitions which purport to resolve all important historical questions on the theoretical plane. Nor is it enough just to concede the existence of these complexities in some other order of reality – in the sphere of history as distinct from the sphere of “objective structures” – which belongs to a different level of discourse, the “empirical” in opposition to the “theoretical”. They must somehow be acknowledged by the theoretical framework itself and be embodied in the very notion of “structure” – as, for example, in Thompson’s definition of ‘structured process’.<sup>26</sup>

This candid passage registered that the category of agency had to be theoretically rendered open to avoid and reject a nomological conception of theory, which in many variants of Marxism had generated an absolute

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<sup>26</sup> Wood 1995c, p. 97-98.

opposition between a nomothetical theoreticism – the laws of motion of modes of production which could be logically established and deduced – and a corresponding switch towards a more open-ended historical register in concrete analyses. This switch to history either arranged and aligned the historical material in accordance with these theoretical presuppositions (immunising theory against empirical surprises), or acknowledged empirical contingencies and ‘messiness’, leaving the theoretical register either undisturbed and intact as a ‘higher level of abstraction’ – in fact: retreating into ever higher and thinner abstractions, which simultaneously undermined their explanatory power. Alternatively, contingencies were neutralised by their capture through a series of infinite auxiliary *ad hoc* additions to the nomological base-line. In these cases, theory and history seemed to inhabit two different forms of reality, licensing a dualism constantly littered with protective clauses.

However, the notion of ‘structured process’ ultimately tried to have it both ways without offering a clear solution. It obscured rather than resolved the problem. For it could either be read in historicist terms as defining agency in potential opposition to structural ‘expectations’, or in broad conformity with them, so that structures would always capture process. In the final analysis, this flight towards the notion of ‘structured process’ was a half-way house, creating

a rhetorical fog, instead of pressing the issue to its logical and radical conclusions: a more radical historicism!

Lafrance, Post and Zmolek take this ambiguity as evidence that PM consciously relied on structuralism and historicism. Lafrance suggests that Thompson's historicism did not constitute a rejection of the role of structural determinants. On the contrary, he argues, Thompson insisted on the need to 'preserves structural analysis' (Lafrance, p. 2) and the importance of 'objective determinations' (Lafrance; Zmolek). While Thompson's work is littered with such formulations, his most authoritative statements on method point overwhelmingly in the opposite direction. He embraced a principled scholarly commitment to the 'historical method', which he conceived, quite in contrast to grand 19<sup>th</sup> century 'logics of history', as a mode of inquiry specific to the historical subject matter.<sup>27</sup> This involved a constant dialogue between conceptual or structural expectations – not determinations – and empirical controls premised on evidentiary openness. This procedure would 'constitute the discipline's ultimate court of appeal', since it enabled attention to the possible non-correspondence between expectations and evidence, which could not only stretch expectations empirically beyond breaking-point, but would ultimately negate and transcend them. In this sense, the craft of the historian

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<sup>27</sup> Thompson 1978, p. 231.

was not to superimpose rules upon the evidence, but rather to use history to de-stabilise general, fixed and pre-programmed concepts. 'History is not rule-governed, and it knows no sufficient causes.'<sup>28</sup>

This method and Thompson's embrace of conscious agency – encapsulated in the concept of experience - was famously demonstrated in his concept of the 'moral economy' of the plebs. For what he found in the behaviour of late 18<sup>th</sup> Century English crowds in times of dearth, was neither a simple materialist reaction to hunger in form of riots – a quantifiable cause and effect logic – nor an objective response by the exploited that could be read off the *rules* of capitalist markets, but rather the mobilisation of a specific set of norms derived from the customary moral economy of the poor, which entertained legitimate convictions of what was right and just in terms of price and provision. 'Hence we can read much eighteenth-century social history as a succession of confrontations between an innovative market economy and the customary moral economy of the plebs'.<sup>29</sup> This popular conservative defense of customs that informed rebellion could not be captured by a 'static' and 'synchronous' analysis of the structural determinants of English late 18<sup>th</sup> Century capitalism, but was in fact a legacy of a collective sense of the common good, which

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<sup>28</sup> Thompson 1978, p. 241.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson 1991a, p. 12

stretched back to Tudor Governments, 'carrying for a long time the Church's imprimatur'.<sup>30</sup> This conjoined the analysis of temporally anterior cultural norms with contemporary socio-economic crises and their political resolution.<sup>31</sup>

This sense of 'morality' was never a mere leftover from the past, which simply disappeared over time with the further deepening and widening of the market economy. For Thompson, culture transported at all times a diachronically active reservoir of norms that intermittently informed rebellions and socio-economic conduct: it suffused the rationalities and subjectivities of people. It informed class consciousness and class conflict.<sup>32</sup> Thompson rejected privileging structural analysis by exploiting the gaps between structural expectations and non-derivable surprises to re-instate social history over economic theory, anchoring this methodologically through his steadfast adherence to the 'historical method' and conceptually through his notion of the 'moral economy'. Thompson's specific injunctions against reasoning from theoretical premises deductively towards historical explanation are anchored in his explicit commitment to this method, which qualifies theoretical claims to reality as mere heuristic 'expectations', which have to be ultimately subjected

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<sup>30</sup> Thompson 1991b, p. 253

<sup>31</sup> Thompson 1991b, p. 188

<sup>32</sup> Thompson is widely regarded in the literature as a 'dialectical interpretivist', as the English working-class 'made itself by using its cultural inheritance to interpret and react to economic transformations and political events'. Trimberger 1984, p. 224

to historical proof – evidence and counter-evidence - as the final court of appeal. This re-invites the irreducibility of specific agency as an entry-point to historical analysis.

Given this principled commitment, one of the striking features of his theoretical intervention was precisely Thompson’s inability, as McNally argues, to reconcile his historicism with a deep belief in capitalism’s structural properties.<sup>33</sup> In spite of his commitment to indeterminacy, Thompson simultaneously asserted that historians ‘will observe in the laboratory of events the evidence of determination, not in its sense as rule-governed law but in its sense of the “setting of limits” and the “exerting of pressures”.’<sup>34</sup> This language of ‘setting limits’ is often adopted by Marxists, including Lafrance and Post, who like to advocate a relaxation of objective determinations to capture a greater variety of practices and outcomes, while still wanting to defend the *rules*. Is this possible? In the end, this represents a call for a pragmatic yet tricky balancing act that would work from the premise of a definitionally loose model of capitalism that should not be formalised precisely to avoid structural trappings and to leave ample room for history to speak for itself. However, showing these inherent biases of capitalism while still focusing on historicization proved an

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<sup>33</sup> McNally 1993.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson 1978, p. 241-2.



impossible task to navigate. The reason for this was not the notion of agency, as we will argue below, but instead the problematic way in which we factor structures into the analysis as generative mechanisms (i.e. in structuralist terms).

#### **4) On the History of Capitalism and its imperatives**

In *Rules of Reproduction*, we advanced various ways in which structural perspectives create blind spots for historical research. We showed that while PM scholars made powerful contributions to our understanding of the transition to capitalism, they commonly ended up downplaying the significance of historical transformations 'within' capitalism on the grounds that these simply reflected the normal workings of its *rules*. Arguments made by others seeking to periodise or historicise capitalism were then frequently rejected on the grounds that these different episodes were secondary or superficial when compared to the 'more fundamental' *rules* of capitalism. We further highlighted how this structural approach led to a reified conception of capitalism that systematically downplayed the agencies and politics of capitalist competition.

In his response, Post argues that the recent history of capitalism, far from undermining the idea of *rules*, demonstrates the power of this notion. According

to him, not only do (1) changes such as the rise of mass production, consumerism or financialisation reflect minor modalities of the same logic of reproduction, but (2), more importantly, changes suggesting a departure from these rules during the post war era (e.g. the rise of social democracy) were swiftly undone with the advent of neoliberalism. The strong convergence in economic practices and governance that resulted reflects, he contends, the return to an unadulterated form of the logic of capitalism, and demonstrates the inability of agents to rewrite the script of capitalism in significant ways.

Let us take these points in turn. First, Post argues that we systematically exaggerate the diversity of practices under capitalism. He disputes, for example, our contention that vocational training in Germany represented a significant departure from American Taylorism. According to him, German industry was just as much driven by a form of Taylorism geared towards de-skilling labour. While forms of Taylorism existed in Germany, pointing this out tells us little about vocational training. Policies to promote the role of guilds in the certification of labour had been adopted since Bismarck to empower the old guilds against industrial labour. This did not protect workers from exploitation since the apprenticeship system it supported was often a source of cheap labour especially for smaller producers who provided the apprenticeships. But the very fact that workers could be often used as cheap labour under the cover of a

subsidised system of apprenticeship, rather than being properly trained, led industrial firms to become increasingly invested in the politics of vocational training.<sup>35</sup> Since they had to partly finance this system, it was now important to fight for what this training would consist in. This resulted in a very different pattern of industrialisation in Germany where struggles over the certification and training of labour generated more skilled labour and a different pattern of industrialisation.<sup>36</sup> The point is not to say that Germany had a great system for workers, but the politics of production led to distinct dynamics that cannot be collapsed with American Taylorism into a generic model of mass production.

Another example we used to demonstrate that producers do not necessarily specialise their production to focus on what they do best was the rise of conglomerates in the US and South Korea. Post, however, is unimpressed stating again that these conglomerates did not diverge significantly from the script of the *rules*. According to Post, we simply misunderstand that specialisation under capitalism is not a matter of producing one type of good, but of committing to producing for the market. Yet our point here is that *even* when producers are fully committed to producing for the market, it is impossible to identify a logic of capitalist development because there are very different

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<sup>35</sup> Thelen 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Herrigel 2000.

ways to compete on markets. This is not simply because producers can follow different courses of actions to produce more efficiently, but more importantly because what it means to be successful in markets is not always the same. There is no single baseline of the market that cuts across all social contexts under capitalism as if competition simply boils down to some transcendental barometer of market performance.

For example, it is a common argument that market shares took priority over profitability in South Korea (and Japan) because the success of industrial firms became predicated on the support of banks and governments which was given to firms with large market share (rather than profitable ones). This dynamic was not exceptional, far-fetched or non-capitalist. After all, Wall Street banks have similarly fostered a model of too big to fail which can generate dramatic losses because banks know that this is a good strategy to secure short term gains and then socialise losses in times of financial crises through government support. The point here is that doing well on markets is not a rigid script that can be measured on a universal efficiency scale. Otherwise, Wall Street banks would have met a swift end long ago. There are different social and political pressures, as well as resources, that shape what form competition takes and this varies considerably depending on the context.

Post, however, turns the issue around by stating that the pursuit of market shares is simply another way to secure profits either by hedging through multiple production lines market risks or to build synergies. But then Post has to deal with the fact that profitability often did not materialise on the back of these large market shares. Many of the East Asian conglomerates were saddled with low profit strategies that nonetheless ensured a level of reproduction because of the financial support they received. In the end, it becomes clear that market competition does not give us a sufficiently precise purchase on the complex history of capitalism because the outcomes are much more diverse than the script of the *rules* can account for. We need to factor politics in. For this reason, there is much more to learn about how competitive pressures play themselves out differently depending on the social context, than by falling back on the somewhat trivial assertion that all capitalists have to meet the competitive pressures of the market modelled in abstract *rules*.

Post's second point suggests that whatever agency takes place under capitalism, it is at best short-lived when it seeks to depart from these *rules*. Vocational training in Germany, the conglomerates in the US and South Korea and social democracy were indeed challenged in the age of neoliberalism. But what kind of historical account would assume that the success of agencies under capitalism is defined by permanency? These are after all strategies adopted in

the context of social struggles, which means that a successful strategy of empowerment will be met by responses that will gradually undermine it. This is also the case for production itself. After its initial successes with complex assembly lines, Ford also struggled to meet the challenge of the consumerist strategies developed by General Motors in the 1920s. GM's turn undermined Ford's commitment to productive efficiency with its heavy investments on elaborate assembly lines thus demonstrating that even when it comes to capitalist production, there is no single barometer of success.<sup>37</sup> Qualitative changes are just as important, if not more, than quantitative improvements in efficiency.

Such qualitative transformations are too often downplayed in Post's reading as if the episodes in the history of capitalism have little new to teach us about the social dynamics of capitalism. The result is a tendency to default to generic characterisations. This is reflected in Post's reference to neoliberalism as a regime characterised by deregulation. Post probably does not mean by this reference that neoliberal societies have actually become deregulated, since we know that regulations have dramatically increased.<sup>38</sup> The point has probably more to do with the form of regulation, not the actual amount of regulations.

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<sup>37</sup> Williams, Haslam and Williams 1992.

<sup>38</sup> McNally 2001.

For example, scholars often mention deregulation to get at the idea that new regulations reinforced the position of capitalists rather than challenged them or that these regulations were ‘market enforcing’.<sup>39</sup> Yet this framing of regulation implies that regulations are *inconsequential* when it comes to capitalists or capitalist accumulation. They do not qualify the story other than to say that capitalism has come closer to its idealised script. And yet the fact that regulations favour some agents does not mean that we can write these regulations off as if they were tantamount to not having regulations. For the power of capitalists is not derived from a state of nature. It is directly shaped by these regulations. Capitalists do not abide by some process of natural economic selection. They use power and politics to shape the rules of the market – and thus selection - in their favour.<sup>40</sup> One can accept that banking rules have favoured big banks, yet still see regulations as being decisive in shaping what type of strategies financiers adopt. By neglecting this, Post defaults to ahistorical forms of reasoning that highlight the logic at the expense of historical forms of characterisation. Instead of specifying the institutions of neoliberalism, Post

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<sup>39</sup> Harvey 2005; Vogel 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Post suggests that ‘scientific abstractions’, such as Brenner’s *rules*, are categorically different from ‘ideal-types’, while the conception of *rules* can be likened to the idea of ‘natural selection’ by firms who are compelled to follow a given set of such. Yet this distinction between (Marxist) ‘scientific abstractions’ and (main stream) ‘ideal-types’ does not hold either. ‘Ideal-types’, as defined by Max Weber, do not entail normative claims ‘about how society should work’ (Post, p. 4), but abstract out from a range of empirical cases a set of attributes regarded as typical of a social phenomenon. Its purified conceptual ideality bears no normative significance. In this sense, Marxist categories are also ‘ideal-types’, as abstracting out normally implies abstracting from the richness and concreteness of the historically-situated phenomenon in question. Teschke 2003, p. 50.

treats them as if they did not make a difference to the script of capitalism. Ironically, it is then Post who ends up denying the importance of historical structures, suggesting instead that capitalists have been given free rein by deregulation.

It should be clear then that contrary to what many of our critics claim, our historicist approach does not amount to a voluntarist reading of history. There are many places in *Rules of Reproduction*, and in our other works, where we explicitly highlight the importance of social, political and geopolitical structures as Lafrance himself points out in his reply. Discussing the rise of modern practices of diplomacy, statecraft, grand strategy, modern monetary policy, neoliberalism, managerialism or financialisation, as we have done in previous contributions, is obviously to be studying structuring processes. These all reflect the fact that structures are very much part of the equation and nowhere have we ever claimed that they are not significant. *But recognising the role of structure is not necessarily to commit to a structural reading of history as we will explain below.*

The difference comes down to how much one thinks can be derived from studying structures. We refer to structures in order to help us contextualise the situation in which agents operate, the pressures they face and the resources they can mobilise. Where we depart from structuralists is in rejecting the idea



that structures generate logics of development or given outcomes that are always present to some extent. In Post's response this is most strongly articulated in his claim that growing capitalist pressures, or the decline of profitability, lead to a 'near universal response' by capitalist firms and states under neoliberalism. It is not at all clear to us that the rise of financialisation or the spread of managerialism in the public sector should be taken as obvious outcomes of the intensification of capitalist *rules*. Why should subcontracting under lean production suddenly be seen as a more capitalist way to compete instead of the vertical integration of firms to maximise productive synergies? Can we assume that one is inherently more efficient than the other from a capitalist standpoint?

Looming in this debate is Post's assumption, also articulated by Lafrance, that structural constraints limit the margin of the possible and the scope for agency. While this seems at first glance like an unobjectionable claim, the problem is that historically we also know that changes often take place precisely when structural pressures build up. This is a point PM scholars themselves have often made. Ellen Wood pointed out, for example, that it was social pressures that force people to innovate, not freedom from these pressures (or opportunity).<sup>41</sup> So while in the abstract, people have more freedom to change

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<sup>41</sup> Wood 1994.

when there is little structural pressure, the reality is that they tend not to change unless forced to. People do not reinvent themselves because they have the luxury of doing things differently, they do so because they have to. If capitalism increases these pressures, then why should we assume that it leads to static reproduction of the same patterns? After all growing market pressures are clearly leading to an increasingly rapid pace of social change. The fact that we even struggle to envisage what the world will look like in 10 years is quite telling.

## **5) What is Capitalism?**

Many of our critics, even those sympathetic to our approaches (Moreno Zacaes) fear that this push for historicisation may lead us to lose sight of the very thing we seek to historicise: capitalism. According to them, a structural account of capitalism is needed to know what we are tracking historically. How do we know where capitalism starts and where it ends otherwise? For Lafrance, the *rules* thus provide us with a roadmap to reading history and frame what we look for. Trying to straddle the line, Moreno Zacaes pleads for a middle ground with a historically attuned conception of structures that can still identify preconditions to make sure that we can keep some sense of what delimits capitalism.

But what exactly are we looking for when we are ‘looking for capitalism’? The question is not as straightforward as it may seem. It is striking how contributors to the symposium often play it safe on this point by referring to highly general features. Post and Lafrance for example, may insist on the clarity that their notion of *rules* brings, yet what they refer to in their response as the main feature of capitalism is the basic fact that no one can ignore market imperatives to compete under capitalism. Similarly Evans speaks of capitalism as something that ‘involves constant motion, expansion and accumulation’ (Evans). These careful framings arguably reflect attempts to capture complex social systems in ways that do not prejudice the history. They are non-committal from a historical standpoint, yet, precisely for this reason, they do little to help us know what to look for.

It is precisely because we think it is important to be clear on what we are tracking that we decided to deflate somewhat the notion of capitalism. Instead of reading it as a broad social system with its inherent logic, we use it (as well as other macro-concepts such as neoliberalism) to denote social and historical lineages that relate to how social practices become institutionalised and circulate socially. In keeping with Brenner’s argument about the transition to capitalism, we thus used the qualification capitalist to refer to social processes where production, and more specifically labour processes (i.e. how people

work) become the focus of a systematic strategy of transformation to increase productivity. Emphasising the historical origins of this development helps us look for practices that made this possible.

The purpose of grouping different developments as being capitalist is not to enable us to apply a common logic to different cases, but rather to help us trace social and historical lineages. They highlight where certain social developments come from and allow us to historicise the various forms these practices take. What connects these different historical instances of so-called capitalist processes is not essentialist features that define supposedly what capitalism is, but a historical claim that there are important lineages that run from one instance to the other. For example, that the industrial revolution in Britain was directly connected to previous agrarian changes. The onus then is on scholars to establish historically this connection by identifying the agencies that connect these two points (i.e. the social forces that link transformations in agrarian production to later industrial changes). This insistence on reading capitalism in terms of practices (e.g. capitalist practices) rather than a social system (e.g. capitalism) is thus meant as a means to avoid the reification, which stems from assuming that similarities in practices imply a single social logic.

Two articulations are particularly important in this regard. The first concerns the relationship between capitalist practices of production and other

types of social activities such as finance, social reproduction, or the role of the state more generally. Does finance become capitalist once capitalist production starts to follow the competitive dynamics revolving around productivity gains charted in the PM literature? In what sense does this qualification (i.e. becoming capitalist) changes what we take finance to be about? On this front, 'what is capitalism' suddenly appears much less obvious than initially thought. The same goes for the state, social reproduction or geopolitics. This suggests that there is no simple answer to the question of what is capitalism once we consider it in these broad social terms, contrary to what Evans and Lafrance seem to suggest. Even if the work on the transition helps us specify what was new about capitalist production, knowledge about this transformation does not settle the issue. As Wood's brilliant *Pristine Culture of Capitalism* clearly shows with regards to culture and the state, the answer to what is capitalism (understood here as a type of society) can only be, ultimately, a historical one.<sup>42</sup> It is not settled by the idea of the rules of reproduction. This is why our conceptualisation of what we are tracking (capitalist practices) is different from what we take to be the more open-ended question of 'what is capitalism?'.<sup>43</sup> Practices can be defined conceptually to help us know what to look for, but social dynamics are more

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<sup>42</sup> Wood 1991.

<sup>43</sup> See also Teschke and Wenten 2016.

difficult to theorise because of the significant risk that we end up reifying history.

The second articulation relates to the various attempts to systematically transform production that have taken place since the initial transition, for example, 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialisation in Britain or in other countries such as Germany. In writing that we should think about capitalism in terms of practice, rather than system, we are not trying to reduce historical analysis to a mere process of describing practices for the sake of it. Rather our aim is to highlight that we should be careful not to read too much into a transition that took place at a given time and place as if it provided the model to interpret the rest of modern history. It is one thing to show, as Brenner brilliantly did, that the systematic transformation of production to improve productivity is not something we should take for granted. But once people realised that such a strategy was a possibility, various social forces began to do this in very different ways.

Building from similar concerns, Evans prefers instead to keep the rules of reproduction and supplement them with a dose of UCD, which could cover the idiosyncracies of different societies and social stratifications. From this perspective, one would then assume that there is still a script of capitalism – a universalising conception that organically spreads – which gets inflected

differently depending on the way in which it combines with other types of social structures. We have addressed elsewhere why we think this is no solution to the problem.<sup>44</sup> For the fundamental problem remains un-addressed of how a nomological theory, (intended to be a ‘law of world-history’), can simultaneously allow for the centrality of agents, which respond differentially to the law-like tendencies of ‘development’, and specifically capitalist development.<sup>45</sup> UCD’s focus on the ‘whip of external necessity’ does not allow for a generic indeterminacy in the results of the encounter between a ‘universalising capitalism’ and extra-capitalist spaces and agents, but expects a process of catch-up by means of importing the most advanced technologies available from the incoming society to combine with pre-existing socio-material conditions, overcoming ‘backwardness’ and facilitating even ‘skipping stages’. Yet, what Evans demonstrates in her case study of settler colonialism in Canada is precisely the opposite: Due to the specificity of indigeneity and the availability of land, the incoming settlers did not ‘combine’ with indigenes and their patterns of social property relations, but embarked on a process of displacement, exclusion and elimination. When this did not create the kind of capitalist model visible in England – private property, wage labour, and liberal

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<sup>44</sup> Teschke 2014; 2020; Rioux 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Rosenberg 2006.

political subjectivity – due to the vastness of available land, the outcome of this encounter was not a more advanced form of capitalism or development, but rather the creation of widespread non-capitalist subsistence and homestead farming – a ‘backwards’ step refuting the general logic of UCD. This pattern was widely replicated in many locations in both Americas where incoming settlers, more often than not, established what many PM scholars conceptualise as pre-capitalist property relations, ranging from plantation slavery to other forms of coerced labour. When, according to Evans, the lack of an available ‘free’ labour-force was sought to be remedied by the import of pools of migrant labour, especially Chinese, they did not only become racialised, but also extra-economically differentiated as non-citizens and transient workers. In short, the story that Evans tells is compelling, but it is neither theorisable on the basis of UCD, nor on the basis of strict rules of reproduction, but requires precisely the kind of agency-centered historicism, which privileges specific social and geopolitical contests, foregrounds agents, and highlights counter-intuitive solutions, which we suggest.

And once this is accepted, we can also leave ‘organic’ conceptions of capitalist spread behind and recognise the fact that English capitalism never simply diffused outwards, but formed one moment in successive rounds of deliberate formulations of British grand strategies in which the active promotion



of capitalism abroad was rarely ever a given. In fact, Britain's early modern 'blue-water' strategy and power-balancing accorded primacy to security over economic concerns, being indifferent in various international treaties – from Utrecht (1713) to Vienna (1815) and beyond – to its historical task assigned by 'theory', both UCD as well as Neo-Gramscian theories of British 'hegemony', to spread or universalise capitalism.<sup>46</sup> Vague assumptions about the 'universalising' tendencies of capitalism-outbound lack a concrete inter-active geopolitical historicist register to capture specificities. It was not capitalism that 'universalised' towards the Americas, but the English polity penetrated parts of the continent through specific geopolitical strategies and colonial rivalries. And it was only through the unique political – and perhaps cultural and religious - subjectivity that characterised the 'economy' of English property relations that the kinds of exclusionary and racist processes gained momentum.

It is therefore unclear why we should operate with a problematic conceptual hierarchy that always ascribes differences and change to the non-capitalist part of the equation while assuming that the, now seemingly universal, script of capitalism applies everywhere to some extent. For any dualist reading – here pure capitalism, there combination - serves more to reproduce the image of a transhistorical logic beyond history (i.e. the rules of reproduction), than it

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<sup>46</sup> Germann and Lacher 2012; Teschke 2019, 2021.

helps us historicise its development. Within this problematic framing, the risk is that difference quickly becomes reduced to a matter of determining how various societies meet the requirements of capitalism in their own different ways, as if difference should be read in functionalist terms as part of an overarching capitalist script.

In that respect, a radically historicist re-definition of PM allows, as Dutra Salgado shows brilliantly, a context-sensitivity that holds promise for a non-eurocentric approach. For a rejection of the notion of RoRs associated with specific social property relations implies simultaneously a rejection of universal and reified concepts which super-impose reified rationalities that are often projected in aprioristic ways on non-European contexts. Thus conceived, the method of radical historicism is neither Eurocentric, nor anti-eurocentric, but simply appropriate to the source material at hand: historical evidence and counter-evidence.

This leads us to another aspect of the question of what is capitalism because many of our critics fear that deflating the notion of capitalism, to read it in terms of practice rather than system, runs the risk of losing a unifying perspective on the politics of capitalism. Lafrance, Post and Evans all voice their concerns about this prospect. According to them, the move away from a systemic account of capitalism to a more focused discussion of the rise of new

practices of production and their historical characteristics is a step towards depoliticization because the problem of capitalism then becomes elusive.

While it is true that reconceptualizing capitalism in terms of practice leads to a more open-ended conception of politics, there is still plenty to draw out of a historicised analysis of the politics of capitalism. For example, the *Transition Debate* offers rich insights into why production becomes politicised under capitalism and a central point of contestation.<sup>47</sup> With a growing emphasis on systematically transforming how people produce, along with new forms of oppression, production became a key nexus of social struggle leading, for example, to the rise of unions as central political actors. This also speaks to the depoliticization of social reproduction traced by Marxist feminists such as Silvia Federici or postcolonial thinkers such as Gargi Bhattacharyya.<sup>48</sup>

Still, we remain committed to think about politics as a process, not as a logic. Instead of relying on rules of reproduction to determine what matters most politically, we think that analysing politics should proceed along similar historicist lines as our discussion of capitalist practices sketched above. Specifying what is new and important about various social practices is helpful to grasp what type of struggles they generate (often as an outcome of new forms

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<sup>47</sup> Thompson 1968.

<sup>48</sup> Federici 2004; Bhattacharyya 2018.

of power) so that we can put in perspective how social forces respond to them. This response however is not predetermined. Nor do we think that we should override a historical analysis by referring to transcendental interests as given by the logic of the rules of reproduction. For the question of politics cannot be settled theoretically. Too often scholars abstract from the very political processes, the actual class struggle, to determine what is at stake politically. While structural biases are important, thinking about politics in abstraction from the struggles leads to reified conceptions of politics, as if 400 years of social struggles can be boiled down to the same fundamental conflict between capital and labour. There is plenty of evidence to show that the interests of workers or capitalists are not uniform and can vary considerably so we should be careful not to assume too quickly that we know what is politically important to the agents we study.

Interestingly, Evans again points this out when she rightly questions the omission of gender and race from PM. She is correct in criticising the fact that PM scholars such as Ellen Wood, ended up finding logical justifications for prioritising the conflict between labour and capital.<sup>49</sup> This problematically reduced issues of race and gender to secondary and non-essential matters. This important point, however, makes it surprising that Evans would then insist on

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<sup>49</sup> Wood 1995.

the importance of rules of reproduction to determine what is most fundamental politically. According to her,

‘if the goal is to analyse how specific agents function to advance, benefits from, work against or face exploitation as a consequences of capitalism, then it remains crucial to retain some theoretically generalisable framework for connecting the interests and objectives of, for example, domestic blue collars workers with those of migrant workers’.

Would such a premise not justify the very exclusion that she highlights?

By contrast, we do not believe politics is something to be formalised in these terms. In our view, looking at class or more generally social struggle is not simply a matter of determining who succeeds in promoting and defending their interests. It is a matter of better understanding what these struggles are about. We should not assume that we know what is at stake politically before we turn to history as if we have a vanguard understanding of politics. The work of historicization is not simply a matter of knowing the details and specified circumstances of how a generic script is being played out. It is vital to our understanding of these politics. This is because the forms of power that are used in these social struggles evolve considerably, and thus shape class struggles

differently depending on the context. This is why we reject Post's claim that the politics of capitalism need to be boiled down to a zero sum game. Such a reification of politics as a tug of war between two camps strikes us as a narrow view, which once again entails a quantitative reading of struggles that risks pushing us back towards an exclusive focus on distribution. In our view, class struggles encompasses much broader issues about the organisation of society that go far beyond who gets what.

None of this leads us to a bland liberal pluralism that celebrates the diversity of interest or invalidates the power of a critique. Why would this make it impossible to be critical, for example, of the ways in which migration workers have been exploited or trade unions been attacked with problematic consequences for their members? We know of these problems because of empirical/historical work that documents them, not because the rules of reproduction tell us what to think about them. We should have more faith in our political judgement than to rely on abstract *rules* as our moral compass.

## **6) Radical Historicism and the Use of Historical Comparisons**

This brings us to the question of radical historicism. There has been some confusion around the term partly because our critics read our arguments in

ontological terms. They are concerned with whether agents are free or not to make history under capitalism. Yet this is not our main concern. For better or worse, we take for granted that people make history. What part of it is free will and what part is the product of conditioning is not ultimately the issue. Instead, we repeatedly emphasised that our focus is *methodological*. It has to do with the strategies we use to frame a historical and social process in order to get better insights into its politics.<sup>50</sup>

The key stumbling block here is the fact that any form of interpretation requires a frame. We need theory as a lens to analyse history. This is an important argument raised in the symposium by both Gerstenberger and Lafrance. According to them, analysing social structures helps us define certain expectations that then allow us to identify moments of agency. For example, it makes it possible to identify when agents depart from the structural script. They take this point to mean that a structuralist account is required for historicism to be possible. The frame, for example a theory of the rules of reproduction, is what makes it possible to see agency, or the making of history. Yet, while this is true, the important thing about setting a frame is that it needs to be precise enough so that episodes in this history stand out. If we rely on a generic

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<sup>50</sup> Knafo 2017.

‘structural’ baseline such as the imperative to compete on markets, then everything will look familiar.

The idea of radical historicism is to address this problem by systematically using historical comparisons to help us conceptualise history (and social structures) in more precise ways. Initially inspired by Brenner’s crafty use of such comparisons in the *Transition Debate*, we set out to develop a practice of conceptualisation that builds on contrasts and historical specificities rather than similarity and generalisation. As we pointed out, Brenner brought a lot of clarity to our understanding of capitalism by opposing the trajectories of Eastern and Western Europe under feudalism and those of France and England in the early modern era.<sup>51</sup> If this method had proven so effective for helping to conceptualise the transition to capitalism then why stop there? Why think that changes and social differences under capitalism were somewhat minor and should not be treated in the same way?

We thus started deploying systematically this method of multiplying the angles of comparisons as a tool of historicization to generate conceptual ideas about big issues such as modern diplomacy, central banking, neoliberalism, financialisation, and shareholder value. The point is not to look for historical

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<sup>51</sup> Incidentally, this is also where Brenner’s *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (2006) has a lot to offer despite its overall structuralist framing. For Brenner again uses here comparative analyses of the trajectories of the United States, Germany and Japan at times to great effects.



details per se or to fetishize micro history. On the contrary, specificities in our various writings mainly have a conceptual purpose to qualify further social concepts *which are already circulating in the literature* (such as capitalism, neoliberalism, etc). Using comparisons between instances that we assume to be similar (e.g. neoliberal practices of governance), we look for specificities that help us enquire further into a phenomenon. As we have repeatedly shown, this work often reveals that what initially struck us as salient features, of say neoliberalism, were not actually specific to it, thus forcing us to dig deeper to understand what really is new and rethink in the process what these regimes are about.

There is, of course, always some level of comparison involved in conceptualisation, otherwise it would be impossible to delimit a concept such a capitalism. Post, for example, uses such a comparison to establish the rules of reproduction of feudalism and capitalism by opposing one to the other. Yet too often, scholars such as Post stop there and thus make a limited use of comparative work, assuming that a few distinctions are sufficient to carry out their analysis. Once set, these concepts thus become reified.

This has been a recurrent problem for historicist approaches. Indeed, historicists, from Hegel to the various instantiations of the Historical School in Germany, have regularly ended up turning insights from historical comparative

work into theories of history. Foundational comparisons would become entrenched as a conceptual armature predetermining what would be deemed important in future historical work. It highlighted the risk of settling for a stagist account of a 'universal' history that commonly led scholars to reify the distinct periods they carved out. The angles for productive comparisons simply became too limited.

This problem, we argue, accounts for why Moreno Zacaes is right to say that the PM scholars we criticized in *Rules of Reproduction* are also historically minded. In that respect there is no necessary conflict between structuralism and writing about history. Historicists can just as well fall into this trap with the same outcome that theory and history become increasingly separated. In fact, it is often the power of the insights initially derived from such comparative works that wrongly led historicists to believe they had settled the issue.

The problem then is not resolved if we situate all PM scholars on a sliding spectrum between structuralism and historicism. For the issue is not a quantitative one – how much historicity do you capture? –, but rather a qualitative and thus methodological one: does a framework actually capture history in a productive way that makes a difference to our theories? This goes to the heart of why we wanted to 'radicalise' historicism and secure its comparative angle to avoid such drifts.

This does not mean however that we think no general knowledge can be produced. As we highlighted at various points, we recognise that the transition debate tells us a lot about capitalist production, but none of this amounts to a structural logic. This point is not particularly controversial when we think of other big social transformations such as the creation of states or of money. Both were dramatic changes with lasting impacts. Learning, for example, about the historical creation of money is important to understand what money is. In that sense, the knowledge we gain from it is not only relevant for the specific moment of its creation. It tells us about money as a social phenomenon. But this still does not mean that we have a script that we would then replay every time money is involved. There is no logic of the state or of money that could be deemed transhistorical. The same goes, we would argue, with the momentous changes that surrounded the rise of capitalist production. To say that this is an important historical transformations does not mean that what followed can be deemed a mere variation of the script played out during the transition in England. In other words, learning about capitalism or neoliberalism through studying them historically does not give us a license to move beyond historicism and shift to a structural script. We should not treat history differently by separating what we see as rare moments of transition, deserving of proper

historicization, and usual variations on a dominant script that would then be treated as mere footnotes.

## 7) The Point about Agency

Moreno Zacaes argues in his helpful intervention that the methodological argument behind the idea of radical historicism has been lost on many readers because we frame our contribution by using the structure-agency debate. For this reason, he proposes to recast our intervention in relation to the *Methodenstreit* of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This would allow, he argues, to put the emphasis on method and the relationship of theory to history rather than what he sees to be the unproductive opposition of agency vs capitalist structures. References to historicism and Hegel in our respective work certainly highlight points of convergence with the concerns of the *Methodenstreit*.<sup>52</sup> Still we see great value in the concept of agency and wish to highlight, in this section, why we think this notion is a powerful tool to develop further our historicist agenda.

To begin with, it should be clear that the notion of agency constitutes a further framing, or methodological, tool to complement our emphasis on

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<sup>52</sup> Heine and Teschke 1996; Knafo 2002.

historical comparisons.<sup>53</sup> Its significance is best reflected by looking at a basic point that is not particularly controversial and very much in line with Marx's own writing: the duality of capitalist power (or any other form of power). One of Marx's key contribution was to challenge the contractual myth of liberalism by highlighting that workers are not free to do what they want, or work for who they want, because money is vital for them to get their means of subsistence. This structural vulnerability forces them, Marx argued, to do things they would not do otherwise. It highlights that workers on the labour market are not 'negotiating' with capitalists on equal terms. Yet these structural constraints do not simply limit the margin of manoeuvre for most workers. They also provide agency or power for capitalists who can take advantage of these constraints to do things they would not be able to do otherwise (e.g. forms of exploitation of workers). A fact like the exploitation of labour in a factory thus reflects both the structural constraints on workers faced by workers and the agency of capitalists who use these constraints for various purposes. This is why Marx emphasises social relations to highlight that power is always defined in these dual terms. Structural constraints experienced by some are also a source of agency for others.

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<sup>53</sup> Knafo 2010.

One can use the same idea of the duality of power to speak of the relations among capitalists. Take for example the competitive pressures on supply chain producers who make iPhone components. These producers are constantly forced to produce more cheaply or face losing supply contracts. Yet such a structural constraint is again, also a source of agency for Apple, which can use this vulnerability of their suppliers to develop various sourcing strategies. As these two examples illustrate, a structuring mechanism can always be reinterpreted as a moment of agency once we understand that social structures open up opportunities for some agents because of the constraints they place on others.

This is probably not particularly controversial. Where it becomes more of an issue is in thinking about the implications of this duality for the way we analyse social dynamics. Many scholars take this duality as proof that the structure and agency debate is a non-issue. We should not worry about it because they simply represent two sides of the same coin. This has often comforted scholars in their belief that nothing is wrong with structuralist viewpoints. As exhibited in some of the response in this symposium, it is assumed that a focus on structural constraints does not preclude adding the other side of the coin when fleshing out a historical process. Lafrance, for

example, argues that there is no problem with structural scripts because they leave ample space to add agency to the picture.

When we argue that we should always analyse social dynamics from the perspective of agency, we are essentially making the case that although these are two sides of the same coin, it makes a big difference which of them we privilege in our readings of history and more generally when developing concepts such as capitalism or neoliberalism. Focusing on the agents making the decisions or on the actors that are constrained by these decisions yields different types of enquiries and accounts of history. The first one focuses more directly on the making of history and is concerned with understanding why some agents adopt distinct strategies and what is significant about these strategies. The second focuses on the social consequences of these decisions and the actors who are affected by those decisions.

From a basic standpoint, the making of a decision should logically be considered as more determinant in deciding the course of history, but the reason why structuralists still focus on the constraints, or the outcomes of these decisions, is that they assume that agents will tend to exploit the vulnerabilities of others more or less in the same way. This is the case, according to Post, because dominant actors are themselves constrained by the logic of the market. Capitalists themselves have to meet market imperatives. But once again, we can

highlight that these constraints manifest themselves in concrete and socially defined ways and these specifications matter. A capitalist firm such as Apple faces specific competitive pressures depending on the strategies of others and the various ways other agents mobilise in relation to them (Labour, government, shareholders etc). In short, the issue is whether we are satisfied with a generic and essentially formal/economistic reading of these constraints (i.e. the abstract idea of market imperatives) or whether we feel it is important to specify *further*, in terms of social relations or social struggles, how these constraints materialise by examining how they are the product of the agencies of others. As our respective works document, the range of strategies adopted in these social struggles should not be underestimated. None of this denies the fact that social agents face significant constraints, but this commitment to articulate constraints in relation to agency trains us to better appreciate the wide range of changes that are taking place under capitalism and to better historicise the various issues we are interested in, systematically problematising why history takes different trajectories.

From this perspective, then, the insistence on always analysing from the perspective of agency is not an invitation to do without structures, but rather a recognition that the structural features of a historical process *do not tell us enough* about what is going on for us to be able to conceptualise this history and



determine what is significant about it. To simply say that a firm is adopting a strategy to remain competitive is not precise enough to understand what is going on. We need more information about the process to be able to understand it. *Specifying the agencies then means taking another step, adding vital precisions to the pictures by articulating more precisely the features of the decisions or strategies adopted by agents and what is interesting about them.*

According to Lafrance and Zmolek, our desire to bring everything back to agency essentially means that we end up taking agency for granted and have no way to account for why agents act. As a result, we overestimate the ability of agents to make sense of their surrounding and come up with original strategies. Yet it should be clear that in reality, it is precisely the opposite. Our work seeks to examine how structures are mobilised to create situated strategies, thus tracing the agencies of history back to their social context.<sup>54</sup> In that respect, the objective is to explore how social agents construct capacities and strategies to respond to their circumstances by using institutions, discourses, and other structural resources, which are found in their social context.

For example, Knafo's work on the gold standard is aimed at problematising how modern monetary policy was constructed as a new form of agency, or state capacity, to deal with a changing financial environment. In the

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<sup>54</sup> Knafo 2010.

process, it explores the ways in which various agents used their institutional and discursive settings pragmatically to defend their interests.<sup>55</sup> In the process they developed radically new, yet unforeseen, governance strategies that would become what we now know as central banking. Such a historical reading is meant to reject the common functional accounts of central banking which emphasise the needs of capitalism (or modern economies) and take this form of agency for granted as a normal (or necessary) way to regulate the economy.

Teschke's work on the balance-of-power as a principled British foreign policy strategy similarly shows that its English/British early 18<sup>th</sup> Century construction cannot be conceived as either a structurally derivable function of English capitalism or "capitalist-bourgeois" foreign policy interests, nor as an automatic, logical and fully expectable enactment of a sharpened condition of early modern 'international anarchy'.<sup>56</sup> It was a very specific situated response by political elites to a domestic and geopolitical context, which had to be domestically struggled and deliberated over, and martially-diplomatically managed over and against other European powers, which developed specific responses in return. Other courses of action were historically possible.

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<sup>55</sup> Knafo 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Teschke 2019, 2021.

It should be emphasised that the added knowledge we get from factoring the agencies involved in the making of history into our framework is not simply a matter of showing the limits with structural conceptions of history or adding details. More importantly, it highlights how the agential aspects of history provide vital resources for conceptualising or theorising. This is because specifying what uses were made of given structures by specific social agents necessarily changes how we consider these structures.

Take the case again of the gold standard. Traditionally scholars have interpreted the constraints imposed by the gold standard on the Bank of England as proof of a Liberal approach bent on limiting state intervention. Yet, an agency-based account dramatically changes our interpretation since it underscores that the Bank of England was a private institution at the time which was still managed in the interest of its shareholders. As a result, the same constraints no longer appears then as a means to limit the government and monetary policy in a classic liberal fashion, but on the contrary as a means to develop tools for the state to exert power over private bankers who were then more or less freely issuing banknotes.

As this basic example shows, specifying the agents involved and the uses that were made of certain structures, such as the gold standard, provides a more historically rooted account of what we study. The added historical specifications

can often dramatically change how we interpret history and radically transform how we understand social regimes, practices or institutions. They are not simply historical details that can easily be abstracted from. This is again why we insisted on the need to always analyse from the perspective of agency. The point is to take an *extra* step to specify the agencies involved as a means to bring into focus how structures are mobilised in the context of social struggles. In this way, historical work registers conceptually in a much more direct way because historical details such as the agents involved in the making of central banking are much more significant for the way we conceptualise these social structures than they are in structural accounts.

In that respect, our focus on agency is not an anti-theoretical commitment that condemns any form of generalisation as Zmolek argues. On the contrary, it offers a conceptual alternative, and a more historically rooted way to theorise. Who is involved in these key processes or turning point? How do the actions taken or innovations made provide new capacities for action? What is surprising about these innovations? How the use of these capacities within the context of social struggles led to unintended outcome? All these questions are key to a more historically grounded account of the general issues that interest political economists.

## 8) Conclusion

PM presents a recognisable theoretical approach with identifiable core commitments and a common analytical idiom and lexicon. As for most traditions, however, it would be presumptive to assume that its intellectual architecture remained throughout its near five decades existence internally consistent, unified, or uncontroversial across successive PM generations or even within the prolific work of its founding scholars – Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood. In fact, we argued that PM has struggled with the same problem of Marxist theory, which saddled Marx's work and generated later the famous split between, broadly speaking, Western Marxism and more structuralist or analytical readings of Marx, encapsulated in the structure-agency and theory-history aporias. We argued that this problematique re-surfaces in PM in form of the constitutive and paradigm-defining antinomy between an economicist structuralism versus a historicist emphasis on the specificities of class conflicts, which gradually undermined Brenner and Wood's earlier promise of a radical historicism.

Traditions ossify if its underlying contradictions and problems are not laid open. Identifying and addressing this antinomy was the primary objective of our intervention. The lively replies to this symposium from within and without PM

have demonstrated the abiding attraction of thinking about Marxism and PM in particular as a progressive research programme and a political position to which we remain, fundamentally committed. Yet, we cannot proceed as if there was a non-problem in PM or by implying that structuralism and historicism are fundamentally compatible.

Formalising this historicist PM method is no easy task, and we should be reminded of Wood's candid admission that no one has ever 'devised a "rigorous" theoretical vocabulary to convey the effect of material conditions on conscious, active beings – beings whose conscious activity is itself a material force – or to comprehend the fact that these effects assume an infinite variety of historically specific empirical forms.' We suggested that our advocacy of a return to the historicist breakthroughs in PM's early works should not be read as an ontological or principled embrace of voluntarism, free-floating agency, or structurelessness. We tried to shift the emphasis from ontology and theoretical extrapolations to the articulation of a historical method of analysis that conceives of major phenomena, including feudalism and capitalism, less as theoretical categories (ideal-types) that remain conceptually identical with themselves as general abstractions over time and space, but as historical process-categories. Instead of logically deducing agency, rationalities, and conflicts from pre-defined conceptual assumptions, we suggest a

methodological commitment to situate agency and inter-subjectivity in specific multi-dimensional historical structures, which provide contexts, which actors navigate in active, dynamic, and open-ended ways. Here, the conception of capitalism as a politically-constituted social relation requires programmatically the incorporation of all non-economic dimensions of power (politics, culture, geopolitics), which situated actors mobilise to advance their interests: Instead of generic *rules*, we embrace a commitment to tracking the 'strategies of reproduction', which different actors devise and contest over to reproduce themselves in ways that routinely exceed the economistically-defined rules of 'market-dependency'. This historicist method seeks to trace these practices and counter-practices genealogically in time and space, rather than compressing them into rigidly defined conceptual boxes. Exploiting the gap between any structural expectations and specific outcomes draws the explanation back to the creativity, innovations and unintended outcomes of such situated actors, as 'they make their own history, even if not under conditions of their own choosing'.

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