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Autonomous or materialist geopolitics?

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Abstract *The body of writing that falls under the label of ‘new imperialism’ proposes a radical and contemporary understanding of post-Cold War international politics that involves a revision and redeployment of the category of inter-imperialist rivalries. Alex Callinicos’s ‘Does capitalism need the state system?’ aims at opening a metatheoretical space where it might be possible, within the frame of capitalist mode of production, to meaningfully speak of such an autonomous logic of geopolitical competition, rooted in the essential political fragmentation of the capitalist system along the frontiers of nation-state, but, crucially, not determined by the logic of capitalist competition. This article takes issue with some of Callinicos’s conclusions, particularly the possibility of a ‘realist moment’ in our understanding of inter-imperialist rivalries. It also explores the possibility of a non-reductionist, Marxist notion of geopolitical rivalries to be developed through the empirical examination of the state–capital link in foreign policy, and attention to capitalist accumulation and its unfolding in space.*

Introduction

In attempting to historicize and reorganize the classical Marxist legacy, the body of writing that travels under the label of ‘new imperialism’ has made a conscious effort to analytically overcome the tradition’s limits. A substantial part of this effort has been spent in articulating a non-determinist analysis of imperialism, which goes on to be defined as the *intersection* of two, theoretically disassociated, modes of power accumulation: the capitalist and the territorial logics of competition. Alex Callinicos’s ‘Does capitalism need the state system?’ (2007) aims at opening a metatheoretical space where it might be possible to (1) make sense of the autonomous logic of territorial competition, (2) analyse its geopolitical forms and (3) contextualize it within the cycles of capitalist accumulation.

This article wishes to take issue with some of Callinicos’s conclusions, particularly the possibility of a ‘realist moment’ in our understanding of geopolitical rivalries, and the relevance of the inter-state system in how we conceive them. In arguing for the autonomy of territorial and economic competition and, crucially, in seeking to understand geopolitical competition, the new imperialism is often forced to make use of modes of explanation alien to

¹ Many thanks to Alexander Anievas and three anonymous referees for their comments and help on all previous versions of this article. Thanks also to the kind staff at Wayne’s, in Aleksis Kiven Katu, Tampere, for their logistical support over the time I spent drafting this.

historical materialism (mainly, realism). Callinicos's metatheoretical solution does not loosen these tensions, and might even sharpen them. The undeniable fact that capitalism is an inter-state system, moreover, does not, in itself, help us uncover the so-far hidden agency of imperialism. If capitalist inter-stateness is to be understood as something more than a Marxist equivalent of realist anarchy (a structuring principle of international relations), then it will require some kind of agency and micro-foundations.

A Marxist theory that is equipped to avoid the reifications of other schools will not only have to show that imperialism is in some way related to capitalism, but also indicate who its imperialists are, and why they act. This seems particularly important for those who, like Callinicos, agree that territorial competition is not reducible to the laws of capital. This work wants to insist that the relation between domestic capitals and each (capitalist) nation-state offers a good foundation for this missing agency of imperialism, but that a recourse to Fred Block's theory of the state (Ashman and Callinicos 2006; Callinicos 2007) will necessarily have to be enriched by more theoretical and empirical work on how class formations encroach on a state's foreign policy structures.

Finally, it is doubtful that laying stress on the fact that capitalism is constituted by a plurality of states will throw much light on the different forms that geopolitical rivalries take among these states. Much valuable research has gone into working out historically how it is that the international system has become subsumed by the capitalist mode of production, but none of it will explain the problem of geopolitics: understanding capitalist geopolitics involves asking a different set of questions altogether.

The 'realist problem' in the new imperialism

The works of Peter Gowan, Alex Callinicos and David Harvey are very different in many relevant senses, but they can be said to share a prime interest in inter-state competition, underlining the continued importance of rivalries among powerful nation-states as an essential element of capitalist international relations. Other authors might well fit into this broad description of the new imperialism, but I shall limit my discussion to these three.

Beginning with Gowan's *The global gamble* (1999), one of this work's many strengths is its display of an often unrivalled knowledge of the decisive diplomatic story behind main events and headlines. Gowan's insight allows him to proceed, in his own words, 'backwards' from the liberal public statements of policymakers to their real, and if we believe him, *realist* frames of mind (Gowan 1999, x). The picture of American imperialism that emerges from *The global gamble*, however, is ambiguous about the autonomy of state managers with regard to capital accumulation. Gowan's American foreign policy establishment appears as a different social group from the US capitalist class, which, nevertheless, seems to have a fairly accurate picture of what is good for US capital as a whole. This move is rendered possible by the identification of an American national interest, which, as he stresses, must be conceived as a *capitalist* national interest. Mainstream thinking, Gowan reminds us, often makes the mistake of artificially distinguishing between the economic and political national interests, without any sense of the institutional mediations between the

two. As Gowan argues, this is precisely the link, the social and institutional mediation, that 'needs to be investigated':

What are their compulsions and how do their compulsions and interests operate in domestic politics to structure the definition of the national interest? ... One obvious such mediation is provided by the concept of capitalism as a social system which gives a twist both of the economy and the state. (Gowan 1999, 63)

The argument can be expressed as such: 'the better placed its [a state's] capitals are in world markets, the stronger its position and influence' (Gowan 1999, 65).² This position, however, primarily concerns itself with the *economic* national interest and therefore preserves a possible autonomy of (geo)political interests—an element not lost on Harvey and Callinicos. For Gowan, state managers still think as realists, imagining the world as a geostrategic map and concerning themselves with the necessary calculations to ensure security and relative superiority (even if they are severely constrained by the quest to ensure economic growth and investment).

Though Gowan's 'rough concept' of the capitalist state is perceptive and useful, it cannot explain how state managers come to articulate and implement a foreign policy that responds, efficiently or not, to capitalism's needs. Nor can it clarify in any systematic way the relation between the economic national interest and other interests specific to the state. The argument that the state must rely on taxation for its own survival, and that it must ensure economic growth, does not solve this problem. Part of the inadequacy of Gowan's (admittedly provisional) solution is that it echoes Block's proposal for a Marxist theory of the state (Block 1987, especially chapters 1, 3 and 5) without stopping to consider its shortcomings. This incomplete articulation of the state-capitalist link greatly lends *The global gamble* its notoriously 'conspiratorial' flavour, with its penchant for star-chamber policymaking, and its occasional reliance on realist literature and terminology.

On their part, Harvey and Callinicos have independently arrived at a definition of imperialism that involves a definitive methodological choice, namely, what Harvey describes as the 'dialectical relation' between the two logics of imperialism (capitalist and territorial) (Harvey 2003). It is important, however, to see that this approach carries with it an in-built lack of definition about the kind of geopolitical explanation to be called on stage in understanding how the territorial logic unfolds. There is nothing in Harvey's otherwise priceless work on *The new imperialism* that can give us any clues as to what capitalist geopolitics look like. Moreover, as Robert Brenner (2006, 87) and Ellen Wood (2006, 12) have pointed out, Harvey's own reconstruction of the recent history of imperialism can be shown to contradict the autonomy of the territorial logic. Callinicos, who is far more committed to understanding how imperialist states operate geopolitically, seems caught in the same net. Defining imperialism as an intersection of two autonomous logics delivers little more than description. One could argue that such a theory's strength lies precisely in its lack of definition

²Consequently, 'in generally stagnant conditions in the core countries, there will be a war of each against all' or, at least, 'acute inter-state rivalries' (Gowan 1999, 65). If this is not more often the case, it is partly a result of a certain division between capital and labour monopolies along territorial lines.

about geopolitics, allowing one to flexibly explain the different modes taken by geopolitical competition as they unfold in time. However, as I argue below, this cannot be reconciled with Callinicos's 'realist moment' (Callinicos 2007, 542).

Harvey and Callinicos, in sum, manage to retain the relevance of 'inter-imperialist rivalries' for contemporary analysis.³ They have adeptly navigated between the Scylla of 'pure' classical instrumentalism, which would posit a complete fusion of state and capital, and the Charybdis of Political Marxism, which would tend to argue that geopolitics is not a capitalist form of competition insofar as it is not directly involved in capital relations. However, setting the capitalist and territorial logics in 'dialectical' motion requires a constant recourse to elements outside the theory. Thus, the new imperialism accomplishes a great feat, but is taxed, as a result, with indeterminacy.

This problem (by now, a standard critique of the new imperialism) has an important upshot. The theory is ambiguous towards realism when it comes to explaining geopolitical competition. To broach the question differently: if the territorial logic of competition is autonomous, does it follow that we must relinquish an attempt to explain its determinations from the perspective of historical materialism? Callinicos's answer is at once no and yes. 'No', in the sense that geopolitical competition must be seen as part of the capitalist totality: the capitalist mode of production, through its historical unfolding, has ended up embracing and internalizing the system's political fragmentation along the frontiers of nation-states. Also, any geopolitical interaction should be circumscribed to different cycles of crisis or boom that characterize capitalist accumulation. But, at the same time, the answer seems to be 'yes', because the inter-stateness of capitalism necessarily involves a set of determinations that originate and belong to the inter-state system itself, and remain irreducible to the logic of capital accumulation.

Callinicos therefore defends the possibility of a 'realist moment' in any Marxist account of imperialism, as long as it can locate, as he puts it, 'the strategies, calculations and interactions of state managers in the context of the crisis tendencies and class conflicts constitutive of capitalism at any stage in its development' (Callinicos 2007, 543). I will turn to consider the plausibility of this particular move below. For this to be done, however, we must now draw attention to the question of the political fragmentation of capitalism.

The capitalist state vs the inter-stateness of capital?

How best to understand the capitalist state? The problem raised by Hannes Lacher (2002), for one, about the necessity of the nation-state under capitalism, and the lines explored by Benno Teschke (2003), about the emergence of a capitalist system of sovereign nation-states, both seem to be pitched at the same level of abstraction vindicated, at least *in embryo*, by Colin Barker, who argued that any theory of the capitalist state would have to begin from the recognition that capitalist states exist as an interactive plurality. For Barker, the politics of capitalism is circumscribed not simply by a capitalist state in the singular, but by a system of states, by a politically fragmented space that reflects politically

³ Callinicos (2005) sees more use in the term 'geopolitical rivalries'.

and historically, but not logically, the fact that capital itself can only exist as many capitals.

It is worth briefly exploring Barker's idea,⁴ according to which the development of capitalism tends to universalize capitalist competition. This implies both the fact that capitals become more integrated in their common interest against the working class (organized or not) and, crucially, that capitalists increasingly find themselves vying against each other. Such a contradictory evolution is grasped in Marx's description of capitals in the plural as 'warring brothers'. Given the infrastructural prerequisites involved in capitalist accumulation (for instance, the need for some institutional stability), one of the lines along which capitals fragment is regional, using the umbrella of an existing state structure to fend off competition from other areas. With the development of competition and concentration, this first cooperation begins to acquire an organic character, deepening in breadth and expanding in scope.

An important consequence of this is that it seems mistaken to conceive of the state as, to use Marx's classic formulation in the *Communist manifesto*, 'a committee for managing the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. As Barker rightly emphasizes, it is impossible to fathom one single political institution that could take up the defence of the interests of the *whole* bourgeoisie, since capital could never exist as a 'universal capital', an idea which, according to the *Grundrisse*, is equivalent to a 'non-thing'. Even if there is nothing in the capital relation that allows us to *logically* derive the nation-state form as its 'natural' polity, it is nevertheless true that capitalism's essentially conflictive constitution (Barker 1991, 209) implies some hue of (political) institutional fragmentation. Capitals, in this analysis, compete against other capitals and, in time, come to subsume the system of nation-states into this horizontal form of competition: nation-states are 'a mobilisation of a particular segment of the bourgeoisie and other classes into a nation', but crucially 'a nation formed in opposition to other nations' (Barker 1991, 207). Thus, inter-state competition becomes an extension, or distant specimen, of the horizontal aspect of the capital relation (inter-capitalist competition). Also, such a view suggests that we should not hold our breath waiting for the *Godot* of a transnational state, and that we can abandon such expectation without fear or guilt of 'reifying' the nation-state.⁵

A second consequence of viewing the existence of the capitalist state as that of a system of states is the fact that each element of the system is seen to be under the pressure, influence and, crucially, constitutional effect of all the others. The capitalist state system, in other words, can be understood to exert its own set of determinations and to interact along the lines of its own set of constitutive relations. As Barker points out, the plurality of nation-states is the

⁴ Claudia von Braunmühl also pioneered the many-state thesis within the State Debate (Braunmühl 1978, 166).

⁵ William Robinson diagnoses Ray Kiely, Alfredo Valladão and myself of blindness to the transnational, and accuses me of wrongly presupposing the existence of national economies, and of upholding my preferred theoretical stance against empirical truth (Robinson 2006; compare Pozo-Martin 2006). I will not rehearse here the more detailed arguments that others have made, and with which I wholly agree (Cammack 2007 and Anievas 2007, forthcoming). I merely note that, after many articles and monographs devoted to this problem, the transnational remains an idea in search of definition and proof, if not an author.

political form of capitalism: 'were this not so, the whole Marxist discussion of imperialism and nationalism would rest on thin air' (Barker 1991, 206; see also Callinicos 1982).

An additional question arises from approaching the fundamental relationship between capitalism and the state system in this way. Callinicos (2007) thinks that a satisfactory answer must necessarily refer to one of the main inherent qualities of capitalism, as identified by Trotsky: its tendency to develop in an uneven and combined way. This is, as far as I can see, a valid explanation. However, this begs yet another crucial question. If the inherent uneven and combined character of capitalist development has the capacity of effecting such fundamental changes on the political make-up of global capitalism, does this not constitute a first step from which to theorize a *capitalist* geopolitical logic, which could then be related to the different patterns and cycles of capital accumulation? This seems the upshot of uneven and combined development, understood, as I think it should be, as a characteristic of capitalism.

The alternative to this involves trying to hook uneven and combined development outside or above the determinations of the capitalist mode of production. Such an endeavour risks collapsing the notion into a Marxist transhistorical equivalent of realist anarchy, or to any similar principle deployed to structure any international/intersocietal theory. However, any attempts at turning uneven and combined development into the anvil on which to forge an alternative understanding of the international can be expected to run into an apparent paradox. If uneven and combined development is extirpated from capitalism and projected into the stratospheric heights of the international (or intersocietal),⁶ it will tend to lose its explanatory edge, acquiring the disabling aura of banality.

Confusingly, what all this amounts to is the idea that a permanently evolving territorial or geopolitical type of competition is, in the end, part and parcel of capitalist development. In Harvey's words: 'if states did not exist, then capital would have to create them' (Harvey 2006, 164). But once again, and at the risk of further alienating the reader: what kind of territorial competition, what kind of competitive governance, is being invoked? What are its geopolitics? Do they change? What cycles alter its geopolitical forms?

A moment of realism

Following from the discussion above, the inter-state system essentially constitutes a higher level of complexity from the abstract logic of capitalist accumulation. According to Callinicos's take on *Capital's* method, the conceptual relation between capital accumulation and successive levels of ever more concrete complexity is not a logical (deductive) one. This implies that each new level of concretization will refer to a set of determinations 'irreducible' to those posited at the previous level (Callinicos 2007, 542).

The implications of this are twofold. Firstly, as has already been shown, the state can and should not be 'deduced' from the concept of capital. Secondly,

⁶All too clearly, I am referring to Rosenberg's (2007) fascinating but, so far, unsuccessful efforts at doing precisely this, but see Rosenberg (2006).

the state system exerts its own set of determinations,⁷ quite independently of capital. This juncture, where historical materialism meets 'the International', has an important consequence: the autonomy of a territorial logic can be located precisely at this level. It is here that Callinicos sees the (necessary) 'realist moment in any Marxist analysis of international relations and conjunctures', which will account for the 'the strategies, calculations and interactions of rival political elites in the state system' (Callinicos 2007, 542). Harvey's methodological choice of two irreducible economic and territorial logics implies, therefore, that 'the state system has distinctive properties: if it did not, it could not play an explanatory role' (Callinicos 2007, 542).

It is hard to disagree with the broader argument about the explanatory role played by the distinctive properties of the inter-state system. On the other hand, it is hard to agree with the conclusion. The realist moment is, at any rate, a hard concept to dissect. To begin with, what does it involve? How long would the moment last? What realist tradition does it refer to? Which realist concepts will be deployed? A much sharper definition is needed here, or, at any rate, a sharp distinction must be made between realist geopolitics and geopolitics. Otherwise we should be forced to assume that Callinicos conceives of realism as part of the fabric of international relations, a necessary attribute of the world, and not just a (flawed) means to explain it. This is more than a semantic quibble: if one really believes that geopolitics is (partly) a realist game, then, among other complications, one has to accept that the calculations of state managers matter very little. For if geopolitics is a realist game, its rules can be ascertained by a proper understanding of international anarchy.

To be fair, this is not exactly what Callinicos is doing. On closer inspection, his point seems to be not that geopolitics and realism are in any way co-terminus, but rather that realism *is* a fact of capitalist geopolitics—if only because it expresses (or even articulates) the world-views of state managers. In other words, it is a way of taking 'into account the strategies, calculations and interactions of rival political elites in the state system' (Callinicos 2007, 542). Alas, such a move also involves a number of complications and perils, and arguably turns out to be as misleading as assuming that essentially realist policies exist in the world. However, if realism is an ideology, what kind of objective social relations is it legitimating? To answer this, we would once again face the original question: what is the logic and changing form of geopolitics?

Surely all students of international relations allow for the significance of economic and geopolitical interests. The problem is how to characterize the notion of 'interests'.⁸ Consequently, it is crucial not to confuse foreign policy ideology with realism. Examining the doctrines that articulate state managers'

⁷ Exactly what degree of transformative power these determinations exert is, of course, an open question. In realism, equal states operating under anarchy have a systemic effect on one another (in the sense that the actions of one state will fundamentally drive the actions of others, and vice versa). Within this Marxist frame, it still needs to be established whether the set of determinations can throw transformative effects of its own, that is, effects not imputable to the uneven and combined development of capitalism.

⁸ In this regard, any Marxist can argue about the ideological, economic or strategic interests behind any international conflict without any systematic reference to historical materialism. This holds, even if describing Callinicos's (2005) article on Iraq as a 'brilliant realist' article is an exaggeration (see Pozo-Martin 2006).

views is an essential task. This will generally provide a well of information, not least about the fundamental harmonies or tensions between the actions of state-managers and the class-conscious influence of sections of national capital on the relevant governmental bodies (Pozo-Martin 2006, 238). The study of ideology is a necessary element in any examination of the state–capital link (which, as has been argued, is the *sine qua non* in any theory devoted to making sense of inter-imperialist rivalries, or of geopolitical conflict for that matter). As Callinicos's *The new Mandarins* (2003) shows, however, this involves a much more interesting and complex discursive analysis of foreign policy than can ever be reached by the assumption that realism in itself reflects the outlook of state managers.

So if 'realist moment' does not imply that geopolitics is a realist *thing*; and it does not necessarily involve the idea that foreign policymakers think as realists; and it does not suggest that realism is the best way to set Harvey's twin logics into dialectical motion (Ashman and Callinicos 2006, 114), then what does it do?

The final way in which the 'realist moment' could be defended would involve the claim that, for all its flaws, 'there will be issues on which Marxists and realists will find themselves on the same side' (Callinicos 2007, 543). The idea would be that realism indeed shows that international relations are anarchic and inherently prone to crises and conflict, and that despite everything, 'realism's 'relentlessly one-sided abstractions do capture some of the contours of world politics' (Callinicos 2003, 325). Such vague claims only capture what is a choice of necessity for the new imperialism. No other International Relations Theory (IR) tradition can arguably match realism's attention to explaining geopolitical conflict, and inter-state conflict is precisely what the new imperialism has brought renewed attention to. Of course, Marxists are less likely to drink from the liberal pool, or draw from the wisdom of constructivism. Indeed, the new imperialism is set against such outlooks from the start, if only because, like realism, it still emphasizes the role of states and the centrality of power and conflict, 'globalisation and Al Qaeda notwithstanding' (Mearsheimer 2005, 139).⁹ The natural choice of geopolitical explanation that follows from Harvey's and Callinicos's methodological choice is some version or other of realism.

If what has been said so far holds some validity, the definitional ambiguity of the 'realist moment' cannot be accidental. As we have by now repeated to the point of homicidal boredom, Callinicos and Harvey posit two twin logics of power competition irreducible to each other. Doing so, however, makes the theory mute about the forms of geopolitical competition that constitute any imperialist moment. Some might argue that this is a relative virtue, as it will keep the theory flexible in accounting for the different forms taken by geopolitics over time. But if the 'realist moment' has any part to play in this, it will necessarily have to be kept broad, loosely characterized, general and intuitive,

⁹The new imperialism is, by constitution, prone to Waltz's (1979, 1990) principle that conflict is a reality, and war a possibility, if only because there is nothing in the system to prevent it.

without being narrowed down or strained in its many possible implications by the corset of an accurate definition.

The inadequacy of realism

Quite apart from its theoretical limits, realism can be seen to bear within it the truncated vocation of constituting a paradigm inside IR theory, with its own set of core premises, problems and inner consistencies (Legro and Moravcsik 1999). It is, of course, a failed paradigm in that, as Felix Ciută (2005) has robustly argued, realists are trapped in a kind of performative contradiction, unable even to criticize foreign policy decisions without overstepping the paradigmatic limits of their own theory. The fact that, despite everything, realists spend most of the time doing precisely this, only deepens that contradiction. This adds to the long string of reasons why the core concepts of realism (national interest, the balance of power, anarchy) are alien to historical materialism (Rosenberg 1994), and to the need of reconstructing them.¹⁰ It is unclear how deploying them in an attempt to capture the determinations of the inter-state system, even if contextualized by the periodic bouts of crisis in global capitalism, will undo this predicament.

The methodological chasm between Marxism and realism is invoked, among others, in an illuminating exchange between Justin Rosenberg and Fred Halliday and realism's king theoretician, Kenneth Waltz. In one section, Waltz explains that the theory and policy preferences of realist thinkers are unrelated, and this can be easily extended to the mindsets and policy options of policymakers (Halliday and Rosenberg 1998, 373). Indeed, realism's strict limits make it very difficult to tell us anything about policy. This is also consistent with Waltz's own stance about the theoretical value of realism. As he goes on to claim:

States try to maintain their position in the system. For me that's an axiom. It's derived from the balance-of-power theory. Now, there's nothing in anybody's theory of *anything* that says you will succeed. It indicates what you are likely to try to do and what will happen to you if you don't manage to do it. (Halliday and Rosenberg 1998, 377)

In other words, while preferences are hard to link up consistently with the axioms of realist theory, it follows that only those policies which, regardless of the policymaker's intentions, calculations or ideology, push for sustaining a given country's position in the system are realist policies. But how, then, do we know a realist policy when we see one? No one has ever seen (and, I dare wager, will ever see) a policy document that bases its recommendations on the grounds that they provide the best way *not* to sustain their country's position in the system, or that justifies its prescriptions by assuring that they will erode the country's relative standing vis-à-vis others. Identifying a realist policy is a nigh-impossible task—despite Mearsheimer's, amongst others, better efforts to provide the grounds for a realist foreign policy (Mearsheimer 2001, 2005). A successful realist policy can only be identified *post factum* as, in EH Carr's felicitous words, 'nothing succeeds like success'. If a commitment to sustaining a given country's relative position in

¹⁰ But see van der Pijl (1998).

the system is all it takes, pretty much all policies are realist. Realism's in-built lack of definition as to what a good realist policy might look like is one of the paradigm's most awkward calling cards. But such incapacity does not burden neorealism alone. Hans Morgenthau and Carr conceive of power as an end in itself and, therefore, as a socially neutral relation. A clear example of this is Morgenthau's (1973) failed quest for what he calls 'a rational hypothesis' in reconstructing the logic of policymakers that can help avoid the misleading input of their personal or ideological characteristics.¹¹

Of course, realists are sometimes right about their policy critiques. No one can deny the significance of Mearsheimer and Walt's polemic against the war in Iraq, for instance. But what is important is that the basis of this critique *is not* grounded on realist *grounds* (apart from the obliged mantra that US failure in Iraq would be detrimental to the US's international standing).¹² Any attempt to concretely fill in what best articulates the 'national interest' at any given time (even documents such as the *Project for a new American century* and Bush II's *National security strategy document*), or to make a conjunctural assessment of what a country's relative position within the international system is, will call in elements that are very difficult to integrate into the theory. In other words, it can be argued that realist theory leaves policymakers and analysts orphaned of any indications as to the specific content of geopolitics. It is important to note that for Waltz, this does not imply that realism is inconsistent. The point is, rather, that realists are gagged by the tight cloth separating theory from everything else.

If this argument is right, then no amount of Marxist contextualization of realist categories will avoid their uselessness to an understanding of imperialism. The danger was never that such sophisticated theorists as Gowan, Harvey or Callinicos could, in identifying an autonomous realm of inter-state competition, risk a reification or abuse of realist notions. The issue, rather, is that realism does not offer Marxists a good guide for understanding geopolitical competition. The 'realist moment' will not satisfactorily aid our analysis of imperialism.

By way of conclusion: towards a materialist geopolitics

There seems to be little use in suggesting that geopolitical competition is, at every given moment, directly determined by capitalist competition; and, of course, this kind of intellectual crusade would probably crash against reality time after time. But it is not necessary to abandon the notion that territorial competition is in some

¹¹ Classical realism, in contrast to its more contemporary structural strand, essentially warns against foreign policy being mixed with moral sentiment. The above critique focuses very specifically on Waltz and his understanding of anarchy and interest. If I do not engage more directly with classical realism, it is because I take for good Waltz's claim that it presents elements of a theory, but never a theory (Waltz 1990). The reason for this is not that only Waltz gets to say what realist theory is, of course, but rather that it is difficult to see how classical realism can illuminate the reality of geopolitics beyond the principles it lays for its 'correct' practice. My thanks to George Lawson and an anonymous referee for helping me to clarify this point.

¹² For the realist debates on empire and Iraq, see Ciută (2005). Ciută shows the difficulty in grounding policy analysis on the substantive claims of realist theory, particularly on American interest.

direct way related to capital and that this relationship, this link, which necessarily passes through the workings of each state as key agents of world politics, be addressed head-on both empirically and theoretically.

How else is one to make sense of geopolitical competition, especially when the relation between economic and territorial competition remains at risk of being seen as a kind of soft intersection, a fusion itself undetermined, almost a thing of chance, which allows the economic drive to take the lead at certain times, whilst at others, allows the territorial pulse to dominate? With no guidance other than an invocation of the 'dialectical' relation between economic and political competition, there is little way to explain the interaction of state managers and sections of capitals, whether or not one posits such a strong division between the state and the economy as to assume that state managers have interests distinct from those of capitalists. The state-capitalist tension must be revised, debated anew, because it is the missing link in the larger process of explaining imperialism. This call for a new state debate, however, is not an invitation to spend our energy 'recomposing' the missing Marxist theory of the state. As Callinicos observes, that would amount to wilfully forgetting Barker's insistence that to focus on a theory of the state in the singular, 'puts the theorist in the position of a one-handed violinist' (Barker 1991, 207).

Without a clear understanding of how the state can be seen to act as imperialist in the capitalist sense, the theory will be unable to count on a stable category of agency. Developing an agency of imperialism, and working out how it fits into the structure of contemporary capitalism, is much more necessary than stressing the autonomy of the political, and might require us to qualify Harvey's claim that territorial competition is irreducible to capitalist accumulation. The question is: who are imperialism's imperialists and how do they *do* imperialism?

While the task of systematically delineating an agenda that might lead towards a Marxist geopolitics is still pending, two elements can be vaguely invoked in the hope of setting the wheel in motion. First, the tensions between the expansionist foreign policies of imperialism and the foreign policy ideologies that sustain and implement them must have some kind of systematic relation at the state level. Depending on their position in international political economy, on any given state's history and political traditions, and on the relative degree of class control of its foreign policy apparatus, any country's geopolitical doctrine and stance is actively participated in and shaped by conscious class interests. The way to provide the micro-foundations of imperialism is not, therefore, to argue that the interests of state managers, while obviously not identical to those of big business, can be seen to interact or harmonize by virtue of some kind of 'homeostatic mechanism' (Brenner 2006, 83).¹³

While it is true that any state manager has an interest in laying the conditions for economic growth and the flourishing of capital (her own survival will depend on it in the long run), this throws little light on how foreign policy is articulated. That would require a much more detailed research, crucially involving some kind of 'proof of intent' on the part of foreign policy structures that their decisions can

¹³ Brenner (2006) incorrectly takes the non-identity of interests between capitalists and state managers which follows from *The new imperialism* to mean the same as interdependence.

be directly related to the welfare of capital and, ultimately, to their own survival as a caste. Foreign policy differs from other aspects of state rule in that the strategies and aims of some particularly powerful segments of capital are likely to exert influence where others fail.

Second, if a revised notion of inter-imperialist rivalries is going to be upheld, more work needs to be done on the contending capitalist centres of power: how do they differ comparatively from the US? How are their foreign policy structures responding to their national capitals? What determines whether two imperialist poles are more likely to cooperate than compete? In what way does capitalist competition set the terms of their geopolitical friction? The impressive amount of work done so far on American imperialism has not been coupled by the necessary research on other contending modes of imperialism. More research is needed if we are to seriously investigate the kind of interactions and possible constitutive effects that the capitalist plurality of states are said to exert.¹⁴ Such attention to other, rival, modes of imperialism, coupled with the above-mentioned need for the analysis of foreign policy concepts and ideology, will open up a space where Marxism can make a contribution to the study of values in IR.¹⁵

George Bernard Shaw defined 'critics' as those who set themselves the task of making sure that no turn is left unstoned. Despite appearances, the above discussion is not meant as that kind of 'criticism'. What animates this critique is the conviction that Harvey and Callinicos's project is, if fully problematized, politically and theoretically irresistible. Analysing the legacy of classical Marxism some decades ago, a much younger Perry Anderson wrote:

the same issues re-emerge practically as universal problems before any socialist militant in the contemporary world. We have seen how numerous and insistent these are, by now. What is the constitutive nature of bourgeois democracy? What is the function and future of the nation-state? What is the real character of imperialism as a system? ... The list goes on, climbing up in ambition, until 'What would be the structure of an authentic socialist revolution?' ... Starting with the first three seems the right order ... (Anderson 1989, 121)

Surely, all those involved with the new imperialism will agree?

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¹⁴ Perhaps the only major Marxist theorist to have worked more systematically on the plurality of imperialist poles is Kees van der Pijl (especially 1984 and 2006). A further area to be explored in this dialogue concerns Harvey's spatial fixes of capital, and the way in which they can be linked, in space, with a state's sovereign control of territory.

¹⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing up what one could ironically refer to here as the necessity for a 'constructivist moment' in our understanding of geopolitical rivalries.

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