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Uneven Ties: Towards a Marxist Systems Theory of International Relations

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ABSTRACT: This paper develops a non-essentialist and non-reductionist Marxist theory of international relations by integrating insights from historical materialism, world-systems theory, the Althusserian concept of overdetermination, and Alexander Bogdanov's Tektology. It challenges economistic and determinist interpretations that either reduce international dynamics to domestic class relations or isolate them within an autonomous geopolitical realm. Instead, it advances a systemic and dialectical framework in which international phenomena are understood as overdetermined processes shaped by the interaction of class exploitation, institutional mediation, ideological formations, and global asymmetries. By foregrounding the global organization of surplus appropriation and the structural reproduction of class relations across borders, this framework redefines imperialism, geopolitical rivalry, and global governance as expressions of the capitalist world-system's contradictory reproduction. The international is thus neither external to class struggle nor reducible to it, but a structurally necessary dialectic of capitalism's uneven totality. This approach revitalizes Marxist theory by combining the rigor of class analysis with the flexibility of systemic and dialectical thinking.

KEYWORDS: Marxist International Relations, Overdetermination, Uneven and Combined Development, World Systems Theory.

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Introduction

Marxism has long grappled with the "international problematique":[1] how to theorize global political relations without abandoning its foundational materialist commitments. Orthodox Marxist interpretations have often tended to reduce international politics to mere epiphenomena of domestic class relations[2]. While we do not endorse a reductive or economicist reading of Marx's work, it is important to note that his primary focus, particularly in Capital, lies in the analysis of national class relations, which are examined above all in their economic dimension.

However, Marx's engagement with ideology, especially in earlier works such as The German Ideology, reveals a more nuanced and non-reductionist approach. There, Marx acknowledges that ideological forms and political structures are not mere reflections of the economic base but develop within relatively autonomous social levels, shaped through historical struggle and material practices. This suggests that Marx's theoretical framework allows for complex interrelations among economic, political, and ideological dimensions, even if his later economic writings emphasize the primacy of class processes. When Marx addresses international dynamics, as in his discussion of colonialism in Capital, his interest remains centered on the extension of internal class dynamics across borders. He does not provide a fully developed theory of international relations per se,[3] but rather examines how the mechanisms of class exploitation inherent in the capitalist mode of production are exported and reproduced globally. As he writes in the section on colonialism:

> However, we are not concerned here with the conditions of the colonies. The only thing that interests us is the secret discovered in the new world by the Political Economy of the old world, and proclaimed on the housetops: that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of self-earned private property; in other words, the expropriation of the labourer. (Marx [1867], Capital, Vol. I)

This passage underscores how even in his treatment of colonialism, Marx foregrounds the structural logic of class exploitation, extending the dynamics of surplus appropriation beyond national borders without

1. See Allison and Anievas 2010, 197.
2. In the sense of "inside the spatial boundaries of a given state or nation."
3. For a critical analysis of Marx's and Marxist accounts on IR, see also Teschke B. 2020.

yet formulating a systemic theory of international relations. Our approach seeks to build on these insights while addressing the theoretical gap in Marxist IR.

In contrast, liberal[4] and realist[5] approaches to international relations tend to treat the "international" as an autonomous realm, insulated from the dynamics of class and production, which are seen as clearly separated both from an epistemological and from an ontological point of view. This paper argues that both approaches fail to capture the complexity of global capitalist development.

Building on the concepts of overdetermination (Althusser, Wolff and Resnick), world-systems theory (Wallerstein, Arrighi), and the underutilized insights of Alexander Bogdanov, this paper constructs a Marxist theory of international relations that avoids the pitfalls of both reductionism and essentialism. Central to this reconstruction is the dialectical category of uneven and combined development (U&CD), which we interpret as the methodological key to theorizing the international as dialectically immanent to, rather than external from, the social totality.

Historical Materialism and the Limits of Reductionism in Marxist IR

Marxist approaches typically emphasize the analysis of class and class relations as central to understanding social formations. These relations are, prima facie, economic in nature, emerging from the interaction between the forces and relations of production, and form the basis for the political struggles and historical development of that society. This reflects what is often identified as a central thesis of historical materialism. In Capital, Marx explores economic relations as they appear within national societies, analyzing how they shape material interactions between individuals and groups, particularly through the processes of production, appropriation and surplus distribution. These material interactions are then conceptualized as class relations, which become the analytical key to understanding the political and ideological configurations of a given social formation, including its institutional architecture.

From this perspective, a deterministic reading can be formulated: the economic structure, represented by the relations of production, materially implies the emergence of political and ideological formations. That is, one may claim that the base (the economic structure) entails, in the

4. See for example Giddens, A. 1990.
5. See Waltz, K. 1979.

logical sense of material implication, the development of all relevant social and political superstructures (institutions, ideologies, legal systems, etc.). What we call Marxist reductionism is precisely the extension of this deterministic logic into domains of social analysis that are analytically distinct from the economic sphere, by asserting that economic relations unilaterally determine them.

When the scope of analysis remains confined within the nation-state, this framework can offer a relatively straightforward explanation of political phenomena. The same social groups defined in economic terms (as owners of the means of production or as direct producers) also appear as political subjects in the form of institutional elites, political parties, or ruling classes. In such cases, economic class relations visibly translate into political configurations. Here, reductionism can be more easily avoided, since political forms are not ontologically or analytically separate from the economic structure, and a rigid material implication is not required to establish a meaningful connection between economic and political dynamics.

However, a central difficulty for many Marxist theoretical approaches arises when attempting to develop a scientific account of international relations and geopolitical dynamics. These are not marginal concerns but have been crucial for many Marxist theorists, particularly in analyses of imperialism and inter-state domination. Despite renewed attention to imperialism, these debates have highlighted enduring theoretical dilemmas regarding how Marxism should conceptualize the "international."

As Allison and Anievas note, this "international problematique" encompasses a range of theoretical, political, normative, and philosophical issues stemming from the division of humanity into a multiplicity of politically organized communities.

> For many Marxists, the issues of empire and imperialism had never really died away. These 'revived' debates have, however, revealed the persistence of a series of dilemmas in Marxist thought on international relations. [...] this can be defined as the myriad theoretical, political, normative, and philosophical problems flowing from the division and interaction of humanity into a multiplicity of political communities. Here, we enquire into the theoretical issues emerging from Marxism's engagement with this international problematique, noting some of its political implications. (Allison and Anievas 2010, 197)

The question becomes: how can Marxism, committed to a materialist account of history, adequately address phenomena that occur across or between nation-states?

Two broad theoretical positions have historically structured this debate within Marxist IR theories. The first posits that international relations, like domestic politics, are ultimately determined by the relations of production. From this perspective, the global political order tends to be understood as a reflection or extension of national class dynamics; a position commonly associated with strands of "Political Marxism," particularly in the work of theorists such as Robert Brenner,[6] who argue that international relations are either epiphenomena of domestic class structures or secondary antagonisms that are ultimately subordinate to class struggle. The second position breaks from Marxist deterministic approaches and instead treats international phenomena as analytically autonomous or irreducible to internal class relations. This includes approaches such as neo-Gramscianism, dependency theory, and especially world-systems theory. While these approaches vary, they share a rejection of strict economic determinism and aim to theorize the international as a structurally significant dimension of capitalist development.

A third approach, which in some respects parallels the first, seeks to analyze class relations at the global level while bypassing the interrelations between nation-states as a primary field of analysis. This perspective is articulated most clearly in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, particularly in their book Empire. Rather than grounding their analysis in the traditional terrain of international relations, Hardt and Negri argue that globalization has rendered the classical system of sovereign states increasingly obsolete. They propose that global capitalism has produced a new supranational form of sovereignty, an "Empire," that transcends the interstate system. In doing so, they displace the analytical centrality of the international and focus instead on transnational class dynamics that are no longer mediated primarily through nation-states.

From our perspective, however, this approach risks evacuating the field of international relations from Marxist analysis altogether. By downplaying the enduring material and coercive role of the state, Hardt and Negri overlook how global class relations continue to be structured,

6. See Brenner (1978a;1978b) and Denemark (1998) on the debate with Wallerstein.

constrained, and reproduced through interstate competition, geopolitical hierarchies, and national institutional forms. In this way, their framework implicitly assumes a post-national capitalism that underestimates the degree to which the state remains a critical site of class power and a vehicle for surplus appropriation, coercion, and global ordering. By contrast, the first approach, typified by orthodox or Political Marxism, tends to fall into a reductionist reading in which the superstructure (the Überbau of political and ideological forms) is mechanically derived from the economic base (Bau). International relations are thereby treated as secondary effects of class interests within nation-states, rather than as overdetermined and unevenly articulated processes within a global capitalist totality.

Even more nuanced versions of Political Marxism, such as Ellen Meiksins Wood's thesis, while explicitly recognizing the "extra-economic" character of international relations, still tend to attribute causal primacy to what she terms "market imperatives" or "capital's imperatives." As Wood notes:

> The argument here is not that the power of capital in conditions of 'globalization' has escaped the control of the state and made the territorial state increasingly irrelevant. On the contrary, my argument is that the state is more essential than ever to capital, even, or especially, in its global form. The political form of globalization is not a global state but a global system of multiple states, and the new imperialism takes its specific shape from the complex and contradic-tory relationship between capital's expansive economic power and the more limited reach of the extra-economic force that sustains it. (Wood 2003, 5–6)

Although Wood rightly affirms the ongoing importance of the state, her account still positions the imperatives of capital as the driving force of international political dynamics. Imperialism, in this view, is shaped primarily and fundamentally by the demands of capital accumulation, with state institutions and military force acting as necessary but derivative supports. This framing, while more nuanced than reductionist accounts, still underplays the dialectical and overdetermined character of international relations, where class, state, and geopolitical dynamics intersect in non-linear and historically contingent ways.

World-systems theory, on the other hand, adopts a distinctive epistemological perspective, one that conceptualizes the world economy as a hierarchically structured system of interrelated regions—namely, core, semi-periphery, and periphery—while framing social phenomena

through a part–whole analytic. This framework enables a systemic understanding of global capitalism and phenomena such as globalization without reducing them to the level of individual national class structures. It integrates both local and systemic dynamics, identifying regularities across the world system that are irreducible to any single nation-state. The key epistemological strength of world-systems theory lies in its capacity to explain complex social processes and systemic regularities without collapsing them into either national-level class struggle or economistic determinations. However, this raises a deeper ontological question: does the systemic approach risk reifying the "international" as an essentially independent or autonomous sphere of reality, effectively establishing a new objectified domain external to class relations? If this were the case, it would represent a significant threat to Marxist theories. It would entail introducing an ontologically separate and substantial entity at the level of the economic base, an "international realm" that stands apart from and outside the dialectics of class and production relations. Such an essentialist dualism would sever the international from the material logic of capitalism and thus undermine the foundational principles of historical materialism. Benno Teschke (2020) has articulated a related critique, calling for a "radical historicism" capable of "escaping the reificatory tendencies of structuralist and nomological Marxist retheorizations of international relations." As he observes:

> World Systems Theory, the 'universal law' of uneven and combined development, and arguments about two generic and analytically dissociated modes of power accumulation—the capitalist and the territorial logics of competition—with two invariant rationalities assigned to firms and states exemplify these trends towards structuralism, nomology, and reification. (Teschko 2020, 304)

While I share Teschke's critical concerns, I contend that radical historicism risks collapsing into particularism and eroding the scientific dimension of Marx's historical materialism. What is required, instead, is a dialectical framework that preserves historical materialism's explanatory rigor—one capable of analyzing social and political phenomena as expressions of historically grounded material regularities, that is, class struggles structured by the contradictory relations of production.

A coherent Marxist approach to international relations must therefore navigate between two extremes: the reduction of global political phenomena to national class structures, and the hypostatization of the international as a sui generis realm. What is needed is a framework that

can grasp the international as an overdetermined moment within the totality of capitalist social relations, neither reducible to national class dynamics, nor external to them. It is in the direction of such a framework, drawing on key insights from overdetermination, systems theory, and dialectical materialism, that the following analysis seeks to move.

Marxism's epistemological issues with IR: a materialistic account of IR

A central thread in much of the Marxist tradition is its commitment to a materialist conception of historical development. Its scientific dimension—historical materialism—explains social and political phenomena through the lens of class struggle, grounded in the relations of production. As Althusser famously distinguished, dialectical materialism constitutes the philosophy of Marxism, while historical materialism represents its scientific practice.[7] The philosophical foundation is built upon the dialectical relationship between the material base (the relations of production) and the ideological-political superstructure, whereas the scientific approach aims to uncover the historical patterns and transformations of social formations through the analysis of productive relations.

In *Capital* (Vol. 3), Marx articulates the foundational claim of historical materialism:

> "The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude, as this grows directly out of production itself and reacts back on it in turn as a determinant. On this is based the entire configuration of the economic community arising from the actual relations of production, and hence also its specific political form. It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers . . . in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and hence also the political form of the relationship of sovereignty and dependence, in short the specific form of state in each case." (Marx [1894] 1981, 927)

This passage encapsulates the Marxian view that the fundamental structure of political power and social domination is rooted in the mode of surplus extraction. The organization of production relations—specifically, the relationship between those who own the means of production and those who do not—shapes the form of the state and its institutions.

7. See Althusser 1969.

The relations of production generate, reproduce, and constrain the political form of the state and its juridical apparatus. However, Marx's analysis is primarily focused on the national context, examining capitalist society, its internal class structure, and the development of its political form. As noted in the introduction, when Marx addresses the international dimension in his discussion of colonialism, he highlights how the social and political phenomena associated with colonial expansion affect the national capitalist mode of production within the colonial powers themselves.

Yet beginning in the early 20th century, with the works of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Hilferding, Marxist theorists began to confront a more expansive problem: how to apply the materialist method to international politics and geopolitical configurations. This shift marked a significant epistemological challenge. How can Marxist theory, which is fundamentally centered on the analysis of domestic class relations, account for transnational and international dynamics such as imperialism, war, diplomacy, and global capital flows?

Imperialism, in this context, must be understood not merely as a policy or strategy of states, but as a methodological concept that seeks to explain how relations of exploitation and domination extend beyond national boundaries. Imperialism, as a global expression of capitalist development, is not reducible to the ambitions of individual states but must be analyzed as a historically specific form of class relation materializing at the international level. Thus, the challenge for Marxist theory is to explain international relations in a manner that preserves its materialist commitments without collapsing global politics into an epiphenomenon of domestic class structures.

A naïve or orthodox response to this challenge is to treat international relations as part of the superstructure—a domain of ideology or statecraft—ultimately reducible to the base of national class relations. On this account, geopolitical dynamics are understood as secondary expressions of internal class struggles. For instance, state behavior on the international stage is seen as reflecting the interests of nationally constituted ruling classes. This is the logic followed by certain currents within "Political Marxism," particularly in the work of Brenner and his followers, who view international politics as a consequence or derivative of national social-property relations. A famous example is the Brenner thesis about the transition from feudalism to capitalism and his debate with Sweezy and Wallerstein:

> Such flowering of commercial relations cum divisions of labor have been a more or less regular feature of human history for thousands of years. Because the occurrence of such 'commercial revolutions' has been relatively so common, the key question which must be answered by Sweezy and Wallerstein is why the rise of trade/division of labor should have set off the transition to capitalism in the case of feudal Europe. (Brenner 1977, 40)

According to Brenner, the international and inter-societal division of labour and trade exchange play no decisive role for the fundamental transition to capitalism; he asks: "Where are the class relations in this formulation? Finding none, he depicts this core/periphery scheme as a kind of 'neo-Smithian Marxism,' after Adam Smith, who placed the idea of the division of labor at the center of his theory of capitalist development."[8] Yet this reductionist approach[9] faces serious epistemological limitations. Most obviously, it lacks explanatory power when it comes to complex and often non-linear international events—wars, diplomatic realignments, the emergence of transnational institutions—that cannot be directly or immediately traced to national class antagonisms. Empirically, there is often no clear or necessary causal link between, say, the decision of a government to engage in war or enter a treaty and specific domestic class configurations or conflicts. This does not mean that such decisions are unrelated to capitalist interests or structures of class domination, but rather that the connections are not linear, singular, or deterministically causal.

The reductionist paradigm thus fails to provide a robust scientific explanation of international relations. It misrepresents the nature of causality in complex social systems by insisting on direct correspondences where multiple mediations and overdeterminations are at play. It also risks producing ad hoc explanations or unfalsifiable generalities when empirical data does not conform to its schema.

A more nuanced and philosophically consistent strand within Marxist thought understands the economic base not as a direct causal mechanism, but rather as a condition of possibility, a structural matrix within which political, ideological, and international phenomena can emerge and take shape, without being mechanically or exhaustively determined by it. This epistemological shift paves the way for a non-reductionist materialist account of international relations. An important contribution in this direction comes from Neo-Gramscian approaches,

8. See Bergesen 1984, 366.
9. The tendency to reduce social states of affairs to "domestic" relations of production.

which reinterpret Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and apply it to the global sphere. As Robert Cox explains:

> World hegemony is describable as a social structure, an economic structure, and a political structure; and it cannot be simply one of these things but must be all three. World hegemony, furthermore, is expressed in universal norms, institutions and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behaviour for states and for those forces of civil society that act across national boundaries—rules which support the dominant mode of production. (Cox 1983, 171–172)

While recognizing the multiplicity of global institutions and norms, this framework may risk reintroducing a hierarchy of explanation in which economic relations are treated as the sole fundamental structuring force, with political and ideological dimensions positioned as merely derivative. However, from a non-reductionist materialist standpoint, these other dimensions are not simply secondary: they can act back upon and transform the economic base itself, assuming a constitutive role within the broader dynamics of global capitalism.

World-systems theory, by contrast, offers a more explicitly systemic and relational methodology for developing a Marxist theory of international relations. Rather than reducing global dynamics to internal class relations within nation-states, it conceptualizes national economies and social formations as interdependent parts of a hierarchically organized capitalist world-economy. This part–whole perspective allows for the analysis of international structures as emergent and historically specific totalities, shaped by but not reducible to domestic class configurations. From this systemic standpoint, national societies are interdependent components of a global totality. The international is not external to the capitalist mode of production but is intrinsic to its historical development and reproduction.

> World-systems analysis meant first of all the substitution of a unit of analysis called "the world system" for the standard unit of analysis, which was the national state. On the whole, historians had been analysing national histories, economists national economies, political scientists national political structures, and sociologists national societies. World-systems analysts raised a skeptical eyebrow, questioning whether any of these objects of study really existed, and in any case whether they were the most useful loci of analysis. Instead of national states as the object of study, they substituted "historical systems" which, it was argued, had existed up to now in only three variants: minisystems; and "world-systems" of two kinds—world-economies and world-empires. (Wallerstein 2004, 16)

Crucially, the relation between national parts and the world-systemic whole is not merely additive or mechanical. The properties of the whole do not emerge from a simple sum of its parts. Rather, the global system is governed by a dialectic of uneven development[10] and structural interdependence. The interactions between core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral regions are overdetermined by complex combinations of political, economic, and cultural processes.

Thus, the national "base" constitutes only one moment of a larger systemic logic, which includes international class exploitation, transnational capital accumulation, and imperial state formations. The explanatory task of Marxist IR is to uncover how these different levels interact and co-constitute one another, not through linear causality, but through dialectical mediation and overdetermination.

Overdetermination and non-reductionist Marxism

To construct a genuinely non-reductionist Marxist theory of international relations, we must reject the epistemological approach grounded in causal monism (and, hence, causal reductionism) and embrace the concept of overdetermination, as introduced by Althusser and later developed by Wolff and Resnick. Overdetermination offers a dialectical and anti-essentialist analytical notion for understanding how social phenomena—especially complex ones such as international conflicts, imperial rivalries, and transnational institutions—emerge not from a single cause, but from the interplay of multiple, mutually conditioning processes.

Overdetermination reframes causality in Marxism. Rather than seeking a singular or "ultimate" cause for any given social phenomenon, overdeterminist analysis emphasizes the structural interdependence of all social processes: economic, political, ideological, cultural, and ecological. Every event or state of affairs is simultaneously shaped by a multiplicity of factors, none of which can be ontologically or epistemologically privileged in abstraction from the rest. In this sense, what appears as a "cause" is always a historically specific configuration of determinations. Wolff and Resnick articulate this insight as follows:

> Indeed, overdetermination implies that every object, constituted as the site of endlessly diverse influences emanating from all other objects, is correspondingly pushed and pulled in endlessly diverse ways and directions and

10. See Wallerstein (1991, 151–169) on the concept of underdevelopment as a central Marxism Notion.

> is therefore endlessly changing. Overdetermination thus means that all objects are conceived to exist in change. To underscore this point, we refer to all possible objects of an overdeterminist analysis as processes, rather than objects. The "being is becoming" notion is thus woven into the basic contours of overdeterminist economic analysis. (Wolff and Resnick 2006, 52)

The analytical shift from static objects to dynamic processes has significant implications for Marxist IR theory. It allows us to conceptualize international relations not as discrete, isolated events (wars, treaties, alliances) caused by external factors or abstract state interests, but as social processes overdetermined by configurations of production, exploitation, ideology, and geopolitical positioning. This perspective resists both economic reductionism and Realist reifications of "the state" or "the international."

In historical materialist terms, overdetermination acknowledges that the "base," the relations of production, is itself internally structured by contradictions and is overdetermined by non-economic elements. As Althusser warned, the temptation to reduce all historical movement to economic necessity, what he termed "economism" or "technologism," simply mirrors Hegelian idealism in reverse. It substitutes the Idea with the Economy as the origin of all motion and contradiction, thereby flattening the dialectic and undermining historical specificity:

> The logical destination of this temptation is the exact mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic the only difference being that it is no longer a question of deriving the successive moments from the Idea, but from the Economy, by virtue of the same internal contradiction. This temptation results in the radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the dialectic generating the successive modes of production. that is. in the last analysis, the different production techniques. There are names for these temptations in the history of Marxism: economism and even technologism. (Althusser [1969] 2005, 108–109)

Avoiding this temptation requires treating the economic "base" not as a deterministic motor but as a structural condition of possibility. The economic base shapes the terrain upon which political and ideological phenomena unfold, but it does not unilaterally determine their content or form. Instead, these spheres exert reciprocal influence on one another, and their interaction produces historically specific totalities. This is particularly important, as we are going to point out later, for analyzing exploitation and class domination at the international level. As Crocker notes:

> "It is never far from Marx's attention that a given organization of production and exchange is simultaneously a certain organization of human beings embodying relations of domination and control." (Crocker 1972, 201–215)

Following this insight, we can argue that international political phenomena are overdetermined by the global organization of production and exchange. But rather than positing a direct causal link between international events and national class structures, overdetermination allows us to trace how forms of domination and control—imperialism, neocolonialism, global governance—emerge from the complex interplay of transnational processes.

In this light, international relations are not superstructural epiphenomena, nor are they purely "external" to class struggle. They are overdetermined moments within a larger totality that includes national production relations, global circuits of capital, ideological formations, and institutional frameworks. A war, for example, is not reducible to capitalist interests, but nor can it be understood apart from them; it must be analyzed as a conjunctural formation shaped by class conflict, state strategy, global hegemony, historical legacies, and economic imperatives, none of which is singularly primary.

Finally, overdetermination equips Marxist theory with the epistemological tools to account for structural asymmetries without essentializing them. The multiplicity of determinations allows us to understand why similar structural positions (e.g., peripheral states) may generate divergent political outcomes, depending on their particular histories, conjunctures, and relations to the whole.

World-Systems Theory and the Dialectics of Global Totality

Building on the epistemological foundations laid by the concept of overdetermination, we now turn to world-systems theory as a crucial framework for conceptualizing international relations within a non-reductionist Marxist paradigm. While world-systems analysis has often been treated as a departure from classical Marxism due to its macro-structural emphasis and limited focus on class, we argue that it can and should be reinterpreted as a dialectical and overdeterminist theory of the global capitalist totality.

Immanuel Wallerstein's influential work in world-systems theory offers a reconceptualization of capitalism, not as a set of nationally bounded economies, but as a historically structured world-economy: a single, historical system structured by a division of labor and characterized by unequal exchange, political segmentation, and the geographical differentiation of surplus appropriation. In this framework, the global

economy is organized into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones, whose relative positions reflect structural patterns of capital accumulation and systemic domination.

Crucially, this part-whole logic is not additive but dialectical. The core exists only in relation to the periphery; their differential positions are constituted through historical processes of exploitation, coercion, and dependency. The world-system is not a container for isolated national units but a relational totality, within which each part is defined by its place in the whole. The capitalist world-economy is thus inherently uneven and combined: it brings together disparate temporalities, social formations, and modes of surplus extraction under the logic of generalized commodity production. This notion is brought by Wallerstein directly inside the core of Marx's thought:

> As long as Marx's ideas are taken to be thesis about processes that occur primarily within state boundaries and that involve primarily urban wage-earning industrial workers working for private industrial bourgeois, then these ideas will be easily demonstrated to be false, misleading and irrelevant—and to lead us down wrong political paths. Once they are taken to be ideas about a historical world-system, whose development itself involves "underdevelopment," indeed is based on it, they are not only valid, but they are revolutionary as well. (Wallerstein 1991, 161)

Yet despite its explanatory reach, world-systems theory has often been criticized—particularly by more orthodox Marxists—for its apparent decentering of class. Critics argue that Wallerstein and his successors underplay the centrality of class struggle, emphasizing inter-state and inter-regional dynamics over the internal contradictions of production.[11] On the other hand, many in international relations have dismissed world-systems theory as overly deterministic, totalizing, or lacking in institutional specificity.[12] These criticisms, we suggest, stem not from the core theoretical premises of world-systems theory but from the absence of an explicitly dialectical and non-essentialist materialist grounding. When reinterpreted through the lens of overdetermination and class process theory (e.g., Wolff and Resnick), world-systems analysis can be restored to its place within the Marxist tradition, not as a rival to class analysis, but as its necessary extension to the global level.

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11. In particular the Brenner-Wallerstein debate has focused on such objections and arguments.
12. See Chirot and Hall (1982) for an objection based on the notion of culture in Weber & Co.

In this dialectical reconstruction, the "system" is not a rigid or closed structure but a historically evolving totality marked by asymmetries, contradictions, and transformations. States are not treated as unitary actors but as sites where multiple processes converge—economic reproduction, class struggle, ideological production, and geopolitical strategy—all of which are themselves overdetermined by the broader global context.

This point is made especially clear when world-systems theory is brought into dialogue with Trotsky's concept of uneven and combined development (U&CD). U&CD posits that capitalist development proceeds through the interaction of heterogeneous social forms, resulting in non-linear and combined historical trajectories. This idea challenges both linear developmentalism and methodological nationalism in Marxism by asserting that societies do not evolve in isolation, but are shaped by external pressures, coercive competition, and geopolitical entanglements.

Anievas and Allison and Rosenberg have powerfully reasserted this principle within Marxist IR, arguing that U&CD provides a necessary ontological foundation for theorizing "the international" as immanent to the social. Rather than treating global interactions as exogenous inputs or secondary outcomes, U&CD foregrounds them as generative moments in the formation of social structures. The capitalist world-system, from this standpoint, is a field of combined and uneven development, in which the spatial and temporal coexistence of diverse social formations drives transformation through interaction.

> By positing 'development' ontologically as the subject matter of the analysis, it identifies the evolution of social structures in historical time as the basis of its explanatory method. It comprises in that sense an emphatically historical sociological conception. However, by simultaneously asserting the 'uneven and combined character' of that development overall, it recovers for social theory those properties of multilinearity and interactivity which would otherwise unavoidably give rise to a sociologically impregnable and rival discourse of geopolitical explanation. I know of no other idea that can do this. (Calliconos and Rosenberg 2008, 86)

As Rosenberg notes, this approach rescues Marxism from a false antinomy: the opposition between structuralist over-totalization and empiricist fragmentation. By positing development as the central object of analysis, understood not as linear progress but as multilinear, contradictory process, the theory of U&CD reintegrates the geopolitical into the heart of historical materialism. He points this out very well in his

thesis by focusing on an alternative non-reductionist view of Marxist IR based on the theory of U&CD:

> What the 'law' of uneven and combined development comprises is the visualising and mapping of the international as a dimension of social causality. [...] the insertion of universal unevenness and consequent combination into the ontology of historical materialism. And this innovation has brought with it a further presupposition which is not announced at all: namely that the articulation of unevenness across a multiplicity of societies produces additional causal mechanisms (such as 'the whip of external necessity') which are generic to the overall process of historical development, and which impart to it a specifically inter-societal or international dimension. (Rosenberg 2013, 19)

This approach enables us to understand imperialism, colonialism, dependency, and global restructuring not as historical contingencies or anomalies, but as necessary expressions of the logic of capital operating at a global scale. An important contribution in this direction comes from the work of David Harvey, whose analysis is deeply informed by the world-systems theories of Giovanni Arrighi and Immanuel Wallerstein. In particular, Harvey draws attention to the interaction between what he calls the "territorial" and the "capitalist" logics of power:

> The relation between these two logics should be seen, therefore, as problematic and often contradictory (that is, dialectical) rather than as functional or one-sided. This dialectical relation sets the stage for an analysis of capitalist imperialism in terms of the intersection of these two distinctive but intertwined logics of power. The difficulty for concrete analyses of actual situations is to keep the two sides of this dialectic simultaneously in motion and not to lapse into either a solely political or a predominantly economic mode of argumentation. (Harvey 2003, 30)

This dialectical understanding of the world-system avoids the twin pitfalls of essentialism and reductionism. It neither reifies "the international" as an ontologically autonomous domain, nor reduces it to a mere reflection of internal class dynamics. Instead, it conceptualizes the international as an internally differentiated field, constituted through the uneven and combined development of class structures, state formations, and productive relations on a global scale. The totality is thus not a monolith but a contradictory unity of difference. Moreover, such a per-

spective permits us to understand how class exploitation itself is internationalized. As Wolff and Resnick[13] argue, surplus value can be appropriated not only within national formations but across them, through mechanisms such as foreign direct investment, unequal exchange, financial extraction, and military intervention. These forms of foreign exploitation are not marginal but structurally central to the global reproduction of capitalism.

In sum, a dialectically reinterpreted world-systems theory, informed by overdetermination and the logic of U&CD, provides the foundation for a non-reductionist Marxist theory of international relations. It conceptualizes the world not as a mere aggregate of states or economies, but as a historically structured totality of interdependent processes. The challenge for Marxist theory is not to reject or segregate the international, but to understand it as an overdetermined dimension of capitalist dialectics itself.

Uneven and Combined Development and the Systemic Logic of the International: Re-Introducing Tektology

A pivotal advance in constructing a non-essentialist Marxist theory of international relations lies in rethinking the nature of development itself, not as a linear, national trajectory, but as a dialectical and inter-societal process. This is the contribution of Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development (U&CD), as Rosenberg reassesses and reformulates, which offers a revolutionary methodological insight: that the very constitution of social development is shaped by the interaction of multiple coexisting social formations, each situated unequally within a global field of historical time.

U&CD emphasizes that social development does not proceed uniformly or in a simple sequence across societies, highlighting its uneven and combined character. As Rosenberg articulates, U&CD displaces the idea of international relations as an external realm and repositions the international as "a dimension of social causality" intrinsic to the very ontology of historical materialism. Crucially, this implies that the "articulation of unevenness across a multiplicity of societies produces additional causal mechanisms [...] which impart to [historical development] a specifically inter-societal or international dimension." In Rosenberg's words:

> "[U&CD] comprises in that sense an emphatically historical sociological conception. However, by simultaneously asserting the 'uneven and combined

13. See Ruccio, Wolff and Resnick (1990).

> character' of that development overall, it recovers for social theory those properties of multilinearity and interactivity which would otherwise unavoidably give rise to a sociologically impregnable and rival discourse of geopolitical explanation." (Calliconos and Rosenberg 2008, 86)

This perspective overcomes the two symmetrical failures in much of modern IR theory: the reductionist domestication of the international within some interpretation of political Marxism, and the essentialist hypostatization of "the international" within some realist and liberal approaches. For Rosenberg, the true theoretical payoff of U&CD is that it "reintegrates 'the international' within the remit of 'the social,'" demonstrating that phenomena typically designated as "international"—imperialism, war, diplomacy, uneven modernization—are themselves expressions of the combined development of capitalist totality.

Yet U&CD, while conceptually profound, lacks a sufficiently developed systemic ontology. It names the pattern of development but offers less by way of modeling how this multiplicity of social formations and processes dynamically interact in structural and organizational terms. Rosenberg describes this difficulty in following words:

> However, because these societies co-exist concretely as parts of a whole, (sense four), typological variation may enter also into (international) axes of causal interrelation. [...] effects which include geopolitical pressure, mercantile penetration, ideological influences, and political substitutionism. In other words, those effects themselves derive their being not only from the variation intrinsic to unevenness, but specifically from its articulation across a numerical multiplicity of instances, (in this case, of concretely co-existing societies). They are irreducibly inter-societal effects. (Rosenberg 2013, 21–22)

This is where Alexander Bogdanov's theory of organization, Tektology, enters the conversation. Bogdanov's Tektology can be understood as a universal science of organization that systematically investigates how heterogeneous elements form coherent systems. He defines his tectology as the study of *"any system both from the point of view of the relationships among all of its parts and the relationship between it as a whole and its environment, i.e., all external systems."*[14]

His goal was to develop a framework that could account for the unity of social, biological, and technical systems, offering a non-dualist and non-reductionist conception of reality. For Bogdanov, human societies can be understood as complex systems whose stability and change are

14. See Bogdanov 1984, 52.

influenced by the organization of their internal parts and their interactions with external environments.

The relevance of Tektology to U&CD lies in its capacity to formalize the part-whole logic that underpins world-systems thinking and uneven development. Rather than assuming discrete national units or self-contained class structures, Bogdanov sees social formations as dynamically evolving systems whose properties emerge from the interplay between internal differentiation and external pressure:

> If societies, classes, or groups interact destructively and de-organize each other, the very reason for it is that each of these collectives desires to organize the world and mankind in accordance with its own purpose. This is an outcome of the separateness and isolation of organizing forces, an outcome which prevents us from achieving this unity and common harmonious organization. It is a struggle between organizational forms. (Bogdanov, 1989 [1917], 3–4)

In his terms, each system maintains itself through "organizational equilibrium," but is always exposed to "egression" (the expulsion or marginalization of subsystems) and "degression" (structural breakdown), especially under conditions of intensified interaction and competition, precisely the kinds of dynamics U&CD describes at the geopolitical level.

Bogdanov's Tektology thus provides a conceptual apparatus to grasp what Rosenberg calls the "interactive shape of the historical process itself," a process in which social forms are shaped not only by their own internal contradictions, but by the systemic mediation of other forms across space and time. The dialectic of uneven and combined development is not simply a historical pattern; it is the structural condition of capitalist modernity, one that demands a theory of organization adequate to its complexity. In this light, the insertion of Tektology into Marxist IR serves to synthesize the insights of overdetermination and U&CD. It allows us to move beyond the simple juxtaposition of "national class structures" and "international interactions" toward a unified theory of dialectical systems, where relations of production, state power, ideology, and geopolitics co-constitute one another across scales and boundaries.

As Rosenberg warns, if Marxist theory fails to incorporate the general abstraction of uneven and combined development at its highest level of conceptual organization, then "when the consequences of this fact are later addressed—say in step four [international relations]—they will either be falsely derived from the historical particularisms of steps two to three, or else they will be encountered as contingencies that

have no theoretical depth." In short, without U&CD—and we would add, without a systemic logic like that of Tektology—Marxist theory risks falling back into either reductionism or a proto-Realist reification of geopolitics.

By combining U&CD with Bogdanov's organizational theoretical approach, we can reimagine international relations not as a separate realm of power politics, nor as mere surface effects of national class struggles, but as historically emergent organizational dynamics, dialectically overdetermined, structurally uneven, and irreducibly inter-societal.

Class Exploitation, Surplus Appropriation, and the Structure of Global Capitalism

If a Marxist theory of international relations is to remain coherent, it must ultimately return to what Marx identified as the "hidden basis of the entire social edifice:" the extraction and appropriation of surplus labour. While the preceding sections have established the necessity of systemic, overdetermined, and inter-societal frameworks for analyzing global dynamics, we must now re-center the analysis on class exploitation as the underlying logic that shapes and traverses international relations.

In Capital Marx makes clear that what defines a mode of production, hence a society's political and ideological forms, is the specific way in which surplus labour is extracted from direct producers. As he writes:

> "The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude... On this is based the entire configuration of the economic community... and hence also its specific political form." (Marx [1894] 1981, 927)

This insight holds true at the international level, though its expression is more complex. Surplus extraction no longer takes place solely within national units; it operates across borders, between states, and through transnational circuits of capital. The challenge is thus to theorize how the fundamental class process, exploitation, functions in a global system structured by uneven and combined development, systemic interdependence, and differentiated state power. Wolff and Resnick provide a critical intervention here, proposing a class-analytic framework that distinguishes between several forms of value flow between nations. As they write:

> "Consider now flows of value between nations. Such flows may or may not entail class exploitation. [...] A flow of value may also be surplus value produced by workers in one country and appropriated by the industrial capitalists of another country, namely the Marxian concept of 'foreign exploitation'. Finally, a flow of value may be a distribution of already appropriated surplus value—a subsumed class payment—from the capitalists of one country to citizens of another." (Resnick and Wolff 2006, 234)

This classification opens the door to a non-reductionist and systemic, yet still materialist theory of international relations. Surplus value is not merely extracted within national economies but is actively redistributed, appropriated, and contested in and through international structures. Trade regimes, financial institutions, development programs, military alliances, and diplomatic relations are all embedded within this global class process. They are organizational mechanisms through which surplus is managed, moved, or monopolized across borders.

This insight parallels Bogdanov's vision of social life as a system of organizational processes. In his terms, "production" is not simply an economic event but a form of social organization that structures human cooperation, hierarchy, and control. As Bogdanov writes: "*The word 'production' conceals the concept of organizational activity... organization of external natural forces, organization of human forces and organization of experience*" (Bogdanov [1917] 1989, 3–4).

This conception allows us to interpret international relations as arenas of organizational conflict over surplus, not in the narrow sense of commodity exchange, but in the broader sense of class-positioned struggles over who controls labour, capital, infrastructure, security, and ideological legitimacy at the global level. As Crocker reinforces, class domination is always embodied in an organizational form: "*... a given organization of production and exchange is simultaneously a certain organization of human beings embodying relations of domination and control.*"[15]

This insight clarifies the function of what are often seen as "non-economic" international institutions. The WTO, IMF, World Bank, and even military alliances like NATO are not neutral arbiters of global order but institutionalized apparatuses for maintaining specific organizational forms of surplus appropriation. These institutions stabilize the conditions under which global capital can exploit labour across space, often bypassing democratic accountability or local resistance. Moreover, as Wolff and Resnick point out, capitalist surplus appropriators must

15. See Crocker 1972, 201–215.

organize access to a wide array of non-labour inputs, including: "*labour-power, means of production, supervision, credit, research and development, security, ideology, rights to own things and command individuals, merchanting, and so forth*" (Resnick and Wolff 2006, 241).

Each of these domains is profoundly shaped by international relations. For instance, access to labour-power increasingly involves migrant labour flows and labour arbitrage between regions; access to credit and R&D depends on global financial hierarchies; and the ideology of "free markets" or "development" is propagated through transnational think tanks, NGOs, and university networks.

Thus, international relations are not "superstructural" distractions from class struggle; they are sites where class struggle is organized, mediated, and sometimes displaced. The international is not outside the logic of exploitation, it is one of its most powerful expressions. Wars, sanctions, interventions, and trade deals are not aberrations or "externalities" of capitalism but instruments through which the relations of domination and surplus appropriation are reconfigured at a world scale. Rosenberg's insights reinforce this view. He writes:

> "What the 'law' of uneven and combined development comprises is the visualising and mapping of the international as a dimension of social causality [...] [It] produces additional causal mechanisms [...] which impart to it a specifically inter-societal or international dimension." (Calliconos and Rosenberg 2008, 95)

And further:

> "Without the idea of 'uneven and combined development' (or some equivalent) the Marxist theory of imperialism—or indeed any theory of geopolitics—is rather like the theory of surplus-value without the theory of value itself." (Calliconos and Rosenberg 2008, 95)

This is a decisive point. A theory of IR that does not center on uneven and combined development as the structural and dialectical organisation of class exploitation and surplus appropriation becomes either voluntarist or reified. It loses explanatory power and critical force. By contrast, a properly Marxist IR theory shows how global politics is always already about the distribution of exploitation: how it is structured, legitimized, and resisted across time and space. This insight is reinforced by David Harvey, who describes the imperialist logic of capital in spatial terms:

> Imperialistic practices, from the perspective of capitalistic logic, are typically about exploiting the uneven geographical conditions under which capital accumulation occurs and also taking advantage of what I call the 'asymmetries' that inevitably arise out of spatial exchange relations. The latter get expressed through unfair and unequal exchange, spatially articulated monopoly powers, extortionate practices attached to restricted capital flows, and the extraction of monopoly rents. (Harvey 2003, 31)

From the perspective of world-systems theory, too, attention to these "uneven geographical conditions" is essential. They constitute the structural foundation for patterns of capital accumulation and surplus extraction at the international level, reinforcing a global division of labor that is integral to the reproduction of capitalism as a world system.

Surplus appropriation is not merely a national process with international effects. It is a transnational process of class relation, overdetermined by geopolitical competition, institutional design, ideological hegemony, and systemic unevenness. Only by anchoring IR theory in the materialist analysis of exploitation can Marxism fully grasp the dynamics of imperialism, global governance, and geopolitical conflict in the age of global capitalism.

Towards a Marxist Systems Theory of the International

The preceding sections have laid the groundwork for rethinking Marxist international theory by rejecting both economistic reductionism and ontological dualism. Drawing from the traditions of historical materialism, world-systems theory, overdetermination, and systemic organization theory (Tektology), we are now in a position to synthesize a non-essentialist, non-reductionist Marxist theory of international relations.

At the core of this approach lies a double theoretical imperative: first, to retain the Marxist commitment to explaining social and political phenomena through the dialectical analysis of class and surplus appropriation; second, to rework the epistemological and ontological assumptions that have traditionally structured Marxist analyses of the international, especially the notion that international relations are either reflections of national class dynamics or autonomous systems governed by distinct laws of geopolitics.

To fulfill the first imperative, we return to the foundational claim in Capital that the "specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers" constitutes the basis for the political and institutional architecture of society. We extend this to argue that class exploitation and surplus appropriation are not confined to the

national sphere, but operate across borders through differentiated but interconnected institutional, military, ideological, and financial mechanisms. As Wolff and Resnick demonstrate, surplus value flows across nations in complex ways—through commodity exchange, direct appropriation, and subsumed class payments—making international relations into processes of class reproduction and contestation. To fulfill the second imperative, we embrace overdetermination as a methodological principle. Overdetermination resists linear, monocausal explanations and instead posits that all social phenomena, including international events, are constituted through multiple, mutually conditioning determinations. This moves us beyond reductionist models in which national class relations "cause" foreign policy or geopolitical rivalry. Instead, international relations emerge as conjunctural formations shaped by the dialectical interaction of class processes, state strategies, systemic pressures, and ideological configurations.

We then draw upon Trotsky's notion of uneven and combined development (U&CD), particularly as elaborated by Rosenberg and Allison and Anievas, to conceptualize the international not as an external addendum to Marxist theory but as a dimension immanent to social development itself. As Rosenberg argues, U&CD inserts "universal unevenness and consequent combination into the ontology of historical materialism," showing how interaction between societies produces distinct causal mechanisms that shape historical outcomes. International phenomena are thus not contingent anomalies but structural expressions of capitalism's contradictory development across space and time. World-systems theory, especially when reinterpreted through a dialectical and class-analytic lens, reinforces this insight and provides a powerful theoretical framework to develop Marxist IR. Rather than viewing the world-economy as a mere background or structural constraint, we see it as an organized totality in which surplus flows, power relations, and institutional differentiation are continually reproduced. The capitalist world-system is defined by the interdependence of core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones, whose internal structures are shaped by their positionality within this global totality.

Finally, Bogdanov's Tektology supplies the necessary systemic ontology for grasping this complexity. Where U&CD gives us the dialectic of historical development and world-systems theory maps its structural logic, Bogdanov offers a formal theory of organization, understood as the dynamic interplay of parts and wholes. His anti-dualist, anti-reductionist framework allows us to think about class, ideology, institutions, and

geopolitics as interlinked organizational processes, constantly evolving in response to internal contradictions and external pressures. His concepts of "egression" and "degression" help explain the disintegration and reformation of political orders, economic blocs, and international regimes as expressions of underlying systemic imbalances.

Taken together, these threads converge in a Marxist theory of international relations with the following core propositions:

- Class exploitation and surplus appropriation are the fundamental processes underlying international relations, even when not immediately visible. International institutions, state strategies, and geopolitical alignments are all implicated in the organization and distribution of surplus labour.
- International relations are overdetermined phenomena, not reducible to domestic class struggles or autonomous state interests. They must be analyzed as historical processes constituted by the dialectical interaction of economic, political, ideological, and systemic determinations.
- The international is not an ontologically separate domain, but a dimension of the capitalist mode of production itself. It emerges from the uneven and combined development of social formations in global interaction.
- Capitalist modernity is inherently systemic and uneven, producing and reproducing geopolitical hierarchies and inter-societal dependencies as part of its structural logic. These are not deviations from capitalism but constitutive elements of its reproduction.
- A coherent Marxist theory of IR must integrate systemic concepts like overdetermination, organization, and dialectics in order to theorize complexity, contradiction, and transformation without falling into essentialism or empiricism.

This theoretical synthesis allows us to address a key lacuna in both mainstream IR and traditional Marxist approaches: the inability to explain how and why international relations—wars, alliances, sanctions, global governance—function as material mechanisms for organizing and contesting class exploitation on a world scale. It provides a framework that does not sacrifice historical specificity for abstraction, nor explanatory clarity for theoretical purity. As Rosenberg rightly notes, "neglect the significance of uneven and combined development in step one,

and either reductionism or proto-Realism will unfailingly result further down the line."[16] A truly materialist theory of international relations must begin from the recognition that the global is always already social, that capitalism is a world system, and that imperialism is a structured expression of class relations at the highest level of their articulation.

Within this framework, contemporary international relations can be understood as dialectical expressions of a global imperialist system, led by the United States and supported by its Western allies. This system asserts itself across institutional, military, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. At the institutional level, the legacy of the Washington Consensus continues through global financial architecture, e.g., the IMF, World Bank, and WTO, that organizes development trajectories to facilitate surplus extraction from the periphery. Military and diplomatic mechanisms—including economic sanctions, alliances (such as NATO), and interventions—serve to enforce Western capitalist dominance and discipline challenging states.[17] At the economic level, imperial inequality is structurally encoded in international financial flows. Developing countries routinely transfer more in debt servicing than they receive in aid, reinforcing surplus accumulation in core economies.

Russia and China, rather than being outside this world-system, function as structural challengers within it. Davis A.E. (2023), for instance, underscores this dynamic, arguing that state-led interventions in contested zones, such as Russia's actions in Ukraine, must be interpreted through the lens of geo-economic rivalry, where struggles over value flows, energy access, and raw materials reflect broader class-driven conflicts in the world system. China's export-oriented infrastructure initiatives (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative) and the formation of alternative structures like BRICS+ and the New Development Bank similarly represent efforts to reformulate the global institutional order[18]. These Sino-Western and Russo-Western tensions manifest through trade wars, investment restrictions, and technology sanctions, especially in sectors critical for capital accumulation (e.g., semiconductors, digital infrastructure, green technology). Such measures are not isolated geopolitical confrontations but dialectical moments in a global struggle over surplus distribution.

16. See Calliconos and Rosenberg 2008, 99.
17. See Brancaccio, Giammetti and Lucarelli 2024.
18. See BRICS Chairmanship Research 2024.

A Marxist IR theory grounded in concepts like uneven and combined development and overdetermination offers a powerful lens for understanding these dynamics, not as anomalies, but as structured, historically specific expressions of global class reproduction. By embedding geopolitics within the systemic logic of capitalism, this framework avoids reductionist readings that collapse international relations into national class conflicts, as well as essentialist readings of geopolitics as separate from class dynamics.

Conclusion: Regrounding Marxist IR in Overdetermined Class Relations

This paper has argued for a non-essentialist and non-reductionist Marxist theory of international relations—one that preserves the analytical centrality of class, surplus appropriation, and historical materialism, while rejecting the linear determinism and ontological separations that have long constrained Marxist approaches to the "international problematique." It offers a proposal for the development of a coherent and systematic Marxist theory of IR, one that integrates Marx's historical-materialist method with the complex realities of international relations and global political dynamics.

We began by identifying the core epistemological tension within Marxist IR: whether international relations can be deduced from national class structures, or whether they constitute an autonomous sphere with their own logic. Rejecting both reductionism and Realist-style dualism, we proposed instead a theory of the international as an immanent, overdetermined, and contradictory dimension of global capitalism.

To this end, we brought together four key theoretical elements:

1. Overdetermination, as theorized by Althusser, Wolff, and Resnick, provides the epistemological basis for rejecting monocausal explanations and emphasizing the conjunctural interaction of multiple determinations.
2. World-systems theory, when read through a dialectical materialist lens, identifies the global structure of capitalist accumulation and the spatial organization of surplus flows.
3. Uneven and combined development, particularly as reformulated by Rosenberg and Anievas, reinstates the international as a constitutive element of social development, embedding intersocietal causality within the ontology of historical materialism itself.

4. Bogdanov's Tektology offers a systemic ontology that complements this framework, allowing us to conceptualize social formations, class processes, and international structures as dynamic, self-organizing wholes that emerge through interaction, contradiction, and organizational transformation.

Central to this framework is the insight that international relations are not an external appendage to class struggle, but one of its highest and most complex expressions. Institutions such as the IMF, NATO, and the WTO are not neutral administrators of global order but mechanisms for the organization and reproduction of class exploitation across borders. Imperialism, war, development policy, and global governance are all moments in the systemic regulation of surplus labor at a global scale. Building on this framework, we can develop a systematic theory of international relations capable of identifying and analyzing the concrete forms through which exploitation is articulated in the relations between states, nations, and international organizations.

By foregrounding class exploitation and surplus appropriation within an overdetermined, dialectically structured, and organizationally mediated world system, this theory recovers the explanatory power of Marxism without falling into economism or Eurocentric developmentalism. It enables us to understand global dynamics not as deviations from capitalist logic, but as structured expressions of its internal contradictions and its uneven reproduction in space and time. In doing so, this approach not only revitalizes Marxist IR theory but also offers a powerful critical tool for analyzing contemporary global crises: from imperial rivalry and militarized borders to debt dependency, climate apartheid, and digital enclosures. These are not isolated crises but interconnected symptoms of a world system governed by the contradictory logic of capital. Future research might extend this framework by engaging with feminist, decolonial, and ecological critiques, exploring how overdetermination and systemic analysis can incorporate struggles over gendered labor, racialized dispossession, and environmental reproduction as integral to the global dynamics of exploitation. Likewise, further work could elaborate empirical case studies using this framework, demonstrating how specific geopolitical configurations materialize and mediate the global class process.

In sum, a non-essentialist Marxist theory of international relations should reaffirm a core Marxist claim: emancipation requires confronting exploitation—not only within nations, but within the global system that

organizes and sustains it. Grasping the logic of this system is the first step toward transforming it

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Biography

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