

Valuing Transition/Transitioning Value: class struggle in Open Marxism and Political Marxism

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Abstract

The paper considers the origins of capitalism as a means to scrutinize critiques of Open Marxism (OM) and Political Marxism (PM), to bring these not-so-distant approaches more into dialogue and enhance the explanatory and critical capacity of both. First, OM has been criticized for its failure to provide a comprehensive account of the origins of capitalism and for analytically subordinating class struggle to the value-form. We argue these critiques render OM vulnerable to the charge that it implicitly supports a Commercialization Model, thus reproducing a self-fulfilling narrative about capitalist development, which fails to adequately account for the diverse, multiple origins of capitalism. Second, PM's historical approach focuses on specific case studies of transition, raising ontological questions about what constitutes a valid transition case. This has led to the approach being criticized for particularism or Eurocentrism. By problematizing the history/theory distinction and the issue of levels of analysis/abstraction implicit in critiques of OM and PM, and in Marxism more broadly, we argue that these critiques and binary tensions can be addressed through closer engagement between these two approaches. First, PM's account of the origins of capitalism, particularly its emphasis on the changing social relations of production, is compatible with OM and can rectify the lacuna within it. Second, OM's use of form-analysis permits the articulation of a link between origins at diverse scales, spaces and temporalities within a globally framed perspective. This joins the dots between PM's transition cases and permits a more robust account of the global origins of capitalism.

Introduction

The emergence of capitalist social relations has been a subject of recurrent debate and contestation within Marxist theorising and historiography. Its actors and drivers have been scrutinised from diverse starting points and yielded multiple, opposing interpretations as well as disagreements between different perspectives. How the origins/transition debate is understood influences the ways in which capitalist social relations are conceived and analysed in the here-and-now and provides intellectual, theoretical and political openings for the envisioning of future transitions as well as origins of novel forms of social relations. This is especially relevant in the context of debates regarding the emergence of 'technofeudalism' apparently displacing the capitalist mode of production and announcing the shift to something worse. Moreover, our discussion also opens space for rethinking the 'national/global' question in terms of 'states/value' rather than the traditional 'states/markets'. Therefore, we contend that there is a wider value in revisiting this debate for critical social theory and praxis as a whole, as well as the two strands of Marxist thought under scrutiny in this special issue in particular.

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Both the open Marxist (OM) and Political Marxist (PM) approaches, from their unique vantage points, levelled a critique of existing Marxist approaches in the 1970s, i.e. Dependency Theory, World Systems Theory, Althusserian structuralism, and commercialisation models for the transition to capitalism. While foregrounding the commonalities in line with our objective to facilitate a stronger engagement between these strands and the individual development of each approach in this article, we are mindful not to underemphasise their divergent analytical, methodological and political starting points in their assessment of capitalist social relations. Therefore we do not propose a reductive synthesis but call for an informed dialogue and engagement with an acknowledgment of the diversity, nuances and differences *between* as well as *within* these two strands of Marxist thought.

The open Marxist (OM) strand has engaged with the origins/transition debate to the extent that it helped its proponents to historically ground the critical assessment of the present dynamics and transformations within capitalism (Clarke, 1974:1) marked by defining developments such as the shift from Keynesianism to monetarism, the recomposition of the British state during the 1980s, economic management in the 1990s, and transformations in post-Soviet Russia. This analytical and empirical emphasis on the inner workings of present and everyday capitalist social relations in OM is one of the underlying reasons behind its limited engagement with the historical origins of these very relations.

While not reducible to it, Political Marxism (PM) is best known for its original approach to the transition to capitalism based on its influential, case-study method following Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood's pioneering work.

Both OM and PM have enjoyed their fair shares of criticism. OM, on the one hand, has been characterised as too abstract, reductionist, and ahistorical (e.g. Bieler et al 2010; Tsolakis 2010; Bruff 2009; Bieler & Morton 2003). Meanwhile, PM has been accused of idealism, Eurocentrism and particularism (e.g. Rioux 2013; Anievas and Nişancioğlu, 2015). Engaging critically with both approaches, we focus on the methodological limitations of PM's case-study approach, which will help explain, but not in our view justify, the charges of Eurocentrism levelled against it. At the same time, we 'transition' value by engaging with OM's accounts of the transition, and show that the limited engagement with this debate leaves it open to slipping into commercialisation assumptions about the development of capitalism. While highlighting the common starting points of both approaches, we unpack their strengths as well as shortcomings and call for the deepening of engagement between them to address their individual weaknesses and critics in the spirit of this special issue. Our key argument to bring these two traditions closer together is to emphasise how class struggle remains the common constitutive factor for understanding the transition to value as the key formal process defining the internal crisis-ridden character of capital accumulation.

Acknowledging value for PM has been previously put forward as a way of bridging the gap between theory and history through the focus on class struggles and alienation (Knafo, 2007). For us, this also entails the need to understand the manifold fetishised

appearances of capitalist social relations, such as the state form, as well as the contingent yet gradually formalised integration of other constitutive dimensions such as gender, sexuality, race, and ability. At the same time, this must not come at the expense of deriving an account of the origins of capitalism based on the formal globalisation or market-based expansion of the logic of value or of other factors. The origins and expansions of capitalism remain contingent processes in terms of how they are produced by specific class struggles key to PM's concept of social property relations, despite the ways in which value fetishises their outcome. In other words, OM and PM bring different but complementary methods and analytical contributions to the questions of origins and expansions, and working with both from the assumption of class struggle as a key driver means acknowledging how different methods are necessary to historical materialism.

First, the paper outlines some recent debates on Value-Form Theory (VT) to contextualise our focus on the theory-history relationship in the article. VT cannot be exclusively associated or conflated with OM. What concerns us, though, is their shared emphasis on the centrality of value for their analysis of capitalist social relations and the criticisms levelled against them as a result (Mau 2023). We conclude from this debate that its key contribution is to show that for some OM and PM scholars, class relations are the historical premise of the form-ing of value.

Second, we delve more directly into the OM scholarship and argue that while OM approaches are diverse, they have generally been reluctant to engage with the historical debate on the origins of capitalist society. We also highlight OM's limited theorising of class relations and class-formation processes given its focus on avoiding reification, particularism and periodisation.

Third, we outline PM's approach to the origins of capitalism and identify the particularist critiques of this account with specific emphasis on PM's case study method. This method is one of its key strengths in acknowledging the contingency of social relations and the need to delve into the specificity of analysis, usually countries or regions with administrative autonomy. This focus on PM's case-study approach allows us to highlight the question of why capitalist states have taken a 'national' form, which itself has provoked PM's seemingly more limited form of method. We argue that this is where a dialogue between OM and PM can be particularly fruitful in opening up a combined inquiry into why, and perhaps for how long still, global value needs a national state. However, we also argue that more emphasis could be placed on explaining and questioning the determination of these units. The 'national question' in the choice of units has led critics today to associate the internalism of the case studies with exceptionalism and methodological nationalism, and thus unfairly charge PM with Eurocentrism. Moreover, this method also leaves PM open to the critique that it diminishes the role of other constitutive factors, such as race and gender, if they are not integrated to the contingency of social relations, and thus class struggles.

Value-Form Theory and its Contemporary Discontents: class struggle and value

In this section we draw attention to a recent critique that has a particular resonance for VT's approach to the question of the origins of capitalism. This critique, especially

levelled against one of OM's key proponents, Werner Bonefeld, has relevance to and parallels with the critique levelled at OM regarding its limited engagement with a historical mode of enquiry and theorisation of class relations which we unpack further in the following section. Søren Mau (2023:181) characterises Marx's theory of value as explaining how 'individual acts of labour are socially validated and incorporated into a system of social production' in capitalist society. However, Mau (2023:195, 207) also offers a critique of VT as subordinating class relations to the impersonal domination of value. While specifically critiquing Postone for this error, Mau (ibid; 2018) argues that VT authors such as Reichelt (1975), Backhaus (1997), Jappe (2014) and Kurz (2012) are prone to this critique. To Mau, these authors see class relations as only a secondary feature of capitalist society, which they characterise by the supremacy of value. While suggesting that Bonefeld is less prone to this criticism, Mau (2023:206) argues that Bonefeld's account of social relations is abstract and vague.⁴ As such, for Mau (2023:206), Bonefeld only 'pays lip service to the connection between value and class, but in the end, his analysis first and foremost presents capitalism as a perverted system where the absurd movements of economic things dominate everyone.' Despite bringing class back into the value-form approach, Bonefeld is therefore as culpable.

For Mau, VT subordinates class domination to value. In this reading, VT treats value as transcending the historical limits of capitalist society as it is not fundamentally tethered to the historically specific social relations that constitute it. Implicitly then, capitalist society, given it is understood in terms of the impersonal domination of value rather than the personal domination of class, emerged as a consequence of the growing power of value.

Mau (2023:209) also raises the riddle over the causal relationship between value and the distinctive class relations of capitalism. Mau (2023:210), speaking hypothetically, argues one does not necessarily follow from the other. As such, if we prioritise value analytically above class relations then we cannot explain the emergence of the specific class relations of production in capitalist society. This leaves the door open to a range of other forms of unfree, bonded and unwaged labour as capable of producing value, which takes away the explanatory potential of VT to identify the main logic of capital accumulation. As we show later, Mau would be correct to argue that there is very little connection made by VT to the origins of capitalist society. It does not explicitly ask the question: which came first the chicken (value) or the egg (class relations)?

The implicit account of the emergence of capitalist society in VT therefore has similarities to the commercialisation model, as it treats value as a transhistorical concept divorced from social relations (Wood 2002; Brenner 1977).⁵ Placing the principal emphasis on value rather than firstly highlighting the social relations that make up value, this approach risks being vulnerable to Wood's (1981:73) critique of Cohen and the political economists: 'by abstracting the laws of capitalist production from their specific social

⁴ This criticism echoes Ellen Wood's (1981:74-75) critique of Simon Clarke's 'unitarian' approach to social relations as too expansive and nebulous. Wood takes issue that Clarke (1979) conflates the relations of production with class relations.

⁵ Mau (2023:125) provides a summary of the commercialisation model but misses out the key flaw Wood and Brenner note with this approach: that it already assumes the existence of what needs to be explained.

determinations', it renders the 'historical experience of capitalism' undifferentiated, pre-determined and universal.

However, a broader and deeper survey of, especially, OM advocates of value-form theory, would yield a different conclusion. Copley (2022:26), for example, following Postone, takes issue with the idea that value is a transhistorical phenomenon. Rather, in Copley's (2022:14) account of VT, historically specific social relations are at the very heart of understanding the emergence of value:

'To survive, people are thus forced onto the market to socialize with one another through money-mediated commodity exchange. However, this form of human socialization accidentally unleashes a powerful logic of economic competition, compelling the members of capitalist society to produce more goods and services in less time'

This view is also echoed by Best (2024:55-56), who notes how value originally emerges out of changing social relations and that this process differs from the reproduction of capital. Bonefeld (2023:122) is also crystal clear that capitalist accumulation, that is the domination of all social relations by value, is a historical consequence of the emergence of the doubly-free nature of the worker and the means of its reproduction.

'Accumulation by exploitation pre-supposes the existence of a class of free labourers as a dependent surplus value producer. The free labourer belongs to the concept of capital. The making of the free labourer "could not spring from its *action as capital*" because the free labourer is the presupposition of its emergence, and it is the continuous result of its reproduction.'

Similarly, for Holloway & Picciotto (1977:86), 'capital is a social relation of exploitation, and the accumulation of capital is the form taken by the class struggle to recreate, develop or destroy that relation'. The emphasis, then, for these scholars is on the historical emergence of specific class relations first, with the contingent emergence of value and accumulation as the (contradictory) reproduction of those relations (Best 2024:54).

In other words, there is a clear thread among OM - and PM (Knafo 2007) - scholars engaging with value-form theory, that value does not exist as a transhistorical phenomenon that impels primitive accumulation but rather the other way round. While this shows the analytical priorities of OM in how it broadly understands the emergence of capitalism, and therefore responds to Mau's critique, it does not address the perceived lacuna in VT/OM of sustained analysis of the emergence. In the next section, we will problematise this issue with a specific reference to OM.

Open Marxism and the *Origins* of Capitalism: a reluctant engagement

This section explores the extent to which OM scholars acknowledge the relevance and significance of a thorough investigation of capitalism's origins, especially the historically specific transformations of class relations in specific geographical and national nodes of capitalism. This further lays the ground for our central argument that class relations,

for OM and PM, underpin the value-form. We further explore the evidence for Mau's charges outlined earlier and establish the case for a deeper engagement between PM and OM while advocating for a non-reductionist and non-particularistic account of capitalist social relations.

OM emerged in the context of the crises and transformations of the 1970s and debates within the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE), yet by no means represented a monolithic, homogeneous position towards these issues. It targeted mainstream and orthodox Marxist accounts of state and social relations simultaneously, advocating for a return to Marx's own writings to ground a non-reductionist, non-teleological form-analysis instead (Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis, 1992).⁶

On this basis, we can identify five key objectives and motivations in OM's intellectual project which contributed to the development of its engagement with the transition/origins debate:

1. to uncover the genesis of the capitalist state form in the emergence of capitalist social relations;
2. to challenge the thing-like categories/concepts and law-like explanations of the dynamics of capitalism found in the orthodox accounts of Marxism and classical political economy by highlighting the primacy of social relations and class struggle;
3. to challenge the teleological, causalist determinism and functionalism of closed Marxisms (à la Hirsch, German state derivation theorists among others) in their explanation of the necessity of the emergence of capitalism (Bonefeld et. al, 1992: xii; Bonefeld, 2014; Clarke, 1991: 38, 91-92);
4. to challenge the periodisation of capitalism as related to the third objective;
5. to emphasise the global character and exposition of the capital relation since its inception (i.e. not a mere product of the recent wave of globalisation) (Holloway, 2002: 59).

As a result, OM scholars such as Bonefeld (2011; 2014; 2023, 2023a) and Holloway (2002: 55-56, 61, 88; 2010: 149-150, 168) engaged more substantially with Marx's account of primitive accumulation and its 'ever-repeated' (Holloway, 1991: 214-5) character instead of 'transition'. This was possibly due to the periodising tendency and teleological undertones detected in the latter conceptualisation which OM scholars criticised and avoided. While the value of a historical approach is acknowledged generally, and implicitly underpins OM's theoretical account (Holloway, 1991: 216), the unity between form-analysis and historical analysis remains central (Holloway and Picciotto, 1978 cited in Holloway, 1991: 214).⁷

⁶ For an overview of the evolution of CSE debates, Clarke (1980:1-7), and Radice (1980).

⁷ There is no singular or consistent OM approach in this regard. There are differences within OM in terms of the attention paid and the space dedicated to the concrete unfolding of the historical process of transition from feudalism to capitalism in specific locations and nodes of capitalism. Two prominent figures that engaged with the origins/transition debates are Heide Gerstenberger (1978; 1992) and Simon Clarke (1974; 1992). Clarke (1974: 15-16), for example, briefly delves into the historical origins of capitalism, stating that capitalism only developed 'with the introduction of factory production' and a 'new class'. The latter was composed of a 'new stratum of capitalist farmers' and a 'new stratum of capitalist producers' alongside the differentiation of peasantry; a process that occurred early and exceptionally in England (ibid: 15-20;

Several tensions can be identified in OM analyses of transitional state-forms, especially in their interaction with other Marxist assessments of the transition. A key point of contention is the relationship between form and function of the absolutist/mercantile states. While some authors (Gerstenberger, 1978, 1992) argue that the state functioned as a bourgeois state while retaining its non-bourgeois form during this period, others (Holloway and Picciotto, 1991: 112-113) challenge this view noting 'both form and functions represented the first moment of development of the capitalist state, imperfectly developed.' In an attempt to avert the paradox of non-capitalist states acting in capitalist ways, Holloway and Picciotto (*ibid.*) ultimately tend toward a commercialisation model as they argue that the spread of 'commodity relations' marked this early moment of the capitalist state form but it was 'compulsion' which dominated the social relations instead of equal exchange 'until commodity production... fully established' (see also Clarke, 2001: 77-78; on the constitutive role of compulsion, Clarke, 1974: 7). To what extent this explanation avoids the paradox above, however, is unclear and creates other serious vulnerabilities, not least the presentation of the capitalist state as perfectible and the adoption of a commercialisation approach to the transition.

Other OM authors refer to the origins of capitalist social relations but only peripherally, as part of the theoretical and historical background of contemporary issues and critical interventions to IR/IPE scholarship (e.g. Bonefeld, 1993: 46-47; Burnham, 1999; 2001; Kettell, 2004; Clarke, 2006; Donmez and Sutton, 2020). In these contributions the primary empirical focus is elsewhere, while the transition is touched upon briefly to delineate the impersonal, abstract character of capitalist social relations and mode of domination *vis-à-vis* feudalism when exploitation and domination retained a personal, direct character (e.g. Kettell, 2004: 20-21).

Nevertheless, an acknowledgment of PM's insights and a close engagement with the ideas of the key PM contributors can be found in the OM scholarship especially given their shared critique of World System Theory and the trade-centred explanations of the genesis of capitalism more broadly (Picciotto, 1991: 196; Burnham, 1994; 4-5; 1999: 38; 2001: 106-107).⁸ In doing so, OM seeks to strike a balance between the global and the national, and the abstract-theoretical and historical modes of explanation. For example, Burnham (1996: 102) notes:

'The capitalist state form is not derived from a 'domestic' analysis, to which 'external' determinants are then appended a posteriori. As I have indicated above, the form of state specific to capitalism is derived from Marx's analysis of the fundamental change in social relations wrought with the demise of feudalism. This level of analysis (as with most of Capital) is neither 'purely

48-49). Clarke subsequently explores the cases of France, Spain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia and India as examples of the 'failure of the new class to arise' which paved the way for new constellations of power between states and classes of the old order across the globe in the aftermath of 'the rise of capitalism in one country' (*ibid.*: 20-25; 27).

⁸ This shared critique entails the prioritisation of the sphere of circulation and trade in the explanation of the origins of capitalism at the expense of the sphere of production, and social property relations.

historical' nor 'purely abstract', but instead utilises the dialectical approach to approximate the concrete.'

There is also a persistent effort to put forward an account of the 'integrated circuit of capital' to challenge the simplistic accounts of 'accumulation and crisis, determined only by the course of class struggle in either production or circulation' which fail to see 'the interaction of the production of surplus value and its circulation' (Clarke 1980: 7). In Holloway's (2003: 166, 168) view there is also aversion to personalise class struggle as if it were between individuals placed in distinct clusters (capitalists vs. workers), with an equal degree of suspicion towards national clustering and categories such as 'Britain', 'Japan', 'Mexico'.

In short, OM does not have a homogenous or consistent treatment of the transition/origins. However, some OM scholars have engaged more substantially with these questions and articulated modes of assessment akin to the PM focus on investigating the *actual* historical changes in social relations of production to understand the origins of capitalism, to which we turn now. Yet, this acknowledgment and engagement in OM, while present, is not made explicitly or developed comprehensively, and remains peripheral.

Political Marxism and the *Transition to Capitalism*: the problems of conflation and case studies

This section presents the key contribution of PM regarding the transition, as well as the problem of conflation between method and description. This problem was raised by PM against its original opponents, and it remains an issue in the more recent critiques by scholars accusing PM of Eurocentrism. . The following and final sections, by further engaging with OM, will show how PM can clarify its methods and address these accusations.

According to key PM theorists, Brenner and Wood, the prevalent Marxist approaches in the 1970s were characterised by more structural and economically determinist methods for defining and historicising capitalism (Brenner, 1977; Wood, 1995). Brenner argued that most scholarship had failed to explain the reasons why Western and Eastern Europe followed different developmental paths, and what made capitalism a particularly new form of exploitation and expropriation. He further developed the specificities of English capitalist development, and argued that both economic historians and Marxists were failing to grasp the significance of the role of specific 'social property relations' for determining the transition to capitalism. If social property relations can be associated with relations of production, referring mostly to hierarchical or vertical class relations, Brenner uses his term to also emphasise horizontal class relations between owners and producers. Crucially, Brenner's work implied that the study of the origins of capitalism had to be broken down into specific cases of transition. This was in contrast to Marxists in the 1970s (e.g. Wallerstein 1974) who emphasised the history of capitalism as a totalising process that structured the world economy according to fundamental relations and categories of dependence.

In other words, in the dominant approaches, capitalism was historicised through a somewhat crude analytical framework of North-South - or core-periphery - dependency that was justified because it reflected a commercial narrative about the process of its global development. Thus, the method and units of analysis - categories of e.g. core and periphery - were determined by a snapshot of the social process under scrutiny in the 1970s. The definition of capitalism was determined by a narrative of historical development based on the expansion and subsumption of all other modes of production traced by the expansion of markets and merchants and the key structural relation of inequality they produced. This generated a 'causal indeterminacy' where all factors for explaining the emergence of capitalism were given equal value and weight and thus constituted a descriptive rather than explanatory framework (Lafrance and Post, 2019: 22). Moreover, in this framework, capitalism was (potentially) everywhere and discoverable whenever commercial activity was permitted to flourish.

Brenner, Wood, and subsequent PM scholars thus became the *bête noire* of Marxism because they went against this methodological conflation between process and analysis, in which the *explanans* and *explanandum* are indistinguishable. Historicising capitalism, by this method, was based on the descriptive process of its own historical consequences. This led Brenner, and especially Wood (2002), to accuse Marxists of being consequentialist historians, who understood the development of capitalism according to its outcome rather than understanding the specificities of its initial and most fully developed emergence in seventeenth century England.

Crucially, PM was interested in explaining capitalism as a form of social power, i.e. as an ensemble of social relations with various institutional manifestations such as political, economic, juridical, etc. rather than as an abstract economic logic (Lafrance and Post, 2019: 22). PM focused on identifying the transition to capitalism as a qualitative rather than quantitative process. Thus, it emphasised the need to focus on how capitalism was a historical rupture in social dynamics and change in social power, rather than merely a diffuse and gradual outgrowth of market exchange. In other words, capitalism should not be equated or conflated with the rise of mercantilism and commercial forms of absolute surplus value. This required explaining the specific English case and differentiating it from France, which initially represented the most important counterargument to the Brenner transition thesis.

If France was not capitalist, how could its revolution have been so influential to the rise of modern liberal institutions and to the spread of capitalism worldwide? This question takes us back to the problem of the state and state system raised previously by OM i.e. explaining how it fulfils both capitalist and non-capitalist functions. PM proposes a solution to this by arguing that France did not undergo a capitalist agrarian transition or industrial transition until late in the nineteenth century (Lafrance and Miller, 2024). Thus, the various absolutist European states of the eighteenth century can be understood as operating according to inter-dynastic geopolitics until Britain begins to shift this order after 1713 through its 'blue-water policy', consisting of a defensive continental approach and an offensive navalism overseas (Teschke, 2019). This shift shows the international social transformations that begin to shape European states and thus explains the emerging international legal order in the following century, both competing with and

reproducing Britain's capitalist/expansionist and power balancing approach, rather than having to explain the modern state abstractly as paradoxically capitalist/non-capitalist. This binary thinking is also problematised, though not comprehensively and satisfactorily addressed, by the OM scholarship as noted in the previous section. As the state form remains a difficult question for both PM and OM, we address this example further in the final section.

If Brenner and Wood disagreed on the case of the Netherlands (Brenner, 2000; Wood, 2002b), later PM scholars developed and applied the method so as to explore other cases of transition, with a special edited volume on 'case studies' (Lafrance and Post, 2019), including interventions looking at France, Japan, the USA, Catalonia, Canada, Turkey, Taiwan, and Brazil. Our focus in this article is on this particular method of expanding PM by accumulating case-studies of various national political entities, and on the ontological questions it raises about what constitutes a valid transition case. A priori, any case is valid to explore as a transition case, once it is acknowledged that the 'origin' case is England, and that following this 'original apparition, capitalism never emerged in the same way in other regions' (Lafrance and Post, 2019: 25). In fact, PM entails the necessity to understand the specific configuration of social transformations for each case under scrutiny, in terms of 'a qualitative conversion of class relations and of the legal and political institutions that make possible surplus appropriation' (Ibid.). Lafrance and Post (2019:343) present in detail the advantages of PM described above, but they fail to go any deeper into the method of choosing case-studies of 'different countries and regions', or the problems and limitations such a methodological choice entails.

Moreover, alongside this question of method, how can PM avoid the ongoing charges of particularism and Eurocentrism that have plagued it since its early debates with Dependency and World Systems Theorists? Although this debate has many waves and protagonists,⁹ it can be caricatured as the way in which PM essentialises the English case, and therefore rids the rest of the world of any agency in terms of capitalist - and by default anti-capitalist - development. PM is seen as guilty of several crimes: misrepresenting or falsifying the history of capitalism, reproducing a Western- or Anglo-centric form of knowledge production, and robbing Marxism of its revolutionary praxis by depriving non-Western, colonised or subaltern societies of historical agency.

It is important to acknowledge the serious questions of particularism, abstraction/ideal-type, and internalism posed by critics and encapsulated in the charge of Eurocentrism. Two decades after Wallerstein's (1996) famous intervention, Anievas and Nişancioğlu (2015) have perhaps developed the most influential critique of PM's Eurocentrism, followed by the influence of Banaji's (2020) concept of commercial capitalism and his critiques of PM (Banaji, 2018).¹⁰ The theory of Uneven and Combined Development, developed by Anievas and Nişancioğlu (2015), as well as Arrighi's (2002) Systemic Cycles of Accumulation approach and Wallerstein's (1974) World Systems theory remain powerful alternatives today that emphasise a *longue-durée* explanation and a focus on the commercial expansion of capitalism. Anievas and Nişancioğlu (2015) add to this

⁹ See Paikin and Salour (forthcoming) for a review and intellectual history of these debates.

¹⁰ See also Allinson (2012), Rioux (2013), Tansel (2015)

charge the issues of using an abstract or ideal-type definition of capitalism and of using an internalist method of analysis, which according to them leads to Anglo- or Eurocentrism.

A similar critique is raised by Rioux (2013:122), for whom PM has at its heart a methodological problem due to a ‘structuralist and ahistorical definition of capitalism’. He argues PM separates the economic and political (e.g. distinguishing between economic and extra-economic coercion), provides an ideal-type vision of capitalism that creates serious problems for incorporating non-waged forms of labour in contemporary capitalism (e.g. explaining how/why slavery still exists), and that it also creates a deterministic understanding of capitalist development ‘within’ capitalism (e.g. Brenner as a historical rather than transhistorical neo-Smithian).

We cannot here do justice to all these debates, but we do take up Rioux’s claim that there is a methodological issue at stake.¹¹ We focus on an aspect of PM that critics have not dwelt on i.e. the question of the case-study method, and specifically how most of the existing case-studies have been determined by countries, delimited by the borders of fixed political entities, usually nations or states, e.g. England, France, the Netherlands, etc. However, we also ask whether this problem is not more deeply linked to a ‘national question’.¹² We show below, by engaging with OM and form analysis, how this question can open and move forward the debate on PM and OM’s methods more constructively.

OM and PM: form analysis and class struggles

Against the background of the strengths and weaknesses assessed in the previous sections, and the acknowledgment of the importance of class relations for underpinning value by at least some OM and PM scholars, our aim is to explore the areas where the two strands could interact with each other more closely and support their own parallel development to address their critiques effectively. We argue that the conversation between these approaches can be deepened by problematizing the history/theory binary and the issue of levels of analysis/abstraction implicit in critiques of OM and PM, and in Marxism more broadly. We show below how these critiques and tensions can be addressed in terms of the need for separate but complementary methods of analysis, the integration of a broader range of social factors into the contingent emergence of capitalism, and the acknowledgement of fetishisation and form-analysis as a potential path towards better explaining the ‘national/global’ and ‘state/value’ conundrum.

Despite the diversity and multiplicity of perspectives within OM, there is a shared emphasis on providing an *integrated* understanding of production and circulation to avoid letting one sphere analytically overwhelm the other. There is also a strong emphasis on not losing sight of the global scale (i.e. the disciplining role of the ‘world market’) while investigating national or domestic dynamics (i.e. the national processing of global class relations). On the one hand, these points of emphasis could be considered as strengths especially with respect to enriching PM. Yet they could equally be interpreted as attempts to explain away the complex processes of concrete historical

¹¹ For PM responses to the charges of Eurocentrism, see Wood (2001) and Duzgun (2018, 2020)

¹² We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this insight.

transformations through an underdeveloped conception of class (and its complex entanglements with gender, sexuality, race and racialisation, indigeneity; colonialism, borders and migration, ability, spatial unevenness) that is reduced to relations of production, as several critics have pointed out (Wood, 1981; Bieler et. al. 2010; Bruff, 2009; Tsolakis, 2010; Mau, 2021; 2023).¹³

Drawing on the rich insights of PM can help OM respond to its critics without endangering its unified understanding of the circuit of capital to challenge structuralist, teleological accounts. Grounding the transition/origins within a more in-depth history of concrete transformations in social property relations would not contradict the OM emphasis on the continuously reproduced and contested imposition of the capital relation and value-form but complement it. By reformulating the concept of social property relations, OM can also gain from a less rigid conceptualisation of class.

In turn, we argue that what is missing in PM's case-study method is an integration of form-analysis, which is provided by OM, and which we develop below. To summarise the above discussion, the method (or relation between theory and history) put forward by PM amounts to analytically separating the analysis of the origins of capitalism from its ontological or empirical/descriptive unfolding and outcome, epitomised by its global expansion. This was in response to Brenner and Wood's critique of structural Marxists for conflating method and description. The drawback of this separation is that PM creates a levels-of-analysis problem for Marxism, and leaves itself vulnerable to charges of particularism, abstraction, and internalism. These charges often assume or take as an ontological given - i.e. they ontologise - the methodological choice of a case-study approach. Thus they derive from the method an argument about the causal development and necessary determinants/qualities of capitalism, as if the case-study determined the ideal type. In other words, critics assume PM is particularist, abstract, or internalist, and thereby essentialises and ahistorically idealises the English case because it uses a method which uses some of these techniques. In other words, the original problem of conflation that PM was responding to reemerges today by critics who conflate PM's analytical and theoretical approach with its broader empirical description/process (history). The gap between PM and its opponents is widened rather than solved by PM's case-study method, or more exactly, by the misunderstanding of its aims and limitations.

This misunderstanding is that PM separates the case-study method i.e. its techniques of internalism, abstraction and particularism, from the way it describes and understands the global development and expansion of capitalism. Using a case study method to capture the origins of capitalism does not imply for PM that capitalism thereafter developed only in independent silos in specific countries or regions, leading to e.g.

¹³ For the rare OM contributions that explore the intersections above, see, for example, Holloway, 2010; Dinerstein and Pitts, 2018; Dinerstein, 2020; 2024. For further problematisation of the Western-centric and state-centric understandings of capitalist (under)development and the role of 'capitalist imperialism' with specific reference to the diverse African trajectories of origins/transition in the pre- and post-colonial era, Rodney (2018 [1972]), and Robinson et. al (1983). For recent contributions aiming to bridge the gap in relation to the abstractive powers of race and money in the enhancement of capitalist discipline, Alami and Guermond, 2023; Alami, 2024.

English exceptionalism and Eurocentrism. Using a case-study method is an exercise in abstraction that should not be ‘ontologised’ and has only a limited methodological use. One should not draw narrow and conflated ontological conclusions from it about its object of study, i.e. capitalism. In fact, for PM, as seen previously, such conflation leads to consequentialism, i.e. overemphasising the outcome of a social process, rather than its origins. Since Marxism has tended to have a consequentialist, structural, and expansion-driven account of the history of capitalism, merging the main outcomes and determinants of capitalism with the method used to analyse its history increases the risks of Marxists drawing the wrong ontological conclusions from PM. Our first concluding argument is thus that PM needs to do the additional work of explaining how to avoid these conclusions and to acknowledge them as potential drawbacks and limitations of its method.

One way to avoid these conclusions, is to disentangle historically why the case-study method has been necessarily driven by the nation-state form. First, why is it that capitalist states have taken overwhelmingly ‘national’ form even though the operations of value are global? Taking a case-study method approach should not stop PM from asking that question and from pushing back against the internal/external analytical binary that the state-form problematically produces. Our proposed dialogue here between OM and PM enables us to think more dialectically about the ‘national/global’ and the ‘states/value’ conundrums. By replacing the classic ‘states/markets’ binary with ‘states/value’ we propose to go beyond commercialisation narratives and focus instead on value as the way in which capitalist social relations, through various class struggles, transforms production (and not just circulation). Thus, the problem of the apparent contradiction between the national and the global, or the fetishism of the national state form, is mediated by changes in production rather than by the more general and ahistorical notion of the market. Second, why is it that the expansion of capitalism has been uneven and has often proceeded on a ‘national’ or ‘regional’ basis? Again, the case-study method does not assume an answer to this question in the abstract, i.e. isolating specific case-studies does not mean that historical development occurs according to this siloed or sliced process. It only means that it is possible and necessary to isolate certain social processes to better understand origins as well as expansion, but that origins and expansion are not the same thing and therefore may require different analytical methods and processes.¹⁴

Another part of this additional work is for PM to explain how it can move from abstracting ‘countries and regions’ as analytical frameworks to better incorporating other agents, ideas, and institutions such as gender, race, non-waged forms of labour, sexuality, ability, and other politics and geographical communities as factors, standpoints and phenomena that intersect in complex ways with the emergence of capitalism. For example, Virdee (2023: 106) argues that to capture ‘how important racism is’ to this emergence, we need to be ‘more vigilant to the convoluted and relational ways in which the racisms of the European interior as well as those of its exterior helped produce the hegemonic and racialised structures, inequalities and identifications that we live with today’. In other words, the problem is not the case-study method itself, or its internalism,

¹⁴ Again, thank you to one of our anonymous reviewers for this comment.

but whether and how diverse factors are included within it. These factors contribute to the fetishisation of capitalist society, and are more integral to the form-analysis method than to the case-study method if our goal is to understand capitalism as a whole (Holloway 2002: 55-56). Thus, PM must be able to integrate form-analysis explicitly to capture these factors in a dialectical fashion while avoiding their homogenisation.

In sum, although PM still needs to do more work on how it understands the global processes of expansion and development of capitalism, perhaps by turning to 'Geopolitical PM' as some argue (von Pfaler and Teschke, 2024), the key point here to remind its critics is that this process is somewhat different to that of its origins, and thus requires a different analytical approach. Moreover, the exploration of fetishisation and the use of form-analysis can complement PM so as to account for other factors in the origins and expansion of capitalism, and avoid ongoing charges of essentialism, particularism and Eurocentrism.

In this vein, we propose to bring in form-analysis as developed by OM. Holloway and Picciotto (1977:77-85) emphasise the value of form-analysis in overcoming the distinction between the political and economic in understanding the capitalist state. Form-analysis allows us to understand capitalism as whole due to the fantastical and fetishized nature of capitalist society. However, they also stress a requirement of form-analysis is that it rest on historical research (ibid: 86). This requirement emanates from the open-ended nature of class struggle. The alienated and contradictory nature of capitalist society shows the value of form-analysis: capitalist society is fantastical, appearing other than it is. This appearance obscures and is itself only understandable through a materialist understanding of fundamental social relations. Form-analysis therefore allows us to understand this fantastical appearance not as a superstructure but rather as a manifestation of those contradictory, alienated relations.

Capitalist social relations act on living human beings as if they exist separately from them, and from society. Following Bonefeld (2023:8), form-analysis enables a critique of the mere appearance of the social relations between living people that make up society as a whole. The contradictory and near-incomprehensible behaviour of human beings can only be explained with reference to those historically specific social relations. Form-analysis therefore permits us to see how those social relations assume fantastical and fetishized appearances and, vice versa, to see how those social forms have social relations that constitute them.

As discussed above, PM's method creates a levels-of-analysis problem that needs addressing to avoid the conflation between method and description at the core of the charge of Eurocentrism. Form-analysis can help with this problem by, first, providing a useful theoretical context for PM's analysis of the rise of the capitalist state through Britain's development of a specific 'grand strategy' (Teschke, 2019). Placed in this context, the state, as a form of social relations, can be seen as a means of begetting capitalist society on a fetishised geopolitical scale. Second, it highlights the ways in which capitalism's origins should not be necessarily conflated with its global expansion but can instead focus on contingent class struggles that incorporate other factors producing hierarchies or forms of exploitation and oppression.

First, on the conceptualisation of the capitalist state, Marxists have struggled to agree and to go beyond useful, but reductive, analyses of the internal and external dimensions of the state (e.g. Barker 1978). What PM brings to this question, through for example Teschke's (2019) analysis of Britain's role in shaping the international order post-1713, is historically detailed and specific to the role of key actors and institutions such as diplomats and parliamentary debates. To make sense of this more theoretically, it is possible to take form-analysis and to argue that, rather than seeing the international as a mere secondary effect of domestic politics, it constitutes a fetishised process of ordering that makes contradictory or competing systems or practices seemingly logical and natural.

For example, European states viciously competed militarily, economically, and politically throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries over European and overseas territory, following Britain's 'offensive navalism' (Teschke, 2019). Yet this needs to be understood simultaneously with how they formed alliances and collaborated on how to organise the running of European affairs through a British-led balance of power mechanism over the continent. The various conferences and congresses in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that established the international legal order and international society of states, as the bedrock of the liberal global order, constitute the fantastical form of the capitalist state, kept dominant by the illusion of sovereign equality between legal subjects of the international system (Miéville, 2005; Parfitt, 2019; Tzouvala, 2020). PM's case study approach to explaining the key shifts and social transformations in the international order is fundamental, but it requires another step to explain the way in which states form these illusory narratives about themselves and integrate specific institutions and practices.

Second, on the application of form-analysis to the methodological problem of conflation, the expansion of capitalism is seen by commercialisation models as a determined and homogeneous wave that subsumes all on its path through the development of commerce and colonialism, and it is in many ways fantastical or 'other than it is'. Similarly, studying the origins of capitalism by case-study is also fantastical and 'other than it is' because it constitutes a methodological abstraction, a necessary isolation of factors and variables to understand the importance of specific social relations and their transformative impact. In other words, form-analysis is a method of analysis that enables us to interrogate the ontological and methodological dimensions of theory. It reminds us that Marxism offers a dialectical method in which our ontological and epistemological tools are not fixed but dependent on changes in material conditions of knowledge.

Specifically, the Brenner debate and subsequent analyses of the emergence of capitalism in different contexts have put forward the need for a more layered and granular understanding of how various class struggles, as well as other agents, ideas, and institutions concretely shape the development of capitalism as social power, or social form (Robinson et. al. 1983). Marxism cannot only rely on seeing capitalism as a grand homogeneous and totalising process. This only goes so far. Rather, we must be sensitive to the open character of class struggle and the importance of historical

analysis. The PM analysis of England and other cases should not be treated as exclusive or ideal-typical but rather as the moment where and when transformed class relations are established and unleash value. In other words, PM's emphasis on class struggle, shared with OM, as a means of understanding the origins of capitalism explains what made value dominate society. Simultaneously, PM cannot remain stuck in its case-study method and needs to better acknowledge its limitations and the potential complementarity of other methods such as form-analysis, as we have tried to show here.

Conclusion

In this article we revisited the origins of/transition to capitalism debate in Marxist theorising with specific reference to OM and PM. Our main aim was to review the commonalities and differences between the approaches with a particular emphasis on their engagement with and prioritisation of theoretical and historical modes of enquiry respectively.

The article acknowledged the criticisms levelled at both approaches in the existing literature (excessive abstraction, reductionism, and ahistoricism in OM; internalism, eurocentrism and particularism in PM). We specifically focused on two main issues in this respect. First, OM's limited engagement with the historical origins/transition debate due to its preoccupation with the contemporary state and capitalist social relations. Second, the problems that PM's case-study approach to the exploration of transition dynamics produces.

We also acknowledged the perspectives' common strengths (focus on class struggle) and individual contributions (form-analytical theorising and grounded historical enquiry, respectively) and noted that these shared elements require stronger recognition in the existing scholarly debates. We argued that these strengths, if embedded in a spirit of constructive dialogue and engagement, have the potential to address the approaches' individual shortcomings and critics while re-establishing the theory-history and national-global balance.

On the one hand, OM's relatively limited (though not entirely absent) attention to the historical transformations that led to the emergence of capitalism in particular geographical nodes could be complemented by PM's case-study method to ground its form-analytical theorising more concretely. On the other hand, the risks of reification and the ontologising tendency in PM's case study method could be checked and averted by drawing on OM's form-analytical theorising.

This mutual engagement and learning are grounded in a shared understanding of the constitutive role of class struggle in both approaches to demonstrate the ways in which value came to dominate social relations. Therefore, if PM allows us to 'transition' value, but creates a levels-of-analysis problem, OM can respond by valuing transition and providing a dialectical framework that allows for other social factors and forms of power to be layered through - or across - the transitional level of analysis.

Future collaborative research between OM and PM scholars in this spirit could prove fruitful to finetune each approach's explanatory power and critique of capitalist social relations. For example, pushing the question of the 'national question' through the binary of 'states/value' can help to see the specific geopolitical contexts of the fetishisation of the state form. This exercise also has a much broader appeal and purpose, as we noted in our introduction, of contributing to broader Marxist theoretical efforts in grasping the dynamics and pre-conditions of possible future transitions as well as the emergence of novel forms of social relations with the potential to challenge the capitalist status quo. We hope future intellectual conversations between the two approaches and their proponents unfold in this spirit and direction.

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