

# The Rules of Reproduction of Capitalism: A Historicist Critique

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## ***The Rules of Reproduction of Capitalism: A Historicist Critique***

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# The Rules of Reproduction of Capitalism: A Historicist Critique

*Samuel Knafo and Benno Teschke*

## **Abstract**

*Marxism has often been associated with two different legacies. The first rests on a strong exposition and critique of the logic of capitalism, which has been grounded in a systematic analysis of the laws of motion of capitalism as a system. The second legacy refers to a strong historicist perspective grounded in a conception of social relations and an emphasis on the centrality of power and social conflict to analyse history. In this article, we challenge the prominence of structural accounts of capitalism, which are inspired by the first of these legacies and argue for the need to radicalize the agent-centered and historicist contribution of Marx that derive from the second. Our claim is that Marxists operating within a structural framework systematically fall into economic readings of capitalism, which hinder the practice of historicisation Marxism was supposed to buttress. To make this argument, we show how this tension between these legacies has played out within Political Marxism (PM). We argue that both orientations – encapsulated in the simultaneous programmatic emphasis on historically specific social conflicts and determinate rules of reproduction that are logically deduced from definitive social property relations – co-existed already uneasily in Robert Brenner’s original contributions to the Transition Debate. We proceed by critically exploring the increasing reliance on a structural conception of the ‘rules of reproduction’ in later works of PM’s early proponents and by some of its contemporary followers. This, we argue, has led to the reification of capitalism and a growing divide between theoretical premises and historical explanation. In response, we seek to return to the early historicist innovation of PM and to recover and develop its commitment to a more contextualised and open-ended interpretation of social conflicts. Through this internal critique and re-formulation of PM, we wish to open a broader debate within Marxism on the need for a more agency-based account of capitalism, which builds more explicitly on the concept of social relations.*

## **Introduction**

Marxism has long been marked by two different legacies. The first rests on a strong exposition and critique of the logic of capitalism, which has been grounded in a systematic analysis of the laws of motion of capitalism conceived as a system. This structural critique has often led to an emphasis on the limited ability of capitalism to overcome its internal contradictions. The second legacy refers to a strong historicist perspective that derives from Marx’s Hegelian background and his own critique of the German philosopher’s trajectory.<sup>1</sup> This historicism is visible in the conception of social relations and an emphasis on the centrality of power and class struggle to analyse history. While most Marxists see themselves as heir to these two defining legacies of Marx, it is no secret that it has

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<sup>1</sup> This Hegelian legacy splits itself into two traditions, one emphasizing the historicist praxis-perspective inherent in Hegel and adopted by the early Marx, and one more logicistic strand, which uses ‘dialectics’ in order to justify a reading of the concept of capital as a self-unfolding category, which relegates history to mere illustration. The latter is exemplified in ‘systematic dialectics’ and other strands of value-form theory.

often been difficult to properly reconcile them. While this tension has generated fertile debates, it has also been systematically exploited by critics.

In this article, we challenge the prominence of structural accounts of capitalism inspired by the first of these legacies and argue for the need to radicalize the agent-centered and historicist contribution of Marx. Our claim is that Marxists operating within a structural framework systematically fall into economic readings of capitalism, which hinder the practice of historicisation Marxism was supposed to buttress. Structural accounts, we argue, have perpetuated a problematic market fetishism and underestimate social change under capitalism. More fundamentally, they constrain our ability to use historicisation *as a practice of theorization* which we see to be the distinctive feature of the radical historicism we wish to put forward.

This article focuses more specifically on how this tension has played out within Political Marxism (PM). Our choice here is motivated by our recognition of the innovative, iconoclastic, and seminal contribution of this approach to the historicist tradition, which we wish to reinvigorate. However, we contend that this project has been blunted by unresolved contradictions within the core premises of PM, which have fuelled a tendency among some Political Marxists to revert back to a problematic structuralism. We argue specifically that Robert Brenner's concept of 'rules of reproduction', which was deployed originally in the Brenner I Debate to dispel the prevailing idea that feudalism contained an innate tendency towards a transition to capitalism, suffered from an in-built structural framing that became more pronounced and visible in the Brenner II Debate.<sup>2</sup> This relapse into structuralism meant that capitalism itself became increasingly reified, especially in the later works of PM's early proponents and in some of their contemporary followers (Post, 2011; Chibber 2011), leading to a fetishized conception of capitalism that left little room for earlier concerns with historicism and method. What is conceptually rendered as an auto-generative logic of action grates with the historical tracking of capitalism (and feudalism) as a contested and concrete process. In short, we argue that the original articulation of PM advanced an interpretation of Marxism that remains suspended between an abstract notion of theory, encapsulated in a rigid definition of social property relations and their attendant rules of reproduction, and analytically deduced logics of development or non-development, and a strong historicist commitment to a more contextualised and open-ended interpretation of social conflicts and their non-deterministic resolutions. This dualism played itself out over time in the prioritisation of a structural reading of capitalism – a nomothetic base-line – which stood either un-reconciled to or disabled the objective of historical specification. Theory and history progressively inhabited two separate worlds, with two different registers, and drifted more and more apart.

In radicalizing the historicist agenda of Marxism through an internal critique and re-formulation of PM, we wish to open a broader debate within Marxism on the need for a more agency-based account of capitalism, which builds more explicitly on the concept of social relations. In short, we seek to open up space for rethinking capitalism as a historically open rather than a theoretically closed category. Coming to terms with social conflicts requires that we examine more carefully their role in constituting and re-constituting the dynamics of capitalism that we study without collapsing them back into rigid theoretical axioms. For this purpose, PM needs to recover and expand upon the historicist method developed, even if implicitly, in Brenner's and Ellen Wood's original contributions to the *Transition Debate*.

The article proceeds in five parts. We start by outlining Brenner's original historicist contribution to the *Transition Debate* and how it departed from structural accounts of the rise of

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<sup>2</sup> The idea to derive determinate and rational strategies of reproduction from specific sets of social property relations, which translate into patterns of development or non-development, was first suggested in the *Transition Debate* (Brenner 1985b, p. 213-15), and subsequently systematized in the concept of the rules of reproduction (Brenner, 1986). These 'rules' – often raised to the status of 'imperatives' - are repeatedly re-affirmed in Brenner's and Ellen Wood's later works as part of PM's basic premises (Brenner 1998, p. 24; 2001, p. 281; 2007, p. 58 ff.; Wood 2002, p. 55 ff.; Wood 2003, p. 9 ff). For early misgivings regarding these structural rules see Teschke and Lacher 2007.

capitalism. Step two identifies a central ambiguity in Brenner's approach, visible in the contradiction between a strict concept of capitalist rules of reproduction, which assigned determinate forms of agency and rationality to classes on both side of the capital-relation and posited a subsequent logic of development, and the simultaneous emphasis on the specificities of situated social conflicts. It proceeds by showing how this ambiguity was expressed over time in the adoption of a reified, de-historicised and de-politicised concept of capitalism: the notion of market-dependency. Step three suggests that this problem was already reflected in unresolved tensions in Brenner's early work on the transition to capitalism - an argument we establish by comparing Brenner's take on the transition to the more historicist account offered by George Comninel. We then turn towards two studies, which lean on the categories of market-dependency and rules of reproduction - respectively Charles Post's recent work on the rise of capitalism in the US and Brenner's and Glick's critique of Regulation Theory - to further explore and exemplify the dangers inherent in the structuralist rendition of the concept of capitalism. The final section concludes by setting out how an agency-centered - rather than rules-centered or capital-centric - re-articulation of PM reconnects theoretically and methodologically with the original historicist promise of the *Transition Debate* in order to renew the PM tradition outside the structuralist trap.

### ***1. The Historicist Breakthrough of Political Marxism***

It has been a firm belief among Marxists that the critique of capitalism must be a structural one, since the objective is often to identify the inherent and systemic contradictions of capitalism, which are held to exist in any capitalist society. This has been the anchor that traditionally motivated Marxists to continue approaching capitalism foremost from a structural perspective, abstracting from specific historical trajectories and the concrete role of social agents in shaping capitalist history. In this perspective, both are routinely seen as secondary, or at least, as associated with lower levels of abstraction. The primacy given to the idea of a structural capitalist logic implies that the history of capitalism is, in its essence, more or less the same wherever capitalism can be identified. Thus conceived, and this is central to the assumption that capitalism can be referred to as a system, capitalism entails a set of consequences which tend to be generated wherever it holds.

PM initially made its mark as a reaction against this form of analysis. Rejecting structural models of capitalism, which were based primarily on deductive analysis (Brenner, 1977), Brenner adopted a comparative historical approach that was based on exploiting differences within social trajectories that seemed at first similar in order to challenge our understanding of capitalism (Brenner, 1985). This early work on the transition to capitalism set out a rich historicism, which sought to ground a concrete understanding of the spatio-temporally specific origins and courses of capitalism. By contrasting the trajectories of Britain and France, Brenner was able to recast what was at stake in developing an account of the transition by focusing on the distinctive features, which had made Britain stand out with its agrarian and industrial revolutions. The task then, he argued, was to explain the sustained improvement in productivity that had come to characterise these revolutions in Britain.

This historicist strategy enabled Brenner to offer a much more concrete account of capitalism. The focus was no longer set on abstract market forces, but on the notion of contested and politically-constituted social property relations. This concept was meant to emphasise the institutional nature of social relations, in particular the legal and political dimensions of property. Brenner was specifically interested in the way social property relations had been redefined so as to make workers and producers dependent on the market. Needing means of subsistence, workers had to labor for capitalists under conditions which both limited their control over production and made them vulnerable to the demands of capitalist owners. The latter were themselves dependent on the

market for accessing means of production and thus in need of systematically improving productivity through constant re-investments and technological innovations in order to compete. The result was a distinctive dynamic – a logic of development – which would come to characterise capitalism, most notably visible in the Industrial Revolution that became its hallmark.

Brenner's initial attempt to break with traditional structuralist accounts was initially greeted with suspicion by Marxists who accused him of falling into a voluntarist conception on the transition that hindered the development of a 'scientific' account of history. The term PM was suggested by Guy Bois during the *Transition Debate* as a derogative label to denote that Brenner's concern with politics and agency precluded the identification of deeper laws of motion of either feudalism or capitalism. This methodological choice, Bois insisted, was a source of confusion, which led Brenner to empiricist conclusions. For class struggles, when studied on their own, are 'too complex and unpredictable' to lead 'to anything other than ideological short cuts', based on isolated political events (Bois, 1987: 110). Since the incorporation of politics and agency as central aspects of differential feudal histories would have to be based on the acceptance of arbitrary theoretical choices, Brenner could not provide a theory solidly grounded in systemic and deeper properties of modes of production, including the 'tendency of a fall in the rate of seigniorial levies'. Instead, Bois insisted on a structural abstraction to identify the key trends and contradictions at the level of the economic infrastructure of feudalism which could account for the transition to capitalism.<sup>3</sup> This critique essentially reproduced a classic understanding of the relationship of theory to history, as theory was held to constitute a superior mode of knowledge, generating an abstract and deductive model, which was said to help organise a messy and layered history through the identification of deep underlying and structuring trends.

By contrast, it was precisely the way in which Brenner, in his early interventions, had destabilized this relationship between theory and history that proved seminal for the development of a new approach. Indeed, the feature perceived as a weakness by Guy Bois (i.e. the historicism based on a commitment to the study of socio-political conflicts) was embraced explicitly by scholars who sought to build upon the legacy of Brenner's work (Wood, 1995; Comninel, 1987), *inter alia* by drawing out its implications for historicising the practices of polity-formation and geopolitics (Teschke, 2003; Lacher, 2006). The term PM was adopted to highlight the irreducibility of historically distinct class struggles in opposition to a more generic conception of class struggle as the passive manifestation of a deeper structural logic. This amounted to a rejection of deterministic and economistic approaches that pervade structural accounts of the transition. At the root of this new political approach to Historical Materialism, PM offered a radical questioning of the apparently universal features of capitalism - a social system which had too often been loosely generalised to all societies where markets seemed to play a significant role. Opposing this focus on markets, Political Marxists were keen to redefine capitalism on the basis of social relations, or more specifically social property relations. Their main point was that the secret of capitalism was a political one: it concerned the nature of power in capitalist social relations (Wood, 1995).

However, the path pioneered by Brenner and Wood would in turn create its own set of pitfalls. For the ability to ground concretely the analysis of capitalism in the study of social property relations gave incentives to the first generation of Political Marxists to stylize theoretically the implications of this historical work. Robert Brenner, in particular, formalised his conception of capitalism in the form of an ideal type (Brenner, 1986), which was in turn stereotyped in Wood's distinction between pre-capitalist markets as an opportunity and capitalist markets as an imperative (Wood, 1994). In time, the elaboration of a more substantial conception of capitalism with its inner logic was to become a structural impediment to the original historicist aspirations of PM.

## ***2. The Problem with Structural Approaches to Capitalism***

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<sup>3</sup> For a critical discussion of Bois' own account of the 'birth of the market', see Teschke 1997.

Formalising the theoretical implications of historical work is always a difficult task for historically minded scholars. There is an inherent tension in the desire to remain close to the historical material while extricating theoretical principles that can be projected beyond the specific case studied. Brenner often struggled to negotiate this difficult translation as he took his rich historical work on the transition as a means to peer into the nature of capitalism. The result was a gradual reification of capitalism as Brenner inflated key insights for explaining a transition in England and its outcomes, a historically specific process, into an essential process and features of capitalism itself. With this reifying move, a historical pattern came to be generalised as the core DNA of capitalist societies leading to three problematic consequences: the conceptual reification, de-historicisation, and de-politicisation of capitalism.

These three problems were products of the demands that structural frameworks place on scholars and which severely handicap one's ability to historicise. A structural model of capitalism can only be derived if all the key parameters are independent from concrete historical settings so that the logic can be translated to various contexts where we find different social institutions. This is the classic positivist trap. For taking a theory or a proposition that is useful in one context and for a specific purpose in order to turn it into a generalisation, as if it captures an essential logic that applies to multiple cases (Knafo 2010), leads to the standard bifurcation between an abstract conceptual definition, which is meant to ground the explanation, and case-specificities, which are then demoted to the status of accidental accretions, superficial appearances, or un-typical anomalies, rather than accepted positively as presences that defy the general abstraction. In this way, a contextualised observation is made to stand on its own, but only at the cost of severing the rich tension between theory and history (Teschke 2014).<sup>4</sup>

In Brenner's work, the result was first a conceptual reification which hindered historicisation. The attempt to anchor the rules of capitalist reproduction beyond any specific institutions led him to gradually substitute a non-context specific idea of market dependency for the actual study of social property relations.<sup>5</sup> As the concrete study of the social property relations with their institutions took a back seat, much of the work of contextualisation (i.e. to determine what type of society or context people are operating in) was done by invoking an abstract notion of the market to set the scene.<sup>6</sup> This yielded a universal model that was not fully dissociated from the tradition of Analytical Marxism and its rational choice leanings. The conception of the rules of capitalist reproduction had much in common with mainstream economics in the way it conceived the inner logic of the market as driven by rational imperatives that were logically derived through deductive reasoning and then generically ascribed to market actors (Brenner, 1986).

This was a curious move, which departed from the spirit of Brenner's initial contribution that had sought to convert the abstract category of the market into a historically rich analysis as a politically constructed phenomenon, grounded in the relationality of politically-constituted social property relations. Ellen Wood objected later to this drift towards the idea of market dependency in the context of the debate on the 'failed' transition to capitalism in the Low Countries (Wood, 2002).

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<sup>4</sup> This history-theory problem is acknowledged in PM (and many other Marxisms), but ultimately 'resolved' unsatisfactorily in favour of logical theory. 'We cannot simply read off the empirical specificities of any given society from its economic "base", nor can we predict the outcome of social interactions and struggles that take place within the constraints of "basic" social-property relations; but it also means that the logic of those social-property relations operates, and is discernible, throughout those empirical manifestations' (Wood 2011, p. xiii.).

<sup>5</sup> Where these actual property relations were historically examined, as in his magisterial study on 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Century England, the mode of analysis returned to a rich historicist register in which social groups constructed their strategies in dense socio-political and institutional contexts, which could no longer be captured by determinate 'rules' (Brenner 1993).

<sup>6</sup> In some cases, this idea of a market/capitalism is invoked precisely to be counterposed to institutionalist conceptions, as if a market (or capitalism) can exist as an extra-political tangible reality when abstracting from the institutions that mediate social relations. See Konings, 2005a for a critique.



For here, Brenner had concluded on the basis of the level of market dependency of the peasantry in maritime Holland that this country was also set on a capitalist course early on only to see this development blocked because of the lack of a sufficiently robust demand from the surrounding feudal economies (Brenner, 2001). Such an argument placed Brenner on a slippery slope since the transition to capitalism was now turned into a quantitative issue regarding the degree of market dependency, rather than a qualitatively based concern with specific and *institutionalised* social property relations. This would make it increasingly difficult for Brenner to maintain the argument of the historical specificity of capitalism, since market dependency is not a sufficiently precise criterion. Indeed, market dependency was not an uncommon phenomenon, even in the late Middle Ages or the early modern era and is often read as a classical indicator of Smithian logics of market development (Persson, 2014). Focusing on market dependency makes it difficult to resist seeing budding capitalisms in places where markets played a prominent role. This naturalising bias was reflected in a subtle shift in the argumentation, as Brenner was forced to fall back on obstacles or *ad hoc* circumstances (i.e. insufficient demand and the inability to develop a vibrant enough domestic market), which blocked what came now to be posited as the 'normal path' towards full market development.<sup>7</sup> This was essentially a return to the form of argumentation so powerfully criticised by Wood whereby capitalism was posited as the expected norm and historicisation turned into a story of how capitalism had been postponed or hindered by social and institutional obstacles.

Secondly, the reification of capitalism was entrenched in a problematic structuralism, which isolated the theory of capitalism from the work of historicisation. For the abstraction required in order to construct structural models necessarily requires that one reduce the points of contacts between theory and history. When we work to abstract from a concrete historical setting and thin out the social determinants that are considered significant in order to produce general models that are amenable to a variety of social contexts, we always face a problem to re-connect theory with history (Knafo 2002). Structural theories usually have little to say about history for they cannot account for the specific circumstances that define historicity. For example, a theoretical strategy aimed at deriving the logic of capitalist development, which applies as much to 16<sup>th</sup> Century Britain as to 20<sup>th</sup> Century New York or contemporary Malaysia, can only rest on very abstract propositions: the higher the abstraction, the thinner its content, the lesser its capacity to place history in perspective and generate rich insights. The limitation becomes explicit when confronted with the discerning and discriminatory grid of comparative history, because general abstractions are just not equipped to deal with contrasting developments, which are the bread and butter of historicisation. When asked to account for history, one is forced to rely on further mediations to establish this connection, assigning an ever more non-substantial role to the abstraction. Ultimately, it is the mediations themselves which have to bear most of the burden to explain history. While the mediations are expected to reconcile the theory with history, the logic itself has little to say about history for it provides no ground to engage with the specific trajectories of capitalist social formations.

Structural theories are not only weak at accounting for history, they also tend to downplay the theoretical significance of history. This can best be seen in relation to a second aspect of history that fares poorly in structural frameworks: agency and the changes brought by social innovations. In the case of the first generation of PM, the rules of capitalist reproduction derived at a theoretical level often came to be seen as a barometer for assessing social change. This is a common outcome in structural approaches which tend to measure change according to the extent to which they transform the rules of reproduction. But such a framing downplays the importance of social innovations because the high standard set by what is often an overly general structural logic means that historical changes rarely stand out. Does the development of financial securitization really change the logic of capitalism? What about the development of the assembly lines and Fordist

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<sup>7</sup> This was again the source of an important critique directed by Wood to Brenner's account of the Dutch case where much of the explanation for the 'limited' nature of the transition relied on the lack of critical mass in terms of demand (Wood, 2002).

techniques of production? Historical circumstances can be easily subsumed under a logic defined in abstract terms as simply a variation under a common theme. Within a structural reasoning, history is thus often demoted to an auxiliary of theory, selectively mobilised as instances of a logic. For the expectations set by the rules of capitalist reproduction mean that innovations usually appear trivial in the grand scheme of things (established by pre-conceived structural theories). As we wait for dramatic transformations, we tend to discount a whole lot of small changes which often add up to something much more important than we assume. As we peel away the layers of history along the lines of this procedure, under the pretence that they constitute secondary details, all we are left with is our common sense.

If our conception of capitalism essentially boils down to market dependency, profit-seeking and productivity growth, the history of capitalism will appear banal, since we always have the impression that we already know more or less the script. Nothing appears surprising within such a template as we comfortably travel through a landscape that has been normalised by the highly abstract lens of the rules of capitalist reproduction. From this vantage point, everything looks monochromatic as history becomes treated as a supplementary ingredient that can always be *later* added to the mix in order to produce 'a more complete picture' *if needed*. And, indeed, it became a recurrent theme within PM to dismiss any suggestion of a profound transformation under capitalism, whether we examine the rise of Fordism (Brenner and Glick, 1991) or Post-Fordism (Wood, 1996: 37) by claiming that these were simply natural and logical outcomes of a generalising and deepening capitalism. Notwithstanding the problems of the approaches rightly criticised by Brenner and Wood in such articles, the striking feature of the latter's argumentation was that they insisted on normalising the developments held up by others as transformative. From their vantage point, these lower-level transformations of capitalism came to look like just another means to 'make more profits' and 'produce cheaper products'.<sup>8</sup> The gap thus cultivated between theory and history often serves more to protect assumptions than to generate new insights.

This disconnect between theory and history was well illustrated in the context of the *Brenner II Debate* launched by the publication of *Global Turbulence*, which deployed an explicit structural framing in order to account for the trajectory of post-war capitalism in the United States, Germany and Japan (Brenner, 1998). The key contribution of this piece was to show how successive waves of new market competitors in the global economy had contributed in fuelling a secular logic of over-accumulation, which systematically pushed the profit rate down. Brenner was particularly interested in the dynamic of inter-capitalist competition, which sees capitalist producers locked into specific lines of production even when these turn out to be less and less profitable. The reason for this, Brenner argued, is that fixed costs often lead capitalists to reduce dramatically their mark up instead of investing in different ventures, because of the one-off costs involved in shifting lines of production. This creates the conditions for over-accumulation since capitalists continue to produce even when the venture is proving overall un-profitable, as long as future investments remain marginally profitable once the sunk costs have been written off.

This argument, however, would produce the two classic failings of structural approaches: a limited ability of the theory to account for history and a propensity to dismiss the theoretical significance of historical evidence. By this point, Brenner had grown more comfortable with a much stronger structural framing and this was reflected in the way this later work flipped the script of the previous *Brenner Debate* on the transition to capitalism: instead of using comparative history to challenge general assumptions and explain differential outcomes, Brenner focused on cross-national structural trends to anchor his main claim that regardless of what states and capitalists do, they cannot circumvent the structural conditions of over-accumulation. In other words, instead of tracing

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<sup>8</sup> As Wood dismissively argued in relation to the so called post-fordist era of capitalism: 'The old Fordism used the assembly line as a substitute for higher-cost skilled craftsmen and to tighten the control of extracting more value from labor. Now, the new technologies are used to the same ends: to make products easy and cheap to assemble' (Wood, 1996: 37).

how an apparently similar logic – increasing entry into markets driving down profit-rates - could have opposite outcomes, he set out to show that despite the apparent diverse trajectories of the United States, Japan and Germany, there was a similar structural logic at work which gradually led to a declining aggregate profit-rate across the core capitalist zone, despite the nationally distinctive and divergent efforts to overcome the problem.

That Brenner would frame this study in this way was surprising considering that he had earlier dismissed the commercialisation thesis for relying on structural trends that were said to apply irrespective of their contexts. He had then expertly used comparative history to show that the same logic, which was invoked to explain the dissolution of feudalism in the West, had in fact resulted in an opposite outcome in Eastern Europe. But when it came to the contemporary history of capitalism, Brenner remained wedded to a structural script, despite the fact that he was well aware of the diversity under capitalism, as reflected by his careful analysis of the respective trajectories of these countries. This made him liable to the same critique he had once directed against the commercialisation thesis. For one can find under capitalism an endless series of instances where similar or identical pressures and crises led to radically dissimilar outcomes. For example, the United States saw a systematic process of de-skilling of labour in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, at the time when Germany was following the opposite path promoting vocational training (Thelen 2004). Similarly, if the logic of specialisation under the pressures of competition is seen as a key feature of capitalism according to Brenner, there are many examples of the opposite from the rise of large American conglomerates in the 1960s accumulating lines of business as if they were assets in a well-diversified portfolio (Fligstein, 1990), to the Korean Chaebols diversifying their product lines because they competed on the basis of market shares rather than profit making per se (Bernard 1999). Translated into the terms of the *Transition Debate*, his argument about over-accumulation amounted to saying that although lords followed different strategies in Western and Eastern Europe (dissolution or intensification of serfdom), in both cases they were subjected to an identical market logic of competition with its imperative to remain profitable.<sup>9</sup> In this way, his work on the contemporary history of capitalism elided the conclusion of what was the crucial theoretical insight of the Brenner I Debate: namely that class politics proved the decisive explanatory *differentia specifica* in these cases.<sup>10</sup>

In the absence of this historical footing, Brenner's theory proved limited in its explanatory power. While it highlighted the way in which imperatives built up to pressure these countries into making social changes, it could not account for the distinct trajectories they had taken. There was nothing straightforward about these specific responses that could be derived directly from the theory in terms of causality. Why did Germany not cut labour costs in the 1980s when international

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<sup>9</sup> A similar problem can be found in the work of Chibber, which seeks to address explicitly the question of difference under capitalism. Here again one sees a subtle articulation which leads him to subordinate difference to the logic of capitalism, even when he goes to great length to argue that there can be a wide range of forms and practices under capitalism. Having started from the premise of market dependency, Chibber posits that greater submission of a wide range of societies to market imperatives should be read as a process of capitalist universalisation (2013: 100). This argument can only be defended as long as the nature of the logic that is being universalised remains considerably under-defined. More importantly, it serves to cast difference as a variation of a common theme (the logic of capital), rather than use difference as the very object of a historicist account, that is the challenging aspect of history which requires explanation.

<sup>10</sup> Knafo has argued that one can make a productive reading of Brenner's account by re-interpreting his dynamic of over-accumulation as an outcome of the creativity of agents in adjusting to growing capitalist imperatives. The point, he argues, is precisely that capitalists demonstrate creativity in responding to market pressure and are thus not easily discarded. From this perspective, the trajectory of post-war capitalism can be read as a series of differentiated trajectories defined by the distinct institutional innovations and social property relations which come to define socio-economic dynamics. This is, in other words, an attempt to re-read the second Brenner Debate from the angle of the first Brenner Debate (Knafo 2013). Here, the emphasis is placed on the different trajectories which can explain how global imperatives are constituted without assigning a determining logic to them.

pressures intensified? Why did Japan continue to stoke overproduction instead of purging productive capacity in the 1990s, as they did in the United States in the 1980s, despite an ongoing economic crisis (Taggart Murphy & Akuni, 2002)? Brenner himself conceded at various points how these trajectories could not be read or interpreted in a straightforward way, but he failed to draw the theoretical conclusion that these different historical trajectories undermined the generic *explanans* of capitalist imperatives. In practice, this meant that he could not count on the logic of over-accumulation to explain history.

It was also noteworthy that Brenner grounded the analytical narrative in *Global Turbulence* only minimally in the insights about capitalism he had suggested in the first Brenner Debate. Recall that Brenner concluded there that strong rules for reproduction prevailed wherever capitalist property relations held, driving a series of rational responses grounded in market dependency that would generate a determinate 'logic of development'. Now, the analysis was framed by re-invoking this 'premise' but then qualified by the suggestion that they – the rules of reproduction – historically face problems of 'realisation' (Brenner, 1998, p.24), including the capacity of firms to switch the line to restore profitability. This seemed to contradict the notion central to the idea of the rules of reproduction that less efficient producers would be displaced through competition, a claim which helped ground the emphasis on generalising labour-saving tools and methods and the reallocation of labour power accordingly (see Post, 2013: 14). But rather than drawing the conclusion that real history overthrows rigid 'rules of reproduction', successive rounds of post-war international trade liberalisation had then to be posited as theoretical externalities, which drove a theoretically unsecured account of crisis outside the rules of reproduction. While the acceptance of the historical 'realisation problem' should have led towards a dismissal or a re-articulation of his premises and to an argument for the primacy of history over theory, Brenner does neither, but shifts the resolution towards a half-way escape. The historical evidence is stylised into a mid-range theoretical argument about over-accumulation, which, in turn, is not unsettled by the further evidence that 'real history' shows that the general phenomenon of over-accumulation panned out differentially in various countries due to different policy responses (which also remain outside the theoretical remit).

Although the 'rules of reproduction' were supposed to capture the fundamental logic of capitalism, it turns out that they had little to add for helping us understand the actual history of capitalism. There was nothing surprising here again, for accepting 'rules', or any other form of structural logic, forced Brenner to move at such a level of abstraction that the general theories he derived were of limited use for explaining history.<sup>11</sup> Theory and history drifted apart, as the *explanandum* became something uniform - the persistence of the decline of the aggregate profit rate across the core capitalist zone anchored in increased entry to markets - rather than something multiform: a demonstration of how a general crisis-context led to differential social conflicts and policy mixes in the actual histories of nationally and institutionally diverging capitalisms. And to the degree that the diverging political responses to the global downturn translated into different national velocities of recovery and stagnation, the real history came to affect the general *explanandum*.

This in turn led Brenner to systematically discount the theoretical significance of history even when *Global Turbulence* was filled with fascinating insights about the trajectory of the US, Germany and Japan. For placing the emphasis on the structural dimension meant seeing the profit downturn as the conclusion of the analysis rather than the starting point. Instead of seeking to analyse the evolution of capitalism as a series of differential responses and innovations to the pressures of over-accumulation, Brenner insisted that, regardless of the path chosen, capitalists and their states were unable to overcome the crisis-prone tendencies of capitalism. This suggested that

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<sup>11</sup> Although we argue that these rules can be formalised as a heuristic device at a very general level of abstraction (for example to distinguish between feudalism and capitalism), historical trajectories under feudalism or capitalism cannot be subsumed under or derived from the general category. In fact, the promise of historicisation resides precisely in showing how the general category loses its explanatory power when it is expected to account for specific empirical cases.

all these strategies and innovations were analysed from the perspective of being inadequate, temporary, and epiphenomenal, implying that Brenner would often neglect their transformative effects. When Brenner adjusted his argument to account for financialisation in a series of later contributions, most notably in *the Boom and the Bubble* (Brenner, 2002), he kept emphasising that the changes were mostly cosmetic and a further demonstration of the failure to overcome the inexorable long downturn. They came to be analysed *ex negativo* as the desperate efforts to sustain accumulation in a context of heavy over-accumulation. Ultimately, this ended in the discounting of this new chapter in the history of capitalism as a mere coda to a script, which had already been written out.

Thirdly, the naturalisation of capitalism underpinned by the separation of theory from history would finally contribute also to its depoliticisation as Brenner was forced to drift towards economism. It is common for structural types of reasoning to de-politicize and de-socialise their object since the level of abstraction they demand forces us to discard much of the contextual material which frames politics (Knafo 2010). To be able to cover a large variety of cases and capture the inherent rationality of capitalism, one needs to push politics down to lower levels of abstraction, functional by-products, and ultimately to the rank of historical details.

In the case of Brenner, this de-politicisation became quite explicit as he sought to anchor his opposition of pre-capitalist societies based on political accumulation and capitalism based on economic accumulation. As the notion of market dependency took on a central importance in his analysis, he thus came to insist that the nature of capitalist competition is an economic one (by contrast to a political one in the pre-capitalist era). According to him, capitalism is marked precisely by the limited ability of capitalists to use power in order to compete, forcing them to focus on production and investment. But this generic insight morphed over time into a classic liberal argument, not all that dissimilar to the Commercialization Thesis, which saw property rights and institutional developments as central in limiting the ability of agents to use power or violence to 'cheat' and avoid competing on a purely *economic* terrain. The end product was a de-politicized account which neglected power struggles, especially among capitalists or more generally dominant social classes, and discounted wider power struggles and institutional changes in order to restrict the analysis to abstract market forces. Politics and institutions were read instead as superficial attempts to circumvent the logic of the market and mostly analysed as transient, unsustainable, and thus irrelevant to our theorisation of capitalism (Konings, 2005b: 195).

Here, we can concretely identify the source of Brenner's limitations in his incomplete account of market dynamics. He focuses primarily on the first half of the story, which relates to the imperatives of capitalism and the market, for example in the form of a market dependency to access means of subsistence or means of production. But when stopping the analysis at this point, we follow an economistic template, which assumes that there is a set of universal strategies, emanating directly from market pressures when allowed to operate (Konings 2005a). From this perspective, the need to be economically efficient dictates that capitalist producers specialise, re-invest in cost-cutting technologies, intensify the labour process, de-skill labour and more generally increase their power over labour, and concentrate capital. Yet, thinking simply in these narrow terms leads astray, because it presumes a definitive rationality on the part of capitalists and a certain linearity to capitalist development very much like neoclassical economics. It suggests an image of agency that conceptualises people as passive rule-followers, rather than creative rule-makers.

If market dependency may provide a glimpse into the problems that people face, it does not tell us much about the solutions they develop to respond to it (Knafo 2002). We then come to the second part of the story, one which features agency, power and a much greater role for history. This involves greater attention to social resources that people can mobilise in order to develop strategies to compete. Here, institutions, regulations, customs, and discourses all become central and the object of numerous forms of mobilisation that cannot be derived from the structural logic of the market. One could go even further and emphasise that the rules of market competition are not set in stone. To compete on the market is inherently indeterminate as an idea. People never fully

compete on all fronts at once. What creates order on the market is precisely that this competition is always channelled in socially specific ways which profoundly transform what types of strategies become privileged (Knafo, Hughes and Wyn-Jones, 2013). In that respect, markets are profoundly political institutions. As in any other social realm, agents use and manipulate regulations and institutions as means of empowerment to exert power over others. They do not simply struggle to compete economically, but struggle over the definition of the rules of competition or the rules of reproduction. For these do not emanate from the existence of some abstract and purified entity named the market, but result from struggles over the institutions and regulations, which define markets as concrete sites for economic activity.

This is difficult for Brenner to take on board fully for it would put into serious questions his later singular focus on market dependency. In this respect, the story of capitalism was always a story of social property rights. For it was not market dependency, which created the patterns of capitalist development, but the form of practices that could be mobilised in order to respond to it. This conclusion would emerge most strongly from George Comninel's re-interpretation of the *Transition Debate*, which better captured the historically rooted nature of the transition to capitalism.

### ***3. A Return to the Transition Debate***

The root of this tension at the heart of PM between axiomatic rules of reproduction and the original promise of a radical historicism can be traced all the way back to the way in which the category of agency was conceived and handled in the *Transition Debate*. For arguably one can already locate the source of the problems highlighted here in the initial strategy followed by Brenner to analyse the rise of capitalism. Brenner deployed a limited conception of agency which emphasised the level of power of agents, understood here as their ability to effectuate change, rather than their creativity in developing new social strategies and technologies. His original claim was that capitalism was the unintended consequence of a class struggle in England that pitted peasants against lords. As elsewhere in Western Europe, the strength of peasant communities had helped them defeat serfdom in the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century and gain their freedom. However, the outcome of their battle would be specific to England. For here, the peasantry only secured a partial victory because of their inability to gain the property rights to their land, in contrast to the French peasantry. A distinctive social property relation thus emerged which enabled a large movement of enclosures whereby peasants were unable to resist being pushed off their customary lands due to their lack of legal claims over property.

This turn to agency led critics to dismiss this account for amounting to a contingent explanation (Callinicos, 1990) in which the rise of capitalism appeared as a fluke of history, only precariously grounded in the relative strengths of the contending classes, rather than in more 'objective', 'systemic' and necessitous dynamics, like the 'dialectic' between the relations and the forces of production or other forms of structural explanations. But this attribution of contingency derives ultimately from an inaccurate reading of Brenner, who mobilised the comparative method precisely in order to outline the long-term institutional contexts which had produced divergent outcomes. Attempting to chart a path between contingency and pre-determination and rightly eschewing the idiom of causality, Brenner set out an institutionally rooted conception of agency:

'The element of indeterminacy emerges in relation to the different character and results of these conflicts in different regions. This is not to say that such outcomes were somehow arbitrary, but rather that they tended to be bound up with certain historically specific patterns of the development of the contending agrarian classes and their relative strengths in different European societies: their relative levels of internal solidarity, their self-consciousness and organisation, and their general political resources – especially their relationship to the non-agricultural classes (in particular, potential urban class allies) and to the state (in particular, whether or not the state developed as a class-like competitor of the lords for the peasants' surplus)' (Brenner 1985a, p. 36).

Instead of grounding the explanation in a free-standing notion of 'class capacity', Brenner was particularly interested in the level of solidarity and the class alliances that were open to different actors within particular institutional contexts (Brenner, 1985: 40-45). Brenner demonstrated how institutionally entrenched property and class relations, stretching back to the resolution of the 10-11<sup>th</sup> Century crisis and the Norman Conquest, led to a greater degree of intra-ruling class co-operation in England (from the Oath of Salisbury, via Magna Carta, to Parliamentarianism), versus greater degrees of French intra-ruling class competition among the Crown and the lords over peasant produce (Brenner 1985a, p. 46 passim; p. 55, passim; Brenner 1985b, p. 249; pp. 254-264, pp. 284-299). Ultimately, it was these institutionalised power-relations, which would enable English landlords to claim absolute ownership over land in the wake of the crisis of serfdom by contrast with their French counterparts. This enabled not only French peasant freedom but also led to royal legal guarantees of their property rights over their smallholdings in contrast to the English experience, where the Common Law excluded unfree peasants from protection by the royal courts.

This was a central *differentia specifica* in the Anglo-French divergence, which framed (without pre-determining) the different forms and outcomes of class conflict in both regions. This mode of explanation is inadequately described as voluntaristic, but rather an attempt to root the divergence in an institutional path-dependent trajectory, which made *different forms* of class struggle intelligible, but not necessary or contingent. Here, agency is always a concretely contextualised and historically relational category, rather than a free-floating theoretical category. Still, despite this move, Brenner's structuralist framing ultimately ended up limiting the space given to agency. For agency was conceived primarily in terms of ability - a term much easier to reconcile with structural determinism - rather than creativity. For ability could be itself seen as a product of structural determinism. The result was an analysis that often relied on comparing classes from different areas on the basis of their ability to achieve similar goals. From this angle, the work of comparison served foremost to highlight how distinct trajectories were related to the respective power of given social classes, rather than differences in the nature of class struggles which would imply specifying how social classes faced different types of problems and thus innovated in different ways. And indeed, one of Brenner's preferred argumentative strategies in order to highlight the importance of class struggle was to show that lords or peasants from different regions had attempted similar types of strategies but with different outcomes.

To be clear, Brenner's account certainly alluded to the complex institutional parameters which shaped class struggles in England. But there were good reasons why 'the ultimate source of diversion' of English and French feudalism was 'not apparent to all readers' (Comninel, 2001: 4). For Brenner's explanation underplays the institutional divergence between France and England by treating the nature of the struggle in both countries as being essentially of the same kind even if the capacities of different social classes were not. He thus factors institutions mostly in terms of the way they affected the strength of distinct classes. And so his explanation rested ultimately on the *greater* strength of English lords, not on the transformation in the *nature* of social property relations, which meant that the very stakes of class struggles had evolved quite differently in England compared with France.

It is for this reason that Brenner's argumentation may have seemed precarious, perhaps also why, even if misleadingly in our view, it was subjected to the charge of contingency, for it was a bit too convenient to suggest that the English aristocracy would have been imbued with just the 'right level' of power to produce such a momentous transformation as the rise of capitalism. As Colin Mooers rightly queried, how 'could the English aristocracy have been simultaneously too weak to re-enserv the peasantry and yet strong enough to drive them off the land through enclosures?' (Mooers, 1991: 36-7). In this account, there was simply too much explanatory burden placed on landlord solidarity to account for the transition, a point rightly criticised by some even if for the wrong reasons (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2013). For despite Brenner's impressive command of the historical material, the theme of aristocratic solidarity was somewhat reified as a historical pattern

of class relations in England which tended to subordinate the study of social property relations. This led to a curious inversion whereby the evolution in social property relations was mostly analysed as a consequence and proof of this solidarity of landlords, rather than the other way around. While institutions such as those of the Common Law or Parliament were discussed, they were treated more as illustrations of the power of landlords in England, rather than a key to Brenner's narrative of this transition.

The problem, then, was not so much the misdirected charge of contingency or voluntarism, but rather Brenner's insistence to supplement this historicism with a separate theoretical grid of axiomatic rules of reproduction for different sets of social property relations from which the significance of historical material would be ultimately drawn. What Brenner had magisterially handled in his historiographical studies – the comparative analysis of the conjunction of patterns of reproduction with moments of qualitative transformations – turned ultimately out to be a theoretical problem. For the emphasis on rules of reproduction could not be reconciled with the simultaneous theoretical demand to account for the historically specific agency of classes-in-contestation and what, from a rules-of-reproduction perspective, must then appear as 'irrational' forms of individual and collective rationality. Action was analytically conceived as an almost automatic and auto-generative outcome of determinate property relations. In other words, by prioritising structural logics and deriving agency from them, Brenner had converted the promise of PM – namely the emphasis on 'lived agency': how agents react when confronted with structural imperatives – back into a structuralism that seemed to echo his earlier engagements with 'Rational Choice Marxism': rules of reproduction prescribe and almost reify forms of rationality. For that actors always opted for the economically most rational course of action, *ceteris paribus*, was a theoretical extrapolation which could not be reconciled with the richness of history, where *ceteris* is never *paribus*. Similarly, which course of action actors eventually chose, could not be derived from the generality of feudal or capitalist property relations either. And most importantly, the historical resultants of class-specific and antagonistic rules of reproduction – class conflicts governed by the historically varying balances of class forces – generated outcomes no longer captured by the stable injunctions of reproductive rules. Rather, these 'resultants' move the explanatory locus decisively back to the creative dynamics of class conflicts, as the results of class conflicts cannot be reduced to prior or deeper sets of reproductive rules that govern regular conduct, but become themselves the moments of change and innovations. In the end, rules of reproduction denote a synchronic and logical category which grates with social agency as a diachronic and historical category. In Brenner's wider scheme, it appeared that the category of rules of reproduction was reserved for periods of normalcy, to be replaced by the idea of specific agency and unintended consequences for periods of crises and transformation. This raises the problem of how to reconcile the generality of feudal and capitalist property relations with the specificity of lived agency within them. Ultimately, the postulated functional correspondence between property relations and rules of reproduction is too narrowly and too abstractly conceived to grasp concrete economic and social activity – human agency.

This structural determinism would ultimately limit Brenner's account of the rise of capitalism. For having posited that strategies of social classes are directly dictated by structural imperatives, Brenner came to see the transition to capitalism mostly as a matter of setting the preconditions for primitive accumulation. This meant examining how access to property came to be dependent on the market. There was very little room for agentic creativity here, for Brenner assumed that the rules of capitalist reproduction would naturally impose themselves once access to property was governed by the market:

'The resulting competition among tenants for the land and among landlords for tenants stimulated cost-cutting, thus specialisation and improvement, leading over time to the replacement of the small, relatively inefficient peasant tenants by larger capitalist tenants, thus underpinning an agricultural transformation' (Brenner 1985: 297).



In this way, agency was mostly reduced to a structural category, a function of social structures. Here, Brenner missed the opportunity to show how the focus on systematically transforming the labour process, what he took to be the main feature of capitalism, was an outcome of agentic creativity rather than a natural consequence of agents responding to structural imperatives. A proper historicist account of capitalism would have required him to show that this was a counterintuitive development which resulted from innovations we fail to appreciate because these have become normalised with time.

It was given to Georges Comninel to further radicalise the historicist path outlined by Brenner, but ultimately rendered ambiguous, and to provide deeper social and institutional foundations for PM (Comninel 2000). Comninel initially underplayed their differences, presenting his own contribution as a further elaboration of Brenner's account of the transition to capitalism. And yet, there were notable discrepancies between the two accounts which seem symptomatic of a different approach to historicisation. For one, there was no mention in Comninel's article of the solidarity of English lords, the very point that Brenner had placed at the heart of his argument. If anything, Comninel insisted rather on the institutional power of the Crown in relation to English lords. He identified the inability of lords in England to secure sovereign jurisdictions over their peasants as the main source of divergence with France. By contrast to France, where the parcellisation of sovereignty (Anderson, 1974) saw a new form of territorial power emerge with the appropriation of the public power of the ban by lords (the royal right to tax, to decree, to command and to punish), the Norman Conquest helped anchor a more centralised feudal state which saw the Crown preserve its royal rights. In this context, lords were never able to combine the power over land with the power to command as their French counterparts. Instead, lords pursued a different path more focused on their manor, the unit of economic exploitation. This meant that English lords generally took on more defensive strategies as they sought to carve out protections from the oversight and interference of the Crown. One of the many outcomes of this dynamic was a Common Law which would ultimately come to define the right of lords over their manor in the negative as something that is shielded from customary law. It was this institutional foundation which anchored a new absolute conception of property no longer defined in terms of a series of rights and duties associated with property, as it had traditionally been the case, but instead by its 'private' nature.<sup>12</sup>

The key point - and the main problem for Brenner's argument - is that this development cannot be read as an outcome of the influence of lords. For if this would have been the case, Common Law would not have emerged in the first place, or at least not in the way it did. As Comninel highlights, customary law tended to go hand in hand with strong lordship (2000: 35). The highly institutionalised set of rights and duties attached to property were often the outcome of precisely the power to set precedents in terms of obligations around which crystallised important struggles. Customary law was thus tied to the manorial power of lords. From this perspective, the important innovation of Common Law was in fact to shield free tenants from, or at least provide a recourse against, this manorial power of lords. It did so by granting access to royal courts on the basis of an individual right that was said to emanate from freehold property. So Brenner may be right in highlighting that the rise of Common Law empowered landlords because its implication was to indirectly deprive the *dependent* tenants of this very access to royal courts, making them more vulnerable to arbitrary exactions. But this was not the important institutional fact about the Common Law for the emergence of capitalism. Rather, the important point was the way in which the individual rights of ownership would anchor a claim to shield property from customary law. As

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<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, the solidarity of landlords was much more an *effect* of their defensive position than a product of their power. It meant that institutional means such as Parliament and the Common Law, both initially a product of the power of the Crown, became focal points for resistance to limit and circumscribe this power. Hence, it was no coincidence if lords mobilised to institutionalise various protections against this power, for example in the form of the Magna Carta, for they were steered by strong incentives to address their institutional vulnerability.

Comninel points out, the enclosures which later occurred were not mainly significant because of the fencing of communal areas as Brenner's focus on access to property would lead us to believe. It was not simply a matter of appropriating property. Much more important for the development of capitalism was the later use of Common Law by, ironically, landlords to extinguish these very communal and customary laws. This process helped disentangle property from its social codification in order to put it to different uses. Without this it would have been impossible to experiment in order to radically restructure the labour process.

If this account helps to highlight the important differences between Brenner and Comninel, Comninel himself underestimated the significance of his departures from Brenner, for he cites approvingly Brenner's highly structural conclusion that 'different class structures, specifically property relations or surplus-extraction relations, once established, tend to impose rather strict limits and possibilities, indeed rather specific long-term patterns, on a society's economic development' (Comninel, 2000: 45). This emphasis on the rules of reproduction of feudalism (and capitalism) captured well Brenner's approach, which took English feudalism as driven by a given pattern anchored in the power and solidarity of lords established by the Norman Conquest. But it was a view that suffered from a reliance on generalisation, as it reduced innovations of the period to exemplifications of a pattern, rather than examine them in a genuinely evolutionary way. By contrast, Comninel's narrative was focused on the constantly changing dynamics of the feudal era and the institutional innovations which came to progressively transform social property relations.<sup>13</sup> There were no traces here of the structuralism that had limited Brenner's initial account other than the emphasis on a path-dependent development. For while the onus was placed on the Norman Conquest as having led England in a very different direction than France, Comninel focused on the numerous and cumulative innovations during this period which saw the emergence of the Common Law and its re-appropriation by lords. In this respect, the path-dependent development was not marked by 'strict limits' and tight patterns, but by distinct forms of agency which meant that the Crown, lords and peasants innovated in different ways in England compared to France, because their distinct social struggles created different types of problems. From this angle, the practice of historicisation, or more specifically the contextualisation in social property relations, was adroitly used by Comninel to put in perspective the English feudal trajectory by contrasting it to France's so as to better appreciate the significance of their respective and diverging institutional innovations. In the end, Comninel's radical historicisation of Brenner's accounts opened the path for transcending the structure-agency dichotomy inherent in the framework of Brenner. For the point was precisely to follow agent innovations that gradually transformed institutions as both part of the source and outcome of these conflicts.

#### ***4. Going Forward: The Case of the US***

If the limitations imposed by the structural template used by Brenner were already present in his early work, the rigid modelisation of history would prove more and more problematic as the lessons from the original case of capitalism were extended to other cases of capitalist transitions. This made it difficult to analyse other cases on their own terms. To illustrate this problem, we turn to the American transition to capitalism in order to show the restrictive nature of the research-organising concept of capitalist rules of reproduction. We focus here on two important publications by Political Marxists on this subject: the first a comprehensive discussion of the transformation of agrarian relations in the US by Charles Post (Post, 2011), the second a more specific critique of the Regulation School by Brenner and Mark Glick (Brenner and Glick, 1991). As we argue, both illustrate the ways in which a structural template closes down our ability to understand history in the making.

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<sup>13</sup> It must be recognised though that Comninel also switches to a problematic structuralist view when discussing capitalism. See for example (Comninel, 2013).

Post's *The American Road to Capitalism* offers an important intervention into the debate on the rise of capitalism in the US. What makes this book powerful is the way in which it systematically criticises market-based accounts of capitalism, which center the growing importance of trade and market exchange as the source of capitalist development in the US. Here, Post excels as he historicises social and political developments and challenges market-based models that reify capitalism. In particular, he productively mobilises Wood's insightful argument that the history of capitalism is too often underwritten by a crypto-teleological perspective, in which its emergence seems always pre-ordained and its history mostly presented in the form of processes, which remove the various obstacles blocking its inevitable ascent, for the US case.

However, we argue that Post's study remains ultimately indebted to a structural mode of analysis, which generates problems when his own alternative account is set out. Using Brenner's rules of capitalist reproduction – variously re-formulated as a 'capital-centric' reading of PM - (Post 2011, pp. 1-3), the account relies on the idea of market dependency to determine how this transition was effectuated. Post shows how a market revolution in the 1840s and 1850s progressively shifted a subsistence-based agriculture towards more market-based strategies as farmers became increasingly dependent on the market for their means of subsistence. This, he argues, was largely the product of rising taxes imposed on northern rural households in combination with the auctioning of the public domain to private owners (the establishment of the public land system), which created a social monopoly on land in the wider antebellum US (2011, pp. 73-102). As families, which previously produced what they needed, became forced to sell goods to raise income for paying taxes and rising land prices, they entered the market and were progressively subjected to a capitalist logic of specialisation and innovations. Once on the road towards market dependency, the only problem left was to secure a labour market based on wage labour - a distinct political challenge in the case of the United States due to the prominence of slavery in the South. Indeed, Post argues, there was no necessary reason for slavery to be displaced by capitalist production as reflected in the fact that the plantations of the South fared very well during the market revolution of the 1840s/50s. The transition then becomes mostly a matter of a political contest. The Civil War of the early 1860s is interpreted as the final turning point, which settled the problem and opened the path for a systematic shift towards capitalism in the US.

Despite the rich and detailed work of historicisation conducted by Post, the deficiencies of a structural framing are here equally on display. For the analysis starts with the acceptance of Brenner's definition of capitalism as market-dependency, a criterion that leads ultimately to an economistic interpretation of social property relations, which relies on the abstract idea of the market being allowed to govern the reproduction of peasants, workers and capitalists, rather than a more sustained engagement with the institutions that mediated their social relations. It is striking how Post's historicisation is much richer when it comes to pre-capitalist modes of organization (i.e. slavery) for these are not already given by Brenner's theory. When it comes to capitalism, the analysis assesses levels of dependency on the market, but spends little time on concrete social relations. Effectively, market dependency becomes a substitute for an analysis of social property relations. Property, in fact, is barely addressed, other than in the form of a discussion of price levels for accessing it, as there is no engagement with the legal and political side of it. This is surprising considering the important changes in the nature of property which occurred in the US (O'Sullivan, 2001: 81). In the end, Post refrains from analysing the transformation of social relations, but instead assesses the degree of market compulsion. The whole issue of social property relations is effectively taken for granted with the assumption that each increment in market compulsion effectively structures social relations.

The structural template also sets the expectation that the transition to capitalism in the US must have been an agrarian one, because this was the case in England. But it is not clear why that should be the case. There are good reasons in fact to think that outside of Britain, the transition to capitalism was often an industrial affair, although not always an urban one, partly because the attempts to emulate British successes were often tied to a concerted effort towards industrialisation

(Comninel 2013: 48). Post, however, remains wedded to an agrarian account, partly because of a transcendental framing, which puts the emphasis on the conditions of possibility, rather than concrete processes of labour transformation. In other words, rather than examining the practices that systematically transformed the labour process in this country, the center of analysis lies in the process by which large proportions of the population became subjected to market imperatives. In this perspective, the agrarian changes certainly remain significant, but this fails to address the distinctive criteria of capitalist production that Brenner had initially singled out: the systematic transformation of the labour process. This is simply assumed to result from market imperatives once the conditions for capitalist rules of reproduction are in place.

These limitations are linked to a third problem that concerns the way in which this structural model leads Post to over-rely on the level of convergence to the British case. This research-guiding procedure tends to level the specific features, which came to define the US capitalist experience. There is, for example, little on the early roots of consumerism, the rise of managerialism, the emergence of corporations, or the radical transformation of law as a tool of accumulation. Even the specific form of industrialisation, one highly dependent on the agro-business, is merely suggested. It is as if the question of the rise of capitalism is completely disconnected from the actual features that came to shape the practices of US capitalism. These are downplayed as secondary features because of the structural frame of analysis. These practices do not seem to connect in any way to the account of the transition. In this way, Post's structuralist account of capitalism closes down crucial questions and limits the degree of historicisation. This is no coincidence, for it is the very confidence that a structuralist lens imparts to scholars who now believe they already know more or less the script, which closes the need for exploring questions of historical specificities. It is no surprise then to find that such features are ultimately relegated to a secondary level, which can then be read as a variation on a common theme that changes little to the overall logic of capitalism.

While these specific features of US capitalism are mostly ignored in Post's work, there is a more explicit engagement with them in a second important work by Political Marxists on US capitalism: Brenner and Glick's critique of Regulation Theory. What makes this work interesting is that it addresses an approach, which placed great emphasis on the fact that there was a profound transformation in the nature of capitalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Regulation School had argued that Fordism, premised on consumerism and its new forms of mass production buttressed by strong technological innovations like the assembly line, represented a deep transformation of the nature of capitalism and its modes of reproduction. In response, Brenner and Glick set out to demonstrate that the rise of Fordism as a social phenomenon was essentially in line with the gradual evolution of capitalism. Regarding the passage to mass production, they argue that gains in productivity are the essence of capitalism and that one should not see the rise of Taylorism or Fordist production to be a significant break. According to them, this is precisely what one should expect from capitalism (1991: 58). Brenner and Glick suggest that there is nothing particularly surprising about the rise of consumerism. It follows from the imperatives that capitalism generates as producers find themselves compelled to meet and develop demand for their products. Here, the rise of consumptionism is a natural outgrowth of capitalism's in-built push for relative surplus-value extraction. In the context of growing market dependency, and the effect of competition on productivity that tends to improve real wages, workers need and are able to buy more and cheaper products.

While the authors are right to challenge the problematic periodisation of the Regulation School, the outcome is a tendency to level out different forms of production and capitalist practices. We may fare better by specifying further the trajectories of capitalist production in order to denaturalise these developments and break the impression that they self-evidently emanate from the dictates of the logic of capitalism. It is interesting, for example, to note with Alfred Chandler that mass production did not follow necessarily from capitalist manufacturing, as demonstrated by the fact that Britain and Germany did not take similar steps towards Fordist production in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Despite gains of efficiency, there was no natural move towards mass production. British

manufacturing, for example, remained labour intensive as reductions in unit costs did not lead to an increase in the volume of material processed by plants (Chandler, 1990: 22).

The same objection applies to the phenomenon of consumerism and the problematic tendency that people have of naturalising it as a normal product of capitalism. For it is striking that nowhere else had there been any development of consumerism that comes remotely close to what emerged in the US. In fact, states often suppressed consumerism, seeing in it a dangerous ideology - and for good reasons: Export-led models tend to dominate, because they are much easier to govern and facilitate the ability of dominant social forces to channel resources towards industrialisation or put them in the hand of powerful classes. Consumerism is also liable to a reliance on imports which can be disastrous for an economy because of the pressure it places on the balance of payment. The fact that only the US developed a proper ideology of consumerism which became only later influential on a global scale seems to suggest that consumerism is anything but a 'normal' phenomenon of capitalist development. Even in Britain, where consumption developed significantly with the rise of a vibrant national market based primarily on subsistence goods (Wood, 1991), there was no similar turn to consumerism with its distinctive financial and institutional innovations as it was the case in the US.

## ***5. Agency and Social Relations***

We have argued above that the dominant structural focus within Marxism has become a problematic lens for historicising social trajectories of development, and we have used the work of Political Marxists, most notably Robert Brenner's, to illustrate some of the defects that spring from this approach. In articulating a critique of the idea of rules of reproduction, our goal is to radicalise the Marxist lineage focusing on class struggle, social relations and historicisation. This last section makes two key propositions: the first about methodology, the second about capitalism. These are based on an alternative reading of PM informed by what we label a radical historicism.

Our first argument is that we need an agency-centered approach to Historical Materialism in order to secure the focus on history and social relations that was pioneered by Marx. As we pointed out, structural and generalising accounts tend to reify their object of analysis. Capitalism is then fleshed out analytically as a given object of research, which is usually defined mostly at a theoretical level and prior to any work of historicisation. Alternatively – and this was Brenner's original contribution – a distinct concept of capitalism is extrapolated from a concrete historical setting and then formalised and generalised into an ideal-typical category. In response, we argue for an agency-based approach that seeks to analyse capitalism from the perspective of concrete social struggles. The aim is to *re-trace the agencies involved in shaping the history of capitalism*. That is, we hope to break down the abstract and systemic framing of the study of capitalism in order to see the very processes making capitalism as integral to the way we understand it in the first place. History is not simply a resource to be used for understanding where capitalism comes from or how it came about, followed by a retreat into the supra-historical category of systemic capitalist rules of production. It is also the key to understanding capitalism itself as a constantly evolving phenomenon.

It must be clear that this approach is not meant as a statement on the nature of capitalism, but rather as a methodological proposition intent on making good on the promises of Marx's historicism. The best way to convey the nature of this project is to come back to Marx's famous insight that people make their history, even if not under the condition of their own making. This is a proposition which few Marxists would object to, and which would even enlist the approval of many non-Marxist critical scholars. And yet, it is fair to say that scholars have largely focused on the second part of this equation, showing how people face conditions that are not of their own making. This is usually the whole point of a structuralist framing, that is to highlight that people confront capitalist compulsions which leave them limited choices. In such accounts, people facing structural constraints become mostly bearers of a logic that is largely determined in abstraction of the role

they play in history. There is very little making of history here, and the one we find is mostly confined to exceptional phases of transitions rather than being an integral component of the wider story (Knafo 2010; Teschke 2014).

The aim of the radical historicism we put forward is to invert this classic framing of Marx's dictum. For instead of putting the emphasis on the conditions that are not of people's making, we seek to reaffirm the fact that even if people do not determine the conditions they are placed in, it is *still people who make history*. The objective then is to establish systematically these agencies as vital to our understanding of capitalism even though, and this is the key, they often *seem* at first to be of limited significance. Scholars may thus recognize the significance of agency, but the fact that they devote little time to it speaks volume of their assumption that agency is of secondary importance – often reduced to an exemplification of instances in which people enact a pre-programmed logic. It often appears as that dimension that can be dismissed when theorising.

It is interesting in this regard that even Political Marxists who initially made such a virtue of looking at class struggles as an open-ended process, still came to systematically discount agency and innovations under capitalism. This, we argue, is no coincidence. It reflects the methodological bias against historicisation that is pervasive in the social sciences. For it is symptomatic of this bias that so much of the literature in political economy interprets social innovations mostly as means to reproduce a pre-established logic (Knafo, 2010). New practices of production, changes in financial instruments, evolution in governance and regulations, labour transformations, and foreign policies are all usually interpreted from a default position, which assumes that these are all means to pursue the profit motives and stabilize the conditions for accumulation. They are interpreted as means to reproduce capitalists and capitalist states. The irony is that PM once emphasised in the context of the *Transition Debate* that lords had put in motion the transition to capitalism in the very process of seeking to reproduce themselves. As this point illustrated, seeking to reproduce one's condition is a poor marker for understanding the significance of agency or what is achieved by social actors, for this pursuit can be fully compatible with initiating profound transformations. And yet when it comes to capitalism, it was the overriding theme of capitalist reproduction that became the dominant analytical motif with its highly reductionist lens. Extremely dynamic and diverse capitalist societies thus came to be interpreted as evidence for capitalism's strong rules of reproduction. The more innovations proliferated, the more these were regarded as proof of the strength of prevailing rules of reproduction. In this way, innovations were paradoxically taken as an illustration of the immutable logic of capitalism and captured and reduced to the product of its imperatives, rather than an imperative for us, scholars, to historicise the making of capitalism itself.

It is one of our main contentions that if scholars tend to neglect social change, it is not an indication that changes are limited or less important under capitalism. It reflects rather an impoverished perspective stemming from a methodological framework that effectively neuters the theoretical significance of historical evidence. Since we see the problem of agency as one of perspective, we take our distance from the usual formulation of the structure-agency debate, which revolves around determining whether it is agency or structure which drives specific processes. For the point is not that scholars are not aware that people make history, but rather that they feel they already know the script by aligning 'the making' with pre-conceived theoretical expectations. Hence, even though most scholars recognize the importance of agency, they struggle in practice to make good on their commitment, *because agency is something difficult to assess*. Issuing another call to awareness that one should take *both side* of the story into account would thus be pointless. The challenge is to develop a methodology that forces us to take agency as active creativity into account in the first place.

The impression that structures determine history stems from the very nature of the relationship between structure and agent. Try as we may, structures will always seem more significant at first glance than what an individual or a group of people do, because they tend to affect the lives of larger groups of people. When we seek to determine which of the two matters most, we are necessarily led to focus on structures. Social structures are often attractive for

developing theories because they hold the promise of covering greater scope than agency and seem to lend greater explanatory power to theories based on them. This does not mean, however, that the analysis of structures provides us with a particularly good platform to understand the making of history. For a structure can be relevant to many different contexts without explaining what is happening in them. It is the attempt to make this leap across diverse contexts and turn structures into the determining explanatory factor that is the fundamental mistake of structural perspectives. Ultimately, they conceive agents as non-agential.

The focus on agency is thus conceived as a means to address a recurrent bias towards structural reasoning. We see radical historicism as a commitment to recover this lost agentic dimension. But doing so requires that we make agency the object of analysis rather than simply a derivative, modificatory, or functional aspect of social life that we can draw upon to substantiate historical development. The point is to establish agency as a historical fact and to highlight how a trajectory was the outcome of various forms of agentic creativity, both in terms of innovations and unintended outcomes. In short, we conceive historicisation as the work of assessing agency. Here agency becomes the object of study itself, even if contexts matter. For it is in the discrepancy between similar structural contexts and diverse agential outcomes that historical change can be identified.

But why such a concern with agency? This has nothing to do with an antiquarian concern with getting the history right (although this helps!). Our interest in agency stems rather from the promise we see in using the conceptual leverage that agency provides as a historicizing device in order to develop richer modes of theorisation. Keeping in line with our argument about the difficulty to assess agency, the argument is not that we should move back to a descriptive form of history. Rather the argument pertains to the work of historicisation, understood here as an attempt to theorise or reflect on the broader significance of what we study, by grounding social processes in historical perspective. Tracing the agencies involved helps place history in a more productive perspective. It sharpens the significance of historical material for theorization, or more specifically it turns the practice of historicisation, so often reduced to an illustrative and confirmationist role, into a proper tool of theorization.

What do we mean by establishing and foregrounding the agencies involved in the making of capitalism? Three key ideas, or methodological guidelines, capture this idea. All of them are anchored in comparative principles intended to place social history in perspective. The main guiding light here is simply the idea that a norm can never be relativised before we can compare it properly to other similar norms. Only in this way can we develop our critical judgment by concretely setting out how capitalism takes different forms and thus highlight the way in which it is socially constructed.

**1. Specific Social Actors:** Following on this idea, the first principle concerns the agents involved and the social relations they are enmeshed in. This is essentially a matter of using dynamically the concept of social relations as a frame.<sup>14</sup> The analysis must start by identifying the agents involved, both those who make innovations and those who are targeted by these innovations. This is, of course, what Marxists do in a way. But the objective here is to systematically seek angles that help specify how the agents and their social relations are distinctive from others we assume at first to be similar. The goal is to avoid a generic framing of actors in terms of categories that are already pre-established and thus associated with a whole set of expectations. For example, instead of casting straightforwardly a worker as a worker, we look for productive comparative angles to determine what makes the workers we are interrogating distinctive, when compared to other workers in similar industries. The point is not to simply add historical details. These specifications must serve an explanatory purpose. They have to be mobilised as a means for understanding the greater

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<sup>14</sup> This requires attention to a context-specification, but one which cannot be reduced to the accumulation of antecedent causes that explain agency, but seeks to establish how agents interpret, mobilise and act upon a specific context.

significance of a phenomenon, rather than serve simply a descriptive purposes as it is usually the case. The simple insight here is that we need to grasp non-generic features in order to make this specific historical context count in our analysis. The best way to do so is to grasp what distinguishes the agents involved in a social relation and what marks out the power relations between them from others we may assume at first to be similar. This implies a question-driven mode of research, which does not subsume a phenomenon under wider categories of a more abstract type, but asks systematically what was new, different, and innovative in the resolution of a specific social contradiction.

**2. Counterintuitive Social Innovations:** Having worked to define the context in terms of specific social relations, the second step is to analyse how agents innovate in a given context. How do we know what is novel about given innovations? We often analyse innovations in terms of what they produce in the long run thus taking the end product to characterise the initial innovation. Furthermore, innovations tend to be normalised and internalised with time, as we get used to them, and so often appear as pre-ordained. It becomes difficult to imagine the world without them. Does capitalism need central banks? Was manufacturing bound to lead to mass production? Does capitalism require multiple states? To counter such biases, we start from the presumption that knowing what is new about an innovation when it emerges is something difficult to grasp. It cannot be read off directly from the context in which it occurs. This is why a comparative standpoint must be once more exploited in order to break down the impression of an organic symbiosis between innovation and context. This can be done along two axes, either temporally through a diachronic historical comparison that seeks to determine how an innovation marks a departure from a previous norm, or spatially through a synchronic historical comparison to show how different courses were taken to address similar types of problems. By outlining different pathways, the objective is to capture something that is counterintuitive about the path taken. Innovations that are not counterintuitive when created are unlikely to have stood out historically. But more importantly, as long as a trajectory seems normal to us, it is probably because we are projecting our own assumptions of what one would do in a similar situation. It is only once we find a comparative angle which helps capture what is surprising about an innovation that the work of historicisation can be said to be productive.

**3. Unintended Outcomes:** The final task is to connect acts of agency in order to grasp what they amount to in the broader picture and this should mostly be done in terms of unintended outcomes. Here we come back to the idea that people make their own history, but not under the conditions of their own making. By contrast to most readings, which take this as a license to employ a structural analysis, we read this notion as something that fully pertains to agency, or more specifically to the fact that since people never fully control the terms under which they make history, they never fully control what emerges from their innovations. The reason is simply that others make their own adjustments and innovations with the result that the outcome is necessarily unintended to some extent. Hence, historicisation requires that we trace social innovations in terms of complex and *decentered* lineages where multiple agencies are involved so that no one can be said to control the whole process. Such a focus on unintended outcomes is once more understood here as something to be established in relation to a specific case, rather than a vacuous ontological admission that history is made of unintended outcomes. The true hallmark of an account which makes social conflict, rather than a structural logic, the motor of history is its ability to separate agency from intentions and to move away from more functionalist readings of history where social developments are explained in terms of systemic needs or the intentions of powerful actors. In reality, things rarely pan out the way people plan it, even when it turns out much better than expected for some. In this way, establishing unintended effects is a key reflexive strategy to problematize our normalising gaze. Historically, people often struggle to transcend the limitations of their own context. For this reason, a significant transformation is unlikely to have been intended. When we see it otherwise, it is often



because with time we have come to expect a specific development as normal and as dictated by historical circumstances. To challenge this *post hoc* rationalisation, it is important to establish significant transformations as unintended effects, even when they suit the powerful.

As we have argued, these three dimensions have mostly been expunged from, or limited to a marginal role in, Marxist accounts that focus on rules of capitalist reproduction. A structural framing forces us to abstract from the specificities of social relations and social innovations in order to reconstruct causal arguments of general validity. These, in turn, often tend to be functionalist because the driving force of history has to be constructed at such a level of abstraction that conceptual shortcuts have to be taken. By contrast, the three points raised here offer guidelines for research as to the type of angle to look for when we work to historicise social development. They set parameters for assessing how productive the work of historicisation is. If one cannot say something about what is specific of the agents involved and their social relations, about the counterintuitive aspect of their innovations and the unintended nature of the consequences, then chances are that history simply serves an illustrative function to show how the logic derived theoretically played out historically. In that respect, these three points are seen as key stepping stones for PM to fulfil its commitment to historicisation by reconfiguring its methodology around the notion of agency. As we mentioned, switching the emphasis towards agency constitutes a *methodological* strategy concerned with the task of historicisation. It is not an *ontological* proposition concerning the ability of subordinated classes to transform their surroundings. The objective here is to place the emphasis on the agents, their innovations, and the difference they make. This changes nothing to the observation that powerful capitalists (or powerful states) tend to secure much better outcomes than workers (or weaker states). It is simply a matter of recognising that it is the creativity of these actors, both powerful and weaker, which is the key to the story.

This brings us to our second main argument in our attempt to reconfigure PM. If we develop a methodology based on agency, what do we do about the notion of capitalism? Shifting our analysis to capture the agencies involved in the making of history has important implications for the way we analyse it in non-structuralist and non-deterministic terms. Marxists have traditionally analysed capitalism in terms of a system with its own rules of reproduction. In that respect, the term capitalism is taken to represent a form of society governed by such an essentialised logic. Certainly, the idea of a system here provides certain conceptual advantages. It anchors the idea of a social logic generally given as the law of value. It provides an object that helps to ground the idea of contradictions (i.e. showing that this logic was fuelled by an internal contradiction) and thus set out the assumption of a limit which would make this system unviable and unable to reproduce itself beyond a certain point. But this conceives capitalism as a phenomenon difficult to historicise. As we have argued, such a conception of capitalism is ultimately incompatible with a rich practice of historicisation, since it relies on and perpetuates reification. Securing capitalism as an object of analysis at a theoretical level before engaging in its historicisation has often served to foreclose any meaningful engagement with history. For Marxists who operate within such a framework will usually be predisposed to maintain the integrity of this theoretical object, implying that history only impacts marginally our understanding of capitalism.

By contrast, we argue for abandoning the systemic notion of capitalism, with its reifying pitfalls, in favour of a more workable notion of capitalist practices that is easier to trace historically. What is at stake in determining the type of theory of capitalism we want comes down to what we are seeking to explain when developing such a theory. PM initially sought to uncover why a society began to radically transform the labour process in a systematic way, thus paving the way for an agrarian and an industrial revolution. From this perspective, the *Transition Debate* concerned the emergence of practices and social technologies which contributed to systematically transforming the labour process. As we have argued, it was not simply a matter of imperatives, but the crystallisation of specific practices to meet these imperatives. The important point is that capitalist practices could only consolidate themselves if they were formalised in various ways so as to be transportable from

one site to the next, and this required the development of a series of social technologies, which enabled new forms of empowerment. This aspect remains largely understudied even within PM, where the transformations of the labour processes have yet to be systematically traced.<sup>15</sup> This point places new demands on what PM needs to do to historicise capitalism: that is establish the ways in which capitalism was formalised in concrete structures, institutions, templates, ideas and practices that could be re-appropriated across various settings. If the work of Brenner helped specify what was new about capitalism, there is still a lot to be done to understand how social practices coalesced to produce this transformation.

As we pointed out, one important side-effect of Brenner's early work was to assume that his historically situated explanation could be extrapolated to stand as an account of all transitions to capitalism and, once locked in place, to constitute *the* fundamental logic of all capitalist societies. The fact that such practices around the systematic transformation of the labour process had been developed in this context, however, does not mean that this should be taken as the DNA of all societies where we see such transformation. There is a fallacy here in the transcendental nature of this argument, which takes a key historical development as a defining logic. It is equivalent to saying that the existence of paper money, which profoundly transformed modern monetary systems at a certain point in history when it emerged, is the defining instance of what is going on in the current financial crisis. This amounts to a *pars pro toto* argument in which a partial phenomenon is spatially and temporally generalised. To say that something is constitutive is not the same as arguing that it is the defining or the politically/socially significant instance. Now, clearly transformations in the labour process continue to be important, but we cannot assume that they are the driving force of all so-called capitalist societies. The extent to or the way in which they govern capitalist societies is a matter of historical enquiry. It should not be a theoretical postulate or an axiomatic *a priori* based on the existence of these practices. By analysing capitalism as the processes by which these practices are extended, adapted and transformed we open up a much richer agenda of research that is more amenable to the work of historicisation.

To illustrate this, it is useful to turn to three common problems which plague attempts to historicise structural notions of capitalism. The first relates to the transition to capitalism. As we mentioned in the case of Post, working from an ideal type of capitalism, or more basically from a conception of what capitalism is as a system, means that we confront a difficult task when analysing transitions to capitalism in specific countries. From this perspective, the transition is mostly a process of approaching the model or ideal type of capitalism as a *pre-defined phenomenon*. But when do we determine the moment when a country shifts from one system to another in order to establish when a society starts to approximate the ideal enough that we can grant the label of capitalism? When is a development sufficiently mature to mark the arrival of capitalism? Thinking in those terms leads us to relegate any specificity to a secondary level. The assumption of a common system (capitalism) dictates that it is the resemblance between Germany and Britain which is of greater interest in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, rather than their differences. And it leads us to emphasize the common category of capitalism when we compare US and Japanese capitalism, rather than their respective national specificities. This is always a decision dictated by the structuralist framework, not by a historical assessment. We thus end up with a largely impressionistic conception of the transition, which locates it at some point in time when, on the basis of a series of signs and indicators, we get the impression that a society is sufficiently close to the ideal to merit the denomination. Ultimately, this procedure leads largely to an arbitrary decision, more or less impossible to substantiate, with the result that capitalism remains a highly diffuse historical object with no clear lineage in most of the literature.

By contrast, a conception of capitalist practices opens up a series of interesting questions about transitions and allows us to avoid the strictures and clear-cut 'befores' and 'afters' that limit Post's and Brenner's attempts to look at other transitions. To begin with, it turns the transition into a much more meaty process beyond the very thin notion of market dependency. For the point is that

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<sup>15</sup> For an important step in this direction see Zmolek (2013)

transforming the labour process requires a set of practices, which need to be taken from one context and applied to another or serve as an influence for the creation of new practices. This is something that needs to be established historically, rather than simply assumed as it is usually the case in most of the structuralist literature. Furthermore, it raises the prospect that applying practices developed in a different context will yield very different outcomes for they are necessarily transmitted and then instrumentalised in a different way when introduced to a different social context with its own set of social struggles. In that respect, the study of the way in which these practices are translated allows us to analyse transitions without relying on a convergence model that can only understand transition in terms of countries looking more and more like an original model (i.e. the so called Anglo-Saxon model). Here the reliance on similar means, for example of transforming the labour process, can be used to different ends that reflect the specificity of social relations and the distinct struggles they give rise to.

The second problem concerns the relationship between the logic of capitalism that we define theoretically and other aspects of society, which are not initially integrated in the preliminary model of the rules of capitalist reproduction. Most authors see in capitalism a society defined foremost by a mode of production. But then, how are we to analyse other aspects of the economy which do not belong *per se* to the sphere of production? Having asserted the priority of production, we are left to 'derive' the implications of capitalist production for other aspects of society, be it governance, the state, finance, or international relations. This leads to a highly derivative account of these aspects of history which reduce them to a *functional* component of the logic of capital (Knafo 2013; Teschke 2006). Once more, the priority given to production largely restricts what can be said about these other dimensions for in imposing a 'derivative framework' we are then mostly interested in how they feed the main logic of production. To avoid such reification, the notion of capitalist practice can serve as a powerful historicising device because it makes fewer assumptions about history and thus offers more leeway for analysing various forms of social developments without having to reduce them to a single logic.

Finally, the problem of starting from the idea of systemic rules of reproduction is that it leaves very little room for analyzing the evolution of capitalism. If there is a kernel (i.e. the rules of reproduction) that is common to all capitalist societies, then this capitalist logic must be placed above history, it must be made inert, fixed, and transhistorical to the history of *capitalism*. This, of course, has created great controversies around any attempt within Marxism to periodise its evolution, with the first generation of Political Marxists standing to reduce this evolution simply to a process of generalization. Social processes are thus analysed increasingly in terms of the degree of maturity of capitalism, rather than studied as proper transformations in their own right. This type of thinking impoverishes our attempt to historicise capitalism as a set of social practices. There can be no proper historicisation of capitalism if we keep subscribing to the idea of a structural logic of capitalism, since everything included in this logic is thus removed from the work of historicisation.

Here once more, a more specific notion of practices makes it easier to trace the evolution of capitalist practices around the transformation of the labour process, and without prejudicing the various developments, such as financialisation, law, state-formation, or foreign policy.

## **Conclusion**

PM is today at a crossroad between those advocates who wish to build on a strict structuralism that emphasizes the logic of capitalism (Brenner, 2008; Post, 2011; Chibber, 2013) and a second tradition which seeks to accentuate the more historicist tradition following on the work of Wood, who occupies a half-way house between the two, and Comninel, one which is more directly inspired by E. P. Thompson (Kennedy, 2008; Lapointe and Dufour, 2012; Knafo, 2013b; Teschke, 2014). Scholars who belong to the former have often voiced their desire to move away from the idea of PM precisely because of what they perceive to be its more voluntarist overtones, with Charles

Post most notably proposing that we turn towards an idea of capital-centric Marxism (Post, 2011: 2). The historicists are more concerned with overcoming the structuralist moniker too often associated with PM in order to radicalize the historicist insights that informed the first *Brenner Debate*.

The main obstacle for this turn to radical historicism within PM is the attachment to the idea that capitalism is a system with its rules of reproduction. PM, we argue, took a first step to shift the onus back onto history, but ultimately failed to free itself from the narrow blinkers imposed by such a theoretical commitment. The outcome has been a constant tendency to discount historical evidence as secondary to the analysis, even when this approach prides itself for its focus on history and socio-political conflict. In arguing for a radical historicism, we are intent on finding a methodology, or a set of research strategies, which can make history the basis for theorisation: not as material we abstract from to formulate generic models, but a real abstraction which creates abstract objects through the practice of historical specification.

We speak of historicism because our main concern is to articulate a methodology, which can clearly spell out an agenda of research that prioritises history to make a difference to our study of capitalism - to turn historicisation into a practice that generates theoretical insights about capitalism rather than simply illustrate them or render them as instances of a super-ordinate logic. The objective is not to reason from axiomatic assumptions to the object of inquiry, but to let the object of inquiry de-stabilise and dissolve axiomatics. We qualify this as a *radical* form of historicism because we place the focus on methodology, or more specifically a form of self-discipline that comes from methodological commitments, which force us out of our comfort zone. In this respect, our agency-centred notion constitutes more than the banal Giddensian idea that people are shaped and draw upon their structural context, that they are conditioned by structures and yet also contribute to transform them (Giddens, 1984). There is no pretence here to have it both ways. For the problem is precisely the illusion that we can have it both ways. If there is an inherent bias towards structures, we simply cannot afford a voluntarist strategy that vests its hopes in our ability to overcome that bias through greater awareness of the problem. On the contrary, the goal is to establish Historical Materialism as an imperative: a method for showing what difference people make to the history of capitalism.

There is often strong resistance to historicist projects, for many critics are quick to equate this with an anti-theoretical stance - a relapse into a descriptive register or even empiricism, a refusal to do anything more than generating a narrative account. But this fear stems largely from a problematic dualism that suggests that we have no other choice than either describe or generalise. We have argued for a third position which sees the process of theorisation as a practice of specification. As demonstrated in the case of the *Transition Debate*, we can discuss changes at a macro-level through the process of specification (e.g. exploring the path-divergences between early modern France and England). A comparative method is the key here to get a solid grounding in history.<sup>16</sup> It provides great leverage to assess the broader signification of social developments we analyse and opens the door for a richer historicisation, which can help us understand how people make history even if they do not set the conditions within which they do so. In that respect, the radical historicism we propose is not a turn towards description but the systematic use of a comparative framing to generate a highly mediated conception of history.

Showing why specific changes matter to our theory is the great challenge for Historical Materialism. It is a task which has both analytical and political importance. From an analytical standpoint this enables us to challenge the common readings of history as an almost natural unfolding of some transcendental logic of social development. Politically, it helps to establish how much and what type of difference people make in order to move away from the absolutist terms under which we too often conceive of politics under capitalism.

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<sup>16</sup> The comparative method remains active even when different regions are inserted into wider geopolitical contexts, since we still need to compare and contrast differential regional and agential responses, which are not given by the common context, either domestic or international.

If agency and social change become the focus of analysis, structures should be analysed as mediating social relations rather than as determining them. The point is not to deny the importance of structures, but rather to analyse them from the perspective of agents. As we have argued, the existence of structures does not afford us a useful perspective to historicise for it forces us to abstract from the very material we need to create perspective on the social objects we study. It either dictates that we ignore what people do or that we align their agency with general theoretical abstractions in the interest of clarity of thought, theoretical rigour, and pretence to scientificity, even when we are fully aware that in the last instance it is still people who are making this history. From this perspective, scholars may very well know that there is agency, that people are making capitalism, but they still feel confident in postponing this account to further discussion *ad calendas graecas*, or remain content to read history as a mere validation and manifestation of pre-conceived logics. These moves often result because proper historicisation would be an impediment or challenge to theorisation, because it is simply not relevant until we move towards more historically oriented research or specific cases, which center agency rather than structural logics.

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