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Capitalist Outcomes, Ideal Types, Historical Realities

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Abstract

This article is a response to some of the criticisms made of *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* by Gerstenberger, Post and Riley. In particular, it focuses on two issues of definition – that of capitalism and the capitalist nation-state – which arise from the book’s ‘consequentialist’ claim that bourgeois revolutions are defined by a particular outcome: the establishment of nation-states dedicated to the accumulation of capital.

Keywords

Bourgeois revolution – capitalist mode of production – market dependence – development of the productive forces – competitive accumulation – French revolution(s) – capitalist nation-states

Introduction

Historical Materialism (HM), as both conference and journal, was central to the genesis of *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*¹ I am glad, therefore, to take the occasion of the book’s publication in an abridged edition to respond to the reviews by Heide Gerstenberger and Charles Post commissioned by HM, and to one by Dylan Riley which appeared in *New Left Review* (NLR) during 2015.

Reviews of *How Revolutionary?* have tended to take three forms. At one extreme were those by academics whose assessments largely depended on their attitude to Marxism and, consequently, whether or not they regarded my attempts to explore and develop it as having any intellectual purpose.² At the other extreme were political comrades for whom the validity of Marxism was not an issue, but who were concerned with how far I had departed from positions associated with the International Socialist tradition, particularly by claiming that the strategy of permanent revolution was now obsolete.³ Between these extremes lay a third approach, represented by the reviews to which I respond here. These are more concerned than the first with the potential impact of theoretical positions on the world outside the academy, but less concerned than the second with the extent of my personal deviations—although they do of course measure my arguments against their own orthodoxies and traditions, whether those of Political/*Capital*-centric Marxism in the case of Post, or the more eclectic mix upheld by the NLR editorial board and represented here by Riley.

A full response to all the issues raised by my critics will be published in the *Historical Materialism* book series, along with some of the reviews themselves. For reasons of space,

¹ See Davidson 2015, pp. x-xii, for details.

² Fowler 2014 thinks that it has; Jenkins 2013 disagrees.

³ See Callinicos 2013 and Gluckstein 2013; I responded to these critiques in Davidson 2015, pp. 217-232.

however, I will focus here on two fundamental questions of definition.⁴ In *How Revolutionary?* I argue for what is usually called a ‘consequentialist’ position, that bourgeois revolutions are defined by a particular outcome: the establishment of nation-states dedicated to the accumulation of capital. But what is capitalism and the social relations which constitute it? And what is a capitalist nation-state? One might think that these questions had long since been answered, but various critiques of my work—including those under consideration here—suggest that they remain unresolved.

PART 1: BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION AND CAPITALIST ECONOMY

1.1 Misreading *Capital*

Any discussion of the nature of capitalism will primarily involve positions associated with Robert Brenner and his followers which, for convenience, I will continue to refer to as Political Marxism, while noting that many leading practitioners, including Post and Brenner himself, reject the term. Their views are represented in this discussion by Post and, more distantly, by Riley. Since I have been accused by the latter of neglecting both the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* in my book, and given the importance which Political Marxists place on these and related texts, I have, where relevant, taken Marx’s discussion in them as my starting point.⁵

It is worth stating from the outset that Post and I are in agreement over a number of the themes which I discuss in the book—indeed, as we will see, he regards me as being *insufficiently* committed to a consequentialist view of bourgeois revolutions. To begin, however, I want to address his other main concern, which is my account of the transition to capitalism. This focus is unsurprising, given the centrality which the question has for Political Marxists, but it means that most of Post’s discussion concentrates very narrowly on the first two sections of chapter 21, ‘Preconditions for an Era of Bourgeois Revolution’, and largely ignores chapter 18, ‘“Capitalist Social Property Relations”’, where I directly engage with the Political Marxist tradition.⁶ Since the arguments of the later chapter assume those of the earlier, I will have to repeat some of them in what follows.

The central *methodological* difficulty with the Political Marxist position is indicated by Post’s preference for the title ‘*Capital-centric*’ Marxism.⁷ There are in fact two problems with invoking *Capital* in this way. First, *Capital* does not exist in a void, but within a larger body of writing, including the much-derided 1859 ‘Preface’ to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, which contain certain operating assumptions about social development. *Capital* cannot be understood in isolation from these texts any more than, say, Lenin’s texts on party organisation can be understood in isolation from those in which he discusses the nature of the Tsarist state.

Second, even in relation to the specific contents of *Capital*, Political Marxists misunderstand Marx’s method and misrecognise his actual subject, failings which are well illustrated by Riley, in his capacity as Political Marxist sympathiser:

Davidson makes the astonishing claim that Marx ‘saw no need for a special mechanism with which to explain the appearance of capitalism in England because he did not think that the development of capitalism was unique to England, but a general phenomenon, at least in Europe’.

⁴ The book will also deal with the validity of the concept of state capitalism and question of whether representative democracy is essential to the stability of post-revolutionary capitalist nation-states.

⁵ Riley 2015, p. 118.

⁶ Davidson 2012, pp. 512-539; Davidson 2017, pp. 27-54.

⁷ Post 2011, p. 2; Post 2017, p. 2.

But of course Marx did see the need to explain the emergence of capitalism in England, since he spent a significant part of his most famous book trying to do precisely that.⁸

As we shall see, Astonishment is one of Riley's default settings, but in this case such a response is unnecessary. My point was simply that, although Marx certainly regarded the English experience as distinctive, as he makes clear several times in *Capital*, he did not believe that capitalism only emerged as an indigenous process there.⁹ What then is the significance of England in the structure of *Capital*? As means of engaging with the methodological issues involved, I want to turn—initially at least—not to Marx, but to Weber.

Now, I have to tread carefully here as I was once accused by John Foster in the pages of HM of being an 'unconscious' Weberian.¹⁰ I am not, although it is pointless to deny that some of Weber's substantive historical conclusions are perfectly compatible with those of the Marxist tradition.¹¹ His methodology, however, is quite alien to it, not least because of his rejection of the category of totality.¹² The notion of an 'ideal type' forms a solitary exception to this otherwise general incompatibility:

An ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct. In its mental purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a *utopia*. Historical research faces the task of determining in each individual case, the extent to which this ideal construct approximates to or diverges from reality.¹³

Regardless of the language in which this is expressed, *some* variation of this approach is unavoidable when discussing any societal movement, process or institution. The view that Weber's ideal types 'did not represent forces that existed in reality', although widely-held, is nevertheless wrong.¹⁴ Ideal types cannot simply be conjured up *ex nihilo*; they must be based on actual characteristics displayed by 'non-ideal' examples and, consequently, it is important to distinguish between those characteristics which are essential and those which are not.¹⁵

Engels noted the need for this approach in one of his last letters, where the notion of 'concept' plays the same role as 'ideal type' for Weber: 'But although a concept has the essential nature of a concept and cannot therefore *prima facie* directly coincide with reality, from which it must first be abstracted, it is still something more than a fiction, unless you are going to declare all the results of thought fictions because reality has to go a long way round before it corresponds to them, and even then only corresponds to them with asymptotic approximation.' After a series of examples mainly relating to the rate of profit, he then asks these questions of feudalism:

⁸ Riley 2015, p. 119.

⁹ See, for example, Marx 1976b, pp. 90, 874, 876, 915-916, etc.

¹⁰ Foster 2002, pp. 164-167.

¹¹ Notably his discussion of the decline of the Ancient World; see Weber 1998, the endorsement by Ste. Croix 1981, p. 85 and the discussion in Allen 2004, pp.117-122.

¹² Davidson 2016, pp. 102-111.

¹³ Weber 1949, p. 90.

¹⁴ Allen 2004, p. 77.

¹⁵ For example, in his most famous work Weber writes: 'The ideal type of the capitalist entrepreneur, as it has been represented even in Germany by occasional outstanding examples...avoids ostentation and unnecessary expenditure, as well as conscious enjoyment of his power, and is embarrassed by the outward signs of the social recognition which he receives.' These are observable behaviours; Weber was not simply making them up. See Weber 1976, p. 71.

Did feudalism ever correspond to its concept? Founded in the kingdom of the West Franks, further developed in Normandy by the Norwegian conquerors, its formation continued by the French Norsemen in England and Southern Italy, it came nearest to its concept—in Jerusalem, in the kingdom of a day, which in the *Assises de Jerusalem* left behind it the most classic expression of the feudal order. Was this order therefore a fiction because it only achieved a short-lived existence in full classical form in Palestine, and even that mostly only on paper?¹⁶

My discussion of the distinction between political and social revolution involves ‘ideal types’ or ‘concepts’, but I am of course aware that some political revolutions have turned into social revolutions and that potential social revolutions have remained as political revolutions, and I give examples of both processes.¹⁷ So, when Riley, echoing an earlier criticism by Alex Callinicos, claims that I make too great a distinction between them, he is similarly missing the point: it is only by setting out their essential characteristics with exaggerated clarity that it is possible to identify the inevitably more complex actual cases.¹⁸

Marx and Engels also took this approach when discussing both the origin and development of capitalism, and the bourgeois revolutions—in both cases using a relatively limited set of historical examples to construct them. As Engels wrote in a footnote to the ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’ from 1888: ‘Generally speaking, for the economic development of the bourgeoisie, England is taken here as the typical country; for its political development, France.’¹⁹ Marx makes the same point about ‘economic development’ at greater length in the Preface to *Capital* Volume 1:

The physicist either observes physical phenomena where they occur in their most typical form and most free from disturbing influence, or, wherever possible, he makes experiments under conditions that assure the occurrence of the phenomenon in its normality. In this work I have to examine the capitalist mode of production, and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode. Up to the present time, their classic ground is England. That is the reason why England is used as the chief illustration in the development of my theoretical ideas.²⁰

The subject of *Capital*—and this one of the very few issues on which I am in agreement with Louis Althusser—is therefore the capitalist mode of production, not the development of capitalism in England.²¹ As Paul Mattick notes: ‘Although constructed with an eye on England which, at that time, represented capitalism in its most advanced and purest form, Marx’s model of capital production represented neither the national nor the world economy but was an imaginary system of basic capital-labour relationships.’²² ‘Imaginary’ is obviously too strong a term, but on the very last page of Volume 3, Marx does nevertheless note that ‘we are only out to present the internal organization of the capitalist mode of production, its ideal average, as it were’.²³

The method of *Capital* certainly involves abstracting from the experience of England, the country where capitalism was most developed, in the same way that Marx always took the most developed form of *any* significant social phenomena from which to abstract. As he notes in the

¹⁶ Engels 1975, pp. 457, 458-9.

¹⁷ Davidson 2012, pp. 486-497; Davidson 2017, pp. 1-12.

¹⁸ Callinicos 2013, pp. 140-141; Riley 2015, p. 116.

¹⁹ Marx and Engels 1973, p. 69, note 14. Their use of individual countries to exemplify particular processes was not restricted to England and France; Engels, for example, wrote of Russia: ‘Given the manifold diversity of forms of landed property and exploitation of the agricultural producers in Russia, this country was to play the same role in the Part on ground-rent as England had done for industrial wage-labour in Volume 1.’ See Engels 1981, p. 96.

²⁰ Marx 1976b, p. 90.

²¹ Althusser 1971, p.76.

²² Mattick 1974, p. 278.

²³ Marx 1981, p. 970.

Grundrisse: ‘Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape.’²⁴ But as Roman Rosdolsky points out, ‘the model of a pure capitalist society in Marx's work...represented a heuristic device, intended to help in the illustration of the developmental tendencies of the capitalist mode of production’.²⁵ Alex Callinicos has highlighted the difference between ‘the abstract model of capitalist production outlined by Marx in *Capital*’ and the concrete forms that capitalism has actually taken: ‘The first is intended to isolate the essential features of capitalism, common to all its variants; the second seek, within the limits set by these features, to identify the diverse historical forms they have assumed.’²⁶ And these ‘historical forms’ include not only specific stages in the development of capitalism, but the way capitalism has emerged and become dominant within individual nation-states.

In a sense it is unnecessary to make the preceding arguments, since Brenner himself has explained that he is working with a model of capitalism that is effectively an ideal type, not one that can be found in the history of *any* country or region:

I do not contend that such economies ever existed in pure form, though rough approximations can be found in seventeenth-century England and seventeenth-century northern Netherlands. But, it is useful to posit the model to see more clearly the social-property relations that underpin the tendency to accumulate capital, as well as to understand the tendency to act like capitalists of the owner-operators who constitute often significant segments of capitalist societies, notably farmers.²⁷

In addition to confusing the ideal with the real, Political Marxists make a related mistake in relation to *Capital*: confusing Marx’s order of presentation with the actual historical process of development. As Derek Sayer explains:

The hidden exegetical structure of *Capital* is that of a hierarchy of conditions of possibility. Thus the commodity is analysed before money, and money before capital, the first form in each pair being a condition for the second. ... We might note, in passing, that although vol. 1 contains an abundance of historical illustration...the placing of this material too is governed by the rigours of this same hierarchy of conditions.

He then goes on to refer to Part VIII, ‘So-called Primitive Accumulation’, which contains the most examples from the English experience.²⁸ Michael Heinrichs points out that these chapters ‘come *after* the (theoretical) depictions of the corresponding categories and not before’: ‘The historical passages compliment the theoretical account, but they don’t *constitute* the theoretical account.’²⁹ In effect, Political Marxists treat the historical passages as if they *did* constitute the theoretical account and consequently reduce all aspects of the transition to the ‘so-called primitive accumulation’, when in fact it is only the opening phase of the process.³⁰ Weber himself noted that Marx and Engels used ideal types such as ‘mode of production’ and claimed that the problem with their approach was that they mistook the ideal types for reality.³¹ The accusation was baseless in relation to the founders of historical materialism, but can with more justice be said of some of their contemporary followers.

²⁴ Marx 1973b, p. 105.

²⁵ Rosdolsky 1977, p. 493.

²⁶ Callinicos 1995, pp. 134–35.

²⁷ Brenner 1999, p. 44.

²⁸ Sayer 1979, pp. 101-102.

²⁹ Heinrichs 2012, p. 30

³⁰ See, for example, Wood 2002a, pp. 13, 35-37.

³¹ Weber 1949, p. 106.

The problem which results from these misreadings is different from the one which used arise in relation to the French Revolution. The events of 1789-1815 were often treated—not least in the early work of Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn—as the very model of what a bourgeois revolution should be, the one against which all others should be measured and usually found wanting—even, or perhaps especially the case of England. In the case of Political Marxism and England, the problem is almost the exact opposite. Brenner, at any rate, is perfectly aware that the English experience of transition was as distinctive as the French experience of revolution and does not claim that later transitions were incomplete simply because they did not reproduce the former. He also notes that Marx ‘stressed...expropriation took place in different times and places’.³² Post, out of all of Brenner’s followers, has perhaps conducted most work on the *actual* forms taken by the transition outside of England, in his studies of the process (‘*specific...in no sense exceptional*’) in the USA.³³

No, the problem is that by mistaking illustrative examples for actual history and presentational sequence for actual chronology, Political Marxists then find themselves, quite unnecessarily, faced with a series of what they regard as unfortunate absences or silences in *Capital*, which Brenner himself has highlighted:

Marx never went much beyond...posing the problem of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. He did not systematically analyse the operation of pre-capitalist systems, as he did that of capitalism; nor did he explain how their own functioning could bring about a transition to capitalism. ... He did not explain exactly why the English landlords did not desire or lacked the capacity to maintain or reconstruct serfdom (as did their counterparts in East Elban Europe). Nor did he make clear what made it possible for the English lords to succeed in expropriating the peasants from possession of their means of subsistence and in reducing them to commercial farmers and wage labourers, when their counterparts in France could not accomplish this.³⁴

But this presupposes that Marx *intended* to explain ‘the problem of the transition from feudalism to capitalism’. If, as I have tried to show, he did not, at least in *Capital*, then these ‘absences’ are a non-problem. Edward Thompson once pointed to the existence of real silences in Marx’s work, and noted that the Althusserians ‘have been happily filling in that silence, taking advantage of the blank pages in Marx’s unfinished notebooks’.³⁵ Political Marxists, on the contrary, are involved in *inventing* silences where none exist and filling them in. The alternative would be to accept that Marx had indeed sketched out a general explanation for the transition, but that it involved ‘the development of the forces of production’.

1.2 The productive forces in the transition to capitalism

This subject unites all my critics, whatever their other differences. On the one hand, they reject the claim that the forces of production have a universal tendency to develop, and that this development, by bringing new social classes with different material interests into being, is what sets the scene for revolutionary transformations. On the other hand, they claim that I *do* accept this claim. According to Post, ‘Davidson’s desire to defend a “productive forces” Marxism against the criticisms of *Capital*-centric Marxists and to keep the French Revolution of 1789 in the pantheon of bourgeois revolutions leads him to several historical and theoretical dead-

³² Brenner then quotes part of the passage from *Capital* Volume 1 which I cite above, including the reference to ‘classic ground’, but continues to treat England as if it was the subject of the analysis rather than an illustration of a process. See Brenner 1989, pp. 293-294.

³³ Post 2011, p.1. For his account of the transition, see *ibid*, pp. 155-252, summarised in Post 2017, p. 25.

³⁴ Brenner 1989, pp. 293, 294.

³⁵ Thompson 1981, p. 106.

ends and to *retreat* from his militant consequentialism'.³⁶ Riley refers to 'the forces of production, which for Davidson play an independent propulsive role in historical development'.³⁷ The source of these errors is apparently my reliance on the 1859 'Preface', which Gerstenberger regards as an example of mere 'historical philosophy':

If this preface is far from summing up theoretical foundations of historical materialism, it is a flawless example of Marxist historical philosophy. Just like the conviction of bourgeois philosophers that rationalization (or modernization) is inherent in the course of human history, versions of Marxist historical philosophy proclaim certain fundamental dynamics of history, foremost amongst them the development of productive forces. ...the overthrow of pre-capitalist political forms of domination is not explained by reference to the crisis of these forms and by the practices which achieved their abolishment but by their inadequacy to further the growth of capitalism.³⁸

There are two separate issues here: one is whether or not Marx *actually* abandoned the positions set out in the 1859 'Preface'; the other is whether arguing that 'the development of the productive forces' has influenced economic development *necessarily* involves the assumption of 'inevitable', 'inexorable' (etc.,etc.) processes which critics claim.

In relation to Marx's own position, we must remember that Smith plays the same role for Political Marxists that Hegel plays for Althusserians, although Marx is supposed to have overcome the former's influence earlier than the latter's. Althusser regarded the 1859 'Preface' as 'still profoundly Hegelian-evolutionist' and even in *Capital* itself 'traces of the Hegelian influence still remained': 'Only later did they disappear *completely*: the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) as well as the *Marginal Notes on Wagner's 'Lehrbuch der Politischen Ökonomie'* (1882) are *totally and definitively exempt* from any trace of Hegelian influence.'³⁹ In case of Political Marxists the influence of Smithian commercialization model of capitalist development is overcome by the publication of *Capital*.⁴⁰ 'For a truly distinctive Marxist approach', wrote Wood, 'we have to look to his critique of political economy, in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*.'⁴¹

But between the *Grundrisse* (1856-7) and *Capital* (1867) falls the shadow of the 1859 'Preface'.

The following passage occurs in the *Grundrisse* in the course of a discussion of how landed proprietors can change the method by which they exploit their labour force:

The change in the form in which he obtains his revenue or in the form in which the worker is paid is not, however, a formal distinction, but *presupposes a total restructuring of the mode of production* (agriculture itself); it therefore presupposes conditions which rest on a certain development of industry, of trade, and of science, in short of the forces of production. Just as, in general, production resting on capital and wage labour differs from other modes of production

³⁶ Post 2017, pp. 11-12.

³⁷ Riley 2015, p. 110.

³⁸ Gerstenberger 2017, p. 6. According to Gerstenberger it is my reliance on productive forces determinism that leads to my consequentialism: 'This substitution of historical analysis with historical philosophy makes it possible to not only analytically lump together very different forms of pre-capitalist forms of political domination but also to term "bourgeois" the overthrow of any of these domination forms.' Ibid.

³⁹ Althusser 1971, p. 90.

⁴⁰ I note in passing that, although Smith gets blamed for all the supposed errors concerning the transition committed by 'the early Marx', these accusations are deeply unfair. Smith did not have a conception of 'the development of the productive forces', but emphasised instead 'the division of labour' rather, and so, if this is an error (which I dispute), then it is of Marx's own making.

⁴¹ Wood 2002a, p. 35.

not merely formally, but equally presupposes a total revolution and development of material production.

Marx then writes: ‘It must be kept in mind that the new forces of production and relations of production do not develop out of *nothing*, nor drop from the sky, nor from the womb of the self-positing Idea; but from within and in antithesis to the existing development of production and the inherited, traditional relations of property.’⁴²

Marx reiterates the same points directly in the 1859 ‘Preface’.⁴³ I will nevertheless set these passages to one side, since, as Post explains, there are a number of ways in which Marx was circumscribed by concerns over censorship in writing this text.⁴⁴ As he acknowledges, I am also aware of these problems, which were set out in an important article of 1969 by Arthur Prinz. Post argues, however, that I take insufficient account of how, in order to evade censorship, Marx was forced to make statements which were at odds with his actual position, above all by situating the revolutionary effects of the development of the productive forces in the past.⁴⁵ But if that is so, then we would surely expect to find that Marx had abandoned these concepts when writing *Capital* during the following decade. Do we? We do not. In Chapter 1 of Volume 1, Marx actually *quotes* from the 1859 ‘Preface’ precisely in order to defend his arguments there from the criticism that the contradiction between the forces and relations of production only occurs in contemporary capitalist societies.⁴⁶ Riley writes: ‘Marx himself never systematically applied the idea of a contradiction between forces and relations of production to pre-capitalist economies.’⁴⁷ He may not have done so systematically, but that is a different matter from saying that did not believe these contradictions existed. Later in *Capital*, he adds: ‘The economic structure of capitalist society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former.’⁴⁸ Similarly, in notes written between 1863 and 1866 he states:

For capitalist relations to establish themselves at all presupposes that a certain level of historical production has been attained. Even within the framework of an earlier mode of production certain needs and certain means of communication and production must have developed which go beyond the old relations of production and coerce them into the capitalist mould.⁴⁹

And at the very end of the notes that became Volume 3 he summarizes the thesis yet again:

The sign that the moment of such a crisis [of a particular historical form of production] has arrived is that the contradiction and antithesis between, on the one hand, the relations of distribution, hence also the specific historical form of relations of production corresponding to them, and on the other hand, the productive forces, productivity, and the development of its agents, gains in breadth and depth. A conflict then sets in between the material development of production and its social form.⁵⁰

⁴² Marx 1973b, pp. 277-278.

⁴³ Marx 1975, pp. 425-426.

⁴⁴ Post 2017, pp. 11-12, note 37.

⁴⁵ Davidson 2012, p. 153; Prinz 1969.

⁴⁶ Marx 1976b, p. 175, note 35.

⁴⁷ Riley 2015, p. 118.

⁴⁸ Marx 1976b, p. 874.

⁴⁹ Marx 1976b, p. 1064.

⁵⁰ Marx 1981, p. 1024.

I could go on but, on the basis of the foregoing, it is difficult to see how anyone could seriously claim that Marx abandoned his belief in the centrality of the productive forces.⁵¹ The latter position might still have been wrong, of course, but Political Marxists would then have to admit that their arguments about the transition, whatever merits they might possess, involve rejecting Marx's actual position, rather than expressing a radically purified version of it.

For my own part, I do not believe *either* that the forces of production inexorably develop (or rather, *are developed*) throughout history *or* that their actual development necessarily leads to revolutionary situations. In fact, the productive forces seem to have been decisive only in two, albeit world-historic processes: the general transition from primitive communism to the various initial forms of class society; and the specific transition from feudalism to capitalism. But rather than repeat what I have written in the book about the role of the productive forces in the latter transition. I simply draw readers' attention to this passage and the arguments surrounding it:

...the productive forces do not 'develop' themselves: they are not sentient, nor are they even independent variables, 'calling forth' this or 'selecting' that response from the relations of production. To say that forces of production have developed is simply to say that human beings have been motivated to change them and have then successfully done so in such a way that the social productivity of labour has risen as a result. Human agency is quite as decisive here as it is in the class struggle. When people develop the productive forces it creates a situation in which they, or other people, can adopt new, more compatible productive relations, of which there are not an infinite number. But although developing the productive forces makes certain types of society possible, it does not make them inevitable: it is an enabling condition.⁵²

It is, however, still necessary to clarify what role 'the development of the productive forces' plays in the overall expansion of capitalism outside of England and the handful of other areas (the Netherlands, Catalonia) where it emerged as an indigenous process. Once the productive forces had developed to the point where capitalism became a possibility in a number of places, and that possibility was realised in a relatively small number of them, states seeking to imitate their achievements did not have to undergo the same prolonged process of emergence—to believe otherwise was one of the errors of Second International Marxism. On the contrary, if social and political leadership was available, these states could move directly to introducing the social relations of production which in the forerunners had been the product of many centuries during which the productive forces had developed. I will return to this process of international adaptation when considering the essential characteristics of capitalism below.

Rightly rejecting accounts which see capitalism as being an *inevitable* outcome of the development of the productive forces, Political Marxists then commit an equal and opposite error by claiming that there was *no* possibility of capitalism emerging at all from the internal relationships of feudal society. Feudalism, like all other pre-capitalist modes of production, exists as Spinoza-type 'eternity' in which its 'rules of reproduction' by definition cannot generate internal contradictions. It requires some contingent or accidental occurrence to lead to that outcome. Hence the famous distinction between different outcomes of the class struggle between lords and peasants in England, France and Eastern Europe. After citing Brenner on this point, Post summarises the argument:

...the demographic collapse of the fourteenth century, which was relatively uniform across Europe, cannot explain the diverse outcomes of the feudal crisis: the imposition of serfdom on a legally free peasantry in the East, the abolition of serfdom in the West, and the emergence of

⁵¹ For my discussion of attempts by Comninel and Wood to argue that Marx meant the opposite of what he actually wrote in these passages, see Davidson 2012, pp. 154-158.

⁵² Davidson 2012, p. 522 and pp. 519-523 more generally; Davidson 2017, p. 37 and pp. 34-38 more generally.

capitalism in England alone. Put another way, the differential outcome of class conflict determined whether the European-wide demographic collapse led to the reestablishment of feudalism (Eastern Europe), the spread of free peasant proprietorship (Western Europe) or the emergence of capitalist social-property relations (England alone).⁵³

Now, one does not have to be a full-on productive forces determinist to find a little implausible the claim that the whole of human history since the sixteenth century has been the result of an indecisive clash between lords and peasants over the ownership of some fields in England; but even leading that aside, there are real problems with highlighting the ‘differential outcomes’ of the class struggle. I am scarcely the first person to notice that this only pushes what has to be explained back a stage.⁵⁴ What *led* to these different outcomes? Presumably the different capacities and organization of the lords and peasants; but surely these must have been shaped by pre-existing structural factors? In other words a degree of differentiation must have taken place *before* the struggles which led to the outcomes which saw the establishment (or not) of capitalism.

The central point is surely that there was not a *single* factor leading to the development of the productive forces to the point where capitalism became possible—it would be much simpler for historians if there was. Instead there were a series of eventually intersecting developments—some consciously undertaken, other unintended—which created the conditions for capitalism eventually becoming the dominant form of economy. One unintended outcome to which I draw attention was the need for large-scale armourers and shipyards to manufacture the necessities of war between competing absolutist states and for their colonial expeditions, enterprises which relied in large part on wage labour. Post complains: ‘Davidson’s examples for the urban sector are...examples of *politically constituted property*—state-run armouries, or private ship-building servicing merchants operating under state monopolies on trade, *all* sheltered from the compulsion to “sell to survive.”’⁵⁵ Now, on this basis a contemporary British arms manufacturer like BAE Systems must be operating outside ‘capitalist imperatives’ as it does not compete on the market, but rather receives contracts directly from the state; but my concern here is not the relationship of the enterprise to the state, but of the employer to the workforce: this is precisely what is meant by ‘transitional forms’. As Ronald Aminzade points out:

Theories of economic development which rely upon ahistorical conceptual dichotomies to counterpose the past and present typically emphasize the rapid displacement of older ‘traditional’ or ‘precapitalist’ forms of production by newer ‘modern’ or ‘capitalist’ forms of industry. The preceding research suggests that such theories fail to appreciate the importance of the reconstitution of older forms of industry in the process of socio-economic change. This process of reconstitution has often been overlooked by historians as well, perhaps because it typically left intact the outward form of production—the household and workshop—while transforming class relations internally.⁵⁶

This passage was not specifically directed at Political Marxists, but it can be applied to them. Indeed, in some respects there is a sense in which they cannot really envisage a transition at all: they either see capitalism *or* non-capitalism, everything *or* nothing, either/or. Marx himself was relaxed about the existence of capitalist economy before it achieved dominance. These passages, for example, are from *Capital* Volume 1, not *The German Ideology*:

⁵³ Post 2017, p. 13.

⁵⁴ Davidson 2012, p. 412; see also Hagen 1988, pp. 41-42; Harman 1989, pp. 73-74; and Katz 1993, pp. 367-368.

⁵⁵ Post 2017, p. 17.

⁵⁶ Aminzade 1984, pp. 348, 349.

With regard to the mode of production itself, manufacture, can hardly to be distinguished, in its earliest stages, from the handicraft trades of the guilds, except by the greater number of works simultaneously employed by the same individual capital. It is merely an enlargement of the workshop of the master craftsman of the guilds.⁵⁷

And again:

The enlargement of *scale* constitutes the real foundation on which the specifically capitalist mode of production can arise if the historical circumstances are otherwise favourable, as they were for example in the sixteenth century. Of course, it may also occur *sporadically*, as something which does not dominate society, at isolated points within earlier social formations.⁵⁸

And more generally, from the *Grundrisse*:

The inner laws of capital—which appear merely as tendencies in the preliminary historic stages of its development—are for the first time posited as laws; production founded on capital for the first time posits itself in the forms adequate to it only in so far as and to the extent that free competition develops, for it is the free development of the mode of production founded on capital; the free development of its conditions and of itself as the process which constantly reproduces these conditions. ... As long as capital is weak, it still itself relies on the crutches of past modes of production, or of those which will pass with its rise. As soon as it feels strong, it throws away the crutches, and moves in accordance with its own laws.⁵⁹

In other words, there is a process, which may be very prolonged, during which different aspects of social life become increasingly subject to capitalist social relations of production; if you were to travel back in time to any moment in that process before it was complete, you would still find elements of ‘non-capitalist’ economy and could consequently proclaim that capitalism did not yet exist. Political Marxists regularly undertake these journeys and make these discoveries. What should they actually be looking for?

1.3 Essential characteristics of capitalism

Political Marxists argue that capitalism has two defining features, both of which distinguish it from all previous modes of production: one is structural, and is characterised by the separation of the political and the economic; the other is relational, and is characterised by the market dependence of all social classes. As Post explains, these are linked: ‘Put simply, the abolition of politically constituted property through the separation of the economic and political places all produces under the discipline of the market, compelling them to reorganize production along capitalist lines in order to appropriate social surplus product.’⁶⁰ But not all capitalist relations of production are introduced by compulsion; some are introduced because those representatives of the existing feudal mode sense what can only be described as—whisper who dares—*an opportunity*. Here is one example by way of illustration from Marx’s critique of Proudhon:

It is a fact that in Scotland landed property acquired a new value by the development of English industry. This industry opened up new outlets for wool. In order to produce wool on a large scale, arable land had to be transformed into pasturage. To effect this transformation, the estates had to be concentrated. To concentrate the estates, small holdings had first to be abolished, thousands

⁵⁷ Marx 1976b, p. 439.

⁵⁸ Marx 1976b, p. 1022.

⁵⁹ Marx 1973b, pp. 650, 651.

⁶⁰ Post 2017, p. 21.

of tenants had to be driven from their native soil and a few shepherds in charge of millions of sheep to be installed in their place. Thus, by successive transformations, landed property in Scotland has resulted in the driving out of men by sheep.⁶¹

This summary of the Highland Clearances, which Marx later expanded in *Capital*, describes a process that only began in 1792, took off in earnest after 1815 and climaxed in the 1840s.⁶²

However, it is certainly true that after a certain stage in the international development of capitalism its logic, its laws of motion, begins to determine all economic relations: they cease to be a matter of choice, to the extent that they ever were. But what is it that economic actors are being forced to do? In this context, ‘market dependence’ is not the explanatory master-category that Political Marxists assume it to be. It is true that, unlike the slave, feudal or tributary modes, exploitation under capitalism takes place *mainly* through economic processes rather than the threat or actuality of physical coercion, although Political Marxists typically tend to ignore the many real-world exceptions to this rule.⁶³ But at no point in the history of capitalism, not in mid-Victorian Britain, not even in the US before the New Deal, has *any* society been totally market dependent. Perhaps the only one to even approximate this condition was the British colony of Hong Kong, hailed as a model for precisely this reason by Milton and Rose Friedman at the very beginning of the neoliberal era.⁶⁴ Unlike the other ‘Asian Tigers’—Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea—Hong Kong had minimal state intervention: no business regulation, no welfare provision, no (or flat rate) taxation and a steady supply of labour fleeing from repression in Maoist China.⁶⁵ But for the most part the lonely hour of total market dependency never strikes, so to speak. Once again, I do not need to argue the point, since Wood has done it for me:

Capitalist transactions also require an elaborate infrastructure that its own profit-maximising imperatives are ill-equipped to provide. And...in a system of market dependence, access to the means of subsistence is subject to the vagaries of the market, especially for the propertyless majority...will also have a distinctive need for politically organised social provision, even just to keep people alive through times when they cannot sell their labour-power, and to ensure a ‘reserve army’ of workers. This means that capitalism remains dependent on extra-economic conditions, political and legal supports.⁶⁶

To be clear: I agree with the description Wood gives in this paragraph; the problem is that she seems to have been unaware of how it contradicted her overall position. Having insisted that capitalism equals market dependence and that any other position must involve Smithian deviations or productive forces determinism, we now learn that capitalism equals market dependence...*except* in all those all those areas of economic and social life where states intervene to ensure that people are *not* entirely dependent on the market. Nor are the non-market interventions restricted to the position of workers, as Eric Hobsbawm points out drawing on the example of the British Empire.

...India was an increasingly vital market for the staple export, cotton goods; and it became so because in the first quarter of the nineteenth century British policy destroyed the local cotton industry as a competitor with Lancashire. In the second place, India controlled the trade of the

⁶¹ Marx 1976a, p. 173.

⁶² See Marx 1976b, pp. 890-895; this is of course part of his discussion of ‘the so-called primitive accumulation’—see my discussion in Davidson 2001 or Davidson 2014, chapter 2.

⁶³ See my discussion in Davidson 2016, pp. 206-212.

⁶⁴ Friedman 1980, pp. 54-55.

⁶⁵ Harris 1986, pp. 54-60; Lanchester 2010, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁶ Wood 2002a, p. 179.

Far East through its export surplus with that area; the exports consisting largely of opium, a state monopoly which the British fostered systematically (mainly for revenue purposes) almost from the start.

Writing of the ‘formal Empire’, Hobsbawm notes that ‘it appeared to become increasingly vital after the 1870s, when foreign competition became acute, and Britain sought to escape from it—and largely succeeded in doing so—by a flight into her dependencies’. More generally:

Britain had escaped from the Great Depression (1873-96)...not by modernising her economy, but by exploiting the remaining possibilities of her traditional situation. She had exported more to the backward and satellite economies (as in cotton), and made what she could from the last great technical innovation she had pioneered, the iron steamship (as in shipbuilding and coal exports).⁶⁷

In fact, as I argue in the book, Marx did not define capitalism as a system of market dependence, but rather as one defined by two essential characteristics.

One of these was wage labour. To demonstrate this we can ignore the relatively early text where this is argued in some detail – the not-accidentally titled ‘Wage Labour and Capital’ – on the grounds that it might still contain as-yet un-expunged Smithian residues.⁶⁸ What, instead, does Marx have to say in *Capital*? In Volume I he writes that the emergence of capital as a social relation is the result of two types of commodity owner: on the one hand, ‘the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence’ and ‘on the other hand, free workers, the sellers of their own labour power, and therefore the sellers of labour’. He concludes: ‘With the polarization of the commodity market into these two classes, the fundamental conditions of capitalist production are present.’⁶⁹ Elsewhere he notes that ‘the capitalist form presupposes from the outset the free wage-labourer who sells his labour power to capital’.⁷⁰ And towards the end of Volume 3, in a passage originally written in the mid-1860s, Marx writes, with what might conceivably be a hint of impatience: ‘It is unnecessary after the argument already developed to demonstrate once again how the relationship of capital and wage-labour determines the whole character of the mode of production.’⁷¹ Wage-labour is therefore central to capitalism and this centrality suggests two observations.

One is that changes in the English countryside down to the end of the sixteenth century were considerably less significant than Political Marxists claim. For them it was the first territory to become fully capitalist by the end of the sixteenth century, on the basis that tenant farmers and landowners had all been rendered market dependent. Let us assume that they did indeed suffer this fate. So what? For all the earth-shattering significance loaded onto this shift, all that ‘market dependence’ means here is...a change in the conditions of the rural petty bourgeoisie, it does not *in itself* mean that capitalism exists; for that we surely require the creation of surplus value, which in turn requires wage labour.⁷² Marx himself did not believe that capitalism emerged *or could have emerged* solely in the countryside. He explains why in a passage from the *Grundrisse*:

⁶⁷ Hobsbawm 1969, pp. 149, 151.

⁶⁸ Marx 1977, pp. 213, 220.

⁶⁹ Marx 1976b pp. 874, 975; see also Marx 1973b, p. 505.

⁷⁰ Marx 1976b, p. 452.

⁷¹ Marx 1976b, p. 1019.

⁷² In response to Wood’s attempt to argue that capitalism could exist in the countryside without wage-labour, I cite examples from late-seventeenth-century Scotland of how tenant farmers were ‘compelled’ by the lords to compete under market conditions for leases; yet no one seriously imagines that Scotland was anything other than feudal at this point. See Davidson 2004, pp. 429-430 and Davidson 2012, p. 417. For examples of the Scottish feudal lords themselves being ‘compelled’ to enter the market, see Davidson 2003, p. 57.

The living labour time alone—and, indeed, in the proportion in which it is employed relative to objectified labour time—can create surplus value, because [it creates] surplus labour time. It has therefore correctly been asserted that in this regard agriculture for instance is less productive (productivity is concerned here with the production of values) than other industries. Just as in another respect—in so far as a growth of productivity in it DIRECTLY reduces necessary labour time—it is more productive than all the others. But this circumstance can accrue to its advantage only where *capital* already rules, together with the general form of production corresponding to it.⁷³

The key passage then follows:

This interruption in the production phase already signifies that *agriculture can never be the sphere in which capital starts; the sphere in which it takes up its original residence*. This contradicts the primary fundamental conditions of industrial labour. Hence agriculture is claimed for capital and becomes industrial only retroactively. Requires a high development of competition on one side, on the other a great development of chemistry, mechanics etc., i.e. of manufacturing industry.⁷⁴

These passages are of course from Marx's notebooks, but he carried the same argument over into *Capital* Volume. 1 itself:

Capitalist production only really begins...when each individual capital simultaneously employs a comparatively large number of workers, and when, as a result, the labour-process is carried on an extensive scale, and yields relatively large quantities of products. A large number of workers working together, at the same time, in one place (or, if you like, in the same field of labour), in order to produce the same sort of commodity under the command of the same capitalist, constitutes the starting-point of capitalist production. This is true both historically and conceptually.⁷⁵

Now these workers could be situated in the countryside, and might even be involved in agriculture; what matters is they were wage labourers involved in production. During his discussion of these issues, Post assimilates my position to those long-established targets of Political Marxism, Pirenne, Sweezy and the neo-Smithians: 'At points, Davidson seems to be reviving the hoary old myth that capitalism developed in the interstices of feudalism—the towns'.⁷⁶ But this is not what 'interstices' means; these are social spaces, not geographical locations. Nor is my account of the towns 'inconsistent': it is perfectly possible to accept that towns were compatible with—even essential to—maintaining the feudal order, while also acknowledging that they also provided areas in which dissident ideas and alternative ways of organising production could be expressed in relative safety. Part of the problem here is the way in which Political Marxists tend to make an absolute distinction between the countryside and the town, as if the former could develop new social relations of production in total isolation from the latter – or *vice-versa*, since Christopher Isset and Stephen Miller have argued that the transition in the French countryside only occurred during the Fifth Republic, when 'Charles de Gaulle and his ministers...sought to make rural France capitalist', even though urban France had presumably experienced capitalist development before 1958.⁷⁷ Here again we have a conceptual distinction being treated as if it actually corresponded to reality.

⁷³ Marx 1973b, p. 669; Marx's italics.

⁷⁴ Marx 1973b; my italics.

⁷⁵ Marx 1976b, p. 439.

⁷⁶ Post 2017, p. 14.

⁷⁷ Isset and Miller 2017, p. 262.

The second observation provides the answer to one of Riley's questions: 'And how, after all, are we to distinguish between the "origins" of capitalism and its "rise to dominance" empirically?'⁷⁸ In effect, this is to ask when the transition can be declared complete. At one point Marx suggested what was required 'to conquer the mode of production in all respects, to bring them under the rule of capital': 'Within a given national society this necessarily arises from the transformation...of all labour into wage labour.'⁷⁹ In fact, this level of completeness is unnecessary and has probably never been achieved anywhere, even now. As Geoffrey de Ste. Croix has pointed out, the key issue in determining the class nature of any society is not necessarily how most labour is performed, but rather how the labour that produced the surplus accruing to the ruling class is performed: thus, at various points Ancient Greece and Rome could be legitimately be classified as slave societies, not because the majority of the direct producers were slaves—in fact the majority were always peasants—but because slaves produced the surplus on which the ruling class depended.⁸⁰ We might say then, that 'dominance' arrives at the point, not when the majority of the direct producers are necessarily wage-labourers, but where wage-labourers are the main source of the surplus accruing to the ruling class, although this will not, of course, leave the rest of society unaffected:

In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.⁸¹

Jairus Banaji has put this in more concrete terms, in relation to the predominance of wage-labour:

...it would surely represent an advance in Marxist theory to think of capitalism working through a multiplicity of forms of exploitation based on wage-labour. In other words, instead of seeing wage-labour as one form of exploitation among many, alongside sharecropping, labour tenancy and various kinds of bonded labour, these specific individual forms of exploitation may just be ways in which paid labour is recruited, exploited, and controlled by employers. The argument is not that all sharecroppers, labour tenants, and bonded labourers are wage-workers, but that these 'forms' may reflect the subsumption of labour into capital in ways where the 'sale' of labour-power for wages is mediated and possibly disguised in more complex arrangements.⁸²

Wage labour is, however, only one of two essential characteristics of capitalism. What is the other? In his survey of the different theories of the Stalinist states, Marcel van Linden quotes from *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* to illustrate his belief that it is *competition*: 'If some supporters of the "state capitalist" interpretation...treat wage-labour either as the most important, or as the only condition for the definition of capitalism, this is possibly due to their limited knowledge of Marx's political-economic writings.'⁸³ In spite of my apparently limited knowledge of Marx's political-economic writings I am nevertheless at least as familiar as Linden with passages such as the following:

⁷⁸ Riley, p. 123.

⁷⁹ Marx 1973b, pp. 729-730. The distinction between 'capital in general' and 'many capitals' was first highlighted in Rosdolsky 1977, pp. 41-50.

⁸⁰ Ste. Croix 1981, p. 52.

⁸¹ Marx 1973b, p.107.

⁸² Banaji 2010, p. 145.

⁸³ Linden 2007, p. 312.

Conceptually, *competition* is nothing other than the inner *nature of capital*, its essential character, appearing in and realized as the reciprocal interaction of many capitals with one another, the inner tendency as external necessity.) (Capital exists and can only exist as many capitals, and its self-determination therefore appears as their reciprocal interaction with one another.)⁸⁴

However, competition is a necessary, but insufficient second defining characteristic of capitalism. Marx says, ‘competition is nothing more than the way in which the many capitals force the inherent determinants of capital upon one another and upon themselves’.⁸⁵ But as Political Marxists are rightly keen to remind us, competition—including economic competition—pre-existed capitalism: the distinctiveness of capitalism is what competition forces capitalists to *do*:

...the capitalist who applies the improved method of production, appropriates and devotes to surplus-labour a greater portion of the working day than the other capitalists in the same business. He does as an individual, what capital taken as a whole when engaged in producing relative surplus-value. On the other hand, however, this extra surplus-value vanishes as soon as the new method of production is generalised, for then the difference between the individual value of the cheapened commodity and its social value vanishes. The law of the determination of value by labour-time makes itself felt to the individual capitalist who applies the new method of production, by compelling him to sell his goods under their social value; this same law, acting as a coercive law of competition, forces his competitors to adopt the new method.⁸⁶

So there is indeed a form of ‘compulsion’ acting on capitalists, but it is the compulsion to *accumulate*, hence ‘competitive accumulation’:

...the development of capitalist production makes it necessary constantly to keep increasing the amount of the capital laid out in a given industrial undertaking, and competition subordinates every individual capitalist to the immanent laws of capitalist production, as external and coercive laws. It compels him to keep extending his capital, in order to preserve it, but he can only extend it by means of progressive accumulation. ... Accumulation is the conquest of the world of social wealth. It is the extension of the area of exploited human material and, at the same time, the extension of the direct and the indirect sway of the capitalist.⁸⁷

Inter-capitalist competition does not, however, only take the form of price competition through the market. In 1920, Nikolai Bukharin suggested what other forms might involve:

Price is a *universal* category of a commodity society and therefore any upset in the balance is manifested in a definite movement in prices. The category of *profit* is inconceivable without the category of price. In short, every economic phenomenon of the capitalist world is, in some way or other, bound up with price and, hence, the market. This does not mean, however, that every economic phenomenon is a market phenomenon. It is the same with competition. Up to now, the chief consideration has been of *market* competition, which was characteristic of the pattern of horizontal competition in general, but competition, i.e. the struggle between capitalist enterprises, can also be waged outside the market in the strict sense of the word. Such, for example, is the struggle for spheres of capital investment, i.e. for the very opportunity to expand the production process.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Marx 1973b, p. 414.

⁸⁵ Marx 1973b, p. 651.

⁸⁶ Marx 1976b, p. 436.

⁸⁷ Marx 1976b, pp. 739-740.

⁸⁸ Bukharin 1979, p. 62.

Two years later in an address to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International he elaborated on the distinction:

When Marx writes of competition, it is almost always of this type [i.e. price]. But in the epoch of imperialist capitalism, this is not the only form of competition that has come to the fore. We also see forms of competitive struggle in which price competition is quite irrelevant. For example, if a coal trust is fighting against an iron trust for surplus value, obviously these trusts cannot contend through price competition. That would be absurd. Such formations can only wage their struggle through one or another expression of force, such as boycott, exclusion, and so on.⁸⁹

Bukharin was one of the first Marxists to emphasise that capitalist competition could take place at the level of the states-system: ‘When competition has reached its highest stage, when it has become competition between state capitalist trusts, then the use of state power, and the possibilities connected with it, begin to play a very large part.’⁹⁰ Like Lenin, Luxemburg and the other major economic thinkers on the revolutionary wing of the Second International, he tended to see this type of competition as only arising during the era of imperialism, but in fact its historical roots can be traced back to the very origins of capitalism. Geopolitical competition between capitalist states has been *constitutive* of the system, even before its survival was assured in face of feudal-absolutist hostility, and has taken three forms.

The first involved rivalries among the very first territories to be dominated by the capitalist mode of production, starting with the Italian city-states in the thirteenth century and reached a self-destructive climax in the first half of the fifteenth century. As Giovanni Arrighi wrote: ‘In the course of this long conflict, the leading capitalist organisations of the time, the Italian city-states, turned from operating fraternity they had been during the preceding pan-Eurasian commercial expansion into hostile brothers struggling to off load on one another the losses involved in the disintegration of the wider trading system that had made their fortunes.’⁹¹ The Italian city-states were unable to unify and thus consolidate their emergence as the first territorial spaces of capitalist dominance precisely because the logic of competition. The same logic initially acted to prevent unity between the first two consolidated capitalist nation-states. Brenner’s own historical work shows how the regimes in England and the United Provinces did not carry through the ‘intrinsic union’ which was briefly considered by both during the Commonwealth period. Instead, the consolidation of capitalism in both states led to renewed rivalry, including several wars.⁹² It was only after the relative decline of Dutch power in the face of the French ascendancy that the Glorious Revolution allowed dynastic fusion and a Dutch-English alliance to be established.

The second form was the process by which new entrants to the capitalist states-system joined the initial Netherlands-British axis. This has been well described by Wood:

The state itself became a major player. This was true most notably in Germany, with its state-led industrialisation, which in the first instance was undoubtedly driven by older geopolitical and military considerations than by capitalist motivations. ... Where, as in France and Germany, there was an adequate concentration of the productive forces, capitalism could develop in response to external pressures emanating from an already existing capitalist system elsewhere. ... The point here, however, is not simply that in these later developing capitalisms, as in many others after them, the state played a primary role. What is even more striking is the ways in which the

⁸⁹ Bukharin 2011, p. 489.

⁹⁰ Bukharin 1972, pp. 123-124 and 122-124 more generally.

⁹¹ Arrighi 1994, p. 227; see also Braudel 1975, pp. 338-341, and Hay and Law 1989, pp. 151-158.

⁹² Brenner 1993, pp. 618-625.

traditional, precapitalist state system, together with the old commercial network, became a transmission belt for capitalist imperatives.⁹³

The third form, the one identified by Bukharin and others, followed almost immediately after the initial consolidation of the capitalist states-system in the 1870s—that is, at the birth of the imperialist era. As Karl Radek wrote during the First World War: ‘Colonial policy, the peaceful or violent subjugation of capitalistically undeveloped countries, was not pursued by capitalism in the abstract but by capitalist *states*.’⁹⁴ Two points are significant here.

First, just because competition was not based on price does not mean that it lacked economic content. Colonies or protectorates were necessary as sources of raw materials, as captive markets and sites of investment; but defending these economically important territories from rival imperialisms could mean the acquisition of others which were strategically necessary, but themselves economically valueless. As Hobsbawm notes, ‘the economic motive for acquiring some colonial territories becomes difficult to disentangle from the political action required for the purpose, for protectionism of whatever kind is economy operated with the aid of politics’: ‘The strategic motive for colonization was evidently strongest in Britain, which had long-established colonies which were crucially placed to control vital to Britain’s access to various zones of land and sea believed to be vital to Britain’s worldwide commercial and maritime interests or, with the rise of the steamship, which could function as coaling stations.’⁹⁵

Second, non-economic competition between capitalist states, and between them and non-capitalist states, reproduces similar types of adoption that occur between enterprises as a result of price competition: recall Marx’s evocation of ‘a coercive law of competition’ which ‘forces...competitors to adopt the new method’. Chris Harman has pointed out the wider implications:

Now when Marx describes the mechanisms whereby different accumulations of alienated labour are compared with each other, he talks in terms of the mechanisms of the market. But in principle there is no reason why other mechanisms which relate independent acts of production to each other in an unplanned manner should not play the same role. Any process by which the organisation of production is continually being transformed through comparison with production taking place elsewhere in an unplanned fashion will have the same results.⁹⁶

Trotsky gives an example of this from the period immediately preceding the Russian Revolution, noting how ‘the Great War, the result of the contradictions of world imperialism, drew into its maelstrom countries of *different* stages of development, but made the same *claims* on all the participants’.⁹⁷ The contestants all needed the most up-to-date guns, artillery and submarines, and this determined what technologies, forms of work organisation and levels of skill were required in the factories. In short, it is necessary to abandon a conception of capitalism which regards it as simply involving market competition on the basis of price, behind which lies the compulsion to achieve cost savings through technical innovation.

This fixation with price competition remains one of the key arguments against the concept of state capitalism today. Linden claims that Tony Cliff’s version competition taking place at the international level ‘forces him to reduce competition essentially to the arms race: a competition over military capacity’, which is apparently a break with Marxist orthodoxy: ‘The arms race, after all, did not involve mainly commodities produced for an open market, and

⁹³ Wood 2002b, p. 24

⁹⁴ Radek 2011, p. 870.

⁹⁵ Hobsbawm 1987, p. 67.

⁹⁶ Harman 1971, p. 184.

⁹⁷ Trotsky 1972, p. 199.

therefore cannot be considered as trade based on Capitalist competition.’⁹⁸ John Eric Marot argues more generally: ‘For state-capitalist theorists, the absence of competition between “capitals” or firms on the market is irrelevant because their definition of “state capitalism” inflates the notion of competition beyond measure to include military/political competition between states in the geopolitical arena, a *passé-partout* notion if ever there was one because such competition can be tracked to the time of the Pharaohs and beyond, long before there was any state-capitalism and any accumulation of capital.’⁹⁹ Apparently it has not occurred to Marot that military competition in a context where capitalism already exists might have rather different consequences than military competition during the Peloponnesian War. In fact, as we have seen, geopolitical rivalry between capitalist and non-capitalist states has historically forced those which were capable among the latter to emulate the former. And these state-driven adaptations did not cease in the nineteenth century. Marot may wish to consider why, in a passage from Wood that I have already quoted, ‘capitalism could develop in response to external pressures emanating from an already existing capitalist system elsewhere’ in the 1860s in relation to France or Germany, but apparently not in the 1920s in relation to Russia. It is possible to argue, of course, that these competitive relationships are, at most, contingently linked to capitalism, since they are not expressions of ‘market dependence’. Marot denies that there is ‘any compelling factual basis for asserting that the military-political pressures of the advanced-capitalist West caused a social transformation in order to competitively accumulate “capital”, build industry and defend the country’ and instead points to overcoming the grain-crisis as the decisive motive for the Stalin’s counter-revolution:

Had the bureaucracy and its chief, Stalin, been able to consolidate itself as a ruling class based on the existing relations of production, circumscribing the development of the forces of production within the limits set by those relations, it would have done so. And that, indeed, was what the tsarist ruling class had been able to do right down to 1917; and it is what Stalin tried to do until 1929. The conflict between classes, not states, drove transformation.¹⁰⁰

Marot claims that it was only, ‘*post festum*, once collectivization and industrialisation were in full swing, did Stalin justify his course in terms of the foreign threat’ and citing his famous ‘catch up and overtake’ speech from 1931.¹⁰¹ In fact, Stalin was urging preparation for war from the beginning of 1925, as in this address to the Central Committee:

...in view of the fact that the pre-conditions for war are maturing and that war may become inevitable, not tomorrow or the day after, of course, but in a few years' time, and in view of the fact that war is bound to intensify the internal, revolutionary crisis both in the East and in the West—in view of this we are bound to be faced with the question of being prepared for all contingencies. ... That does not mean that in such a situation we must necessarily undertake active operations against somebody or other. That is not so. If anybody shows signs of harbouring such a notion—he is wrong. Our banner is still the banner of *peace*. But if war breaks out we shall not be able to sit with folded arms. We shall have to take action, but we shall be the last to do so. And we shall do so in order to throw the decisive weight in the scales, the *weight* that can turn the scales. Hence the conclusion: we must be prepared for all contingencies; we must prepare our army, supply it with footwear and clothing, train it, improve its technical equipment, improve

⁹⁸ Linden 2007, pp. 312-313. Neither Cliff nor any of his followers *reduced* competition to the Cold War arms race, but saw it involving a far wider notion of inter-imperialist rivalry between the USSR and the USA—which does not, incidentally involve treating them as ‘equals’.

⁹⁹ Marot 2012, p. 47, note 92.

¹⁰⁰ Marot 2012, pp. 53-54.

¹⁰¹ Marot 2012, p. 54.

chemical defence and aviation, and in general, raise our Red Army to the proper level. The international situation makes this imperative for us.¹⁰²

Marot remains confined within a kind of methodological nationalism in which developments within Russia are entirely self-contained within its borders: the Second International saw the development of the productive forces taking place within each individual state; Marot sees the class struggle playing out within the same confines; in neither case is there any sense that states exist within a system, of which they are all constitutive and mutually influencing parts. External pressure was not the only driver of Stalinist policy, but it was not one which could be ignored. As David Rousset noted of this period in Russian history: ‘The expression “compelled by circumstances” takes on its full meaning. The bureaucracy acted blindly under the joint pressure of the internal situation and the international conjuncture.’ The collectivisation therefore had ‘a double aim’: ‘the expropriation of a socially dangerous adversary, and securing investment indispensable to the growth of state industry’.¹⁰³

Riley questions, not only whether competition between capitalist states is capitalist competition, but whether there is anything particularly capitalist about the contemporary states-system:

The historical record clearly shows that the inter-state system arose in the seventeenth century in continental Europe, forged through centuries of warfare that followed a fiscal-feudal logic of territorial accumulation. Rising bourgeoisies had to adapt themselves to this pre-existing reality, which they took as given, but did not create.¹⁰⁴

As I have argued elsewhere, the historical record ‘clearly’ shows nothing of the sort, but here I will restrict myself to the theoretical issue involved.¹⁰⁵ Riley seems to be following Brenner, who once wrote: ‘That capitalism is governed by multiple states is the result of the historical fact that it emerged against the background of a system of multiple feudal states, and, in the course of its development, transformed the component states of that system into capitalist states but failed to alter the multi-state character of the resulting international system.’¹⁰⁶ But is it really credible to claim that all aspects of the individual feudal-absolutist states could be overcome, as they were transformed by bourgeois revolutions from above or below, *except* that of the state system which they collectively comprised? Take, for example, the struggle for global supremacy between England/Britain and France.

Most conventional accounts see this as running from 1688 to 1815; but the nature of that struggle fundamentally changed after 1789. Before the Revolution (or more precisely, before victory in the Seven Years’ War) Britain confronted France as the long-established standard-bearer of a rival system, the feudal-absolutism which had been rejected first in England during the Glorious Revolution and then in Scotland with the suppression of the last Jacobite Rebellion. After the Revolution, Britain confronted France as an upstart rival for dominance within the emergent capitalist system. In both periods Britain was faced with an opponent called ‘France’, but the internal dynamics of that state, and consequently its external behaviour, had fundamentally changed—unless, of course, you think that the Napoleonic abolition of feudalism across central Europe is somehow equivalent to the ancien regime’s earlier attempts to preserve it. Mention of France does, however, finally bring us to the question of the

¹⁰² Stalin 1954, p.14.

¹⁰³ Rousset 1982, p. 165.

¹⁰⁴ Riley 2015, p. 124.

¹⁰⁵ Davidson 2016, pp. 194-198, 243-246.

¹⁰⁶ Brenner 2006, p. 84.

bourgeois revolutions, whether they have actually existed, and if so, whether the French Revolution should be included among them.

PART 2: BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION AND CAPITALIST NATION-STATES

2.1 Different process, same outcome

At certain points in his review Riley suggests that there are insurmountable difficulties in formulating a Marxist concept of bourgeois revolution, which he traces back to Marx and Engels themselves:

It is clear that Marx and Engels considered the English and French Revolutions to be landmark events in the consolidation of capitalism; but they never attempted a full historical analysis of them, and their positions on the question of bourgeois revolution remained shifting and contradictory. In this basic sense there simply does not exist a ‘Marxist concept’ of bourgeois revolution. To attempt to reconstruct one from the ‘first principles of historical materialism’, as Davidson sets out to do, would seem a dubious proposition given that Marx and Engels offer so little by way of a starting point. ... In fact, as Perry Anderson noted in 1976, the concept of bourgeois revolution was essentially constructed through a retro projection, whose model was the proletarian revolution.¹⁰⁷

It is true that Marx and Engels did not have a systematically worked-out concept of bourgeois revolution; as Post points out, they mainly discuss it in their ‘*conjunctural writings*’, but their views relatively clear for all that.¹⁰⁸ And, as I try to demonstrate over the course of three chapters, they did not have ‘shifting and contradictory’ views about the bourgeois revolution, they simply changed their minds about the forms which these revolutions could take in response to actual events, notably German Unification and the American Civil War.¹⁰⁹ But in any case, I never suggested that I was constructing a theory solely on the basis of their writings, or even their writings and those of later Marxists. ‘First principles’ here means both the general abstractions which are at the core of the Marxist method—mediated totality, contradiction and the notion that future possibilities are contained in present realities, and the more concrete assessments which they refined throughout their careers, on, for example, the different structural capacities of social classes. Anderson did indeed claim, in an article to which I will return below, that ‘the concept of bourgeois revolution was essentially constructed through a retro projection, whose model was the proletarian revolution’, but this involves a serious oversimplification. Marx and Engels came to believe that the bourgeoisie had risen to power through revolution in the past, as they had already decided that the proletariat would have to in the future; but they did not believe that the forms taken by these revolutions would be the same—again, how could they be, given that one brought about the most dynamic mechanism for minority exploitation and oppression *of* the majority ever seen, and the other would see the entry into history *by* that majority to achieve previously inconceivable levels of human liberation? The difference between these outcomes determined the disparity between their respective revolutionary agencies.

But let us return to the text in which Anderson makes his observation about ‘retro-projection’. Riley is Outraged (although thankfully not in this case Astonished) by my supposed neglect of it: ‘Anderson’s texts on Britain from 1964 and 1987 are quoted, critically,

¹⁰⁷ Riley 2015, p. 118.

¹⁰⁸ Post 2017, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ Davidson 2012, pp. 112-180.

but without any mention of the essay specifically addressing the bourgeois revolutions, dating from 1976—which thereafter receives a single sentence, with no explanation of its argument, a hundred pages later.’¹¹⁰ What could account for this—decidedly not innocent—refusal to recognize Anderson’s prescience? Apparently, it is because in making my arguments about revolutionary agency and outcomes, I face an ‘awkward problem, namely that the theoretical positions he takes were set out some forty years ago by Anderson, the source which for political reasons Davidson most wishes to avoid, while largely repeating his arguments, since Anderson spoke unpardonably of state socialism’.¹¹¹ This is a textbook example of why reviewers should avoid imputing motives to authors. It is simply unworthy of Riley to assume that I would refuse to acknowledge a theoretical influence because of a political disagreement.¹¹² In fact, I cite the article, not once, but on *nine* separate occasions, at least two of which in order to support points central to my analysis.¹¹³ But contrary to Riley’s insinuations, I did not derive my arguments from Anderson, nor do I agree with all of his formulations.

According to the ‘acknowledgements’ in *English Questions*, Anderson’s article was ‘first given as a talk at Cambridge in March 1976’; however, unless you were lucky enough to attend that presentation—and sadly I was working in my first post-secondary school job as a clerk with the Grampian Health Board in Aberdeen at the time—you would not have had access to Anderson’s thoughts on the subject until it appeared in print in 1992.¹¹⁴ By this point several other writers had both made the ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ distinction, and also highlighted the importance of outcomes. I first encountered these arguments in a book by Alex Callinicos published in 1987, and a talk by Duncan Hallas given during the same year and published in 1988, then again at much greater length in an article by Callinicos from 1989.¹¹⁵ From these interventions I traced the positions argued by Callinicos and Hallas back through the work of Geoff Eley, Christopher Hill, Isaac Deutscher, Tony Cliff and Max Shachtman, and from them to key thinkers in the classical Marxist tradition, particularly Engels, Lenin, Lukács and Gramsci, necessarily without any recourse to Anderson’s unpublished article, which in any case ignores most of these contributions.

Had ‘The Notion of a Bourgeois Revolution’ (or the unpublished book of which it is presumably a condensation) appeared in the mid-1970s it would undoubtedly have had a greater impact on the debates, but it did not. So what did readers find when it finally appeared in print? A discussion which dealt summarily with the Classical Marxist discussions, mainly referencing the views of Marx, Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin, which touched briefly on the revisionist controversy, and which then set out a highly formal model of the two types of bourgeois revolution which had emerged down to 1871. The piece was, as we have come to expect, compellingly written and within its chronological limits, uncontentious—but that is precisely the problem: for anyone aware of debates which had been taking place since the 1940s

¹¹⁰ Riley 2015, p. 119. Callinicos also inaccurately remarks that I ‘pay little attention’ to this essay. See Callinicos 2013, p. 132-133, note 11.

¹¹¹ Riley 2015, p. 120.

¹¹² In fact, I am generally an admirer of Anderson’s work—as an essayist in particular. At his most acute, his consideration of particular bodies of work, or even a single component of one, have transcended exposition or critique and have themselves advanced our understanding of their subjects, even when his views are themselves open to criticism. See, for examples of each, Anderson 1976-7 and Anderson 1984: I discuss my disagreements with the former article below.

¹¹³ Davidson 2012, pp. 118, note 32; p. 136, note 12; p. 164, note 43; p. 198, note 1; p. 468, note 142; p. 489, note 17; p. 557, note 221; p. 564, note 247; and p. 586, note 49.

¹¹⁴ There is a brief discussion of bourgeois revolution in Anderson’s 1987 essay, ‘The Figures of Descent’, but it posits the supposedly universal need for a second ‘rectifying revolution’, not the ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ distinction. See Anderson 1992b, pp. 155-156.

¹¹⁵ Callinicos 1987, pp. 229-232; Hallas 1988; Callinicos 1989, pp. 124-127, 136-159; see my comments in Davidson 2012, pp. 468, 476-479, and 707-708, note 166.

it provided a useful summary of one position, but contained nothing particularly new or revelatory.

Turning to Anderson's substantive argument, I agree that 1848 constitutes the dividing line between the eras of bourgeois revolution from below and from above. Riley, however, claims that I see it lying earlier, at the climax of the Seven Years' War:

Davidson's reproduction of the taxonomic contrast between revolutions from below and above also wrenches it away from its structuring condition, the advent of modern industrial production, and links it instead to the year 1763—a periodization not unlike Wallerstein's emphasis on capitalism as a dynamic commercial system, and dismissal of any special significance to the industrial revolution, which Davidson himself attacks.¹¹⁶

Riley also claims that bringing the period of 'revolution from above' to an end in 1763, leads me into inconsistencies, since the Scottish revolution from above concluded before that date and the French revolution from below opened after it.¹¹⁷ There is only one problem with this argument: I do not think that the era of revolutions from below came to an end in 1763.

The significance of 1763—or more precisely, that of 1759, the year actually identified in my discussion—is quite different. This is the moment I identify as being that of 'systemic irreversibility', in the sense that the decisive British victories over French feudal-absolutism (begun with destruction of its Scottish Jacobite ally in 1745-6) ensured that the outcome of the British bourgeois revolutions was now secure, and that its influence would go on to shape the future, which was now inescapably capitalist.¹¹⁸ What was not yet clear was the form which the extension of capitalism across the rest of the world would take, and this only became clear in the aftermath of the French Revolution. In short, I see two important international turning points in the birth of the capitalist system: 1759, establishing that capitalism would be the future, one way or another; and 1848, determining the political processes by which capitalism would be extended and consolidated after the initial breakthroughs.

I disagree, however, with the reason Anderson gives for the transition to bourgeois revolution from above—or at least I regarded it as too one-sided in its emphasis. Anderson argues—and I quote him to this effect in the book—that that it was industrialisation, strengthening the *economic* power of the capitalist system, that enabled the revolutions from above to have such a limited *political* dynamic.¹¹⁹ The reason why no further bourgeois revolutions from below took place—or at least succeeded—after 1789 had nothing to do with industrialisation and everything to do with the bourgeoisie's desperation to avoid two types of insurgency from below, such as had been experienced in both (pre-industrial) France and those other areas which tried to emulate the French experience. One, extending from the urban masses in Paris to former slaves in San Domingo, was propelled by a radicalism which pushed the revolution in directions far beyond those acceptable to the bourgeoisie and at some points threatened their lives and property: these challenged the bourgeoisie from the left. The other, displayed in peasant and lumpen risings for Church and King in Spain and Naples, was a reactionary wave in which liberals were slaughtered in defence of the old order: these challenged the bourgeoisie from the right. In other words, the once-revolutionary bourgeoisie were, if not completely paralysed, then at least unwilling to begin transformations which could threaten their interests,

¹¹⁶ Riley 2015, p. 121.

¹¹⁷ Riley 2015, pp. 116-117.

¹¹⁸ Davidson 2012, pp. 580-586. I am not alone in seeing the significance of the outcome of the Seven Years' War. As Riley notes, Wallerstein does so from a World Systems Theory perspective—but so too does Teschke from that of Political Marxism and, from one closer to my own, Anievas and Nişancıoğlu. This is not of course to suggest that we all agree on the nature of its significance. See, respectively: Wallerstein 1989, pp. 72-3; Teschke 2003, pp. 362-63; and Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 269-273.

¹¹⁹ Davidson, p. 586; Anderson 1992a, p. 118.

and possibly their lives, from both sides, hence their feebleness and willingness to compromise in 1848-9, the events of which consolidated and confirmed the shift in bourgeois attitudes since 1815.¹²⁰

After 1849 sections of the existing ruling classes of Europe and Japan were forced to take the action from which the bourgeoisie now shrank, action conducted from above precisely in order to circumvent the threat of action from below which they also feared. But this was not yet a fear of the working class. Anderson is therefore right to say that '[t]he memory of 1794 was in all minds', but *not* that 'the effects of industrial change were visible in every large town'.¹²¹ What drove Bismarck and Cavour was the need to establish the *conditions* for industrialisation, from which to compete commercially and militarily with the existing capitalist powers, not the security of already possessing an industrial base. Industrialisation was in fact still relatively limited by the time the revolutions from above began in 1859, as Hobsbawm points out:

...by the late 1840s what 'the bourgeoisie' had achieved was a great deal more modest than the miracles ascribed to it in the *Manifesto*. After all, in 1850 the world produced no more than 71,000 tons of steel (almost 70% in Britain) and had built fewer than 24,000 miles of railroads (two-thirds of these in Britain and the USA). Historians have had no difficulty in showing that even in Britain the Industrial Revolution...had hardly created an industrial or even a predominantly urban country before the 1850s. Marx and Engels described not the world as it had been transformed by capitalism in 1848, but predicted how it was logically destined to be transformed by it.¹²²

Raphael Samuel earlier emphasised the impossibility of equating British capitalism with factory production, even as late as the second half of the 19th century: 'In metal work and engineering—at least until the 1880s—it was the workshop rather than the factory which prevailed, in boot and shoemaking, cottage industry.'¹²³

Neither the Dutch, English and French revolutions against absolutism 'from below' on the one hand, and the unifications of Germany and Italy 'from above' on the other, represents a normative model against which the others should be judged. This is *why* any definition has to be based on outcomes, on consequences, specifically by the establishment of a nation-state which can act as a territorial centre of capital accumulation. It does not involve the process through which that outcome was achieved, nor by the identity, ideology or intention of the social forces which achieved it. Where then do my critics stand on the central question of consequentialism as a way of understanding the processes involved in bourgeois revolutions?

Riley is non-committal, or at least unconvinced. In so far as he has a positive conception of bourgeois revolution, it is derived from Anderson; consequently, he is prepared to accept that social forces other than the capitalist bourgeoisie are capable of achieving them, but this only applies until 1871, or perhaps October 1917. What Riley thinks happened after then, when most of the world's nation-states actually came into being, is unclear. At first glance, Gerstenberger and Post take diametrically opposite positions on consequentialism. The former rejects it, although she has, however, changed her position over time. In her monumental study, *Impersonal Power*, she originally argued that 'capitalist forms of production and distribution could only become dominant *after* the personal character of power had been (largely) abolished, so that the development of a separate economic sphere becomes possible':

¹²⁰ Davidson 2012, pp. 602-04; Davidson 2017, pp. 117-19.

¹²¹ Anderson 1992a, p. 117.

¹²² Hobsbawm 2011, pp. 111-112

¹²³ Samuel 1977, p. 8.

Orthodox Marxism maintains the opposite: the change in the mode of production is supposed to burst asunder the previous forms of power. As a structural category, moreover, bourgeois revolution does not refer here to a particular *form* of historical change. *Whether conflicts leading to a change in power culminated in open civil war and events that contemporaries already viewed as the start of a whole new epoch until personal power was eventually eliminated, does not affect bourgeois revolution as a structural category. Finally, the concept also says nothing about the groups who waged the conflicts that led to personal power being regulated, limited and abolished.* The central content of the concept is, rather, the thesis that the transition from ancient regime to bourgeois society demanded the expropriation of personal possession of power, or whether they led to successive rounds of reform.¹²⁴

The sections of this quotation which I have italicised are compatible with my position, at least in relation to agency; but Gerstenberger's current position treats bourgeois revolution as a much more specific category and consequently claims—although she does not use the term—that I am engaged in conceptual overstretch, since my 'theoretical concept...forces very different historical events and processes into the theoretical mould of a deterministic concept of Historical Materialism, thereby denying the theoretical concept "bourgeois revolution" any political content':

I oppose this reduction of the content of bourgeois revolutions to the establishment of a state which delivers functions for the development of capitalism. Instead, I maintain, that bourgeois revolutions occurred in the very specific historical conditions having been brought about by the theoretical and practical critique of the domination forms in *ancien régime* Europe. In other words: the theoretical concept 'bourgeois revolution' is only appropriate for those events and processes which Neil Davidson has termed 'revolutions from below'. But the historical relevance of these revolutions is not limited to the actual events and processes, because the critique of domination forms of the European *ancien régime* has since also been present in struggles against inequality, injustice, and exploitation all over the world. Many of those who fought against colonial domination were inspired by the hopes of freedom and equality having been present in bourgeois revolutions.¹²⁵

The problem here is that the relevant revolutions from below (since the First American Revolution was not made against an *ancien régime*) only amount to the two cases—the English and French—which she discusses in her book, although presumably we could add the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish absolutist state. And the attempt to extend the concept to incorporate anti-colonial revolts is only justified if Gerstenberger is willing to treat them as bourgeois revolutions which, unlike me, I suspect she is not. Gerstenberger does not see the function of bourgeois revolutions as being the establishment of capitalist states, but what she calls 'bourgeois states':

The essence of any bourgeois revolution was not the furthering of capitalism but the establishment of a bourgeois state. Its apparatus belongs to nobody—and hence to 'the nation'. The bourgeois state is separated from society in that it transforms the inequality of social positions into the equality of the subjects of law, while at the same time sanctioning the existence (and further development) of fundamental inequality in the material living conditions of citizens by sanctioning any sort of private property.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Gerstenberger 2007, p. 662 and pp. 661-671 more generally; my italics.

¹²⁵ Gerstenberger 2017, p. 16.

¹²⁶ Gerstenberger 2017, p. 13.

The notion that it is possible to have a bourgeois state which is not a capitalist state is one that Gerstenberger shares with at least some representatives of Political Marxism. Here for example, is George Comninel:

It can no longer be supposed that ‘bourgeois’ society—contractual property relations, the rule of law, a centralized state, etc.—is co-extensive with *capitalist* society. Social relations which may be necessary for the existence of capitalism are by no means sufficient to create it.¹²⁷

This argument is necessary for Political Marxists because of their claim that France after 1815 could have both a bourgeois state and a bourgeois society without an underpinning capitalist economy. It is this overlap in position which allows Post to cite Gerstenberger in his support.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, his version of consequentialism is close to my own, in that it does not expect bourgeois revolutions to have a particular structure, or to be associated with a particular agency, although it does assume that bourgeois revolutions initiate capitalist development, rather than *either* initiating *or* consolidating it, depending on the historical period concerned. Post defines ‘militant consequentialism’ as follows:

...the capitalist revolutions are time-delimited, political upheavals that destroy noncapitalist state institutions and social-property relations and create capitalist state institutions that promote the reproduction of capitalist social-property relations. This conception requires no development of capitalist social-property relations before these revolutionary upheavals, or revolutionary agency in the form of a class-conscious capitalist class in the leadership of these revolutions. Nor does a militant consequentialism require popular mobilisation or the establishment of an ‘ideal-typical’ capitalist state (usually associated with parliamentary democracy). A revolution is *capitalist* only to the extent that it, *regardless of the intentions of its leaders and supporters*, advances capitalist development in a given society.¹²⁹

I obviously agree with the overall direction of this argument, but in each case we are still required to ask to what *extent* did capitalism *actually* pre-exist the outbreak of the various revolutions and class-conscious capitalists *actually* lead, or participate at all, in the revolutionary process? Whatever view one takes of the French Revolution, it is clearly central to answering these questions.

2.2 France before and after the Revolution of 1789

I noted above that France plays a role in relation to the bourgeois revolutions analogous to that of England in relation to the transitions to capitalism. It might have been more accurate to say that it *once* did: post-Revisionism and post-Political Marxism it has been dislodged from its former role as model and benchmark—in some respects justifiably, since the French revolution was as singular and unrepeatable a process as the English transition. It is also true that, even in relatively sophisticated and nuanced versions of the traditional Marxist account—in the work of Albert Soboul for example, or more recently in that of Henry Heller—there is a tendency to exaggerate the size and, especially, the political and ideological coherence of the capitalist class before the Revolution.¹³⁰ In what might be regarded as an extreme over-reaction, however, it has become possible to argue, as both Post and Gerstenberger do for different reasons, that the

¹²⁷ Comninel 1987, p. 203.

¹²⁸ Post 2017, pp. 20-21; but see also his critical remarks on p. 21 note 71 and p. 26 note 86.

¹²⁹ Post 2017, p. 19.

¹³⁰ See, for example, Soboul 1989, pp. 43-52 and Heller 2006, pp. 54-60.

Revolution had virtually no relationship to the development of capitalism in France at all, intentional or otherwise.

In relation to my arguments, Post claims that: ‘In a retreat from his previous consequentialism, which requires neither a previous development of capitalism nor a capitalist leadership for a bourgeois revolution, Davidson attempts to make a case that the “bourgeoisie” which developed under French Absolutism in France not only led the revolution of 1789, but were part of a capitalist class.’¹³¹ But on the basis of Post’s own position (which, remember, does not require prior ‘development of capitalist social-property relations...or revolutionary agency in the form of a class-conscious capitalist class’) this is not a decisive argument. Saying that certain characteristics are *unnecessary* to a *definition* of bourgeois revolution does not mean that they are *absent* in every actual *case* of bourgeois revolution, just that they are not a requirement for the definition to apply. According to the consequentialist position, the French Revolution could have had a capitalist outcome even if this was not the conscious intention of the participants. As I point out in the book, this explanation was offered *at the time* by one of the very few actual capitalists in the Jacobin leadership, Pierre-Louis Roederer: ‘What the nation did for liberty and property was only the consequence and side effect of what it did to achieve equality of rights.’¹³² But contemporary historians such as Sylvia Marzagalli have also noted the disjunction between intention and outcome:

Looking at the results, historians attribute a consciousness in pursuit of goals that ought to be demonstrated instead of postulated. The French Revolution produced, indeed, a turn towards a capitalistic world in the sense that it freed property from collective rights and complex jurisdictional webs, and put the working class under stricter control. The Revolution ultimately gave political rights to a new social category of landed proprietors, in which non-nobles were numerous. Assuming that the Revolution occurred because a capitalistic class-conscious bourgeoisie aimed to achieve these goals is simply contrary to the historical evidence.¹³³

Post is on stronger ground in relation to outcomes, namely that the Revolution did not create capitalism in the countryside. For him, although feudalism was abolished, the peasantry remained ‘non-capitalist’—indeed, an obstacle to capitalism.¹³⁴ But, as we shall see, even this does not prove that the Revolution had no connection with capitalist development.

Gerstenberger agrees with Post about my supposed beliefs concerning the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary (i.e. post-1815) French state which, as we have seen, she argues was bourgeois, but not capitalist:

According to his general theoretical concept, Davidson maintains that every bourgeois revolution resulted in the establishment of a capitalist state and that it occurred, when the correspondence between the productive forces and politics as well as laws were no longer in correspondence. It then follows that the development of capitalism in France had to be already well on its way before the revolution.while Wood and other ‘political Marxists’ maintain that the state which was established through the French Revolution cannot have been a capitalist state because there was no capitalist base, Davidson maintains that the base must have been capitalist, because the post-Revolutionary state was established through a bourgeois revolution. The riddle is solved as soon as analysis is emancipated from the theoretical limits of functionalism. It then becomes possible to actually analyse the French Revolution as a revolution which resulted in a bourgeois state, the political essence of which is not sufficiently captured by describing state functions.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Post 2017, p. 17.

¹³² Roederer 1989, p.7.

¹³³ Marzagalli 2015, p. 17.

¹³⁴ Post 2017, p. 9, note 26; and pp. 25-27.

¹³⁵ Gerstenberger 2017, pp. 10, 11.

Finally, Riley restricts himself to highlighting what he sees as the inconsistencies in my position rather than setting out his own. He rightly notes that I do not, in fact, emphasise the extent of the pre-revolutionary development of French capitalism, but rather the failure of the post-revolutionary state to develop it, which apparently invalidates my argument: ‘But [Davidson] also contends that bourgeois revolutions did not accelerate capitalist development as such, at least for a considerable length of time, as in France—exposing him to mockery from Wood and others on the grounds that, if the consequences of such revolutions can be either to quicken or to retard economic growth, they can scarcely be relevant to the development of capitalism at all.’¹³⁶

So, on the one hand I apparently believe that capitalism was *already* fully developed *prior* to 1789; on the other I supposedly claim that it did *not* develop *even after* 1815, at least for many decades. This is what we Scots refer to as a guddle. I could at this point simply direct readers to what I actually written about the French Revolution, but I will set out the main arguments here, drawing on different sources from those used in the book.¹³⁷

France occupied an intermediate position in the history of bourgeois revolutions. Capitalist development was highly advanced by the time of the respective revolutions in the Netherlands and England, whereas in France it was still relatively limited by 1789, in this respect resembling more the starting point for the successor revolutions ‘from above’ in Italy and Germany. Unlike Italy and Germany, however, the revolutionary process in France was driven ‘from below’, situating it in this regard nearer to its Dutch and English predecessors. In short, the French Revolution looked both backwards in history to the 1560s and 1640s in relation to the decisiveness of popular agency, and forwards in history to the 1860s in relation to the limited nature of pre-revolutionary capitalist development. France did not occupy this singular position solely as a result of internal processes, but because of its situation within the international order which was already in the early stages of transition in response to British pressure. At one point, Post correctly notes that: ‘The incorporation of the international into the analysis of class and state formation in the transition to capitalism outside England is crucial to understanding the determinants of the capitalist revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.’¹³⁸ In my view, by restricting the impact of ‘the international’ to that of interstate competition, he has insufficiently attended to his own advice in two respects.

One is that the cumulative effect of the Dutch and English revolutions, and their partial fusion in 1688, was initially to make the leading figures in the remaining absolutist regimes alert to the potential for similar upheavals occurring in their own territories. In other words, the reason why capitalism remained undeveloped—although not non-existent—was at least in part because the existing feudal-absolutist states consciously, and to a large extent successfully, prevented it from developing beyond certain limits, as the Eastern tributary states had been doing more thoroughly for much longer. France, the most powerful absolutism, was naturally in the vanguard, but even it could not act as a complete block, in part because it required some level of capitalist development to contribute towards tax revenues and arms manufacture. Consequently, as Anatoly Ado writes, feudal and capitalist relations of production ‘were inextricably linked in the society of the Old Regime forming a conflictual unity’: ‘Some nobles clearly got involved in different ways in capitalist or semi-capitalist activities. Merchants and traders acquired landed property and estate income that was based on a mix of feudal and capitalist relations.’¹³⁹ So, while would be wrong to claim that capitalist relations of production *dominated* the French economy on the eve of 1789, it would be equally wrong to claim that they did not exist. Here we need to get beyond the capitalist/not capitalist dichotomy and

¹³⁶ Riley 2015, p. 122.

¹³⁷ Davidson 2012, pp. 588-599; Davidson 2015, pp. 103-119; Davidson 2017, pp. 101-114.

¹³⁸ Post 2017, p. 22.

¹³⁹ Ado1996, p. 364.

understand what ‘transition’ actually means. Marx himself thought, not only that capitalism existed in France by the eighteenth century, but that this had also enabled the early theorisations of the Physiocrats, ‘the first system which analyses capitalist production’:

...the Physiocratic system is presented as the new capitalist society prevailing within the framework of feudal society. This therefore corresponds to bourgeois society in the epoch when the latter breaks its way out of the feudal order. Consequently, the starting-point is in France, in a predominantly agricultural country, and not in England, a predominantly industrial, commercial and seafaring country.

This passage describes the process of uneven development, where a more backward social formation can nevertheless produce more advanced forms, in this case of a theoretical nature, out of the drive to ‘catch up’. On the one hand, the analysis could not have begun without observable capitalist development to inform it; on the other hand, the undeveloped nature of that development led the analysis to be contradictory and to have definite limits. Nevertheless, as Marx notes:

...it is taken for granted that the landowner confronts the labourer as a capitalist. He pays for the labour-power, which the labourer offers to him as a commodity, and he receives in return not only an equivalent, but appropriates for himself the enlarged value arising from the use of this labour-power. The alienation of the material condition of labour from labour-power itself is presupposed in this exchange. The starting-point is the feudal landowner, but he comes on to the stage as a capitalist, as a mere owner of commodities, who makes profitable use of the goods exchanged by him for labour, and gets back not only their equivalent, but a surplus over this equivalent, because he pays for the labour-power only as a commodity. He confronts the free labourer as an owner of commodities. In other words, this landowner is in essence a capitalist.¹⁴⁰

The other missing aspect of the international is the relationship of the people who would become the revolutionary leadership to the world outside France. One of the grounds on which Post criticises my position is that ‘*none* of the bourgeoisies of the early modern period—in particular *ancien regime* France—surrounded a “hard core” of capitalists because capitalist social property relations had not developed in society, outside of England in the eighteenth century.’¹⁴¹ The Enlightenment was an international event and it was closely bound up with practical questions of economic development. It is true that France was considerably less developed in capitalist terms than England, and Britain as a whole after 1746, for reasons I have just explained; but this did not mean that the bourgeoisie was uninterested in what had been achieved elsewhere. French people travelled abroad, to the Netherlands, England and Scotland; saw how much more productive their economies were compared to that of France, wrote books and articles discussing how they could transform France along similar lines.¹⁴² They wanted what they did not have. To say that there was *no* economic ‘hard core’ of capitalists in France—even if were true—is not decisive, since the non-economic bourgeoisie did exist and they wanted to create a society in which capitalists could flourish as they did in the Anglo-Scottish and Dutch cases.

Too often, a failure to recognise this leads to a view of the leading groups in the French Revolution acting solely in support of support of ethereal ‘Enlightenment ideals’ which have no social or material basis whatsoever. In the final volume of his important trilogy on the Enlightenment, for example, Jonathan Israel turns to the French Revolution and rejects not only

¹⁴⁰ Marx 1963, pp. 49, 50, 51.

¹⁴¹ Post 2017, p. 18.

¹⁴² See, for example, B-d 1790, a work based on observations made in Scotland before the outbreak of the French Revolution and dedicated to the National Assembly.

any role for ‘the influence of business men, merchants, men with strong enterprise concerns’, but also for peasants and artisans, except ‘indirectly and secondarily (and often anarchically)’, and points instead to how ‘the initiative was seized by a tiny group that was socially entirely unrepresentative’. Who were this group? Not the bourgeoisie, at any rate: ‘Nothing could be more ill-founded than to suppose, as some still do, that there existed a “revolutionary class” in society in 1789 that can meaningfully be designated “bourgeois” in terms of either social position or class consciousness.’ Instead, ‘the Third Estate’s leadership were mostly journalists, editors, literary men, intellectuals’ and, although Israel concedes ‘the amazingly high proportion of lawyers among the rank and file, only one or two, like Barnave and Le Chapelier, figured among the leading clique and these were altogether untypical’.¹⁴³ I find it difficult to see what classification could be used *in 1789* to describe ‘journalists, editors, literary men, intellectuals’ and lawyers—to which list we might also add doctors, journalists, ministers of religion and junior officers—other than ‘bourgeois’. Part of the problem here is the notion of ‘the middle class’, flagged up at one point by Post.¹⁴⁴ This is problematic for Marxists because of its non-specificity (*which* classes are in the ‘middle?’), indicating a position relative to other classes rather than specific relationship to the means of production, although in some contexts (discussion of the ‘new middle class’, for example) it is unavoidable. Capitalists constituted part of ‘the middle class’ (i.e. the bourgeoisie) under feudal absolutism, but unlike the landowners, merchants, financiers and manufacturers who became part of the new capitalist ruling class, the non-economic bourgeoisie also *remained* part of the middle class after feudal absolutism was overthrown. Colin Jones writes of their role:

If one assumes that the liberal professionals who made up such an important constitutive part of the assemblies are socially autonomous from the economic bourgeoisie, then reforms as classically capitalistic in their character as the formation of a national market, the abolition of guilds, the introduction of uniform weights and measures, the removal of seigneurial excrescences, and the redefinition of property rights come to be seen as the product of conspiracy, accident, or a hidden hand. The impregnation of the bourgeoisie with market values, the ‘bourgeoisification’ of the professions, and the organic links between the professions and mercantile groups prior to 1789, on the other hand, help to provide a more viable political and cultural framework for understanding why such reforms were introduced.¹⁴⁵

Riley finds my arguments about the non-economic bourgeoisie inadequate when compared—inevitably—with those of Anderson:

His account of both agency and consequentialism is distinctly weaker since he offers no structural framework for either exploring or understanding the necessary heterogeneity of the vectors of such revolutions, merely observing that the ‘non-economic’ bourgeoisie played a more important role than the ‘economic’ one—in effect repeating, without now acknowledging, Kautsky’s proposition that it was bourgeois intellectuals rather than entrepreneurs that took the lead.¹⁴⁶

Leaving aside the pretentiousness of the language here (‘heterogeneity of the vectors’ anyone?), it is untrue that I ‘merely’ observe that the non-capitalist bourgeoisie had greater involvement in the early bourgeois revolutions than the capitalist wing of their class: I also attempt to explain it.

Brenner was undoubtedly right to draw attention to the fact that the English Revolution—however we conceive of that process—did involve actual (merchant) capitalists. In the case of

¹⁴³ Israel 2011, pp. 764, 769-770.

¹⁴⁴ Post 2017, p.18.

¹⁴⁵ Jones 2006, pp. 102-103.

¹⁴⁶ Riley 2015, p. 121.

France their class was however simply too small to play all the required leadership roles, even had they wished to. Nor was this the only obstacle to them forming the vanguard. Leaving aside the fear of radicalism from either left or right which only became decisive after 1815, capitalists generally tend to shy away from revolution because of the sheer unpredictable destructiveness of the process, not least in terms of what this might mean for their property. But capitalists also have two more fundamental problems. One, which I address in the book, stems from one of the essential characteristics of capitalism itself: competition between capitals, a divisive condition which, where capitalism is dominant, requires the state to act on their behalf ('from above') in their overall interest. The other, to which I should have given greater emphasis, is the relative *newness* of the capitalist wing of the bourgeoisie, a point made strongly by Liah Greenfeld in her argument that it did not exercise—and could not have exercised—leadership in the French Revolution:

...in distinction to the bourgeoisie, which was many centuries old, the capitalist class was only emerging in France in the late eighteenth century. It evolved out of the bourgeoisie, it is true, but also out of sectors of the nobility, and, in any case, like other new social groups, such as the intellectuals, it did not cultivate collective memory that would emphasise its genetic lineage; there was a break in continuity. It was a new social construction, a new reality, in fact so new that its members could hardly have been aware of its existence as a class, and it could not, as such, have taken a significant part in the preparation and shaping of the revolution.

In effect, Greenfeld upholds a consequentialist position, claiming that 'the results [of the Revolution] were favourable to capitalism because capitalism was consistent with nationalism, and the Revolution, which owed to nationalism its character, direction, and the very fact of its occurrence...established nationalism as the foundation of the social order'.¹⁴⁷ This is true, but less decisive than Greenfeld thinks: nationalism is not a timeless free-floating ideology detached from social agency, but one which itself made possible and ultimately essential, albeit through several mediations, by the emergence of capitalism.¹⁴⁸ The bearers of this ideology came from the 'non-capitalist' bourgeoisie, a group which far wider and more diverse than Kautsky's category of 'intellectuals', which would exclude members of the armed forces or other 'practical' professions. Nevertheless figures of this sort were integral to the bourgeoisie as a whole, as is well conveyed by Gramsci's later discussion of 'organic intellectuals':

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. The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc.¹⁴⁹

I quote here from my discussion of the three-fold importance of this group:

First, precisely because they were not subject to competitive economic divisions within their class, these groups were often more able to express the common interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole than capitalists: they were tactful cousins smoothing over the tensions between the hostile band of warring brothers. Second, and conversely, they were also prepared to temporarily transgress capitalist property rights in order to better permanently enshrine them. Third, because these revolutionaries still belonged to a minority exploiting class, albeit one broader than their

¹⁴⁷ Greenfeld 2001, p. 148.

¹⁴⁸ Davidson 2016, chapter 3.

¹⁴⁹ Gramsci 1971, 5–6, Q12§3.

feudal predecessor, they needed to involve other social forces to overthrow the French absolutist state. The bourgeoisie should not be confused with the petty bourgeoisie, but the former did have a close *relationship* with the latter, which, from 1789 through 1830 and down until 1848 at least, invariably provided the foot soldiers for the struggle against feudal absolutism.¹⁵⁰

Finally, we must answer the question of when capitalism *did* become dominant in France. Revisionists of all sorts are certainly correct to one serious constraint emerging from the revolutionary era: the granting of peasant rights to the land, which genuinely involved the retention of non-capitalist social relations. Yet it is not clear what else the successive revolutionary regimes could have done in order to gain peasant support in the face of foreign invasion and domestic subversion. In other words, the consolidation of post-feudal but non-capitalist agriculture has to be seen as a necessary sacrifice to ensure the safety of the revolution. ‘The French Revolution cleared the ground for a possible unleashing of capitalism’, writes Terence Byres, who then notes that it then encountered massive resistance across most of the country: ‘It was sufficient to continue to stifle the capitalist impulse, and prevent the unleashing of capitalism throughout the French countryside, until the very end of the nineteenth century.’¹⁵¹ The exception was in the north-east of the country and, given my earlier argument about the impossibility of separating rural and urban economies, it is unsurprisingly that this was also the site of the largest industrial area in France, involving coal, textiles, iron and food processing.¹⁵²

But beyond this, as I have already suggested, if the concept of ‘transition’ is to mean anything other than an implausibly instantaneous shift from feudalism to capitalism, there are bound to be national variations in which the latter is less than fully developed or simply weak. It is in this context that comparisons with England or Britain are particularly invidious. I noted earlier that Political Marxists understand that no other country copied, or indeed *could* have copied, the forms of the English transition, since the existence of a capitalist England, then Britain, changed the context in which subsequent transitions took place. Where Britain *does* appear as a comparator, however, is in relation to how well emergent capitalist economies like France perform. Unless they are doing so at British levels then the implication is that they are somehow not ‘really’ fully-fledged capitalisms at all. It is not true that there was *no* expansion of capitalist industrialisation during the Revolution: between 1789 and 1814 the number of large-scale mechanised cotton-mills in France increased from 6 to 272.¹⁵³ But as Francois Crouzet points out, this is to expect France to replicate British development is to set an impossible scale of achievement, particularly given the legacy of physical destruction and human exhaustion following nearly three decades of revolutionary and military mobilisation, war and occupation, to which France was subject but Britain largely spared:

A structural redeployment on British lines, within a few decades, would have been a formidable, unfeasible, unrealistic upheaval. Actually, almost a century elapsed between the date at which employment in industry overtook that in agriculture in Britain and the time when it happened in France (1911)—as well as in Germany, the paragon of successful industrialisers. So French levels of industrialisation were not especially low in the 1850s and 1860s, except by British standards, which reflected the uniqueness of the British experience, with an employment structure which was untypical in Europe.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Davidson 2012, p. 564; Davidson 2017, p. 79.

¹⁵¹ Byres 2009, pp. 45, 46.

¹⁵² Crouzet 1996, p. 53.

¹⁵³ Horn 2006, p. 223.

¹⁵⁴ Crouzet 1996, pp. 44, 53.

As Jim Wolfreys argues, ‘the Revolution itself may not have transformed the economy overnight, it did create the environment in which change was possible, eventually allowing France to become a major industrial power’:

The survival of rented property long after the Revolution—in 1892 it made up 47 per cent of agricultural land—is identified as a major factor in the imposition of inefficient practices on rural France. But the Revolution nevertheless paved the way for the replacement of polyculture by removing the burden of seigneurial tithes on peasant farmers who could then risk greater specialization. Similarly, the creation of a uniform legal framework and currency, a system of weights and measures, and the removal of feudal obstacles to internal free trade facilitated the development of a national market. ...in the absence of radical upheavals, it is by no means certain that these changes would have inevitably occurred piecemeal over time...¹⁵⁵

The final point bears repeating: would the ultimate transition to capitalism have happened *without* the Revolution? According to Comninel: ‘The separation of the political public sphere of state from the economic sphere of civil society never really occurred in France before the establishment of the Third Republic, which time capitalism can at last be said to have existed.’¹⁵⁶ Are we seriously expected to believe that the capital-wage labour relations which existed in French workshops and factories between 1815 and 1871 were ‘non’-capitalist, but were magically transformed to being capitalist after the collapse of the Second Empire? By what mechanism? Aminzade has set out some of the actual processes involved:

In the case of urban household weavers, journeymen and apprentices were wage labourers who owned neither looms, workshops nor raw materials. The masters for whom they worked typically owned the looms, but the masters were dependent upon merchant capitalists who owned the raw materials and, in the case of Jacquard looms, the cardboard patterns necessary to set them in motion. Master weavers could not use their looms without engaging in relations with merchant capitalists. ... These findings suggest that it was not changes in legal ownership of the means of production, but rather changes in effective power over persons and productive forces that were the central feature of capitalist industrialization in mid-nineteenth century Toulouse and St-Etienne. Only such a broad view of the process of capitalist development can account for the diverse strategies of accumulation and mechanisms of subordination of labour to capital that occurred in nineteenth century France. The separation of workers from the means of production was indeed a central part of the overall process of capitalist development, but it is only part of a more general process of the subordination of labour to capital by various means.¹⁵⁷

As early as 1832, one early French socialist follower of Saint-Simon, Jean Reynaud, outlined the difference and antagonism between the people he respectively called ‘proletarians’ and ‘bourgeois’ in his text, *De la Nécessité d'une Représentation Spéciale pour les Prolétaires*:

I call proletarians the people who produce the wealth of the nation, who only own the daily wage of their work, whose labour is subject to causes beyond their control, whose everyday reward amounts to only a weak fraction of their toil, constantly reduced by competition, whose future rests on the wavering promises of the uncertain and hectic course of industry, and who have no other hope for their old age than a place in hospitals or a premature death. ... I call bourgeois the people to which the fate of proletarians is subjected and fettered, people owning capitals and living on their annual yield, who hold under their say the course of industry whose enhancement or regress is subject to their consumption, who fully benefit from present circumstances, and have

¹⁵⁵ Wolfreys 2007, pp. 59, 61.

¹⁵⁶ Comninel 1987, p. 204.

¹⁵⁷ Aminzade 1984, pp. 348, 349.

no other wishes for the future than the prolongation of their fate as enjoyed in the previous day and the continuation of a constitution that gave them the first rank and the best share.¹⁵⁸

One has to ask: how is it possible for Reynaud to make this distinction between bourgeois and proletarian if they did not exist? Or are we seriously saying that we can have capitalists and workers, class relations of exploitation and struggle, but not capitalism, even as a subordinate mode of production? Here, we appear to have entered a bizarre parallel universe in which, for example, the strikes and accompanying insurrections associated with Scotland in 1820, and with England and Wales in 1842 are apparently completely different from those in France in 1830 and 1848, even they involved similar workers fighting for similar goals. In fact, as Roger Gould points out:

In 1848, insurgents in Paris responded to a participation identity based on class. The vast majority of them were wage-earners, and this fact was central to participation in the revolution: they justified their actions, both to themselves and others, using a conceptual framework that explicitly tied their grievances and demands to their status as exploited workers in a social system understood as capitalist. The June insurrection was a revolt against the French Provisional Government and Constituent Assembly, but only because the latter were accused of trampling on the right to work and were consequently standing in the way of the emancipation of the working class.¹⁵⁹

Marx's own discussion of the class struggle between 1848 and 1850 in France is exemplary in its measured assessment of the relative weakness of industrial compared with financial capital, the greater numerical social weight of the peasantry compared to the geographically concentrated working class, and the way in which the most fully developed forms of capitalism were not yet dominant. Yet his care in assessing the social forces and relationships involved did not lead him to conclude that capitalism had not yet emerged by 1848:

French industry is more developed and the French bourgeoisie more revolutionary than that of the rest of the Continent. But was not the February Revolution aimed directly against the finance aristocracy? This fact proved that the industrial bourgeoisie did not rule France. The industrial bourgeoisie can rule only where modern industry shapes all property relations to suit itself, and industry can win this power only where it has conquered the world market, for national bounds are inadequate for its development. But French industry, to a great extent, maintains its command even of the national market only through a more or less modified system of prohibitive duties. While, therefore, the French proletariat, at the moment of a revolution, possesses in Paris actual power and influence which spur it on to a drive beyond its means, in the rest of France it is crowded into separate, scattered industrial centres, almost lost in the superior number of peasants and petty bourgeois. The struggle against capital in its developed, modern form—in its decisive aspect, the struggle of the industrial wage worker against the industrial bourgeois—is in France a partial phenomenon, which after the February days could so much the less supply the national content of the revolution, since the struggle against capital's secondary modes of exploitation, that of the peasant against usury and mortgages or of the petty bourgeois against the wholesale dealer, banker, and manufacturer—in a word, against bankruptcy—was still hidden in the general uprising against the finance aristocracy.¹⁶⁰

There was not one single moment around 1870 when all previously-existing relationships were suddenly swept away, but their gradual erosion and transformation in the context—especially

¹⁵⁸ Cited in Duménil and Lévy 2018, pp. 83-84.

¹⁵⁹ Gould 1995, p. 27.

¹⁶⁰ Marx 1973a, p. 46.

after the mid-century point—of a growing world system to which France was integral. As David Harvey has pointed out in relation to Paris:

By 1870 the lineaments of old patterns of class relations—traditional landowners, craft workers and artisans, shopkeepers, and government employees—could still be easily discerned. But another kind of class structure was now being more firmly impressed upon it, itself confused between the state monopoly capitalism practiced by much of the new haute bourgeoisie and the growing subsumption of all labour (craft and skilled) under capitalist relations of production and exchange in the vast fields of small-scale Parisian industry and commerce.¹⁶¹

So much for economy and society: what of the state?

2.3 Post-revolutionary nation-states

I have argued that the bourgeois revolutions can be identified by a specific outcome: the creation of a nation-state capable of acting as territorial centre of capital accumulation. How successful they are in capitalist terms tends to be dependent on how well or badly they perform three main functions: preventing vertical and horizontal class relations (i.e. inter-class struggle and intra-class competition) from impeding the accumulation process; providing the essential superstructure both physical (e.g. roads) and ideological (e.g. a legal system) for accumulation to take place; and representing the interests of national capitals within the international states-system.¹⁶² This is, or course, what I earlier described as an ideal type. Gerstenberger criticizes me on the grounds that there are nation-states, notably in sub-Saharan Africa, which do not conform to it, which is true but irrelevant, since *no* nation-state corresponds exactly to the ideal, but only constitute closer or—in the case of, for example, the Central African Republic—very distant approximations to it.¹⁶³ Actual nation-states can vary in size, power, internal cohesion, access to resources and any number of other characteristics. It is also possible, as Gerstenberger wrote during the German state derivation debate of the 1970s, that ‘actual state activity is not always the adequate expression of the interests of capital as a whole’: ‘Not that the interests of capital are not in general implemented; but in a concrete analysis we should not assume in advance as a certainty that in a concrete case the ensuing state activity will further the possibilities for national capital to the fullest extent possible under capitalist conditions.’¹⁶⁴

Riley does not use the term, ‘ideal type’, but he is evidently not opposed to the procedure in principle. His objection is rather to what he regards as my omission of what he regards as an essential characteristic, namely democracy:

Davidson essentially avoids any discussion of the modal type of state that must fulfil the three functions he attributes to it. There is a complete neglect of representative institutions, which he sees as largely unnecessary for capitalist class rule. One reason for this might be that it would compromise the claim that the classic bourgeois revolutions were once-and-for-all affairs, needing no sequels, since clearly none of them established bourgeois democracy as we know it today. Another is political: *How Revolutionary?* is determined both to reject the Stalinist ‘stageist’ theory of history, which identifies the establishment of a democratic republic as a principal ‘task’ of the bourgeoisie, and the idea that the rise of representative democracy has rendered socialist revolution obsolete.

¹⁶¹ Harvey 2003, p. 234.

¹⁶² Davidson 2012, p. 578; Davidson 2016, pp. 191-193.

¹⁶³ Gerstenberger 2017, pp. 6-7.

¹⁶⁴ Gerstenberger 1978, p. 158. This sentence will no doubt bring to mind the ‘activities’ of the UK state in relation to withdrawing from the European Union.

After these further speculations concerning my motives for holding particular positions, Riley goes on to claim that I and unnamed others have a tendency to misrepresent the nature of the social forces responsible for establishing, or at least extending representative democracy, for ‘while the bourgeoisie rarely pushed for universal suffrage on its own, the argument, however politically attractive, that the working class was the main force behind representative democracy has been dramatically overstated on the left’. Drawing on a range of theorists from the classical Marxists through to Adam Przeworski and Goran Therborn, he then gives a number of reasons for why representative democracy is effective in demobilising and incorporating working class political interests, before concluding: ‘Of Davidson’s three requirements for a capitalist state, that of structuring of intra- and inter-class struggle would seem virtually to require representative democracy.’ Riley’s final objections are concerned with the centrality of this requirement:

First, on consequentialist grounds, the fact that bourgeois revolutions did not always establish representative institutions should not exclude them from being counted as central features of a fully consolidated bourgeois state. Second, these institutions seem to have been at least as important as nationalism to the consolidation of capitalist rule. To deny any connection between capitalism and the competitive elitisms that have come to be called democracies in the capitalist core is a form of blindness.¹⁶⁵

I am not entirely clear whether Riley is arguing that a) the bourgeois revolutions are only complete after the establishment of ‘a fully consolidated bourgeois state’ which involves representative democracy or b) that bourgeois revolutions need not lead to representative democracy, but that it is nevertheless essential for a fully consolidated bourgeois state. Part of the difficulty is that Riley never actually reveals his own definition of bourgeois revolution, although this would clarify matters considerably. The first position was originally argued put by Anderson in his important article on Gramsci from 1976, recently republished with the passages quoted immediately below intact:

The existence of the parliamentary State thus constitutes the formal framework of all other ideological mechanisms of the ruling class. It provides the general code in which every specific message elsewhere is transmitted. The code is all the more powerful because the juridical rights of citizenship are not a mere mirage: on the contrary, the civic freedoms and suffrages of bourgeois democracy are a tangible reality, whose completion was historically in part the work of the labour movement itself, and whose loss would be a momentous defeat for the working class.

In addition to identifying a more positive role for the labour movement in establishing representative democracy than Riley will allow, Anderson is clearly right to say that, whatever its limitations, the fullest conditions of bourgeois democracy are the best under which the working class can prepare for power, not only because it is preferable to be able to organise and agitate openly, but because under these conditions forms of working class and popular democracy—political parties, trade unions, campaigns and community groups—develop which are both training grounds for the working class and the means by which to challenge the bourgeois state. Anderson then, however, goes on to describe parliaments as, ‘objective structures of a once great—still potent—historical achievement, the triumph of the ideals of

¹⁶⁵ Riley 2014, pp. 123, 124. At this point Riley’s admiration for Anderson reaches such a peak that he begins to use his phraseology, as in this use of the metaphor of visual impairment previously used by Anderson in a discussion of the Stalinist regimes: ‘However, merely to denounce them as undemocratic and therefore as historically illegitimate is a form of blindness.’ Anderson 1965, p. 225.

the bourgeois revolution.¹⁶⁶ For Anderson, this was an untypically rhetorical flourish, although it still leaves open whether or not these ideals were actually *achieved* by the bourgeois revolutions.

Within a year of Anderson's assessment appearing in print, NLR published a pioneering article by Therborn which answered this question in the negative. Hailed by Anderson as a 'brilliant survey' in an editorial which identified 'the bourgeois democratic-state' as the 'central...barrier to socialist revolution', Therborn sets out the minimum 'ideal type' characteristics of bourgeois democracy (a representative government elected by the adult population, where votes have equal weight and can be exercised without intimidation by the state), then notes that it is a relatively recent development in the history of capitalism and, crucially, that 'none of the great bourgeois revolutions actually established bourgeois democracy'.¹⁶⁷ Clearly much depends on which revolutions are being classified as 'great' and when they are regarded as being complete. By the following decade Anderson himself could write that, down to the close of the Second World War: 'In no European state was bourgeois democracy completed as a form, or the labour movement integrated or co-opted as a force.'¹⁶⁸ This at any rate comes close to suggesting that, even in the heartlands of imperialism, the bourgeois revolutions were not complete until the middle of the twentieth century, a point which Anderson made explicit, at least for the Axis powers, three years later in 'The Figures of Descent'.¹⁶⁹

I do not agree that the conclusion of the bourgeois revolutions in the West (which in this context includes Japan) can be situated as late as the aftermath of the Second World War, although for most of the countries of the East they only began at that point. But arguing for a much earlier chronological boundary does not necessarily mean that I believe 'the classic bourgeois revolutions were once-and-for-all affairs, needing no sequels'. Indeed, since I explicitly describe the bourgeois revolutions involving processes rather than single events, I find this to be one of Riley's more puzzling accusations.¹⁷⁰ I do accept, however, that my argument compressed *two* key moments, which certainly overlapped in the revolutions, but which nevertheless require to be kept conceptually distinct.

One moment involved the destruction of the pre-capitalist state, a task which has indeed involved sequels. The English Revolution needed 1688 to complete the work of 1640-60, because the structures of absolutism had not been permanently transformed in the original revolutionary upheaval and were partially re-established in 1660. The American Revolution needed 1861-65 to complete the work of 1776-83, because of the secession of an entire part of its territory, one based on an incomplete transition to capitalism with its own distinct state form. One could add other examples where both state form and territorial extent were in question, such as Turkey in 1908-09 and 1919-23. But the circumstances under which the first moment may require repetition or extension are quite limited—the temporary restoration of the absolutist state (as in the case of England) or the threat of a pre-capitalist rival state within the same territory (as in the case of the USA); but these are quite specific circumstances and far from some universal formal requirement or historical law. Absolutist and tributary states are unitary structures and their destruction cannot be carried out incrementally: the act is necessarily a decisive one.

The other moment is involved the construction of the post-revolutionary state, which is bound to be a more prolonged process, as new the structures and structures of the capitalist state are established. Obviously, there is no point in any bourgeois revolution where there is an

¹⁶⁶ Anderson 1976-7, p. 28, note 49; Anderson 2017, p.65, note 5.

¹⁶⁷ Therborn 1977, pp. 4, 17.

¹⁶⁸ Anderson 1984, p. 105.

¹⁶⁹ Anderson 1992b, pp. 155-156.

¹⁷⁰ Davidson 2012, pp. 481-483, 495; Davidson 2015, pp. 223-224.

anarchic absence of any state whatsoever, even if the state apparatus is a military holding operation as in England before the proclamation of the Republic in 1649 or the former Confederacy after defeat in 1865. It is important, however, not to confuse movements which refine or reform these structures and institutions, which in a largely pre-democratic age were bound to involve force to one degree or another, with episodes of further social revolution. An important distinction in this context is that between ‘states’ and ‘regimes’, as Paul du Gay and Alan Scott explain:

A change in the latter does not entail a transformation of the former. States outlive regimes. While the notion of changes of the state not in terms of its *form* but of its *modality* implicitly or explicitly acknowledges this, this shift of emphasis alone remains too weak to fully capture the longer-term historical continuities in the state as a historically particular form of political association. The state/regime distinction encourages us to interpret recent and contemporary developments differently.¹⁷¹

The last sentence refers to neoliberalism, but the point is equally relevant to earlier episodes of regime shift within an established capitalist state. I wrote earlier that France occupied an intermediate position in the sense that it was a revolution from below like England, but one which took place with relatively low levels of capitalist development, like Germany. However, it was also intermediate in a different, if related way. For, unlike England beforehand, the new state did not immediately form in conformity with an existing capitalist economy (since the capitalist economy was relatively undeveloped); but neither, unlike Prussia afterwards, did the state managers consciously set out to ‘catch up’ from a low base: the feudal state was smashed, but the capitalist state which replaced it was relatively weak, and required several iterations—‘political revolutions’ in the terminology used in the book—to complete it in 1830, 1848 and 1870; but these revolutions refined and perfected a structure that already existed. In the case of France, the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, and the military defeat of 1870, have to be understood in this way, as ‘regime shifts’, not as corrections to the supposedly incomplete revolution of 1789-1815.

One source of confusion here may be the fact that, as Therborn points out, there are two functions which *all* states have to perform: one of representation, to ‘promote and defend the ruling class and its mode of exploitation or supremacy’; the other, mediation of ‘the exploitation or domination of the ruling class over other classes and strata’.¹⁷² There will inevitably be continuities between absolutist and other pre-capitalist states on the one hand and capitalist states on the other—not because the revolution which overthrew the former were somehow ‘incomplete’ or requiring ‘correction’, but because both are responsible for maintaining ruling class domination. The point was made, in relation to France, by the thinker I regard as having made the last serious contribution to thinking about the bourgeois revolution from the perspective of the bourgeoisie: Tocqueville. Modern revisionists of the French Revolution from Cobban to Furet have endorsed his supposed claim that, rather than transforming the French state, the French Revolution of 1789 expanded the apparatus of absolutism and left society untouched.¹⁷³ In the face of these endorsements, what Tocqueville actually wrote in his great work on the French Revolution repays study, as it is in many respects perfectly compatible with the analysis of Marx and Engels, even though his political conclusions were obviously the opposite of theirs.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Gay and Scott 2010.

¹⁷² Therborn 1978, p. 181.

¹⁷³ See, for example, Cobban 1971, p. 94; Furet 1981, pp. 14–23; Furet 2006, pp. 59-62

¹⁷⁴ Nimitz 2000, chapter 5.

Tocqueville wrote that, before the Revolution, the old feudal institutions ‘still entered into the very texture of the religious and political institutions of almost the whole of Europe,’ but they had also produced a series of more intangible aspects—or what Marx would later call ‘superstructures,’ ‘a host of ideas, sentiments, manners, and customs, which, so to speak, adhered to them’: ‘Thus nothing short of a major operation was needed to excise from the body politic these accretions and to destroy them utterly.’ And what it destroyed ‘affected the entire social system’. These passages do not suggest a process which left fundamental structures unchanged. Yet they are followed immediately afterwards by one on which much of the case for Tocqueville as theorist of continuity depends: ‘Radical though it may have been, the Revolution made far fewer changes than is generally supposed.’ Yet the revisionists who endlessly quote these words appear to stop reading at this point, as the passages that follow suggest that this was not because the Revolution failed to transform French society, but because the transformation—or perhaps we should say the transition—was already under way before it began:

What in point of fact it destroyed, or is in the process of destroying—for the Revolution is still operative—may be summed up as everything that stemmed from aristocratic and feudal institutions, was in any way connected with them, or even bore, however faintly, their imprint. The only elements of the old order that it retained were those which had always been foreign to its institutions and could exist independently of them. Chance played no part whatever in the outbreak of Revolution...it was the inevitable outcome of a process in which six generations had played an intermittent part. Even if it had not taken place, the old social structure would nonetheless have been shattered everywhere sooner or later. The only difference would have been that instead of collapsing with such brutal suddenness it would have crumbled bit by bit.¹⁷⁵

Tocqueville looks in both directions from the Revolution: back to a pre-1789 absolutism which had already begun to adapt to the emerging capitalist order; and forward to a post-1815 capitalist state which adopted those aspects of the previous state—and those which were, so to speak, autonomous. Later in the book he restates the latter observation, noting that ‘there had existed under the old order a host of institutions which had quite a “modern” air and, not being incompatible with equality, could easily be embodied in the new social order—and all these institutions offered remarkable facilities to despotism. They were duly hunted for among the wreckage of the old order and duly salvaged’.¹⁷⁶ But, once salvaged, they were usable to the new capitalist order because they were compatible with it, not because that order had compromised itself by their incorporation.

Much has been made by Political Marxists and others about how radically different capitalism is from all previous forms of class society, but these comments by Tocqueville should remind us that the differences are not total, and that the really great division in human history is not between capitalism and the societies we know preceded it, but will be between capitalism and the society we aim to succeed it. Or, in the words of another Frenchman with rather different political perspectives than Tocqueville: ‘The French Revolution is but the precursor of another revolution, far greater, far more solemn, which will be the last.’¹⁷⁷

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¹⁷⁵ Tocqueville 1974, pp. 50-51.

¹⁷⁶ Tocqueville 1974, p. 226.

¹⁷⁷ Babuef 1920, p.54.

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