

## Preface

This text aims to present an overview, against the backdrop of the historical development of philosophy and general social science, of the various strands of theory that can be ranged under the heading of Global Political Economy (GPE). I prefer this term over *International* Political Economy because the latter tends to position itself, by implication, as a sub-discipline of International (i.e., inter-state) Relations (IR) and often boils down to either international economic relations, or to an (economic) theory of consumer choice projected on politics and society.

GPE as understood here, however, self-consciously cuts across the disciplinary organisation of the social sciences. It opens up new possibilities for investigation and insight although it also is bound to provoke distrust among academic authorities and mainstream academics. The reason for this, I have come to believe, is because contesting the disciplinary organisation of the sciences (social as well as natural science) *amounts to resisting a more fundamental discipline, the discipline imposed by capital on society.*

The discipline of capital today constitutes the comprehensive framework in which society evolves, across the globe. The current crisis has shaken the belief that ultimately, this is beneficial for humanity, but not dislodged it. Through complex processes of reward and encouragement, habit and acquiescence, capitalist 'market' discipline governs every aspect of human relations, reaching into the remotest corners of the social structure and nature. In universities, it is expressed in an intensive auditing regime and never-ending reorganisations, against the backdrop of perennial financial crisis in spite of rising student fees. The disciplinary organisation of the social sciences is part and parcel of *this* discipline.

As Peter Bratsis points out (2006: 113n), the organisation into separate academic disciplines has

much less to do with the requisites of intellectual production than ... with Taylorizing academic labour and standardising curricula so as to increase the “efficiency” of higher education and decrease the power of faculty by making them much more interchangeable.

Yet as the same author reminds us, the disciplinary division is a major obstacle to understanding. ‘A social compulsion must be understood in its totality, as a product of a totality of practices not limited by the typical academic boundaries and departmental subfields’ (Ibid.: 113).

One specific consequence of slicing up the subject matter is that research can be made into an activity that can be managed on the basis of a division of labour, with separate tasks parcelled out to quasi-technicians who are no longer in a position to question the fundamental assumptions on which these investigatory tasks are premised.

Modern universities, as I have argued elsewhere (1998: 154-6), primarily function to (re-) produce a class of *managerial cadre*. Higher education therefore must prepare students for a role as directive, but wage-dependent functionaries, who must take the existing distribution of wealth and power for granted—and yet, *within these limits*, be creative. This means that every aspect of their training should ideally be *de-politicised*. In the twentieth century, this has come to mean that the different structures supporting the established order have all been bracketed from critical inquiry by looking at each in isolation from the others. Capitalist economy; multi-party elected government; the priority of civil over public law; social inequality, and an achievement-oriented mind-set, all are cast as either universal norms or inevitable attributes of society, *naturalised* into aspects of the original make-up of the human species. Nature itself has become a discipline, ecology; however, our exploitative relationship with nature, the unifying condition of historical human existence, cannot be properly understood in isolation either. Today that relationship is the source of growing problems, as both society and its natural substratum are showing unmistakeable signs of exhaustion.

The organisation of separate disciplines through professional associations among other things serves to present its practitioners as technically competent. This has further raised the concern of being seen as 'neutral'. Political commitment (other than recommending practical adjustments to changing circumstances) is considered bringing 'the field' into disrepute, making practitioners ineligible for being called in as *experts*. Paradoxically, politics itself has been de-politicised, turned into a science of winning elections and (as IR) maintaining Western pre-eminence in the world. Even in a characteristically politicised country like France, academic specialisation has worked to sanitise academia as well. The result is self-defeating, even from a 'disciplinary' point of view: 20 to 30 professors of public administration are appointed in France every year but the number of professorial appointments in political science declined from 9 in 1996 to 4 in 2002 (Favre, 2005: 355; 362).

As I will argue in Chapter 1, the first signs of how the class politics of capitalist discipline filtered through into academic practice transpired in the subjectivist turn away from classical political economy by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. This created an axiomatic 'economics' sharply demarcated from the remaining social science domain; other specialisations were then lifted out and transformed into academic disciplines, too, beginning with sociology. The challenge posed by Marxism, and more specifically, by the labour movement embracing it, was paramount in triggering this process. Parallel to it, the divide within the emerging capitalist class between a pecuniary, *rentier* element exclusively concerned with property and profit, and a managerial cadre facing actual workers and society at large, was of equal importance at least for shaping the academic response.

The Rational Choice approach I will discuss in Chapter 2 takes the axioms of subjectivist economics as the starting point for a deductive interpretation of all social activity. It articulates the disciplinary perspective of those who take private property and the right to freely dispose of it as their vantage point and applies it across the social sciences. This chapter (like the others that follow) concludes with a section entitled, 'Applying the Method', which outlines the actual procedure one may follow if the approach in question is taken as a guide for actual research and presentation.

In the development of sociology, the managerial perspective (empirical, flexible, realistic) has long prevailed, albeit within a narrowly defined disciplinary separation from economics. As I will argue in Chapter 3, sociology (in France in particular) emerged in tandem with positivism, which lent it its own disciplinary codex equally ready to be exported to other fields. As the discipline of capital deepens, Rational Choice and its concept of 'economic man' also pervade the empirical social science disciplines, creating the confusion between axiomatic deduction and empirical induction that characterises economics, also in the other fields.

Discipline is never a foregone conclusion. It has to be imposed, renewed, and consolidated, just as it will provoke resistance in all kinds of ways. Indeed all along, scholars have resisted the disciplinary organisation of academia, if only by the quality and sweep of their analysis. GPE as understood in this text brings together those approaches that have done this in the domain of the interaction of global politics and economics. In the process, they have reinserted themselves into the history of philosophy, the one 'discipline' solely concerned with thinking and hence, trans-disciplinary in nature. In Chapter 4, the Weberian departure in sociology which challenges positivism from a hermeneutic, neo-Kantian position; in Chapter 5, the institutionalist perspective grafted on pragmatism and pioneered by the rebel American economist, Thorstein Veblen.

Chapter 6 discusses more contemporary approaches, Regulation and Regime theories, as examples of what I call 'weak' systems theory. World System and Long Cycle theory on the other hand, discussed in Chapter 7, are 'strong' systems theories, that is, the presumed connections between politics and economics are part of a structure of determination that is seen as all-pervasive and compelling over long periods.

System approaches have been developed from various angles. In the cases discussed here, they exemplify the idea that development proceeds *objectively*, according to a logic of its own. Rational Choice and Weberian action theory, on the other hand, are *subjectivist* approaches. Positivism too, certainly after the neo-positivist mutation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is a

subjective approach in that it assumes that the source of logic/rationality is the human capacity to establish and order 'facts' – even if this order is then supposed to correspond to an objective order of things. But that order itself is out of reach for the 'observer', who is preoccupied with the rules of observation and ready for the facts to change.

Institutionalism has subjective and objective aspects, differentially weighted by its representative authors, from Veblen to Karl Polanyi. Indeed if we place 'subjectivist' and 'objectivist' on a continuum, institutionalism might be situated somewhere in the middle.

The third category of theories are those that so to speak rise up from that middle point, escaping the antinomy of the subjective and the objective altogether. Historical materialism as developed by Marx (Chapter 8), transnational class and hegemony theories grafted on Gramsci's sketches for a theory of politics (9), and Post-Structuralism (10), are *synthetic* approaches. In various ways they interpret the objective world as shaped by subjects who in turn are moulded by the world in which they find themselves.

Marxism, based on Hegel's understanding of an evolving spiritual realm in combination with the material reproduction of life, owes its place to formulating such a developmental, or *historicist* approach. Post-structuralism on the other hand tends to emphasise the subjective side, to the point of denying any broader historical constraint. Yet it is paradoxically best understood in juxtaposition with the historical materialist tradition, which it confronts and complements where this tradition is weakest and least developed – the human psyche, language, and indeterminacy.

Rational Choice has sought to overcome the separation into different disciplines by generalising the notion of subjects engaged in utility maximising (the axiomatic criterion of 'rationality'). All other GPE theories pursue a trans-disciplinary strategy, but then, by finding ways round the naturalised axioms of neo-classical economics and bringing in an evolutionary, developmental, or historical dimension into the analysis. Indeed as Robert Cox has written, 'The real achievement of IPE was not to

bring in economics, but to open up a critical investigation into change in historical structures' (Cox, 2002: 79). This might well serve as a motto for the text presented here.

In theoretical matters, one cannot give all approaches equal weight, and they do not deserve equal respect either. Yet the spirit of the present text is that *all theories* contribute, negatively or positively, to an understanding of the world in which we live. No single theory has produced such a watertight 'coverage' of the object of inquiry that a different approach would not serve to highlight blind spots or weaknesses. To paraphrase Hegel, there cannot exist a truth that is separate from the totality of thinking and being.

There is another bias in the present text—the emphasis on Western thought. Euro-centrism is a persistent problem of social science. It has worked to enlist social science into a cultural imperialism that distorts understanding, both for those on the receiving end and those in the West. However, because commercialism and capitalism developed in the West first, social change assumed an incomparably more rapid pace than elsewhere. Hence, philosophy in all its aspects developed in the West most propitiously. That is not to say that Western society has the privilege of wisdom, on the contrary. The way of life developed as liberal society and capitalism poses an acute danger to human survival. But it does mean that the technical problems of theory formation were always most advanced and explicit in the West, and the history of thought has therefore inevitably been constructed around the history of Western thought.

In May 2007, I was invited to take part as an external assessor in a panel discussion of a new German textbook on International Political Economy at Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf, at the invitation of Maria Behrens and Hartwig Hummel. This event inspired me to rework the present text into the format it has now. For the version posted in the autumn of 2009, I have again rewritten parts of the text and reformatted it to make better use of the possibilities a web-text offers. These include, besides the links to general background of authors discussed, also links to works that can be consulted freely—the writings of Max Weber, Karl

Marx, and many others. During her stay at Sussex, Nicky Short of York University, Toronto, provided some key links in this respect. I have also included web-links to journal articles as sample readings, where possible from freely accessible sources. Andrea Lagna has provided assistance with some of these links.

The text has been developed for use in the Sussex GPE MA core course, Contemporary Theories of GPE (the course outline lists the e-readings of this text in addition to the print readings.) The critical enthusiasm of the successive cohorts of students that have passed through this course has been a key factor in keeping me on my toes. Meanwhile the text has also been adopted at other universities—one more advantage of having a web resource like this, but also reason to continue to scrutinise the text for accuracy and accessibility. Many weaknesses remain which still have to be repaired. I thank those who have made suggestions for further improvement, and will welcome more for use in future versions.

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