Realism VS Marxism: The Problem That Drives Socialists CRAZY | Dr. Pascal Lottaz

Has Marxism ever had a proper answer to Realism? The Realist school holds that the division of humanity into separate states produces conflict, whatever the ideology of those states. In 2011, the theorist Andrew Davenport argued that Marxism never really dealt with this claim, and that the gap goes back to Marx himself. We go through the Realist argument, the Marxist reply, the contradiction in the Communist Manifesto, August 1914, and four attempts by Marxist scholars to repair the damage. We then look at what has happened in the fifteen years since: the debate on "multiplicity", the Marxist quarrel over Ukraine and the US–China rivalry, and Davenport's new book, Capital and the International (2026). Support our work: Substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Merch: https://neutralitystudies.com/shop Donation: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Chapters: 0:00 Why did communists fight communists? 1:04 Realism: why war keeps returning 2:22 Marxism: classes, not nations 3:10 The challenge: capitalism or states? 4:25 Marx's blind spot 5:53 Four attempts to repair the damage 7:56 Davenport's proposal 8:42 Fifteen years later MAIN SOURCE Andrew Davenport, "Marxism in IR: Condemned to a Realist fate?", European Journal of International Relations 19(1), 2013, pp. 27–48 (first published online 2011). DOI: 10.1177 /1354066111416021 #Marxism #Realism #InternationalRelations

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In February 1979, Chinese troops crossed the border into Vietnam. Only a few weeks earlier, Vietnam itself had invaded Cambodia. Obviously, wars between neighbors are nothing unusual. What is remarkable about these two is who fought them. All three governments flew red flags. All three were run by parties that called themselves Marxist, and all three claimed the tradition that goes back to a pamphlet ending with the words, “Working men of all countries, unite!” The question, then, is what the workers’ states were doing shooting at each other. One can answer with betrayal or with bad leadership, and in each individual case, that may even be correct. However, there is a more uncomfortable possibility: that the division of humanity into separate states is stronger than any revolution, whatever the color of the flag. This is exactly what the realist school of international relations has been saying for a very long time. And in 2011, the theorist Andrew Davenport asked whether Marxism has ever had a proper answer to it.

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His article is titled “Marxism in IR: Condemned to a Realist Fate?”

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Realism rests on three assumptions.

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Firstly, international affairs are conflictual by nature. Secondly, the basic unit of social life is the group. Human beings are, as one realist put it, a tribal species. And thirdly, what ultimately drives political life is the pursuit of power and security. The groups themselves change. There were tribes, then city-states, kingdoms and empires, and today there are nation-states. What does not change, realism maintains, is the conflict between them. Davenport explains why this view runs deeper than it looks. Every political community does two things at once. On the inside, it creates unity. People share a law and a government, and with them at least the possibility of a decent life.

However, the same act that creates the inside also creates the outside. One cannot have one without the other. And on the outside, between the communities, nobody is in charge. Realists call this condition anarchy, which should not be misunderstood as chaos. It simply means that there is no ruler above the states, so each of them must, in the end, look after its own survival. All of this suggests something rather bleak. The order we build at home is precisely what produces the disorder abroad. War does not return because of this or that ideology. It returns because of the way political life is organized.

Marxism tells the story from the opposite end. For Marx, the units that matter in history are classes, not nations. The decisive line of conflict runs between those who own and those who work, which means that it cuts straight through Germany and France alike. In this account, the state is an instrument of class rule, and wars arise from competition among capitalists for markets. Workers, on the other hand, are exploited in much the same way everywhere and therefore have no real reason to care which flag flies over their factory. If capitalism ends, the causes of war end with it. In fact, Marx was after something larger than peace.

He wanted human freedom, by which he meant a humanity that finally governs its own collective life consciously instead of being pushed around by forces it has created but does not control. Now, put the two stories side by side. Already in 1959, the realist Kenneth Waltz put a very simple question to the socialist tradition: Is it capitalism or states that must be destroyed in order to get peace? Or must both go? Imagine that the revolution succeeded everywhere. Exploitation is over. However, look at this map. There are still many separate communities on it, and each one occupies its own territory and controls its own resources.

These communities now relate to one another like private owners, and nations in that position cannot help but be self-regarding. A world of socialist nations is still a world of nations. If we think back to 1979, that is pretty much what we saw. This is why Davenport takes realism so seriously. Beneath all the talk about the balance of power, the realist message is that, at the level of humanity as a whole, nobody is steering. There has never been a single global subject that decides for everybody. If that condition cannot change, then Marx's freedom ends at the border. And for a

theory of human emancipation, this is not a small concession. To be fair, the realists have not explained any of this either.

They do not tell us why humanity is divided into many societies. They simply start from that fact. Whatever the case, the fact itself does not go away. Davenport finds the problem already in Marx himself. Take the Communist Manifesto, for example. In one place, it declares, "The working men have no country." But a few pages away, it says that the proletariat of each country must first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie. So which is it? Remarkably, the answer is both. The working class is supposed to stand beyond the nation, and at the same time, it is tied to the nation as the place where it has to fight. Marx never tells us how the two fit together.

The explanation lies in the difference between content and form. Think of the state as a container. Marx was very good on what is inside the container: the laws, the parties, and the struggles over policy. He showed how much of it comes down to economic interests and class. What he did not examine is the container itself. Why is political life packed into bounded communities at all, and why are there many of them, each with an inside and an outside? Davenport calls this form "the political," and it is exactly the thing on which realism builds its entire case. The price was paid in August 1914. For years, the socialist parties of Europe had promised that they would not allow workers to be sent to kill one another.

Then the war came, and the German Social Democrats, the largest socialist party in the world, voted unanimously for war credits. The French and Belgian parties, too, backed their governments. The contradiction that had been sitting in the Manifesto all along had finally broken open. Marxist scholars have been trying to repair the damage ever since, but Davenport finds the same gap in each of their attempts. The first is the new theory of imperialism. It holds that world politics is driven by two logics: a capitalist one, in which companies compete, and a territorial one, in which states compete. Its own author admits that this leaves a realist moment inside Marxist analysis. But where does the territorial logic come from?

The theory does not say. It is simply put there. The second follows Antonio Gramsci. Realists treat the state like a billiard ball, he holds: solid all the way through. The Gramscians crack it open and show the social forces struggling inside, and they describe a form of leadership that works through consent more than through force, which they call hegemony. The difficulty is that these concepts were developed for politics within one country. Once they are stretched across the globe, the division between the national and the international is already assumed. The third, known as political Marxism, explains different kinds of states through class relations—that is, through the question of who extracts the surplus from whom and how.

However, a political community is held together by more than domination, because people also cooperate and accept authority. And class struggle always takes place somewhere, inside a space that already exists. Hence Davenport's rather dry verdict: the political Marxists have no theory of the political. The fourth attempt is the most ambitious. It takes up an idea of Trotsky's called uneven

and combined development. Societies never develop alone and never at the same speed. They put pressure on one another, they copy one another, and they come out changed. This places the multiplicity of societies at the very center of the theory. However, if we ask why there are many societies in the first place, the answer we receive is that, historically, there always have been. That is a fact, but a fact is not yet an explanation.

The realist's starting point has received a sociological foundation, which is not the same as getting beyond it. All four attempts, then, end up in front of the same door. If we cannot say what a thing is, we cannot begin to think what a different one would look like. What, then, does Davenport propose? He wants to repeat what Marx did, only in a field that Marx left alone. Marx did not throw out the concepts of the economists of his day—value, commodity, and capital—nor did he simply accept them. He kept interrogating them until they no longer looked like facts of nature and revealed themselves as arrangements that human beings had made at a particular point in history. The same must now be done with the basic concepts of political thought: sovereignty, law, and territory. How did human beings come to make themselves sovereign?

How was the surface of the earth turned into political space? Until we understand how this form came about, we are in no position to ask whether it could be otherwise. And here the 2011 article ends. It tells us what is missing and where to look, but it does not give us the theory itself. That was 15 years ago, and three things have happened since. First, the fourth attempt grew into a research program of its own. Its claim is that the real subject of international relations is the fact that the human world consists of many societies that exist side by side and interact. The name for this is multiplicity. Where anarchy describes the international by what is absent—namely, government—multiplicity describes it by what is present: interaction, combination, and development.

Davenport was not convinced. Moving from politics to sociology, he replied, makes the international look friendlier, but it leaves the hard part untouched: the conflict, the tragedy, and the repetition of which realism speaks. Multiplicity, in his words, complements anarchy sociologically rather than transcending it theoretically. Second, the world intruded. In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, and the rivalry between the United States and China hardened into what many now call a new Cold War. Great power politics was back, and Marxists had to say something about it. What they said reveals that Davenport's diagnosis was more than an academic curiosity.

One camp accuses the other of talking about China and the United States as if states and capital were one and the same thing, and of exchanging Marxist analysis for a realist story of the West against the rest. The other camp replies that the Marxist theory of imperialism simply resonates with structural realism. This is the realist moment all over again, only now with a real war as the test case. And still nobody has explained where the territorial logic comes from. Thirdly, and this is the development I didn't expect, Davenport has now written the book that his article called for. It appeared this autumn under the title Capital and the International.

The book opens with an observation that sounds simple once somebody has made it. For the first time in history, there is a single economic space that covers the whole planet—the capitalist world market—and a single political space that covers the whole planet—the system of sovereign states. The question then is why these two belong together. If one reads a historical atlas from the first page to the last, he argues, one watches political spaces expand from a few scattered cities to a world in which the borders touch one another everywhere. This ought to be the story of human self-determination reaching its goal.

Yet what emerges at the end is experienced as the opposite: a closed system of necessity in which each state can only try to survive. Sovereignty was the principle of freedom, and at the scale of the whole world, it has turned into a trap. Hence his question: why does the political produce the international? His verdict on Marxism is harsher than in 2011. Marxism, he now concludes, has no theory of sovereignty, and it cannot have one because it explains the world from the economic side. And from the economic side, the line between inside and outside cannot be understood at all. What he offers instead is, by his own account, no longer a Marxist argument, although it works its way through Marx.

If I may compress the claim brutally, value and sovereignty have the same structure. Each of them draws a line between an inside and an outside, and each takes hold of the whole world by means of that line. A sovereign order exists by excluding what does not fit into it, and its authority is unlimited precisely because it is the one that decides where the limit runs. This is how the world market and the system of states can both be universal while both depend on a border. The question in the title of the article has thus received an answer from its own author. Marxism as a tradition does not escape. What may escape, he believes, is a kind of theory that keeps Marx's method and gives up the economic starting point.

All of this matters far outside the seminar room and outside Marxism. We have one global economy, we have one climate, and we have just under 200 sovereign states. Whoever hopes that humanity might act together on anything, be it carbon, pandemics, or nuclear weapons, runs into the wall that Davenport describes. So, is the division of the world into separate, rival communities a fact of nature, or have we made it, in which case we might be able to make something else? Realism says that it is our fate. Davenport says that the line which divides us and the market which connects us are made of the same stuff. Whether that holds up is a question I would like to return to in the future.

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Thank you for your attention.