

Paper Review: "Rediscovering Robert Cox"

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Berry, Craig. (2007). Rediscovering Robert Cox: agency and the ideational in critical IPE. *Political Perspectives*, 1(8), 1-29.

The paper in question, authored by Craig Berry, presents itself as a reflection on the limits and contributions of the neo-Gramscian current of International Relations (IR)—referred to as a critical branch of International Political Economy.

The author primarily raises the issue that this school of thought, despite being influenced by the work of Robert Cox, distances itself from him, moving toward a materialism that is, according to the author, less comprehensive and more influenced by Marxist thought. The author's reading of Marxism, however, posits it as a thought of pure material determination, where structures are predominantly inflexible, and amidst which individuals are merely supporting actors.

In opposition to this, Berry presents a Cox who, according to the author, utilizes "historical materialism" (p. 14-15) to construct a reading of the international system's formation based on the notion of "historical structure" (p. 13). This historical structure is conceived as a stage of institutions and material forms upon which agents act. This action is reportedly marked by what the author calls ideational factors, which he explains by stating that:

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, idealized 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. (p. 14).

We believe that what the author calls ideational is what we understand as representations—which includes conceptions of ideology, perceptions, and opinions of reality. It is supposedly the contradictions between intersubjective understandings and collective comprehensions of reality that lead to structural changes. According to the author, Cox argues that conflict is the primary source of structural change, but based on the preceding explanation, the nature of this conflict is rooted in the plane of representations—the ideational plane.

The main question here is to what extent this conception is truly Gramscian—and, by extension, Marxian—or if, on the other hand, it is heading toward becoming a modality of idealism.

Berry states that for Robert Cox, ideas are not determined by society's material and institutional conditions, "ideas have bi-directional relationships with both material conditions and institutions" (p. 13); in other words, there is supposedly some type of co-constitution between matter, idea, and institution. But Berry's explanation leads one to perceive that, despite defending a notion of indeterminacy—or rather, complex determination—Cox, by locating the driver of structural change in the contradictions between individual and collective ideational representations, aligns himself much more closely with Hegelian historical theory than with that which emerges from interpreting the works of Marx and Gramsci.

In other words, Berry's Cox takes Hegel's concept of the idea, rebrands it, and then places the dynamic of historical change within the contradictions existing on the plane of representations. In fact, the field of representations in Cox appears to us to be the plane of Hegel's absolute idea.

Thus, Cox's appropriation of Gramsci's conceptions reveals itself to be merely instrumental: he adds "hegemony" (p. 15) to explain that dominant countries exist on the plane of the international system; he uses "civil society" (p. 15) to contrast the notion of the State—but conceives them as separate entities, not organically intertwined as in the work of the Italian militant.

The articulation of Vico and Marx by Cox, as related by Craig Berry, seems curious (to say the least): if Robert Cox truly pursues such an agenda, he mixes historical and epistemological conceptions so completely foreign to one another that it makes one question the true scope, or fidelity, of his knowledge of the authors he employs.

Thus, the critique of neo-Gramscian thought—that it is too materialist, and therefore distances itself from Cox—holds true precisely because the Cox described by Berry presents himself as a Hegelian idealist: for him, it is the intersubjective plane that subordinates and determines the material plane and its changes. Cox, we agree with the author, is not a neo-Gramscian, nor even a Gramscian, much less a Marxist, but rather a Hegelian; his effort is, therefore, to construct an idealist realism. And as this is naturally anachronistic, Robert Cox seems to incorporate "materialist" authors to lend some notion of realism to his analysis.

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