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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Economy and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713685159>

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To cite this Article: Yohan Ariffin, 'The return of Marx in international relations theory', *Economy and Society*, 25:1, 127 - 134

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/03085149600000006

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03085149600000006>

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The return of Marx in international relations theory

Text reviewed

Justin Rosenberg (1994) *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations*, London, New York: Verso.

Abstract

Realism may still be the dominant theory in international relations. Nevertheless serious rethinking has been called for from various perspectives during the last decade. Gramsci, Habermas, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, etc., have been used by numerous scholars to challenge realism's main assumptions, namely: sovereignty, anarchy and the balance of power. Rosenberg makes a contribution to the debate by bringing Marx into the fray against both realism and indirectly 'post-structuralism'.

I

Justin Rosenberg's *Empire of Civil Society* seeks to mount, as its subtitle indicates, a critique of the 'Realist Theory of International Relations' (IR). This alone is not a particularly uncommon venture within the field of international theory: realism has been much criticized during the last decade, demands for new 'paradigms' or new 'agendas' have frequently been made, so much that it would not be unfair to say that the challenge itself is not the most original aspect of Rosenberg's book. Its originality however lies in its ambition to provide an 'alternative framework for understanding the modern international system' (p. 7) based upon a broad historical materialist approach.

Similar projects have been undertaken by structuralist dependency and world systems theory and, more recently, by the French *Ecole de la Régulation*, just to mention three Marxian approaches which seek to analyse the relationship between capitalism and the rise and evolution of the modern

international system. In each case however, the concerns have not focused on IR as such, but mainly on history, economics and sociology. Rosenberg, on the other hand, aims at demonstrating the relevance of historical sociology and of Marx's social theory of value for this particular field of study. Now this, I shall argue, makes *The Empire of Civil Society* stand quite apart from what IR literature has had to offer recently. Realism has indeed been contested from a number of *critical* perspectives: a Gramscian critique was developed in the early 1980s by Robert Cox (Cox 1981, 1984), followed by a debate on the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory (Hoffman 1987; Linklater 1990) and by the emergence of postmodern, poststructural, post-positivist, etc., perspectives which have drawn on Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, and even on Baudrillard (Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Lapid 1989; Rosenau 1990). But to Marx, few have dared to return. This is precisely Rosenberg's objective and, in this respect, his book can rightly claim to be provocative.

Because Rosenberg's study is concerned with providing a more promising 'starting point' than realism for students of IR – a starting point which in effect turns out to be an ambitious research agenda for the discipline – I will try to put his work to use by pursuing some broad issues and problems it raises. These problems are (i) 'the trouble with Realism', (ii) the possibilities and limits of historical sociology and (iii) the extent to which Rosenberg's understanding of Marx may or may not set out a 'radically different historical narrative' (p. 7).

II

What is realism? A school of thought which can be traced back to the Renaissance advisers to the Prince and more recently to nineteenth and early twentieth-century historians of statecraft. During the cold war, realism developed into a specifically 'American Social Science' with Hans Morgenthau generally regarded as its 'founding father' (Morgenthau 1948; Hoffmann 1977: 44). In *Politics among Nations*, first published in 1948, Morgenthau's ambition was to erect an 'empirical science' (as opposed to 'ideology') for the study of international politics and to lay down the precepts of political realism, which Rosenberg sums up as follows: a) the unit of IR is the sovereign state. In other words, political realism offers a 'state-as-actor' model of IR. b) The distinctive character of international politics is Hobbesian anarchy, i.e. the absence of regulation by a superordinate authority. c) International stability can only be achieved through the operation of the 'balance of power' (Rosenberg 1994: 9–10).

So what, then, is the trouble with realism? The main charge Rosenberg brings against it will sound familiar to anyone who has read recent critical IR literature: namely, that realism fails to problematize its three key categories – sovereignty, anarchy and the balance of power. The reason for this 'omission' is fairly evident. For all its claims to be an empirical science, realism has always

remained comfortably close to the 'kitchens of power' (Hoffmann 1977). It is, as Rosenberg puts it, the 'conservative ideology of the exercise of state power' (p. 30). To say that realism understands IR from the 'foreign policy' perspective of a superpower (and its quest for 'security' and 'stability') and not from that of the weak and the revolutionary is as obvious a statement as to declare that notorious realists such as Morgenthau, Kennan or Kissinger were not Marxists.

One might then ask, why should it be 'unavoidable' to get 'ensnared' in the debate on realist conceptions of sovereignty, anarchy *et al.*, debate which, besides, has become such a favourite among scholars as to constitute a new genre in IR literature (cf. especially Ashley 1983, 1984, 1987, 1988)? Obviously because Rosenberg intends to use these categories differently. His intention is to problematize them within an alternative, historical and sociological 'problematic of modernity'. Chapters 2 and 3 take up the notion of state sovereignty and autonomy within a broad perspective of historical materialism. Chapters 4 and 5 re-examine the notion of anarchy in the light of Marxian sociology.

III

To begin with, Rosenberg argues that realists are unable to give a 'historical explanation of how the modern [international] system arose' (p. 6). This appears to be the case because realism does not go beyond, Rosenberg remarks,

the bare dating of when one of its descriptive attributes [anarchy] appears. It might equally have appeared in ancient Greece, China, in the period of the Warring States or India before the Moghul conquests. . . . When a putatively historical definition pans out so readily across the centuries, one might perforce reconsider what is being defined, and what relationship it bears to the understanding of the international system. (p. 44)

'Ahistoricism' is a well-established, yet severe, criticism directed against realism. There is no doubt that realists have tended to 'naturalize' the state, depicting it as an independent, autonomous subject. Classical realists nevertheless do have some notion of historical agency. Their works usually insist on the role of history, on the accidental and the unexpected (realist history is in fact a modernized version of Machiavelli's *fortuna* as opposed to the Prince's *virtù*). Aron, for example, assigned the study of international politics both to sociology (which, following Pareto, deals with non-logical actions) and to history (which deals with unique events), thus concluding on the impossibility of devising a theory of international politics (cf. Aron 1967).

Rosenberg for his part considers that the historical issue of state sovereignty should be posed in alternative terms, and proposes to take as a starting point the 'identification of what is distinctive in the social forms of modernity'

(p. 46). What precisely Rosenberg means by 'modernity' is not very clear at the beginning of the book. Further on however the term is equated with capitalism. This is probably why *The Empire of Civil Society* is so concerned with periodization: much of its historical argument aims at demonstrating that the modern states-system did not emerge before capitalism itself.

Rosenberg purports to show this by analysing, in Chapter 3, 'the secret origins of the state' in relation to 'the political mechanisms of surplus appropriation' (described in slightly dogmatic terms as being 'unquestionably the dominant form in human history') (p. 85). Rushing *con brio* (this is indeed a very good chapter) through Renaissance Italy and Classical Greece states systems, Rosenberg concludes that at first sight they 'seem to offer the basis for a transhistorical theory of the states system *sui generis*' and that 'it is no wonder therefore that many realists look to Italy as the dawn of the modern system and to Classical Greece as evidence of the timelessness of those properties which they single out as *sui generis* and hence the starting point of their theory of the modern states-system'. But 'on closer inspection, this transhistorical continuity resolves into a gigantic optical illusion' (p. 90). This is because the modern state, according to Rosenberg, needed capitalism to acquire its *differentia specifica*, namely 'sovereignty'. For, Rosenberg argues, 'the very possibility of sovereign equality is dependent on the abstraction of the purely political states-system which creates the realm of private transnational power (the world market)' (p. 89). In other words, the underlying constituents of sovereignty, of *raison d'état* and ultimately of the modern state lie in capitalism.

The same view – that the modern international system was not consolidated before capitalism – is pursued in Chapter 4 which reviews the question of 'trade expansion in early modern Europe'. Here Rosenberg goes on to argue that sixteenth-century Portuguese and Spanish expansion were precapitalist. These 'absolutist empires' were not 'structurally commensurate with the modern world economy' because mercantile surplus accumulation did not require the constitution of the market as a private sphere and the concomitant exploitation of productive labour. The modern world economy on the other hand is the domain of sovereign states *and* free markets. Rosenberg thus concludes that 'the structural specificity of state sovereignty lies in its "abstraction" from civil society – an abstraction which is constitutive of the private sphere of the market, and hence inseparable from capitalist relations of production' (pp. 123–4).

Now this conclusion seems to me slightly disappointing. It is difficult not to feel that an impressive amount of historical sociology has been used to secure a fairly standard Marxian definition of the state (i.e. that state sovereignty is a form of reification or that the creation of the private sphere of the market is in effect a political differentiation). One is left wanting over a number of issues, not least because one might have expected a Marxian account to address them seriously. If 'war and peace *between* states' should not be the focus of IR, what, then, are the main sites of conflict or collusion in the modern international

system? If capitalism defines the modern international system and explains its evolution, the ongoing socio-economic and political contradictions and conflicts have yet to be delineated. According to Rosenberg, the system has become so homogeneous as to constitute a social whole (the capitalist 'empire of civil society'). What if it were not the case? What if the dualism (or structural homology) of states and markets took different forms in time and space? And what if there were other issues at stake besides surplus appropriation? Surely the quest for hegemony (or as Bourdieu puts it, 'monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1992: 112)) constitutes as much a site of ongoing struggles in IR as surplus appropriation?

In the absence of contradiction, conflict and collusion, historical materialism can all but fall short of its main aim which is to break with idealism and its 'muddy notions of historic movement' (Marx).

IV

If, for these reasons, Rosenberg's historical narrative is not all that convincing, what about his understanding of Marxian sociology? Does it provide new insights into formerly unsolved puzzles? This is the objective of Chapter 5 which returns to the contemporary epoch and proposes to redefine the concept of sovereignty in light of Marx's 'unremarked theory of "anarchy"' (p. 7). The promised theory however turns out to be none other than one of Marx's descriptions of individual alienation in the bourgeois state: namely, 'personal independence based upon dependence mediated by things' (p. 44). This, according to Rosenberg, has important implications for IR theory :

Now let us look again at the parallel conception of anarchy encountered in IR. It clearly belongs to the same genus: the plurality of sovereign independent states lacking superordinate direction; the emergence none the less of impersonal mechanisms of social organisation (the balance of power and the invisible hand of the market) which escape the command of individual states; the paradoxical role of this collective alienation as the precondition of sovereign independence; and the novel forms of international power which characterise such an order. (p. 152)

Rosenberg goes on to note that what makes the parallel stick is 'the condition of social relations mediated through things, rather than through personalised relations of domination. . . . it is this same alienation of social relations onto impersonal mechanisms – the balance of power and the invisible hand of the market – which provides the social forms through which the new kinds of power peculiar to value relations operate in the international system' (p. 155). Just what these 'social forms' or 'new kinds of power' could in effect be remains unaddressed in the *Empire of Civil Society*. These issues are presented as starting-points for further investigation. It is my view however that they are misleading. They merely displace realism's reified account of international

anarchy (the 'a state is a state is a state' assumption) with another reified account ('a state is a state is capitalism').

Something overall is missing in Rosenberg's sociological account. He complains rightly about realism's total disregard of 'social relations between people', but his own account (besides the conclusion) eschews the problem of the actor or the agent of IR. If, as one can agree with him, the realist 'state-as-actor' model should be abandoned, 'who' then is the subject of contemporary IR theory? Surely a Marxian perspective would opt for categories such as class, class fraction (cf. van der Pijl 1984), social formation (often used by structural dependency theorists), social forces (cf. Cox 1981). How to discriminate the dominant 'social actors'? Under which category should they fall? *Bourgeoisie*? Surely, few today would dispute that we would be better off calling it something else (and indeed Rosenberg doesn't use this term either). Official classes, then? This would bring the state back in the forefront. 'Transnational class', which would focus on the role of multinational corporations and international institutions (Cox 1987)? Or, more acutely, 'Atlantic Ruling class' (van der Pijl 1984)? None of these categories is seriously considered by Rosenberg. Were it not for his conclusion in which he describes the emergence of the capitalist world economy in Hobsbawmian terms ('a great machine for uprooting country-men'), thus introducing social actors in his account, it would have been difficult *clearly* to differentiate his analysis from, say, a 'post-structuralist' narrative on anarchy. In works of the latter genre, the problem of the actor is usually subsumed under wider generalizations, such as that given by the Foucauldian notion of 'practices' or 'procedures'. Rosenberg's sociological account of 'modernity and IR' has no clear notion of the social actor and is, in this respect, more of a metanarrative.

To insist on the *Empire*'s failure to address this issue may seem unfair considering that its main and timely effort is to 'think as the earlier social theorists did in terms of the social world as a whole – as a social totality' (p. 4). This view is pursued by Rosenberg in a recent article where he elaborates on Wright Mills' notion of the 'sociological imagination' (Rosenberg 1994). Following this perspective, 'classic social analysis' should consider of paramount importance four 'overlapping themes'. These are '(1) the grounding of social thought in substantive problems; (2) the use of an historical and comparative depth of field; (3) the perception of the social world as a totality; and finally (4) the commitment to the ideals of reason and freedom' (Rosenberg 1994: 487).

I shall once again suspend the judgement on whether or not this should be *the* method for IR theory. My question is rather: what would this imply in terms of 'research agenda'? Perhaps it would bring 'construction' back into IR theory (some fifteen years after Kenneth Waltz's structural realism (1979) triggered the 'post-structuralists' counter-attacks and contributed to establish their current hegemony in critical IR studies). Construction is precisely what enables Mills' four themes to overlap consistently. Without

some degree of construction the social world couldn't be understood – let alone explained – *as a whole*. This is because, in Marxian or Durkheimian 'classic social analysis', the social fact should be '*conquis, construit, constaté*' as Bachelard put it so clearly: conquered against common sense, constructed with theoretical tools, verified empirically. Critique and the necessity to ground social thought in substantive problems are both subsumed in the necessity to 'conquer' common sense, i.e. conquer the arbitrariness of the taken for granted. Theoretical tools are as necessary to break with common sense as they are to *construct* a field of study (the data for analysis).

Such constraints are powerful. They are nevertheless necessary for any 'objectivist' or structural account of reality (and this is ultimately what Rosenberg aims at achieving). In structural analysis, 'breaking with common sense' usually implies the uncovering of 'determinate relations' (for Marxians: those relations in which men 'produce their social existence'). The scholastic trap here, in which many have fallen, consists in reifying the constructed structures. How a structural, objectivist framework can take seriously into account human agency is a daunting question. Perhaps Pierre Bourdieu, who has worked consistently and imaginatively on this problem, could be of some help here. His *social praxeology* on the one hand constructs 'objective structures' (*espaces de position*: spaces of position which bear on the social actors' interactions, dispositions and representations) and, on the other hand, introduces human agency by analysing the ongoing struggles (*prises de position*) carried out by the agents in their specific field. Bourdieu's fields hold no resemblance to disembodied Foucauldian processes or procedures. They are constantly (re)defined by their occupants. Their frontiers – the definition of their frontiers – are constantly shaped by ongoing struggles among their actors.

Can this form of 'classic social analysis' be applied to IR and, if so, what would one seek to study? Rosenberg's optimism actually convinces me to remain positively sceptical. He notes that 'imperialism, general crisis, cold war, revolution, capitalist development and social transformation – here are some of the processes which have made up the real content of international relations' (Rosenberg 1994) and which could be studied *via* the sociological imagination. But these are very broad and general themes which certainly do not constitute social fields *per se*. Such boundaries have yet to be carved out and their social actors and institutions delineated. Till then, the sociological imagination will remain but a mirage: nice to contemplate but virtually impossible to concretize. This is because, once one rejects the realist 'state-as-actor' model, the field of IR extends to the whole *social* world, while the field of sociological enquiry – or imagination – needs to be reduced to a small world of actors (the 'social whole').

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Typeset by Type Study, Scarborough

Printed in Great Britain by Redwood Books Ltd, Trowbridge