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Boekbespreking van: Transnational Classes and International Relations

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Citation

Baltz, K., & Schirm, S. A. (2001). Boekbespreking van: Transnational Classes and International Relations. *Acta Politica*, 36: 2001(2), 206-209. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450837>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Book Reviews

Kees van der Pijl, *Transnational Classes and International Relations*, RIPE Series in Global Political Economy. London/New York: Routledge, 1998, ISBN: 0-415-19201-3, 192 p., £ 18.99.

The study of economic *globalization* and its political implications has become a central topic for scientists with different theoretical standings but who are united by their interest in the field of international political economy. Though the term is not addressed directly in the book under review here, the author's main research question deals with precisely this problematic context. As can be guessed from the title, the author takes a Neo-Marxian approach to the study of the international political economy, which is specified as an analysis of the development of transnational classes promoting this movement.

The main theses advanced in Van der Pijl's analysis are Marxian in outlook and design. First, there is the thesis of the self-destroying effects of capitalism. The capitalist mode of economic production is claimed to infiltrate all aspects of social life and to produce a corrupting effect on society. It undermines the social and (added to the original Marxian thesis) the natural stratum as the reproduction basis of capitalist economy, which is expressed in the destruction of social cohesion and exploitation of natural human bonds as well as the natural resources needed for maintaining the basis for capitalist production. This is the well-known question related to the *humana conditio* in advanced industrial societies. The second important research question is also inspired by Marxian political economy. It deals with the question of how the Marxian claim that capital has an inherent tendency to globalize itself as an institution for the disciplining of social life can be traced empirically. In answering this question, Van der Pijl complements Marxian analytical claims by the empirical study of the socialization and development of transnational ruling classes as the driving force of global capitalism. More precisely, the author makes use of the originally non-Marxian concept of 'imagined communities'. The study is concluded with a normative question that also has its roots in classical Marxian analysis: is it possible to overcome this development and, if yes, how should we imagine this solution? The puzzle is translated into the search for 'classes' in the globalized capitalist society, which can contribute to its transcendence and to the development of a classless world society.

Book Reviews

The first two chapters of the book address the question of the roots of the development of the capitalist mode of production and the socializing effects capitalism imposes on social life. The author tries to answer a basic question that is very troubling from a Marxian point of view: How has capitalism managed to survive as a social institution for more than three centuries so far despite its acclaimed self-destroying capacities? Capitalism as a social institution is based on the existence of class society and tends to deepen the dividing lines between antagonistic classes defined by their relation to the means of production, i.e., production capital and labour. Therefore, capitalism is claimed to have disrupting effects on society as the basic stratum of capitalism and to be responsible for social degradation and even 'modern' phenomena such as fetishism. The basic argument for the survival of capitalism, despite its potential for self-destruction, rests on the discipline it exerts on both classes, be it capitalist or labour, and on the inherent flexibility to develop fractions of capital and corresponding concepts of control. The ruling capitalist class, unified by the ultimate goal of accumulation developed certain modes or sectors of accumulation during the historic periods. Van der Pijl distinguishes four of them: capitalism began with a period of extensive accumulation (sector A), dominated by a low organic composition of capital (labour-intensive) and with an output that consisted primarily of consumption goods – output originating with the industrial revolution and remaining dominant into the 19th century. Following falling profit rates, a new sector B developed as a new mode of high organic composition capital-'intensive' accumulation, primarily supplying producer commodities, the metals, oil and engineering industries being prominent examples dominant into the middle of the 20th century. The next stage of 'progressive accumulation' (sector C) combines labour and capital-intensive production of mixed goods with the automobile, chemicals and electrical engineering as core industries with a highly innovative research-intensive sector. In terms of scale of operation, 'C' industry combines a concern for secure national markets with active internationalization. Van der Pijl discusses recent developments of a science-related growth, with the 'core technologies' micro-electronics/ telecommunications and biotechnology constituting a new sector D, characterized by a 'virtual' mode of accumulation. On the one hand, this analytical shape of different stages of accumulation is supported by convincing empirical evidence. On the other hand, it is restrained by some methodological deficiencies of the presented data. The exclusion or inclusion of countries in the analysis is often not justified and some findings are highly restricted by the small number of cases. After all, its basic idea rests on the well-known thesis of Kondratieff cycles in international economy with which non-Marxian political economists are also familiar.

More important is the argument that each stage of accumulation is accompanied by a distinctive concept of control which has to be developed to contain struggles against accumulation. Following the development of the four stages of accumulation, four concepts of control are identified: from liberal internationalism to a state monopoly tendency in stage B, corporate liberalism and with the rise of 'D' industries a backlash to neo-liberalism. Whereas state monopoly and corporate liberalism tend to be relatively insulated from international capital movements and social protection, the opposite is true for the two other modes of control.

These modes of control need a form of political institutionalization, like the one that developed in Anglo-Saxon societies. Van der Pijl coins this the 'Lockean heartland' and defines this concept as containing, first, civil society as the privileged terrain of social action, second, the bourgeoisie (with the governing class) as ruling class, third, the self-regulating market as the central mode of regulation and, finally, a transnational mode of expansion. Van der Pijl reckons that this concept originates in the work of John Locke on Britain. These state/society-complexes are contested by their counterpart, the so-called Hobbesian contender state which is characterized by the state as the privileged terrain of social action, the state class as ruling class, central administration as the mode of regulation and an international mode of expansion. The thesis is that in every period the 'Lockean heartland' was challenged by a 'Hobbesian contender' and that it prevailed in this conflict (which is always meant to culminate in war), e.g., Britain over France in the 17th/18th and 19th centuries, and the United States (with Britain and France) against Germany until 1945 and against the Soviet bloc until 1991. The main thesis is that the superior position of the 'Lockean heartland' resides "in its capacity to provide the setting to the most advanced and profitable forms of capital accumulation" (p. 89), which refers to industrial development, growth of productive capital and the widening of its circulation, so that every 'Hobbesian contender' had to give up his challenge against the Lockean heartland and accept the primacy of this concept of capitalism.

Showing how this transnational mode of expansion did manifest itself in the formation of transnational classes and historical hegemony is the aim of chapter 4. It is rich in detail about the complex affiliations of the members of the 'ruling class' and the development of so-called 'imagined communities' beyond the nation-state as the crystallization of a transnational 'ruling class'. The description identifies freemasonry as the first real transnational imagined community of national ruling classes, the Rhodes-Milner group model in the era of high finance in early 20th century, switching to the Anglo-American dominance of think-tanks such as Bilderberg, and culminating in hegemonic integration under the World Economic Forum as the most prominent example today.

Concerning the question how to overcome class society, the author argues that in advanced industrial societies the uprising of the managerial 'class' or cadre, as he calls it, is a sign of the development of classlessness within the boundaries of class society. The cadre, or in socio-structural terms the new middle class, is instituted by the ruling class to supervise and control the functioning of the capitalist system and to maintain social cohesion. Due to their control task they must have the autonomy to create concepts (e.g., using systems analysis) to guarantee the functioning of the system and to shape the possibilities and restraints of capitalist society. Therefore, the controllers must also be informed by anti-capitalist ideologies to try to integrate the proponents into the system. By knowing their status in society as a large class-conscious autonomous group they could alter the system and become the forerunners / the avantgarde of class-less society. This argument is not convincing because the author remains on a rather descriptive and quite speculative level.

Though the study is well developed and well argued, it inherits with its theoretical background the basic weaknesses of Marxian approaches. It is based mostly on

assumptions that do not go far beyond classic Marxian theses, the most prominent being the self-destruction of capitalist society. Van der Pijl tries to explain why capitalism has survived in spite of its supposed negative characteristics by a known and common Marxian argument: capitalism tends to expand globally until the rate of profit can not raise any further because of the destruction of the social and natural resources needed. This argument ignores the potential for innovations within the capitalist framework aimed at retaining global natural resources. Van der Pijl could claim that this is not a stable outcome and contradicts the logic of capital accumulation, but the facts of the development of natural resources since the 1970s speak another language, at least in some important environmental aspects. The argument that capitalism destroys social life and causes alienation of man and that it tends to revolutionize international relations is also not new. The book's specific analytical contribution lies in the precise description of the development of a transnational ruling class trying to sustain capital discipline. Yet, even in this case problems arise around the question of causality: is this a deterministic development or is it based on voluntary, but historically and culturally constrained, actions and is success, therefore, uncertain? Van der Pijl would supposedly lean more to the second interpretation, but since he relies heavily on a classical Marxian approach, he cannot fully dissociate himself from the first. Even though the examination of the transnational ruling classes is quite detailed it is not convincing in arguing that freemasonry or the World Economic Forum are ruling classes beyond or above the nation-state. Typical for Marxian analyses, the autonomy of the state as part of the 'ideological superstructure' is interpreted to be non-existent and can therefore be more or less neglected in the study of international relations. The study of 'Lockean' or 'Hobbesian' state/society-complexes is only a background for the described development and remains mainly on an idealtypical level, although the chosen examples are partly convincing. The important contribution of the study is on an empirical rather than a methodological or theoretical level.

Despite its shortcomings the study develops a framework for international political economy by interpreting the phenomenon of economic globalization. It thus differs from mainstream (neo-)liberal studies, which mostly trace the roots of globalization to political decisions of the 1970s and which tend sometimes to overlook the long history that made the global expansion of capitalism possible. Nevertheless, the usefulness of the class concept and Marxian reductionism to the understanding of the interrelationship between politics and economy remains a highly controversial topic in the field of International Political Economy.

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