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Historical Materialism and the Postcolonial Challenge to IRⁱ

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Section 54: Histories and Sociologies of IR and the Postcolonial Challenge

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Morten Ougaard

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Introduction

This paper addresses one of the “exemplary questions” listed by the panel conveners, namely: “How does the postcolonial perspective enable/disable the rethinking of theories and concepts considered central to critical IR?” This requires an explication of how I see the several parts of the exemplary question. I will do this in reverse order, beginning with critical IR.

Firstly, one of the central issues facing critical (and indeed all) IR today, is the question of analysing and assessing the role of the so-called ‘emerging economies’ in global affairs. Given the rise and growing influence of these powers, understanding the societal roots of their foreign policies and their engagement with global governance is an increasingly important task for IR scholars. The purpose of the following is to present some concepts and theories that can contribute to this.

Secondly, I understand ‘critical IR’ as a broad church that shares the concern articulated decades ago by Susan Strange when she had ‘reached the final parting of the ways from the discipline of international relations’. Strange declared that she ‘can no longer profess a special concern with international politics if that is defined as a study different from other kinds of politics and which takes the state as the unit of analysis, and the international society of states as the main problematic’ (Strange 1996: xv). I consider Historical Materialism (HM) as one strand within this broad church and, importantly, I understand HM not as a fixed body of theory, but rather as a *research program*. This concept was introduced by Imre Lakatos (Lakatos 1978), but my use of it is not necessarily restricted to or identical with his. I understand a research program as a set of interconnected concepts and presuppositions that define the object for inquiry and the questions for research, along with some causal hypotheses and explanatory principles, all of which can operate at different levels of abstraction and be subject to further specification and modification and thus is, essentially, an open-ended agenda for research.

Thirdly, my understanding of the postcolonial challenge and the postcolonial perspective needs a comment because I must confess a limited knowledge of the literature on postcolonialism. It is largely based on Said’s *Orientalism* (1979), Dirlik’s critique (Dirlik 1994), Young’s historical introduction

(Young 2001), Chibber's critique of subaltern studies, a particular strand of postcolonial theory, (Chibber 2013), and the debate spurred by this work (Warren 2017; Hung 2014).¹ These admittedly few works have made me doubt whether there is *one* postcolonial perspective and *one* postcolonial challenge. Still, in spite of what seems to be a variety or more or less mutually compatible postcolonial perspectives one theme seems to run through many of them, namely the emphasis on *difference* and the questioning of the adequacy of 'western concepts' for understanding how postcolonial societies are different from the 'West' and from each other, along with a focus on the sustained inequalities between the former colonies and colonial powers. Thus, while I cannot follow the rejection of any and all kinds of universalism found in some strands of postcolonialism, I find those themes both relevant and important and this is one of the key motivators for my interest in the postcolonial challenge.

This take on the postcolonial challenge intersects with discussions, running for some years now, about 'Eurocentrism' in IR, as represented e.g. by Bilgin (Bilgin 2008, 5-23), Hobson (Hobson 2012), Buzan and Lawson's *The Global Transformation* (Buzan and Lawson 2015) and several contributions in the symposium this work in *International Theory* 8 (3), 2016,, and Andrew Phillips (Phillips 2016, 62-77). I will also draw on contributions to this debate in what follows.

Fourthly, there seems to be agreement that postcolonialism is particularly developed in literary and cultural studies and less so in the social sciences, especially social sciences of a political economy bent. And indeed, some post-colonial scholars seem to hold that Western social science including Marxism is incompatible with postcolonial perspectives. Robert Young, on the other hand, finds that postcolonialism, although focusing on personal experiences, culture and identity, is incorporating 'the legacy of the syncretic traditions of Marxism that developed outside the west' (Young 2001: 10). This indicates precisely one of my concerns in this paper, namely that non-western scholarship and non-western experiences have contributed significantly to IR theory in ways that are relevant for IR.

In pursuing this agenda I find Bilgin's suggestion useful, namely that thinking past "western ideas" in IR requires attention both to how such ideas have been influenced by the non-west, and conversely how "non-western ideas" have been influenced by the west (Bilgin 2008). This dialectic between 'western' and 'non-western' ideas is also, I will argue, pertinent for several IR relevant themes in IR and I will discuss examples of this in the paper.

¹ But perhaps, to be clear about 'where I come from' I should mention that years before the postcolonial became an 'ism' I was much interested in the postcolonial world academically (e.g. Ougaard 1983, 385-404; Ougaard 1984, 61-75, and also reflected in the references in this paper) and politically in solidarity movements.

Specifically I will focus on the concepts of social formation and modes of production as they have been developed theoretically and applied in historical research by Louis Althusser and Samir Amin, arguing inter alia that Amin's contribution is relevant for a global and non-Eurocentric ontology in IR and that the concepts are relevant for contemporary issues although there still are unfinished business in this regard.

Finally a question of terminology. Several typologies are on offer: developed/developing, first world/third world, advanced/emerging/least developed, centre/periphery, metropole/satellite, global South/global North, West/Non-West. Robert Young suggested 'tricontinentalism' as an alternative to postcolonialism, partly to avoid negative connotations associated with other labels, partly to locate postcolonialism geographically in the three continents united by opposition to imperialism (Young 2001: 4-5). One advantage of 'tricontinentalism' in my context is that it better includes societies that have not been formally colonized such as Turkey, Iran, Thailand, and China. Still, I find the word a bit awkward and prefer to refer to *peripheral and post-colonial societies (PPC societies)* for reasons made clear in the following.

The double holism

There is no need here to recount the many contributions to the study of imperialism, colonialism, post-colonial societies found in Historical Materialism. Young's study gives an extensive account of this (Young 2001) and labels such as dependencia theory, theories of imperialism and neo-imperialism, world-systems analysis, neo-Gramscian world order theory, and 'uneven and combined development' are fairly well known. Several themes in this literature are, I will argue, of enduring theoretical relevance for contemporary IR. Of particular importance is a theme that I label the double holism which is shared by many but not all of these strands and which is the combination of two distinct holisms.

The first of these is the spatial or geographical holism, having a world encompassing or global perspective and taking human society as whole as the object for study or at least as an underlying frame of reference. This holism is, in one restricted sense, shared with IR which, at least in principle, includes all the world's states on its agenda and thereby has an inherently global perspective. But the second holism clearly differentiates HM from state-centric theories of 'the international', because this holism is about a holistic view of society that includes economy, politics and cultural and idea-

tional factors. It is what is also known as the totality perspective on society. And it is the insistence on this second holism that gives the first holism its distinctive character in historical materialism.

In the next sections I will discuss, in reverse order, two major contributions to this double holism. First the related concepts of social formation and the articulation of modes of production as developed at the level of abstract theory by Louis Althusser, and second Samir Amin's application and further development of these concepts for the global context.

Modes of production and social formations

The interlinked notions of *articulation of the modes of production* and the *social formation* bring the diversity of societies to the centre of attention, thus addressing one of the key elements in the post-colonial challenge. This is evident from Althusser's brief introduction:

[The concept of] 'social formation' designates every 'concrete society' that has historical existence and is *individualized*, so that it is distinct from other societies contemporaneous with it, and is also distinct from its own past, by virtue of the mode of production dominant in it.

[...]

Every concrete social formation is based on a *dominant* mode of production. The immediate implication is that, in every social formation, there exists more than one mode of production: at least two and often many more. One of the modes of production in this set is described as *dominant*, the others as dominated. The dominated modes are those surviving from the old social formation's past or the one that may be emerging in its present (Althusser 2014: 19).

It is important to stress that in research and debates on this theme the word *articulation* has become the preferred term (see the survey of positions in Wolpe 1980b and the contributions in Wolpe 1980a). This underscores that different modes of production not merely co-exist side by side in a society, as theories of a 'dual economy' would have it. Rather they are linked to each other in combinations that vary between countries and over time, and where they are more or less modified or changed by this articulation. As Poulantzas (another writer whose relevance for IR seems little appreciated (Bruff 2012)), phrased it: 'in every social formation, we find the dominance of one mode of production, which produces *complex effects of dissolution and conservation* on the other modes of

production)' (Poulantzas 1978: 22, emphasis added). There is a striking parallel to the argument recently forwarded by Andrew Phillips, namely that imperialism leads not to the homogenization of social forms, but rather to the rise of '*hybrid hierarchies*' (Phillips 2016, 62-77: 67). More on Phillips later.

The articulated co-existence of several modes of production is a characteristic of *all* societies; in Europe, for instance, there are both legacies of feudalism and petty commodity production articulated with and dominated by capitalism. But this feature is particularly important in PPC societies where capitalism generally was introduced from the outside and led to hybridization rather than homogenization, i.e. pre-capitalist forms being partly dissolved and partly preserved when articulated with capitalism.

The prevalence of pre-capitalist modes of production, in all their variegated forms of articulation with and subordination to capitalism, is however, not the only feature that differentiates PPC societies from the centre. Of equal importance is that capitalism was introduced from the outside wherefore the periphery is characterized by 'dual track' accumulation processes (Sonntag 1973), where the externally directed processes are dominant in relation to internal dynamics. This argument has in various ways been developed in the dependencia tradition and elsewhere (e.g. Cardoso and Faletto 1979). In Samir Amin's version, the decisive factor is that peripheral societies lack the dynamic linkages between the production of the means of production and the production of consumer goods, hence being prevented by their dependency to engage in self-centred development (see e.g. Amin 1976: 287-288).

The twin concepts of social formation and articulated modes of production, in other words, define a program for analysing societies, both their uniqueness and their similarities, acknowledging their internal dynamics as well as the importance of their insertion in the larger international context. This analytic is based on core elements of HM such as the relations between producers, the means of production, and the control over the economic surplus. But it is not only a program for studying economic aspects of society. As argued by Althusser (and parallel arguments are undoubtedly found elsewhere), the relations of production presuppose political and ideological relations as preconditions for their reproduction, and contrary to economic determinism, these aspects of society have a relative autonomy and can be decisive in some modes of production (Althusser 2014). Thus the HM program of studying social formations also calls for an analysis of the articulation of different political power relations, forms of authority, and ideational configurations. Which is not to say that HM theo-

ry is equally well developed in all of these realms – indeed I will argue later that some of these, of relevance for IR, are undertheorized in HM.

The abstract model of society and West – non-West exchanges

Let me dwell more on the concept of the social formation, setting it in the context of the dialectic between Western and non-Western ideas. In summary the concept points to society as a complex dynamic totality, reproduced and transformed by human agency in conflictual processes marked by several contradictions. To expound a bit, the key elements are first the ‘totality’ or holistic view of society, i.e. the social formation as an interconnected whole. Secondly, this whole is ‘always already structured,’ meaning that at any point in time it is the result of previous developments that have produced the social relations that mark the present. Thirdly, this ongoing historical process is the result of the ongoing dialectic between structure and agency – agency being in Althusser always referred to/ reduced to class struggle, but it is open to debate whether this means a narrowing of the concept of agency or an expansion of the notion of ‘class struggle’. After all, in the highly politicised 1970s everything was considered to be political and all human practices had a bearing on class struggle.

Fourthly, the social whole can be divided analytically into the economic, political and ideational levels (here I rephrase Althusser: he never spoke of the level of ideas, always ideology), and these levels have relative autonomy. This is a much debated proposition which in my understanding implies a double demarcation: against full determinism, i.e. that the economy (or ideas for that matter) fully determines the other levels, and against full autonomy, e.g. for instance that the realm of ideas is fully independent of the realms of economy and politics. Thus the notion of relative autonomy simply designates a field of possible variation between two rejected ontologies. The fifth element is that due to the articulation of modes of production and the relative autonomy of the levels a social formation is always complex and marked by several contradictions, not only the one defined by the dominant mode of production, e.g. capital and labour. Human agency, the economic, political and ideational practices that reproduce and/or transform society, is always located in such a context, and in any concrete situation there will always be several contradictions and political lines of conflict at play. Finally, associated with this is the central proposition that societal development is always uneven and never a linear unfolding of a particular logic or principle.

Althusser developed this view in an effort to reformulate the 'materialist dialectic' in opposition to Hegel's idealism and essentialism on one side, and to the mechanical and economic schemata dogmatized by Soviet communism and its followers on the other (Althusser 2005 (1965), 161-218). But it is also interesting to see how this theoretical contribution is situated in the dialectic between western and non-western ideas, i.e. to what extent had non-western ideas and experiences informed this reformulation of 'the materialist dialectic'. And the answer is quite a lot.

One thing is that Althusser's own colonial background – he was born in French Algeria – arguably had influenced his thinking (Young 2001: 416), another is the more direct intellectual inspiration from non-western experiences. Marxist studies of so-called primitive societies, especially by the anthropologists Emmanuel Terray (Terray 1970 (1969)) and Maurice Godelier influenced his thoughts on what a society is and how it can be analysed.

But even more important was the inspiration from Mao Tse-Tung's essay 'On Contradiction' (Mao Tse-Tung 1967 (1937), 'an important text' according to Althusser (Althusser 2005 (1965): 182) that introduced 'very remarkable concepts' (Althusser 2005 (1965): 194). This inspiration from Mao is amply documented in Gregory Elliot's sympathetic *and* critical discussion of Althusser (Elliott 1987).

Mao's essay, in turn, was a creative reformulation of the Marxist dialectic, as codified dogmatically by the communist parties, by a mind schooled in Asian philosophy. It is full of references to Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, but it is also enlivened by bits of Chinese philosophy and proverbs, used to amplify and explain quotes from the Europeans.² More importantly, however, in style and substance it is entirely different from anything written by Western Marxists, and Mao's insistence on the existence of several contradictions, his distinction between primary and secondary contradictions, and the concept of the primary aspect of the contradiction were original contributions that strongly informed Althusser's thinking. In opposition to a conception of the materialist dialectic as the unfolding of one particular contradiction (between capital and labour), Althusser developed a dialectic that put the existence of several contradictions and their interplay at the centre of attention and at the same time insisted on the concrete analysis of concrete situations in their individuality. Mao's text on contradictions clearly was a major source of inspiration for this.

Going further back in intellectual history it is interesting to note that Chinese philosophy with its emphasis on reason and rationality had been an important source of inspiration for the European en-

² Perhaps I should note that I disagree with those who consider Mao's early texts a 'no go' because of his responsibility for grave policy errors and atrocities in post-revolution China.

lightenment (Hobson 2004: 194-201), and Marxism is one intellectual current that developed from the enlightenment. Thus in a larger perspective we can situate Althusser's elaboration of the concept of the social formation in a world historical process of intellectual exchange, translation, and transformation, going from Asia to Europe, back to Asia, and then back to Europe again.

The concept of the social formation is also central in Samir Amin's work and the contributions to HM theory by this self-described 'Afro-Asian observer' (Amin 2011: 10) is another example of productive engagements between western and non-western ideas, perspectives and experiences.

Samir Amin's contributions

Amin was born in Egypt and educated in France. His career has spanned employment in government agencies in Egypt and Mali, the UN's Institut Africain de Développement Économique et de Planification (IDEP) in Dakar, Senegal, where he served as director for a decade. He also has held professorships in France and Senegal, and is now director of the NGO *Forum du Tiers Monde* in Dakar.

Through this career he has published, along with studies of the economies of countries in West Africa and the Arab world, studies in Marxist economic theory and studies of world history with an emphasis on non-European social formations.

The stage theory and the tributary mode

Some of the suggestions and conclusions in this work are, in my judgement, debatable, but I do find some of his theoretical innovations convincing and of enduring relevance for HM studies of international relations.

Amin has maintained throughout his work that Marx's work remains the best starting point for social science but has also insisted that this is only a beginning. As evident also from his own account of his intellectual development in (Amin 2011: 1-11), he sees historical materialism is an unfinished project, a perspective that is close to the idea of HM as a research program informing this paper.

Thus modes of production and social formation are central for Amin and it is worth pointing out that in his first major contribution he referenced both the Marxist anthropologists that had influenced Althusser, as well as Althusser (Amin 1976: 387-388). But Amin rejected the stage theory of history commonly associated with Marxism that posited a general movement from primitive communism through slave society and feudalism to capitalism, and then to socialism. This theory can be traced back to early works of Marx and Engels although some of their writings are much more nuanced. But

it became canonized and dogmatized in communist parties and has been echoed in many texts in historical materialism, also, for instance by Althusser (2014: 19) and Poulantzas (1978: 22). Samir Amin rejected this theory as Eurocentric and plainly wrong, and developed a more convincing but equally parsimonious alternative.

There are several elements in Amin's alternative. He maintained the first stage but relabelled it 'communitarian' and described this as a 'family' of different social formations that shared the common feature of the absence of differentiated political and ideational institutions. For the next stage in history Amin introduced a new concept: the *tributary mode of production* along with social formations dominated by this mode. The central feature is that a centralized political structure extracts economic surplus from a large agrarian area. Historically this mode of production also has existed in multiple forms but they all shared this defining characteristic. This 'family of tributary formations' includes the ancient civilizations in the Middle East, South Asia, China and pre-Columbian America, and, Amin points out, in a long term perspective these have been the most successful in human history in terms of duration – having lasted in some cases for millennia. European feudalism, in this perspective, is a special case of the tributary formation, indeed a marginal one developed in the periphery of the highly successful Middle Eastern and Asian cases. In the same manner the slave-owning formations of Greek and Roman antiquity were special cases, 'situated on the borders of the tributary formations' (16).

A third element in Amin's alternative is to bring *long-distance trade* between social formations into the framework as a critical factor, along with the articulation of modes of production within them (Amin 1976: 16 ff). This may seem trivial today where the existence of connections between ancient civilizations is generally acknowledged, but it was a novelty in HM when Amin suggested it more than forty years ago. Finally Amin called attention to *petty commodity production*, a distinct mode of production that is much older than capitalism and has existed in the interstices of other modes but never been dominant in a social formation.

Amin's reformulation of HM's analytic allowed him, among other things, to give a theoretical account of social formations that at first glance would be difficult to fit into a stage theory. One example is *the trading town* – a town whose rulers' wealth is not derived from the extraction of surplus from the surrounding countryside but from their position in long distance trade between tributary formations. Many advanced cities in the Islamic world had this character. Another example, also drawn from the Islamic world, is the *tribal nomadic societies* that thrived on their control of long distance trade routes, based on their knowledge of the deserts and their mastering of camel breeding technology.

Allow me a Nordic-centric digression. It seems to me that Amin's analytic also can shed light on the Viking social formations. Weren't they a little developed tributary formation based on a patriarchal peasant society articulated with long distance trade, being situated at the intersection of the major North-South and East-West trade routes of Northern Europe? A superior naval technology allowed them to control these trade routes where in particular the route through the Baltic and Russia connected the more advanced formations in the Middle East and Western Europe – being then a supplement and alternative to the major route through the Mediterranean. If this is the case, it is hardly a coincidence that that the rise and decline of the Viking formation followed, with a time lag, the rise and decline of Islam.

To summarize, the importance of Amin is first that he insists that a theoretical account of human history must take a global view. Secondly it is that his proposal for a parsimonious synthesis, based on the concepts of communitarian, tributary, and capitalist social formations, with several forms within each, along with long-distance trade and petty commodity production, is more convincing than the traditional Marxist stage theory and also more open as a research program. These concepts were also the theoretical foundation for his synthetic overview of world history, first presented in his 1973 book. Later this overview was amended and in certain ways revised, but the theoretical agenda and core concepts were retained.

The rise and fall of civilizations

In the long essay on peripheral social formations, first published in 1973, Amin gave this synthetic summary of world history:

‘Around two fully developed centers of the tribute-paying formation that appeared very early, namely, Egypt and China, and a third that arose later, namely, India, peripheral constellations of various types took shape and entered into relations with each other along their fluctuating frontiers. Thus one may list the Mediterranean and European peripheries (Greece, Rome, feudal Europe, the Arab and Ottoman world), those of Black Africa, Japan etc. It was in one of these, Europe, that capitalism was born’ (Amin 1976: 58).

Thirty five years later, informed by the intervening advances in historiography, and in an entirely different global situation, he summarized the development as one of

.. successive waves that gradually invented modernity, moving from the East to the West, from China of the Sōng to the Arab-Persian Abbasside Caliphate, then to the Italian towns, before finding its European form that took shape during the 16th century in the London-Amsterdam-Paris triangle. This last form produced historical capitalism, which has imposed itself through its conquest of the world, annihilating the previous variants which could have been possible and were both similar and different from the one we know. This conquest of the world by European capitalism is at the origin of Eurocentric interpretations of global history... (Amin 2011: 5).

In these summary forms Amin's synthesis may sound commonplace to readers familiar with more recent works in macro-sociological history and critiques of Eurocentrism in IR (Mann 1986; Abu-Lughod 1989; Hobson 2004; Hobson 2012; Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015; Buzan and Lawson 2015). But in 1973 when Amin's book first was published, it was a radical departure in several ways. It provided a critique of, and an alternative to, then dominant West-centric views of human history, as typified by William McNeill's 1963 influential major study *The Rise of the West. A History of the Human Community* (McNeill 1991 (1963)). It is only fair to let McNeill himself comment on the pervasiveness of this unreflected West-centrism. In his 1991 retrospective essay he wrote:

'In retrospect it seems obvious that *The Rise of the West* should be seen as an expression of the postwar imperial mood in the United States. Its scope and conception is a form of intellectual imperialism..' (xv)

'when I was writing the book I was entirely unaware of the way in which my method of making sense of world history conformed to the temporary world experience of the United States' (xvi).

In addition to the break with West-centrism, which Amin later developed into a deeper analysis and critique of Eurocentrism (Amin 2011 (2009, French original 1988)), Amin's 1973 text also, as explained above, introduced new concepts and broke out of the straitjacket of the dogmatized deterministic stage theory in historical materialism. Furthermore it informed and served to reinforce his political positions.

The centrality of the periphery

One overall lesson Amin has drawn from his extensive readings in world history is that major transformations in human society, transitions to a higher state of civilization or superior way of organizing human life, always develop in the periphery of the older, hitherto successful formations. This princi-

ple was announced briefly but succinctly in the 1973 introduction to *Unequal Development*: 'when a system is outgrown and superseded, this process takes place not, in the first place, starting from its centre, but from its periphery' (Amin 1976: 10) . Thus the Greece and Rome of antiquity developed in the periphery of the older tributary formations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, feudalism developed in Rome's periphery, capitalism in the North-Western periphery of feudalism, and American capitalism in the English periphery.

Amin combines this general observation from world history with the conclusions from his economic studies of peripheral capitalism. Being a radical dependency theorist he argued that the dominance of extraverted capital accumulation has led to a permanent blocking of the path to self-centred development in the periphery. Therefore peripheral societies should break with the capitalist world economy and find their own path to development and this path, he argued, had to be socialist. In other words, the next great stage in human history, after capitalism, would originate in the periphery.

This was in a time of Soviet supported 'non-capitalist development' projects in some peripheral countries and of experiments with African Socialism in others, of radical demands for a New International Economic Order by developing countries in the UN system, and of the heyday of the new left in the West. Later, after the opening up of China, the onset of neoliberalism, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the rise of the emerging economies which seriously questioned his blocking thesis and his idea that self-centred accumulation is the only path to real development, Amin's outlook became more temperate. But he did maintain that peripheral societies are faced with a basic choice between 'catching up' and 'doing something different', and while circumstances for the time being necessitate an emphasis on catching up, long-term they should and would strive for 'something different,' which, in Amin's view would be socialism. Thus Amin has maintained the core underlying idea, namely that in the long term, the next major transformation of human society will originate in the periphery. In 2003 he explained it this way:

In the twentieth-century challenge to the basic driving forces of capitalism, the two tasks – 'catching up' and 'doing something else' – were combined in ways that varied from period to period and place to place. But we can say, without forcing things too much that the first task became so dominant that development was virtually synonymous with strategies of 'catching up' (and later overtaking, perhaps).

[...]

In future, then, more emphasis must be placed on 'doing something else', although this should not make us forget that some elements of 'catching up' remains a necessary part of the agenda. (Amin 2003: 136).

'Catching up', in other words, is necessary but insufficient because it is unable to overcome the basic contradictions of the system. This implied a critique of the rulers of peripheral societies, 'the established class powers', whose struggle against the dominant powers are limited to the aspiration 'to flourish in the form of national bourgeoisies forcing acceptance of their equal participation in shaping the future of the world'. Based on his economic analysis he claimed that 'such a "patch-up" within the system is objectively impossible' and instead he pinned his hopes on 'the complex and alternative historical blocs centred, to diverse degrees, on the popular classes in the diversity of their expressions' (Amin 2010: 120-121). Based on this he concluded that 'Once again, the transformation of the world is being initiated in the periphery of the established system (Amin 2010: 128).

At this point, it is worth giving the word to McNeill again. He noted that the rise of new civilizations always had been based on transfer of knowledge and skills from older ones, so that "just as China's rise after A.D. 1000 had depended on prior borrowings from the Middle East, so Europe's world success after 1500 depended on prior borrowings from China" (McNeill 1991 (1963): xxviii). This led him to state the following:

"This looks like one of the clearest patterns in world history. It is also something to be expected inasmuch as no population can overtake and then surpass the rest of the world without using the most efficacious and powerful instruments known anywhere on earth; and by definition such instruments are located at the world centers of wealth and power – wherever they may be. Thus any successful geographical displacement of world leadership must be prefaced by successful borrowing from previously established centers of the highest prevailing skills" (McNeill 1991 (1963): xxviii).

McNeill and Amin evidently agree that in a bird's eye view of human history, world leadership moves from one part of the globe to another. But for McNeill there is no way around 'catching up', surpassing presupposes a successful borrowing of 'the highest prevailing skills', whereas Amin seems to suggest that 'doing something different' should be initiated now, from below, while also striving to catch up. On the other hand, Amin also seems to acknowledge that the prospects for the alternative he hopes for are not very optimistic. A real alternative would have to be some kind of 'planification',

different from ‘the bureaucratic management of a “state socialism”, and such a planification would ‘rest on forms still to be invented and on the active participation by the popular classes’ (Amin 2010: 129).

Recent popular left uprisings notwithstanding, such an alternative seems to be close to utopian in the foreseeable future. But Amin’s perspective still has relevance if we accept that ‘doing something different’ not necessarily means moving to socialist ‘planification’, but can also mean introducing agendas that differ from those promoted by the Western great powers. In the current global conjuncture, the centre is marked by internal strife (Trump, Brexit, populist nationalism) and political decay (Fukuyama 2014a and 2014b) and a major peripheral society China has offered to help fill any global leadership vacuum this may lead to (Acharya 2017). In this situation Amin’s notion of the centrality of the periphery, combining ‘catching up’ and ‘doing something different’, is worth keeping in mind in IR scholarship.

But there is more. In the next section I flesh out how the double holism presented above has relevant implications for ‘critical IR’.

Implications for IR

Ontology

One theoretical implication concerns basic societal ontology. In a HM research program informed by the notions of social formation and modes of production, the defining object for study is not interstate relations or ‘the international’, but rather the global social formation. IR, understood as relations between states, i.e. governments and state machineries, are an important aspect of this larger societal context, and so are the global governance arrangements that have evolved as a result of interstate politics and non-state actors’ involvement. But these phenomena must be seen in the context of the global social formation as a whole, and analysed with a reference to this context.

This implies both a reference to the global perspective and to, what in foreign policy analysis is referred to as the *domestic sources of foreign policy* (e.g. Hudson 2007; Alden and Aran 2012). As theorized in state theory, state institutions and state policies are theorized at the most abstract levels as condensations of relations of power between social forces (Poulantzas 2000 (1978): 123 ff.; Jessop

1990: 273 ff.), and this goes also for global governance institutions (Brand, Görg, and Wissen 2011, 149-175).

Building on such a global perspective is not unique to this particular strand of HM theory. Other contributions sharing this basic premise are Chase-Dunn's study of the 'global formation' (Chase-Dunn 1989), Robert Cox's Gramsci inspired approach to 'production and world order' (Cox 1987), as well as neo-Gramscian approaches and Samir Amin as we have seen. The world systems analysis developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein 1974; Wallerstein 2005) also falls in this category although Wallerstein differs from the others by downplaying the view shared by most others that the global formation is a composite of several social formations – to the extent that Wallerstein at one point rejected the relevance of the concepts 'social formation' and 'society' (Wallerstein 1984)³. There are also differences between the other contributions mentioned, but the core point remains that with the exception of Wallerstein, these scholars share the basic ontological perspective of world society as an integrated whole, a global societal system or social formation, but one that is a composite of distinct social formations that are, as emphasized by scholars inspired by Leon Trotsky, set in a situation of uneven and combined development (e.g. Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015).

There is one more important feature in this ontology shared by contributions to HM, namely that the object for study is in constant development and change. In some periods change is fast and dramatic, in other periods it is slow and incremental, but there are always both an element of reproduction and of transformation of pre-existing societal structures and relations enacted by human agency. In consequence HM analyses of IR phenomena must always be historicized, referring the particular object under study to a periodization into epochs, phases and stages – a consequence that in turn makes the question of developing meaningful periodizations an important theoretical task in itself.

The next set of implications I will point out are less abstract and pertain only to a specific set of issues in the global social formation, namely the analysis of the so-called emerging economies' foreign policies in general and their policies towards global governance in particular.

³ Samir Amin is sometimes portrayed as being part of Wallerstein's World Systems Analysis circle. This has some justification but it is worth pointing out that Amin developed his global perspective before encountering Wallerstein, beginning with his doctoral dissertation on 'Accumulation on a world scale' from 1957 and Amin's 1973 book on Unequal development did not draw on Wallerstein. For a period there was some cooperation between 'the gang of four' (Amin, Arrighi, Frank and Wallerstein) that shared the global perspective, but their differences remained and later they went their separate ways. This, at least, is how Amin summarizes the story (Amin 2011: 10).

The societal roots of foreign policy

In HM theory, foreign policy like any other policy is shaped by the relations of power within the social formation, in particular the dominant social forces and their relations of support and alliance with other forces. As such this is fairly similar to what is known as ‘the domestic sources of foreign policy’ in the subfield of foreign policy analysis (e.g. Alden and Aran 2012, 46-77; Hudson 2007, 125-141). A recent contribution to the VoC literature (Nölke et al. 2015) has pointed in the same direction, but whereas this work largely remains within the parameters defined by the VoC approach, the HM perspective emphasizes a focus on the dominant classes’ material economic base, in addition to and as background for their political organization and relations to the state, along with the nature of the state, the latter being in focus in the VoC literature.

The material base

Concerning the material base the notion of structural heterogeneity outlined above, combining dual track accumulation and articulation of modes of production, provides an analytic for identifying and analysing the dominant social forces in PPC societies. It calls for an analysis of the economic class structure, identifying for instance the national industrial bourgeoisie, capitalists based on extraverted accumulation processes, the presence of foreign capital in the society in question, as well as dominant classes such as large land-owners based on pre-capitalist property relations as articulated with and modified by capitalist relations.

This analysis of the economic base of the dominant social forces is important because it helps identify both their material capabilities and the constraints and opportunities they face for engaging with the outside world. This provides an important contribution to the explanation of their foreign policy preferences, including their preferences and strategies towards global economic governance.

Recent critical debates about varieties of capitalism have contributed to this discussion. With a particular focus on Latin America and drawing on the dependencia tradition, for instance, Arinci et al. (2015) called for the study of

‘How the distinct modes of insertion of particular, relatively bounded space economies into the ‘ecology’ of global capitalism imply multiple and changing modes of interrelation among actors and institutions located inside and outside of the territories in question’ (p. 192).

They further insisted that 'we have to take seriously the diversity of ways in which the concrete situation can be processed, negotiated, contested and, potentially, transformed on the local level' (Arinci, Pessina, and Ebenau 2015: 193). In more general terms Tilly called for 'decolonizing the concept of the developmental state' in order to better understand the 'varied geographies of coloniality' (Tilley 2015: 219).

My claim is that the notion of structural heterogeneity, dual-track accumulation and articulation of modes of production, is a powerful analytic for analysing this diversity of economic structures; an analytic that at the most basic level is built on an examination of the relations between producers, non-producers and means of production, and the ways the economic surplus is extracted and controlled.

This analytic can account both for the difference between the social formations of the centre and those in the periphery, and for the variations among PPC societies. A classic contribution is Stavenhagen's study of social classes in agrarian societies (Stavenhagen 1975 (1969)) but HM scholarship has also integrated industrial bourgeoisies in the analysis. By way of illustration, think for instance of the difference between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, three social formations that share the same colonial history as parts of British India, but today are very different on the accounts identified by the HM analytic. India has a quite powerful domestic industrial bourgeoisie with considerable capabilities, also in some high tech areas, in Pakistan the industrial bourgeoisie is weaker and the landed property interests stronger, whereas in Bangladesh the domestic industrial interests to a large extent are sub-contractors to foreign capital. In short, the power blocs of these three countries are very different, reflecting the relative strength of domestic capital, the different articulation of modes of production and relative weight of pre-capitalist relations, and the different insertions into global capitalism (this is largely built on Martinussen 1980 which only is available in Danish; for a brief summary of the arguments see Martinussen 1997: 101-113; also Ougaard 1983).

As mentioned in a previous section, the concept of the mode of production is not a purely economic one. Relations of production presuppose political and ideational relations and these are therefore integral to the concept, although they can be separated analytically. Hence the next and final theme I will discuss in this paper.

Political and ideational hybridity

Economic analysis can identify the material base of classes and other groupings, but this need to be supplemented with analysis of political and ideational relations of dominance and subordination, and, on this basis, how agents interact with each other in societal practice (Poulantzas 1978: 15 ff.). This brings to the centre of attention the organisation of classes, their relations to the state, and the ideational complexes that inform and guide their political practices. In other words, structural heterogeneity is not only an economic matter. PPC societies are characterized also by the articulation of different modes of authority, types of state, and ideational configurations.

It is not difficult to show the relevance of this with a few impressionistic illustrations. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is an articulation of tribal authority and religious legitimacy with imported notions of monarchy and bureaucratic-rational organizing principles. Or think about China: one of the oldest centralized bureaucratic states in the world with a millennia old intellectual tradition, transformed by foreign intrusion, civil war and revolution, articulated with an original interpretation and adaptation of a Western model of communist party dictatorship and economic planning, and then embarked on a reform process of ‘catching-up’ with the capitalist world and perhaps also ‘doing something different’.

Understanding the way in which these and other PPC societies engage with the world in general and global governance in particular requires attention to the societal roots of foreign policy, and therefore to the articulation of modes of production, forms of political authority and power, and ideational complexes. And there are indeed, in HM and critical IR theory contributions to this kind of analysis, contributions that directly or indirectly help to relate PPC societies’ external relations to their domestic power relations and internal political conflicts (e.g. Arinci, Pessina, and Ebenau 2015; Mulvad 2015). We can also point to studies of the post-colonial state and ‘hybrid hierarchies’ (Alavi 1972; Phillips 2016; Tilley 2015), and Samir Amin’s very interesting discussion of ‘central and peripheral tributary cultures’ (Amin 2011).

But still, it also seems to me that there is much unfinished business in these regards, as also pointed out by Mulvad (Mulvad 2015: 201-201). In particular, whereas there is in HM theory broadly construed a strong and well developed analytic for the economic analysis of modes of production, a similar developed analytic for the analysis of political and ideational forms and their articulation is, to my knowledge, not yet developed.

Conclusion

This paper set out to discuss the question: “How does the postcolonial perspective enable/disable the rethinking of theories and concepts considered central to critical IR?”, but doing so from the perspective of historical materialism, understood as a research programme.

To make a long story short, the key arguments made are firstly that specific elements in HM do represent a postcolonial perspective. The reasons are that they result from productive engagements between HM theory and colonial and postcolonial perspectives and experiences, and that their originators in important cases were from peripheral and post-colonial societies; and more importantly that they meet postcolonialism’s demand for theoretical perspectives that are sensitive to difference and inequalities between post-colonial societies and the former colonial powers. The second argument is that these theoretical elements are useful contributions to the study of international relations and represent an alternative to state-centric IR.

These contributions can be summarized as a clear break with Euro-centrism, a societal ontology that situates inter-state relations and global governance in the larger context of the global social formation, and the notions of the articulation of modes of production, authority forms and ideational configurations that are particular relevant for the analysis of PPC societies and can serve as entry points to the analysis of power relations that shape state policies, including foreign policies. I also pointed out, though, that HM theory is less developed concerning the articulation of political and ideational forms, and that this is an area of unfinished business for HM theory.

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