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## **‘The Deficits of Discourse in IPE: turning base metal into gold?’**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article engages with the debate on how the role of ideas can be conceptualised within International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) and how this is related to the discursive production of meanings embedded in the economy. It is argued that although constructivist and post-structuralist approaches can conceptualise the structural relevance of ideas, thereby improving on neo-realist and liberal institutionalist approaches, they nevertheless fail to explain why certain ideas dominate over others at a particular moment in time. In response to constructivist and post-structuralist criticism, it is argued that the internal relation of ideas as material social processes is appreciated better through an historical materialist theory of history. In other words, the article shows how ideas can be conceived as material social processes through which signs become part of the socially created world in a way that surpasses the deficits of constructivist and post-structuralist approaches alike, whilst avoiding the problems of economism.

Following general developments within the social sciences, the conceptualisation of the role of ideas in the disciplines of International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) has become increasingly important over recent years. Neo-realism and liberal institutionalism generally treat ideas as exogenous to states' interest formation and state interaction. It has been gradually pointed out, however, that such approaches can not answer important 'questions of which economic theories and beliefs are most likely to shape the definition of interests in international relations and why and how it is that particular sets of ideas prevail in the international arena' (Woods, 1995: 161; see also Jacobsen, 2003: 41). A first set of attempts to deal with this problem resulted in an amendment to these approaches by simply adding an additional focus on ideas (e.g. Adler and Haas, 1992; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; Haas, 1992). These contributions do not analyse the constitution of ideas but, instead, try to establish their causal effects on policy when, for instance, they are accepted as guidelines for policy-making. Such approaches are thus based on a positivist understanding of social science as are mainstream IR perspectives more widely. This involves a separation of subject and object and the search for clear cause-effect relationships. For example, some scholars have tried to establish relationships via the identification of institutional and/or actor-centred causal mechanisms. It is then argued that ideas acquire causal relevance when they become embedded as organisational rules and procedures in institutions (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 20-4; Yee, 1996: 88-92).

A problem befalling this literature, however, is that ideas are still treated as causes, as possible additional explanatory variables, leaving no space for understanding ideas as partly constituting the wider social totality. Ideas are merely seen as commodities, as objects which influence other objects. This 'reinforces the notion that "ideas" are distinct from interests and that their role, in practice, is limited to manipulation; and it obscures the constitutive function of "ideas"' (Laffey and Weldes, 1997: 207). In short, the

emphasis on empirical analysis of observable behaviour prevents mainstream IR approaches from capturing the structural quality of ideas in the form of ‘intersubjective meanings’ (Yee, 1996: 102).

Since these early debates, three sets of theoretical perspectives have more recently emerged, which challenge neo-realist and liberal institutionalist approaches more fundamentally in the way they conceptualise the role of ideas: social constructivist, post-structuralist and historical materialist contributions. As post-positivist theories, they all commonly question the notion that it is possible to establish causal relationships within a given objective reality. Hence, they share a rather different concentration on the analysis of structural change. They all agree that ideas can be part of overall structural conditions in the form of intersubjective meanings, i.e. collectively held beliefs. They differ, however, in their underlying normative rationale and how precisely intersubjectivity can be conceptualised due to their different ontological/epistemological approaches (Smith, 1995: 24-6; Smith, 1996: 35, 38). In this article, we set out to discuss critically these approaches aiming to establish the pivotal contributions of an historical materialist conceptualisation of the role of ideas embedded in material social practices that is relevant to IR theory.

In the first main section we focus on social constructivism which has argued that ideas, in the form of intersubjective meanings, are as much part of the structure confronting agents as are material processes. Hence ideas may constrain or enable agency. Additionally, ideas may change as the result of individual and collective agency and the establishment of new intersubjective meanings. In short, there is a very close relationship between ideas, practice and the overall structure, within which agency operates. Importantly, however, agency often remains underconceptualised across social constructivist approaches. Moreover, while the latter can establish *how* specific ideas might become part of the overall structure, social constructivists are unable to explain

*why* a particular set of ideas became part of the structure and not another, rival set of ideas at a particular moment in time. The subsequent section then analyses post-structuralist contributions to the analysis of discourse in and beyond IR theory. Post-structuralism has generally criticised social constructivism for not questioning more directly the way structure and subjects are constituted. Simply adding an ideational dimension to structural conditions does not overcome the problem of separating structure and agency. Rather, the focus has to be on how the constitution of the social subject is directly linked to the discursive founding of the social order. One implicates the other and cannot be analytically separated. As a result, post-structuralists concentrate on power/knowledge relations articulated through discourse around the moments when a new founding myth is created and a new social order (along with social subjects) is constituted. Similar to constructivist approaches, however, while it is outlined *how* a particular discourse can gain dominance at a specific point in time, the question as to *why* a certain discourse and not another is successful, is not addressed. The underlying power structures pushing individual discourses are overlooked.

It is by stressing the importance of such underlying power structures that the turning point towards historical materialism is made. At the same time, recent post-structuralist scholarship has accused critical, historical materialist approaches in IR/IPE for taking ‘the economic and financial domains as unproblematic or material starting points to their enquiries’, thus failing, ‘to enquire how financial knowledge, including statistics and indices, has been historically developed’ (de Goede, 2003: 80). These critical historical materialist perspectives in IPE are therefore accused of economism in that class identity is presented as preceding the political and, thus, driving explanation in a determinist way. ‘The point to be emphasised here is that in Gramscian IPE, culture, discourse and ideology remain largely in the domain of the superstructure, and of secondary importance to the study of the economic base which ultimately determines the

objective economic interests of agents.’ In other words, there is supposedly an undue distinction ‘between the material sphere of the economic and the ideational sphere of the political’ (de Goede, 2003: 90; see also de Goede, 2005: 7).

Similarly, these claims are linked to recent moves asserting attentiveness to modes of knowledge, dominant discourses, and practices in delineating approaches to the financialisation of the economy, perceptions of risk, and the governmentality of global civil society; whilst eschewing any link to developments in the logic of capitalism held to be plaguing critical IPE (Amoore, 2004; Amoore and Langley, 2004; Langley, 2004a). These authors desire a move away from the settled, defined and delimited boundaries of political community whilst, in doing so, reprimanding an ill defined and shifting ‘orthodox’ IPE viewpoint.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the tendency to conflate ‘orthodox’ and critical IPE approaches across such commentaries on the problematic of sovereignty is a common practice (Ashley, 1996: 241-3; Campbell, 1996: 9-10). Hence, before outlining a historical materialist contribution to the understanding of ideas, we first outline the philosophy of internal relations, at the heart of a historical materialist, yet non-deterministic approach. This allows us, then, in the final section, to show that for historical materialist critical IR/IPE, ‘it is not true that the philosophy of praxis “detaches” the structure from the superstructures when, instead, it conceives their development as intimately bound together and necessarily interrelated and reciprocal’ (Gramsci, 1995: 414). It is the dialectical way ideas prevail in interrelationship with material properties that can be subsumed within an historical materialist theory of history, which is the core of our analysis. Thus, we will show how ideas can be conceived as material social processes through which signs become part of the socially created world in a way that surpasses the deficits of social constructivist and post-structuralist approaches alike, without collapsing into the problem of economism.

**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM:  
THE IDEAL/MATERIAL AS ALWAYS-ALREADY SEPARATE AND  
COMBINED**

Social constructivists consider ideas to be ‘intersubjective meanings’, defined as ‘the product of the collective self-interpretations and self-definitions of human communities’ (Neufeld, 1995: 77). Together, these intersubjective meanings make up a ‘web of meaning’, which is as much a part of the social totality, the structures human beings are confronted with, as material social practices. It is argued, consequently, that ‘the practices in which human beings are engaged cannot be studied in isolation from the “web of meaning”, which is, in a fundamental sense, constitutive of those practices, even as it is embedded in and instantiated through those same practices’ (Neufeld, 1995: 76). This definition is widely accepted by social constructivists. For example, Emanuel Adler (1997: 322) argues that ‘constructivism is the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world.’ The close link between ideas and practice is further highlighted, albeit from a different stance, by Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes (1997: 209) who define ideas as ‘symbolic technologies’, which ‘are, most simply, intersubjective systems of representations and representation-producing practices.’ In other words, ideas are not objects to be fetishised but intersubjectively constituted forms of social action that shape social reality.

Alexander Wendt develops this social constructivist line and criticises state-centric approaches such as neo-realism for taking the interests and identity of states as given, i.e. exogenous to the process of state interaction. This makes the explanation of ‘identities and interests, the reproduction and/or transformation of which is a key determinant of structural change,’ impossible (Wendt, 1994: 394). He further argues that

structure, within which action takes place, does not only consist of material capabilities, but also intersubjectively constituted identities and interests in the states-system. He notes that ‘it is through reciprocal interaction . . . that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social structures in terms of which we define our identities and interests’ (Wendt, 1992: 406). Thus, structures are endogenous to process and changing practices of interaction will change ‘intersubjective meanings’ that partly constitute social totality. Applied to the neo-realists’ understanding of the international system as logically anarchic, Wendt counters that this structure is also characterised by the intersubjective meanings collectively held by states. Anarchy may be one possibility, but the international system could equally be characterised by rivalry, which considers both war and co-operation a possibility, or it could alternatively be characterised by a notion of collective security (Wendt, 1999: 246-312). In short, ‘anarchy is what states make of it’. While clearly an advance over neo-realist IR theory, there are, however, several problems with Wendt’s understanding. First, his constructivism does not allow him to conceptualise which actors are important for his analysis. Instead, he simply falls back on the neo-realist understanding that states are the most important international actors (Wendt, 1992: 424; Wendt, 1999: 39, 43). Thus, Wendt’s variant of social constructivism suffers from state-centricity and an empiricist methodology (Bieler and Morton, 2001: 11-12; Campbell, 1996: 12; Wight, 2004: 273-9). Second, Wendt also continues to take ‘the view that material conditions are in fact independent of ideas’ (Palan, 2000: 590). As argued below, this makes it difficult to analyse why certain ideas gain efficacy in terms of structural importance and not others. Hence, Wendt cannot explain why, for example, it is *anarchy* that is characteristic of the international system, at a particular moment in time, rather than *rivalry*. Third, Wendt completely separates the ‘logic of anarchy’ from the ‘logic of capital’ in his analysis of the states-system and its potential transformation into a world state (Wendt, 2003: 494). Such ‘bracketing’ divorces the relation of capitalist

development from state formation processes whilst also then collapsing analysis into a single logic in which the power dynamics of anarchy prevail. This undercuts any appreciation of the internal relationship between the geopolitical circumstances of the states-system and capital accumulation.

In IR theory, Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie have gone further than most in their social constructivist conceptualisations. They have highlighted that the intersubjective quality of convergent expectations, as the basis for international regimes, is not accessible to mainstream approaches, which treat ideas simply as independent variables. Instead, the incorporation of social constructivist insights and methods is necessary for explanation to proceed (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986: 771). Kratochwil argues that international relationships resemble the intersubjective dimension of games. Positivists can only observe the 'facts' of overt behaviour. 'Beyond that lies the realm of intersubjective rules which are constitutive of social practice, and which an interpretive epistemology has to uncover' (Kratochwil, 1988: 277; see also Kratochwil, 1989). This focus on constitutive rules may provide a non-causal, explanatory account in certain situations plus a narrative explanatory form, which 'is established through a process of successive interrogative reasoning between explanans and explanandum' (Ruggie, 1998: 34). Without a conception of constitutive rules, it is 'impossible to provide endogenously the noncausal explanations that constitutive rules embody and which are logically prior to the domain in which causal explanations take effect' (Ruggie, 1998: 24).

This research agenda has set out to problematise the identities and interests of states, to open up the historical constitution of the states-system, and reflect on issues of systemic change. Intersubjective frameworks of meaning are attached to social norms that are not taken as simple descriptive categories but as components of generative structures that shape, condition, and constrain action (Ruggie, 1982; 1983; 1993). For example, rather than assuming an undifferentiated states-system inceptive from the 1648

Peace of Westphalia, Ruggie instead attempts to account for the historical specificity of medieval and modern geopolitical orders to reveal the social construction of transformations in the international states-system. The shift from the medieval to the modern international system is surmised as an instance of change in the basic structure of property rights, alongside transformations in strategic behaviour among major actors, and alterations in epistemic conditions consisting of political doctrines and metaphysical assumptions (Ruggie, 1982: 281-3; Ruggie, 1993: 168-9). Elsewhere, in his analysis of ‘embedded liberalism’ in the post-World War II economic order, Ruggie also asks why it was that the social purpose of the post-war order continued to be maintained to some extent after the collapse of Bretton Woods in the 1970s, despite the fact that the US had ceased to maintain this system as a hegemon. In response, he argues that international regimes are not only a reflection of the underlying power structure, but are ‘a fusion of power and legitimate social purpose’ (Ruggie, 1982: 404). Hence, while the underlying power structure changed with the decline of US hegemony, the regime of embedded liberalism was maintained due to the continuation of its legitimised social purpose.

However, whilst Ruggie’s analyses of either the shift from the medieval to the modern international states-system, or the evolving monetary and trade regimes since the early 1970s, can demonstrate various features constitutive of geopolitical orders, what he cannot explain is *why* this has happened and *why* other political authority structures did not come to dominate. As one recent and compelling critique attests, no clear, definitive argument is permitted to emerge within these accounts of system transformation, as all factors of explanation are held to be equally irreducible to one another (Teschke, 2003: 27-32). In this variant, social constructivism offers a causally indeterminate sketch of the modern states-system and ‘fails to identify those social agents that sustained, lived out, and changed property titles—not merely as formal institutions, but as politically maintained and actively negotiated social relations’ (Teschke, 2003: 29; Teschke, 1998:

330). A pluralist framework is thus evident within social constructivist arguments that grants the same indistinguishable weight to different factors in explaining changes in the international states-system. Yet, in terms of tracing the causes and consequences of the capitalist states-system, social constructivists can be subjected to C. Wright Mills' (1959: 154) criticism that 'what are often taken as historical explanations would better be taken as part of the statement of that which is to be explained.' This means that within social constructivism there is confusion over the relation between explanandum (or principle of historical explanation) and explanans (or point of reference that itself explains the changing character of the modern world). (Anderson, 1992: 121; Rosenberg, 2000: 3). Whilst no clear-cut distinction is implied by this contrast, to treat social facts specifically in terms of the latter would endow them with a sense of absolute autonomy, eliding how particular material institutional forms condition and circumscribe discursive power relations in a determinate historical conjuncture.

Elsewhere, social constructivism has increasingly been applied in comparative IPE. Two prominent examples are dealt with here in more detail. Mark Blyth analyses the embedding as well as disembedding of the US and Swedish political economies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the role ideas have played within these processes of structural change. In times of crisis, he argues, 'ideas allow agents to reduce uncertainty, propose a particular solution to a moment of crisis, and empower agents to resolve that crisis by constructing new institutions in line with these new ideas' (Blyth, 2002: 11). Unlike many other social constructivists, he links the emergence of new ideas to material relations. His narrative of disembedding liberalism in Sweden, for example, mentions several times the importance of business in the promotion and dissemination of neo-liberal ideas from the mid-1970s onwards and he highlights specifically the vast financial resources capital employed to this effect (Blyth, 2002: 209-19, 228, 262, 269). Nevertheless, there is an ad hoc nature to the linkage of ideas to material relations stemming from an underdeveloped

conceptualisation of the social relations of production, which leads to the neglect of two interrelated and crucial factors. First, at a methodological level, Blyth identifies capital, labour, and the state as core collective homogenous actors, a move developed through his critical engagement with methodological individualism (Blyth, 2002: 13-14). Thereby, Blyth implicitly draws on a corporatist understanding of agency, without however adequately conceptualising or substantiating this choice of actors. Similar to Wendt, core actors are simply identified on an external basis and are not internally related within the constructivist approach itself. This, second, has serious ramifications for the empirical study of the case of Sweden. Capital was not only important for the direct dissemination and financing of neo-liberal ideas in Sweden but it also held a position of structural power more broadly due to its ability to transfer production units abroad. Hence Blyth overlooks the point that it was not capital in general but Swedish transnational capital in particular that was intrinsic to the promotion of neo-liberal economics, supported on several significant occasions by forces of transnational labour, such as *inter alia* in the separate collective wage agreement between employers and trade unions in the transnational metalworking sector in 1983, the pro-European Union (EU) membership campaign in 1994 (Bieler, 2000: 46, 102-10) and the pro-European Monetary Union (EMU) membership campaign in 2003 (Bieler, 2006: 96-7, 143-5). A conceptualisation of the changing Swedish social relations of production in processes of transnational restructuring would have indicated the growing significance of the structural power of transnational capital (Bieler, 2006: 59-66).

In short, as positive as Blyth's advance is over other constructivist approaches, he does not fully comprehend the importance of material structural conditions in their internal relation to ideas. He adopts a dualistic view of material structure and ideas that are always-already separated as variables that are then combined in their external relationship to one another (e.g. Blyth, 2002: 251). This means that ideas and material

conditions are treated as two independent entities based on their external relation to one another, which are then combined in a functional relation as independent and dependent variables. We will come back to an analysis of the internal relationship between the two and the related notion of the material structure of ideas, when outlining a historical materialist conception of the structuring of ideas. Only then, it will be argued, can one begin to understand *why* a particular set of ideas may triumph over another at a particular point in time.

Another social constructivist contribution is made by Leonard Seabrooke's analysis of how states legitimate their policies in the conflict over the distribution of resources within the financial reform nexus (credit and property access and tax burdens) between lower income groupings (LIGs) and rentiers, who live on passive and unearned income. Seabrooke aims to analyse how the settlement of this conflict 'bolsters or undermines its creation of a broad and deep domestic pool of capital that the state and private financial institutions may then employ internationally' (Seabrooke, 2006: 3). He argues that the more favourable a state's policies are towards LIGs, the larger is the domestic capital pool, which in turn implies a stronger role in the international financial system for this state. Seabrooke draws to a large extent on constructivist assumptions in that he accepts that money and credit are fundamentally social constructions. However, this is also related to a belief about the legitimacy of these social constructions. Hence, he criticises constructivists such as Blyth for: 'i) a persistent selection bias toward moments of radical uncertainty and periods of embeddedness; and ii) a view of legitimacy by proclamation due to an overwhelming focus on institutional and ideational entrepreneurs' (Seabrooke, 2006: 38). Hence, by drawing on the work of Max Weber, he adds to social constructivism 'a conception of legitimacy as a process in which social groups contest economic social norms within everyday life' (Seabrooke, 2006: 42). In

short, the focus is on incremental social change as a result of specific historical legitimacy contests between the state and social groups (Seabrooke, 2006: 46).

Ultimately, though, Seabrooke does not escape the wider shortcomings of social constructivism. His empirical case studies of the conflicts in society between LIGs and rentiers over influence on the state and related financial policies reveal that in most instances rentiers triumph over LIGs. ‘Most states do not intervene positively into their financial reform nexuses for LIGs and impede their international financial capacity by instead supporting rentier interests. And in some cases they directly support a “rentier shift”’ (Seabrooke, 2006: 173). This is despite the fact that such action is against states’ own best interests in relation to their role in the international financial system, as Seabrooke generally argues. He thus outlines *how* this has happened in his case studies but the question as to *why* rentiers may win, or lose, over LIGs in a particular empirical context is left unquestioned. The latter could be pursued if reference was made to the power structures underlying the struggle between these actors and the state but again such a conceptualisation is forestalled.

In summary, the problem of social constructivism, as a theory of history, is that it is grounded in an idealist understanding of transformations in social relations due to the disembedding of intersubjective ideas, norms and values from the social relations in which they cohere. In other words, the interrelatedness and influence of the ideal/material is posed as always-already separate and combined entities and constructivism fails to live up to its own claims of resolving all manner of contrasting philosophical problems within international theory (see Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner, 1998; Price and Reus-Smit, 1998). The recurring questions are therefore: *Whose* values and beliefs have constituted or embodied state identities and interests and the relevant constitutional structure of the international society of states? *Which* agents shape the core intersubjective beliefs of underlying social and world orders? *Why* does a

particular set of ideas become part of the structure and not another? As it stands, there exists an undertheorised notion of power across social constructivist perspectives that fail to ascertain whose interpretations come to constitute the social world and why they do so (Adler, 1997: 337-8; Checkel, 1998: 325). The end result is that constructivism as a whole stands as merely the latest reincarnation and manifestation of liberal theorising, reaching similarly bland conclusions about social change as mainstream approaches (Sterling-Folker 2000; Teschke and Heine 2002; Morton 2005a: 502-6).

### **THE DISCOURSE OF POST-STRUCTURALISM**

Post-structuralist accounts are highly critical of social constructivism for not breaking completely with mainstream, positivist IR theory. As Nalini Persram (1999: 171) argues, ‘the pseudo-progressive vocabulary of intersubjectivity and all the rest cannot hide the uncritical categories through which constructivism expresses itself.’ More problematically, rather than providing a challenge to mainstream approaches, by adopting core assumptions—such as a conception of the state as an anthropomorphic actor (e.g. Wendt, 1999: 10)—social constructivism actually cements the predominance of the mainstream within the discipline, simultaneously closing down alternative critical ways of thinking. In short, simply adding an ideational dimension to the overall structure without questioning how the social and/or world order and the subjects within it are constituted does not go far enough.

The main focus of post-structuralism is the way in which social subjects are constituted in the first place. Instead of seeing structure and agency as two different entities, they are taken as directly implicated in each other through discursive practices (Doty, 1997). ‘Subjectivity and the social order are constituted together, the social order being the frame within which subjectivities are placed. The social order only comes into existence by our positing it in advance, assuming that it already exists, and in doing this

we are ourselves constituted as subjects' (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 1999: 5). As a result, the moment when a new social order is established becomes crucial. Jenny Edkins' distinction between 'politics' and 'the political' is important in this respect. Politics refers to the technical arrangements within an established social order and identified subjects. For example, neo-realist IR theory assumes that international politics, as the social or world order, is dominated by states, as the subjects. What neo-realists analyse then is the politics of state interaction. What they cannot question, however, is the assumed social or world order and the subjects themselves. Subject and state formation is taken for granted. Post-structuralists, by contrast, concentrate on the political, the founding moment, when the myth of a new social or world order is established. According to Edkins (1999: 13), 'the founding moment is the moment of decisioning, the moment that both produces and reproduces the law.' An example of such a founding moment would be the significance of 1989 within processes of European integration, when a new order could be enacted through the inclusion and legitimacy of Central and Eastern Europe within the regional social order.

As a critical strategy, then, post-structuralists turn their attention to these founding moments, when a new master signifier is established. They concentrate on questioning what is generally taken as given. 'In a sense, the duty of the critical intellectual is exactly this not forgetting, this drawing of attention to the produced, artificial, contingent character of any reigning master signifier' (Edkins, 1999: 140). In other words, the IR scholar is set the task of challenging 'the hegemony of the power relations or symbolic order in whose name security is produced, to render visible its contingent, provisional nature' (Edkins, 1999: 142). Accepting, however, the contingent character of a master signifier implies that there can never be a moment of ontological fullness, a moment of establishing clearly the material and ideational basis of a particular social or world order as well as the subjects within it. Hence, the subject is fragmented and decentred: 'in this

picture, the subject is always in the process of being constituted; there is no point at which, however briefly, the performance is finished. In some sense the subject does not exist . . . ?' (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 1999: 1). Accepting any structure as foundational is therefore impossible from a post-structuralist account. It is in this respect that post-structuralism then criticises critical IPE theories. The latter, although claiming to challenge key mainstream assumptions, nonetheless are charged with simply replacing one foundation with another, upholding a view of 'a heroic subject in estrangement' that is presented as 'the necessary, central figure of any labour that would have critical, emancipatory, transformative potentials' (Ashley, 1996: 243, 248). In other words, by taking as foundational the structures of historical processes, which are understood to determine the realms of the possible, analysis within critical IPE remains caught within modernist assumptions (Ashley, 1989: 275).

Post-structuralist reflections on the international engagements of critical activity are thus presented rather differently. Ashley (1996: 242) has pushed himself to consider an 'interpretation of circumstances' in which such critical activity emerges to focus on the undecidability of claims to sovereignty. He casts out the lonely figure of the 'itinerate *condottiere*' that he posits as equivalent to his posture towards understanding the constitutive field of international studies (Ashley, 1996: 250-3). In medieval Italy, *condottieres* led armies for different cities and rulers depending on who paid them most, without attaching themselves too closely to a particular city or ruler on a principled basis. Thus, the itinerate *condottiere* exists in a condition of 'estranged unsituatedness' that 'lives the life of a vagabond' as 'a stranger to every place and faith', that is 'never at home among the people who dwell there', as a nomad constantly facing forceful eviction. Similarly, the post-structuralist, Ashley continues, holds an 'ideal of inhabiting a securely bounded territory of truth and transparent meaning beyond doubt, a place given as if by some author beyond time, a place where it is possible to appeal to the word in order to

decide what things mean . . .’ (Ashley, 1996: 252). Nevertheless, at the same time, because the post-structuralist asserts the artificial nature of any such bounded territory of truth and order, the short-lived order is not mistaken as the concrete realisation of the ideal. Rather, the post-structuralist accepts that the ideal of such a territory of truth can never be fully achieved. This in itself is considered to be more desirable than the mistaken assumption that there could be something such as an ontologically true social order and its subjects within it.

When this understanding is related to moves in IR theory to consider the way ideas defined in a broad way can be conceptualised, it is clear that from a post-structuralist perspective they cannot be regarded as a part of the ontological structure. Instead, there is a conception of ideas *as* discourse (which is more than language) surrounding the political, or the moment a new myth is deployed to establish a particular social/world order. What post-structuralists propose ‘is a recognition of the contingency of present political forms and the discourses that we use to produce and describe them’ (Edkins and Zehfuss, 2005: 470). Hence, discourses establish the truth for a temporarily limited moment. As a result, post-structuralists claim to reject the very distinction between the material and the ideational expressed within constructivism. ‘Discourses provide criteria of intelligibility that establish the conditions of possibility for social being and, as such, cannot be considered as separate from, or secondary to, the material realm’ (de Goede, 2001: 152). For instance, in attempting to criticise the current international financial order, de Goede does not concentrate on a material structure. Instead ‘in order to criticise the legitimacy deficit in finance and to broaden financial debates, it is imperative to understand how financial science became a historical possibility and how financial decision making became depoliticised in the first place’ (de Goede, 2001: 151). This is traced through the historical constitution of financial speculation as a technical issue, which depoliticises the circumstances surrounding notions of risk. Once discourses of

financial speculation as well as the discursive constitution of modern finance more broadly are deconstructed, the process of thinking about possible alternatives can then begin (de Goede, 2005: xxvi; de Goede, 2004).

However, it is doubtful whether the above approaches to the role, or social function, of the theorist in revealing such acts of deconstruction is adequate. Ashley's self-image of the itinerate *condottiere*—a noble that chooses the life of organising mercenary activity in order to increase revenue—merely compounds similarly problematic reflections on the conditions of emergence of post-structuralism in international studies. For example, it most notably evokes the status of dissident theorists questioning narratives of sovereignty from the position of disciplinary exiles (Ashley and Walker, 1990). It also retains resonance within the assumption that intellectual activity involves constantly shifting ethico-political responsibility between 'coalitions of support and political advocacy . . . seen as constituted, temporary and issue-based' (Edkins and Zehfuss, 2005: 468). The itinerate nature of ethical commitments, furthermore, links with David Campbell's reflections on the duty, obligation and responsibility of post-structuralist theorising that involves a struggle for and on behalf of the Other and thus the necessity of a *deterritorialisation* of responsibility (Campbell, 1999: 50-1). His focus is cast towards the delineation of ethico-political criteria within international engagements that involve 'a philosophical anthropology of everyday life on a global scale', which is emergent from 'specific, local inquiries of political questions, inquiries that focus on how problems in international politics are problematised.' These ethico-political criteria are marked in international studies through 'inside/outside distinctions' that 'are the geographical-spatial exemplars of self/other demarcations' (Campbell, 2001: 445-6). Yet within these divergent considerations of scholarly international engagements (the unrooted, shifting, global-travelling *condottiere* and the specific localist of everyday life committed to deterritorialised responsibility) scant attention is cast to situating post-

structuralism within its own historical conditions of emergence. Akin to developments elsewhere in the social sciences, the point can be sustained that there is an obfuscation within post-structuralism that mystifies its own relationship to social conditions linked to global capitalism which, however fragmented in appearance and circumstance, serve as a structuring principle of social relations (Dirlik, 1994: 331).

Moreover, despite denying ontological foundations, post-structuralists in IPE fall short in a similar manner to social constructivists when attempting to establish the role of discourses within social power relations. Louise Amoore outlines well *how* the discourse of linking risk/uncertainty to globalisation ‘has become central to programmes of work flexibilisation, casualisation, and fragmentation’ (Amoore, 2004: 175), thereby exerting pressure on workers and individualising uncertainty and risk. What she does not explain, however, is *why* this particular discourse became dominant. There is a failure here to uncover the agency and structural power behind discourses of risk. Similarly, in his analysis of the shift away from final salary pension schemes in Anglo-American capitalism, Paul Langley (2004a: 541) asserts that ‘there is a need to ask how the current financialisation of capitalism is taking place at the expense of other possible restructurings.’ What is missing is the analysis of *why* this shift occurs and *who* has deployed it as a strategy of social power. Elsewhere, in an examination of IPE literature on the New International Financial Architecture, he also claims that analysis should not be restricted to a critical assessment of International Financial Institutions, ‘but should also explicitly recognise the discursive features of authority relations and situate governance networks in the power relations, contestation, contradictions and reproduction of the global financial order’ (Langley, 2004b: 84). In practice, however, there is a sole concentration on discourse without examining the internal relation of dominant discourses as material social processes. Specifically, statements such as ‘the institutional focus of much existing IPE research should be combined with a concern

with the discursive dynamics of authority relations' located in global financial governance (Langley, 2004b: 73), echo the always-already separate *and* combined approach to ideal/material relations evident within social constructivism. This separation is most starkly apparent in the clear binary line drawn by Louise Amoore (2004: 186 emphasis added) between the material and ideational in her account of discourses of risk:

the transformation of working practices must be understood as more than simply a response to the material reality of an uncertain global economy; instead *it relies upon* the ideational production and reproduction of ways of thinking about risk and uncertainty.

What is evident here is precisely an act of inscribing ontological centrality to ideas, a moment that not only clearly establishes and separates the material and ideational dimensions but also grants causal priority to the latter in political economy.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, post-structuralists in IPE assert that at any juncture, any political moment, different outcomes are possible within the contingent and conjuncturally specific power relations of global capitalism (Langley, 2004b: 71, 75). The different problem here, though, is that despite uncovering and sequencing how a particular discourse might become established in a specific period of time, total contingency is prioritised (see Morton, 2005b: 441-4). Thus, whilst a post-structuralist gaze can be effectively cast over what Foucault (1980: 92; 2003: 24) termed the “how of power”, in terms of the effects of hegemonic discourses, there is nevertheless abnegation in refraining from asking the *who* of power (see also Marsden, 1999: 26, 192).<sup>3</sup> This is revealed in Foucault’s deliberation on the functioning of society when stating that ‘the best conditions for this functioning may be defined internally, without one being able to say “for whom” it is best that things may be like that’, thus effacing questions of *cui bono?* intrinsic to political economy (Foucault, 1999: 100).<sup>4</sup> Whilst power may very well be regarded as relational, or produced through social interaction, there is thus little indication of the direct social agents of relational power (Edkins, Pin-Fat and Shapiro, 2004: 2; Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005: 406). *Who* practices hegemony? *Why* might one

discourse have been successful in a specific historical context and underpin the distribution of material entitlements and not other, rival discourses in power struggles? What is lost in the game of discursivity is any point of condensation within social power relations. Or, put differently, how the discipline of capital structures concrete individuals and the interpellation of identities. Post-structuralists, to paraphrase Stuart Hall (1996: 136), might therefore save for themselves ‘the political’ but they deny themselves a politics due to their neglect of historical relations of force. The result is a rendering of capitalist exploitation and domination into a shapeless and contingent world of fetishised self/other differences. This is reflected in a focus on the ‘arbitrary play of actions upon actions—actions that are not attributable to any ultimate source’ (Ashley, 1996: 244; see also Doty, 1997: 377). To draw from Fernando Coronil (1992: 99-100), there is a repudiation of metanarratives here that produces disjointed mininarratives, which in reacting against ‘determinism’, presents a series of free-floating events. The hegemony of discourse therefore becomes a phagocytic essence, absorbing and engulfing everything within the discursive (Poulantzas, 1978: 151).

We turn now to an historical materialist analysis of these issues in an attempt to explain precisely this problem through an emphasis on the internal relation of ideas as material social processes. This requires, however, a prior discussion of why a historical materialist approach is not, by default, economicist.

## **HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE FETISHISM OF COMMODITIES**

Bob Jessop (1990: 295) has argued that if the only properties which entities have are the product of discourse then one could discursively turn base metal into gold. This line of argument is completely neglected in de Goede’s attempt to clarify ‘the precise ways in which value and entitlements are created and distributed in modern capitalist practices’ (de Goede, 2003: 82). For her, ‘capital itself seems to be discursively constituted and

contested' to the extent that capital is brought into being through historically grounded discourses, through 'money's discursivity' so that 'money, credit and capital are, quite literally, systems of writing' (de Goede, 2003: 89; de Goede, 2001: 151-2).

It seems highly appropriate to raise questions about the historical constitution of financial markets and how money, profit and value are generated in late-modern capitalist practices. In short by asking 'what *is* capital?' (de Goede, 2003: 90 original emphasis). Yet, an immediate counter-response would be: does money *possess* discursivity? Further, is there not a lack of engagement here with a stream of classic social theory that has precisely grappled with modernity and the specific forms of social power deriving from the historical and social constitution of processes of capitalist development (Rosenberg, 1994a)? In wanting to question the ways in which value and entitlements are created and distributed in modern capitalism, the role played by financial markets, money, profit and value therein, our argument is that there is a reinvention of the wheel here that expunges from the contours of debate the contributions of classic social theory. In sum, the question that needs to be added to 'what *is* capital?' is quite simply 'where is *Capital*'?

Within the language of *Capital* there is a clear interrogation of the social constitution of the world linked to the 'life process of society' understood as the historically specific conditions of productive activity (Marx, 1887/1996: 90). Marx wants to reveal the mystery, 'the magic and necromancy', which surrounds the products of labour that take the form of fetishised commodities. His central question is *why is labour represented by the value of its product and labour time by the magnitude of that value?*, which is tackled by demonstrating that categories of classical political economy take as given the objective appearance of the social characteristics of labour through the fetishism inherent in commodities (Marx, 1887/1996: 93). 'The characters that stamp', he argues, 'products as commodities, and whose establishment is a necessary preliminary to the circulation of commodities, have already acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of

social life, before man [*sic*, as throughout] seeks to decipher, not their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but their meaning' (Marx, 1887/1996: 86). Fetishism, then, is an act that is attached to the products of labour in the commodity form, which is inseparable from the production of commodities. In the case of commodities, the value relation between the products of labour which create the commodities have no relation with physical properties nor with material relations. It is in this sense that Marx argued, in such cases of commodity production, that 'it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes . . . the fantastic form of a relation between things.' Subsequently stating that 'this fetishism of commodities has its origin . . . in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them' (Marx, 1887/1996: 83). This is not an emphasis on objectified, reified institutions as they appear to us—as the properties of things, or as money possessing discursivity—but rather a focus on material relations between persons as the social relations between things.

Marx is also concerned here with dissipating 'the mist through which the social character of labour appears to us to be an objective character of the products themselves', which is linked to questions of value. In his view, 'the mystical character of commodities does not originate . . . in their use value' (Marx, 1887/1996: 82, 85). Moreover, to discuss solely the discursive categories of money, profit and value would be tantamount to abstracting from their inequalities. To concentrate on the discursive fixing of value would, after all, remain ignorant of the practices of inequality, exploitation and immiseration constitutive of such value. 'Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic', and to decipher this is crucial, 'for to stamp an object of utility as a value, *is just as much a social product as language*' (Marx, 1887/1996: 85 emphasis added).

Further, when the proportions of specific products have attained a certain stability they *appear* as natural products, 'so that, for instance, one ton of iron and two ounces of

gold appear as naturally to be of equal value, as a pound of gold and a pound of iron, in spite of their different physical and chemical quantities, appear to be of equal weight' (Marx, 1887/1996: 85). The character of having value therefore only obtains fixity through the ascription of value although it takes the appearance and form of the action of objects. But it would be mistaken to assume then that the base metal of iron can be discursively turned into gold. Rather, it is the labour time socially necessary for the production of such commodities alongside the inherent properties of objects that determine the ascription of value. 'The determination of the magnitude of value by labour time is therefore a secret, hidden under the apparent fluctuations in the relative value of commodities' (Marx, 1887/1996: 86). Marx wishes to trace the 'cabalistic signs' of money within which the value relation is lost in the names of currencies (such as the dollar or euro), 'because these money names express both the values of commodities, and, at the same time, aliquot<sup>5</sup> parts of the weight of the metal that was the standard of money' (Marx, 1887/1996: 110). As Theodor Adorno (2000: 32) warns, a naïve acceptance of media such as money as a self-evident form of equivalence, a medium of exchange—or simply a discursive system of writing—relieves people of the need for reflection on the specific social relationships governing the system of exchange, or discursive writing, in the first place.

The relations through which the social world attains 'objectivity', whereby externalised products of human activity appear *as if* they are real, are therefore part of the above process known as objectivation or reification. Far from representing an economistic rendering of social reality, this awareness raises meaningful questions about the very objectivations of subjective processes in human activity, or the ways in which the socially constructed world is intersubjectively realised (Bieler and Morton, 2001: 17-21). It thus offers an historical materialist mode of enquiry into the conditions and constitution of productive activity by suggesting a way in which the characteristic

institutional forms and social practices of capitalism can be understood. Within a historical materialist theory of history, there is therefore a novel vantage point from which to consider factors, not as variables independent of one another, but as internally related. This *philosophy of internal relations* means that the character of capital is considered as a social relation in such a way that the internal ties between the means of production, and those who own them, as well as those who work them, as well as the realisation of value within historically specific conditions, are all understood as relations internal to each other (Ollman, 1976: 47). This is distinct from viewing such relations as a set of external connections and treating capital as a simple variable. For as Bertell Ollman (2003: 69) attests, ‘capital is itself a relation in which the ties of the material means of production to labour, value, commodity, et cetera, are interiorised as parts of what capital is.’ In summarising this philosophy of internal relations he also states that, ‘the relations that come together to make up the whole get expressed in what are taken to be its parts’ (Ollman, 2003: 70). The appearance of relations as external—taken as a given by social constructivists or as simply discursively constructed by post-structuralists, as demonstrated earlier—arises precisely as a result of the process of reification and the alienation of labour under capitalism (Gould, 1978: 93).

As a consequence of this philosophy of internal relations, the social ontology of historical materialism—that takes as primary the social organisation of production and the very process of objectivation through which human beings exist—is able to offer a non-reductionist and open-ended view of capital (Rupert, 1995: 16). After all, as Robert Cox (1987: 1) has stated, ‘production creates the material basis for all forms of social existence, and the ways in which human efforts are combined in productive processes affect all other aspects of social life, including the polity.’ This starting point, however, does not serve to establish a distinction between the economic and the political realms in an ahistoric way. Rather, it promotes a precise conceptualisation of the historical and

social constitution of particular social relations of production and the emergence of related political and economic institutions. An historical materialist approach asks why is it that these two spheres appear to be separate in capitalism in the first place. In contrast to post-structuralists such as de Goede, who contends ‘that historically constructed discourses of the economy have made possible this separation between the domain of the economic and the domain of the political’ (de Goede, 2005: 2), the answer is sought through the philosophy of internal relations. This recognises that under capitalist property relations the direct extraction of surplus is accomplished through ‘non-political’ relations conducted through a contractual relation between those who maintain the power of appropriation as owners of the means of production over those who only have their labour to sell as expropriated producers (Burnham, 1995; Rupert, 1995: 21; Wood, 1995: 31-6). On this basis, state and civil society, the political and the economic, are not understood as given or discursively constructed, separate entities, which are then externally related to each other, but as two expressions of the same configuration of capitalist social relations of production. Hence, an internal relationship is acknowledged that includes, for example, the way private property is legally ensured by the state, so that forms of power such as ‘the law’ may be seen as *both* an instrument through which definitions of property are imposed or maintained *and* an ideology in active relationship to social norms through which class relations are mediated. Productive relations are therefore in part meaningful in terms of their very definition in law in civil society, although ‘the anatomy of this civil society . . . has to be sought in political economy’ (Marx, 1859/1987: 262; Thompson, 1975: 261; Wood, 1995: 22).

According to Marx, the state has a set of presuppositions in civil society in terms of religion, the judiciary, private property, and the family. Under capitalist social relations these become divided into separate spheres. Therefore, the division of ‘state’ from ‘civil society’ unfolds as a discrete form of capitalist social relations. This induces a

mystification of the powers of the state to the extent that collective identities become separated into individual elements. The public and private spheres are shorn, so that individual freedom forms the foundation of civil society and class exploitation is set aside to give decisive status to abstract citizenship (Marx, 1843a/1975: 77-8, 81). Civil society therefore becomes equated with individual rights and private interests and ‘appears as a framework external to the individuals, as a restriction of their original independence’ (Marx, 1843b/1975: 164). The individual is presented as an ‘isolated monad’ with the state regarding ‘civil society, the world of needs, labour, private interests, civil law, as the *basis of its existence*, as a *precondition* not requiring further substantiation and therefore as its *natural basis*’ (Marx, 1843b/1975: 167 original emphases). Yet, declares Marx, ‘sovereignty is nothing but the objectified mind of the subjects of the state’ and the very social existence of people within the state constitutes their participation and relation to the state. ‘They *are* not only part of the state, but the state is *their* portion’ (1843a/1975: 24, 26, 117 original emphasis).

It is this radicalised social ontology, as outlined by Mark Rupert (1995: 16), that is the basis for an historically specific understanding of the organisation of production. It is also closely related to Antonio Gramsci’s own rejection of all kinds of economism, including the notion that economic crisis would result in an inevitable, automatic historical transformation of society (Gramsci, 1971: 168). In more detail, Gramsci argued that economic crisis would not automatically give rise to political crisis, or that ideas can be read off as mere epiphenomena of material forces, because “‘civil society’ has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic “incursions” of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.)’ (Gramsci, 1971: 235). Instead, the cultural sphere of socio-political class struggle through which hegemony is constructed tends to lag behind the thrust of economic events, slowing down the weight of economic crisis. ‘It may be ruled out’, Gramsci (1971: 184) stated, ‘that immediate

economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events; they can simply create the terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought.’<sup>6</sup> As Justin Rosenberg (1994b: 53 original emphasis) has commented, ‘the central thesis of historical materialism is not economic determinism; it is the centrality of those relations which organise material production to the wider institutional reproduction of social orders.’ As will be demonstrated in the following section, it is here that the philosophy of internal relations articulated by historical materialism, specifically in terms of a dialectical connectedness of ideas as material social processes, becomes apparent in a non-deterministic understanding of structural change.

### **THE MATERIAL STRUCTURE OF IDEAS**

Eric Hobsbawm has noted that, following the revolutions of 1830 and despite the regional variations in social and economic organisation across Europe, the decisive importance of capital cities as a locus for revolt gained widespread acceptance. However, by the time further revolution spread across the continent after 1848, ‘governments began to replan them in order to facilitate the operation of troops against [the] revolutionaries’ (Hobsbawm, 1962: 129). ‘For the city planners’, he continues, ‘the poor were a public danger, their potentially riotous concentrations to be broken up by avenues and boulevards which would drive the inhabitants of the crowded popular quarters they replaced into some unspecified, but presumably more sanitary and certainly less perilous locations’ (Hobsbawm 1975: 211). The archetypal example is the hiring of Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-1892) by Napoleon III to ‘modernise’ Paris in the 1860s with the building of *grande boulevards* to accommodate new street cafés and single-function urban development (Harvey, 2003: 107-16). Richard Sennett (1977: 134-5) has summarised this as the transference of an ecology of *quartiers* into an ecology of classes. Gramsci (1971: 365) also drew attention to such state-impelled practices and

designations, which he regarded as linked to the wider class ‘realisation of a hegemonic apparatus’ in four main ways.<sup>7</sup>

First, he referred to the overarching importance of the ‘material structure of ideology’ which included issues such as architecture alongside street lay-outs (as well as street names), and the social function performed by libraries, schools, publishing houses, newspapers and journals, down to the local parish newsletter. Overall awareness of these aspects of social power ‘would get people into the habit of a more cautious and precise calculation of the forces acting in society’ (Gramsci, 1995: 155-6). A point that may strike one whether standing on Avenue de la Grande Armée, one of Haussmann’s twelve grand avenues radiating from the Arc de Triomphe; or facing El Monumento de la Revolución in México City located on the Plaza de la República; or situated opposite the Republic Monument in Taksim Square in İstanbul and its sculpture to the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk; or located on the more humble but still symbolic Viale Gramsci in Rome.<sup>8</sup> It is such a focus on the internal relation of the material structure of ideas that has been explored in the work of David Harvey, notably tracing transformations in the built environment of modernist architecture in the early twentieth century—embodied in the work of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, or Frank Lloyd Wright—that unfolded ‘less as a controlling force of ideas over production than as a theoretical framework and justification for what practically-minded engineers, politicians, builders, and developers were in many cases engaged upon out of sheer social, economic and political necessity’ (Harvey, 1989: 69). Likewise, within the postmodernism of the late twentieth century city, Harvey internally associates speculative land, property development and redevelopment in the built environment, to processes of capital accumulation, market and land-rent allocation, and money capital. Linking with our preceding section, ‘the fetishism (direct concern with surface appearances that conceal underlying meanings) is obvious,’ according to Harvey (1989: 77-8), ‘but it is here

deployed deliberately to conceal, through the realms of culture and taste, the real base of economic distinctions’, which are entailed in establishing enclosed and protected housing and leisure spaces as an expression of class power. Architecture, then, amidst a diverse array of other social condensations (such as cadastral mapping defining property rights over land, or the drawing of territorial boundaries for administration, social control and communication routes) provides an opportunity to question the role played by discursive productive meanings embedded within the economy through analysis of the internal relations within the ‘material structure of ideology’.

Second, these social condensations of hegemony are the means by which a “diffused” and capillary form of indirect pressure’ becomes mediated through various organisations—or ‘capillary intellectual meatuses’—to exercise hegemonic class relations (Gramsci, 1971: 110; Gramsci, 1985: 194). Gramsci is thus a paramount theorist of capillary power due to his attentiveness to the social class meatuses of ‘capillary sources of capitalist profit’ (Gramsci, 1977: 82; Gramsci, 1992: 230-1).<sup>9</sup> Hegemony within the realm of civil society is grasped when the citizenry come to believe that authority over their lives emanates from the self. Hegemony is therefore articulated through capillary power—akin to ‘an incorporeal government’—when it is transmitted organically through various ‘social infusoria’ such as schools, street layout and names, architecture, the family, workplace, or church (Gramsci, 1977: 143-4). Hence ‘within the husk of political society a complex and well-articulated civil society’, is evident, ‘*in which the individual can govern himself* without his self-government thereby entering into conflict with political society—but rather becoming its normal continuation, its organic complement’ (Gramsci, 1971: 268 emphasis added). It was this separation, outlined earlier, that Marx saw as characteristic of the structuring of societies leading to the naturalisation of the distinctive forms of modernity. That is why, in his view:

*Security* is the highest social concept of civil society . . . expressing the fact that the whole of society exists only in order to guarantee to each of its members the preservation of his person, his rights, and his property. . . . The concept of security does not raise civil society above its egoism. On the contrary, security is the *insurance* of its egoism (Marx, 1843b/1975: 162-3, original emphases).

Embedded within this process of naturalisation is therefore the struggle over hegemony. Hence, for historical materialism ‘ideologies are anything but arbitrary; they are real historical facts which must be combated and their nature as instruments of domination exposed . . . precisely for reasons of political struggle’ (Gramsci, 1995: 395).

Third, according to Gramsci, ‘ideology’ was neither artificial nor something mechanically superimposed. Rather, ideologies were viewed as historically produced through ceaseless struggle, taking on substance through practical activity bound up with systems of meaning embedded in the economy (Gramsci, 1996: 56). ‘Ideas are realised when they find their justification—and the means to assert themselves—in economic reality’ (Gramsci, 1994: 56). Importantly, not all ideas are relevant. ‘Ideas only become effective if they do, in the end, connect with a particular constellation of social forces. In that sense, ideological struggle is a part of the general social struggle for mastery and leadership—in short for hegemony’ (Hall, 1986: 42). Consequently, ideas represent an independent force when maintained in dialectical connectivity, or internally related, with the social relations of production. Only those ideas can be regarded as ‘organic’ that ‘organise human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.’ (Gramsci, 1971: 377). Related to this, is the twofold distinction drawn between ‘historically organic ideologies’ and those based on extemporary polemics that are ‘arbitrary, rationalistic, or “willed”’. Hence highlighting ‘real action on the one hand . . . and on the other hand the gladiatorial futility which is self-declared action but modifies only the word, not things, the external gesture’ (Gramsci, 1971: 307, 376-7). For Gramsci, ‘it is on the level of ideologies that men become conscious of conflicts in the world of the economy’ (Gramsci, 1971: 162). These

conflicts can be heuristically analysed in the form of class struggle in IPE (Cox, 1985/1996: 57-8). The social relations of production are understood as engendering social class forces as the main collective actors, implying a conflict between capital and labour. However, this importantly does not suggest a homogenous understanding of identities in their class relevance. Depending on the forms of capital within the overall process of surplus accumulation, one can distinguish between different circuits of financial and industrial capital and labour as well as, depending on which level production is organised, between national and transnational fractions of capital and labour (van Apeldoorn, 2002: 26-34; Bieler, 2000: 10-11; Bieler, 2006: 32-5; Cox, 1981: 147; van der Pijl, 1984: 4-20). In short, different class fractions are regarded as emerging through the way production is organised in capitalism. As a result, forms of agency can be identified and conceptualised from a historical materialist perspective. The *who?* question can thus be addressed.

Importantly, class identity does not need to imply class-consciousness and common class interests (Ste. Croix, 1981: 44). Class-consciousness only emerges out of particular historical contexts of struggle rather than mechanically deriving from objective determinations that have an automatic place in production. People ‘identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness’ (Thompson, 1978: 149). Clearly, there is cognisance here of the diversity of social identities and how these attain class-relevance through processes of exploitation. In short, “‘non-class’ issues—peace, ecology, and feminism—are not to be set aside but given a firm and conscious basis in the social realities shaped through the production process’ (Cox, 1987: 353; see also Bakker and Gill, 2003; Bieler and Morton, 2003: 475-7; Cox, 1992: 35). Even more importantly, the identification of class-relevance does not imply that interests and political strategies are simply determined by the location

of social class forces in production processes. Production is only determining in the first instance in that it prevents some strategies and enables others. ‘Whether any such possibilities are realised, and in what particular ways, depends upon open-ended political struggles in which the power relations of capitalism will necessarily be implicated’ (Rupert, 2003: 183). There are, in short, always several possible strategies from which social class forces, as bearers of both agency and structure, can choose (Bieler and Morton, 2001: 16-29). And it is in these struggles that ideas, put forward by different, rival class fractions, gain their importance as expressions of conflicts in the social world. Ideas are not ascribed fixed class positions but at the same time the class-structuring of ideology is not dispensed with, because ideas arise from and may reflect the material conditions within which social forces as classes exist (Hall, 1986: 40). As Nicos Poulantzas (1973: 191) puts it, ‘the state is not a class instrument, but rather the state of a society divided into classes.’

Fourth, it is here, in the struggle over hegemony between different class fractions, that Gramsci attributed an important role to intellectuals. Thus, ‘Gramsci’s investigation of the role of the intellectuals in modern society is part of his attempt to understand what actually links the world of production and civil or private society with the political realm’ (Vacca, 1982: 37). Gramsci understood intellectuals as exercising an ideological social function in a broad sense across the social, political, economic and cultural fields in ways related to the class-structuring of societies. On one hand, traditional intellectuals are those who consider themselves to be autonomous (the itinerate *condottiere*?) but, more accurately, can be related to socio-economic structures belonging to a specific period of historical time. Examples would include ‘ivory tower’ intellectuals, who ‘can be defined as the expression of that social utopia by which the intellectuals think of themselves as “independent”, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own etc.’ (Gramsci, 1971: 8). Traditional intellectuals therefore represent ‘the culture of a restricted

intellectual aristocracy' that is 'given by the man of letters, the philosopher, the artist' (Gramsci, 1971: 9, 393). On the other hand, the category of organic intellectual was predominantly reserved for those intellectuals that stood as the mediators of hegemony articulated by social classes (see Sassoon, 1987: 144, 214). Hence, according to Gramsci,

every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields (Gramsci, 1971: 5).

Such intellectuals have the function of organising the hegemony of social class forces, and thus capillary power, beyond the coercive apparatus of the state whether as direct members of an intelligentsia; as industrial technicians; as intellectuals of statecraft; as specialists in political economy, acting as organisers of 'the "confidence" of investors'; as journalists; or as architects (Gramsci, 1971: 5, 12; Gramsci, 1995: 61-70; Gramsci, 1996: 200-1).<sup>10</sup> For Gramsci, organic intellectuals are engaged in active participation in everyday life, acting as agents or constructors, organisers and 'permanent persuaders' in forming social class hegemony, or by performing a valuable supporting role to subaltern groups engaged in promoting social change, that is then "mediated" by the whole fabric of society' (Gramsci, 1971: 12, 52-5). Thus, organic intellectuals do not simply produce ideas, they also concretise and articulate strategies in complex and often contradictory ways, which is possible because of their proximity to the most powerful forces in society. It is their task to develop the 'gastric juices' to digest competing conceptions of social order in conformity with a hegemonic project (Gramsci, 1971: 128n.6). Put differently, it is their social function to transcend the particular interests of their own social group which brings 'the interests of the leading class into harmony with those of subordinate classes and incorporates these other interests into an ideology expressed in universal terms' (Cox, 1983: 168). When ideas are thus accepted as common sense—or 'diffuse, unco-ordinated features of a generic mode of thought' (Gramsci, 1971: 330)—they

become naturalised in the form of intersubjective meanings. Accordingly, it is in this manner that ideas establish the wider frameworks of thought, 'which condition the way individuals and groups are able to understand their social situation and the possibilities of social change' (Gill and Law, 1988: 74). It is through this process that the material structure of ideas plays a decisive role in shaping the terrain of class (-relevant) struggle.

What this amounts to is a conception of the 'necessary reciprocity' between ideas and material social conditions, in sustaining and possibly transforming state-civil society relations (Gramsci, 1971: 12, 366). It is a focus that links the social function of intellectuals to the world of production within capitalist society, without succumbing to economism, whilst still offering the basis for a materialist and social class analysis of intellectuals. Cultural aspects, from literature to architecture, clearly play a significant role within this conception of organic intellectuals where each activity is understood as a material social product having a social function endowed with political significance. The task therefore becomes one of revealing the social functions of organic intellectuals as representative of class fractions within the complex web of relations between rulers and ruled (Morton, 2003: 29-33). In sum, this mode of enquiry allows us to understand *why* certain ideas attain the presence of 'common sense' in the form of intersubjective meanings and not others.

This account of historical materialism helps to avoid, first, the pitfalls of economism, regarding ideas merely as a reflection of a material structure, and, second, the problems of constructivism, regarding ideas as an equal explanatory factor alongside material social conditions. The opposition to post-structuralism has to be cast in a slightly different manner. There is the view that although there may well be a non-discursive realm of material reality this can only be understood within categories that are constituted through discourse. This position is most clearly pronounced in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001: 108 original emphasis):

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition . . . What is denied is not that . . . objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive condition of emergence.

In such a formulation, hegemony becomes rendered as a constant interplay between autonomous and indeterminate discourses rather than linked to specific social interests and class identities. This results in abstracting forms of collective agency from the prevailing social order and isolating and separating issues from social conditions and material interests (Wood, 1986: 176). To recap, the deficits of post-structuralism revolve around a failure to grasp the conditions of inequality and exploitation that confront social forces. The point that peoples' identities are constituted within the context of existing social relations, which are to some extent inherited from and shaped by historical relations of force, is largely ignored. Questions attempting to ascertain what aspects of social experience *make possible* the articulation of certain discourses, within the struggle over hegemony, are thus suppressed. Discourse does not simply act upon people; rather, people act through discourse, so the world cannot be reduced to discourse alone. As Stuart Hall (1997: 31) puts it, 'everything is within the discursive, but nothing is only discourse or only discursive.'

### **CONCLUSION: THE EFFECTS OF HEGEMONY**

Antonio Gramsci elaborated a distinct theory of history within which ideology was understood in 'its highest sense of a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life' (Gramsci, 1971: 328). For Gramsci, idealist intellectuals developed a subjective account of history based on the progression of philosophical thought rather than historically specific conditions of class struggle. This resulted in a hypostatizing of hegemony, removing social conflict from a quite specific context and treating it as an independent

property divorced from any social basis so that 'history becomes a formal history, a history of concepts' (Gramsci, 1995: 338, 343-4, 370). Akin to the separation of ideas from material conditions within social constructivism, these solipsistic tendencies can also be similarly linked to the deficits of post-structuralism. It has been argued that a discursive approach to politics possesses an aversion to locating representations in the context of political economy, or at worst is a very conscious attempt to eviscerate the enterprise of political economy (Laffey, 2000: 436; Campbell, 1998: 219). This results in the suppression of agency linked to class power and political economy so that the overriding economic significance of the promotion of certain discourses, in favour of particular interests and purposes, is missed. Accordingly:

Questions of identity may insinuate their way into all forms of politics but all forms of politics are not about questions of identity. Preoccupation with the politics of identity can create a history without materialism, a history without economic exploitation, capital accumulation and power applied for the instrumental purposes of economic gain (Ó Tuathail, 1996: 652).

As Dirlik makes clear, the implications of such a strategy to the social sciences more broadly are significant. Post-structuralism might well then be 'appealing because it disguises the power relations that shape a seemingly shapeless world and contributes to a conceptualisation of that world that both consolidates and subverts possibilities of resistance' (Dirlik, 1994: 355-6). By contrast, the position that ideas are material, a process of articulation within which signs themselves become part of a socially created world, can be subsumed differently within an historical materialist theory of history. What is denied here is not that objects are constituted through discourse; instead the rather different assertion is made that this is itself a material social practice: a practical activity developed through means of social production and reproduction as a material relation. Emphasising this rather different position thus entails realising the production of meaning and ideas as part of material social processes, so that consciousness and thought are necessarily social material activities. An historical materialist theory of history

thus throws into relief certain features necessary to understanding the dual process of knowing and being known embedded within the production of ideas. But it does so by expressing textuality in terms of class struggle or specific conflictual social relationships. For ‘the philosophy of praxis conceives the reality of human relationships of knowledge as an element of political “hegemony”’, linked to the agency of social classes (Gramsci, 1995: 306). In sum, a historical materialist conceptualisation of the role of ideas through its philosophy of internal relations overcomes the shortcomings of constructivist and post-structuralist approaches. Social class forces are identified as core collective actors through a focus on the social relations of production. By acknowledging the location of these actors within the social relations of production, i.e. the underlying power structure, it is then possible to address the question as to *why* a certain set of ideas, rooted within these material relations, dominates at a particular point in time.

At the same time, revealing the effects of hegemony through a focus on the objectifications of subjective processes and meanings, by which the social world is constructed, is never a clear-cut process. This means that our ‘understandings of social power relations which abstract from the social organisation of production must be radically incomplete’ (Rupert, 2003: 184). This notwithstanding, it is through our specific conception of hegemony that culture is not conceived as separate and then added to the socio-economic realm. Rather, the stress is on political economy *as* cultural. As Gramsci (1971: 360), rather soberly, reminds us, ‘that the objective possibilities exist for people not to die of hunger and that people do die of hunger, has its importance, or so one would have thought’ whilst indicating at the same that ‘the existence of objective conditions . . . is not yet enough: it is necessary to “know” them, and know how to use them.’ As we have argued, this is far removed from any tendencies of economism. But it *is* a view that reappraises different modes of cultural struggle as a ‘critique of capitalist civilisation’ (Gramsci, 1977: 10-13). By outlining the above epistemological philosophy of

internal relations that marks a historical materialist theory of history, a thorough challenge to the mainstream can then be enabled, which has been long implied by the ontological assumptions within critical IPE (Smith, 2004: 505). To conclude, citing Georg Lukács (1971: 168), if ‘history is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man’, then the deficits of discourse revolve around an inability to disclose antagonistic identities embedded in the very processes of economic exploitation. Leaving one to surmise whether post-structuralism actively seeks to erase such features as a viable focus in the first place.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the same critical work in IPE has also been accused of *too strong* an emphasis on the role of ideas, collapsing into an empirical pluralism and, thereby, overlooking the central importance of the sphere of production (see Burnham, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Such attempts to prioritise ideational production are actually contrary to Michel Foucault's own stance on the exercise of power. 'Power relations, relationships of communication, objective capacities should not,' he argues, '... be confused. This is not to say that there is a question of three separate domains. Nor that there is, on the one hand, the field of things, of perfected technique, work, and the transformation of the real, and on the other, that of signs, communication, reciprocity, and the production of meaning' (Foucault, 2000: 337-8).

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<sup>3</sup> We are aware here of Foucault’s statement that, ‘If for the time being, I grant a certain privileged position to the question of “how”, it is not because I would wish to eliminate the questions of “what” and “why.”’ However, his preference for a focus on *power relations* rather than power itself—with power relations regarded as linked but distinct from objective capacities—is still troubling. Power relations become embedded within a complex and indistinct ‘ensemble of actions’ (Foucault, 2000: 336). With the limits of space preventing a full development of this point, the problem here is locating power within a vague ensemble of social relations, which may throw up a theory of individuality but obscures the history of social formations linked to the conditions of production and reproduction constitutive of material relations of existence in the labour process (Althusser 2003: 254, 290). For a preferential treatment of processes of individuation—or the ‘isolation effect’—of the state that facilitates an interpretation of the fragmentation and atomisation of social agents through the capitalist labour process, see Poulantzas (1973: 130-7). We develop this focus on individuation processes intrinsic to capitalism in the next section.

<sup>4</sup> This quotation is referred to in Perry Anderson’s (1983: 57) critique of the capsizing of both structure and subject within post-structuralism.

<sup>5</sup> An aliquot part simply means (of a part or portion) contained by a whole within a number of times e.g. four is an aliquot part of twelve.

<sup>6</sup> Also witness Gramsci stating that ‘it is illusory to think that a well propagated “clear idea” enters diverse consciousness with the same “organising” effects of widespread clarity. It is an “enlightenment” error’ (see Gramsci, 1992: 128; Gramsci, 1985: 417).

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<sup>7</sup> For an extended unravelling of the work of Antonio Gramsci on the themes of hegemony and uneven development relevant to the contemporary global political economy, see Morton (2007).

<sup>8</sup> The political importance of street-naming practices outlined by Gramsci took an ironic turn in Rome in 2002 when a local council proposed the renaming of *Viale Gramsci* to *Viale Chiorboli*, in honour of Aldo Chiorboli who tried to rescue a Fascist fighter pilot from his blazing plane to only end up also dying in the process. The plan was to thereby displace *Viale Gramsci* to a more peripheral secondary location within the city, an act regional councillor Carl Lucherini described as an attempt to cancel history through revisionism, see *Il Messaggero* (Rome), ‘Gramsci “sfrattato” va in periferia: arriva il nuovo “eroe”’, (28 September 2002), 39.

<sup>9</sup> Whilst space restrictions limit full elaboration, this conception differs in marked ways from the focus on discursive formations and architecture in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1972); essentially because of the indeterminate determinism within Foucault’s notion of capillary power (see Wight, 1999: 121). This results in a focus on architecture as ‘complex structures of discourse-practice in which objects, entities and activities are defined and constructed within the domain of a discursive formation’ (Hirst, 2005: 156). The phagocytic essence of discourse is again present here.

<sup>10</sup> Intellectuals of statecraft refers to ‘a whole community of state bureaucrats, leaders, foreign policy experts and advisors throughout the world who comment upon, influence and conduct the activities of statecraft’ (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 193).