

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #23

KEES VAN DER PIJL ON THE DEMISE OF LEFT-WING PARTIES IN EUROPE, EMPIRES AND THE CURRENT VALUE OF MARX

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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While scholars in International Relations are generally easily classified as belonging to one or other epistemic community, Kees van der Pijl, while clearly defending a leftist outlook on international politics, is more difficult to place – making him not only a controversial scholar, but for many students also an inspiring critical scholar. In this Talk, van der Pijl, amongst others, explains why left-wing parties in Europe have virtually disappeared, why empires cannot be analyzed as homogenous entities, and what the current value of Marx's approach analysis consists of.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge or principal debate in current IR? And what is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I think the biggest challenge to be to break with economism or the tendency to interpret everything in world politics in terms of the trap of returning to 'sacred truths', such as: 'Marx was right' or 'we should return to classical imperialism theories' ('they were true after all'). We had a twentieth century in which these 'truths' were acted on, and we have to accept that they were found wanting in key respects – so we must have new, synthetic, insights which cover the big gaps.

My own contribution lies in the thesis of how transnational capital and the associated class developed in the context of what I call the 'Lockean heartland' (while diffuse, typically occidental states with a clear 'neoliberal' agenda) versus the contender state as the larger structure of modernity, possibly now collapsing. In my *Making of an Atlantic Ruling Class: transnational Classes and IR*, and in *Global Rivalries from the Cold War to Iraq*, this has been worked out.

Another area is that of foreign relations as an underlying reality not just IR as inter-state. My project on *Modes of Foreign Relations and Political Economy*, of which the first came out last year, *Nomads, Empires, States*, elaborates on this to get a non-economistic, non-Eurocentric, non-modernistic, non-state-centric understanding of world politics. The second volume, on Myth and Religion, is almost done and investigates the underlying metaphysical world views of different civilizations and how they resonate today. Amongst others, it challenges the currently salient state-centric conception of IR, which has been aggressively marketed across the world, but is, as I argue, a recipe for ethnic cleansing and genocide.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

The people or ideas that influenced me most, are primarily French discussions on internationalization of capital (notably Christian Palloix, known for his ideas on '[unequal exchange](#)'); Habermas on ideology, the work of the structural Marxist [Nicos Poulantzas](#) on class, Frank Deppe on European integration, and [Gabriel Kolko](#) on the foreign policy of the U.S. (read one of his articles [here](#)).

In terms of valuable sources of new ideas, I have learnt a lot reading [Le Monde Diplomatique](#), the socialist [Monthly Review](#), and so forth.

I am furthermore much indebted to often brilliant students, and the general workshop climate brisling with theoretical debates (like the one between [Ernest Mandel](#) and the French Communist party on European Integration). My own work at some point turned out to be very close to that of [Stephen Gill](#) and Robert Cox although I was not so aware of that fact earlier. The later work of Ronen Palan on the Offshore World (read an article [here](#)) and the general climate at Sussex were also extremely important. However, the university also has a downside – both at Amsterdam, where I worked before, and at Sussex, the management of the university at some point sought to actively stifle and sour the mood because they had other plans, in which some research agenda's did, and others didn't, fit. This is the great curse of modern universities, the managerial anti-intellectualism (paradox!)

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

A critical mind-set, reading, nice fellow students, inspiring teachers, seeing that understanding the world requires a struggle to break with the glib-equations of the mainstream media and the (even blander) mainstream academia. Pluralism is the name of the game, not any deification or sectism.

Your approach to international politics has a classical geopolitical stance to it: you refer, for instance, to an Anglo-Saxon 'heartland'. How influential are geopolitics for the way you explain international relations?

Actually, the 'Lockean heartland' is a concept I use a lot applied to the modern era. But I only use it as a metaphor to describe the interaction between global social forces. Terminology, for me, is in itself not essential – I for example wish I had a more open, network-like term, when referring to the heartland, something like the French *l'espace Lockéen*, but not 'Lockean space', in English, simply doesn't work. The idea, however, is that of a transnational constellation that occupies the commanding heights of the global political economy, and there I do insist in importance.

You've written, amongst others, on the history of IR, and we seem to be in a period of transition. Are there any underlying dynamics in IR which can be considered to be stable and always there?

International relations as a discipline has had a long history of looking for these underlying constants, and not without danger, I must add. Take the Marxist class-struggle, the neoliberal invisible hand of the market, the Hobbesian idea of a prevailing national interest or the [Wallersteinian](#) world-system idea of long cycles. The only kind of exogenous and stable factors in international political history I have discovered, is that all communities must occupy some (social) space, protect it, and exchange (mates, goods etc), that is, interact. That's the only solid basis for theorizing on long periods of the history of politics, simply because it is also the dynamics that help people make sense of the world around them.

Your work has a strong preoccupation with analyzing empires and transnational ruling classes. Where is power located in the international system and what are its 'intentions'?

Power exists only in relations, so it is actually not located anywhere – it is rather like money in exchange, that is, it only plays out if it is part of active transactions or processes. But you do strike a point there: intentionality is my personal weakest link – the danger of conspiratorial approaches always lurks and looms. On the other hand, however, not recognizing that powerful groups plan their handling of key challenges is equally silly, so it is a, clearly difficult, balancing act.

You are an explicit left-wing thinker in international politics. Perhaps you can explain us where have the European left-wing political parties have gone?

Down the drain. Increasingly since the end of the Cold War, left-wing parties have unfortunately lacked a credible philosophy, like, for instance, economic Marxism in the 20th century.

In order to recover, left-wing parties will have to engage in an ecological, more elaborated humanistic understanding of social trends.

While I have to admit that I currently understand little of it, one of my future research themes has a lot to do with it. For now, I think the issue to include the role of the 'managerial cadre' in managing the globalised world. There is a group of people with a specific interest in how the system works, a class, which will further imprint its views on parties and political forms generally. How can we understand, influence, and 'govern' that powerful transnational class that depoliticizes the left? I have a hunch that the Internet will change things massively, but I'm still working on that.

Empires have always existed, both as bad, homogenizing invaders and as the center of knowledge spurring innovation. Is the current, American, empire worse than others?

Empires are a complex subject, especially the American one. It actually only exists to the degree that it is recognized as an empire – which it isn't. The U.S. hegemony (that we can speak of) is a highly dynamic and non-territorial central structure in the liberal heartland, which forms the core of the current configuration of international economy and world politics. In that sense, we're all dependent on the U.S. faring well – even the Chinese. But the U.S. also consists of a dangerous

monster, especially because of the as of yet unbroken power of its military-industrial-complex which has killed off (sometimes literally) any challenge to its positions ever since Eisenhower warned it had gone out of control (read his speech on the subject [here](#)).

As you've indicated earlier, you just published a book entitled *Nomads, Empires, States* in which you argue that IR scholars are reifying the state and thus contribute to a Euro-centric and a-historical discipline. But isn't the state, as argues Stephen Krasner in [Theory Talk #21](#), merely the less of all evils and the most feasible way of ordering the world in a way that rulers can be held responsible for the wellbeing (or the lack thereof) of their 'subjects'?

Talking about the state in terms of a necessary less of all evils, as realist scholars such as Stephen Krasner do, makes no sense; it is moral babble, and not scholarly analysis. The state is not the only form of governance historically, in fact, it only quite recently acquired the so characteristic monopoly on violence, and even now, that monopoly is being challenged 'from above', that is, by networks that exceed states in size, and 'from below', that is, by local actors. Some sort of public authority will always be around, but it has to be seen in its true context, in relation to society, class structures, ruling ideologies, and other formations, whether they be state or non-state in nature.

How would you explain the current economic crisis the international system is going through?

I would interpret the current economic slump as a crisis of the Lockean heartland, which is possibly entailing a demise of the West as the centre in the global political economy. Capitalism and the West as a dominant and exportable, imposable way of life will wither together, just as they have arisen in that specific combination; the big question is whether that process is now in progress. In any case, as recent history has shown, western capitalism with all its necessary ideological underpinnings cannot be put in a box and transported to, for instance, Afghanistan, Iraq or China.

What is, according to you, the direction in which the international political (and economic) system is headed?

More wars, and more anarchy I am afraid. While I am not a realist, I do acknowledge that the international system is currently configured as an anarchy, by its most important protagonists.

We will, furthermore, surely see widespread ecological disaster. But then there is a new generation, since ten or so years, which may rise to face the challenge. If Barack Obama is not part of it, then at least part of the Obama electorate belongs to it – people who are profoundly fed up with the current/waning order and the concrete living conditions it entails. But for me, an important part of this challenge is that we must fight for our universities to remain places where we can be formed as true world citizens and where we can be given some sophistication culturally and theoretically.

Last question. What is the current value of the work of Karl Marx?

The core of Marxism is that you historicize the present. So you always start with the concrete situation of today that you look at in terms of change and movement, with a footnote where you yourself and the people with whom you share an outlook or position, come into the equation. But the present as history, the notion that every day society moves in one direction and not in another, and that we can trace that back into the past and project trends into the future and act on it, is what Marx was about. Value theory, and a whole lot of other things are often less relevant today but can be seen as insights resulting from that key historicist position (and to that degree remain relevant). But the normative, economic position people take on Marx is deadly, as is any sectarian position, that (fill in any name – Marx, Trotsky, Mao...) saw it all. Useless and silly.

Kees van der Pijl is Professor of International Relations at the University of Sussex. He is known for his critical approach to international politics, and has published, amongst others, *Nomads, Empires, States* (London: Pluto, 2007); *Global Rivalries from the Cold War to Iraq* (London: Pluto, and New Delhi: Sage Vistaar, 2006); *Transnational Classes and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 1998); *Vordenker der Weltpolitik* (Opladen: Leske+Budrich, 1996); and *The Making of an Atlantic Ruling Class* (London: Verso, 1984).

Related links

- [Faculty profile at the University of Sussex](#)
- Read Van der Pijl's *A Survey of Global Political Economy* (2008) [here](#)
- Read Van der Pijl's whole book *The Making of an Atlantic Ruling Class* (2004 edition) online [here](#)