

***Human Geography* special issue on Marxist geography: Editors' introduction**

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**Marxist geography**

From the late 1960s to the early 1980s English-language human geography took a sharp turn to Marxism. This reflected the emerging long term crisis of capitalism and the rise of militant popular struggles in both the imperialist and dominated capitalist countries. But in the last 30 years the mainstream of human geography has moved strongly away from Marxism (see Cox, this issue) on the grounds that Marxism reduces everything to the economic, that it is epistemologically determinist, and so on (see Eagleton, 2012). Economic geography has become dominated by institutionalist and Keynesian theory; social and cultural geography has become post-structuralist or postmodern; political geography has moved to a Weberian conception of the state, a distinct institution analytically separate from capitalist economy and civil society. As with the earlier rise of Marxist geography, this rightward move has been powered by change outside academia. The worldwide neoliberal offensive of capital against workers and the oppressed has produced many defeats, which have made a perspective of socialism seem utopian. This offensive was successful in restoring capitalism in the USSR, Eastern Europe and China, seen by many on the left (though not by us) as 'socialist'. The middle class in both the Majority and Minority Worlds took its lead from capital and moved sharply to the right. Academics in particular, as part of this social layer, shifted their theorisations to be more appealing to the state and business on whom they are ultimately dependent for their livelihoods and promotions; within internal academic and university politics, Marxism became increasingly unacceptable (for the case of economics, see for example Fine (2013)).

Of course, these various forms of new human geography engage in critical thinking (indeed 'critical human geography' has been a buzzword for years now, and has been institutionalized in many forms), but they are critical in an inadequate manner (Cox, this issue). The very notion of critique remains unproblematized (see Das (2014) on the notion of critique and Marxism as a critique). A large number of human geographers remained critical of the existing society from a social democratic, associationalist, or anarchist standpoint, including non-class versions of green politics, small-is-beautiful localism and social economy promotion. They are critical of poverty and 'social exclusion' within countries and across the globe; of 'consumerism'; of the destruction of particular ecologies and the global ecology; of the oppression or 'disadvantage' of blue-collar workers and poor peasants, women, LGBT people, people with disabilities, the young and the old, and racialized groups; of the weakening of parliamentary democracy and rise of state authoritarianism. But their critique is not a Marxist one. Our view of the essentials of a dialectical and historical materialist approach includes the following linked aspects.

\* The capitalist mode of production is a totality. One can divide this totality into distinct spheres and distinct sets of social relations; but none of these is understandable outside of its place within the totality. Distinct aspects of the society are therefore *internally* related to each other and to the totality, rather than being separately constituted and then externally related, as in non-Marxist thinking (Ollman, 1993). The key difficulty, therefore, is not to

relate separate social processes but rather to find the concepts, based in real processes rather than merely mental abstractions, which demarcate them from each other.

\* All forms of exploitation and social oppression, and all degradations of humans and Earth's ecology, are a part of this social totality.

\* The essential starting point for analysing the capitalist mode of production is the reproduction of life through work, including both wage labour and the unpaid work of reproducing and caring for people, and the ways in which these forms of work use the Earth's ecosystem and transform it. Gender oppression is rooted in the internal relations between the waged and unpaid spheres of work (Vogel, 1983; Gough, 2014).

\* The capitalist production realm ('the economy') is based on the purchase of the labour power of workers by capital; capital's supervision of labour within the workplace, so as to produce more value than the wages paid, that is, exploitation; the accumulation of realised surplus value as capital, which seeks its own expansion without limit, the fetish of expanding value (Marx, 1972 ed.). Capitalism as a class relation is a dialectical totality of exchange relation, property relation, and value relation (Das, 2017a: Chapter 7).

\* The power of capital over the working class both within and outside of the workplace depends in the first place on the the separation of the working class from the means of production and the process of production. But it also depends on the competition between workers to sell their labour power to capital, including competition organised across divisions of gender, racialised groups, age and location. The latter social divisions are therefore a crucial contribution to the reproduction of class relations, and class relations are a crucial moment in these social divisions. Class and social divisions are not, therefore, merely externally related as in various Weberian, dual system or intersectionality work, but rather constitute each other at the deepest level (McNally, 2015).

\* The Earth's ecosystem ('Nature') and the built environment ('Second Nature') are crucial moments of capitalist production and domestic reproduction, and are at the same time transformed by production and reproduction labour. Thus ecological destruction and problems of the built environment are internally related to capital accumulation and class oppression (O'Connor, 1998; Harvey, 1989).

\* The spread of capitalist society across the world has involved ever-increasing flows of commodities, money-capital, production and labour, corresponding to capital's impulsion to expand without limit. These flows tend to create a unified global society. But these flows seek to use differences in capitalism across the world, and serve to further differentiate territories as much as to equalise them. We have both uneven and combined development (Trotsky, 2008; Dunn and Radice, 2006). Uneven development is a product of uneven changes in class relations (e.g. pre-capitalism to capitalism) and uneven changes in the forms of capitalist class relation (e.g. formal and real subordination of labour under capital), as mediated by uneven class struggles. Uneven development also reflects the capitalist class's attempt to deploy geographical concentration and dispersal in order to respond to crisis and place-specific working class struggle, and to maintain a given rate of profit (Eisenschitz, this issue; Das, 2017b). Racism and racialisation are predominantly rooted in this uneven and combined development, specially the poverty of the Majority World, and in the consequent migrations from and within it impelled by both those migrants' needs for employment and capital's profitable exploitation of their labour power (Sivanandan, 1990).

\* The state and capitalist society (economy, social life) are not two separate spheres which come into external interaction. The state in capitalist society is embedded in socio-economic life and arises from its contradictions. The state is a moment of class relations and class struggle runs through it. The state is a moment in capital accumulation, organising crucial aspects of production and reproduction, but by the same token is subject to, and (re)expresses, all the contradictions and conflicts of capitalist life (Das,2006a).

\* The existence of the state as a separate institution from the ruling class, unique among class societies, arises from the impersonal nature of capital accumulation as growth of value (Clarke, 1991). But this creates constant tensions between the state as an organiser of accumulation as a whole and manager of overall class relations, and its necessary relations to particular capitals and particular sections of the working class. A strong 'progressive' state favoured by social democracy risks politicising economy and society, from which the state retreats into clientelism or non-intervention. The ever-shifting boundaries between the state, capital and civil society, including recent shifts from government to 'governance', reflect these contradictions.

\* The capitalist mode of production in the abstract, and in its historically-geographical concrete forms, is riven with contradictions (Harvey, 2014). These are not merely conflicts of interest (the pluralist, social democratic view) but arise from interdependence and antagonism between logically connected elements of the totality (Ollman, 1993). One result is chronic crisis tendencies disrupting both productive accumulation and reproduction of people. These crises can reimpose the discipline of value onto workers and divide them, but they can also push workers towards collective action against capital and against the state to the extent that it expresses capital's logic. To the extent that accumulation contradictions and crisis tendencies disrupt capital, they open fissures for these struggles to go forward.

\* Since exploitation, social oppressions and the destruction of nature are intrinsic to capitalist society, they can only be overcome by a socialist society in which the majority of productive resources are publicly owned, planned and managed collaboratively, and developed democratically. By the same token, socialism can overcome the particular contradictions and crises which arise from the logics of capitalist society.

This abstract and terse account of Marxist geography points to some key differences from contemporary mainstream human geography.

\* The majority of critical geography sees social and urban problems as related to others and to capitalism, but *externally* related. For the social oppressions of gender, 'race' and sexuality are seen as 'spheres' of society, 'non-class oppressions', albeit with 'economic' components; Fraser's (1995) separation of cultural/political and economic components has been highly influential in human geography. Moreover, the 'economic' component of these oppressions is understood as 'distribution of resources', a mere pattern, rather than the underlying class relations (*ibid.*). Much contemporary human geography is concerned with networks (economic, social, 'governance'), assemblages and nexuses of varied social actors and institutions. These are usually understood as external relations between separately constituted parts. A Marxist approach, in contrast, focuses on social relations and social processes which *co-constitute* these parts and are the substance of their 'interaction'. As a result, the construction of social and urban problems by the capitalist totality is minimised.

\* The mainstream approach has political consequences. Each social or urban problem can be addressed, even solved, *in itself, within its own 'sphere'*; policies for women, for black people, for 'development', for protecting the ecosystem, for better housing and transport, for more inclusive public spaces and so on can be devised and implemented without linking them to the totality of oppressive relations and to struggles against them. This fits with the bourgeois political method of treating each problem one at a time with a specific policy, since to link it to other problems and oppression would risk excessive politicisation (Wright Mills, 1967; Habermas, 1995). This fragmentation of policy results in endless failures.

\* Critical economic geographers wish to develop policies to overcome weak growth in particular territories, unemployment and poor wages and conditions. They propose 'better capitalism' of a neo-Keynesian kind: stronger innovation and productivity growth, higher skills and better wages, secured through stronger non-market interactions and forms of coordination; regional clusters are a favourite form of this approach (Storper, 1998). This approach rests on, and seeks to build, cooperation and consensus between capital and labour (Cooke and Morgan, 1998). But this ignores the exploitation of labour, the social divisions, the tendencies to over-accumulation and uneven development, and the despoliation of nature within every form of capitalism, and the instabilities and territorial economic crises that these give rise to. A Marxist approach, by contrast, highlights these failures and instabilities, and seeks to understand how struggles of labour against capital, rather than collaboration, can address them.

\* A prominent strand of human geography in recent years has been a view of power as 'power to' rather than 'power over', horizontal and democratic capacity rather than vertical oppression and exploitation (Allan, 2003; Amin and Thrift, 2002). But our account of Marxist geography shows the centrality of the power of capital over labour, without which capital and capitalism would not *exist*, and the internally-related power of men over women and power of 'core' over racialised groups. The theorists of 'power to' hugely exaggerate the ability of the working class to achieve progress through horizontal collaborations (social capital, non-class community) without the need to confront capital, gender and 'racial' power (Das, 2006b).

\* The rejection of 'power over' in some accounts draws on Foucault's theory of power-knowledge, in which there is no subject or imposer of power, and in which power is diffuse, multidirectional and internalised ('governability'). Foucault's approach deliberately avoids relating power-knowledge to the main patterns of material life, and hence to class, gender and racism. It therefore, again, avoids politics which confront these forms of power (Sayer, 2012). And indeed, the neglect of everyday socio-economic life means that there are no material bases, resources or milieu for the working class to resist power. Any putative 'nodes of resistance' are therefore fated to remain merely nodes, fighting their battles in the realm of discourse and rhetoric alone (Teivainen, 2016).

\* A related but distinct strand of human geography seeks to create utopian counter-spaces in which cooperative collective life is built, avoiding oppressive capitalist social relations. This can include households, urban blocks, rural communes or even whole localities such as Transition Towns and slow-food towns (Gibson-Graham, 1996). Some authors frame these as examples of Foucault's heterotopias. These liberated spaces can provide an improved life for the participants, and can point discursively to non-capitalist futures. But they cannot and do not insulate themselves from their capitalist surroundings, from the law of value, which is essentially global (Amin, 2010); they are consequently highly unstable (Harvey, 2000; Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011; Sharzer, 2012). Their gestures towards a liberated future

contain no strategy for the majority of the working class collectively to confront capitalist, gendered and racial power.

We need to defend the space for Marxist geographical knowledge: one that places the geography of accumulation and class struggle at the center, maps accumulation by exploitation and accumulation by dispossession, explains the mechanisms of imperialism, rising authoritarianism and emergence of right-wing politics, ecological destruction, and oppressions based on gender, race and other ‘non-class’ relations, all within a dialectical-totalising logic of accumulation and its politics and discourses.

The contributors to this issue seek not merely to critique non-Marxist methods but also, more positively, to develop Marxist analyses of concrete social-geographical processes and problems, and to suggest socialist, anti-capitalist forms of struggle to address these problems.

### **Introduction to the papers**

This issue of *Human Geography* originates in a session on Marxist geography which we organised at the 2015 AAG conference in Chicago. Four of the papers in this issue were presented there (McCusker, Bridi, Cox, Beitel). Unfortunately, for reasons of time some other presenters were unable to write up their presentations for this issue. Three other papers have therefore been added (Roy, Shrimali, Eisenschitz).

#### *Topics*

The concrete subject matter of the papers range across a number of fields. **The relations between capital and nature** are discussed in Robert Bridi’s paper on biotechnology in Canada, Ritika Shrimali’s investigation of contract farming in India, and Brent McCusker’s paper on rural livelihood strategies in Malawi. **Large-scale capitalist production** is studied in Kevin Cox’s history of the mining industry in South Africa and in Aram Eisenschitz’s exploration of what by some reckonings is now the largest industry in the world, tourism. The latter paper also investigates the social-spatial construction of **consumption** in the industry. Despite the growing role of large capital in the Majority World, **small-scale and family production** remains important, albeit often under the sway of large capital. Small scale agricultural production is studied in the papers by McCusker and Shrimali, while Anurupa Roy investigates the livelihoods of canal-side dwellers, both wage earners and petty commodity producers, in Kolkata subjected to forced relocation. **Housing in large cities** is the subject of two papers, which look at contrasted though linked ‘ends’ of the housing market: Karl Beitel presents a theorisation of the inexorable growth of house prices in ‘world cities’, while Roy’s paper is concerned with evictions from self-build housing and relocations to capitalist-built apartments.

#### *Theoretical themes*

The papers develop some of the theoretical themes of Marxist geography outlined above. All the papers approach their subjects as part of the capitalist totality, analysing **internal relations and their contradictions rather than external relations** between apparently separate social processes. Three papers examine this dialectical approach explicitly. McCusker argues that livelihood strategies and organisation of land uses in the Majority World, which are typically treated separately in the academic literature, are internally related; each constructs the other, and neither can be understood separately from the other. Moreover,

he shows that the material and discursive aspects of household strategies need to be considered as a differentiated unity rather than taking place in distinct economic/political/cultural spheres. Cox argues that in the history of mining in South Africa class, race and gender cannot be understood as three separate oppressions; rather, the particular class relations in mining developed by the employers and the state integrally involved the use, perpetuation and reinforcement of gender difference and the invention and material creation of racial difference. Thus struggle against racial and gender oppression were necessarily also class struggles. Eisenschitz shows how apparently disparate problems of tourism are in fact all results of tourist capital's strategy under neoliberalism.

This conception of internal relations is found, too, in the three papers which concern the **relation between society and nature**: this is seen as internal rather than an external relation between two distinct systems. Thus Bridi shows how the production of new bio-technologies is an internal moment of capital accumulation. He also shows how these new technologies, as part of nature, internalise the dynamics of capital accumulation, including its tendency towards decline in the rate of profit. McCusker shows how the uses of land, climate and flora by peasants in Malawi are essential moments within their livelihood strategies, and how flora are then transformed by these strategies. Shrimali shows how agricultural land in India is shaped by accumulation of agribusiness capital. Cox shows how the geology of South Africa had crucial impacts on the labour strategies used by mining capital.

Several of the papers consider **discourse in its internal relations with material social relations**, leading to a critique of postmodern approaches. Roy critiques Foucault's theory of power, in particular for its abstraction from material processes and material life. She argues that this renders the approach incapable of theorising the relations between the poor on the one hand and capital and the state on the other. Cox critiques the view of representation and discourse common in critical human geography, where it is detached from materiality. As we noted above, McCusker insists that the discursive aspect of social relations cannot be understood in abstraction from their material form.

**Class** in the Marxist sense is central to the papers in this issue. Cox shows how capital both organised its supply and reproduction of labour power and exerted discipline over the labour process in the South African mining industry. Eisenschitz shows how tourist capital has strategically created and used supplies of low-wage labour power across the globe, both using and helping to constitute the class relations of neoliberalism. He also shows how tourism of medium and low income people in the rich countries is offered as a compensation for their stagnant or declining wages and living standards, promising a week or two of 'luxury' and status; he interprets this as an important part of the class relations in those countries. Shrimali shows that under certain conditions capital is 'happy' with accumulation *without* dispossession as opposed to what Harvey (2003) calls accumulation *by* dispossession. Such accumulation happens in a structure of relations in which multiple class agents function: big companies (e.g. Pepsi) and their agents; commercial farmers, including capitalist farmers; and farm labour, including vulnerable rural migrants and women. Shrimali, like Bridi, shows that class relations underlying accumulation are mediated and enabled by the state. The state has made it possible for large agribusiness to exploit the labour of rural inhabitants, and to dominate small-scale farmers through contracts which on the surface treat the two parties as equals when in fact they are not and cannot be. Both Roy and Beitel explore the strong income segregations of housing in large cities. In these cases, bourgeois incomes, that is, those derived from surplus value, define the high-end housing market, while other housing

segments are constructed by the division of labour within the working class and the incomes and location-requirements arising from this.

The analysis of **target and surplus profits** is central to three papers in this issue. In neoclassical economics, profit rates above the rate of interest are impossible in the medium term since they are eroded by competition between firms; some branches of Keynesian economics, too, accept this equilibrating framework. But Bridi shows that biotechnology capital aims for surplus profits, that is, return on capital greater than the world average. This is achieved through the appropriation and internalisation of nature as discussed above, enabling the transformation of a unique part of nature into a unique commodity which can then be sold at above its value ('price of production'). Eisenschitz shows how the rapid expansion of tourism since the 1970s has aimed, and been able, to achieve higher than average profit rates in a situation where the latter had become severely depressed by the crisis of accumulation during the boom. He also shows the multiple contradictions that have arisen this strategy. Beitel argues that supply of urban housing cannot be understood in a neoclassical framework, and how policies based on this theory patently fail. One reason for this is the existence of land as a non-producible commodity; this gives rise to ground rent which is a deduction from *surplus* profits earned by capital using the land, and to land price which has key effects on the dynamics of building and property capital. A second reason is that property companies do not build when marginal revenue equals marginal cost, as neo-classical economics predicts; rather, they wait until prices rise sufficiently for them to reap at least the normal or average rate of profit in the sector. A third reason is the housing market in large cities is not a single market but is strongly segmented by purchaser income. On these premises, Beitel develops an original model of house building in large cities, and shows that increased building, far from causing prices to fall, usually causes them to rise.

The theoretical issues mentioned so far – internal relations, society-nature, class, profit rates – all enter into and are merged in analyses of **how capital accumulation both uses space and transforms it**. Cox shows how mining capital used and responded to the geology of South African in locating and designing its mines, how this linked to its particular needs for labour power, and how capital constructed the spaces of reproduction of this labour power; geography of both production and reproduction within South Africa and beyond is therefore crucial to his history. Eisenschitz's account of the growth of the tourist industry is equally rich in geography. The production of tourist services is located in places where wage levels are low or where immigrant workers can be drawn in, the latter often in conditions of virtual slavery. Much of the tourism industry uses the 'heritage' and exoticism of places to appeal to distant tourists, or constructs the 'exclusivity' of the tourist resort *sui generis* by capital investment. The spatial enclosure of tourist sites by capital minimises leakage of income, creating high ground rents. But this produces ever-more homogeneous sites, which fail to offer anything special and intensifying competition. Moreover, in doing so tourism negatively affects heritage, the social and economic life of the local population, and the ecology of the area (water, vegetation). These contradictions have given rise to resistance from local people. Shrimali shows that agribusiness has made an effective use of space. It invests a huge amount of time to convince farmers scattered over a large geographical area to come together to create a geographically circumscribed farmer-pool, which behaves as if it is one large landholding producing the contracted agri-raw materials, and such a concentration of investment makes use of labour from a large number of surrounding and far-off villages to work on the land to produce the commodities demanded by the companies. Lastly, both Beitel and Roy explore how housing investment occurs across the territory of large cities: the combined and uneven development of housing in different income segments, how this creates

differentiated land prices, and the impact of the latter on the dynamics of housing development. The geography of urban land and its nature as fictitious capital are thus central to their accounts.

The final Marxist theme developed in these papers is highly contradictory internal relations between **capital accumulation, class struggle and the state**. Bridi discusses the role of the nation state in the privatisation of nature. He shows that biotechnology capital depends on the state for support, but also that there is substantial resistance from Canadian civil society – in Marxist terms the working class– expressed through the parliamentary-democratic state. Cox shows the crucial role of the nation state in the development of mining, particularly in the complete restructuring of the reproduction of labour power through the state imposition of the apartheid system. But this role of the state in time faced a revolutionary challenge from the black population. Eisenschitz shows how tourism capital both seeks to avoid regulation by the state (labour, ecology, service quality) while depending strongly on the state to organise land and property development and provide infrastructures. Roy's and Beitel's accounts of large-city housing development both involve important roles for the state in fostering investment. These roles arise from the fact that land is a commodity but a *fictitious* commodity, where each piece of land is unique, thus requiring state intervention to deal with fragmented land ownership. In Cox's, Roy's and Eisenschitz's accounts, the state carries out systematic violence against sections of the working class. Beitel's paper explores another aspect of Marxist state theory, namely the weakness of the state in achieving social democratic ('just') objectives, in this case affordable housing: the attempts of the local state to do so are negated by the dynamics of property capital, which are neither understood nor controlled by the state. Overall, then, we find that the state is neither a neutral arbiter, a functionalist fix, a purely discursive power, nor a tool of capital. These papers show, rather, that the state is embedded in contradictions of capital accumulation and in struggles of the exploited and oppressed.

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