

## Does capitalism need the state system?

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**Abstract** *Contemporary Marxist students of international relations, like their mainstream counterparts, disagree over whether geopolitics has a future. Many believe that it has none, either because globalized capitalism has overcome the nation-state or because the 'informal empire' of the United States has overridden inter-state conflict. This article supports those who argue that significant economic and political conflicts persist among the main capitalist states. It does so by exploring the question of whether, in Marxist theory, the capitalist economic system and the international system of states are necessarily or contingently related. Marx's method in *Capital* offers, it is argued, a way of non-reductively incorporating the state system within the capitalist mode of production. This argument provides the basis for a partial reconciliation of Marxism and realism. More importantly, it offers a theoretical framework in which to explore the scope for inter-state conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

### Introduction

One of the major puzzles in international politics since the end of the Cold War has been whether the collapse of the Soviet Union also marked the effective termination of geopolitics, at least on a global scale.<sup>2</sup> Realists famously answered this question in the negative. Kenneth Waltz, for example, predicted that Germany and Japan would develop into great powers armed with nuclear weapons and that the unipolar structure of global politics produced by the eclipse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) would prove a passing phenomenon as states started to balance against the United States: 'over time, unbalanced power will be checked by the responses of the weaker who will, rightly or not, feel put upon' (Waltz 1993, 79). Samuel Huntington argued that 'the formation of an anti-hegemonic coalition ... would ... appear to be a natural phenomenon in a uni-multi-polar world' where the American superpower coexists with regional powers (Huntington 1999, 44). But, as the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall draws nigh, most observers see

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<sup>2</sup>Buzan (2004) offers a suggestive analysis of the changing structure of geopolitics.

little real sign of a coalition capable of limiting US primacy. For Huntington, the slowness of significant balancing behaviour to appear is to be accounted for, in part at least, by the greater influence of civilizations, larger cultural unities than the political units of the state system, in a post-ideological world (Huntington 1999, 45–46); for Waltz, it simply reflects the inherent difficulty of determining the precise timing of structural trends: ‘Realist theory predicts that balances disrupted will one day be restored. A limitation of the theory, a limitation common to social science theories, is that it cannot say when’ (Waltz 2000, 27).

For many, however, these responses represent unsuccessful attempts to rescue a failed research programme. Some offer explanations that seek to show that, granted the realist premise of an anarchic international system in which rational states must seek their own security, balancing is not the necessary outcome of a unipolar structure (for example, see Wohlforth 1999 or Paul 2005). Others posit a transformation in the nature of global politics: one influential thought is that economic globalization has been accompanied by the development of forms of global governance that both impose further restrictions on the sovereignty and capabilities of nation-states than those arising from the changed structure of the world economy and offer states real incentives to cooperate and to pool some of their remaining powers (for example, Held et al 1999).

Similar debates have emerged among Marxist political economists and students of international relations. This article seeks to explore these debates and, in the process, to respond to criticisms of my own approach made in this journal by Ray Kiely and Gonzalo Pozo-Martin (Kiely, 2006; Pozo-Martin, 2006). I do so by, first, framing the argument in the major controversy dividing Marxists about the nature of contemporary imperialism; second, addressing one particular theoretical anomaly, namely the relationship between the capitalist economic system and the international state system; and, finally, returning to the problem with which we started—the nature and future of contemporary geopolitics. While practitioners of mainstream international relations theory may find the conceptual vocabulary and the specific content of these Marxist debates unfamiliar, they may still discover some benefit from seeing how important problems are approached from a different perspective. Given that I defend the same conclusion as that affirmed by realists—that the end of the Cold War did not terminate geopolitical competition—of necessity I make some points about the relationship between Marxism and realism, though there is much more that could be said on this subject.

### **The debate on imperialism renewed**

It has become a cliché to say that, with the Bush administration’s proclamation of a ‘long war’ against terrorism, imperialism is back with a vengeance. This has coincided with a renaissance of Marxist writing on imperialism. Of course, this is not exactly a coincidence, but the intellectual revival predated George W Bush’s entry to the White House. It was the conjuncture of the 1990s—in particular, the combination of the unrivalled hegemony of the US and the proliferating discourse of globalization—that commanded a new focus on imperialism among Marxist

theorists (see, for example, Rupert and Smith 2002 for a good range of theoretical perspectives, and, on the conjuncture, Rosenberg 2005). Of course, this return was no simple repetition. Common ground among most contributors to the resulting debates was that the theory of imperialism formulated by Vladimir Lenin and considerably refined by Nikolai Bukharin during World War I was a dead dog (for a rare exception, see Halliday 2002, and, for the originals, Lenin 1964 and Bukharin 1972).

Nevertheless the Lenin-Bukharin theory can provide a useful framework for contrasting the positions staked out in the current Marxist discussion of imperialism.<sup>3</sup> This theory did two things: (1) it offered an account of the specific phase of capitalist development that Marxists of the time generally agreed had been reached by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which the concentration and centralization of capital had produced what Rudolf Hilferding called 'organized capitalism' at the national level, culminating (Bukharin affirmed more strongly than Lenin) in the fusion of the state and private capital; and (2) it attempted an explanation of the geopolitical rivalries among the great powers that produced World War I as a consequence of the economic and territorial competition of the 'state capitalist trusts' that now dominated these states. Given these two claims, it can be understood why both Lenin and Bukharin were so hostile to Karl Kautsky's theory of ultra-imperialism (Kautsky 1984), which asserted that the process of 'organization' would not stop at the national level but would so integrate capital transnationally as to make war irrational from a capitalist perspective (Callinicos 2002).

This is not the place for a full assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Lenin-Bukharin theory (see Callinicos, 1987, 79–88; 1991). More to the point, claim (2) can be used as a template for framing contemporary debates. One can identify, broadly speaking, three positions. First, there are those who offer a version of Kautsky's argument. Thus, Michael Hardt, Toni Negri, and William Robinson all claim that capitalism is now organized both economically and politically along transnational lines: the conclusion straightforwardly follows that geopolitical conflicts among the leading capitalist states are obsolete (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Robinson 2004). The minor premise of this argument is that the inter-state system that has provided the structural context of geopolitical rivalries, first in Europe, then globally, for the past few centuries is neither inherently necessary nor any longer required for capitalist relations of production to function optimally. This claim has been very strongly contested, notably by Ellen Wood (Wood 2002, 2003), but those who reject it do not share the same view of contemporary imperialism. A second position, argued systematically by Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, asserts that while capitalism needs the state system, the US has succeeded in constructing since World War II an 'informal empire' that effectively subordinates the other leading capitalist states to American hegemony

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<sup>3</sup>In a brief, primarily conceptual paper of this kind, a degree of stylization is appropriate. The Lenin-Bukharin theory was by no means the only perspective on imperialism offered by Marxists during the eras of the Second and Third Internationals: Rosa Luxemburg offered a significantly different explanation whose major premise—the theory of capitalist breakdown developed in *The accumulation of capital*—was implicitly rejected by Lenin and explicitly criticized by Bukharin: see Luxemburg and Bukharin (1972).

(Panitch and Gindin 2003, 2004, 2005). This argument implies the same conclusion as is affirmed by Hardt, Negri and Robinson: geopolitical competition is obsolete. Neither the crisis of the 1970s, in which Japanese and West German economic competition with the US played a significant causal role, nor the contretemps over the Iraq war, has significantly dented American primacy, according to Panitch and Gindin.

It is probably fair to say that some version of this position is widely supported on the intellectual left; for example, it informs the editorial outlook of the *New Left Review*. It has the merit of consistency with the assertion of American national power under George W Bush (a development highly embarrassing to Hardt and Negri: see Boron 2005), and it certainly captures the asymmetry of power between the US and all other states in the post-Cold War era. Kiely has put forward a variant on this position that differs from Hardt and Negri in asserting that 'the increased globalization of capital does not mean the erosion of the nation state or the end of a hierarchical nation-state system', but stresses the benefits that US hegemony offers the other leading capitalist classes: accordingly, 'the most useful classical Marxist theory for understanding current realities is Kautsky's ... theory of ultra-imperialist cooperation between the core capitalist states' (Kiely 2006).

Both these perspectives are contested by a third group, dubbed 'theorists of the new imperialism' by Kiely (2005, 32–34). They are most prominently represented by David Harvey, but also include Walden Bello, Peter Gowan, Chris Harman, John Rees, Claude Serfati and myself (Bello 2005, Callinicos 2003, Gowan 1999, Harman 2003, Harvey 2003, Rees 2006, Serfati 2004). Broadly speaking, all these theorists affirm the following:

1. Global capitalism has yet to exit from the era of economic crisis into which it entered in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Brenner 1998, 2002);
2. One important dimension of this crisis is the division of advanced capitalism between three competing centres of economic and political power, the so-called Triad of Western Europe, North America and East Asia;
3. Consequently, despite the real asymmetries of power between the US and the other leading capitalist states, significant conflicts of interest exist among them (and indeed other states such as Russia and China) that are likely, in the context of the continuing 'long downturn', to give rise to geopolitical struggles.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>From a realist perspective, of course, asymmetry of power does not exclude geopolitical conflict but may rather produce it if unipolarity provokes balancing against the hegemon, but Marxist and non-Marxist versions of hegemonic stability theory suggest that, so long as the dominant power provides public goods, other states may have an incentive to cooperate: see, for example, Gilpin (1981). The above classification of current debates is not exhaustive. The most important contemporary exponent of world systems theory, Giovanni Arrighi, spreads himself with brio across all three positions: he certainly rejects Hardt's and Negri's premises but accepts their conclusion (that geopolitical rivalries are obsolete), while further affirming that, while the US is currently hegemonic, its dominance has probably entered its 'terminal crisis'. See, for example, Arrighi (2005a, 2005b). Robert Brenner's position is also, albeit in a different way, inassimilable to this classification, though he would probably not reject the three propositions listed in the text (see Brenner 2006).

This third school of thought therefore differs from the other two in claiming that geopolitical conflict continues in the post-Cold War era. I have myself expressed this view strongly in debate with Panitch and Gindin (Callinicos 2005a, 2006; Panitch and Gindin 2006). Plainly, who is right or wrong about this and other issues is ultimately an empirical and historical question. What I want to do in this paper is to clarify some theoretical problems as a way of addressing criticisms that have been made of Harvey's and my views. Perhaps I should preface this with some remarks about where I am coming from. I start from a standpoint that is relatively sympathetic to the Lenin-Bukharin theory but recognizes that the theory's limitations demand criticism, revision, and refinement. Therefore, *pace* some lazy critics, my position is not simply a reaffirmation or defence of the Lenin-Bukharin theory.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Harvey's analysis in *The new imperialism* (1982) is evidently a development of his own restatement and extension, in a broader 'geo-historical' framework, of Marx's theory of the capitalist mode of production in *The limits to capital*—though it should be noted that this earlier work already concludes with an account of how inter-imperialist rivalries and war are one way of resolving crises of over-accumulation (for more on Harvey, see Ashman and Callinicos 2006).

Mention of this analysis brings me to the first point of clarification. It is common in contemporary Marxist debates to pose one of the main questions at issue between the third current of thought and the other two as whether inter-imperialist rivalries persist today. I prefer to formulate this question in more abstract terms as that of the persistence of geopolitical competition, for two reasons. First, though the phrase 'inter-imperialist rivalries' has canonical status in Marxist discussion deriving from the Lenin-Bukharin theory, it has the disadvantage of equating conflicts between states with the polarization of the state system into Great Power blocs that prevailed between (roughly) the 1890s and 1989–1991. The implication is that conflicts among states tend to take the form of general war between the Great Powers: the apparent absence of such a tendency today therefore demonstrates the absence altogether of inter-state conflict. To avoid such rhetorically effective but question-begging tactics, I prefer to use the more general concept of geopolitical competition, which

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<sup>5</sup> Kiely offers an example of this kind of lazy criticism. Thus he charges 'theorists of the new imperialism' with simply repeating Lenin and Bukharin. For example, '[t]he small power imperialism of the Iraqi regime in 1991 is barely mentioned in these accounts as "local" conflicts appear to be completely determined by global (big power) imperialist conflicts. The analysis therefore lacks a convincing account of processes of state formation and development, and primitive accumulation in the periphery' (Kiely 2005, 33). Kiely cites as an instance of this kind of approach a collective work to which I contributed a revised version of Callinicos (1991), which includes in its survey of 'Imperialism after the Cold War' a substantial section devoted to 'The rise of sub-imperialisms in the Third World' that takes Saddam's Iraq as a prime example (Callinicos et al 1994, 45–54). This analysis may be inadequate, but that would be no reason for effectively denying its existence, as Kiely does. His historical criticisms of the Lenin-Bukharin theory (Kiely 2005, 30–34; 2006, 208–210) refer to phenomena long familiar to 'theorists of the new imperialism': compare Callinicos (1987, 79–88), and Callinicos (1991, 13–26). Many of the substantive points that Kiely makes about the contemporary global political economy are, in my view, also unexceptionable: it is a pity then that he feels obliged to present theoretical differences in such a caricatured and misleading way.

denotes all conflicts over security, territory, resources and influence among states.<sup>6</sup>

Second, geopolitical competition thus understood characterizes one of the main forms of interaction among units of the state system. This has the merit of reframing the problem in terms of the relationship between capitalism and the state system. Both Weberian historical sociologists, such as Anthony Giddens, Michael Mann and Theda Skocpol, and international relations theorists in one or other realist tradition have reproached Marxists for failing to see the kind of competition specific to inter-state systems as a transhistorical phenomenon governed by a logic irreducible to that of class exploitation. Recently some Marxist theorists, notably Hannes Lacher and Benno Teschke, have gone part of the way with these critics. They argue that (1) the modern state system, while not, as Weberians and realists affirm, a transhistorical phenomenon, emerged prior to the predominance of capitalism, in the era of the absolutist states that developed out of the crisis of feudal property relations but which they argue (contrary to earlier Marxist interpretations of absolutism) did not yet represent the transition to capitalism; and (2) consequently the state system has only a contingent connection with capitalism, which could in principle dispense with it, though they differ about whether it is actually doing so (Lacher 2002, 2005; Teschke 2003).

Lacher's and Teschke's argument rests in part on a mistaken view of the development of capitalism (Harman 1989, 2004). But their conclusion (item (2) in the preceding paragraph) is rejected by at least one theorist who shares this view, Ellen Wood (2002). For Wood, even if the modern state system originated prior to capitalism, the sovereign territorial state required capitalist property relations and the separation they effect between the economic and the political for its perfection (see also Rosenberg 1994). Furthermore, the more globally integrated capitalism becomes, the more dependent it is on a system of such states to provide the intensive management of those subject to its domination. Wood's argument can be extended using Mann's distinction between the despotic and infrastructural power of states (Mann 1986, 1993). A state's despotic power is greater the fewer restraints there are on its exercise over its subjects. Its infrastructural power is, by contrast, a function of its capacity actually to regulate the lives of all its subjects. Thus, the rulers of ancient empires had great despotic power, but restricted to a relatively confined territory around the capital; modern states, by contrast, have, thanks to their bureaucratic organization and the extractive capabilities facilitated by capitalist economic relations, very great infrastructural power, which may or may not be exercised despotically. So one might restate Wood's case by saying capitalist domination not only makes possible but actually requires the infrastructural power exercised by the plurality of states making up the modern state system.

There are two difficulties with this argument. The first is that it suffers from what Vivek Chibber calls 'soft functionalism' (Chibber 2005, 157): in other words, it goes from the needs of capital to the existence of the state system. Second, even if we

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<sup>6</sup> Realists such as John Mearsheimer tend to equate competition between states with security competition (Mearsheimer 1994–1995, 2001), but there is no reason for a Marxist approach that seeks to embed inter-state relations within the global accumulation process and consequently to diversify the interests and connections of state managers to make this restrictive assumption.

nevertheless grant that capitalism both facilitates and requires a far more intensive management of populations than earlier modes of production, why should the exercise of this function have to be by a plurality of states (Callinicos 2004a)? Hardt and Negri are perfectly clear that capitalist reproduction needs state capabilities; they just deny that these capabilities are now exercised by sovereign territorial states, as opposed to the transnational political networks binding together different actors—states, certainly, but also transnational corporations, international institutions, NGOs, etc—that they claim to be constitutive of the new ‘imperial sovereignty’. This illustrates one of the more general problems with functionalism, hard or soft: namely that to identify a function that must be performed if certain effects are to be produced does not of itself explain why the performance of that function takes any specific form. Hence, to repeat, granted that the reproduction of capitalist relations depends on the exercise of the kind of state capabilities that Mann describes as infrastructural power, why should the exercise of these capabilities be undertaken by a plurality of states?

But other Marxist approaches that also treat the relationship between capitalism and the state system as necessary also seem vulnerable. Both Harvey and I have independently developed very similar conceptions of capitalist imperialism as constituted by the intersection of, respectively, capitalist and territorial logics of power and economic and geopolitical competition. One of the attractions of this approach is that it avoids any attempt to reduce the geopolitical strategies of states to economic interests. Thus for Harvey, ‘[t]he relation between these two logics should ... be seen as problematic and often contradictory (that is, dialectical) rather than as functional or one-sided’ (Harvey, 2003, 30). Similarly, I argue that:

the Bush Doctrine can’t simply be read off the administration’s corporate connections: rather, it represents a more or less coherent project for maintaining and strengthening US hegemony that has, *inter alia*, an economic dimension.... More generally, throughout the history of modern imperialism, Great Powers have acted for complex mixtures of economic and geopolitical reasons... The Marxist theory of imperialism analyses the forms in which geopolitical and economic competition have become interwoven in modern capitalism, but does not seek to collapse these analytically distinct dimensions into one another. (Callinicos 2003, 105–106)

I commit what might seem to be the vulgarity of quoting myself at length in part because of the misrepresentation of my views persistently committed by Kiely. Thus, he describes my position as ‘seeing the Bush administration in terms of its functionality to US capital’ (Kiely 2006, 208, 212), an interpretation that is hard to square with the passage I have just cited, let alone with the overall account of the Bush administration’s global strategy from which this passage is drawn, *The new Mandarins of American power*.<sup>7</sup> The real challenge to Harvey’s and my position is not that it is economic reductionist, but rather precisely the opposite. Thus, Pozo-Martin writes:

two separate logics are posited, and thus it seems perfectly possible to uphold the realist explanation, in the sense that at certain conjunctures, the territorial logic might be seen as taking precedence over the economic one. Might not this lead to an abuse of explanations based on themes like national interests or balance of power?

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<sup>7</sup>Panitch laid the (equally improbable) charge that Harvey has an instrumentalist conception of the state at the International Marx Congress in Paris in October 2004.

... Has Marxism not already dealt a strong enough blow to realism, only now to return to its (partial) virtues? (Pozo-Martin 2006)

Pozo-Martin cites me as a prime example of this ‘ambiguity towards realism’: thus an article of mine on Iraq is ‘a Marxist explanation that often reads like an excellent realist one’ (Pozo-Martin 2006; compare Callinicos 2005b). This criticism can be reformulated as follows: Harvey’s and my conception of imperialism succeeds in incorporating inter-state competition only formally within a Marxist framework. By positing two distinct logics or forms of competition—economic and geopolitical—we have surreptitiously embraced the explanatory pluralism of Weber and of historical sociologists such as Mann and Skocpol. To assert that the two logics intersect or interact tells us nothing about the relative causal primacy of one over the other. But without such an assignment of priority, our position is, in effect identical to Mann’s conception of the four sources of power (ideological, military, economic and political), or Skocpol’s notion of two relatively autonomous and causally equivalent transnational dimensions, the world economy and the inter-state system (Mann 1986, chapter 1; Skocpol 1979). Harvey and I have therefore avoided economic reductionism and an instrumentalist conception of the state, but at a high price, since the explanatory pluralism to which we are, in effect, committed licences the kind of reliance on reified concepts of national interest and the like characteristic of realism.<sup>8</sup>

### **Geopolitical competition and the logic of capital**

This charge is serious, but it can be rebutted. Doing so requires a detour into Marx’s theory of the capitalist mode of production, incompletely developed in *Capital*. For Karl Marx, capitalist relations of production are constituted by two separations—first, that of labour-power from the means of production, which leads to the sale of labour-power to capital on terms that lead to its exploitation; second, that of the ‘many capitals’ that jointly control the means of production from one another, and hence their competitive interaction, which places units of production under systematic pressure to maximize profitability and to accumulate. It follows that the characteristic features of the capitalist mode—the exploitation of wage-labour, accumulation and crises—are a consequence of economic mechanisms in which competition plays an indispensable role (for a good recent discussion of competition in *Capital*, see Arthur 2002). From this perspective, the emergence of capitalist imperialism can be seen as a transformation in the nature of the competition constitutive of capitalist production relations.

Geopolitical competition predates capitalism, as both the Weberians and Marxists such as Lacher and Teschke insist. Robert Brenner has developed an important analysis of what he calls ‘political accumulation’ (Brenner 1983, 37–41). In pre-capitalist modes of production (paradigmatically feudalism), where neither exploiters nor exploited have any incentive to increase their income by introducing productivity-enhancing technological innovations, the main opportunity that the ruling class has to improve its material situation is through

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<sup>8</sup> Alex Anievas (2005), Robert Brenner (at a conference in London devoted to his work in November 2004) and Sebastian Budgen (on various occasions) make what amount to similar criticisms.



territorial expansion—through lords seizing other lords' estates and peasants. This requires investment in troops and weapons and also the more effective political organization of estates to organize this investment and mobilize the resources necessary to fund it. Feudal relations of production therefore command a dynamic of territorial expansion and state-building. The emergence of the inter-state system in late medieval and early modern Europe, therefore, was not simply a consequence of the contingent imperatives of military and political power, as Mann would have it, but arose from what Brenner calls the 'rules of reproduction' specific to feudal property relations—that is, the strategies that classes of economic actors must, within a given system of property relations, pursue in order to gain access to the means of subsistence (Brenner 1986).

But—here I go beyond Brenner—the development of capitalist relations of production gives those states where they prevail (first Holland, then England in the early modern period) a selective advantage in the process of inter-state competition thanks, in particular, to the spectacular increase in the capacity of these states to finance and organize their activities (see, for example, Brewer 1989). This advantage was evident prior to the development of industrial capitalism, but the 'industrialization of war' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (McNeill 1982, chapters 7 and 8) gave every state an interest in the promotion of capitalist economic relations in order to produce domestically the high technology weapons and transport systems on which military success now depended. Correlatively, there were the trends in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century stressed by Bukharin for both an increasing concentration of economic power within national borders and the internationalization of trade and investment. These were driven by the processes of economic competition among capitals (constituted primarily as private firms), but they made individual capitals increasingly dependent on the support of their nation-states for the prosecution of their interests. Thus, both economic and geopolitical rivalries brought about a growing interdependence of state and capital, as a result of which the process of inter-state competition became subsumed under that between capitals. The moment of imperialism comes, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as this subsumption becomes a historical reality.<sup>9</sup>

I first developed the historical argument hastily sketched out above 20 years ago (Callinicos 2004b, chapter 4.4; Carling 1992, Part 1). It still seems to me correct, but it requires more precise theoretical grounding, in particular, to clarify the sense in which geopolitical competition can be said to have been subsumed under and therefore become a species of competition between capitals. This requires us to consider the place of the state within Marx's own theoretical discourse in *Capital* and the method that he employs there. Marx originally envisaged that his critique of political economy would be 'divided into 6 books: 1. On Capital. 2. Landed Property. 3. Wage Labour. 4. State. 5. International Trade. 6. World Market' (Marx 1983, 298). Famously, of course, he never finished *Capital*, the first of these six 'books'. Commentators disagree about whether or not he abandoned the larger plan (compare Rosdolsky 1977 and Dussel 2001). My own view is that, as Marx came to

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<sup>9</sup>For a historical treatment, see Hobsbawm (1987). This process can be seen as an instance of what Alan Carling (1993) calls the 'competitive primacy' of the productive forces, in which inter-state competition provides the mechanism through which societies are led to develop the productive forces (in this case by promoting capitalist economic relations).

write *Capital*, he found himself forced to incorporate much of the material he had intended for Books 2 and 3, on Wage Labour and Landed Property, but that he did not really start whatever he planned for the remaining three 'books', including that on the state. But he did develop a method of theory construction that is relevant to addressing the problem under discussion here.

As is well known, *Capital* is conceived as a multi-levelled theoretical structure in which successive levels represent increasing degrees of complexity: thus Volume I analyses the creation of value and the extraction of surplus value in the process of production; Volume III, devoted to the capitalist economic system as a whole, traces the distribution of surplus value, first among individual capitals, and then between different kinds of capital (productive, money and commercial) and landed property, processes that give rise to the formation of a general rate of profit and to the differentiation of surplus value into different forms of revenue, namely, entrepreneurial and commercial profit, interest and rent (Mosley 2002). The relationship between different levels is non-deductive: the complexities that are developed in the course of *Capital* are not somehow 'contained' in the concepts developed at the start of the book—the commodity, use value, value, abstract and concrete labour, etc. Rather, new and more complex determinations are progressively introduced in order to overcome problems that emerged at prior stages in the analysis: these determinations are explained by their place in the overall argument, but each possesses specific properties that are irreducible to those of the determinations posited earlier.<sup>10</sup>

Now this procedure should, in my view, apply to any attempt to develop a Marxist understanding of the state system (one of the many reasons why no one should try to write Marx's missing Book 4 on 'the State' is that, as Colin Barker (1978) insisted during the state derivation debate of the 1970s, states always exist in the plural). In other words, the state system is to be understood as a distinct determination (or, rather, set of determinations) within the larger enterprise of developing a satisfactory theory of the capitalist mode of production. As I have already noted, each such determination has specific properties irreducible to those of previously introduced determinations. Therefore, the fact, cited by Pozo-Martin as an objection to Harvey's and my conceptualization of imperialism, that in it geopolitical competition has properties different from those of economic competition, is precisely what this method would lead us to expect to be the case. Of course the state system has distinctive properties: if it did not, it could not play an explanatory role. One implication of this point is that there is, necessarily, a realist moment in any Marxist analysis of international relations and conjunctures: in other words, any such analysis must take into account the strategies, calculations and interactions of rival political elites in the state system. But there is no reason why this should lead one to an uncritical reification of the concepts employed by realist theorists such as Waltz and Mearsheimer; and critics should identify concrete examples of where Harvey, I, or others of similar outlook

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<sup>10</sup> For much more on the nature and difficulties of this procedure, see Callinicos (2001, 2005c). The concept of determination derives ultimately from Hegel, for whom it means what gives something an identity differentiating it from other things. For the purposes of Marx's explanatory strategy, a determination is best understood simply as a social phenomenon constituted by the causal powers that it has different from those constitutive of other social phenomena.

have committed this error, rather than issue vague general warnings. More importantly, any Marxist analysis following this approach will be radically distinctive in that it sets the strategies, calculations and interactions of state managers in the context of the crisis tendencies and class conflicts constitutive of capitalism at any stage in its development; it is part of the success of *The new imperialism* that Harvey, in so situating the behaviour of the Bush administration, makes an independent contribution to our understanding of the contemporary evolution of capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

It is, however, not enough to posit the state system as a distinct set of determinations within a larger theorization of the capitalist mode. As Jacques Bidet has shown, as Marx recast his concepts and elaborated his arguments across successive drafts of *Capital*, he became increasingly reliant on citing competitive structures to explain the systemic tendencies that he ascribed to capitalism (Bidet 2000). To take the most important example, the tendency of the general rate of profit to fall central to Marx's theory of crises depends on the introduction of technological innovations that are introduced by capitals seeking a higher-than-average rate of profit and then imitated by other capitals, leading to a rise in investment per worker and hence a fall in the return on capital. This kind of argument provides Marx's theory with 'micro-foundations' by showing how macro-tendencies become operative thanks to the incentives capitalist relations give individual actors to behave in ways that realize the processes responsible for these tendencies. Any theory of the place of the state system in the capitalist mode must provide such micro-mechanisms. Sam Ashman and I argue that the interrelation of economic and geopolitical competition must be grounded in an account of the rules of reproduction of two groups of actors, capitalists and state managers (Ashman and Callinicos, 2006). This argument builds on the idea, pioneered by Fred Block in the 1970s, that the pursuit of its distinctive interests by each of these groups will draw it into alliance with the other: capitalists need state support for a myriad of reasons, while the relative power of any individual state is dependent on the resources generated by the process of capital accumulation (Block 1987). This idea, which has the great merit of starting from the assumption of a non-identity of interests between capitalists and state managers, seems to us to be capable of fruitful extension to the international arena.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the implication of this position will be that, despite the entirely valid criticisms of realism made notably by Justin Rosenberg (1994), there will be issues on which Marxists and realists will find themselves on the same side—for example, in contesting exaggerated expectations of inter-state harmony after the end of the Cold War and criticizing idealist conceptions of the international offered by constructivists such as Alexander Wendt (1999, especially chapter 3). For an example of an effective realist challenge in both these respects, see Mearsheimer (1994–1995).

<sup>12</sup> A somewhat analogous conception was also put forward in the 1970s by Claus Offe and Volker Ronge, although they do not posit a symmetrical interdependence between the state and capital: 'The agents of accumulation are not interested in "using" the power of the state, but the state must be interested—for the sake of its own power—in guaranteeing and safeguarding a "healthy" accumulation process upon which it depends' (Offe and Ronge 1982, 250). Brenner (2006) expresses a similar view. Compare Miliband (1983) and Harman (1991), both of whom, like Block, argue for the structural interdependence of the state and capital.

All of this, however, begs the question of the plural character of the state system. Why are there many states? Is it merely a contingent historical fact inherited from the pre-capitalist processes of ‘political accumulation’? Or is there anything inherent in capitalism that tends to keep states plural? My answer is that there is: what Leon Trotsky calls the tendency to uneven and combined development. In other words, capitalism tends to unify the globe in a single world system where access to investment and markets is extremely unequally distributed geographically. It is interesting to see the role this plays in Lenin’s critique of Kautsky’s theory of ultra-imperialism. Lenin concedes that the ultimate formation of a single world monopoly as a result of the progressive organization of capitalism is theoretically conceivable, but argues that to base political analysis on such a possibility is profoundly misleading. International agreements and cartels register the existing correlation of forces among the capitalist powers, but—given that the dynamism of capitalist development is constantly altering the global distribution of power—such arrangements are necessarily temporary and liable to give way to periods of instability in which the new correlation can be established only through the proof of force:

The only conceivable basis under capitalism for the division of spheres of influence, interests, colonies, etc., is a calculation of the *strength* of those participating, their general economic, financial, military strength, etc. And the strength of these participants in the division does not change to an equal degree, for the *even* development of different undertakings, trusts, branches of industry, or countries is impossible under capitalism. Half a century ago Germany was a miserable insignificant country, if her capitalist strength is compared with that of the Britain of that time; Japan compared with Russia in the same way. Is it ‘conceivable’ that in ten or twenty years’ time the relative strength of the imperialist powers will have remained *unchanged*? It is out of the question. (Lenin 1964, 295)

Underlying this argument is Lenin’s view that capitalism is inherently dynamic and also governed by what he calls the law of uneven development. The two are related. Marx’s analysis of competition rests on the idea that individual capitals are impelled to maintain or improve their market position by seeking profits higher than the average rate (surplus profits). Monopoly is one source of surplus profits, but much more important is technological innovation that, by increasing productivity, reduces the innovator’s costs of production below the sectoral average. It is thus the pursuit of differential profits that is the source of the development of the productive forces responsible for the dynamism of capitalism. It is true that this happens only when innovations are generalized, eliminating the innovator’s competitive advantage, and hence the surplus profits (we might see this as the economic kernel of the ‘law’ of combined development). But this is only the beginning of a new disequilibrating round of innovation driven by the search for differential profits. Uneven development and, what is more, uneven development that both raises productivity and is economically destabilizing is inherent in capitalism. It is this force, Lenin suggests, that constantly subverts the efforts to integrate ‘many capitals’ into a single entity. Of course, this is an argument restricted to the economic: it would contradict what I have already argued simply to assume that it carries over to the political. All the same, there would seem to be good reason to believe that it *does* carry over: the tendency not

simply to uneven development, but to destabilizing shifts in its pattern, would constantly subvert attempts to construct a transnational state.

This argument can be further reinforced by the evidence increasingly thematized by Marxist political economists that the global accumulation process leads not to the evening up of economic differences predicted by neoclassical theory, but rather to the spatial concentration of investment, markets and skilled labour in certain privileged regions of the world economy (Ashman 2006). Success reinforces success: those regions enjoying such concentrations are likely to be able to continue to make the innovations generating surplus profits that will allow them to maintain and even strengthen their lead. Uneven development is thus an inherent tendency of the capitalist mode, not a contingent feature. The extension of the East Asian hub of the Triad to incorporate coastal China does not contradict this analysis, since it leaves unchanged—indeed accentuates—the global picture of uneven development. Harman and Harvey have independently suggested that such dense clusterings of capitalist economic relations provide the territorial base of states, both demanding and providing the resources necessary to support effectively functioning state apparatuses (Harman 1991, 7–10; Harvey 2003, 101–108). Of course, all sorts of contingencies, many reflecting a past irreducible to capitalism, others more recent history (consider, for example, the lasting impact of Japanese imperialism in Asia), must explain the specificities of the territorial division of the world into states. Moreover, the formation and fission of national identities no doubt plays its part in producing the intense and exclusive nature of modern territorial sovereignty. Nevertheless, the centrifugal pulls generated by the inherently geographically uneven distribution of resources under capitalism play an irreducible role in keeping the state system plural.<sup>13</sup>

### Changing patterns of inter-state competition

My argument has proceeded at a high level of theoretical abstraction. This has been unavoidable, given that my aim has been to establish whether, within the Marxist theory of capitalist mode of production, the state system and geopolitical competition are necessary determinations of that mode. Let me conclude, then, with at least a gesture towards how this argument might help to shape empirical research agendas. Capitalist imperialism is best understood, I claim, as the intersection of economic and geopolitical competition. But, since (*per hypothese*) these forms of competition differ in structure and are (immediately at least) supported by the interests of different actors, how they interrelate is historically variable. I have suggested in earlier work that the first and second halves of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are significantly different (for example, Callinicos 1991). In the first half, the era of Arno Mayer's 'Thirty Years' War of the 20<sup>th</sup> century' (1914–1945),

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<sup>13</sup>I am grateful to Gowan for emphasizing the role of collective identity formation. Justin Rosenberg (2006, 2007) has developed an extremely interesting argument for making Trotsky's conception of uneven and combined development the basis of a transhistorical theory of the inter-societal. This argument is perfectly consistent with the one developed here, provided that one acknowledges, as Rosenberg does, the much more imperative way in which societies are subject to combined development under capitalism, which is in turn a consequence of how actors' rules of reproduction come to depend on their access to means of subsistence through the market: see Brenner 1986.

economic and geopolitical competition were mutually reinforcing (Mayer 1981, 329). Britain, hitherto the closest the state system had to a hegemon, found itself confronted by two powers that challenged both its industrial and its naval supremacy: Germany and the US. The solution it came to in two world wars was to defeat the former by allying with the latter, but in the process it lost the resources required to sustain any claim to hegemonic status. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was, by contrast, marked by a partial dissociation of economic and geopolitical competition. The new hegemonic power, the US, confronted the Soviet Union geopolitically and ideologically, leading to the polarization of the state system into two rival blocs. But the US was able simultaneously to integrate all the regions of advanced capitalism into a single transnational political and economic space. Within that space, economic competition could occur and, indeed, it became increasingly destabilizing from the late 1960s onwards, but the decline of the weaker of the superpower blocs turned out to be running on a faster clock.<sup>14</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has been seeking to perpetuate its hegemony by making the transnational space constructed under its leadership after 1945 genuinely global and preventing shifts in economic power from developing into geopolitical challenges. The institutionalized forms of cooperation among the leading capitalist states—the international financial institutions, the G8, NATO, UN, etc— provide the political frame of this process. Their role and importance, along with the development since the early 1970s of what Gowan calls the Dollar-Wall Street Regime that provides the key regulating mechanisms of global financial markets, are evidence of Panitch's and Gindin's American 'informal empire' (Gowan 1999). But the overall pattern of relations among the leading capitalist states is much more complex and contradictory than they suggest.

The kind of Marxist approach I have sought to develop here can make an important contribution to unravelling some of these perplexities. It is much easier, for example, to understand from this perspective the puzzle posed for realists by the failure of anything more than 'soft balancing' against the US to emerge (Pape 2005; Paul 2005). Marxists, like liberal internationalists, are free to recognize the significance of the development since the 1940s of a liberal world economy in providing the leading capitalist states strong incentives to cooperate, rather than to balance against each other. But liberals rely for their economic theory on neoclassical orthodoxy, which conceives a market economy as necessarily a positive-sum game, since it treats equilibrium as by definition a Pareto optimum that no actor has an interest in changing. It is undoubtedly important that positive-sum games are possible, since otherwise hegemons would be unable to provide public goods for all states. But Marxist political economy does not privilege such outcomes as the default situation; on the contrary, it conceives capitalist economic

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<sup>14</sup> Layne (2006) offers an exceptionally interesting treatment of US grand strategy since the 1940s that, while starting from realist assumptions, goes beyond them in identifying a domestic 'multinational liberal coalition' responsible for the pursuit by the American state of global hegemony: here there does seem to be an intriguing convergence between a practitioner of realism associated with the libertarian right and the critical interpretation of US global strategy developed by radical scholars (for example, Kolko 1970 and Williams 1991).

relations as inherently conflictual, presupposing and generating antagonisms of interest between workers and capitalists and among capitals, and unleashing economic crises and self-reinforcing processes of uneven development. This seems a much more plausible perspective on a world economy constituted, as we have seen, by extreme geographical concentrations of economic power than that offered by liberal internationalism. The unfolding rivalries among these concentrations will shape geopolitics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Careful thought and intensive study by many scholars will be required to make sense of how it develops. The Marxist theoretical apparatus to which this paper has been devoted is not a substitute for this intellectual effort, but it can provide it with some useful tools.

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