



Rediscovering Robert Cox: Agency and the Ideational In Critical IPE

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Robert Cox has been instrumental in the establishment of critical IPE. However, critical IPE is currently failing to fully account for agents in structural change, despite innumerable attempts to provide a synthesis between structural and agential explanations. This is especially problematic given that Cox specifically identifies structural change as a central concern of critical theory, in distinction from both mainstream IR/IPE and traditional Marxism. This article argues that a reinterpretation of Cox's work could provide the direction and methodological tools by which agency can be more successfully incorporated into accounts of structural change by critical IPE theorists. What is rediscovered in Cox's 'historical structures' approach is, essentially, Cox's concern with ideational phenomena. This article discuss several recent attempts to 'renew' critical IPE in light of the structure/agency problem, before showing how the most effective strategy for renewal is actually situated in IPE's past. It will then argue that Cox's legacy is not bound up with the Neo-Gramscian School of critical IPE, given Cox's distinguishing approach to ideas.

Introduction

Robert Cox's influence upon the development of international studies is not in doubt; the very fact that we still, rightly, speak of 'world order' or 'world orders' as meaningful and important aspects of the global political economy is due in large part to the endurance of his work. But it is no longer clear exactly what Cox's intellectual legacy will be. It will be argued here that critical International Political Economy (IPE) – the branch of the IPE discipline where Cox has had most apparent influence – is currently failing to fully account for the role of agents in structural change, despite consistent attempts to provide a synthesis between structural and agential explanations. This article will suggest that critical IPE's future capacity to fully appreciate agency may depend on a reinterpretation of its past, particularly Cox's work. By upholding the notion that material and ideational factors have equal explanatory weight, Cox's 'historical structures' approach offers IPE an epistemological path by which agency can be incorporated into accounts of structural change. Currently, critical IPE remains predominantly materialist.

It is in this context that Cox is currently influential: he provides a nuanced account of how material structures – whether political or economic – change. But Cox's view on exactly *how* structures change has been somewhat forgotten. This applies most, perhaps, to the Neo-Gramscian School of critical IPE, with which Cox has ironically, although not unjustifiably, been associated. It will be argued here that despite the many valuable aspects of Neo-Gramscian scholarship, it does not provide for a synthesis of material and ideational explanations, and therefore cannot comprehensively account for the role of agents in structural change. Unfortunately, the fate of Cox's legacy

appears wrongly bound up with the Neo-Gramscian School. If the treatment of agency by critical IPE is to be enhanced, the two need to be disentangled. The second and third sections of this article will evaluate, respectively, Cox and the Ne-Gramscians. The first section will set up the subsequent inquiry by detailing some of the difficulties encountered by critical IPE more recently in relations to structure and agency, thereby justifying the rediscovery of Robert Cox.

International Political Economy at a Crossroads

Critical IPE is unquestionably among the most innovative and diverse fields of study in contemporary social science. Whether its origins are attributed to the splintering of some theorists away from the tired discipline of International Relations (IR), in order to focus more on economic phenomena, or to a heightened interest in a resurgent classical political economy approach, its emergence and ongoing institutionalisation within academia is a cause for celebration. IPE is, of course, a divided discipline. Many 'mainstream'² IPE theorists retain the rationalist and behaviouralist assumptions of positivist branches of 'traditional' IR. The distinction between the two can be conceptualised in terms of either focus or epistemology. Mainstream IPE focuses upon the traditional concerns of IR: the interaction of states, the emergence and operation of multilateral institutions, order and stability in the international system, and the position of the USA as a hegemonic power. This focus is distinguished from traditional IR by the addition of economic factors as a part of explanation, and by the belief that economic relations between states are as important, if not more so, than political and military relations.

Critical IPE's focus is much more diverse: it includes states and multilateral institutions, although they are usually conceived in different ways, but also inequality, sub-state and transnational relations, gender, normative issues – and, of course, economic structures and processes. In terms of epistemology, critical IPE takes inspiration from radical social science, not positivism. A less austere approach to science is endorsed, involving qualitative methods, alongside quantitative, more systematically. Neither politics nor economics are essentialised – they are deemed to be co-constitutive. The distinction between the international and the domestic is eagerly broken down. The two approaches also embody different understandings of power. For American IPE, power is relational – this assumption is only partially mitigated by institutions (see Keohane, 1984). Critical IPE, following Susan Strange's critique of mainstream IPE, believes that power can also be structural. According to Strange, this is precisely why economic processes need to be investigated: they are a source of political power (Strange, 1988).

This article makes no high-minded claim to bipartisanship: it upholds the inherent value of critical scholarship, radical social science and the broader 'new political economy' project articulated by Andrew Gamble (1995). It is to theorists within this approach that the argument is primarily addressed, and to whom its findings will hopefully be of most use. What I want to argue, however, is that critical IPE is failing in one key regard – the comprehensive incorporation of agency into explanations of structural change. Critical IPE has developed an expertise in studying structural phenomena. In many ways studying structure is the *raison d'être* of critical IPE. First, its immediate origins can plausibly be traced to Susan Strange's directive that non-state

structures matter. Second, one of the principal and partially distinctive aims of critical IPE is to study 'globalisation', which is generally understood as a structural phenomenon (Phillips, 2005a). Third, critical IPE's long-term origins can obviously be traced to Karl Marx, whose work is widely credited with instigating a systematic focus in social science on the role and impact of socio-economic structures on political and ethical life (O'Brien & Williams, 2004). As such, critical IPE has developed an expertise on structure, whether the phenomenon in question is manifest locally or globally, in a particular sector, or is primarily social, political or economic in nature.

In studying structure from a critical perspective, particularly when the structure is being related to globalisation, attention is inevitably directed to structural change. In fact, Robert Cox argues that it is precisely this that makes critical scholarship so valuable, when compared to non-critical structuralist approaches, even some from within the Marxist tradition, that fail to appreciate or focus upon the social, political and economic forces that are constantly challenging given structural forms (Cox, 1981). Yet critical IPE seems unable to provide anything more than *description* of structural change, due to a lack of systematic attention to the agents that are the carriers of such forces. References to actual human participants are obviously widespread in critical IPE; they are recognised as present within all forms of structure. They are too often, however, treated as *exogenous* to structure: affected by structure but not constitutive of it. Before attempting to rediscover Robert Cox for contemporary critical IPE, it is necessary to discuss several recent attempts by IPE theorists to overcome critical IPE's epistemological problems and, as such, provide a renewed impetus for critical IPE. Although not all

commentators use the terminology of 'structure and agency', 'material and ideational' or even 'epistemology' to document critical IPE's theoretical problems, I believe such terms are useful, both for understanding and appraising this scholarship.

Amanda Dickins has recently attempted to create a path by which the mainstream and critical variants of IPE may be reconciled. She bases this project on an appreciation of both critical IPE's value, but also of its apparent weakness on agency. Parts of her argument are extremely convincing. Dickins believes that critical IPE has successfully carved out a field of inquiry, but now needs to borrow tools from rationalist and behaviouralist methodologies to enact a more sophisticated research agenda, in order that the behaviour of states in the context of globalisation may be better explained (Dickins, 2006). Critical IPE theorists have directed attention to the structural aspects of change in the international economy, as Dickins sees it, but they have not fully explained the way that agents (primarily states) have behaved in relation to structure. It is for this reason that Dickins wants the methods indigenous to mainstream IPE to be applied to the concerns and subjects of critical IPE. She gives two examples of areas of study where fruitful collaboration is already occurring. First, the role of 'developing countries' in international trade negotiations. This is an issue replete with normative implications, but Dickins argues that the latest innovations in rational choice theory can be wedded to a critical perspective to produce a more robust analytical framework (2006: 484-5). Second, the emergence of a global 'bio-economy'. This is understood as a marketplace within which states are

competing for advantage. But the critical presumption that political power frames new markets is also accepted.

Accordingly, Dickins endorses Phillip Cerny's concept of the 'competition state'. This is understood as 'a state restructured and refocused to the pressures of global or transnational forces in an open international economy', and Dickins argues that 'the bio-economy provides vivid examples of the competition state in action'. The concept of the competition state is, for Dickins, a valuable innovation of critical IPE. She thinks, however, that to explain the behaviour of competition states critical theorists need to look to American IPE. Rationalist methods are apparently well-prepared to trace the dynamics of competition and collaboration between states in international organisations set up to regulate markets as such organisations come into contact with new markets. Mainstream IPE's work on 'incentive structures' is deemed particularly helpful, as is the distinction - widely and rightly discredited by most critical IPE theorists - between 'hard' and 'soft' power (Dickins, 2006: 485-91; see also Strange, 1988).

Critical IPE can, of course, simply ignore the olive branch of mainstream IPE, and defend the value of its own perspective. However, adherents of rationalist methodologies are gaining an audience in critical IPE, in ways suggested by Dickins, meaning that the victory of critical theory at certain sites is potentially set to be undermined. This does not mean that epistemological cross-fertilisation is not inherently valuable, but rather that critical IPE risks jeopardising the inherent value of its own epistemology – which Dickins does not fully appreciate – if its future prospects are tied exclusively to the success of such cross-fertilisation. In this context, attack

would be the best form of defence. Dickins' article is credible precisely because she has identified critical IPE's weakness on explaining political action. However, as the next section will show, this failing is not necessarily innate to critical IPE; thus there is no need to foster collaboration with the mainstream variant of the discipline.

Critical IPE can develop methodological flexibility without excessive outside help. Nevertheless there is an urgent need to nurture an approach to agency that systematically directs attention towards the role of agents in making, maintaining and transforming global, local and sectoral structures. It should also be noted here that mainstream IPE theorists, Dickins included, still largely assume that 'agency' equals 'the state'; again, this is probably not inherent to mainstream IPE, just as structuralism is not inherent to critical IPE. However, it is a flaw of current mainstream scholarship that need not be reproduced.

Nicola Phillips rejects the turn to mainstream IPE advocated by Dickins as a means for renewing critical IPE. In *Globalizing International Political Economy*, Phillips presents the case for the defence of critical IPE. Her argument is that, just as IPE studies globalisation, the discipline itself needs to be globalised. It is too rigidly focused upon the problems of Western states and societies and, even more seriously, reliant upon methods only appropriate to studying the problems of Western states (Phillips, 2005b). We soon learn, however, that her main quarrel is with mainstream IPE. While the criticism that IPE's focus is biased applies across the board, the theoretical critique is directed exclusively at positivism, rationalism and behaviouralism. What Phillips would like from critical IPE is, simply, more of the same. She

argues that critical IPE has focused too much on *global* structures at the expense of structural phenomena at other levels (Phillips, 2005b). Whether accurate or not, her petition for IPE theorists to focus also upon local and sectoral experiences of the global political economy is understandable and expertly articulated.

We can recognise *Globalizing IPE*, insofar as it consolidates the many successes of critical thought, as the ideal gauge for the strength of critical IPE. The argument here, then, is that although such work undoubtedly convinces the reader of the importance of critical scholarship, it offers little further guidance on how to incorporate agents into explanations of structural change. *Globalizing IPE* should be read as a critique of critical IPE's bias in its choice of subjects, but not as a critique of its epistemology. Phillips does offer a series of analytical concepts by which IPE could extend its focus – a strategy which does veer towards discussing epistemology – but she stops well short of the epistemological radicalism being advocated here, as a complement to existing critical IPE scholarship (see Phillips 2005d).

A similar point has been made, in relation to IPE in general, by constructivist Ben Rosamond (2003; see also 2006). He does not label critical IPE as structuralist, but agrees that the treatment of agency by theorists has been deficient. He arrives at this through a critique of globalisation theory.³ He criticises the way that globalisation is treated by critical IPE theorists; that is, as a material structural phenomenon, exogenous to agency – something that agents are affected by. He characterises IPE's work on globalisation as centred around five related questions: a) is globalisation actually a characteristic and distinctive feature of the contemporary period? b) does

globalisation circumscribe the policy autonomy and capacities of established forms of political authority? c) does globalisation set common policy imperatives for both advanced capitalist and 'developing' societies? d) does globalisation induce institutional convergence among hitherto diverse models of capitalist political economies? and e) is globalisation, in fact, a policy choice made by states? (2003: 661).

Rosamond praises the most sophisticated answers to these questions, and acknowledges that different approaches and theorists may understand globalisation in different ways. He 'does not seek to devalue in any way the answers generated to those questions by a decade of IPE scholarship', but since each of the questions listed treats globalisation as something exogenous to agency, additional questions about discourse and perception must be asked (2003: 662). He characterises this as a 'partial shift of emphasis', from policy-making in institutional processes, or the structural conditions in which policy is made, to 'policy knowledge' or 'the ideational matter of globalisation' (2003: 665-6,669). It should be noted that IPE does things besides testing globalisation, and related pursuits, and also focuses on local and sectoral structures – but it tends to do so having answered one or several of the above questions, thus implying that local and sectoral structures are manifestations of whatever reality globalisation is deemed to embody.

For Rosamond, globalisation only acquires reality when it becomes part of the 'assumptive worlds' of policy actors. Thus an implicit agenda for understanding agency within critical IPE analysis is mapped out: in order to fully account for agency, we need to appreciate the perceptions and

intersubjective understandings of which it is constitutive. Rosamond has applied this approach, innovatively, to the creation of a European economic space, an intensely discursive process within which notions of globalisation and 'competitiveness' are bound up (Rosamond, 2002; see also 1999).

Rosamond is surely right to claim epistemological radicalism for his own approach; his constructivism deviates significantly from the 'orthodoxy' in critical IPE. Furthermore, the turn to analysing the ideational matter of globalisation, and relating this directly to the analysis of agency, is similar to the strategy I am advocating. But exactly what is the role of material factors in constructivist explanations? Rosamond accepts that the material matters. The critique here, then, is not that Rosamond upholds an excessively materialist epistemology in the face of critical IPE's materialism, but rather that constructivism cannot provide a flexible theoretical framework for all kinds of inquiry in critical IPE. In fact Rosamond is aware of this, and does not attempt to provide a comprehensive, alternative epistemology for critical IPE.

Constructivism could form part of the discipline's toolkit, and assists the analysis of agency, but in itself seems incapable of marking out critical IPE's conceptual territory and subjects of concern in the way that Phillips' work does, albeit on the basis of an unsatisfactory epistemology of agency. Constructivism also seems incapable, moreover, of providing criteria for the normative evaluation of outcomes in political economy. Any critique of particular political discourses proffered by 'critical' constructivists is usually based on explicit or implicit opinions about how representations of reality present in certain discourses diverge from actual structural reality (see Cameron and Palan 2004). There is nothing wrong with such analysis;

however, it is further evidence that a framework that combines structural and agential explanations is required for the renewal of critical IPE. Tellingly, Phillips has a lot more confidence than Rosamond in suggesting ways that critical scholars may deal with normative implications of analysis (see Phillips 2005d). To reiterate, there is much to be inspired by in the work of constructivists like Rosamond. Indeed, the next section will suggest significant overlaps between Cox's epistemology and constructivism.

There is clearly some agreement between all of the theorists discussed in this section, although they approach the question of IPE's future from different vantages. For Dickins and Rosamond, critical IPE's weakness is understanding agency. For both Phillips and Rosamond, globalisation theory is having a destructive impact on critical IPE. Phillips is the most optimistic of the three about the current state of critical IPE, which is extremely reasonable, given its achievements. This does not mean that we should not investigate how critical IPE could be doing more. Phillips is also right to identify Robert Cox as a foundation for critical IPE (2005b). But I disagree that critical IPE has learnt all it can learn from Cox. Cox has more to teach us, particularly on questions about the role of agents. In relation to agency, critical IPE generally asks: which agents matter? and what are the structural conditions within which agents matter? A further question must be asked, about how agents perceive their structural context. Bringing such a question into the centre of IPE analysis has radical epistemological implications. Yet it can be found at the heart of Robert Cox's 'historical structures' approach.

The Promise of a Coxian approach

Robert Cox's work provides a robust framework for the study of structure and agency, incorporating ideational and material analysis. This section will concentrate upon Cox's approach to the ideational; the influence of his approach to the material on critical IPE is taken as given. Cox announced himself as a major presence within IPE with the publication of 'Social forces, states and world order: beyond international relations theory' in the journal *Millennium* in 1981. In this article, Cox outlined his 'historical structures' methodology for studying the global political economy. An historical structure, for Cox, is a fit between particular configurations of forces, namely ideas, institutions and material capabilities. Or, more precisely, it is an ideal-type of such a fit – Cox maintains that any 'picture' of an historical structure is principally an analytical device (1981: 135-8). An historical structure is, simply, a framework for action. But whereas some accounts of structure, according to Cox⁴, permit little scope for agency, Cox presents a fundamentally anti-reductionist account of structure. Structure, for Cox, is one moment in a continual process of structural change, orchestrated by human beings; the point of studying structure is to show where it might have come from, and so that we have knowledge of how it may be transformed (1981: 135).

There is considerable promise in Cox's inclusion of ideas within his historical structures methodology, especially since he argues that ideas have bi-directional relationships with both material conditions and institutions; they are not determined by them. Human actors populate every aspect of an historical structure – they form institutions, they experience material life – but it is the causal significance given to ideational phenomena by Cox that

underlines his commitment to agency. Human beings have relationships with social, political and economic phenomena, and act upon them, by having ideas about them. Ideas, according to Cox, are important in two, idealised forms: first, as intersubjective understandings. Second, as agent-specific collective ideas, or political ideologies, which contain particular views of what in society is good, just, legitimate, natural, and so on (1981: 137-8). Crucially, Cox argues that disjuncture between these two forms of ideational phenomena is a major source of structural change (1981: 138). This is a line of argument that critical IPE should develop further. Clearly, institutions, the fora in which agents act politically, are challenged if the intersubjective notions of which they are constitutive come into conflict with ideological perspectives seeking different outcomes from institutional processes.

'Social forces, states and world order' is not a statement of an epistemological idealism. It includes an endorsement of Karl Marx, and more particularly 'historical materialism'. However, Cox is adamant that his work does not suffer from the economic determinism often associated, rightly or wrongly, with Marxism. Focuses on class and production are defining features of Cox's work, but he looks to historical materialism specifically for the concept of 'the dialectic'. Cox believes, like Marx, that conflict is a part of *structural change* rather than a part of structure itself; this viewpoint seems to have been obscured within contemporary IPE, particularly in relation to the notions that power operates vertically as well as horizontally and that there is a symbiotic relationship between state and civil society (1981: 133-5). Cox does not consider himself a Marxist. He takes inspiration from historical

materialism, but combines it with other historical analyses of social relations in order to develop a more comprehensive account of structural change.

There are three levels of social organisation in the global political economy to which Cox says the method of historical structures can be applied: social forces (engendered by production relations), forms of state, and world orders. Ideas, institutions and material capabilities are inherent in each of these. Social forces, states and world order are deemed to relate to one another, because no historical structure is impermeable, and therefore there are, for Cox, a large number of relationships that could be studied to tell us something about reality. Which is chosen depends upon what one is trying to explain. In 1981, Cox's aim was to explain 'the relative stability of successive world orders'. He considered that the key to stability was the basis of a dominant empire's power in a particular system of production (1981: 138-41). Cox would of course agree that this is not the only thing worth explaining or indeed the only way of explaining it, but argue that the political and intellectual climate of the time made this the most important type of analysis.

It is precisely here that Cox brings in the work of Antonio Gramsci. In particular, Cox employs the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Utilising, also, Gramscian notions of civil society and common sense – as extensions of the state apparatus as well as potential challenges to it – Cox shows how first Britain and later the United States maintained dominant positions in the global political economy. Such dominance is a form of world order (1981: 141-44). The intellectual debt owed by Cox to Gramsci is widely appreciated, though perhaps exaggerated. There is no doubt that Cox finds many Gramscian techniques helpful; the concerns of Gramsci are reproduced in Cox's early

work, that is, how states in capitalist societies maintain their power, and how those oppressed by the capitalist system may best resist it. There is also little doubt that concepts such as hegemony can be interpreted as providing a 'more or less ideal fit' between certain ideas, institutions and material capabilities (Cox 1981: 141). In particular, Cox does claim in a later article⁵ that Gramsci's methodology provides for the mutual influence of ideational and material factors (1996: 132). However, it is clear that Cox does not rely exclusively, or even significantly, upon Gramsci's work in this regard.

The thoughts, firstly, of eighteenth century philosopher Giambattista Vico, and secondly of Karl Marx, feature far more prominently in 'Social forces, states and world orders' (1981: 132-3). A later publication, *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilization* (2002) provides further clarification of the ontological foundations of Cox's historical structures approach.⁶ According to Cox, Vico's most important concept was 'mind', by which he meant the thoughts and ideas of human beings. Vico, for Cox, was therefore essentially a theorist of agency; he sought to develop an account of the agent distinct from Cartesian notions of the universal, rational individual. He sought to show that people's ideas were developed in the process of becoming aware of their material existence. Crucially, he believed that structures and institutions are made by human action, but to understand structural and institutional change we need to understand changes in 'mind', that is, in people's understandings of and attitude towards their environment. We need to imagine the mental processes of actors, to reconstruct their assumptive worlds, to rethink their thoughts. This, for Cox, is not a statement of an idealist ontology, but rather an

assertion that ideas matter.⁷ As Cox shows, for Vico, as later for Marx, class was the most important material condition, and class struggle the most important process by which people came to understand their world. Gramsci is used by Cox as an example of an intellectual inspired by similar formulations, both Vichian and Marxist, who also, helpfully, addressed similar realities and problems to those addressed by Cox (2002:29). The aim here is not to distance Cox from Gramsci more than is necessary or plausible, but rather to indicate that the promise of a Coxian approach is not necessarily bound up with the fate of neo-Gramscian IPE.

We must also consider that the argument here is attempting to distance Cox from himself. His book *Production, Power and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (1987) has been interpreted as an excessively materialist tract on social change, in that it considers the effect of production processes and relations on all other aspects of social life, including politics and ideology. However, the book's intent is actually far more subtle than it first appears. First, production is never said to *determine* socio-political organisation, merely to affect it. Influences flowing in the opposite direction are recognised in *Production, Power and World Order*. Second, Cox does not claim that production is the only, or even most, important aspect of social reality that should be studied. Production is the 'angle' at which he surveys world order in this work, on the premise that labour relations affect social relations. But the much wider analytical focus suggested by his earlier work is upheld. Later works have proven Cox capable of adopting different analytical perches. Third, much of Cox's work in this period maintains the view that international capitalism was in a state of crisis. 'Crisis' can come in many forms, as Cox

recognises, but in 1987 he genuinely believed that it was the production system of capitalism that was experiencing crisis. Ever-attuned to transformative possibilities, Cox emphasised the aspects of world order most likely to generate progressive political change. As a matter of fact, in *The Political Economy of a Plural World*, Cox clarifies his position on production. Cox has admitted that the focus on production in his earliest work was excessive.

I have been criticised in my previous work... for being 'reductionist' about production... [This criticism] should be put in context. My book, *Production, Power and World Order* grew out of a study of labour relations. As it developed in my mind with the benefit of critical comment by others, labour relations became less an object of inquiry in itself and more an angle of vision upon society and the world as a whole. This was not an attempt to *reduce* the whole of social affairs and historical change to labour relations and the production process, but to use that as a point of departure, for the exploration of the wider world. Of course, the point of departure conditions what you see, and it is quite legitimate to point out that I missed some things that were important at that time, and which I, in retrospect, recognise to have been neglected (2002: 1).

Cox believes that anything that can be known or experienced must have material reality in some sense, but describes this as a 'trite' axiom rather than an ontological principle. Cox says the concept of production should be applied equally to the production of ideas as to the production of goods, as well as skills, families, institutions, etc (2002: 31-2). This does not leave the

material/ideational relationship entirely free of ambiguity, and it is not clear if applying the concept of production in this way would prove useful empirically. But we can of course say, tritely, that ideas have material reality, insofar as they exist in books, the media, laws, human beings, and so on, or have empirical referents, while maintaining that they can be independently significant as a cause of outcomes. A sophisticated *epistemological* approach to agency requires equal weight to ideational and material factors; Cox agrees with this, and in fact offers considerable guidance for its realisation. Ontological ambiguity can never be fully overcome.

The Political Economy of a Plural World also provides for two more important clarifications of, or perhaps departures from, Cox's earlier work. First, the concept of class. Cox has long conceived of class as the most important source of political identity, even where its influence is not explicitly articulated by agents. He therefore conceives of agents primarily as class actors; we experience capitalism and seek to change it as social classes. However, in this later work, he defines a class relationship as any relationship of subordination and domination, and argues that these things can be found in many forms, including gender, race, caste, and so on. All of these converge in the making of relations of production but have other manifestations too (2002:30). Second, Cox's work on the state. Cox has actually apologised for his work in this regard, arguing that his approach to the transformation of the state in the contemporary global political economy has converged too comfortably with hyperglobalist assumptions about globalisation, which he deems theoretically and empirically problematic. In particular, he is somewhat sheepish about his use of the term 'transmission belt' to describe the

structural location of states in global capitalism: 'I hereby withdraw this misleading metaphor' (2002: 33). All of these developments are, in different ways, promising, but perhaps more importantly, suggestive of the under-appreciated breadth and depth of Cox's methodology. The interpretation offered here is not intended as a blueprint for how critical IPE scholars should be studying agency; rather, it is intended as a guide to how critical IPE may learn to incorporate new approaches to agency in order to complement existing work. If it is possible that such learning can be informed in any way by the work of Robert Cox, then clearly this indicates how strong a position critical IPE is in, given that since the inception of IPE critical thinkers have thus far been extremely receptive to Cox's ideas.

The Neo-Gramscian School

The Neo-Gramscian School of critical IPE deserves much credit for promoting the work of Robert Cox in IPE, and indeed Antonio Gramsci. However, it will be argued here that most Neo-Gramscians are not loyal to every aspect of Cox's work, and therefore is no substitute for the rediscovery of Cox's ideational analysis that this article is advocating. This is not to say that Neo-Gramscians should necessarily desire to be entirely loyal to Cox; the argument here concerns critical IPE in general, and not primarily the Neo-Gramscian School. As such, the purpose of this section is to demonstrate why the Neo-Gramscian School, despite much valuable work, cannot lead critical IPE towards an epistemological orientation that grants more serious attention to agency. Cox is of course considered the main progenitor of the intellectual movement now represented by the Neo-Gramscian Schhol, but he is no

longer its best advocate. To reiterate, the Neo-Gramscian School will be briefly discussed here in order to provide further clarity on Cox's approach, but also because Neo-Gramscians have played an important part within critical IPE. Leaving aside the difficulties of interpreting Gramsci's work, and for that matter transposing it into more contemporary contexts, the main problem is that Neo-Gramscian theorists do not use Gramsci's work as a gateway to renewing critical IPE's epistemology of agency, despite regularly pronouncing that Gramscianism combines structural, agential, materialist and idealist theorising (see for example Gill, 1993a; b; Rupert, 2005). They, like Cox, employ Gramscian concepts, but also, unlike Cox, adopt his ontology, insofar as this is possible. Cox does not necessarily disagree with Gramsci's ontology, but recognises its weaknesses, and therefore does not rely upon Gramsci's work for his own theoretical foundations.

Randall Germain and Michael Kenny argue that using Gramsci's ontology is fraught with difficulty. Simply, it is not clear that Gramsci prevailed over the structuralism and materialism of traditional Marxism, or that he even sought to. Gramsci did uphold some form of structure-agency synthesis – material structure constrains and constitutes action, and actions can alter structures. But exactly what is possible and, more importantly, how are the limits of possibility set? How do we come to know these limits – does such knowledge exist naturally in our minds; is it imposed upon us, like our social class is, by hegemonic forces, or do we learn over time what may be possible? (Germain & Kenny, 1998: 8-10). For Gramsci, proposing the dialectic of structure and agency was not mere cant, but his approach is fairly rudimentary by

contemporary standards. For today's thinkers, the precise operation of the dialectic requires more exposition.

Several Neo-Gramscian theorists responded immediately to the critique of Germain and Kenny. Craig Murphy fixated on two aspects of their argument: first, the notion that there are many Antonio Gramscis, meaning that presenting a definitive interpretation of his work as the basis of a theoretical framework is unfeasible. Second, the contention that the Gramscian understanding of civil society could not be globalised, that is, translated so as to make it applicable to an account of world order in the contemporary global political economy (1998: 14-17). This article is not the place for adjudication on the latter. It should be noted, however, that Germain and Kenny argue not that the Neo-Gramscian work on global civil society is unsound, but rather *unGramscian* (1998: 17). On the former, Murphy's argument appears misdirected. He says that although there are many Gramscis, the Gramsci that Neo-Gramscians have chosen to adopt is the historicist, idealist Gramsci, the one most attuned to the role of agents and ideas and the maintenance and transformation of structure.

The problem, here, is that Murphy fails to address the main thrust of Germain and Kenny's argument. Gramsci's work does not bequeath to us a range of ontological positions to choose from, but rather a fundamentally ambiguous position. To imagine that a position that, one way or another, holds the key to understanding change in social, political and economic structures and loyal to agency, which can be applied far beyond Gramsci's spatial and temporal environs, can be found in Gramsci's work is to ask too much of his work. It should be remembered that the main problem with the

Neo-Gramscian School is not its relationship with Gramsci, but rather its relationship with reality. It is on these terms that Murphy asks for his work to be judged (1998: 417). There can be no doubt about Murphy's valuable contributions to the enterprise of critical IPE⁸ but he nevertheless fails to escape excessively structuralist and materialist explanations. In general, the innovative but ultimately limited way in which Gramsci incorporates ideational phenomena into his account of agency and analysis of structure has been sufficient for Neo-Gramscian scholars. I believe it is insufficient.

Another theorist critical of Germain and Kenny's position is Mark Rupert. Rupert criticises their diagnosis that, for all Gramsci's contemplation of ideational phenomena and the potential of agents to transform structure, it remains that 'in the last instance' agency is deemed to be governed by material interests. Instead, he says, material interests govern agency 'in the first instance': they condition but do not determine (1998: 427, 431). However, as well as representing Germain and Kenny's argument somewhat crudely, the distinction Rupert makes between 'the last instance' and 'the first instance' is not as insightful as it may initially appear. 'The first instance' may not invoke the notion of material life as an ultimately non-negotiable constraint, but we must still ask how long the first instance is supposed to last. How extensive is its influence, and how is it experienced? A close reading of Rupert's work suggests that he gives considerable weight to material interests in accounting for agency. Marx's materialism is clearly the foundation of his theoretical framework; Gramsci's thoughts are employed to emphasise the importance of political struggle – the status of which is apparently uncertain in Marx's work, for Rupert (1998: 428; see also 2000).

Mark Rupert's book *Ideologies of Globalization: Contending Visions of a New World Order* (2000; see Drainville, 2004 for a similar analysis) represents his contribution to globalisation theory. In fact, it is probably the most important attempt by a Neo-Gramscian to address ideational aspects of the process of globalisation, an ability supposedly inherent to Gramscian thought. Yet it remains epistemologically conservative. Globalisation is not, in general, treated as an ideational phenomenon, which may more or less accurately refer to aspects of material life. Rather, it is treated primarily, and without problematisation, as a material process of structural change which, moreover, is exogenous to agents. It is argued, glibly, that agents have a role in altering structures – encouraging this is a central objective of the book, just as it was for Gramsci and for Marx. But the constitution of structures in political action nor the constitution of agency in subjective and intersubjective understandings of structure are not recognised, or at least form no part of Rupert's analysis of agency or indeed ideology. His empirical focus is neoliberalism, so-called 'grassroots' socialism, and fascism, with the focus principally on the United States. Each, including neoliberalism, is treated as a response to the material structural change of globalisation. They are (imperfect) products of new class relationships. It is only in this sense that they are 'ideologies of globalisation'. This is not to claim that the emergence of new ideological positions, which Rupert expertly documents, has nothing to do with real-world change. It has a great deal to do with structural change and material conditions, only not in the simplistic – and uni-directional – way suggested by Rupert. Even the limited potential that Cox found in Gramsci's work for the study of ideational phenomena is forgone by Rupert.

Nevertheless, Germain and Kenny are perhaps a little unfair in describing the Neo-Gramscian School as 'ultimately problematic', in that this phrase suggests that there is little value in pursuing neo-Gramscian inquiry. In social science, surely there are few epistemological frameworks which are not problematic, from some vantage point. Neo-Gramscian theorists should therefore be applauded in many ways. What has been criticised here is their failure to establish a sophisticated inquiry into ideational phenomenon within IPE, or, more crudely, its disloyalty to the promise of Robert Cox's work. Robert Cox is of course partly culpable, especially in relation to globalisation as an ideational phenomenon. He has made only a few brief, definitional comments on globalisation. Clearly, Cox accepts globalisation as an appropriate label for describing recent material structural change (1997). This is not in itself problematic, if applied in conjunction with his historical structures methodology. Helpfully, in *The Political Economy of a Plural World*, Cox, in a discussion on the relationship between power and knowledge, describes globalisation as 'the salient emerging reality around which knowledge struggle now clusters' (2002:76). This provides clues to an understanding of globalisation as an ideational phenomenon which is missing from Mark Rupert's approach. For Cox, globalisation is not simply 'out there' for agents to respond to. Rather, its meaning is contested, and the struggle to give it meaning is intimately related to the struggle for power. The fact that Cox gives it his own meaning, for whatever reason, does not detract from this.

Conclusion

It is perhaps possible to see projects such as Ben Rosamond's, discussed earlier, as an augmentation of the Coxian project, in that they seek to provide a fuller account of agency at the meso-level with reference to ideas – an aspect of social reality that too few IPE scholars have studied, despite constant references to Cox's work. Robert Cox's legacy is multi-faceted, and the argument here is not designed to discredit the use of his ideas in any of the many analytical and normative enterprises in which they have been used. The many variants of critical IPE, which have been impossible to document here, by and large represent intellectual innovations that should be cherished. There can be no single, authoritative reading of Cox's work, and we should welcome any perspective that finds something valuable in his ideas. The Neo-Gramscian School is of course included in this diagnosis. The approach has been criticised not for what it has been able to do, or the insights into the workings of the global political economy that it has developed.

'World order' is a term first popularised by Robert Cox, but Cox has worked in conjunction with Neo-Gramscian thinkers to make this concept, and theoretical approaches relating to it, a vital aspect of the IPE discipline. Neo-Gramscianism is criticised here, rather, for failing to succeed in one important respect. Namely, its failure to develop an epistemological synthesis between ideational and material explanations. This is true of many IPE approaches, but crucially it is an achievement wrongly claimed by some Neo-Gramscians. Robert Cox appears more equipped than the Neo-Gramscian School in general to provide such a synthesis, and therefore, if certain aspects of his work were to be rediscovered, critical IPE would be able to develop a more flexible analytical toolkit for explaining agency, or the role of agency in

structural change. The fact that Robert Cox's work is already indigenous to the enterprise of critical IPE should make the discipline receptive to new interpretations of his legacy.

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2 'Mainstream' is used here to mean simply 'non-critical'; it is not meant to apply that critical IPE is not as popular or as important within the discipline. In academic institutions in some parts of the world, critical IPE has almost achieved the status of orthodoxy.

3 A similar diagnosis to the one presented by Nicola Philips. However, the prescriptions are very different.

4 Cox refers explicitly to neo-realists such as Kenneth Waltz as well as Marxists such as Louis Althusser and Immanuel Wallerstein.

5 First published in 1983, again in Millennium.

6 Whilst also acknowledging the influence of Max Weber and George Sorel in this regard (2002: 28-9, 45-6).

7 There is a fascinating passage in *The Political Economy of a Plural World* in which Cox argues that environmental decay will only be reversed if our understanding of humanity's place in nature and the biosphere is reconstructed (2002:88). He is not arguing that environmental decay is not real, or that it does not affect us, as a material condition. The point is that any reaction to the environment cannot be conceived as an automatic response to changing material conditions. 'Mind' must be active.

8 See in particular Murphy's work on global governance and industrial change (1994)

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