Political Marxism and the rules of reproduction of capitalism: a historicist critique

Article (Accepted Version)

Knafo, Samuel and Teschke, Benno (2020) Political Marxism and the rules of reproduction of capitalism: a historicist critique. *Historical Materialism*. pp. 1-30. ISSN 1465-4466

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Abstract

Marxism has often been associated with two different legacies. The first rests on a strong exposition and critique of the logic of capitalism, grounded in a systematic analysis of the laws of motion of capitalism as a system. The second legacy refers to a strong historicist perspective grounded in a conception of social relations that emphasises the centrality of power and social conflict to analyse history. This article challenges the prominence of structural accounts of capitalism by showing how the tension between these legacies has played out within Political Marxism in which both orientations co-existed already uneasily in Robert Brenner's original contributions to the Transition Debate. Through this internal critique and re-formulation of PM, we wish to open a broader debate within Marxism on the need for a more agency-based account of capitalism, which builds more explicitly on the concept of social relations, to recover the historicist legacy of Marxism.

Political Marxism and The Rules of Reproduction of Capitalism: A Historicist Critique

Introduction

Marxism has long been marked by two different legacies. The first rests on a strong exposition and critique of the logic of capitalism, which has been grounded in a systematic analysis of the laws of motion of capitalism conceived as a system. This structural critique has often led to an emphasis on the limited ability of capitalism to overcome its internal contradictions. The second legacy refers to a strong historicist perspective that derives from Marx's Hegelian background and his own critique of the German philosopher's trajectory. This historicism is visible in the focus on social relations and the emphasis on the centrality of power and class struggle to analyse history. While most Marxists see themselves as heir to these two defining legacies of Marx, it is no secret that it has often been difficult to properly reconcile them. While this tension has generated fertile debates, it has also been systematically exploited by critics (Block, 2000; Gibson-Graham, 1996; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

In this article, we challenge the prominence of structural accounts of capitalism inspired by the first of these legacies and argue for the need to radicalize the agent-centered and historicist contribution of Marx. Our claim is that Marxists operating within a structural framework systematically fall into economistic readings of capitalism, which hinder the practice of historicisation Marxism was supposed to buttress. Structural accounts, we argue, have perpetuated a problematic market fetishism and underestimate social change under capitalism. More fundamentally, they constrain our ability to use historicisation *as a practice*

1 *of theorization*, which we see to be the distinctive feature of the radical historicism we wish
2 to put forward. This conception of historicism pertains primarily to the elaboration of a
3 method of historical analysis that privileges the tracing of agency to account for historical
4 specificities in the differential trajectories of historical capitalism without subsuming these
5 under one common explanatory denominator.¹
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11 This article focuses more specifically on how this tension has played out within
12 Political Marxism (PM). Our choice here is motivated by our recognition of the innovative,
13 iconoclastic, and seminal contribution of this approach to the historicist tradition, we wish to
14 reinvigorate. Following on the work of Robert Brenner, this approach has worked to establish
15 the historical break that marks the advent of capitalism and its specific origins. In the process
16 of fleshing out this argument to establish conceptually what was distinctive about capitalism
17 from what had existed previously, Brenner came to stylise his account in conceptual terms.
18 The demand for theorisation led him to gradually reify capitalism in his attempt to specify
19 propositions that were valid beyond this specific context of this transition. As a result, some
20 Political Marxists reverted back to a problematic structuralism. We argue specifically that
21 Robert Brenner's concept of 'rules of reproduction', which was deployed originally in the
22 Brenner I Debate to dispel the prevailing idea that feudalism contained an innate tendency
23 towards capitalism, suffered from an in-built structural framing that became more
24 pronounced and visible in the Brenner II Debate.² This relapse into structuralism meant that
25 capitalism itself became increasingly reified, especially in the later works of PM's early
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49 ¹ Our conception of historicism is thus the opposite of Louis Althusser's critical equation of the term
50 with either Marxist 'humanism' – a progressive and unilinear conception of history revolving around
51 human self-creation – or 'economism' – the conception of history grounded in the advance of the
52 forces of production (Honneth 1994).
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54 ² The idea to derive determinate and rational strategies of reproduction from specific sets of social
55 property relations, which translate into patterns of development or non-development, was first
56 suggested in the *Transition Debate* (Brenner 1985b, p. 213-15), and subsequently systematized in the
57 concept of the rules of reproduction (Brenner, 1986). These 'rules' – often raised to the status of
58 'imperatives' – are repeatedly re-affirmed in Brenner's and Ellen Wood's later works as part of PM's
59 basic premises (Brenner 1998, p. 24; 2001, p. 281; 2007, p. 58 ff.; Wood 2002, p. 55 ff.; Wood 2003,
60 p. 9 ff). For early misgivings regarding these structural rules see Teschke and Lacher 2007.
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1 proponents and in some of their contemporary followers (Post, 2011; Chibber 2011), leading
2 to a fetishized conception of capitalism that left little room for earlier concerns with
3 historicism and method. What is conceptually rendered as an auto-generative logic of action
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proponents and in some of their contemporary followers (Post, 2011; Chibber 2011), leading to a fetishized conception of capitalism that left little room for earlier concerns with historicism and method. What is conceptually rendered as an auto-generative logic of action grates with the historical tracking of capitalism and feudalism as contested and concrete processes. This dualism played itself out over time in the prioritisation of a structural reading of capitalism – a nomothetic base-line – which stood either un-reconciled to or disabled the objective of historical specification. Theory and history progressively inhabited two separate worlds, with two different registers, and drifted more and more apart.

In radicalizing the historicist agenda of Marxism through an internal critique and re-formulation of PM, we wish to open a broader debate within Marxism on the need for a more agency-based account of capitalism, which builds more explicitly on the concept of social relations. In short, we seek to open up space for rethinking capitalism as a historically open rather than a theoretically closed category. Coming to terms with social conflicts requires that we examine more carefully their role in constituting and re-constituting the dynamics of capitalism that we study without collapsing them back into rigid theoretical axioms. For this purpose, PM needs to recover and expand upon the historicist method developed, even if implicitly, in Brenner's and Ellen Wood's original contributions to the *Transition Debate*.

The article proceeds in four parts. We start by outlining Brenner's original historicist contribution to the *Transition Debate* and how it departed from structural accounts of the rise of capitalism. Step two identifies a central ambiguity in Brenner's approach, visible in the contradiction between a strict concept of capitalist rules of reproduction, which assigned determinate forms of agency and rationality to classes on both side of the capital-relation and posited a subsequent logic of development, and the simultaneous emphasis on the open-ended specificities of situated socio-political and geopolitical conflicts. It proceeds by showing how this ambiguity was expressed over time in the adoption of a reified, de-historicised and de-

1 politicised concept of capitalism: the notion of market-dependency. The final section
2 concludes by setting out how an agency-centered – rather than rules-centered or capital-
3 centric - re-articulation of PM reconnects theoretically and methodologically with the original
4 historicist promise of the *Transition Debate* in order to renew the PM tradition outside the
5 structuralist trap. We identify the approach as a radical historicism because of its systematic
6 way of using historical specificities as a framing device.
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19 ***1. The Historicist Breakthrough of Political Marxism*** 20 21 22 23 24 25 26

27 It has been a firm belief among Marxists that the critique of capitalism must be a
28 structural one, since the objective is often to identify the inherent and systemic contradictions
29 of capitalism, which are held to exist in any capitalist society. This has been the anchor that
30 traditionally motivated Marxists to continue approaching capitalism foremost from a
31 structural perspective, abstracting from specific historical trajectories and the concrete role of
32 social agents in shaping capitalist history. In this perspective, both are routinely seen as
33 secondary, or at least, as associated with lower levels of abstraction. The primacy given to the
34 idea of a structural capitalist logic implies that the history of capitalism is, in its essence,
35 more or less the same wherever capitalism can be identified. Thus conceived, and this is
36 central to the assumption that capitalism can be referred to as a system, capitalism entails a
37 set of consequences which tend to be generated wherever it holds.
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53 PM initially made its mark as a reaction against this form of structural analysis. In his
54 famous argument on the transition to capitalism, Robert Brenner (Brenner, 1977) pointed out
55 that the same structural trend of the intensification of commerce in Europe had historically
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1 produced opposite outcomes depending on the region. Whereas the intensification of these
2 commercial exchanges had led to the collapse of serfdom in Western Europe, it had led to its
3 consolidation in Eastern Europe. Through this comparative perspective Brenner thus
4 problematized the focus on structural trends. It helped him shift the focus onto class struggle
5 as the key determinant of this history since the divergent outcomes could only be explained
6 by looking at how specific social struggles had mediated these structural forces.
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14 The innovative aspect of Brenner's approach here was its comparative and multi-
15 linear angle which exploited differences within social trajectories that seemed at first similar
16 in order to challenge common understandings of capitalism (Brenner, 1985). If the same
17 condition, previously believed to be key to the rise of capitalism, was present in two different
18 regions with widely diverging outcomes, one of which was not associated with the rise of
19 capitalism, then something else needed to bear the burden to explain the transition to
20 capitalism. Brenner repeated this process by contrasting further the trajectories of England
21 and France. Seeking to explain why agrarian and industrial revolutions had taken place first
22 in England/Britain, he argued that neither the intensification of market exchange nor the
23 exploitation of labour could account for these revolutions because they could be observed in
24 both countries. What then could account for the fact that one society had begun
25 systematically transforming the labour process leading to sustained improvements in
26 productivity?
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45 Brenner's answer was to point to changes in social-property relations and the social
46 struggles that had taken place over them. The notion of politically-constituted social property
47 relations was meant to emphasise the institutional nature of social relations, in particular the
48 legal and political dimensions of property. Brenner was specifically interested in the way
49 social property relations had been redefined through social struggles in England, notably
50 through the enclosures, so as to make workers and producers dependent on the market.
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1 Through a historical analysis of the early modern era, he showed how workers became
2 dependent on wages to get means of subsistence. This made them vulnerable to the demands
3 of capitalist owners. Capitalist were themselves dependent on the market for accessing means
4 of production and thus in need of systematically improving productivity through constant re-
5 investments and technological innovations in order to compete. The result was a distinct
6 dynamic – a logic of development – which would come to characterise English capitalism,
7 most notably visible in the Industrial Revolution that became its hallmark.
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17 Brenner's attempt to break with traditional structuralist accounts was initially greeted
18 with suspicion by Marxists who accused him of falling into a voluntarist conception on the
19 transition that hindered the development of a 'scientific' account of history. The term
20 Political Marxism was suggested by Guy Bois during the *Transition Debate* as a derogative
21 label to denote that Brenner's concern with politics and agency precluded the identification of
22 deeper laws of motion of either feudalism or capitalism. This methodological choice, Bois
23 insisted, was a source of confusion, which led Brenner to empiricist conclusions. For class
24 struggles, when studied on their own, are 'too complex and unpredictable' to lead 'to
25 anything other than ideological short cuts', based on isolated political events (Bois, 1987:
26 110). Without a structural abstraction to identify the key trends and contradictions in the
27 economic infrastructure of feudalism, one could not account for the transition to capitalism.³
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29 This critique essentially reproduced a classic understanding of the relationship of theory to
30 history, as theory was held to constitute a superior mode of knowledge, generating an abstract
31 and deductive model, which was said to help organise a messy and layered history through
32 the identification of deep underlying and structuring trends.
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54 By contrast, it was precisely the way in which Brenner, in his early interventions, had
55 destabilized this relationship between theory and history that proved seminal for the
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60 ³ For a critical discussion of Bois' own account of the 'birth of the market', see Teschke 1997.
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development of a new approach. Indeed, the feature perceived as a weakness by Guy Bois (i.e. the historicism based on a commitment to the study of socio-political conflicts) was embraced explicitly by scholars who sought to build upon the legacy of Brenner's work (Wood, 1995; Comninel, 1987), *inter alia* by drawing out its implications for historicising the practices of polity-formation and geopolitics (Teschke, 2003; Lacher, 2006). The term PM was adopted to highlight the irreducibility of historically distinct socio-political conflicts in opposition to a more generic conception of class struggle as the passive manifestation of a deeper structural logic (Knafo 2002). This amounted to a rejection of deterministic and economistic approaches that pervade structural accounts of the transition. At the root of this new political approach to Historical Materialism, PM offered a radical questioning of the apparently universal features of capitalism - a social system, which had too often been loosely generalised to all societies where markets seemed to play a significant role. Opposing this focus on markets, Political Marxists were keen to redefine capitalism on the basis of social relations, or more specifically social property relations. Their main point was that the secret of capitalism was a political one: it concerned the nature of power in capitalist social relations (Wood, 1995).

However, the path pioneered by Brenner and Wood would in turn create its own set of pitfalls. For the ability to ground concretely the analysis of capitalism in the study of social property relations gave incentives to the first generation of Political Marxists to stylize theoretically the implications of this historical work. Robert Brenner, in particular, formalised his conception of capitalism in the form of an ideal type (Brenner, 1986), which was in turn stereotyped in Wood's distinction between pre-capitalist markets as an opportunity and capitalist markets as an imperative (Wood, 1994). In time, the elaboration of a more substantial conception of capitalism with its inner logic was to become a structural impediment to the original historicist aspirations of PM.

2. *The Problem with Structural Approaches to Capitalism*

Formalising the theoretical implications of historical work is always a difficult task for historically minded scholars. There is an inherent tension in the desire to remain close to the historical material while extricating theoretical principles that can be projected beyond the specific case studied. Brenner often struggled to negotiate this difficult translation as he took his rich historical work on the transition as a means to peer into the systemic nature of capitalism. The result was a gradual reification of capitalism as Brenner inflated key insights of his account of the transition to capitalism in England (a historically specific process) into an abstract and generic model of capitalism. What started as a concern with history thus became an obstacle to further historicisation. For structural models can only be derived if their key parameters are considered independent from concrete historical settings so that the logic can be translated to various contexts despite their different social institutions. With this reifying move, a historical pattern came to be generalised as the core DNA of capitalist societies leading to three problematic consequences: the conceptual reification, de-historicisation, and de-politicisation of capitalism.

The first problem was a conceptual reification that led Brenner to rely increasingly on deductive reasoning to analyse capitalism rather than historicisation. This disconnection with history was best exemplified by the way Brenner gradually substituted a non-context specific idea of market dependency for the actual study of social property relations.⁴ As a result, much of the work of contextualisation (i.e. to determine what type of society or context people are

⁴ Where these actual property relations were historically examined, as in his magisterial study on 16th-17th Century England, the mode of analysis returned to a rich historicist register in which social groups constructed their strategies in dense socio-political and institutional contexts, which could no longer be captured by determinate 'rules' (Brenner 1993).

operating in) was thus increasingly done by examining market dependency, thus invoking an abstract notion of the market to set the scene. By contrast, the concrete study of the social property relations with their institutions took a back seat.

The conception of the rules of capitalist reproduction that resulted from this approach had much in common with mainstream economics in the way it conceived the inner logic of the market as driven by rational imperatives that were logically derived through deductive reasoning and then generically ascribed to market actors (Brenner, 1986). This yielded a universal model that was not fully dissociated from the tradition of Analytical Marxism and its rational choice leanings. This was a curious move, which departed from the spirit of Brenner's initial contribution that had sought to convert the abstract category of the market into a historically rich analysis of capitalism as a politically constructed phenomenon. This drift was best exemplified in the context of the debate on the 'failed' transition to capitalism in the Low Countries. For here, Brenner had made the case for considering Holland as having also been a pioneer in the transition to capitalism on the basis that the peasantry in this country experienced high levels of market dependency. If Holland had not followed through, he argued, it was only because of the lack of a sufficiently robust demand from the surrounding feudal economies (Brenner, 2001).

By treating this transition as a matter of market dependency, Brenner found himself on a slippery slope since the transition to capitalism was now turned into a quantitative issue, rather than a qualitatively based concern with specific and *institutionalised* social property relations. Ellen Wood noted at the time that this would make it increasingly difficult for Brenner to maintain the argument of the historical specificity of capitalism, since market dependency is not a sufficiently precise criterion (Wood, 2002). Indeed, market dependency was not an uncommon phenomenon, even in the late Middle Ages or the early modern era and is often read as a classical indicator of Smithian logics of market development (Persson,

2014). Focusing on market dependency makes it difficult to resist seeing budding capitalisms in places where markets played a prominent role. This naturalising bias was further reflected in a subtle shift in the argumentation, as Brenner was forced to fall back on obstacles or *ad hoc* circumstances (i.e. insufficient demand and the inability to develop a vibrant enough domestic market), which blocked what came now to be posited as the ‘normal path’ towards full market development.⁵ This was essentially a return to the form of argumentation so powerfully criticised by Wood whereby capitalism was posited as the expected norm and historicisation turned into a story of how capitalism had been postponed or hindered by social and institutional obstacles.

The second problem of this structural reading of capitalism is that it isolates the theory of capitalism from the work of historicisation. Producing general models that are amenable to a variety of social contexts forces us to abstract from concrete historical details and thin out the social determinants that are considered significant. Having detached general insights from their historical setting makes it then difficult to re-connect theory with history (Knafo 2002). On the one hand, structural theories usually have little to say about history for they cannot account for the specific circumstances that define historicity. Deriving a logic of capitalist development that applies as much to 16th Century Britain as to 20th Century New York or contemporary Malaysia, can only be done if we rely on very abstract propositions. The higher the abstraction, the thinner its content, the lesser its capacity to place history in perspective and generate rich insights. The limitation becomes explicit when confronted with the discerning and discriminatory grid of comparative history, because general abstractions are just not equipped to deal with contrasting developments, which are the bread and butter of historicisation. By definition, general abstractions cannot account for anything that is specific

⁵ This was again the source of an important critique directed by Wood to Brenner’s account of the Dutch case where much of the explanation for the ‘limited’ nature of the transition relied on the lack of critical mass in terms of demand (Wood, 2002).

1 to the case we analyze. When asked to account for history, one is forced to rely on further
2 mediations to establish this connection, assigning an ever more non-substantial role to the
3 abstraction. This is why, so often, it is the mediations themselves that have to bear most of
4 the burden to explain history. While the mediations are expected to reconcile the theory with
5 history, the logic itself has little to say about history for it provides no ground to engage with
6 the specific trajectories of capitalist societies (Wood, 1993).
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14 Structural theories are not only weak at accounting for history, they also tend to
15 downplay the theoretical significance of history. This can best be seen in relation to a second
16 aspect of history that fares poorly in structural frameworks: social change. Commonly,
17 structural approaches measure change in terms of the extent to which they transform the rules
18 of reproduction. Such a macro-framing downplays the importance of social innovations
19 because the high standard set by what is often an overly general structural logic means that
20 little seems qualitatively significant. Historical changes rarely stand out when cast against
21 abstract and general models. Does the development of financial securitization really change
22 the logic of capitalism? What about the development of the assembly lines and Fordist
23 techniques of production? Historical circumstances can be easily subsumed under a logic
24 defined in basic abstract terms as simply a variation under a common theme, or as an
25 outcome retrospectively interpreted as a functional response and expected resolution to the
26 requirements of a particular capitalist crisis. Within a structural reasoning, history is thus
27 often demoted to an auxiliary of theory, selectively mobilised as instances of a logic. As we
28 wait for dramatic transformations, we tend to discount whole series of small changes which
29 often add up to something much more important than we assume. As we peel away the layers
30 of history through this procedure under the pretence that they constitute secondary details, all
31 we are left with is our common sense.
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1 If our conception of capitalism essentially boils down to market dependency, profit-
2 seeking and productivity growth, the history of capitalism will appear banal. We will always
3 have the impression that we already know more or less the script. Nothing appears surprising
4 within such a template as we comfortably travel through a landscape that has been
5 normalised by the highly abstract lens of the rules of capitalist reproduction. From this
6 vantage point, everything looks monochromatic as history becomes treated as a
7 supplementary ingredient that can always be *later* added to the mix in order to produce 'a
8 more complete picture' *if needed*. And, indeed, it became a recurrent theme within PM to
9 dismiss any suggestion of a profound transformation under capitalism, whether we examine
10 the rise of Fordism (Brenner and Glick, 1991) or Post-Fordism (Wood, 1996: 37) by claiming
11 that these were simply natural and logical outcomes of a generalising and deepening
12 capitalism. In such articles, Brenner and Wood strikingly normalise developments held up by
13 others as transformative. From their vantage point, these lower-level transformations of
14 capitalism came to look like just another means to 'make more profits' and 'produce cheaper
15 products'.⁶ This illustrates how the gap thus cultivated between theory and history often
16 serves more to protect assumptions than to generate new insights.

17 This disconnect between theory and history was well illustrated in the context of the
18 *Brenner II Debate* launched by the publication of *Global Turbulence*, which deployed an
19 explicit structural framing in order to account for the trajectory of post-war capitalism in the
20 United States, Germany and Japan (Brenner, 1998). The key contribution of this piece was to
21 show how successive waves of new market competitors in the global economy had
22 contributed in fuelling a secular logic of over-accumulation, which systematically pushed the
23 profit rate down. Brenner was particularly interested in the dynamic of inter-capitalist

24 ⁶ As Wood dismissively argued in relation to the so called post-fordist era of capitalism: 'The old
25 Fordism used the assembly line as a substitute for higher-cost skilled craftsmen and to tighten the
26 control of extracting more value from labor. Now, the new technologies are used to the same ends: to
27 make products easy and cheap to assemble' (Wood, 1996: 37).

1 competition, which sees capitalist producers locked into specific lines of production even
2 when these turn out to be less and less profitable. The reason for this, Brenner argued, is that
3 fixed costs often lead capitalists to reduce dramatically their mark up instead of investing in
4 different ventures, because of the one-off costs involved in shifting lines of production. This
5 creates the conditions for over-accumulation since capitalists continue to produce even when
6 the venture is proving overall un-profitable, as long as future investments remain marginally
7 profitable once the sunk costs have been written off.
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17 This argument exemplified the two classic failings of structural approaches: a limited
18 ability of the theory to account for history and a propensity to dismiss the theoretical
19 significance of historical evidence. By this point, Brenner had grown more comfortable with
20 a much stronger structural framing and this was reflected in the way this later work flipped
21 the script of the previous *Brenner Debate* on the transition to capitalism: instead of using
22 comparative history to challenge general assumptions and explain differential outcomes,
23 Brenner focused on cross-national structural trends to anchor his main claim that regardless
24 of what states and capitalists do, they cannot circumvent the structural conditions of over-
25 accumulation. In other words, instead of tracing how an apparently similar logic – increasing
26 entry into markets driving down profit-rates - could have opposite outcomes, he set out to
27 show that despite the apparent diverse trajectories of the United States, Japan and Germany,
28 there was a similar structural logic at work which gradually led to a declining aggregate
29 profit-rate across the core capitalist zone.
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48 This made him liable to the same critique he had once directed against the
49 commercialisation thesis. For one can find under capitalism an endless series of instances
50 where similar or identical pressures and crises led to radically dissimilar outcomes. For
51 example, the United States saw a systematic process of de-skilling of labour in the early
52 decades of the 20th Century, at the time when Germany was following the opposite path
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1 promoting vocational training (Thelen 2004). Similarly, if the logic of specialisation under
2 the pressures of competition is seen as a key feature of capitalism according to Brenner, there
3 are many examples of the opposite from the rise of large American conglomerates in the
4 1960s accumulating lines of business as if they were assets in a well-diversified portfolio
5 (Fligstein, 1990), to the Korean Chaebols diversifying their product lines because they
6 competed on the basis of market shares rather than profit making per se (Bernard 1999).
7 Translated into the terms of the *Transition Debate*, his argument about over-accumulation
8 amounted to saying that although lords followed different strategies in Western and Eastern
9 Europe (dissolution or intensification of serfdom), in both cases they were subjected to an
10 identical market logic of competition with its imperative to remain profitable.⁷ In this way,
11 his work on the contemporary history of capitalism elided the crucial theoretical insight of
12 the Brenner I Debate: namely that class politics proved the decisive explanatory *differentia*
13 *specifica* in these cases.⁸

14 In the absence of this historical footing, Brenner's theory proved limited in its
15 explanatory power. While it highlighted the way in which imperatives pressured these
16 countries into making social changes, it could not account for the distinct trajectories they

17 ⁷ A similar problem can be found in the work of Vivek Chibber, which seeks to address explicitly the
18 question of difference under capitalism. Here again one sees a subtle articulation, which leads him to
19 subordinate difference to the logic of capitalism, even when he goes to great length to argue that there
20 can be a wide range of forms and practices under capitalism. Having started from the premise of
21 market dependency, Chibber posits that greater submission of a wide range of societies to market
22 imperatives should be read as a process of capitalist universalisation (2013: 100). This argument can
23 only be defended as long as the nature of the logic that is being universalised remains considerably
24 under-defined. More importantly, it serves to cast difference as a variation of a common theme (the
25 logic of capital), rather than use difference as the very object of a historicist account, that is the
26 challenging aspect of history requiring explanation.

27 ⁸ Knafo has argued that one can make a productive reading of Brenner's account by re-interpreting his
28 dynamic of over-accumulation as an outcome of the creativity of agents in adjusting to growing
29 capitalist imperatives. The point, he argues, is precisely that capitalists demonstrate creativity in
30 responding to market pressure and are thus not easily discarded. From this perspective, the trajectory
31 of post-war capitalism can be read as a series of differentiated trajectories defined by the distinct
32 institutional innovations and social property relations, which come to define socio-economic
33 dynamics. This is, in other words, an attempt to re-read the second Brenner Debate from the angle of
34 the first Brenner Debate (Knafo 2013a). Here, the emphasis is placed on the different trajectories,
35 which can explain how global imperatives are constituted without assigning a determining logic to
36 them.

1 had taken. There was nothing straightforward about the way different countries had
2 responded to a growing problem of over-accumulation. Why did Germany not cut labour
3 costs in the 1980s when international pressures intensified? Why did Japan continue to stoke
4 overproduction instead of purging productive capacity in the 1990s, as the United States did
5 in the 1980s (Akuni & Taggart Murphy 2002)? Brenner himself conceded at various points
6 that these trajectories could not be read or interpreted in a straightforward way, but he failed
7 to draw the theoretical conclusion that these different historical trajectories undermined the
8 generic *explanans* of capitalist imperatives. In practice, this meant that he could not count on
9 the logic of over-accumulation to explain history.
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22 It was also noteworthy that Brenner grounded the analytical narrative in *Global*
23 *Turbulence* only minimally in the insights about capitalism he had suggested in the first
24 Brenner Debate. Although the ‘rules of reproduction’ were supposed to capture the
25 fundamental logic of capitalism, it turns out that they had little to add for helping us
26 understand the actual history of capitalism. Recall that Brenner concluded there that strong
27 rules for reproduction prevailed wherever capitalist property relations held, driving a series of
28 rational responses grounded in market dependency that would generate a determinate ‘logic
29 of development’. In the second Brenner debate, however, the argument about over-
30 accumulation seemed to contradict the rules of reproduction of capitalism as understood in
31 the first debate. For if less efficient producers were not displaced through competition, a
32 claim which helped ground the emphasis on generalising labour-saving tools and methods,
33 then it was no longer clear why market imperatives would have determinate effects (see Post,
34 2013: 14). Instead, the historical evidence was stylised into a mid-range theoretical argument
35 about over-accumulation, which, in turn, was not unsettled by the further evidence that ‘real
36 history’ shows that the general phenomenon of over-accumulation panned out differentially
37 in various countries due to different policy responses.
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1 This in turn led Brenner to systematically discount the theoretical significance of
2 history even when *Global Turbulence* was filled with fascinating insights about the trajectory
3 of the US, Germany and Japan. For placing the emphasis on the structural dimension meant
4 seeing the profit downturn as the conclusion of the analysis rather than the starting point.
5 Instead of seeking to analyse the evolution of capitalism as a series of differential responses
6 and innovations to the pressures of over-accumulation, Brenner insisted that, regardless of the
7 path chosen, capitalists and their states were unable to overcome the crisis-prone tendencies
8 of capitalism. This suggested that all these strategies and innovations were analysed from the
9 perspective of being inadequate, temporary, and epiphenomenal, implying that Brenner
10 would often neglect their transformative effects. When Brenner adjusted his argument to
11 account for financialisation in a series of later contributions, most notably in *the Boom and*
12 *the Bubble* (Brenner, 2002), he kept emphasising that the changes were mostly cosmetic and
13 a further demonstration of the failure to overcome the inexorable long downturn. They came
14 to be analysed *ex negativo* as the desperate efforts to sustain accumulation in a context of
15 heavy over-accumulation. Ultimately, this ended in the discounting of this new chapter in the
16 history of capitalism as a mere coda to a script, which had already been written out.

17 This brings us to the third problematic consequences of Brenner's structural framing:
18 the depoliticisation of capitalism as Brenner was forced to drift towards economism. It is
19 common for structural types of reasoning to de-politicize and de-socialise their object since
20 the level of abstraction they demand forces us to discard much of the contextual material
21 which frames politics (Knafo 2010; Teschke and Wenten 2016). To be able to cover a large
22 variety of cases and capture the inherent rationality of capitalism, one needs to push politics
23 down to lower levels of abstraction, functional by-products, and ultimately to the rank of
24 historical details.

1 In the case of Brenner, this de-politicisation became quite explicit as he sought to
2 anchor his opposition of pre-capitalist societies based on political accumulation and
3 capitalism based on economic accumulation. As the notion of market dependency took on a
4 central importance in his analysis, he thus came to insist that the nature of capitalist
5 competition is an economic one (by contrast to a political one in the pre-capitalist era).
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7 According to him, capitalism is marked precisely by the limited ability of capitalists to use
8 power in order to compete, forcing them to focus on production and investment. But this
9 generic insight morphed over time into a classic liberal argument, not all that dissimilar to the
10 Commercialization Thesis, which saw property rights and institutional developments as
11 central in limiting the ability of agents to use power or violence to 'cheat' and avoid
12 competing on a purely *economic* terrain. The end product was a de-politicized account, which
13 neglected power struggles, especially among capitalists or more generally dominant social
14 classes, and discounted wider power struggles and institutional changes in order to restrict the
15 analysis to abstract market forces. Politics and institutions were read instead as superficial
16 attempts to circumvent the logic of the market and mostly analysed as transient,
17 unsustainable, and thus irrelevant to our theorisation of capitalism (Konings, 2005b: 195).
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20 Here, we can concretely identify the source of Brenner's limitations in his incomplete
21 account of market dynamics. He focuses primarily on the first half of the story, which relates
22 to the imperatives of capitalism and the market, for example in the form of a market
23 dependency to access means of subsistence or means of production. But stopping the analysis
24 at this point places us in an economistic perspective, which assumes that there is a set of
25 universal strategies emanating directly from market pressures (Konings 2005a). From this
26 perspective, the need to be economically efficient dictates that capitalist producers specialise,
27 re-invest in cost-cutting technologies, intensify the labour process, de-skill labour and more
28 generally increase their power over labour, and concentrate capital. Yet, thinking simply in
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1 these narrow terms leads astray, because it presumes a definitive rationality on the part of
2 capitalists and a certain linearity to capitalist development very much like neoclassical
3 economics. It suggests an image of agency that conceptualises people as passive rule-
4 followers, rather than creative rule-makers.
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10 If market dependency may provide a glimpse into the problems that people face, it
11 does not tell us much about the solutions they develop to respond to it (Knafo 2002). We then
12 come to the second part of the story, one which features agency, power and a much greater
13 role for history. This involves greater attention to social resources that people can mobilise in
14 order to develop strategies to compete. Here, institutions, regulations, customs, and
15 discourses all become central and the object of numerous forms of mobilisation that cannot
16 be derived from the structural logic of the market. One could go even further and emphasise
17 that the rules of market competition are not set in stone. To compete on the market is
18 inherently indeterminate as an idea. People never fully compete on all fronts at once. What
19 creates order on the market is precisely that this competition is always channelled in socially
20 specific ways, which profoundly transform what types of strategies become privileged
21 (Knafo, Hughes and Wyn-Jones, 2013). In that respect, markets are profoundly political
22 institutions. As in any other social realm, agents use and manipulate regulations and
23 institutions as means of empowerment to exert power over others. They do not simply
24 struggle to compete economically, but struggle over the definition of the rules of competition
25 or the rules of reproduction. For these do not emanate from the existence of some abstract
26 and purified entity named the market, but result from struggles over the institutions and
27 regulations, which define markets as concrete sites for economic activity.
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3. Radical Historicism and the Methodology of Historical Materialism

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5 We have argued above that the dominant structural focus within Marxism has become
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7 a problematic lens for historicising social trajectories of development, and we have used the
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9 work of Political Marxists, most notably Robert Brenner's, to illustrate some of the defects
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11 that spring from this approach. We are not, of course, the first to criticise Brenner for his
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13 rationalism, his overly structural perspective (Rioux, 2013), but much of the literature has
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15 emphasised that the problem stems from too much of a specific perspective on the making of
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17 capitalism which illustrates the eurocentric and reified conception of Brenner (Banaji 2010;
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19 Heller 2011; Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015). Some have criticised his narrow focus on free
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21 labour (Rioux, 2013) and on transformations in Britain (Blaut, 1994) pointing out that we
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23 should not confine our concepts to specific features that travel poorly through history. By
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25 contrast we argue that PM needs to radicalise its reliance on historical specificity and agency
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27 as a systematic practice of theorisation. In many ways, the problem with Brenner, we argue,
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29 is not that he took a historically specific development to conceptualise capitalism, but that he
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31 did not pursue the work of conceptualising the history of capitalism through a consistent
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33 focus on specificity. In that respect, our goal is to radicalise the Marxist lineage focusing on
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35 class struggle, social relations, geopolitics, and historicisation.
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43 Why radical historicism? We speak of historicism because our main concern is to use
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45 history itself as a framing device. The aim is to turn historicisation into a practice that
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47 generates theoretical insights about capitalism, rather than a simple recourse for illustrating
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49 them. We qualify this as a *radical* form of historicism because we place the focus on rigour,
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51 or more specifically a form of self-discipline that comes from methodological commitments,
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53 which force us out of our comfort zone. This can only work if we adopt a methodology that
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55 systematically prioritises history over abstract and deductive studies of capitalism. As we will
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1 argue, our agency-centred notion constitutes more than the banal Giddensian idea that people
2 are shaped and draw upon their structural context, that they are conditioned by structures and
3 yet also contribute to transform them (Giddens, 1984). There is no pretence here to have it
4 both ways. On the contrary, the goal is to establish Historical Materialism as an imperative all
5 the way through: a method for showing what difference people make to the history of
6 capitalism. It is a commitment to always analyse from the perspective of agency.
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14 This historicism builds on Marx's famous proposition that people make their history,
15 even if not under the condition of their own making. Most scholars have read this proposition
16 in ontological terms to highlight that people confront capitalist compulsions, which leave
17 them limited choices. They thus focus on the second part of this proposition, the conditions
18 that are not of their own making. In such accounts, people facing structural constraints
19 become mostly bearers of a logic that is largely determined in abstraction of the role they
20 play in history. There is very little making of history in these accounts and agency is mostly
21 confined to exceptional phases of transitions rather than being an integral component of the
22 wider story (Knafo 2010; Teschke 2014).
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36 The aim of the radical historicism we put forward is to invert this classic framing of
37 Marx's dictum. Instead of putting the emphasis on the conditions that are not of people's
38 making, we seek to reaffirm the fact that even if people do not determine the conditions they
39 are placed in, it is *still people who make history*. The objective then is to establish
40 systematically these agencies as vital to our understanding of capitalism even though, and
41 this is the key, they often *seem* at first to be of limited significance.
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51 The impression that structures determine history stems from the very nature of the
52 relationship between structure and agent. Try as we may, structures will always seem more
53 significant at first glance than what individuals or groups can do, because they tend to affect
54 the lives of larger groups of people than specific actions or decisions. When we seek to
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determine which of the two matters most, we are necessarily led to focus on structures. For this same reason, social structures may be more attractive for developing theories because they hold the promise of covering greater scope than agency and seem to lend greater explanatory power to theories based on them. However, this also means that we tend to overestimate how much can be explained by social structures, as if they generate similar outcomes. This is largely mistaken. A structure can be relevant to many different contexts without explaining what is happening in them. It is the attempt to make this leap across diverse contexts and turn structures into the determining explanatory factor that is the fundamental mistake of structural perspectives.

From our perspective, the debate about structure and agency is not an ontological matter that concerns how structure shape agency who in turn transform structures through their own actions. Instead, what is at stake is a matter of perspective because at a high level of abstraction, everything looks the same. It creates the impression that we already know the script. More often these specificities are seen as secondary matters that change little to the story. Hence, even though most scholars recognize the importance of agency, they struggle in practice to make good on their commitment, *because agency is something difficult to assess*. Issuing another call to awareness that one should take *both side* of the story into account would thus be pointless. The challenge is to develop a methodology that forces us to systematically analyse from the perspective of agency to register the making of history.

It is interesting in this regard that even Political Marxists who initially made such a virtue of looking at class struggles as an open-ended process, still came to systematically discount agency and innovations under capitalism. This, we argue, is no coincidence. It reflects the methodological bias against historicisation that is pervasive in the social sciences. For it is symptomatic of this bias that so much of the literature in political economy and international relations interprets innovations mostly as means to reproduce a pre-established

logic or confirm law-like assumptions (Knafo, 2010; Teschke, 2014; Teschke and Wyn-Jones 2017). New practices of production, changes in financial instruments, evolution in governance and regulations, labour transformations, foreign policies and capitalist international orders are all usually interpreted from a default position, which assumes that these are all means to pursue the profit motives and stabilize the conditions for accumulation. They are interpreted as means to reproduce capitalists and capitalist states. In a paradoxical way, the extreme dynamism and diversity of capitalist orders is then read as proof for the inability for an institutional fix to overcome the contradictions of capitalism and social and geopolitical change was thus ultimately discounted as secondary.

The focus on agency is thus conceived as a means to address a recurrent bias towards structural reasoning. We see radical historicism as an approach that uses agency as a framing device; a means to specify what the work of historicisation should consist in. Our contention is that the work required to establish agencies in the making of history as facts allows us to gain perspective and relativise what is often taken for granted.

What do we mean by establishing and foregrounding the agencies involved in the making of capitalism? This approach is anchored in comparative principles intended to place social history in perspective to bring the differences in developments that may seem similar at first sight. Emphasising differences allows to see things in richer historical terms and register the concrete social determinations in the making of history. Three key ideas, or methodological guidelines, capture this idea:

1. Specific Actors: The first challenge is to reflect on the way we characterise the social agents involved. The objective here is to systematically seek angles that help specify how the

agents and their social relations are distinctive from others we assume at first to be similar.⁹

The goal is to avoid generic framings of actors that rely on categories that are already pre-established and thus associated with a whole set of expectations. When examining agents (workers, bankers, capitalists, parties, politicians, etc.) involved in a struggle, we have a tendency to project assumptions about them that have little to do with the specific context in which they are. To combat this, it is important to look for productive comparative angles to determine what makes, for example, specific workers distinctive, when compared to other workers in similar industries. The point is not to simply add historical details. These specifications must serve an explanatory purpose. They have to be mobilised as a means for understanding the greater significance of a phenomenon, rather than serve simply a descriptive purpose as it is usually the case. The simple insight here is that we need to grasp non-generic features in order to make this specific historical context count in our analysis. This focus on specificity helps register features from the context that would otherwise be ignored if we assumed that they would act like any other capitalist.

2. Counterintuitive Innovations: Having worked to define the context in terms of specific social relations, the second step is to analyse how agents innovate in a given context. How do we know what is novel about given innovations? We often analyse innovations in terms of what they produce in the long run thus taking the end product to characterise the initial innovation. Furthermore, innovations tend to be normalised and internalised with time, as we get used to them. They often appear as pre-ordained and it becomes difficult to imagine the world without them. Does capitalism need central banks? Was manufacturing bound to lead to mass production? Does capitalism require multiple states? Knowing what is new about an

⁹ This requires attention to context-specification, but one, which cannot be reduced to the accumulation of antecedent structural causes that explain agency, but one that seeks to establish how agents interpret, mobilise, and act upon a specific context in non-derivative ways.

1 innovation when it emerges is something difficult to grasp. It cannot be read off directly from
2 the context in which it occurs as if it was dictated by the circumstances. This is why a
3 comparative standpoint must be once more exploited in order to break down the impression
4 of an organic symbiosis between innovation and context. This can be done along two axes,
5 either temporally through a diachronic historical comparison that seeks to determine how an
6 innovation marks a departure from a previous norm, or spatially through a synchronic
7 historical comparison to show how different courses were taken to address similar types of
8 problems. By outlining different pathways, the objective is to capture something that is
9 counterintuitive about the path taken. This is important because if the innovations appear
10 normal to us for that context, it is probably because we are projecting our own assumptions of
11 what one would do or expect in a similar situation. It is only once we find a comparative
12 angle, which helps capture what is surprising about an innovation that the work of
13 historicisation can be said to be productive.

34 **3. Unintended Outcomes:** The final task is to connect acts of agency in order to grasp what
35 they amount to in the broader picture and this should mostly be done in terms of unintended
36 outcomes. Here we come back to the idea that people make their own history, but not under
37 the conditions of their own making. By contrast to most readings, that take this as a license to
38 employ a structural analysis, we read this notion as something that fully pertains to agency, or
39 more specifically to the fact that since people never fully control the terms under which they
40 make history, they never fully control what emerges from their innovations. The reason is
41 simply that others make their own adjustments and innovations with the result that the
42 outcome is necessarily unintended to some extent. Hence, historicisation requires that we
43 trace social innovations in terms of complex and *decentered* lineages where multiple agencies
44 are involved so that no one can be said to control the whole process. Such a focus on

1 unintended outcomes is once more understood here as something to be established in relation
2 to a specific case, rather than a vacuous ontological admission that history is made of
3 unintended outcomes. The true hallmark of an account which makes social conflict, rather
4 than a structural logic, the motor of history is its ability to separate agency from intentions
5 and to move away from more functionalist readings of history where social developments are
6 explained in terms of systemic needs or the intentions of powerful actors. In reality, things
7 rarely pan out the way people plan it, even when it turns out much worse/better than expected
8 for some. In this way, establishing unintended effects is a key reflexive strategy to
9 problematize our normalising gaze. Historically, people often struggle to transcend the
10 limitations of their own context. For this reason, a significant transformation is unlikely to
11 have been intended. When we see it otherwise, it is often because with time we have come to
12 expect a specific development as normal and as dictated by historical circumstances. To
13 challenge this *post hoc* rationalisation, it is important to establish significant transformations
14 as unintended effects, even when they suit the powerful.

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36 As we have argued, these three dimensions have mostly been expunged from, or
37 limited to a marginal role in, Marxist accounts that focus on rules of capitalist reproduction.
38 A structural framing forces us to abstract from the specificities of social relations and social
39 innovations in order to reconstruct causal arguments of general validity. These, in turn, often
40 tend to be functionalist because the driving force of history has to be constructed at such a
41 level of abstraction that conceptual shortcuts have to be taken. By contrast, the three points
42 raised here offer guidelines for research as to the type of angle to look for when we work to
43 historicise social development. They set parameters for assessing how productive the work of
44 historicisation is. If one cannot say something about what is specific of the agents involved
45 and their social relations, about the counterintuitive aspect of their innovations and the

1 unintended nature of the consequences, then chances are that history simply serves an
2 illustrative function to show how the logic derived theoretically played out historically. In
3 that respect, these three points are seen as key stepping stones for fulfilling a commitment to
4 historicisation. As we mentioned, it represents a means to develop a *methodological* strategy
5 concerned with the task of historicisation by switching the emphasis towards agency.
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7 Importantly, this is not an *ontological* proposition concerning the ability of subordinated
8 classes to transform their surroundings. It is a methodological commitment aimed at placing
9 the emphasis on the agents, their innovations, and the difference they make. This changes
10 nothing to the observation that powerful capitalists (or powerful states) tend to secure much
11 better outcomes than workers (or weaker states). It is simply a matter of recognising that it is
12 the creativity of these actors, both powerful and weaker, which is the key to the story.
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29 ***4. Rethinking Capitalism in Non Structural Terms***

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34 This brings us to the second main argument in our attempt to reconfigure PM. If we
35 develop a methodology based on agency, what do we do about the notion of capitalism?
36 Shifting our analysis to capture the agencies involved in the making of history has important
37 implications for the way we analyse capitalism in non-structuralist and non-deterministic
38 terms. Marxists have traditionally analysed capitalism in terms of a system with its own rules
39 of reproduction. Capitalism is then taken as a form of society governed by a distinct logic.
40 Certainly, the idea that capitalism amounts to a system provides certain conceptual
41 advantages. It anchors the idea of a social logic generally given as the law of value. It
42 provides an object that helps to ground the idea of contradictions (i.e. showing that this logic
43 was fuelled by an internal contradiction) and thus sets out the assumption of a limit which
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1 would make this system unviable and unable to reproduce itself beyond a certain point. As
2 we argued, this makes it difficult to historicise capitalism.
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4 By contrast, we propose to replace a systemic notion of capitalism, with its reifying
5 pitfalls, in favour of a more workable notion of capitalist practices that is easier to trace
6 historically. It helps us specify what the transition to capitalism debate is about and more
7 specifically what the notion of capitalism can account for. What is the hallmark of these
8 practices? From a PM perspective, capitalism referred to the practices that radically
9 transformed the labour process in a systematic way, thus paving the way for an agrarian and
10 an industrial revolution. From this perspective, the *Transition Debate* concerned the
11 emergence of practices and social technologies which contributed to *systematically*
12 *transforming the labour process*. As we have argued, it was not simply a matter of
13 imperatives, but the crystallisation of specific solutions to meet these imperatives. If those
14 developments took on a more generalised and form, it is because they were formalised in
15 various ways so as to be transportable from one site to the next and diffuse socially. This
16 process remains largely understudied even within PM, where the transformations of the
17 labour processes has yet to be systematically traced.¹⁰ It highlights the need for PM to
18 establish the ways in which capitalist practices were formalised in concrete institutions,
19 templates, ideas and practices that could be re-appropriated across various settings. If the
20 work of Brenner helped specify what was new about capitalism, there is still a lot to be done
21 to understand how social practices coalesced to produce this transformation, and the various
22 trajectories that were taken to later pursue this objective in various ways, from the rise of
23 scientific management to lean production.
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53 Deflating the concept of capitalism from a system with its own logic to a reference to
54 specific practices related to the systematic transformation of the labour process can help us
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60 ¹⁰ For an important step in this direction see Zmolek (2013).
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1 address three common problems which plague attempts to historicise structural notions of
2 capitalism. The first relates to the transition to capitalism. Working from an ideal type of
3 capitalism, or more basically from a conception of what capitalism is as a system, means that
4 we confront a difficult task when analysing transitions to capitalism in specific countries. For
5 the analytical task we then set for ourselves is to determine whether a society in transition is
6 approaching the model or ideal type of capitalism as a *pre-defined phenomenon*. But how
7 then can we determine the moment when a country shifts from one system to another so as to
8 establish that a society is approximating the ideal sufficiently that we can grant the label of
9 capitalism? We thus end up with a largely impressionistic conception of the transition, which
10 locates it at some point in time when, on the basis of a series of signs and indicators, we get
11 the impression that a society is sufficiently close to the ideal to merit the denomination.
12 Ultimately, this procedure leads to a largely arbitrary decision, more or less impossible to
13 substantiate, with the result that capitalism remains a highly diffuse historical object with no
14 clear lineage in most of the literature.

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16 More generally, this also biases how we read the transition. The assumption of a
17 common system (capitalism) dictates that it is the resemblance between Germany and Britain,
18 which is of greater interest to our understanding of this transformation, rather than their
19 differences. And it leads us to emphasize the common feature of capitalism when we
20 compare US and Japanese capitalism, rather than their respective national specificities. This
21 is always a decision dictated by the structuralist framework, not by a historical assessment.

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23 By contrast, a conception of capitalist practices opens up a series of interesting
24 questions about transitions and allows us to avoid the strictures and clear-cut ‘befores’ and
25 ‘afters’ that limit Political Marxists attempts to look at other transitions. To begin with, it
26 turns the transition into a more meaty process beyond the very thin notion of market
27 dependency. For the point is that transforming the labour process requires a set of practices

1 that needs to be taken from one context and applied to another or serve as an influence for the
2 creation of new practices. This is something that needs to be established historically, rather
3 than simply assumed as it is usually the case in most of the structuralist literature.
4 Furthermore, it raises the prospect that applying practices developed in a different context
5 will yield very different outcomes for they are necessarily transmitted and then
6 instrumentalised in a different way when introduced to a different social context with its own
7 set of social struggles. In that respect, the study of the ways in which these practices are
8 translated allows us to analyse transitions without relying on a convergence model that can
9 only understand transition in terms of countries looking more and more like an original
10 model (i.e. the so called Anglo-Saxon model). Here the reliance on similar means, for
11 example to transform the labour process, can be connected to different purposes which reflect
12 the specificity of social relations and the distinct struggles they give rise to.
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29 The second problem concerns the relationship between the logic of capitalism and the
30 various aspects of society that are not initially integrated in the preliminary model of the rules
31 of capitalist reproduction. Most authors see in capitalism a society defined foremost by a
32 mode of production. But then, how are we to analyse other aspects of the economy, which do
33 not belong *per se* to the sphere of production? Having asserted the priority of production, we
34 are left to ‘derive’ the implications of capitalist production for other aspects of society, be it
35 governance, the state, finance, or international relations. This leads to a highly derivative
36 account of these aspects of history, which tend to reduce them to a *functional* component of
37 the logic of capital (Teschke 2006; Knafo 2013a). Once more, the priority given to
38 production largely restricts what can be said about these other dimensions for in imposing a
39 ‘derivative framework’ we are then mostly interested in how they feed the main logic of
40 production. To avoid such reification, the notion of capitalist practice can serve as a powerful
41 historicising device because it makes fewer assumptions about history and thus offers more
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leeway for analysing various forms of social developments without having to reduce them to a single logic. More importantly, it transforms the problem of the relation to transformation in production to other transformations as a historical problem rather than a theoretical one to be studied as a functional moment of the logic of capital.

Finally, the problem of starting from the idea of systemic rules of reproduction is that it leaves very little room for analyzing the evolution of capitalism. If there is a kernel (i.e. the rules of reproduction) that is common to all capitalist societies, then this capitalist logic must be placed above history. This, of course, has created great controversies around any attempt within Marxism to periodise its evolution, with the first generation of Political Marxists standing to reduce this evolution simply to a process of generalization. Social processes are thus analysed increasingly in terms of the degree of maturity of capitalism, rather than studied as proper transformations in their own right. This type of thinking impoverishes our attempt to historicise capitalism as a set of social practices. There can be no proper historicisation of capitalism if we keep subscribing to the idea of a structural logic of capitalism, since everything included in this logic is thus removed from the work of historicisation. Here once more, a more specific notion of practices makes it easier to trace the evolution of capitalist practices around the transformation of the labour process, without prejudicing the various developments, such as financialisation, law, state-formation, or foreign policy.

Conclusion

PM is today at a crossroad between those advocates who wish to build on a strict structuralism that emphasizes the logic of capitalism and its universalising features (Brenner,

1998; Post, 2011; Chibber, 2013) and a second tradition which seeks to accentuate the more historicist tradition, which is more directly inspired by E. P. Thompson (Comninel, 1987; Kennedy, 2008; Lapointe and Dufour, 2012; Knafo, 2013b; Teschke, 2014). Scholars who belong to the former have often voiced their desire to move away from the idea of Political Marxism precisely because of what they perceive to be its more voluntarist overtones, with Charles Post most notably proposing that we turn towards an idea of capital-centric Marxism (Post, 2011: 2). By contrast, the historicists are more concerned with overcoming the structuralist moniker too often associated with PM in order to radicalize the historicist insights that informed the first *Brenner Debate*.

The main obstacle for this turn to radical historicism within PM is the attachment to the idea that capitalism is a system with its rules of reproduction. PM, we argue, took a first step to shift the onus back onto history, but ultimately failed to free itself from the narrow blinkers imposed by such a theoretical commitment. The outcome has been a constant tendency to discount historical evidence as secondary to the analysis, even when this approach prides itself for its focus on history and socio-political conflict. In arguing for a radical historicism, we are intent on finding a methodology, or a set of research strategies, which can make history the basis for theorisation. This can only be possible if we conceptualise by mobilising comparative and international history to specify rather than generalise by abstraction what is similar.

There is often strong resistance to historicist projects, for many critics are quick to equate this with an anti-theoretical stance - a relapse into a descriptive register or even empiricism, and a refusal to do anything more than generating a narrative account. But this fear stems largely from a problematic dualism that suggests that we have no other choice than either describe or generalise. We have argued for a third position, which sees the process of theorisation as a practice of specification. As demonstrated in the case of the *Transition*

1 *Debate*, we can discuss changes at a macro-level through the process of specification (e.g.
2 exploring the path-divergences between early modern France and England). A comparative
3 method is the key here to get a solid grounding in history.¹¹ It provides great leverage to
4 assess the broader signification of social developments we analyse and opens the door for a
5 richer historicisation, which can help us understand how people make history even if they do
6 not set the conditions within which they do so. In that respect, the radical historicism we
7 propose is not a turn towards description but the systematic use of a comparative framing to
8 generate a mediated conception of history.
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10 Showing why specific changes matter to our theories is the great challenge for
11 Historical Materialism. It is a task pregnant with analytical and political importance. From an
12 analytical standpoint this enables us to challenge the common readings of history as an
13 almost natural unfolding of some transcendental logic of social development. Politically, it
14 helps to establish how much and what type of difference people make in order to move away
15 from the absolutist terms under which we too often conceive of politics under capitalism.
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57 ¹¹ The comparative method remains active even when different regions are inserted into wider
58 geopolitical contexts, since we still need to compare and contrast differential regional and agential
59 strategies and responses, which are not pre-given by the common context, either domestic or
60 international.
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