China and the philosophy of internal relations

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Bieler and Morton’s *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* makes an important and timely contribution to the academic study of the international political economy. Based on the philosophy of internal relations, the book seeks to challenge the ‘ontological exteriority’ that is typically posited between key elements of the international system, such as ideas, the social relations of production, the workplace, the ‘social factory’, the market, state, and inter-state system. While the authors draw on a range of theoretical resources and approaches, it is the historical materialism of Antonio Gramsci that provides the key intellectual resource for the numerous theoretical interventions made in the book. For example, Gramsci’s critique of economism and statology provides the basis of an insightful intervention into the structure-agency by emphasising the intersections between the social relations of production and class struggle. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and the integral state, on the other hand, provides the basis of an understanding of the material structure of ideology. As such, Bieler and Morton further strengthen the case for the relevance of Gramsci’s writings not just for the field of International Political Economy but for social theory more broadly.

Any critical engagement with the book should thus recognise its ambition and scope. Yet, for all this dense theoretical discussion, it is the three empirical chapters on the rising powers, the Iraq war, and global financial crisis that provide the opportunity for the authors to demonstrate that theoretical framework centred on the philosophy of internal relations lives up to its potential in terms of offering novel and compelling explanations of contemporary international affairs. In my comments, therefore, I will reflect primarily on the chapter on rising powers, and as with the chapter itself, on the case of the rise of China within the new international division of labour. Bieler and Morton utilise the philosophy of internal relations to critically engage with a number of arguments commonly made in the wider literature on China. For example, they argue that realist and liberal approaches to the rise of China, as represented by such scholars such as John Mearsheimer and John Ikenberry respectively, share in common their ontological separation of ‘state’ and ‘market,’ and by extension, of the inter-state system and the global economy, a shortcoming that Bieler and Morton argue constitutes an ahistorical starting point for analysis.

Turning to more Marxist-inspired accounts, the authors critically engage with Giovanni Arrighi and Samir Amin’s characterisation of the Chinese political economy during the reform era as “non-capitalist.” Arrighi argues, for example, that China’s non-capitalist nature
derives from the fact that private property rights in land still do not exist in the country. He argues further that, in contrast to the West’s industrial revolution, China has undergone an “industrious revolution” that relied much more heavily on the country’s vast reserves of human labour rather than on capital-intensive technologies. For Arrighi, even the mere presence of capitalists does not in itself amount to capitalism. For the latter to exist, the state must be subordinated to capital’s interests. As a result, China can be said to have pursued a different developmental path to the West, one that is more promising in terms of social equality and more peaceful in relation to the geopolitical order. Samir Amin agrees that the absence of the commodification of land means that China cannot be termed “capitalist,” though at the same time argues (somewhat ambiguously) that the country should be understood as a form of “state capitalism” established in the 1950s. Amin further argues that the post-1978 era should be understood more in terms of continuity with the era of Maoist development.

Bieler and Morton again critique these views by arguing that Arrighi understands states and markets to be ontologically exterior to each other, thereby leading to an analysis that is both ahistorical and incognisant of the character of capital as a social relation and the cluster of internal relations organised around wage labour and the private ownership of the means of production. Similarly, they take issue with Amin by arguing that the lack of private property rights in China is precisely why it has been so easy to dispossess peasants from their land. Indeed, for Bieler and Morton, the proletarianisation of a large migrant workforce, the role of the transnational capitalist class in the organisation of Chinese production, and the emergence of an indigenous capitalist class all suggest that “Chinese development is just one of the latest expressions of neoliberal restructuring including accumulation by dispossession with Chinese people being expropriated from their land” (p.164).

Bieler and Morton’s critique of the notion that China is “non-capitalist” is largely convincing. However, there is some ambiguity in their alternative account due to terminological slippage between “capitalism” and “neoliberalism” when discussing China, thereby serving to obscure the question of the significance of the post-1978 era. A key question for Marxist analysis of the Chinese political economy is whether Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms represented a “restoration” of capitalism or simply the transformation of an existing form of state capitalism (understood as a system in which the bureaucratic class has taken the place of the bourgeoisie as owners of the means of production and extractors of surplus value) into a neoliberalised form. Bieler and Morton seem to lean towards the former when they argue that
the emergence of capitalism in China was characterised by its gradualism, the crucial role of
the state, political centralisation amidst regionalisation, state control over finance, and
membership of the WTO (p.178-179). Yet, this fails to specify exactly at what point the
Chinese political economy became capitalist and what forms of continuity and discontinuity
exist between the pre- and post-1978 eras. This ambiguity seems somewhat out of step with
the great care that the authors take more generally in the book in emphasising the historical
specificity of capitalist social relations. It also risks denying what is arguably valuable in
Arrighi and Amin’s account, namely that the Deng Xiaoping reform era was not a complete
repudiation of the Maoist era but rather built upon its significant legacies. Though Arrighi
and Amin may have exaggerated the progressive aspects of the Chinese political economy,
there seems little doubt that the reform era built upon key legacies such as the
decentralisation of political authority, the building of rural infrastructure, education, basic
health care, etc. Indeed, while the Chinese economy may have since become integrated and
subordinated into a broader system of transnational accumulation by performing the role of a
“final assembly platform,” the sheer scope and scale of China’s rise, in comparison to other
rising powers such as India, remains a puzzle that needs explaining beyond simple reference
to the spatial, technological and financial fixes taking place elsewhere in the international
political economy.

A further observation that might be made regarding Bieler and Morton’s analysis of China
and the rising powers relates to their engagement with ongoing debates surrounding the
relationship between the state and global capitalism. For example, the authors are (rightly in
my view) sceptical of the claim made by William Robinson that China’s capitalist class has
been integrated into the transnational capitalist class. They also critically examine Panitch
and Gindin’s alternative view that the rise of China should be understood in the context of the
continuing centrality of the United States in the international system. Bieler and Morton
argue that this amounts to a view of the United States as a unitary actor rather than as a state
constituted by different class alliances that struggle with each other over which line the US
should pursue towards China. Thus, in a similar fashion to the mainstream approaches, Bieler
and Morton argue that this Marxist-inspired approaches positing an ontologically exterior
relationship between geopolitical and capitalist logics.

It might be questioned whether it is fair to group the Marxist-inspired “dual logic” approach
together with the ontological exteriority of the mainstream and liberal theories, as the former
have stressed the dialectical and mutually constitutive relations between the two logics.
Drawing on Robert Brenner’s notion of the “rules of reproduction,” Ashman and Callinicos have for example challenged the view that the capitalist and geopolitical logics are “externally related” to each other by arguing that capitalists and state managers pursue different strategies to reproduce themselves as a class. Whereas capitalists are primarily concerned with the accumulation of capital, state managers pursue strategies to keep themselves in their positions, such as through the maintenance of state power against other states and over the populations, their ability to extract resources, as well as the representation of capital’s interests externally. The ability of state managers to achieve their aims externally nonetheless depends on the size and profitability of capitals within their territory, and thus, whilst state managers and capitalists have their own distinctive interests, they are ultimately dependent on each other (Ashman and Callinicos, 2007, pp. 112–113). Thus, as Harvey argues, “whilst the territorial and the capitalist logics of power as distinct from each other, they intertwine in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. The relation between the two logics are thus problematic and often contradictory ... rather than functional or one-sided” (Harvey, 2003, pp. 26–30).

No doubt Bieler and Morton will have their own response to these arguments, but it seems that the challenge to their philosophy of internal relations is to provide a more compelling explanation of contemporary international affairs. In this respect, it would have been useful to address the increasingly prominent paradox that lays at the heart of China’s rise, namely the fact that China’s integration into the circuits of neoliberal global capital has been accompanied by increased geopolitical tensions with the United States. Unfortunately, this is not address in the chapter of China, partly as a result of the “postholing” strategy whereby the book separates its analysis of capitalism, war and crisis out across three different case studies, thereby missing the opportunity to fully capture such contradictory elements. Indeed, the closest that the authors come is the statement that “Integration into forms of transnational capital does not imply the absence of conflicts or contradictions. It does, however, indicate that there is no fundamental challenge to the dominant neoliberal order … the interests of transnational capital have become internalised within the different forms of state constitutes the BRICS” (p.175).

But does this really capture the very real tensions emerging between the United States and China? The US-China trade war, tensions surrounding the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, and the East and South China seas, increased competition for influence and resources across the global south including but not limited to the Belt Road Initiative, and increasing nationalistic
sentiment in both the US and China also suggest at least the possibility for geopolitical conflict that would seemingly run counter to the logic of the transnational neoliberalism. Indeed, from an alternative Gramscian perspective, Kees van der Pijl (2012) has spoken of China as “contender state” in terms of its competition for command over technologies and intellectual property, access to resources, China’s growing military prowess, and over global economic governance. Some further consideration of this paradoxical nature of China’s rise and how the authors’ philosophy of internal relations would tackle this would have been insightful.

Nonetheless, for a book of such broad scope and ambition, there are of course bound to be gaps and nuances that could be developed further. As it stands, Bieler and Morton provide a comprehensive account of the contribution that historical materialism can make to the field of International Political Economy, while putting up a robust defence of the charges of “economism” that are often directed at Marxist approaches. The sheer scope of the literature that the authors engage with is impressive. As such, the book deserves a wide readership and is likely to become a key reference point in the field of critical scholarship for years to come.

References

