The ‘current situation’: Marxism, historicism and relative autonomy

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Abstract
Kevin Cox’s (2013) paper makes a strong case for a historical–geographical materialism, based in what he calls ‘classical Marxism’, as a better means to engage the world than critical realism. In demonstrating why this is so, he defends a Marxism that is caught in a trap much like that Nicos Poulantzas labelled ‘historicist’. This leads Cox to ignore a large part of the best work in contemporary Marxist geography, and thus also to underestimate what a more complex historical geographical materialism can help us to understand.

Keywords
historicism, Marxism, Poulantzas, relative autonomy

I am no longer young, but I am yet young enough to have missed the brief flare of critical realist enthusiasm in human geography. By the time I was in graduate school in the late 1990s, it seemed even more passé than regulation theory. Still, many around me talked about it admiringly, almost nostalgically, as anglers speak of the one that got away. For them, it seemed to represent the last, or only, or best hope for a rigorous methodological ground for ‘critical geography’. They praised critical realism’s capacity to ‘overcome’ the structure–agency dualism that had so long ‘plagued’ both Marxism and its liberal alternatives. They insisted their students include Sayer’s Method in Social Science on exam reading lists. And yet by the time my peers and I were actually conducting research and writing dissertations, it had disappeared from our horizons entirely.

So it was with some curiosity that I picked up Kevin Cox’s (2013) learned and engaging paper. For I must admit that after having read the abstract – in which the reader is informed that relative to critical realism, ‘the author’s conclusion is that historical geographical materialism provides more convincing purchase on the world’ – I was wondering if the point was merely to flog a dead horse. That is not the case. In many ways, Cox uses a critique of critical realism as a means to reassert, in clear and rigorous terms, the merits of Harveyite historical–materialist human geography. It is fair to say that we learn much less about critical realism than about historical materialism in the paper, and what we do learn is mostly posited (usually quite sympathetically) as a foil for the exposition of the preferable historical–materialist approach to social explanation. Consequently – and

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because it is a realm with which I am much more familiar – it is an engagement with Cox’s characterization of Marxism to which I am drawn in the following paragraphs.

I really only have the space to make one point here. That point is that the historical geographical materialism (or historical materialism or Marxism; the terms are equivalent here) Cox (2013) so clearly defends and explains is pretty monolithic, and misses much of the historical materialist story. Before anyone jumps to the conclusion that my point is simply that there are many Marxisms – although that may be true – that is not my main concern. Cox quite reasonably delimits the range of his discussion in footnote 3: ‘[e]mphatically it is the work of Marx that is under review here and not the various forms in which it has been reworked since. Arguably it is classical Marxism that has been most influential in human geography, largely through the mediation of David Harvey’. This characterization of Marxism-in-geography is no longer quite accurate, and the complete absence of recent work in Marxist geography in the bibliography backs me up on that. But I am happy to leave it unchallenged (though I will return to this in conclusion). Because my main point is neither that there are lots of different Marxisms nor that there are lots of different capitalisms, at least in the critical realist sense that ‘general processes’ interact with differentiated ‘contingent circumstances’ to produce spatially specific capitalist social formations via ‘structures’ like the division of labour.

Rather, I want to suggest that Marxism or historical materialism as it is presented here is a kind of capital-centred homology of the accounts that Nicos Poulantzas (1967, 1973) criticized in the 1970s as ‘historicist’. Since it is not always clear what Poulantzas meant by ‘historicism’, it is worth emphasizing that he did not mean it in the Karl Popper sense (i.e. a commitment to historical ‘laws’ and teleology), and he did not mean it (or not entirely) in the Gramscian sense either (i.e. a commitment to understanding specific social processes and ideas as products of their time). When Poulantzas labelled thinkers or theories ‘historicist’ – his favourite target was Lukács, but he went after Gramsci too – his main point was that they took the social totality as ‘expressive’ of both (a) the ‘current situation’, a ‘materialization of unilinear time’ (2008 [1966]: 163) and (b) the ideology of the dominant class in a social formation (1973: 195–201).1 ‘[C]omplex organization’ is thus ‘reduced to a central “monist” instance, the original donor of meaning to the unity. This instance can be represented either by the “economic level”, empirically conceived, or by a “subject” of history on the idealist pattern. The succession of the various social formations itself is reduced to the auto-development of this instance. History becomes the unilinear, temporal becoming of this “subject” (1967: 60). This ‘expressive totality’ (1973: 197–198), anchored in a sort of power-centre that determines everything, cannot account for what he argued was the overwhelming complexity, structural differentiation and ‘relative autonomy’ of the ‘regions’ of a social formation (economic, political, cultural, religious, etc.).

In suggesting that Cox (2013) offers something homologous here, I am not proposing a Gibson-Graham critique (i.e. that his account is ‘capital-centric’) or one based in the rigid Althusserian structuralism to which Poulantzas was at one stage drawn. My point is actually much simpler: the way historical materialism operates according to Cox, it is the method/theory of the inexorably logical unfolding of capital, and capital alone, in the world. For Cox – and for Harvey also – capital is in command of a process of continually ‘re-totalizing’ the world, producing space and social relations intended to meet its accumulatory needs. Of course, neither Cox nor Harvey see these processes as stable. Working class resistance and the encrustations of place, for instance, trouble capital’s efforts. Its movement thus frequently meets its limits, and needs to be reigned, or displaced, or reinvented. But they always make sense on capitalist terms, however temporarily. Even when they are short-lived or miss their mark, the elements of the world are moments in an expressive totality of which capital (accumulation) is the origin.

Poulantzas, however, was convinced that a capitalist social formation can neither be reduced to a product of the relations or ideologies of its time (if nothing else, other times and places are also a factor) nor understood as a straightforward expression of
the coherent ideology or political economy of one
fraction of society, however powerful. Different
dynamics and different forces are at work in differ-
ent ‘regions’ of the social formation (as are different
processes of ‘causation’). Different modes of direc-
tion, power and force consolidate what he called
‘structures’, but we need not go structuralist to get
his point, which is that outside of an examination
of a mode of production in its ‘pure’ form (1973:
57), things get extraordinarily complex. This is not
to deny that capital is not dominant or hegemonic
or both; rather it is to remember that the truths that
historical materialism or Marxism bring to light are
not only the processes by which capital ‘suspends’
and/or overcomes its contradictions (which is the
impression you would get here). Historical material-
ism’s objects of inquiry are also – and this, by the
way, is in my opinion the real legacy of Poulantzas
– the ways in which these contradictions are
contained in, lived in, managed (for a time) in
‘structures’, institutions, relations, ideologies (and
whatever else you want to emphasize) that are
relatively autonomous from capital.

That relative autonomy means everything. And it
is incompatible with the idea of an ‘expressive’
capitalist totality (but not with totality per se). Not
merely because it allows for institutions, like the
‘welfare state’, that can limit capital’s tendency to
self-destruction. This would in fact fit quite nicely
with the notion of an expressive totality, that is, a
social formation whose anatomy is a consequence
of capital’s constant ‘re-totalizations’. Relative
autonomy describes something more than an external,
not-necessarily-capitalist ‘tool’ capital can use
to rule. Instead, its most fundamental characteristic
resides in the capitalist separation of the economic
and the political ‘regions’ of a social formation
(1976: 71–72). The point is that this separation is not
a ruse, an illusion capital substitutes for a world that
is not ‘really’ there. On the contrary, although there
is nothing transhistorically inevitable about it, the
politics–economy separation is constitutive of capital-
ism, it is a real abstraction, a separation that is
made true in the world (2008 [1965]: 30). Conse-
quently, capitalism is founded on the determination
of separation as much as totality, on a suite of logics,
not only capital-logic.

For Poulantzas, of course, the state is preeminent
among these mechanisms: ‘The modern state does
not translate the ‘interests’ of the dominant classes
at the political level, but the relationship between
those interests and the interests of the dominated
classes – which means that it precisely constitutes
the ‘political’ expression of the dominant classes’
(2008 [1965]: 80; emphasis in original). It is not ‘the
rational kernel of civil society’ – this being the
essence, for example, of the classical Marxist argu-
ment that Keynesianism was an attempt to ‘save
capitalism’ – but a ‘contradictory condensation of
a balance of forces’, an ‘unstable equilibrium of
compromises’ (1975: 170; 1976: 71). I would argue
that it is virtually impossible to develop an historical
geographical materialist account of the modern state
without starting with this observation. Indeed, the
expressive totalizing of Cox’s (2013) Marxism goes
some way toward explaining why the state, or ideol-
ogy, or politics, are not significant topics of his
discussion.

Certainly, the few times he mentions it, the state
is historicized in its mode of production (feudal,
slave, capitalist, etc.), and does not just appear as
some uncomplicated ‘executive committee’. But it
is fair to say that Cox’s (2013) rejection of ‘empiri-
cist abstraction’ is a far cry from the complex
contradiction that infuses every moment of social
life in Poulantzas’ account. Say what you like about
his ‘empirical’ work (e.g. Poulantzas, 1974), but it is
clear that Poulantzas’ lens gave him insights into an
array of capitalist state forms and regimes – fascist,
state capitalist, Bonapartist, monopoly capitalist,
peasant–semiproletarian and so on – that historical
geographical materialism of the Harvey variety has
thus far proven unable or unwilling to elucidate.
There are many different actually existing capital-
isms, but their ‘specificities’ have nothing necessa-
ryly to do with empirical ‘contingency’. Cox’s
historical materialism dismisses the difference
between the two, and thus, while it rightly deempha-
sizes the latter, ignores the former. Surely no con-
temporary Marxist would, for example, analyze
modern Chinese capital as ‘contingent’, but it sure
as heck has conjunctural specificities that cannot
be reduced to the expression of capitalist
imperatives.
So, to come back to where we started: even though Poulantzas seems to have very quickly come and gone in geography (unfortunately, and despite Bob Jessop’s efforts), there is a way in which the problems he identified in ‘classical’ Marxism helped undo its hegemony in geographers’ historical materialism. Harvey, Cox (2013) and others (like Neil Smith, whom we sorely miss) have continued in profoundly important work based in the ‘classical’ mode, but they have rejected the kind of fundamental challenge posed by Poulantzas to the unity and modes of dominance of capital in capitalism. This is perhaps the reason that there is no mention or engagement with contemporary Marxist geography in the paper – no Vinay Gidwani or Melissa Wright, no Joel Wainwright or Ruthie Gilmore: because it cannot fit with this vision of historical geographical materialism. Yet all of it poses a far more interesting and valuable challenge to Marxist method/theory than critical realism ever did.

Note
1. Poulantzas defines a social formation as ‘a social whole, in the widest sense, at a given moment in its historical existence’ (1973: 15).

References