

Competitiveness and Critique: The Value of a New Materialist Research Project

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Abstract

Following Marcus Taylor's critique of Paul Cammack's 'new materialism', this paper proposes a New Materialist Research Project (NMRP) borne out of a synthesis of the insights of both open Marxism and Cammack's project. The rationale for this lies in the conviction that a more 'applied' focus upon specific forms of contemporary class practice can aid open Marxism to move beyond general and abstract critique, thereby making an original and critical contribution to our understanding of the contemporary management of global capitalism. While the proposed NMRP refutes the problematic theorisation of relative autonomy in Cammack's original proposal, it is argued that a more rigorously theorised NMRP can extend negative critique to the current activities of international regulative agencies. By focusing on the activities of such agencies – beginning with their discursive operations – it is possible to discern how contemporary forms of ideology operate in a retroactive manner, obfuscating and distorting the contradictions being played out across the world market; and also how such agencies are seeking to exercise unprecedented levels of intervention and control in the management of individual national 'capitalisms', and under the rubric of promoting 'competitiveness'.

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Competitiveness and Critique: The Value of a New Materialist Research Project¹

In *Historical Materialism* 13.1, Marcus Taylor congratulates Paul Cammack on opening a 'welcome chapter in the analysis of the World Bank', but proceeds to close the book as far as Cammack's proposal for a 'new materialism' is concerned. Taylor's principle criticism of the proposal is that it follows a 'structuralist-functionalist' tradition within Marxist scholarship by reifying the technical logics of capital accumulation ('laws of motion'), and by attributing to the World Bank the capacity to exercise 'relative autonomy' from class and national interests that it simply does not have. In this regard, Taylor's critique of Cammack's new materialism echoes debates which developed within the Conference of Socialist Economists from the 1970s onwards, and which involved criticism of, inter alia, Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, the 'Regulation School', and Bob Jessop by the proponents of 'open Marxism'.² The open Marxists reject structuralism-functionalism for reifying the bourgeois state, and for eschewing the question of how social relations (as 'content') constitute certain 'forms', or 'modes of appearance' of value-in-movement. The upshot of the tendency toward reification in structuralist-functionalist accounts is that political institutions are treated as predetermined, independent and rational forms of organisation with the capacity – notwithstanding the consideration of conjuncturally specific constraints – to adapt, strategise, and perform appropriate forms of statecraft in order to facilitate future rounds of capital accumulation. Class struggle, therefore, is theorised in such a way as to externalise labour's 'agency', often in a particular subjectified form (such as trade unions), before being relegated to a subordinate role vis-à-vis prevailing structural and institutional frameworks. Open Marxism, on the other hand, dialectically traces the internal relationship between the various modes of appearance of labour's struggle 'within and against' the social relation that is capital, thereby enabling the form of the bourgeois state to be seen as a 'moment' within the totality of capitalist society, its constitution determined by antagonistic and crisis-ridden social relations.³ Open Marxism therefore rejects structuralism-functionalism for theorising and analysing political economy in terms of the externalised but coterminous relationship between structural imperatives, or logics, of accumulation, on the one hand; and struggles

¹ I thank the *Historical Materialism* Editorial Board, and Guido Starosta and Liam Campling in particular, for constructive criticism on an earlier draft.

² Hence, presumably, the main title of Taylor's intervention: 'Opening the World Bank'. See the debates in Clarke 1991, and Bonefeld and Holloway 1992.

³ Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis 1992, and Bonefeld 1993, pp. 20-67.

waged by a plurality of capitalist and labour interests in the 'extra-economic sphere', on the other.⁴

This pluralist-fractionalist tendency is characteristic of both structuralist-functional Marxist and neo-Gramscian approaches,⁵ but also, in Taylor's view, of Cammack's work since it 'operates at the level of surface appearances – depicting global capitalism as the pursuit of accumulation by the established interests who must concurrently secure hegemony within this process'.⁶ In analytical terms, then, Cammack's new materialism is diagnosed as being congenitally blind to the reality that 'the subsumption of the World Bank into global capitalist social relations imparts a complex and contradictory character on the Bank'. By making the concept of relative autonomy the 'central concept' or 'cornerstone' of the new materialism,⁷ Cammack is accused of 'an ahistorical form of argument' lacking in 'substantive explanatory power', which succeeds only in its attempt 'merely to invert the conclusions of mainstream social science'. In other words, the new materialism, whilst purporting to be derived from classical Marxism, is shown by Taylor to resemble a vulgarised Marxism in that it is not *negative critique*.⁸ In Taylor's view, only an 'old materialism' – by which I infer open Marxism – 'allows us to comprehend how the social and material reproduction of global capitalist society is mediated through abstract yet dominating social force (the movement of value) that imposes itself in seemingly objective fashion upon all social actors'; meaning that the 'pervasive irrationalities of the World Bank's institutional form, its development practices and its intellectual production must be comprehended not primarily as a result of a lack of "relative autonomy" from specific interests, but on the basis of the contradictions of global capitalist social relations within which the World Bank is subsumed'.⁹

This paper acknowledges the irreconcilable theoretical tenets of Taylor's old and Cammack's new materialisms. The article does not seek to defend the new materialism on Cammack's behalf; rather it accepts Taylor's argument that the relative autonomy of regulative agencies involved in the management of capital accumulation can only ever be illusory. The reasons for this are explained in the first section of the paper. However, the shortcomings of open Marxism are then introduced in the following section. Chief among these is the allegation that, while the approach has been successful in asserting the negative dialectic of the form and content of class struggle during a difficult intellectual and world-historic period for

⁴ Jessop 2002, chapter 1.

⁵ Bieler, Bonefeld, Burnham and Morton 2006.

⁶ Taylor 2005, p. 160.

⁷ Taylor 2005, p. 155 and 157.

⁸ Taylor 2005, p. 156. Cf. Bonefeld 2001, and Backhaus 2005.

⁹ Taylor 2005, p. 161.

Marxism generally, it has failed to move substantively beyond formality and abstraction by 'elaborating the actual historical struggles which have mediated and formulated the development of the contradictions of the capital relation'.¹⁰ In particular, it has failed to acknowledge how class struggle can be mediated discursively. Having reviewed both approaches, the paper goes on to support a NMRP borne out of a synthesis of the insights of both approaches. The rationale for this lies in the conviction that Cammack's more 'applied' focus upon specific forms of contemporary class practice can aid open Marxism to move beyond general and abstract critique, thereby making an original and critical contribution to our understanding of the contemporary management of global capitalism. While the proposed NMRP refutes the problematic theorisation of relative autonomy in Cammack's original proposal, it is argued that a more rigorously theorised NMRP can extend negative critique to the current activities of international regulative agencies. By focusing on the activities of such agencies – beginning, as Cammack does, with their discursive operations – it is possible to discern how contemporary forms of ideology operate in a retroactive manner, obfuscating and distorting the contradictions being played out across the world market; and also how such agencies are seeking to exercise unprecedented levels of intervention and control in the management of individual national 'capitalisms', and under the rubric of promoting 'competitiveness'.

The critique of relative autonomy

In order to make sense of Taylor's outright rejection of Cammack's original proposal for a new materialism a brief detour into the debates on the Left in the 1970s and 1980s is necessary. A working indication of the general understanding of relative autonomy within structuralist-functionalist Marxism is given by Poulantzas in *Political Power and Social Classes*. He writes that '... the unity of power characteristic of the state, related to its role in the class struggle, is the reflection of its role of unity vis-à-vis the instances [economic, political, ideological and theoretical levels within a mode of production]; and its relative autonomy vis-à-vis the politically dominant classes or fractions is the reflection of the relative autonomy of the instances of a capitalist formation. In short, this unity and autonomy of the capitalist type of state is related to the *specificity* of its structures (relatively autonomous vis-à-vis the economic) in their relation to the political class struggle, which is relatively autonomous vis-à-vis the economic class struggle'.¹¹ Such formulations have been attacked principally upon the simple grounds that they construct an externalising

¹⁰ This was the task set by Holloway and Picciotto 1978, p. 30.

¹¹ Poulantzas 1975, p. 257. See also Jessop 1990, pp. 85-94.

dichotomy between the political (the capitalist state) and the economic (accumulation) which allows for the relative autonomy of the capitalist state to be posited, but which fails to grasp the internal dialectical inter-relations of political economy in doing so. For critics of Poulantzas, the separation of the political and economic spheres, and of structure and struggle, amounts to an ahistorical and pluralist theory of the 'state within capitalist society' in which

there is no analysis of the development of capitalist society, of the changing forms of state-society relations and of the state itself. Because there is no systematic analysis of the relation between the capitalist state and its basis, capitalist exploitation of the working class in the process of accumulation, so too there is no analysis of the constraints and limitations which the nature of capitalist accumulation imposes upon state action. Further, his failure correctly to problematise the nature of the separation of the economic and the political leads to his identification of the economic with production relations, and ... to a continual tendency to identify class struggle with the realm of the political.¹²

This 'pluralist conception of social conflict, as conflict between distributively defined social groups organised into pressure groups and political parties which seek to achieve their ends by organising state power as their objective, operating on a given technically determined economic foundation, is the theory which Poulantzas offers as a Marxist theory of class'.¹³ And it is this pluralist conception which open Marxists have located as being central to all associated structuralist-functionalist approaches to political economy, including Jessop's strategic-relational and, more recently, neo-Gramscian approaches. For open Marxists, the implications of this logic are not simply analytical, but also political since they tend towards advocating reformism through the recapturing of political institutions, rather than the emancipation of the revolutionary subject.

At the heart of Taylor's critical reading of the new materialism is an objection to way in which Cammack reproduces this logic. In the latter's piece in *Historical Materialism*, he explicitly makes a case for

... thinking about relative autonomy in a genuinely global capitalist system, and [he proposes] that in such a system relative autonomy should be thought about at both national and global levels. The assumption behind this is straightforward – that where capitalist enterprises compete globally, and where the terrain of the 'global capitalist economy' is shared between a multitude of competing politically independent states, the contradictions generated by the development of capitalism will demand management across the world market as a whole by authoritative institutions with autonomy from both particular capitalist interests and from particular capitalist states.¹⁴

¹² Holloway and Picciotto 1978, p. 7. See, also, Holloway and Picciotto 1991, p. 109.

¹³ Clarke 1977, p. 15.

¹⁴ Cammack 2003, pp. 42-3.

In this crucial passage, Cammack appears to presuppose that a global agency capable of disciplining individual states and capitalist interests to the functional requirements of capital in general would be desirable from the perspective of capital, and finds its closest concrete approximation in the form of the World Bank. Having already decided on this, Cammack's interpretation of the Bank's operations proceeds from the 'theoretical dogma of a functionally-determined need for autonomy'.¹⁵ In this way, Cammack is shown to be theorising in terms of 'political economy's constituted forms', and using 'closed' categories of analysis.¹⁶ In contrast, Taylor seeks to explain the genesis of the World Bank as a response to a particular period of capitalist crisis, and highlights the irrationalities of its ensuing development as an organisation whose ongoing constitution as a supposedly rational and functional capitalist institution is a profoundly contradictory process – an 'open' categorisation.¹⁷

The limits of critique

Taylor's alternative account of the Bank's inherent pathology is insightful, and is informed by a tradition within Marxism which is renowned for its rigor and its uncompromising commitment to the negative critique of political economy. However, Taylor's preferred old materialism is not without its own detractors. Critics have attacked it for failing to move beyond formal and abstract theorisation so as to focus on the concrete specificities of what might be termed 'actually existing' forms of class practice and of 'neoliberalism' in particular. They have stressed the limits to any approach to social theorisation and explanation which fails to strike a balance between a commitment to *critique*, and more 'applied' *critical* research which can account for the quotidian 'messiness' of myriad social processes as they unfold simultaneously and concretely.¹⁸

Such concerns have been raised about the open Marxist project and its failure to acknowledge how class struggle finds forms or modes of appearance which are always mediated and contingent and therefore historically specific. Bieler and Morton, for example, conclude that open Marxism resembles a dogmatic 'Theological

¹⁵ Taylor 2005, p. 157.

¹⁶ Cf. Bonefeld 1995.

¹⁷ In fairness to Cammack, the concept of relative autonomy is conspicuous only by its absence in the remainder of his publications since his new materialism was first proposed (Cammack 1999). And, within his other writing since the 1999 article, there is evidence of a rejection of any tendency to attribute rationality and functionality to international organisations. The original proposal for a new materialism, for example, is couched in terms of offering a genuinely critical alternative to Robert Cox's 'new multilateralism' (Cox 1997). This anti-functionalism is also apparent in a later article by Cammack which argues that country ownership is fundamental to the World Bank's current project 'because it recognises that it lacks the means to enforce the strategy itself' (Cammack 2003, p. 37).

¹⁸ Cf. Castree 2006, p. 260, who explains this tension in the classical Marxism of David Harvey.

Marxism' that reproduces totalising generalisations that 'reduce the social antagonism between capital and labour to the unmediated effect of class struggle.'¹⁹ Bieler and Morton's antipathy towards open Marxism does appear to stem from a markedly different methodological starting point to the open Marxists. The former precisely wishes to privilege the 'newer Marxism' of Gramsci and Poulantzas, with its explicit separation of the 'integral state' from the wider pluralistic social formation, over the dialectical method of 'determinate abstraction' (*bestimmte abstraktion*) in order to reveal the social constitution of economic categories, as preferred by open Marxists.²⁰ Bieler and Morton nonetheless do highlight the open Marxist's apparent reticence toward undertaking less (perhaps lower level) abstract analysis of the complexity of concrete developments within capitalism. As I discuss at greater length below, the open Marxist discussion of the role of international and multilateral organisations which reduces them to almost incidental interlocutors in the more general management of circuits of capital is a case in point, and one that would appear to substantiate Bieler and Morton's accusation of a 'creeping statism' within open Marxism.²¹ Yet, as I argue in the next section, there is no reason why old materialist critique cannot be extended to such global spaces of capitalist management without abandoning the notion that capitalist social relations necessarily remain organised on a national basis, nor by resting upon notions of relative autonomy, nor by instrumentally conceiving of key agencies such as the World Bank as being captured by a 'transnational capitalist class' or some pernicious configuration of US/neoliberal hegemony. And, as I intend to show in the remaining sections of this paper, the roadmap towards such critique is to be found in a (relative autonomy-less) synthesis that owes as much to Cammack's work as to open Marxism.

However, before outlining my own version of a NM RP, one further shortcoming of open Marxist critique deserves a mention. John Michael Roberts outlines the problem well by arguing that that open Marxism fails to accord significance to the role that particular discourses have played in the movement of class struggle over time. He finds the open Marxists' rejection of theories which explicitly examine discursive dimensions of the reproduction and legitimation of capitalism 'puzzling'. He argues 'that it is important to move beyond Marx's account of commodity fetishism, an account that seeks to isolate the determining ideology of the capitalist mode of production, in order to explore the specificity of ideology in time and space', and that

¹⁹ Bieler and Morton 2003, pp. 473-474.

²⁰ Bonefeld 2004.

²¹ Bieler and Morton 2003, p. 475.

there is no reason why a discursive approach can not be made applicable within the insights of an open Marxist account. Indeed, a consistent Marxist form theory would seem to require a discursive approach for the simple reason that ... the form and content of a particular social form of life is usually realised in some way through discursive means. Further, the crisis of a social form partially manifests itself discursively.²²

The proposed NMRP accepts Roberts's criticism and will retain a strong discursive focus. In doing so, I do not wish to overstate the importance of ideology, nor to attest to the rationality of neoliberal logic. As Peter Burnham stresses of earlier forms of neoliberal ideology, 'capital does not wait for the articulation of the ideology of monetarism before restructuring. The articulation of ideology is important for the political legitimisation of a set of policies that by and large have already been implemented'.²³ However, it would be naive not to emphasise the fact that many forms of neoliberal ideology have a prescriptive dimension which, whilst serving as apologia for past violences inflicted upon societies through neoliberal restructuring, stems from the ability of 'experts' on policy design and reform to think 'critically' about the management of capitalism – albeit only so far as vulgar economy permits. Hence, the NMRP will focus on key capitalist discourses in much of a similar way as Marx sought to reveal political economy discourses in his own time as wholly bourgeois forms of ideology, prejudice, and apologia.

Global capitalism, ideology and international organisations

Having summarised the principal shortcomings of both Cammack's new materialism and open Marxism, the remainder of the paper sets out the core claims and preliminary conclusions of my own synthetic proposal for a NMRP. It is resolutely materialist in its approach to the critique of political economy, yet it acknowledges that recent developments in the global management of capitalism warrant a 'new' focus on the part of Marxist scholars.²⁴ I schematically present the rationale for a NMRP in the form of three interrelated core claims: the first concerns the interpretation of 'globalisation' in terms of a neoliberal offensive against labour necessitated by profound crisis; the second explains how open Marxism might be complemented with a Marxist theory of ideology in order to trace how the globalisation offensive has a discursive dimension; and the third concerns the role of international regulative agencies in transforming discourses into legitimating orthodoxies tailored to the globalisation offensive.

'Globalisation' and the neoliberal offensive against labour

²² Roberts 2002a, p. 109.

²³ Burnham 1991, p. 83. Taylor 2005, p.164, notes how the Bank often lags behind actual restructuring processes.

²⁴ Cf. Bonefeld 1998, pp. 153-54.

Unlike many forms of structuralist-functionalist Marxism, Cammack does not see globalisation in terms of a 'new regime of accumulation' but in terms of the 'completion of the world market'.²⁵ In this regard there is actually important common ground between proponents of open Marxism and Cammack. Following both camps, the NMRP being proposed here affirms the contemporary resonance of *The Communist Manifesto's* depiction of capital as inherently self-expansive and disrespectful of existing territorial boundaries; 'it compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production' and 'creates a world after its own image'.²⁶ The expansion and imposition of capitalist imperatives in the decades following the international crisis of the 1970s – a process Cammack terms the 'universalisation' of capitalist social relations²⁷ – can therefore be partly understood in terms of the intrinsic geographical and revolutionising propensities of capital.²⁸ More specifically, however, a modified NMRP can historicise this universalising tendency by drawing upon the dialectic of the movement of value which open Marxism has so strongly theorised.²⁹ Since the collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system in the early 1970s – prompted by a decline in profitability and revolt across the world market – unregulated monetary elasticity at the world level has led to 'a massive increase in global monetary reserves, of which over 90 per cent now comprises "inconvertible" (i.e. paper) foreign exchange', 'with domestic bond markets now topping US\$33 trillion compared to US\$1 trillion in 1970, with an additional US\$9 trillion issued on international markets (up from US\$900 billion in 1987)'.³⁰ To date, capital remains mired in a secular crisis of overaccumulation in which 'money cannot look back reassuringly upon a hoard of reified human labour as somehow backing its promise of embodying validated social wealth'.³¹ In the decades that have followed, state managers have responded to a secular global crisis in a manner which substantiates the Marxist insight that 'if fictitious values turn out not to be backed by the products of social labour, or if, for whatever reason, faith in the credit system is shaken, then capital must find some way to re-establish its footing in the world of socially necessary labour'.³² It follows that globalisation can be understood in terms of 'a major capitalist offensive',³³ which entails a multiplicity of states' attempts to restore patterns of relatively stable accumulation in the context of this global crisis through the de-composition of labour into a competitive work

²⁵ Cammack 2003. Cf. Bonefeld 2000, p.58.

²⁶ Marx and Engels 1967, p. 84.

²⁷ Cammack 1999, p. 21; cf. Wood 1997.

²⁸ See Cammack 1999, pp. 20-21.

²⁹ See the collection edited by Bonefeld and Holloway 1995.

³⁰ Hampton 2003, pp. 5-6; see, also, the contributions in Bonefeld and Holloway (eds) 1995.

³¹ Hampton 2003, p. 6. See, also, Cleaver 1996.

³² Harvey 1999, p. 293.

³³ Bonefeld 2003, p. 183.

force of alienated individuals, and the expansion of domestic markets' productive capacity as a means of strengthening the state's capacity to stave off balance-of-payments crises. Neoliberal ideology obfuscates the class character of globalisation. Holloway neatly captures the class content of neoliberalism when he writes that

the drive to subordinate every aspect of life more and more intensely to capital is the essence of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is the attempt to resolve crisis by the intensification and reorganisation of subordination. The separation of subject and object (the dehumanisation of the subject) is taken to new lengths by the extension of command-through-money.³⁴

The resort to such 'new lengths' necessitates a research agenda that builds upon the insights of open Marxism – particularly the reworking of the autonomist Marxist theory of *class composition* (see below) – in order to trace the specific forms taken by capital's neoliberal offensive in different spaces of the world market.³⁵ The novelty of a NMRP is therefore justified in terms of its potential contribution to defetishising the relatively recent ideology of 'globalisation' and exposing it as a form of class practice. As a feature of this offensive in the South, for example, Cammack's work draws attention to contemporary forms of the process Marx termed 'primitive accumulation' in spaces of world market where social relations have until recently tended to assume non-capitalistic and therefore – from the perspective of capital – anachronistic forms, or where latent sources of labour power – especially women in the South – remain inaccessible to the command of money.³⁶ And, with the increasingly orthodox discourse of promoting competitiveness – which I discuss later – a NMRP pays attention to the specific way in which the World Bank, in particular, is articulating discourses which champion national state reform agendas that are aimed at 'completing' processes of de-socialisation and de-politicisation which constitute globalisation.³⁷

The retroactive character of neoliberal ideology

The proposed NMRP takes on board Roberts' criticisms of open Marxism and places the focus on the ideological and discursive dimensions of capital's offensive at the centre of the project. But further clarification is required here. The Marxist understanding of ideology differs from others in important respects, in that it cannot be isolated from the project of the critique of bourgeois society. It is therefore a critical theory of ideology, and builds upon the premise that 'to understand that capital is objectified labour, that it stands in logical contradiction to human subjective activity, to life itself, is accurately to comprehend the dilemma of our epoch'; and

³⁴ Holloway 2002, p. 202.

³⁵ See Holloway 1992, and Bonefeld 2003.

³⁶ See Cammack 1999, 2001, and 2003, pp. 43-45. Cf. Bonefeld 2000, p. 48.

³⁷ See Burnham 2000, and Gough 2002.

that 'there are, naturally, many powerful and determined modes of thought that seek to obscure this comprehension. The name we give to such modes of thought is "ideology"'.³⁸ In this regard, the Marxist account of ideology is discriminatory. It stresses only certain 'insidious' forms of thought which are related to a distinctively bourgeois episteme arising out of a vulgar understanding of class society. 'Within specific class relations, therefore, ideology conceals objective contradictions that emanate from those relations. Under these conditions ideology can be said to benefit the interests of a ruling class'.³⁹

Cammack has laudably mounted such a sustained discriminatory and critical attack on neoliberal ideology, identifying how doctrinal forms of ideology have emerged from key institutions, such as the World Bank, professing to possess the self-endorsed authority to advise the international development community. 'Far from simply disseminating recipes for development which will benefit all sectors of society', writes Cammack, 'the World Bank and other institutions are constructing a legitimising ideology which conceals the contradictions of capitalism as a global system, translates its structural requisites into a universal programme, and represents it as a remedy for the very human ills it generates'.⁴⁰ His review of a series of *World Development Reports* since 1990, for example, demonstrates neoliberal ideology at work. It is tailored to the specific requirements of ensuring that, at both domestic and regional levels, state managers are made aware of the 'general conditions for capital accumulation' in the context of the globalisation offensive.⁴¹ The proposed NMRP similarly draws attention to particular forms of bourgeois thought which serve to mystify the class character of the globalisation offensive.

Cammack highlights the *retroactive* character of neoliberal ideology in the following passage:

As the twenty-first century dawned, a bid was underway to establish the global hegemony of capitalism. The essential elements of a global capitalist system – the authority of capital over labour, the unimpeded operation of capitalist markets for labour, goods, and investment, the receptiveness of governments to the needs of capital, the presence of domestic and global regulatory orders capable of reinforcing the disciplines essential to capitalist reproduction, and the dissemination of ideologies justifying capitalism and dismissing alternatives – were in place for the first time ... Advocates of alternative strategies are now faced with a new and powerful doctrine for capitalist development, supported and allegedly vindicated by world-historical changes in recent decades and the global shifts in power and authority they reflect ... The presentation of this new orthodoxy in seemingly authoritative texts is part of a concerted process of re-establishing the authority of the

³⁸ Hawkes 2003, p. 14.

³⁹ Roberts 2002b, p. 254-55.

⁴⁰ Cammack 2002a, p. 160.

⁴¹ Cammack 1999, p. 21.

attitudes, ideas, behavioural norms and practices that capitalism requires, and embedding them so profoundly that they no longer appear as requisites for capitalism, but as natural aspects of everyday life.⁴²

Current forms of neoliberal ideology and associated discourses can therefore be seen, firstly, to reflect a defence of earlier structural adjustment reforms undertaken in the global South during the 1980s and 90s. Despite the chequered history of World Bank orthodoxies to which Taylor refers in his critique, Cammack has shown how Bank economists still adhere to certain 'fundamentals': namely, that 'economic growth comes from investment and productivity gains; inflation should be low, labour markets flexible, and fiscal, monetary, and exchange rate policy prudent; trade should be liberalised; and property rights should be secure and enforced'.⁴³ However, in recent years – and precisely because of the limits to the Bank-endorsed reforms – the orthodoxy has been rethought so as to encompass a partial self-critique which nonetheless allows for the legitimisation of political campaigns seeking to 'operationalise' – to use Bank terminology – further rounds of restructuring reforms in the South.⁴⁴ Today, the vulgar economists' prescription for state managers are couched within a discourse of promoting competitiveness – a thoroughly fetishising ideology which presents exploitative capitalist social relations in a 'free' market context in wholly benign terms. As I explain later, such discourses are strikingly explicit at times in their orientation towards strategising class practice and legitimating the offensive against labour.

International organisations and national states

As with Cammack's original new materialism, the NMRP accords strategic importance to international organisations in terms of their practical and ideological role in the globalisation offensive.⁴⁵ However, the NMRP need not overstate the significance of such organisations insofar as globalisation is, for both Cammack and open Marxists, a project in which national states play the central role. Of course, it is at the nexus between the national and the international where Cammack posits relative autonomy, so this proposal for a NMRP must proceed with caution, so as not to reproduce a Coxian account of globalisation, for instance, which is attacked by open Marxists for associating international organisations with a '*nebuleuse* personified as the global economy'.⁴⁶ Essentially, Cox's analysis depicts neoliberal statecraft in terms of adapting to the exigencies of an externally imposed neoliberal

⁴² Cammack 2002a, p. 159.

⁴³ Cammack 2002c, p. 661.

⁴⁴ See Fine 2001, pp. 131-54.

⁴⁵ Cammack 2002d and 2003, borrowed from Marx 1976, p. 929.

⁴⁶ Cox cited in Bonefeld 2000, p. 35.

project.⁴⁷ However, if globalisation is understood as class practice in which capital-in-crisis seeks to re-compose itself at the level of the world market through national states' projects then the separation-in-unity between 'the national' and 'the global' is upheld.⁴⁸

Open Marxists have argued that

national states derive their revenue from the capital outlay and the working class subsequently employed within the bounds of their jurisdiction. To increase the chances of attracting and retaining capital within their boundaries, national states pursue a plethora of policies as well as offering inducements and incentives for investment. However, the 'success' of these 'national' policies depends upon re-establishing conditions for the expanded accumulation of capital on a world scale ... In other words, the crisis of the capital relation is thus at the same time a crisis of the international state system.⁴⁹

The implications of 'failure' on the part of national state projects are manifold. One palpable consequence, as Alberto Bonnet has recognised, is the *post hoc* sanctioning of national projects by world money in the form of 'capital flight'; as witnessed in Mexico (1994) and Argentina (2001).⁵⁰ This means that it is in the interests of capital-in-general to foster compliance on the part of national governments to particular management strategies deemed appropriate in the context of secular crisis.

It is understandable, therefore, that national state projects are being lent cohesion, authority, and a degree of legitimacy by the unprecedented degree of intervention of international financial and development organisations housing 'experts' in economic policy reform.⁵¹ Such experts have played a key role in policy design initiatives which follow a specific framework based upon universally applicable criteria aimed at engineering 'success' across the international state system. Seen in this light, Cammack's focus upon the World Bank's Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) and the emphasis upon 'country ownership' – rather than attempting to substantiate a predetermined case for international organisations' relative autonomy – shows how the Bank and the IMF have been drawn into the management of crisis-ridden social relations across a multiplicity of states – and to an arguably unprecedented extent.⁵² Taylor acknowledges this, but is keen to add that the CDF ought to be understood as 'a rearguard reaction to the contradictions of uneven development', and that national governments still take the lead in managing the

⁴⁷ Burnham 1997.

⁴⁸ See von Braunmühl 1978.

⁴⁹ Bonefeld, Brown and Burnham 1995, p. 29.

⁵⁰ Bonnet 2002; on Mexico, see also Holloway 2000. On p. 119, Bonnet 2002 provides the rationale for country-risk evaluations by credit rating agencies such as Moody's or Standard and Poor's: 'the most synthetic and disturbing expression of capitalist forecasting about the conditions for domination and exploitation of labour in distinct accumulation spaces in the world market'.

⁵¹ Cammack 1999 and 2003.

contradictions of restructuring. The NMRP does not contradict this insight, but it does propose a more focused analysis of international organisations' practical and ideological role in globalisation which moves beyond suggestive and non-substantive references to the role of international regulative agencies in helping states manage circuits of capital.⁵³ In this regard, the ideological dimension to the globalisation offensive is particularly important since it is borne out of a the contradictions Taylor is so keen to emphasise, but also because (as I explain below) the increasingly orthodox discourse of competitiveness betrays a concern within, and increasingly outside of, the Bank with the subordination of labour to the command of money in national states where earlier episodes of neoliberal restructuring have failed to adequately do so.

Vulgar economy, neoliberal strategy and the paradox of relative autonomy

Two prominent 'old materialists', John Holloway and Sol Picciotto, recognise that the ideology of the autonomous state has always been central to fetishising vulgar economy. They conclude that 'the autonomisation of the state is, like all forms of fetishism, *both reality and illusion*, the reality depending on the successful struggle of the ruling class to maintain the complex of social relations upon which the illusion rests. The autonomisation of the state, which forms part of, and is necessary for the accumulation of capital, involves not only the necessity of separate political institutions, but also a constant class practice involving the structural and ideological separation and fetishisation of economics and politics and of the private and the public'.⁵⁴ The proposed NMRP does not insist upon the separation of the political and the economic as a real determination; indeed, I acknowledge that Holloway and Picciotto here overemphasise the moment of separation in the unity-in-separation of capital and state.⁵⁵ However, it is evident that class practice in its various legal-constitutional, coercive, and ideological forms is necessarily oriented towards maintaining the moment of separation between capital and state, both within individual states and, as we witness in 'a globalising world', between national 'models of capitalism' and exogenous 'pressures' to liberalise. Paradoxically then, while Cammack's original theorisation of the governance of global capitalism must be rejected for its reliance on a structuralist-functionalist operationalisation of the

⁵² Cammack 2002d.

⁵³ Burnham 2001, pp. 108-9, for example, writes that it 'should be no surprise that a global system resting on an antagonistic social relationship will be subject to dynamic change as both state and market actors seek to remove what they perceive to be "blockages" in the flow of capital ... For the open Marxist tradition, "globalisation" simply represents a deepening of the existing circuits and a broadening of the "political" as regulative agencies (both public and private) beyond the national state are drawn into the complex process of "managing" the rotation of capital'.

⁵⁴ Holloway and Picciotto 1991, p. 115, emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Barker 1991.

concept of relative autonomy, he does, I feel, deserve credit for revealing a coherent (albeit vulgar) relative autonomy logic at the heart of World Bank ideology. The task of the NMRP is therefore firstly to engage in immanent critique, to expose the true character of key discourses and initiatives like the CDF as class practice; and then to trace concretely how the moment of unity in the unity-in-separation of 'capital' and 'state' reasserts itself through the failure of such class practice to subordinate class struggle expressed through forms of crisis.

Having set out the foundational claims of a NMRP, the remainder of this paper establishes some preliminary lines of inquiry into the current activities of international regulative agencies such as the World Bank. Evidence of the retroactive and strategic properties of neoliberal ideology is rife within World Bank literature. It is demonstrably clear that the internal coherence of the Bank's reform discourses often hinges on a specific relative autonomy logic; a logic which is carried through into the heart of key operational reforms – principally, the CDF. The World Bank (along with the IMF) has formulated the CDF in accordance with a *self-identified* role as an impartial managerial body best placed within the 'development community' to provide financial and non-financial value-added ('knowledge') assistance to states across the South seeking to embed appropriate 'governance' processes.⁵⁶ As one Bank promotional leaflet advertises: 'what we as a development community can do is help countries — by providing financing, yes; but more important, by providing knowledge and lessons learned about the challenges and how to address them.'⁵⁷ Accordingly, a NMRP ought not to assume that relative autonomy on the part of international organisations or national states is either possible or being realised, simply that the Bank's self-articulated project posits such an autonomous role for itself, as well as states, in entirely plausible terms.

Taylor does stress that 'it is important not to take the Bank's self-representation as the pre-eminent global development leader at face value'. The Bank is after all, as Taylor persuasively argues, racked with contradiction. However, Cammack's argument that the ideology promulgated by the Bank in its flagship publications represents a 'new politics of development' is equally as persuasive.⁵⁸ A substantive

⁵⁶ Cammack 2003, p. 37.

⁵⁷ James D. Wolfensohn, then president of the World Bank Group, cited in World Bank 2001.

⁵⁸ Taylor 2004, p. 26, writes that the CDF 'represents a vision of the extension of social engineering through policy and institutional reforms in order to achieve a projected market utopia in the global South. It builds upon the basis of the neoliberal project to obliterate institutionalised impediments to the discipline of capital, yet acknowledges the need to recompose new institutional forms to facilitate the former'. Compare this with the following in Cammack 2004a, p. 203: the CDF 'is precisely what it what it says it is – a blueprint for a complete set of social and governmental relations and institutions ... Presented as a vehicle for incorporating social and structural policies into an agenda previously dominated by macroeconomic policy alone, it is intended as a means of shaping and monitoring social and

element of the NMRP therefore synthesises these arguments, and proposes to explore the contradictory manner in which an institution that is irrational in terms of organisation and accountability to shareholders, fractious in terms of differences in the outlook of particular researchers and managers, and has often failed to impact significantly upon important policy debates does not detract from the consistent manner on which it has elaborated a 'recipe for establishing capitalism on a global scale' in its flagship publications.⁵⁹ This recipe is embodied in the form of the CDF, which while presented as the culmination of decades of objective developmental learning, remains fundamentally neoliberal insofar as it is 'centrally concerned with depoliticising economy and society by weakening or removing historically accumulated forms of socialisation'.⁶⁰

Drawing upon Cammack's interpretation of key documents, but without succumbing to the mistaken theorisation of the World Bank or any other international organisation as a relatively autonomous entity, the NMRP nonetheless recognises a relative autonomy logic within the Bank's discourse; one which recognises – albeit in vulgar and pluralistic terms – that neoliberal strategy, as outlined by Gough, is best pursued by state institutions divorced from social groups – both capitalists and workers – who have a vested interest in preserving the status quo; as well as by international regulative agencies which are able to broker appropriate and impartial 'knowledge' regarding appropriate reform strategies. Evidence of this logic can be found throughout the World Bank's flagship literature – including the annual *World Development Reports* which Cammack has dealt with in detail. A more explicit statement on this can be found in a 2004 report for the joint Bank-IMF meetings co-prepared, for the last time, by outgoing Bank president James D. Wolfensohn:

We have a framework to deal with poverty reduction and global environmental challenges. What we do not have is a world executive committee that has global legitimacy, representing the interests of the vast majority, dealing with longer-term strategic issues. Such a world body would have three main tasks: to think seriously about these international issues, to monitor what happens, and to crack the whip when progress is not forthcoming and selfish national or parochial interests threaten to delay progress for the common good.⁶¹

Here we have an open plea for some form of relatively autonomous world government. To reiterate then: the task of the NMRP is to reveal the true character of

structural policies so that they reinforce and extend macroeconomic discipline, and subordinating them to imperatives of capitalist accumulation'.

⁵⁹ Cammack, 2002a, p. 178.

⁶⁰ Gough 2002, pp. 63-4.

⁶¹ Bourguignon and Wolfensohn 2004, p. 32.

such a plea as ideology, while tracing the contradictions of international regulative projects such as the CDF as they unfold.

Competitiveness and the recomposition of developing states

It is increasingly clear within World Bank discourses that relatively autonomous international agencies and national institutions are desirable for a reason: they are best suited to promote *competitiveness*.⁶² And competitiveness – attributable to capitalists and workers alike – is desirable as it is the driving force behind economic growth and development.⁶³ An emerging orthodoxy within development policy circles now contends that only through proactive government involvement in transforming domestic institutions, regulatory frameworks, and discouraging culturally embedded practices deemed non-conducive to the efficient functioning of the market (rent-seeking and graft, for instance) will a suitably competitive environment for both producers and workers ('human capital') be created. This explains why, within key reform discourses, 'deeper' interventionism and 'good governance' – underpinned by a commitment to the promotion of competitiveness – are considered preconditions for stable, sustained, and poverty-reducing growth. The preoccupation with competitiveness at the inter-firm level is reflected in the *World Development Report 2005*, hailed by one high-profile commentator as 'the most important the Bank has ever produced' since 'it is about how to make market economies work'.⁶⁴ The report states that 'a good investment climate encourages firms to invest by removing unjustified costs, risks, and barriers to competition'.⁶⁵ What is required, therefore, is 'an environment that fosters the competitive processes that Joseph Schumpeter called "creative destruction" – an environment in which firms have opportunities and incentives to test their ideas, strive for success, and prosper or fail'.⁶⁶ And in the *World Development Report 2006*, the square is circled by

⁶² According to the World Economic Forum 2005, p. xiii, competitiveness is defined as 'the collection of factors, policies and institutions which determine the level of productivity of a country and that, therefore, determine the level of prosperity that can be attained by an economy'.

⁶³ This is the central thrust of an ideology of competitiveness which has been propagated through World Bank literatures and policy documents, representing the culminating of, what Cammack 2004a terms, the 'Wolfensohn-Stiglitz project' after its principal proponents. Taylor accuses Cammack of confusing 'competitiveness (the struggle between individual capitals) with profitability (based on the extraction of surplus-value from labour-in-general by capital-in-general)'. However, it would appear that Taylor actually confuses 'competitiveness' with 'competition'. The tensions Cammack alludes to in his 2003 piece are no different than those highlighted in Bonefeld, Brown and Burnham 1995, p. 29, between the 'national interest' and the need to guarantee the global conditions for capitalist accumulation. And, as Cammack 2004a explains, competitiveness (which can be understood, *a la* open Marxism, as the vulgar economists' measure of the capacity for a national state to secure a higher footing in the global hierarchy of prices) is central to the Bank's retroactive ideology.

⁶⁴ Wolf 2004.

⁶⁵ World Bank 2004, p. 2.

⁶⁶ World Bank 2004, p. 2.

focusing upon the need for reforms across the developing world aimed at removing inequalities of access and opportunity and empowering the poor to compete and successfully deploy their income generating labour power:

Interventions that build greater human capacities for those with the most limited opportunities (generally the poor) will prepare them to be more economically productive and politically effective ... And promoting fairness in markets is all about improvements in the quality of institutions that support and complement markets in ways that broaden access and ensure equitable rules ... A good investment climate is about real economic opportunities. Equity is about levelling the playing field so that opportunities are available on the basis of talent and efforts, rather than on the basis of gender, race, family background, or other predetermined circumstances.⁶⁷

But how are we to make sense of the promotion of competitiveness as ideology and class practice? The key to this question is contained in a variety of World Bank reports on countries commonly depicted as being mid-way through a process of transition from an inward-oriented development path, as is the case for much of Latin America, or from state socialism in the case of Eastern Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. These countries are generally characterised as lacking optimally competitive business and labour market environments owing to the institutional legacies of earlier forms of political-economic organisation and 'incomplete' subsequent reform efforts. A case in point is a 2002 Bank report which reviews the progress that has been made in Central Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union during a decade of transition from 'a production system adapted not to a competitive environment but to the exigencies of a command economy'.⁶⁸ 'The transition report' is highly illustrative of the Bank's preoccupation with competitiveness, especially in the context of 'incompletion'.⁶⁹ The report implores reformers to divorce themselves from the vested interests of particular sectors of society – reproducing a logic of relative autonomy – and to more effectively 'discipline' and encourage' workers to capitulate to the command of capital. The class content of the strategy of 'discipline and encouragement' is striking:

Discipline forces old enterprises to release assets and labour, which are then potentially available to restructured and new enterprises ... The social safety net then needs to be strengthened to ensure that labour shed by contracting enterprises and other losers from reform do not fall into poverty, while not eroding these workers' incentives to find employment in new enterprises.

Encouragement entails policies to create an attractive and competitive investment climate in which restructured and new enterprises have

⁶⁷ World Bank 2005, p. 228. Compare with Cammack 2002e.

⁶⁸ World Bank 2002, p. xiv.

⁶⁹ See Charnock 2006 on Latin America.

incentives to absorb labour and assets rendered inexpensive by the downsizing and to invest in expansion.⁷⁰

The transition report also contains a 'stylised model' which explicitly sets out the blueprint for the de-composition of labour in these territories. This is to be accomplished by a relatively autonomous and insulated state pressing on with the offensive against labour and completing depoliticising institutional reforms to the fullest extent possible.

[figure about here]

The model exhibits that, to date (R_1), the extent of neoliberalisation after the collapse of the command economy remains limited. It is a legacy of centrally planned development that 'oligarchs' remain in an entrenched position with near monopoly over capital accumulation, and that 'distortions' exist as labour market rigidities persist. According to the Report, such distortions have led to the poor economic performance of these economies since the market transition. This demands a renewed commitment to extended reform (R_2) on the part of state managers. The re-commodification of public sector workers must be maximised so as to ensure they are exposed to competition in the open labour market, whilst also ensuring an effective market environment for capitalist entrepreneurs who will likewise fly or fall according to their ability to compete.

From the perspective of a NMRP, these reports are indicative of ideology at work: one that apologetically presents earlier offensives against labour as necessary but insufficient; which prescribes a second phase of reforms aimed at dismantling all institutionalised forms of socialisation and cultural practices that prevent the fullest possible command of money over labour; which posits a proactive and relatively autonomous state as essential if competitiveness – between capitalists and workers alike - is to be engineered; and which distorts the class content of the project so that competitiveness, leading to optimal 'total factor productivity', becomes the flip-side of pro-poor, poverty-eradicating growth. This implies a 'complete' de-socialisation of national economies, and a removal of the institutional impediments that stand in the way of money's fullest capability of commanding labour and expanding the productive capabilities of national economies. From a vulgar economy perspective such discourses appear remarkably progressive, even radical. With institutions suitably reformed and potential opposition abated, these economies will be made up of 'empowered' (de-socialised) individuals, 'freely' (fully dependent) upon the

⁷⁰ World Bank 2002, pp. xiv-xvii.

market and engaging competitively in productive activities: 'a very Eden of the innate rights of man'.⁷¹

Conclusion

From a Marxist perspective, if ideology is both retroactive and prescriptive then it has to be politically significant. It serves to mystify and distort actual contradictions as they reveal themselves and to insidiously disseminate a class response to those contradictions. Whether this is a product of rationality and functionality, or simply a product of vulgar logic, the political implications ought to be taken seriously by Marxists. This is even more important once it becomes apparent that such forms of ideology are becoming orthodox; when they are not particular to a specific institution's ideational output but, rather, characterise the ideational and policy-related activities of a range of international regulative agencies involved in various ways with state projects across the entire world market. Cammack's work should be commended for drawing attention to evidence that the ideology of competitiveness is becoming such orthodoxy.⁷²

The rationale for this paper is therefore straightforward. I have sought to propose a NMRP which draws upon Cammack's original proposal for a new materialism, but which proceeds from an approach to critique that is – like Taylor's intervention – critical of the structuralism-functionalism contained in the former. By means of a critical synthesis between open Marxism and the new materialism, the proposed NMRP advances a critical theory which views globalisation as a major capital offence; which acknowledges the mediating influence of neoliberal discourses, doctrines and orthodoxies in the course of capital's unfolding crisis; and which takes as its main focus of critique the activities of key international regulative agencies. As regards the World Bank, in particular, the article finds credence in Cammack's portrait of a globally significant institution which, in the face of the profound internal and wider contextual contradictions Taylor ably highlights, has nonetheless been responsible for the sustained and ostensibly coherent dissemination of a retroactive ideology which distorts and recasts capital's dilemma and neoliberalism's 'solution' in wholly benign terms. I have argued, in a necessarily cursory manner, that a NMRP ought to proceed from the recognition of the centrality of relatively autonomous states within reform discourses that increasingly comply with an orthodoxy of competitiveness. In order to further develop the NMRP, it will be necessary to extend this critique to encompass the specific relations between such regulative agencies and those very national states being urged to promote competitiveness. Of course, it is possible that such demands will fall upon deaf ears as some state managers wage

⁷¹ Marx 1976, p. 280.

their own struggles to remove blockages to the flow of capital within spaces of the world market under their control; or as others seek to perpetuate 'crony' or oligarchic forms of state. Nevertheless, the critique of contemporary vulgar economy reveals a determined preoccupation with recomposing social relations (decomposing class in open Marxist terms) in states immersed in a long-term transition towards competitive market societies. And, as with Marx's critique of political economy, the NMRP seeks to reveal contemporary vulgar economy as a mere 'sycophant of capital': 'in the interest of the so-called wealth of the nation, he seeks for artificial means to ensure the poverty of the people. Here his apologetic armour crumbles off, piece by piece, like rotten touchwood'.⁷³

⁷² See Cammack 2004b, 2006a, 2006b, and 2006 for such evidence.

⁷³ Marx 1976, p. 932.

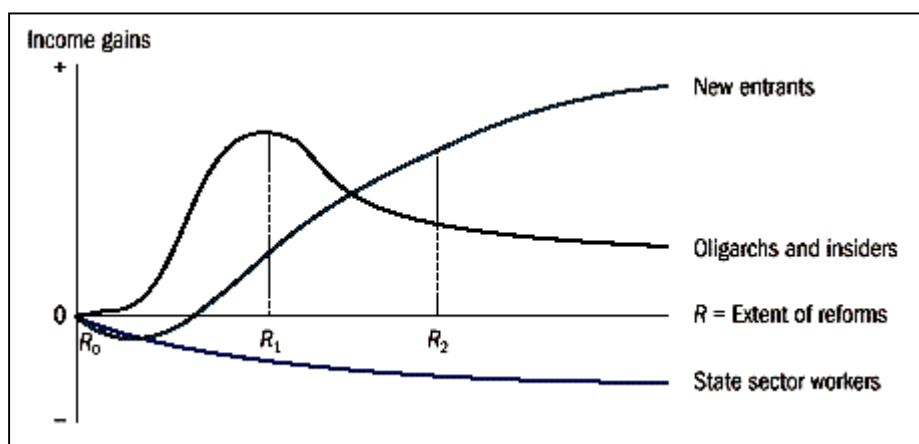
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Figure: Winners and Losers from Reform



Note: R_0 = no reforms; R_1 = point at which income gains of oligarchs and insiders are maximized; R_2 = level of reforms that allows the winners of reforms beyond R_1 (new entrants) to compensate for or exercise enough political pressure to neutralize the resistance of oligarchs, insiders, and state sector workers (Source: World Bank 2002, p. 93).