

Robert Cox: *Production, Power and World Order*

A book review by Katie Kaufman

International political economic theory is a branch of the discipline of international relations that aims to break down the artificial borders between state and market, the domestic and international spheres of analysis as well as the fields of politics and economics. Therefore, for any student or academic in the area of critical political economy, this mandate requires, as Susan Strange puts it "an imperative of multidisciplinary."¹ In other words, the critical IPE theorist must familiarize themselves not only with the traditional state-centric political science method, but approach change in the international system with a combination of perspectives including, but not limited to, those of sociology, economics, anthropology and history.

In his study *Production, Power and World Order*, Robert Cox, political scientist and pioneer of the critical international political economic movement, has taken on this task with a superior understanding of the relationship between production-level, national and international levels of analysis (1987). Although Cox affirms the theoretical emphasis of his book from the very beginning, he demonstrates a great breadth of historical understanding throughout the work. Cox's in-depth look at modern world history is a reflection of some of his influences from earlier streams of IPE thought, such as Karl Polanyi (2001), Eric Wolf (1999) and Theda Skocpol (2003), and complements his theoretical analysis extremely well. However, as one progresses through the book, it becomes evident that he is not interested in history for its own sake, but about what historical evidence can illustrate about changes in the international system, and how the

international system may evolve in the future.

In other words, Cox aims to ascertain how international change might happen in the contemporary era. His methodology involves an in-depth examination of the structures that "give a framework for action and form the actors"² that can affect political transformation in our world today. Cox identifies three primary structures that, when interacting with each other in an open system of power, provide human agents with a frame within which to act: the modes of social relations of production, forms of state and structures of world order. While Cox analyzes each structure separately, he is most interested in their interrelationship: where these structures are linked, where change can happen, and how this "mutually sustaining relationship"³ reflects the interplay between production and power. Cox himself states that all of his theoretical development is based on the premise that production is the material basis "for all forms of social existence".⁴ Therefore, even changes at the international level can be traced back to the reciprocal relationship between production (which creates the capacity to use power) and power (which sets the boundaries of production).

The main body of Cox's book is divided into three distinct sections: the first examining the social relations of production in isolation, the second which looks at how the social relations surrounding production interact with state forms and world orders, and the third analyzing the possibility for future transformations in all three structures. One of the most important concepts

¹ Susan Strange, 1996. *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, VX.

² Robert Cox, 1987. *Production, Power and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 395.

³ Ibid, 8.

⁴ Ibid, 1.

that Cox uses in all three sections of the book is the Gramscian tool of the historic bloc, or the "structure defining...[the] tasks and limits [of the state] which becomes part and parcel of the state itself".⁵ Although Gramsci himself only used the historic bloc idea within a national perspective, Cox broadens the concept to encompass the dominant transnational actors that hold power in the current world order.

One of the more frustrating aspects of this book for novices in political theory is that Cox assumes that the reader already has a background in Gramscian thought and therefore never quite clarifies the precise nature of an international historic bloc. Nonetheless, Cox relies quite a bit on this concept, particularly in part three of the book when he looks into the possibility of a shift in the current world structure. Because any change in world structure depends on, according to Cox, the weakening of the existing historic bloc,⁶ a good grasp of the international historic bloc concept would be useful before attempting to delve further into the book.

Once one is able to wrap one's mind around all of the theoretical concepts that Cox addresses in the beginning of the volume, the three main sections of the book become much easier to follow. In part one, Cox examines how production has been historically organized throughout the ages according to social relations of production. Cox isolates what he calls "modes of social relations of production,"⁷ which are patterns of the social organization of power and production between dominant and subordinate groups in society. He identifies twelve modes of social relations of production that were present in the late Twentieth century, such as the peasant-lord mode of production,⁸ and the enterprise corporatism mode,⁹ and compares their development across time and across cultural boundaries. He

also looks at each 'mode' within the greater context of different social forms of distribution and reproduction; he therefore divides the section into chapters dealing with simple reproduction, capitalist development and redistributive (communist/socialist) development.

It is this section of Cox's work that is most reminiscent of earlier political economy studies that focus on political revolutions and the resulting changes in economic and social power-lord production relations. However, when Cox looks at peasantry, he looks at this group in a much broader perspective than any political economist before him, as he traces them from old regime China to Japan to the European feudal era to Latin America of the Twentieth century. Cox also sees the modes of social relations of production as they function in regards to other modes: in every society there are dominant and subordinate modes of production. And while he attempts to explain the occurrence of shifts in production relations just as Moore (1993), Wolf (1991) and Theda Skocpol (2003) do, Cox does this by looking at the relationship between objective factors, institutional factors as well as subjective factors. In fact, it is Cox's inclusion of subjectivity of things like the perception of one's work obligation and the rationality behind the meaning of production that distinguish him from many in the field of critical IPE.

To elaborate on the origins of each mode of production and how they are transformed, Cox, in the second section of the book, turns to an examination of the role of the state. While he sees the state as the primary determinant of the structure of production,¹⁰ he does affirm that the state can only be autonomous within a system of internal constraints (provided by historic blocs) and external constraints (provided by the world order). In the latter respect, Cox follows very closely in the footsteps of Theda Skocpol, who, in her book *States and Social Revolutions*, is one of the first political economists to emphasize the importance of

⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁶ Ibid, 270.

⁷ Ibid, 14.

⁸ Ibid, 39.

⁹ Ibid, 70.

¹⁰ Ibid, 105.

the international system in political and economic change (2003).

Cox examines the relationship between the social relations of production, forms of state, and world orders in the development and decline of three different eras of modern history: the liberal international economy (1789-1873), the era of rival imperialisms (1873-1945) and the neoliberal world order (1945-present). He explores two main theses in relation to the politico-economic dynamics of all three eras: the first being that the formative phases of production relations are determined by transformations in forms of state,¹¹ and the second dealing with the parallelism between changes in state forms and changes in world order structure.¹² For example, when looking at the liberal international economy, Cox looks at how the transformation of France from a continental power state towards a liberal republic determined the shift in dominant and subordinate modes of social relations of production to favour the enterprise labour market and bipartism. In addition, in regards to his second thesis, Cox looks at how the British state and British world order emerge together through a British bourgeois hegemony.

Not surprisingly, it is this section more than any other in the book, that presents the reader with the most substantial theoretical exploration of Cox's initial ideas concerning the interplay of production and power, production relations and the state, and the forms of state and world order. It is here where one can best trace Cox's ideas to Karl Polyani's *The Great Transformation* (2002) as he does an exemplary job of portraying the dialectical evolution of the international political economy of mankind in modern times.

After having established, explained and illustrated the tools with which he proposes to analyze the progression of the international system and all that it encompasses, Cox moves on, in part three, to look at how these tools might be applied to the

present day. In other words, Cox, using the theoretical framework developed in parts one and two, strives to examine tendencies of the late Twentieth century in terms of shifts in production relations and state structures. He recognizes the world economic crisis of the 1970s as the threshold of the neoliberal world order, as this world order has engendered its own internal contradictions like stagflation and the Third World debt disaster. This type of crisis, according to Cox, is what Gramsci would call an 'organic' crisis, where social forces have been misaligned and are thus causing internal tensions within states as well as international tensions.¹³

Thus, Cox believes that the very same conditions were present at the time of the publication of his book that were present at the turning points in all of the world orders in human history. All that is needed to complete the shift into a new world order is "a political movement capable of uniting sufficient elements of existing societies into a counterhegemonic bloc".¹⁴

The question most likely to perplex the reader after completing the book is whether or not Cox's prediction of an impending change in world order has occurred between 1987 and the present day. Indeed, it is difficult to convince oneself, when looking at the present forms of state and current world order under American dominance, that the structures that govern the international political economy have experienced a great transformation. What exactly has changed in our international political economy since the economic crisis of the 1970s?

It is this question that actually may bring up an inherent weakness in Robert Cox's structuralist approach to political economy: his view of state power as the political reflection of production relations leads him to inadvertently support a state-centric view of power. In her book *The Retreat of the State*, Susan Strange brings up this very criticism of Cox's overemphasis of the

¹¹ Ibid, 106.

¹² Ibid, 108.

¹³ Ibid, 274.

¹⁴ Ibid, 403.

state role in the world order.¹⁵ Strange believes, as do I, that this approach leads Cox to ignore the increasing power of the international non-state actors, like multinational corporations and NGOs, in the outcomes of international political economy.¹⁶

However, despite this oversight in Cox's theory, his theoretical framework based on the interrelationship of social relations of production, state forms and world orders is a groundbreaking work in critical IPE theory. His sweeping analysis of local, national and international changes in power across cultures in the modern era has become a classic work in the discipline of international relations. *Production, Power and World Order*, like most other works in political economy, has paved the way for more scholarship from those who do not wish to restrict themselves to a narrow view of politics, power and how they shape the international system.

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¹⁵ Susan Strange, 1996, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

