

Marxism and Geopolitics¹

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Alejandro Colás, Birkbeck College

The relationship between Marxism and Geopolitics is a complex one. Mainly because of the historical alignment of the latter with far-right and imperialist politics, and also due to the analytical emphasis of the former upon temporal processes characteristic of capitalist modernity. (As Edward Soja once famously said, 'Marxism doesn't do space well'). And yet the apparent 'return of geopolitics' to world affairs prompts several questions around the nature of contemporary imperialism; the relationship between war, violence and profit; the tensions between so-called globalisation and territory where Marxism – in its broadest acceptance – arguably has very important things to say. By the same token, these very processes raise important challenges for a historical materialist reading of international relations – particularly in relation to how such an approach might differ from realist interpretations.

I propose in this exploratory paper to address several aspects of the conjugation between Marxism and geopolitics. After a brief survey of the historical background to this relationship, I discuss three levels of abstraction where the marriage between Marxism and geopolitics can be rendered analytically fruitful. The question here is really: what can Marxism bring to contemporary reinvigorations of geopolitics? Finally, I try to illustrate these possible contributions with reference to what is perhaps the most obvious recent example of geopolitical drivers in world politics: the war over Iraq since 2003.

Prelude: the Forgotten History of Marxist Geopolitics

'Geopolitics' understood broadly as the study of geographical determinants in international politics sits uneasily with the materialist conception of history. Whereas classical geopolitics gives the state an existential, biological property - like other natural organisms characterised by growth, decline and extinction – the Marxist tradition understands the modern territorial state as an historical product of specific combination of social relations and modes of surplus appropriation. The fetishisation of territorial space (*Raum*) by classical geopolitics, with its focus on the *Bodenbedingtheit* (territorial determination) of politics, is countered by historical materialism with a dialectical conception of territorial space as a changing *product* of socio-economic and political antagonism among and between classes.²

Yet like all legal-political superstructures, the modern territorial state is for most Marxists a concrete abstraction: it exists as a powerful tool of class rule, both

¹ This paper draws on a shorter, polemical piece co-authored with Gonzalo Pozo-Martin to appear in a forthcoming round-table discussion of the journal *Geopolitics*. I am however solely responsible for the content of the present paper.

² For Haushofer, Geopolitics constitutes, 'die wissenschaftlich erfaßbaren, erdbestimmten und bodengewachsenen Züge des politischen Lebens, wie sie sich in Ablauf des geschichtlichen Geschehens erprobt haben' and 'die Wissenschaft von der politischen Lebensform im natürlichen Lebensraum, die sie in ihrer Erdgebundenheit und ihrer Bedingtheit durch geschichtliche Bewegungen zu erfassen sucht.' Karl Haushofer, Eric Obst, Hermann Lautenschach, Otto Maul, *Bausteine zur Geopolitik* (Berlin: Kurt Vorwinckel Verlag, 1928), p.28. The classic Marxist statement on geographical space is Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

domestically and internationally, and is as such conditioned by environmental factors, including geographical location. I leave aside here relevant but separate questions surrounding Marxist notions of humanity's 'metabolic exchange with nature', to focus exclusively upon the Marxist conceptions of territorial space and their role in international affairs. Studies by Mark Bassin and David Thomas Murphy have recovered an often forgotten history of Marxist engagement with geopolitics and political geography during its inter-war heyday in Weimar Germany.³ A number of lesser-known Social-Democratic intellectuals, including George Engel Bert Graf, James Francis Horrabin and Alexander Radó – penned various texts which explicitly sought to salvage the 'objective' and 'scientific' dimensions of *Geopolitik* as developed by Haushofer and his colleagues at the time, and inject it with a historical materialist content. For Graf in particular, Marx's 'overemphasis' on social structures to the detriment of natural determinants required correction by bringing geography back into the 'otherwise incomplete structure of historical materialism'.⁴ This essentially entailed adopting many of the classical geopolitical concerns over natural limits to social development, demographic fluctuations, climatic determinations of socio-economic structures and the concomitant international scramble for scarce resources, giving them a social-democratic twist, practically aimed at 'socialist' exploitation of Africa, a benevolent Franco-German hegemony of Europe and domestically, to a utilitarian policy of population control.⁵ Graf was unapologetic about interpreting the project and policy of *Geopolitik* as a tool for social-democratic advancement: 'It is precisely the proletariat as a rising class that has an interest in geopolitical thought and geopolitical education ... because the rise of a class takes its course to political power through conquest. And political power will always be faced with the resolution of geopolitical problems. An education for democracy must, therefore, also be an education to geopolitical thought.'⁶

Such (mis?)appropriations of geopolitical thinking for socialist ends prompted in 1929 one of the most robust statements on Marxism and geopolitics by Karl Wittfogel, in successive issues of the German communist journal *Unter Dem Banner des Marxismus*.⁷ The first sections of this extended essay involve a critical overview of various geopolitical authors, while the latter parts engage with the more 'historicist' Marxism of Lukács and Korsch. Wittfogel charts a path for a Marxist geography that steers clear of both the positivist naturalism of the former and the promethean voluntarism of the latter, insisting that '[t]he natural and social sides of the process of labor are not rigidly separated. The parallel interpretation of natural and social traits, as between the powers and relations of production, shows that the boundaries in and between nature and society are fluid and shifting. But clear differences are not thereby abolished.'⁸ The net result of Wittfogel's polemic is a complete rejection of *Geopolitik* in any of its variants and a return to an orthodox historical-materialist conception of relationship between society and nature where

³ Mark Bassin, 'Nature, Geopolitics and Marxism: Ecological Contestations in Weimar Germany', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 21, No.2, 1996, pp.315-341. David Thomas Murphy, *The Heroic Earth: Geopolitical Thought in Weimar Germany 1918-1933* (Kent: OH and London: Kent State University Press, 1997).

⁴ Bassin, 'Nature, Geopolitics and Marxism', p.324

⁵ Murphy, *The Heroic Earth*, p. 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.70.

⁷ Karl A. Wittfogel, 'Geopolitics, Geographical Materialism and Marxism' (trans., G.L.Ulmen) *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography*, Vol. 17, No.1, 1985., pp.21-72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.46

political forms are conditioned fundamentally by the social relations of production: 'The geographical factors, whatever their character, do not directly influence but rather mediate the political sphere of life; the "primary and given facts of nature" (Graf) demonstrate their significance either as general natural conditions underlying or as productive powers in the process of production. Even so, their influence is not direct. The social order which grows out of the peculiarity of the respective processes of production is the second connecting link through which and only through which the influences of the sphere of nature effect the mode and development of political life.'⁹

Marxism and Geopolitics Today

The purpose of the preceding digression into interwar German *Geopolitik* is to underline how much of the problematic surrounding Marxism and geopolitics survives today. Plainly the intervening historical experience has modified both the context and content of geopolitical theorisation and practice – yet, as I'll try to suggest below, the tension between the 'social' and the 'natural' continues to permeate contemporary discussions of geopolitics. Over the past twenty years, political geography has witnessed extremely fertile efforts at rescuing geopolitics as a form of respectable scholarship (and thus, to remove it from the corridors of power or popular commentary). These attempts to develop 'a geographer's geopolitics' have resulted in a body of work which aims at revising the discipline's earliest canons and practitioners, concentrating on the close links between their thought and political power.¹⁰ As a result, geopolitics has been stood on its feet. Once a set of 'scientific' theories concerned with the geographical laws underpinning power-politics, today it acts as a kind of textual analysis, deconstructing the different ways in which power and space are imagined and represented. However illuminating and engaging, this textual turn tends to foreclose (explicitly or implicitly) any analysis of space as a social construction conditioned by relations of socio-economic power, and thus, tends to limit itself to narrative and discursive process which invest policy with legitimacy and meaning. For this reason, 'critical geopolitics' is neither sufficiently critical nor explanatory, and falls short of exhausting the potential of geopolitics. It remains unable to illuminate the role of space in international politics at a level beyond the merely discursive.

I'd like now to make a case for a distinctively Marxist conception of geopolitics, arguing for a substantive understanding of the category that privileges territorial space as a pivotal lever of change in the international system. On such a view, territoriality is first and foremost a social process, constantly drawn and redrawn by the production, circulation and accumulation of value, as well as by the relations of power accompanying the global reproduction of capitalism. A Marxist geopolitics, in essence, begins by analysing the capitalist valorisation of territory and ends by explaining its international repercussions. Far from overlooking them, such an approach insists on the key role played by geopolitical concepts, narratives and codes, which help to conjugate the economic interests of capital and the political aims of state managers at the level of (foreign-) policy.

⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰ See especially Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: the Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Brevity imposes a number of important limits, which it is necessary to state at the outset. Firstly, the focus in this paper is on the role of space at an international scale (although important developments have of course been made in the analysis of urban or regional geography). Secondly, the argument is limited to the geopolitics of contemporary capitalism. Many in this room have considered the dynamics and structure of different historical 'geopolitical orders' and although non-capitalists 'foreign relations' are obviously pertinent to discussions of Marxism and geopolitics, I shall ignore them here. Finally, I don't seek to formulate a geopolitics which, Marxist or otherwise, can address *all* aspects of international politics. The focus here is on an understanding of geopolitics as a specific link between territoriality and power in international relations – one where the dynamics of global capitalism are central to the mobilisation of geopolitics as an expression of global power.

The greatest challenge for any conception of geopolitics today (Marxist or not) involves reconciling the fundamentally temporal dynamics of global capitalism with the reality of a world politically fragmented into two-hundred odd sovereign territorial states. The most persuasive response to this challenge in my view comes through David Harvey's conception of 'spatial fixes' as the inherent (if temporary) geographical resolution of capitalist crises. It is now clear from Harvey's work, and that of his associates, that the temporal logic of capital accumulation has historically been accompanied by constant and unstable reconfigurations of social space on various geographical scales. In its modern capitalist modality, it is the sovereign territorial state that principally mediates capital's need to simultaneously circulate across space (local, regional, international) yet constantly realise its value in tangible physical forms (money, property, machinery) and in named locations (factories, offices, farms, call centres). Thus, on an international plane, the conception, production and organisation of space is not simply a 'discursive practice' contrived by 'intellectuals of statecraft' (important as this often is). Nor can a historical materialist account have any truck with the organicist, naturalised and cyclical conceptions of socio-political space propagated by classical geopolitics. This broad tradition makes a tapestry of 'scientific' theories in which physical geography is linked to territorial space through different conceptions of power, expansion, rivalry and natural limits that see states as struggling for survival in a world with finite space, reifying territory in ways that are radically antithetical to the dynamic, dialectical conceptions of the state issuing from historical-geographical materialism. Classical geopolitics was one of the ideological products of the 'age of empire', but has evolved through time and survived into the 'age of globalisation', with figures such as Zbigniew Brzezinski or Aleksandr Dugin, and with them, a host of foreign-policy journals and websites advocating 'the return of geopolitics' as some kind of inevitable and recurrent feature of international power-politics. With 'critical geopolitics', Marxism rejects such analyses as hopelessly essentialist, and because they continue to invest territory with timeless, organic attributes which do not stand up to any critical scrutiny. But *contra* 'critical geopolitics', a Marxist geopolitics emphasises specific combinations of uniquely temporal imperatives that drive capital to expand across the world, constantly refashioning existing spatial dispensations of power, with the geographical requirement of realising, accounting and reinvesting that value-in-motion through a relatively productive workforce, situated in a territory with suitable transport and

communication infrastructure, and in legal setting that regulates and guarantees property rights - what Harvey calls 'social infrastructure'.¹¹

Drawing on the work of the late Giovanni Arrighi, Harvey has (re)labelled such imperatives as the 'capitalist' and 'territorial' and logics of power, though he rightly insists that these be dialectically applied in our understanding of contemporary capitalist imperialism. Whilst taking his basic recommendations on board, I wish nonetheless to push Harvey's argument further and insist that in an inter-state system where capitalism is the dominant form of social reproduction, territory acquires a value that transcends the neat distinction between capitalist and territorial logics of power.¹² This capitalist valorisation of territory plays itself out at different levels of abstraction, and is deployed in diverse ways by different capitalist states in various spatio-temporal contexts.

At the most abstract, structural level, operating in its *longue durée*, capitalism integrates distant locations into a world market where value is produced, circulated and accumulated through the mediation of sovereign territorial states. Here the value of territory lies in the sovereign state's ability to provide the 'social infrastructure' necessary for the expanded reproduction of capital. Although always uneven and unequal, the geographical distribution of capital and labour is at this level driven by the economic imperatives of the capitalist market, with its accompanying mechanisms of private contract and open competition. State agencies certainly play an instrumental role in facilitating and regulating such exchanges, often using political-diplomatic, cultural and geo-strategic levers to the advantage of their own nation's capital. But in a post-colonial world in particular, the production of space manifests itself fundamentally through the capitalist market and as the intensification of accumulation *within* existing sovereign territorial states.

As I have argued elsewhere, one of the distinguishing features of properly capitalist imperialism had been an attempt to organise global political space through 'open doors and closed frontiers' (only really successfully in the aftermath of World War II).¹³ 'Classical' European colonialism transplanted agrarian capitalism to many parts of the world as settlers extended the frontier of imperial rule, subjecting local populations to 'internal colonialism' through dispossession, enslavement and legalised racism. But they rarely achieved 'closure' of the frontier. It was industrial capitalism, with its reliance on the mobility of factors of production, alienable land, formally free wage labour and complex divisions of labour which paradoxically

¹¹ These insights are an integral part of Harvey's critical (re)reading of Marx's *Capital*, which he has developed over three decades and which find their most complete exposition in *Limits to Capital* (Verso: London, 2007) and in the collection of essays *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹² Harvey talks about the two logics of power as part of his analysis of imperialism, in particular in *The New Imperialism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2003). The implications of his analysis are discussed at some length in G. Pozo-Martin, 'A Tougher Gordian Knot: Globalisation, Imperialism and the Problem of the State', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 19/2 (2006), pp. 223-42; see also 'Autonomous or Materialist Geopolitics', *Cambridge Review of International Relations*, 20/4 (2007), pp. 551-63.

¹³ A. Colás 'Open Doors and Closed Frontiers: The Limits of American Empire' *European Journal of International Relations*, 14, 4: 619-43, December 2008.

affirmed the political authority of the territorially-bounded state. As Robert Sack reminds us

[t]he expansion and intensification of capitalism made the modern territorial effects of conceptually empty space and impersonal bureaucracy even more of an integral part of the geographical environment [...] Heightened geographical mobility and continuous commodification of place makes the public-economic meaning of space more and more a metrical system of locations and distances to which events are contingently connected. Within this context, political territories continue to be convenient molds for transient labour and capital. They are molds which can be conceptually emptied and filled, and these hierarchies of territoriality defined communities reinforce impersonal relations (Sack, 1986: 154-55).

Because the spatial logic of industrial capitalism tended toward the ‘molding’ or ‘fixing’ of political authority within a closed, bounded territory, the modern state increasingly became the depository of such power. Consequently, the ‘new imperialism’ of the late nineteenth century was characterised not just by the export of capital to the colonies, but also by its import of the territorially exclusive state as the dominant form of rule.

The history of this world-historical transformation in the organisation of political space is of course far more complex and differentiated than can be conveyed here. But two points emerge which are germane to our discussion of Marxism and geopolitics. The first challenges the merely discursive or narrative conceptions of spatial representation issuing from ‘critical geopolitics’. Capitalist social relations generate what Lefebvre labelled ‘abstract space’ where ‘The ground, the underground, the air, and even light enter into both the productive forces and the product.’¹⁴ This commodification of space in turn relies on surveying, calculating, delimiting and mapping spaces in order to render them alienable. Geopolitics is no exception here as the very ‘conditions of possibility’ for ordering or mastering space through discourses and collective imaginaries are set through this accompanying production of abstract spaces.¹⁵ Secondly, and following on from this, the sovereign territorial state does not simply become a conduit of capitalist interests because of its functional role as a guarantor of ‘social infrastructure’, but also acts as a locus of class and other socio-political antagonisms. Here the national state emerges – for good or ill- as the principal spatial expression of a political ‘community of fate’, so that struggles for democracy –particularly, though not exclusively in the Third World - reinforce the

¹⁴ H. Lefebvre, ‘Space: Social Product and Use Value’ in S. Elden and N. Smith (eds) *State, Space, World: Selected Essays* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press), pp.185-195, p. 188.

¹⁵ Benjamin Orlove offers a fascinating illustration of how geographers of postcolonial Peru aimed in the latter half of the nineteenth, to reorder the new Republic along the lines of abstract space by measuring, delimiting, representing, penetrating, classifying and thereby controlling its territory and populations. Whereas colonial geography had relied on textual representations of space, with its attendant classification of peoples and places according to natural characteristics (places were either cold, dry or wet; Indians were peaceful or belligerent; mountains snow-capped, volcanic or ‘magnetic’), republican geography on the other hand deployed scientific conceptions of region, altitude and biology to construct the modern Peruvian national state. See Benjamin S. Orlove, ‘Putting Race in Its Place: Order in Colonial and Postcolonial Peruvian Geography’, *Social Research*, Vol. 60, No.2 (Summer 1993), pp. 301-336.

legitimacy of the sovereign state as the dominant form of political organisation across the world. The capitalist logic of 'flows' here merely reorders the imperial hierarchies of space along the famed 'pluriverse' of multiple, formally equal territorial jurisdictions.

Indeed, the past half a century has witnessed what Leo Panitch called the 'Canadianisation' of large parts of the advanced capitalist world, as US capital deepens its penetration of other market economies without thereby dissolving their territorial integrity (and in some cases – Japan, South Korea or the Federal Republic of Germany - actively shoring up their political sovereignty). In such scenarios it would indeed be more apposite to speak of the ascendancy of geoeconomics over geopolitics, as Smith and Cowen have recently done.¹⁶ However, as Panitch himself readily recognises, the forging of a post-war 'informal' American Empire was made possible only through the geopolitical contest of the Cold War. Without the internationalised socio-political antagonisms that fuelled the military confrontation between the capitalist West and its Soviet-aligned rivals, the consolidation of US hegemony through the globalisation of market relations would have been inconceivable. Contrary to conventional Realist readings of the 'Long Peace' as a geopolitical manifestation of a bipolar balancing, a historical materialist conception of Cold War geopolitics emphasises the class antagonisms that underpinned that military-strategic confrontation. The origins of both the First and Second Cold wars after all lie in the internationalisation of civil wars in Korea, southeast Asia, the Balkans and central America.

The collapse of the Soviet bloc brought to an end international communism's seven decades of challenges to global capitalism but its defeat was not matched with an accompanying strategic retreat by western powers. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has absorbed the bulk of the erstwhile Warsaw Pact and has extended its 'out of area' operations eastwards as far as Afghanistan. Newly-hatched revolutionary challenges to international capital in 'Bolivarian' Latin America have given a further impetus to territorial control of that continent by opposing political forces. Meanwhile, territorial conflicts rooted in fundamentally ideological antagonisms (in the Korean peninsula or across the Taiwan Straits, or in the unresolved post-colonial disputes over Palestine, Jammu-Kashmir and Western Sahara) signal what Rick Saull has called the 'uneven endings' of the Cold War.¹⁷

All this leads us to the second sense in which capitalism constructs geopolitical spaces: through the process of class agency. In all these historical instances (during and after the Cold War), powerful capitalist interests valorise these territories not just because of the untapped sources of profit at stake, but also because socio-political upheaval, instability and more recently, 'failed states' are generally not conducive to expanded capitalist reproduction. Capitalist geopolitics privileges 'stability' as a source of world order in ways that are arguably unique. Unlike tributary or feudal societies the expanded reproduction of capital is not structurally tied to constant violence and warfare, but rather to forms of rule that guarantee the class privileges of existing elites by protecting private property relations, allowing capitalist markets to

¹⁶ D. Cowen and N. Smith, 'After Geopolitics? From the Geopolitical Social to Geoeconomics', *Antipode*, 41, 1 (2009): 22-48.

¹⁷ R. Saull, *The Cold War and After* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

flourish and undermining radical political threats to the prevailing order. Establishing an international political order favourable to such class interests requires ruling elites to think and act geopolitically – developing political strategies to secure privileged access to distinct territories through a range of possible mechanisms.

One common strategy is to exploit the legacy of an imperial past to build diplomatic ‘special relationships’ with post-colonial elites. France continues to approach much of francophone Africa as its *chasse gardée*, nurturing strategic alliances with former colonies chiefly by way of accessing markets, particularly in the lucrative trade in arms and mineral resources. London and Washington have followed a similar logic in their relationship with Saudi Arabia and other conservative Gulf monarchies. (Indeed there seems to be a familiar pattern here with the scions of ruling classes – Jean-Christophe ‘Papamadi’ Mitterand, Mark ‘Wonga’ Thatcher and George W. Bush – let loose on their post-colonial playgrounds). Another approach is simply to engage in state subversion (‘regime change’) through overt or covert means by way of rewarding commercial or political alliances forged in the Miami, London, Paris and Texas. The continued embargo on Cuba can only be explained with reference to the convergence between the powerful (though increasingly unrepresentative) Cuban-American conservatives and their political-economic allies in Tallahassee, Miami, New York and Washington. In all these instances, a geopolitical premium is slapped onto what might otherwise be conventional market transactions, simply virtue of the privileged access to the levers of territorial power.

To claim, then, that conflict, violence and war over named territories are not integral to the expanded reproduction of capitalism, is not to deny that they are often its direct result: where the hidden hand of the market fails, the iron fist of military force becomes an attractive policy tool for ruling elites. The seminal studies by Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler on workings of the US ‘Weapon-dollar-Petro-dollar Coalition’ in the Middle East from 1966-91 serve as a stark reminder of the signal role played by the defence industry across many capitalist economies, and the profitability of war – or threat thereof – for some sectors of that economy.¹⁸ For Nitzan and Bichler, there was a strong correlation during that period between the militarisation of that region and the outbreak of what they label ‘energy conflicts’ which in turn generate higher oil prices. As Nitzan and Bichler readily admit, the interests of the ‘Arms-core’ and the ‘Petro-Core’ do not always converge, as the latter ‘would prefer the status quo of tension-without-war’ if their ‘financial performance is deemed satisfactory’.¹⁹ They do insist, however, that there is a direct connection between US foreign policy, Middle East conflict and the relative profitability of American arms and oil corporations.

Irrespective of the value of the data provided by Nitzan and Bichler, there are several assumptions in this kind of instrumentalist reading of the relationship between war and profit-making which need to be challenged. The first – one again, candidly acknowledged by the authors – is that the increasing commercialisation of weapon transfers in the 1980s compromised a simple reading of such trade as being determined exclusively by geo-strategic considerations. This tendency has arguably

¹⁸ Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, ‘Bringing Capital Accumulation Back In: the Weapon-dollar-Petro-dollar Coalition: Military Contractors, Oil Companies and Middle East “Energy Conflicts”’

Review of International Political Economy, Vol. 2, No.3, Summer 1995, pp.446-515.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

been intensified in the post-Cold War period with global arms flows following the logic of profit rather than flag. Secondly, there are some important empirical counterfactuals – the Arab-Israeli wars over Palestine are unrelated to oil; after signing peace with Israel, Egypt continues to be the second-largest recipient US aid in the region – which cannot be clearly explained on Niztan and Bichler’s account. But perhaps most important – and here a Marxist conception of geopolitics can take us beyond the ‘resource wars’ perspective – the structural source of surplus under capitalism (value) has only a contingent relation to war and violence. The spoils of war are certainly valorised by capitalist markets, but the latter do not in any structural sense rely on a ‘permanent war economy’ or a constant re-territorialisation in ways that non-capitalist societies have historically done. In this respect, geopolitical strategising by capitalist elites briefly alluded to above should be seen primarily as context-specific, agent-driven exercises by distinctive economic sectors or class fractions in defending their privileges.

The final, and most concrete expression of the capitalist valorisation of territory concerns ground-rent and constant capital attached to what Marx called ‘particular portions of the earth and its appurtenances’. I have thus far used the phrase ‘valorisation of territory’ quite figuratively, to describe the realisation of profits in and through delimited territorial spaces. However, there are forms of generating value directly *from* ‘the earth and its appurtenances’, most obviously through capitalist agriculture and mining. For our purposes, however, it is the commodification of hydrocarbons –so central to the reproduction of industrial societies - that best exemplifies the ways in which the capitalist valorisation of landed property is inserted within wider configurations of geopolitical space (there are other examples, for instance, the scarcity of water and arable land which we cannot analyse here). Put very simply, their property as natural resources present only in the earth’s subsoil means that physical location plays an especially pronounced role in the valorisation of crude oil and natural gas. Plainly international commodity markets and other, socially constructed factors – levels of technological and infrastructural investment, prevailing legal and fiscal regimes and more recently, the effects of global climate change – intervene to determine the valorisation of oil and gas. In the case of gas in particular, pipelines remain the most cost-efficient method of international transmission, as a consequence making the construction of networks (investment in constant capital) and subsequent negotiation of tariff and price agreements (rent extraction) highly strategic exercises involving long-term, geographical commitments (‘spatio-temporal fixes’). Because these resources are subject to shortages, access to oil and gas cannot be left to market mechanisms alone; because they are territorially fixed, they create international rivalry. Once again, while the logic of capitalist accumulation does not *structurally* depend on violence and war, its historical evolution has continued to raise the stakes of territorial space as a currency of power in the international relations of capitalism. While its social agents struggle to ‘make the world safe for capitalism’, capitalism’s valorisation of space continues to make the world unsafe. As the American industrialist J. Paul Getty famously quipped, ‘the meek shall inherit the Earth, but not its mineral rights.’

An Illustration: Iraq since 2003

The reproduction of capitalist relations, then, finds its different kind of spatial expression in the three different levels of theoretical abstraction just outlined, each of which emphasises the role of territory as 'social infrastructure', as a domain of class politics, or as a source of contested value. The exact combination of these three expressions of capitalist geopolitical power cannot of course be determined in advance. Putting such categories of historical-geographical materialism to work can give content to a substantive, structural usage of the term 'geopolitics' whilst at the same time illuminating more historically-specific, contingent and agent-driven dimensions of contemporary international relations. In this final section of the paper I try to illustrate with very broad brush-strokes how such usage might be deployed more concretely.

For many on the international left, the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq was a war for oil - paradigmatic of the return to imperialism and geopolitical conflict under the G.W.Bush Administrations. The surface appeal of such an analysis is obvious enough: the globe's lone military superpower and leading capitalist economy, commanded by a cabal of American nationalists with close links to the oil industry unilaterally invaded and occupied Iraq in order to control the world's second largest known oil reserves, and extend Washington's military presence along the rimlands of its chief Eurasian rivals. But if we are to denaturalise 'imperialism' and 'geopolitics' and, more importantly explain the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, such a straightforward connection between territorial control and economic benefit needs to be critically scrutinised. If nothing else, the preceding conceptual discussion has suggested that terms such as 'control' cannot denote a direct appropriation of resources, nor can sectorial or class interest be read nearly into delivering specific economic or political outcomes. The mediating structures of capitalist geopolitics (states, markets, classes, law) are too entrenched to allow for such uncomplicated explanations.

Starting with the most abstract of the geopolitical determinants of capital outlined above, the invasion and occupation of Iraq was an attempt at founding a sort of polyarchy by the Tigris: a stable, unified, democratic and market-oriented ally in a critical region for Western interests. Washington used its overwhelming military force in Iraq with three chief aims: to defeat an enemy regime and replace it with an allied one; to restore state legitimacy and internal order; and to guarantee Iraq's territorial unity whilst promoting a liberal version of the free market in that country and its neighbours. The invasion and occupation of Iraq follows the wider logic of US foreign policy after the end of the Cold War, neatly summarised by Neil Smith in his outstanding book on American Empire: '[w]e can see the "war on terrorism" as something less, yet also more than, simply a war for oil. It is a war to fill the interstices of globalization. These interstices may be cast as entire nation-states (Afghanistan, Iraq) but also smaller regions (the occupied West bank) ... Viewed from the White House or Wall Street, the war against terrorism is a war to eliminate these interstices in an otherwise globalizing world in which the alchemy of "our values" has achieved a perfect fusion of freedom, democracy and capitalist profit.'²⁰

²⁰ N. Smith, *American Empire* Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 2003.

As applied to Iraq, this policy cut across all post-Cold War US Administrations. It was after all President Clinton who coined the term 'rogue states' and his Special Assistant Martin Indyk who declared the Administration's policy in 1993 was to 'establish clearly and unequivocally that the current regime in Iraq is a criminal regime, beyond the pale of international society and, in our judgement, irredeemable'.²¹ It was during Clinton's second term that the screw of the sanctions regime was turned on Iraq and the disciplining mechanism of air strikes was intensified (most notably during the 1998 'Operation Desert Fox'). It was under his Presidency (albeit initiated by Congress) that the Iraq Liberation Act was passed authorising the training of insurgent forces in Iraq. The list could go on - the point is merely to underline how the invasion and occupation of Iraq was not simply the result of an accidental 'imperial turn' in US foreign policy, but rather the expression of a longer-term anxiety over the preservation of a world order through the territorial sovereignty of multiple (preferably allied) states.

During and after the Second World War American planners were above all concerned with the socio-economic and political reconstruction of states falling within their sphere of influence, thereby seeking to stave off communist subversion. This basic formula – what, following Harvey, I have here called building 'social infrastructure' - was applied by Washington throughout the Cold War with varying degrees of success, but the collapse of the Soviet bloc after 1989 gave it an almost unassailable quality as vast swathes of the world's population previously isolated from global capitalism were by the start of the new century subsumed into the dynamics of the world market under the ideological mantle of a peculiarly Lockean liberalism. Under such post-Cold War conditions of absolute preponderance it is unsurprising that US officials sought to address the fresh challenges of 'failed' and 'rogue' states, and the attendant phenomenon of international terrorism by reverting to the strategy which fifty years earlier, during the previous moment of American postwar ascendancy, had transformed fascist Germany and Japan into stable and legitimate liberal-democratic polities. The then National Security Advisor Condolezza Rice made the parallels explicit between the two moments when the USA has re-created a world order: 'This is a period' she declared in 2002 'akin to 1945 to 1947, when American leadership expanded the number of free and democratic states – Japan and Germany among the great powers – to create a balance of power that favoured freedom.'²²

Generating a 'balance of power that favours freedom' is an aspiration that both realist and liberal analysts of American empire could readily address within their respective explanatory frameworks. What a specifically Marxist conception of geopolitics brings to the table is the combined emphasis on the second and third levels of abstraction identified above – which arguably point to the reasons why the Iraq war has proved to be such a strategic blunder for the USA and its allies. A class analysis of contemporary Iraqi politics is admittedly one of the biggest challenges for a Marxist account of this crisis. The most comprehensive sanctions regime in history led to a socio-cultural involution of Iraqi society and an accompanying re-invention, re-charging and re-articulation of various kinship, sectarian and regional networks along

²¹ Cited in D. Hiro *Neighbours, Not Friends: Iraq and Iran After the Gulf Wars* London: Routledge, 2001, p.70.

²² 'Remarks by the National Security Advisor Condolezza Rice on Terrorism and Foreign Policy', 29 April 2002, www.whitehouse.gov.

political lines.²³ The re-embedding of the Iraqi economy along such lines of patronage and informal networks in turn intensified the transnational ties between the various Iraqi populations and their neighbours (Shias looking toward Iran, Kurds toward their western allies and many non-Baathist Sunnis neighboring Arab states and beyond). Here the geopolitical component involved both transnational class alliances (between, for instance, Chalabi's exiled INC and neo-conservatives or Shia notables and their counterparts in Qom or Tehran) and the properly state-sponsored support for distinct social forces and political programmes within post-Saddam Iraq. The key point here is that, whether it be for the purpose of securing oil reserves or promoting polyarchy, named political groups and social forces acquire a geopolitical dimension in times of general crisis. Eschewing both primordialist or merely discursive conceptions of collective identity, a materialist geopolitics needs to factor in the power of such transnational social forces whilst rooting their emergence and dynamics in specific socio-economic and political contexts – what used to be known as 'social formations'.

The value of seeing both states and social forces as geopolitical agents becomes apparent when considering the most concrete valorisation of territory in contemporary Iraq, namely the political battles over the distribution of oil rents. One of the principal political aims of the Bush Administration in the aftermath of the invasion was to align Iraq's oil and gas legislation to international markets. The chief vehicle for this was to be the Draft Hydrocarbons Law, 'primarily concerned with attracting investment into Iraq's oil sector by defining responsibilities for the management of petroleum resources, including setting out licensing and contracting procedures.'²⁴ The problem for those wishing to 'control' Iraqi oil is that such legislation has been stalled in the face of deep party-political and regional rifts in the Iraqi parliament. To date international oil companies have signed agreements with two separate juridical entities in Iraq – the national government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government. The result is investor uncertainty and regional antagonism which may still resolve itself through a dismemberment of Iraq into two oil-rich states – Kurdistan in the north and a Shiia state in the south. Though the political-economy of this battle is being played out principally by domestic agents, the sources of the predicament clearly lie in Washington's fixation with regularising Iraq's hydrocarbon's regime in line with the world market. 'The first principal criticism of the Bush administration's approach', Sean Kane has succinctly suggested, 'is that the legislation that the United States prioritised – the hydrocarbon law – and the strategic objective that it had identified – revenue sharing – were mismatched.'²⁵

One of the guiding threads of this paper has been that this 'mismatch' at the very local level between metropolitan aspirations and realities one-the-spot (over oil legislation in this case) is a reflection of a broader tension in capitalist geopolitics between markets flows and state interests. This contradiction is not always or necessarily between two separate 'territorial' and 'capitalist' logics. As I've tried to indicate, there are various ways in which capitalist social relations valorise territory so as to give 'geopolitics' – or the geographical determination of international politics – greater analytical purchase than a mere narrative of spatial organisation or an

²³ F. Jabar and H. Dawod, *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East* (London: Saqi, 2002).

²⁴ Sean Kane, 'Iraq's Oil Politics: Where Agreement Might be Found', *Peaceworks*, No. 64 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.10.

expression of the anarchical structure of the states-system. Capitalism generates class relations – with their attendant political structures and social forces – that constantly (re)produce spatial forms of power. In the contemporary international system, as in the past, geopolitics involves socio-economic and political struggles over the delimitation, identity and content of diverse territories. Unlike preceding epochs, however, such struggles necessarily involve a historically-distinctive form of power, namely value.