

## Chapter 8

# Marxist theories of international relations

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### Framing Questions

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

### Reader's Guide

This chapter introduces, outlines, and assesses the Marxist contribution to the study of international relations. It first identifies several core features common to Marxist approaches and then discusses how Marx's ideas were internationalized by Lenin and subsequently by writers in the world-system framework. It then examines how Frankfurt School critical theory, and Gramsci and his various followers, introduced an analysis of culture into Marxist analysis, and, more recently, how new (or orthodox) Marxists have sought a more profound re-engagement with Marx's original

writings. The chapter argues that no analysis of globalization is complete without an input from Marxist theory. Indeed, Marx was arguably the first theorist of globalization, and from the perspective of Marxism, the features often pointed to as evidence of globalization are hardly novel, but are rather the modern manifestations of long-term tendencies in the development of capitalism.



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## 8.1 Introduction

When the **cold war** ended in the late 1980s with the defeat of communism and the victory of global ‘free market **capitalism**’, it became commonplace to assume that the ideas of Karl Marx and his numerous disciples could be safely consigned to the dustbin of history. The future, it seemed clear, was capitalist and liberal democratic. Ironically enough, the fate of those communist parties that managed to retain **power** in China, Vietnam, and Cuba seemed only to underline the extent to which ‘the Western model’ had triumphed. In the wake of the failed attempt to build an alternative to the global capitalist system, they had all been forced to adapt themselves to its **hegemony**. For many it appeared only a matter of time before this was accompanied by the wider liberalization and democratization of those societies. Resistance would ultimately prove to be futile.

That was then. In the early 2020s, things appear very different. Even if its mortal enemy was defeated, the problems of capitalism have persisted and even intensified. Not only have the regular crises that characterize

capitalism continued to wreak havoc, but the ever-deepening crisis that is humanity’s relationship with the natural world raises fundamental questions about the sustainability of our current patterns of production and consumption. Massive global corporations may continue to be remorselessly successful in their efforts to persuade the already sated to buy more of what they do not really need, but the resulting environmental degradation is becoming increasingly hard to ignore. All the while, of course, even the most basic needs of many hundreds of millions of our fellow humans remain unfulfilled (see Ch. 27).

Not only that, but the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy can no longer be taken for granted. China, for example, appears to have arrived at a new, extremely dynamic social model that combines authoritarian political control with state-directed capitalism (see Case Study 8.1). To what extent will it be this model, rather than the ‘Western model’, that invites emulation among the countries of the Global South over the coming decades, especially as some

### Case Study 8.1 The capitalist development of Communist China



Rapid urbanization in China  
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Marx and those who have developed his work since his death are famous for their critique of capitalism. It is easy to forget that Marx also acknowledged its transformative power, albeit as a necessary stage towards the development of a classless society. Indeed, it is hard to think of any writer before or since who has been more fulsome in his admiration of capitalism’s ‘constant revolutionizing of production’, to quote the words of *The Communist Manifesto*: it has ‘accomplished wonders’ (Marx and

Engels 1967). It nonetheless remains a considerable irony that there is no better example of the transformative power of capitalism than the People’s Republic of China under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

When in 1949 the CCP finally emerged victorious from the civil war against the Nationalists, they inherited a country that had undergone a ‘century of humiliation’ at the hands of European imperialist powers, as well as invasion and brutal occupation by Japan prior to and during the Second World War. Subsequent economic and social development remained limited, not least due to the disastrous impacts of the ‘Great Leap Forward’ and ‘Cultural Revolution’.

Since 1979, however, China has undergone an economic and related social transformation that has few if any parallels in human history. Starting from a comparatively low base, China is now by some measures the largest economy in the world, accounting for approximately one-fifth of the world’s gross domestic product, as well as the world’s largest producer of exports (nearly twice those of either the United States or Germany). Most accounts of this transformation cite the central importance of the economic reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping when he became the effective leader of China in late 1978. While these reforms were ultimately very extensive, they were introduced gradually. Deng spoke of ‘crossing the river by feeling for stones’, indicating the need for careful experimentation and the imperative of maintaining stability. The eventual

result was a reversal of the collectivist policies of Mao Zedong, widespread marketization, and an opening up to the global economy—the latter boosted by China's membership in the World Trade Organization from 2001.

The embrace of capitalism—or in Deng's words, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'—led to major changes in China's society and economy. According to the World Bank, more than 800 million people have been lifted out of poverty because of China's growth. This has been accompanied by rapid urbanization. According to International Labour Organization figures, more than 225 million people moved from the rural west of the country to the industrialized east, representing the largest population movement in history. It is a development that has 'rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life', to cite the words of Marx and Engels. China has also emerged as a

technological innovator, with its own space programme and the potential to develop sophisticated weaponry.

Potentially more puzzling for Marxists is that despite the emergence of a middle class and a wealthy bourgeoisie, developments in the superstructure have lagged behind economic changes. Indeed, rather than China adapting to the Western model of 'bourgeois democracy', a Chinese social model combining authoritarian political control with economic dynamism may yet emerge as a serious alternative to it.

**Question 1:** Assess the implications of China's economic transformation for the Marxist analysis of international relations.

**Question 2:** What are the implications of China's rapid economic transformation for its role in global politics?

countries in the Global North themselves appear to be succumbing to more politically and socially authoritarian tendencies? While it may be too soon to measure the impacts of the global Covid-19 pandemic, it is also hard to imagine that the way it has served to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities will not have long-term repercussions for a global system that has inequality at its core (see **Case Study 8.2**).

Against this background, Marx is back as an intellectual force to be reckoned with. This is not only

because there are some uncanny parallels between his own times and our own—both periods of huge technological, socio-economic, and political turmoil and transformation (for Marx's life and times, see Liedman 2018). More fundamentally, Marx's forensic examination of both the extraordinary dynamism and inherent contradictions of capitalism has arguably never been improved upon. Its great strength is that it allows us to see how so many apparently different crises and instances of resistance, from the global to the most

### Case Study 8.2 The global Covid-19 pandemic



Frontline medical workers during the Covid-19 pandemic  
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Daniel Defoe's account of the great plague that ravaged London in 1665 noted that 'the plague was chiefly among the poor'. Three hundred and fifty years later, even if the geographic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is far wider—with **globalization** enabling very rapid worldwide transmission—in terms of its social impact, the pattern observed by Defoe remains largely unchanged. Whether comparing within or between different

countries, it is the poorest who have tended to suffer most, with Covid-19 exacerbating pre-existing inequalities based on nation, class, race, and gender. In this way, the pandemic has served to confirm one of the most basic insights of the Marxist approach to international relations: our life chances are shaped to a very significant extent by our location within the global capitalist system.

Even if Northern societies differ considerably in terms of social welfare provision, a general pattern is nonetheless observable. During the pandemic, workers in the more protected and privileged parts of the economy, including academics such as ourselves, tended to be able to work from the relative safety of their own homes. Furthermore, those working on secure contracts often found themselves 'furloughed'—that is, their was income supported either directly or indirectly by the government. By contrast, relatively low-paid 'frontline' or 'key' workers such as nurses, bus drivers, and delivery workers were required to daily put themselves at risk through close interaction with other members of the public. Furthermore, many of those on insecure contracts fell beyond the purview of furlough schemes and had to keep working to maintain an income. In other words, those who were already the lowest paid and most insecurely employed found themselves being put at most risk during the pandemic, whether to keep society functioning or to avoid destitution.

Another striking feature of the global response to the pandemic has been the unwillingness of the countries of the privileged North to provide meaningful support to the Global South. The various pledges of financial support that have been made remain largely unfulfilled. Even more strikingly, almost nothing has been done to reduce extreme inequalities in terms of access to vaccines. Thus, while a high proportion of the population of developed countries have now received multiple doses, vaccination rates in the developing world are dramatically lower.

Part of the explanation for this is that governments in the Global North continue to support pharmaceutical companies in their refusal to waive patents on vaccines, even where companies received government money to develop those vaccines in the first place (see **Case Study 25.2**). Setting aside the immorality of

this position, given that in a globalized world even the most privileged will never be able to insulate themselves from the threat of the pandemic until the poorest are protected, this situation highlights another feature of capitalism emphasized by Marxists—its irrationality.

**Question 1:** Evaluate the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed inequalities at a national and global level.

**Question 2:** What can we learn about the operation of capitalism from a study of vaccine availability in different countries?



Watch the video on the online resources to see the authors discuss these questions.

personal and local, link together. Thus, even if Marx and Marxism failed to supply a prescription that would guarantee progressive social change, as a diagnosis of what ails us they remain essential tools for those who continue to strive for that goal.

Compared to **liberalism** and **realism** (see **Chs 7 and 9**), Marxist thought presents a rather unfamiliar view of international relations. While the former portray world politics in ways that resonate with those presented in the foreign news pages, Marxist theories aim to expose a deeper, underlying—indeed hidden—truth. This is that the familiar events of world politics—wars, treaties, international aid operations—all occur within structures that have an enormous influence on those events. These are the structures of a global capitalist system. Any attempt to understand world politics must be based on a broader understanding of the processes operating in global capitalism.

Marxist theories are also discomfiting, for they argue that the effects of global capitalism are to ensure that the powerful and wealthy prosper at the expense

of the powerless and the poor. We are all aware that there is gross inequality in the world. Statistics concerning the human costs of **poverty** are numbing in their awfulness (global poverty is further discussed in **Ch. 27**). Marxist theorists argue that the relative prosperity of the few is dependent on the destitution of the many. In Marx's own words, 'Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality at the opposite pole.'

**Section 8.2** outlines some of the central features of the Marxist approach. Following from this, subsequent sections will explore some of the most important strands in contemporary Marx-inspired thinking about world politics. Given, however, the richness and variety of Marxist thinking about world politics, the account that follows is inevitably destined to be partial and to some extent arbitrary. Our aim is to provide a route map that we hope will encourage readers to explore further the work of Marx and of those who have built on the foundations he laid.

## 8.2 The essential elements of Marxist theories of world politics

In his inaugural address to the Working Men's International Association in London in 1864, Karl Marx told his audience that history had 'taught the working classes the duty to master [for] themselves the mysteries of international politics'. However, despite the fact that Marx himself wrote copiously about international affairs (see K. Anderson 2010), most of this writing was journalistic in character.

He did not incorporate the international dimension into his theoretical mapping of the contours of capitalism. This 'omission' should perhaps not surprise us. The staggering ambition of the theoretical enterprise in which he was engaged, as well as the nature of his own methodology, inevitably meant that Marx's work would be contingent and unfinished.

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

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

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

the social, political and intellectual life process in general' (Marx 1970 [1859]: 20–1). Thus the legal, political, and cultural **institutions** and practices of a given society reflect and reinforce—in a more or less mediated form—the pattern of power and control in the economy. It follows logically, therefore, that change in the economic base ultimately leads to change in the 'legal and political superstructure'. (For a diagrammatical representation of the base–superstructure model, see Fig. 8.1.) The relationship between the base and superstructure is one of the key areas of discussion in Marxism, and for critics of Marxist approaches.

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

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

It is important to emphasize that the essential elements of Marxist thought, all too briefly discussed in this section, are also fundamentally contested. That is,

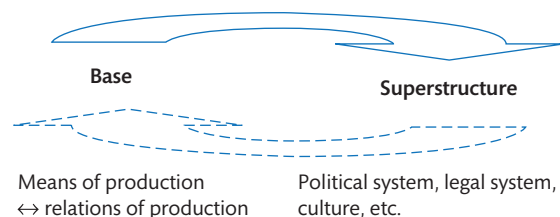


Figure 8.1 The base–superstructure model

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

### Key Points

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

## 8.3 Marx internationalized: from imperialism to world-systems theory

Although Marx was clearly aware of the international and expansive character of capitalism, his key work, *Capital*, focuses on the development and characteristics of nineteenth-century British capitalism. At the start of the twentieth century a number of writers took on the task of developing analyses that incorporated the implications of capitalism's transborder characteristics, in particular **imperialism** (see Brewer 1990). Rosa Luxemburg was a major contributor to these debates. Her 1913 book, *The Accumulation of Capital* (Luxemburg 2003 [1913]), argued that by analysing capitalism as a closed system, Marx had overlooked the central role played by the colonies. In order to survive, Luxemburg argued, capitalism constantly needed to expand into non-capitalist areas. A 1917 pamphlet by Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, made similar arguments. Lenin accepted much of Marx's basic thesis, but argued that the character of capitalism had changed since Marx published the first volume of *Capital* in 1867 (Marx 1992 [1867]). Capitalism had entered a new stage—its highest and final stage—with the development of monopoly capitalism. Under monopoly capitalism, a two-tier structure had developed in the world economy, with a dominant core exploiting a less-developed periphery. With the development of a core and periphery, there was no longer an automatic **harmony of interests** between all workers as posited by Marx. The bourgeoisie in the core countries could use profits derived from exploiting the periphery to improve the lot of their own proletariat. In other words, the capitalists of the core could pacify their

own working class through the further exploitation of the periphery.

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

World-systems theory is particularly associated with the work of Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019). For Wallerstein, global history has been marked by the rise and demise of a series of world systems. The modern world system emerged in **Europe** at around the turn of the sixteenth century. It subsequently expanded to encompass the entire globe. The driving force behind this seemingly relentless process of expansion and incorporation has been capitalism, defined by Wallerstein (1979: 66) as 'a system of

production for sale in a market for profit and appropriation of this profit on the basis of individual or collective ownership'. In the context of this system, all the institutions of the social world are continually being created and recreated. Furthermore, and crucially, it is not only the elements within the system that change. The system itself is historically bounded. It had a beginning, has a middle, and will have an end.

In terms of the geography of the modern world system, in addition to a core–periphery distinction, Wallerstein added an intermediate semi-periphery, which displays certain features characteristic of the core and others characteristic of the periphery. Although dominated by core economic interests, the semi-periphery has its own relatively vibrant indigenously owned industrial base (see Fig. 8.2). Because of this hybrid nature, the semi-periphery plays important economic and political roles in the modern world system. In particular, it provides a source of labour that counteracts any upward pressure on wages in the core. It also offers a new home for those industries that can no longer function profitably in the core (e.g. car assembly and textiles). The semi-periphery plays a vital role in stabilizing the political structure of the world system.

According to world-systems theorists, the three zones of the world economy are linked together in an exploitative relationship in which wealth is drained

away from the periphery to the core. As a consequence, the relative positions of the zones become ever more deeply entrenched: the rich get richer while the poor become poorer.

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

Feminist Marxists have also played a significant role in theorizing the development of an international capitalist system. A particular concern of feminist writers (often drawing their inspiration from Engels's (2010 [1884]) work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*) has been the role of women, both in the workplace and as the providers of domestic labour necessary for the reproduction of capitalism. For example, Maria Mies (1998 [1986]) argued that women play a central role in the maintenance of capitalist relations. There is, she argues, a **sexual** (or one could say **gendered**) **division of labour**: first, women in the developed world working as housewives, whose labour is unpaid but vital in maintaining and reproducing the labour force; and second, women in the developing world as a source of cheap labour. She

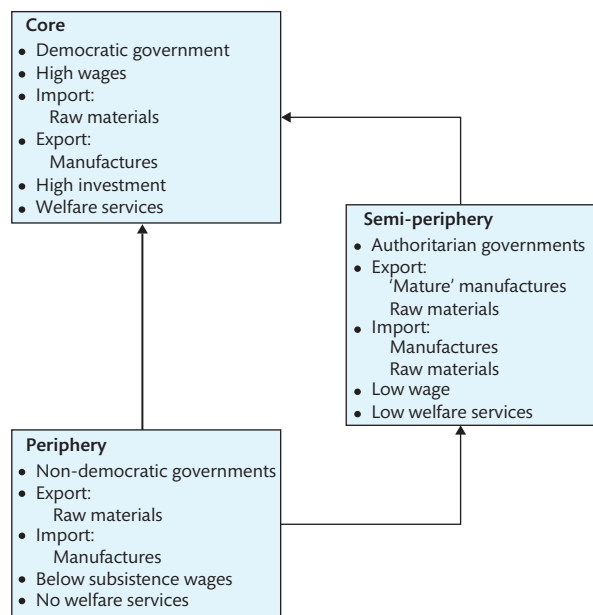


Figure 8.2 Interrelationships in the world economy

later argued that women were the ‘last colony’ (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and von Werlhof 1988), a view that can be traced back to Rosa Luxemburg’s claim regarding the role of the colonies in international capitalism (Luxemburg 2003 [1913]).

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

### Key Points

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

## 8.4 Gramscianism

### 8.4.1 Antonio Gramsci—the importance of hegemony

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

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was a Sardinian and one of the founding members of the Italian Communist Party. He was jailed in 1926 for his political activities and spent the remainder of his life in prison. Although many regard him as the most creative Marxist thinker of the twentieth century, he produced no single, integrated theoretical treatise. Rather, his intellectual legacy has been transmitted primarily through his remarkable *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971). The key question that animated Gramsci’s theoretical work was: why had it proven to be so difficult to promote revolution in Western Europe? After all, Marx had predicted that revolution, and the **transition** to socialism, would occur first in the most advanced capitalist societies. But, in the event, it was the Bolsheviks of comparatively backward Russia that had made the first ‘break-through’, while all the subsequent efforts by putative revolutionaries in Western and Central Europe to

emulate their success ended in failure. The history of the early twentieth century seemed to suggest, therefore, that there was a flaw in classical Marxist analysis. But where had they gone wrong?

Gramsci’s answer revolved around his use of the concept of hegemony, his understanding of which reflected his broader conceptualization of power. Gramsci developed Machiavelli’s view of power as a centaur—half beast, half man—a mixture of coercion and consent. In understanding how the prevailing order was maintained, Marxists had concentrated almost exclusively on the coercive practices and **capabilities** of the state. On this understanding, it was simply coercion, or the fear of coercion, that kept the exploited and alienated majority in society from rising up and overthrowing the system that was the cause of their suffering. Gramsci recognized that while this characterization may have held true in less developed societies, such as pre-revolutionary Russia, it was not the case in the more developed countries of the West. Here the system was also maintained through consent.

Consent, on Gramsci’s reading, is created and recreated by the hegemony of the ruling class in society. It is this hegemony that allows the moral, political, and cultural values of the dominant group to become widely dispersed throughout society and to be accepted by subordinate groups and classes as their own. This takes place through the institutions of **civil society**: the **network** of institutions and practices that enjoy some autonomy from the state, and through which groups

and individuals organize, represent, and express themselves to each other and to the state (for example, the media, the education system, churches, and voluntary organizations).

Several important implications flow from this analysis. The first is that Marxist theory needs to take superstructural phenomena seriously, because while the structure of society may ultimately be a reflection of social relations of production in the economic base, the nature of relations in the superstructure is of great relevance in determining how susceptible that society is to change and transformation. Gramsci used the term ‘historic bloc’ to describe the mutually reinforcing and reciprocal relationships between the socio-economic relations (base) and political and cultural practices (superstructure) that together underpin a given order. For Gramsci and Gramscians, to reduce analysis to the narrow consideration of economic relationships on the one hand, or solely to politics and ideas on the other, is deeply mistaken. It is their interaction that matters.

Gramsci’s argument also has crucial implications for political practice. If the hegemony of the ruling class is a key element in the perpetuation of its dominance, then society can only be transformed if that hegemonic position is successfully challenged. This entails a counter-hegemonic struggle in civil society, in which the prevailing hegemony is undermined, allowing an alternative historic bloc to be constructed.

Gramsci’s writing reflects a particular time and a particular—in many ways unique—set of circumstances. This has led several writers to question the broader applicability of his ideas (see Burnham 1991; Germain and Kenny 1998). But the most important test, of course, is how useful ideas and concepts derived from Gramsci’s work prove to be when they are removed from their original context and applied to other issues and problems. It is to this question that we now turn.

#### 8.4.2 Robert W. Cox—the analysis of ‘world order’

It was the Canadian scholar Robert W. Cox (1926–2018) who arguably did most to introduce Gramsci to the study of world politics. He developed a Gramscian approach that involves both a critique of prevailing theories of international relations and international political economy, and the development

of an alternative framework for the analysis of world politics.

To explain Cox’s ideas, we begin by focusing on one particular sentence in his seminal 1981 article, ‘Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory’. The sentence, which has become one of the most often-quoted lines in all of contemporary International Relations theory, reads: ‘Theory is always for some one, and for some purpose’ (R. Cox 1981: 128). It expresses a worldview that follows logically from the Gramscian, and broader Marxist, position that has been explored in this chapter. If ideas and values are (ultimately) a reflection of a particular set of social relations, and are transformed as those relations are themselves transformed, then this suggests that all knowledge (of the social world at least) must reflect a certain context, a certain time, a certain space. Knowledge, in other words, cannot be objective and timeless in the sense that some contemporary realists, for example, would like to claim.

One key implication of this is that there can be no simple separation between facts and values. Whether consciously or not, all theorists inevitably bring their values to bear on their analysis. This leads Cox to suggest that we need to look closely at each of those theories, those ideas, those analyses that claim to be objective or value-free, and ask who or what is it for, and what purpose does it serve? He subjected realism, and in particular its contemporary variant **neorealism**, to thoroughgoing critique on these grounds. According to Cox, these theories are for—or serve the interests of—those who prosper under the prevailing order: the inhabitants of the developed states, and in particular the ruling elites. The purpose of these theories, whether consciously or not, is to reinforce and legitimate the status quo. They do this by making the current configuration of international relations appear natural and immutable. When realists (falsely) claim to be describing the world as it is, as it has been, and as it always will be, what they are in fact doing is reinforcing the ruling hegemony in the current world order.

Cox contrasted problem-solving theory (that is, theory that accepts the parameters of the present order, and thus helps legitimate an unjust and deeply iniquitous system) with **critical theory**. Critical theory attempts to challenge the prevailing order by seeking out, analysing, and, where possible, assisting social processes that can potentially lead to emancipatory change.

One way in which theory can contribute to these emancipatory goals is by developing a theoretical understanding of world orders that grasps both the sources of stability in a given system, and also the dynamics of processes of transformation. In this context, Cox drew on Gramsci's notion of hegemony and transposed it to the international realm, arguing that hegemony is as important for maintaining stability and continuity there as it is at the domestic level. According to Cox, successive dominant powers in the international system have shaped a world order that suits their interests, and have done so not only as a result of their coercive capabilities, but also because they have managed to generate broad consent for that order, even among those who are disadvantaged by it.

For the two hegemons that Cox analyses (the UK and the US), the ruling hegemonic idea has been 'free trade'. The claim that this system benefits everybody has been so widely accepted that it has attained 'common sense' status. Yet the reality is that while 'free trade' is very much in the interests of the hegemon (which, as the most efficient producer in the global economy, can produce goods which are competitive in all markets, so long as it has access to them), its benefits for peripheral states and regions are far less apparent. Indeed, many would argue that 'free trade' is a hindrance to their economic and social development. The degree to which a state can successfully produce and reproduce its hegemony is an indication of the extent of its power. The success of the United States in gaining worldwide acceptance for neoliberalism

suggests just how dominant the current hegemon has become.

But despite the dominance of the present world order, Cox did not expect it to remain unchallenged. Rather, he maintained Marx's view that capitalism is an inherently unstable system, riven by inescapable contradictions. Inevitable economic crises will act as a catalyst for the emergence of counter-hegemonic movements. The success of such movements is, however, far from assured. In this sense, thinkers such as Cox face the future on the basis of a dictum popularized by Gramsci—that is, combining 'pessimism of the intellect' with 'optimism of the will'.

### Key Points

- Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci for inspiration, writers in an 'Italian' school of International Relations have made a considerable contribution to thinking about world politics.
- Gramsci shifted the focus of Marxist analysis more towards superstructural phenomena.
- Gramsci explored the processes by which consent for a particular social and political system was produced and reproduced through the operation of hegemony. Hegemony allows the ideas and ideologies of the ruling stratum to become widely dispersed, and widely accepted, throughout society.
- Thinkers such as Robert W. Cox have attempted to 'internationalize' Gramsci's thought by transposing several of his key concepts, most notably hegemony, to the global context.

## 8.5 Critical theory

Both Gramscianism and critical theory have their roots in Western Europe in the 1920s and 1930s—a place and a time in which Marxism was forced to come to terms not only with the failure of a series of attempted revolutionary uprisings, but also with the rise of fascism. However, contemporary critical theory and Gramscian thought about international relations draw on the ideas of different thinkers, with differing intellectual concerns. There is a clear difference in focus between these two strands of Marxist thought, with those influenced by Gramsci tending to be much more concerned with issues relating to the subfield of international political economy than critical theorists. Critical theorists, on the other hand, have involved themselves with

questions concerning **international society**, international ethics, and **security** (the latter through the development of critical security studies). This section introduces critical theory and the thought of one of its main proponents in the field of International Relations, Andrew Linklater.

Critical theory developed out of the work of the **Frankfurt School**. This was an extraordinarily talented group of thinkers who began to work together in the 1920s and 1930s. As left-wing German Jews, the members of the school were forced into exile by the Nazis' rise to power in the early 1930s, and much of their most creative work was produced in the US. The leading lights of the first generation of the Frankfurt

School included Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. A subsequent generation has taken up the legacy of these thinkers and developed it in important and innovative ways. The best known is Jürgen Habermas, who is regarded by many as the most influential of all contemporary social theorists. Given the vast scope of critical theory writing, this section can do no more than introduce some of its key features.

The first point to note is that their intellectual concerns are rather different from those of most other Marxists: they have not been much interested in the further development of analysis of the economic base of society. They have instead concentrated on questions relating to culture, bureaucracy, the social basis and nature of authoritarianism, and the structure of the family, and on exploring such concepts as reason and **rationality** as well as theories of knowledge. Frankfurt School theorists have been particularly innovative in terms of their analysis of the role of the media, and what they have famously termed the ‘culture industry’. In other words, in classical Marxist terms, the focus of critical theory is almost entirely superstructural.

Another key feature is that critical theorists have been highly dubious as to whether the proletariat in contemporary society does in fact embody the potential for emancipatory transformation in the way that Marx believed. Rather, with the rise of mass culture and the increasing commodification of every element of social life, Frankfurt School thinkers have argued that the working class has simply been absorbed by the system and no longer represents a threat to it. This, to use Marcuse’s famous phrase, is a one-dimensional society, to which the vast majority simply cannot begin to conceive an alternative.

Finally, critical theorists have made some of their most important contributions through their explorations of the meaning of emancipation. Emancipation, as we have seen, is a key concern of Marxist thinkers, but the meaning that they give to the term is often very unclear and deeply ambiguous. Moreover, the historical record is unfortunately replete with examples of unspeakably barbaric behaviour being justified in the name of emancipation, of which imperialism and Stalinism are but two. Traditionally, Marxists have equated emancipation with the process of humanity gaining ever greater mastery over nature through the development of ever more sophisticated technology, and its use for the benefit of all. But early critical theorists argued that humanity’s increased domination over nature had been bought at too high a price,

claiming that the kind of mindset that is required for conquering nature slips all too easily into the domination of other human beings. In contrast, they argued that emancipation had to be conceived of in terms of a reconciliation with nature—an evocative, if admittedly vague, vision. By contrast, Habermas’s understanding of emancipation is more concerned with communication than with our relationship with the natural world. Setting aside the various twists and turns of his argument, Habermas’s central political point is that the route to emancipation lies through radical democracy—a system in which the widest possible participation is encouraged not only in word (as is the case in many Western democracies) but also in deed, by actively identifying barriers to participation—be they social, economic, or cultural—and overcoming them. For Habermas and his many followers, participation is not to be confined within the borders of a particular sovereign state. Rights and obligations extend beyond state frontiers. This, of course, leads Habermas directly to the concerns of International Relations, and it is striking that his recent writings have begun to focus on the international realm. In particular, he has become an impassioned defender of European integration. However, thus far, the most systematic attempt to think through some of the key issues in world politics from a recognizably Habermasian perspective has been made by Andrew Linklater.

Linklater has used some of the key principles and precepts developed in Habermas’s work to argue that emancipation in the realm of international relations should be understood in terms of the expansion of the moral boundaries of a **political community** (see **Ch. 12**). In other words, he equates emancipation with a process in which the borders of the sovereign state lose their ethical and moral significance. At present, state borders denote the furthest extent of our sense of duty and obligation, or at best, the point where our sense of duty and obligation is radically transformed, only proceeding in a very attenuated form. For critical theorists, this situation is simply indefensible. Their goal is therefore to move towards a situation in which citizens share the same duties and obligations towards non-citizens as they do towards their fellow citizens.

To arrive at such a situation would, of course, entail a wholesale transformation of the present institutions of governance. But an important element of the critical theory method is to identify—and, if

possible, nurture—tendencies that exist in the present conjuncture that point in the direction of emancipation. On this basis, Linklater (here very much echoing Habermas) identifies the development of the European Union as representing a progressive or emancipatory tendency in contemporary world politics. If true, this suggests that an important part of the international system is entering an era in which the sovereign state, which has for so long claimed an exclusive hold on its citizens, is beginning to lose some of its pre-eminence. Given the notorious pessimism of the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, the guarded optimism of Linklater in this context is indeed striking. Indeed, the increasingly obvious authoritarian tendencies pointed to in **Section 8.1** may suggest a case for returning to the work of that first generation of critical theorists for ideas and inspiration.

### Key Points

- Critical theory has its roots in the work of the Frankfurt School.
- Critical theorists have tended to focus their attention on culture (especially the role of the media), bureaucracy, the social basis and nature of authoritarianism, and the structure of the family, and on exploring such concepts as reason and rationality.
- Jürgen Habermas is the most influential contemporary advocate of critical theory; he advocates radical democracy as a means of unlocking the emancipatory potential inherent in the realm of communication.
- Andrew Linklater has developed critical theory themes to argue in favour of the expansion of the moral boundaries of the political community, and has pointed to the European Union as an example of a post-Westphalian institution of governance.

## 8.6 New Marxism

### 8.6.1 'New Marxists'

This section examines the work of writers who derive their ideas more directly from Marx's own writings. To indicate that they represent something of a departure from other Marxist and post-Marxist trends, we have termed them 'new Marxists'. They themselves might well prefer to be described as 'historical materialists' (one of the key academic journals associated with this approach is called *Historical Materialism*); however, as that is a self-description which has also been adopted by some Gramsci-inspired writers, the appellation may not be particularly helpful for our present purposes. At any rate, even if there remains no settled label for this group of scholars, the fundamental approach that they embody is not hard to characterize. They are Marxists who have returned to the fundamental tenets of Marxist thought and sought to reappropriate ideas that they regard as having been neglected or somehow misinterpreted by subsequent generations. On this basis, they have sought both to criticize other developments in Marxism, and to make their own original theoretical contributions to the understanding of contemporary trends.

The most outstanding advocate of what one might term 'the return to Marx' is the geographer David Harvey, whose explorations and explanations of Marx's masterpiece *Capital* have reached an enormous online audience as well as being published in book form (see

davidharvey.org; Harvey 2018). In another important contribution, Kevin B. Anderson's *Marx at the Margins* (2010) focuses on Marx's little-known writing on the world politics of his day to recover his ideas about nationalism, ethnicity, and race.

### 8.6.2 Uneven and combined development

Meanwhile, in a series of articles, Justin Rosenberg (1996, 2013; also see Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008) has developed an analysis based on Leon Trotsky's idea of uneven and combined development, which Trotsky outlined primarily in his history of the Russian Revolution. Contrary to the traditional Marxist line, Trotsky observed that capitalism was not having the effects that were anticipated. Certainly it was spreading around the globe at a rapid rate as Marx and Engels had predicted in the *Communist Manifesto*. However, Marx and Engels had predicted that capitalism would create a world 'after its own image'. Elsewhere Marx (1954 [1867]: 19) had stated that 'the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future'. Marx at this point appeared to have a unilinear perspective on historical development and, while there is evidence in some of his later writing that he became sceptical about this view, it was not an issue that he had time to develop. Therefore it became Marxist orthodoxy that capitalist development was

a singular road, with countries joining the process at different times. There was just one route through capitalist modernization, the path having been mapped out by Britain as the pioneering capitalist economy. While some countries would start the journey at different times, the sequence and destination would be the same.

Trotsky's insight was that paths to development were indeed uneven in that different countries started the road to capitalism at different times, and from differing starting points. They were also, however, combined, in the sense that the development of capitalism in the states that had already started on the process had implications for those that followed. In other words, the context for capitalism in any one country would be set by all the other countries that had already embarked on capitalist development. Hence the process in Russia occurred in the context of capitalist developments elsewhere, and particularly in Western Europe. The advance of capitalism can thus be seen as an international process, with latecomers having certain disadvantages but also some advantages. One particular advantage was what Trotsky called the 'privilege of historic backwardness' (cited in Rosenberg 1996: 7). Countries joining the capitalist road had the possibility of leapfrogging states that had started earlier, because they had access to investment and technology that had not been previously available. However, this came at a potential cost: a distorted political structure. Whereas in Britain, the country on which Marx had focused his attention, the political system had evolved over a lengthy period of time and was relatively stable, in Russia the political structure that emerged from a rapid process of modernization was highly unstable. It was characterized by an authoritarian state leading the process of development in conjunction with international finance, a growing but concentrated working class, an enormous peasantry on which the state was reliant for raising tax, but only a small and weak bourgeoisie. Hence the social formation in Russia was markedly different from that of Britain, and its structure made sense only in the context of the *international* development of capital.

While Trotsky used the concept of uneven and combined development to analyse the events leading up to the Russian Revolution, Kamran Matin (2013) has employed it to consider the history of Iran.

Criticizing Eurocentric accounts of historical progress that focus on European states as the model for state development, Matin argues that while the study of International Relations is crucial to understanding Iran's history, it has to be considered in conjunction with an assessment of Iran's domestic history. Matin shows how Iran's history is a complex interaction between its domestic social and economic systems and the priorities of international politics and economics. The country's historical progress has been impacted by both the influence of events such as the Russian Revolution, and the economic and political incursions by European countries and subsequently the United States. This has resulted in a largely unstable combination, in which attempts at modernization, for example by the last Shah, have faced a system combining a modern industrial sector, largely dominated by the state in collaboration with foreign capital, and a small cosmopolitan middle class along with a large agricultural and merchant class with established institutions and close links to the religious establishment. During the economic downturn of the 1970s, and in conjunction with pressure from the US Carter administration, this combination became increasingly unstable until the revolutionary overthrow of 1979. Development in Iran, then, Matin argues, can be understood only as uneven, in that Iran commenced on the capitalist path at a later time and from a different starting point, yet combined in terms of the influence of already existing global capitalism.

### Key Points

- New Marxism is characterized by a direct re-engagement with and reappropriation of the concepts and categories developed by Marx himself or other classic Marxist thinkers.
- One example of New Marxist scholarship is Justin Rosenberg's work on uneven and combined development, which draws on Trotsky's examination of the development of Russia in the global political economy.
- Uneven and combined development suggests that rather than all countries following a single path of economic and political development, each country's path will be affected by the international context.
- The uneven and combined development approach has been utilized to analyse Iran's economic and political development in the twentieth century.

## 8.7 Conclusion

As outlined in **Chapter 2**, globalization is the name given to the process whereby social transactions of all kinds increasingly take place without accounting for national or state boundaries, with the result that the world has become ‘one relatively borderless social sphere’. Marxist theorists would certainly not disagree that these developments are taking place, nor would they deny their importance, but they would reject any notion that they are somehow novel. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Marx and Engels were clearly aware not only of the global scope of capitalism, but also of its potential for social transformation. In a particularly prescient section of the *Communist Manifesto*, they argue:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country . . . All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe.

(Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]: 83–4)

According to Marxist theorists, the globe has long been dominated by a single integrated economic and political entity—a global capitalist system—that has gradually incorporated all of humanity within its grasp. In this system, all elements have always been interrelated and interdependent. The only thing that is ‘new’ is an increased awareness of these linkages. Similarly, ecological processes have always ignored state boundaries, even if it is only recently that growing environmental degradation has finally caused this fact to permeate public consciousness.

While the intensity of cross-border flows may be increasing, this does not necessarily signify the fundamental change in world politics proclaimed by so many of those who argue that we have entered an era of globalization. Marxist theorists insist that the only way to discover how significant contemporary developments really are is to view them in the context of the deeper structural processes at work. When this is done, we may well discover indications that important changes are afoot. For example, many Marxists regard the apparent delegitimation of the sovereign state as a very important contemporary development. However, the essential first step in generating any understanding of those trends regarded as evidence of globalization must be to map the contours of global capitalism itself. If we fail to do so, we will inevitably fail to gauge the real significance of the changes that are occurring.

Another danger of adopting an ahistoric and uncritical attitude to globalization is that such an attitude can prevent us from noticing the way in which reference to globalization has become part of the ideological armoury of elites in the contemporary world. ‘Globalization’ is now regularly cited as a reason to promote measures to reduce workers’ rights and lessen other constraints on business. Such ideological justifications for policies that favour the interests of business can only be countered through a broader understanding of the relationship between the political and economic structures of capitalism (see **Opposing Opinions 8.1**). The understanding proffered by the Marxist theorists suggests that there is nothing natural or inevitable about a world order based on a global market. Rather than accept the inevitability of the present order, the task facing us is to lay the foundations for a new way of organizing society—a global society that is more just and more humane than our own. In our world of multiple crises, Rosa Luxemburg’s observation that we have a choice between socialism or barbarism appears more relevant than ever.

### Opposing Opinions 8.1 The global economy is the prime determinant of the character of global politics

#### For

**Economic power determines states’ capability to project military power.** Economic resources are needed to purchase military equipment or to maintain the research and development necessary to keep military capability at the highest level. It is no coincidence that the most militarily powerful states in the

international system (the US and China) are also the most economically powerful.

**Periods of economic turmoil are linked to increased instability in the international system.** The Second World War was preceded by a long period of economic instability caused by the Great Depression. Marxists, following Lenin, locate the cause of

the First World War in the competition among capitalist states for control over the colonies. Since the economic crisis of 2008, international tensions have been mounting, particularly between Russia and the United States. By contrast, the 'long peace' of the cold war was marked by a period of relative economic stability.

**Capitalist interests determine states' foreign policy.** For example, Paul Wolfowitz, who was Deputy Secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush administration, openly declared that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was about securing access to oil. There is a long history of large corporations influencing US policy towards Latin America. For instance, United Fruit played a key role in lobbying for the overthrow of the Arbenz administration in Guatemala in 1954.

### Against

**The balance of power determines the character of international politics.** Periods of relative balance coincide with greater stability in the international system. The 'long peace' of the second half of the twentieth century occurred because there was a relative balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union, particularly since 'mutual assured destruction' meant that neither side could 'win' a nuclear conflict. The current

instability in the international system derives from the relative decline of the United States.

### The spread of democracy produces greater global stability.

While we may not have reached 'the end of history' in Francis Fukuyama's term, the claim that democracies don't go to war with each other retains its validity, and democracy promotion is the best hope for a more peaceful and stable future. Europe, which is now a peaceful community of democracies, was historically the most war-torn region in the world. With the exception of the break-up of post-communist Yugoslavia, Europe has not experienced a major conflict since the end of the Second World War.

### Reducing state behaviour to the expression of capitalist interests does not explain actions that appear at least partly motivated by genuine altruistic or other concerns.

Behaviour such as contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations, for example, or pressure-group-inspired debt forgiveness, cannot readily be explained in terms of the operation of crude economic interests. More controversially, it might even be argued that some behaviours—such as the United States' continuing and largely uncritical support for Israel—may well work against the state's long-term economic interests. Simplistic, reductionist readings of the influences on state behaviour are almost always inadequate.

1. Does the balance of power provide a better explanation for periods of stability than economic prosperity?
2. Can state actions be reduced purely to economic interests?
3. What is the connection between economic power and military capability?



Visit the online resources to discover pointers to help you tackle these questions.

## Questions

1. How would you account for the continuing vitality of Marxist thought?
2. How useful is Wallerstein's notion of a semi-periphery?
3. Why has Wallerstein's world-systems theory been criticized for its alleged Eurocentrism? Do you agree with this critique?
4. In what ways is 'combined and uneven development' a useful lens through which to view the development of world politics?
5. In what ways does Gramsci's notion of hegemony differ from that used by realist International Relations writers?
6. How might it be argued that Marx and Engels were the original theorists of globalization?
7. What do you regard as the main contribution of Marxist theories to our understanding of world politics?
8. How useful is the notion of emancipation employed by critical theorists?
9. Do you agree with Cox's distinction between 'problem-solving theory' and 'critical theory'?
10. Assess Wallerstein's claim that the power of the United States is in decline.



Visit the online resources to test your understanding by trying the self-test questions.

## Further Reading

**Anderson, K. B.** (2010), *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). A brilliant reconstruction of Marx's own writing on world politics.

**Brincat, S., Lima, L., and Nunes, J.** (eds) (2012), *Critical Theory in International Relations and Security Studies: Interviews and Reflections* (London: Routledge). Interviews with some of the key proponents of critical theory in the field, along with further reflections both supportive and more critical.

**Cox, R. W.** (1981), 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium*, 10(2): 126–55. Cox's much-quoted essay continues to inspire.

**Derluguian, G. M.** (2005), *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). This unconventional book is a dazzling display of the insights generated by the world-system approach.

**Eagleton, T.** (2018), *Why Marx was Right* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press). A short, highly entertaining and deceptively erudite defence of the core tenets of Marx's worldview.

**Lenin, V. I.** (1917), *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (multiple editions available). While of limited contemporary relevance, it is still worth reading this once-influential pamphlet.

**Linklater, A.** (2007), *Critical Theory and World Politics: Sovereignty, Citizenship and Humanity* (London: Routledge). An important book from one of the most influential critical theorists working on international relations.

**Marx, K., and Engels, F.** (1848), *The Communist Manifesto* (multiple editions available). The best introduction to Marx's thinking. Essential reading even after 150 years.

**Wallerstein, I., Collins, R., Mann, M., Derluguian, G., and Calhoun, C.** (2013), *Does Capitalism Have a Future?* (New York: Oxford University Press). A fascinating exploration of the problems of contemporary global capitalism by prominent world-system theorists and their (sympathetic) critics.



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