

“Winning the Peace”: The Role of International Peace Settlements in the Creation of World Orders – A “Geopolitical Marxist” Perspective

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ABSTRACT

For the discipline of International Relations (IR), the study of International Peace Settlements (IPS) for the organization of postwar international orders has thus far primarily been the purview of realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches. To date, Marxist approaches have tended to either ignore the significance of IPS in the formation of new global orders or have been inscribed into longer-term overarching processes – namely, the reified consequences of the development of capitalism. These proclivities have had the unwelcome effect of subsuming the role historical agents have played in the devising of international ordering strategies under preordained universal “laws of motion” and downplaying the broader efficacy of foreign policymaking in the building of world order. This paper proposes to rectify this Marxist lacuna by highlighting how adopting an approach that elaborates on the principles of Geopolitical Marxism (GPM) in IR can overcome these shortcomings. The paper argues that a radical historicist methodology for analysing these important world-historical junctures retrieves the significance of contextualized agency within the historical materialist tradition and overcomes the issues beholden to structuralist Marxist approaches.

Keywords: Peace Conferences, World Order, Foreign Policy, Geopolitical Marxism, The Congress of Vienna

Research Article | Received: 1 October 2023, Last Revision: 19 April 2024, Accepted: 22 April 2024

Introduction

The perception that Marxism was unable to provide a theoretical account of the emergence of the modern state-system stems from Marx and Engels’ own lack of engagement with the processes by which capitalism became spatially structured over time. However, since the 1990s and two separate calls by John Maclean (1988) and Fred Halliday (1994) for a “necessary encounter” between Marxism and International Relations (IR), the discipline of IR has seen a remarkable proliferation of Marxist studies. It is therefore somewhat curious that one of IR’s central themes – the study of International Peace Settlements (IPS) – has been largely disregarded by Marxist IR.

International Peace Settlements usually occur at the end of a period of protracted international conflict. If these conflicts are important enough to bring about the destabilization or the end of the existing world order, states have historically congregated to re-establish international order by agreeing to a basic set of interstate rules and commitments that proffer on the new order its fundamental and singular quality. For the discipline of IR, the study of these international conferences has thus far primarily been the purview of realist, liberal, and constructivist scholars. The application of Marxist theory to these key events has to date been few and far between. Why this neglect?

Marxism has played a central role in the recent “historical turn” in IR. This being said, Marxist critiques of capitalism have generally embraced structural analyses in order to identify capitalism’s universal properties and contradictions that, when established, are held to pertain across all space and all time. The view that capitalism has the propensity to expand ubiquitously and uniformly has led Marxism to favor the analysis of large historical sweeps in which many historical events become in some way reducible to the reified consequences of the development of capitalism (Wallerstein 2011). This view has also informed the drive within Marxist IR toward “general theory” rather than historicism (Knafo and Teschke 2020). These proclivities have not been congenial for the study of singular events such as IPS. Extant Marxist studies of global transformations, as I hope to show later, have largely ignored the significance of IPS in the formation of global order, tending to inscribe them either into longer-term overarching capitalistic processes such as different modes of production, regimes of accumulation, or capitalist development; or simply considering them as sociological derivatives of some of IR’s higher meta-analytical categories such as “hegemony” or “unevenness” and “combination” (Von Pfaler and Teschke 2024). These tendencies have had the unwelcome effect of subsuming the role historical agents have played in the devising of international ordering strategies under preordained universal capitalist “laws of motion” and downplaying the broader efficacy of foreign policymaking in the building of world order. This paper proposes to rectify this Marxist lacuna by highlighting how adopting an approach that elaborates on the principles of Political Marxism (PM) in IR – Geopolitical Marxism (GPM) – can overcome these shortcomings (Teschke 2003; Lacher 2006). The paper argues that a radical historicist methodology for analyzing these important world-historical junctures retrieves the significance of contextualized agency within the historical materialist tradition and overcomes the issues beholden to structuralist Marxist approaches.

This paper proceeds in four steps: I start with a consideration of the limitations and pitfalls within mainstream IR analyses of International Peace Settlements, before zeroing-in in the second section on the issues prevalent in extant Marxist approaches to the study of peace settlements. Third section provides the theoretical backdrop against which I develop a GPM-inspired historicist framework for capturing the historical specificity of foreign policymaking practices and outcomes of constructing postwar international orders. The fourth and final section outlines, substantively, what the historicist method looks like by briefly underlining its implications with regards to the Congress of Vienna (1815).

International Peace Settlements within the IR literature

The study of International Peace Settlements and their influence on ensuing international relations has been a productive area of enquiry for the discipline of IR. Whether it be Westphalia (1648), Utrecht (1713-1715), Vienna (1814-1815), Berlin (1884-1885), Paris (1919), San Francisco (1945) or Bandung (1955), IR scholars have sought to understand the dynamics underscoring these historic international forums and the nature of international relations that they have bequeathed. Some of the foremost contributions to this sub-field have come from IR's long-established schools of thought. For (neo-)realists, these international settlements have predominantly reaffirmed the systemic laws of anarchy. Conference diplomacy from this perspective is judged on the extent foreign policymakers have followed the prudent doctrines of power balancing (Gilpin 1981; Morgenthau 1985; Kissinger 1994; 2000; Carr 2016). Liberal IR scholars such as Robert Keohane (1984) and John Ikenberry (2001) have instead explored the relationship between IPS and the proliferation of international institutional regimes. Ikenberry's central claim is that "after victory" states find it in their interest to build comprehensive systems of transnational institutions, which offset power asymmetries between member states and restrain the hegemon's power returns, since these "constitutional" regimes are longer-lasting and deliver longer-term gains than orders based on hegemonic coercion or the Balance of Power (2001: 6).

The two mainstream approaches, although dissimilar in their evaluations of the implications of International Peace Settlements for the development of world order suffer nevertheless from similar drawbacks – both accounts fail to ground their analysis for the explanation of "social" arrangements and outcomes on "social" factors. Realist and liberal IR theory restricts the analysis of social multi-level phenomena to the analysis of the inter-state system (Waltz 1979). For example, in Ikenberry's study the various settlement's plenipotentiaries and their respective foreign policies are never contextualized in terms of a comprehensive analysis of the broader social settings in which they take place. The national interest is not socially anchored but instead conferred from an a priori understanding, drawn from Realism, that considers states as rational self-interested security/power maximisers. Foreign policy decisions – the increasing propensity to construct binding international institutions – are justified by examining the cost-benefit ratio of a decision within the settlement's (under-socialized) politico-strategic context in terms of producing more or less security/power over time. Realism and Liberal Institutionalism's inherent reductionism have provoked various efforts within IR to further socialize the field and to "bring history back in."

The contributions of Constructivism and the English School should be seen in this light. Rejecting Realism's stark conception of international politics as a simple power struggle between self-contained homogenous units, English School authors such as Hedley Bull emphasized the idea of an "international society" organized around "conceptions of the common interests of states, of common rules accepted and common institutions worked by them" (2012: 40). Departing from systemic theories about the pervasiveness of *Machtpolitik* – power politics – as fundamentally constitutive of IR, Constructivist and English School accounts emphasize the importance of "practices that create and instantiate" international relations (Wendt 1992: 395). Here, the importance of normative principles, ideas and culture enter the equation, not

in mere symbolic form, but at the theoretical level. The analysis of IPS as key moments in the generation and definition of international norms has proven a productive area of research for scholars of these traditions (Holsti 1990; Osiander 1994; Schroeder 1994; Reus-Smit 1999). While there are variations within the traditions, overall, for English School and Constructivist scholars:

“The great multilateral peace conferences were [...] attempts to build new world order. The main elements of these orders include the definition of norms regarding the use of force; systems of governance for the society of states; conflict-resolving mechanisms and procedures; the resolution of war-producing issues; specific terms of settlement that will preclude wars of revenge by the losers; and some consideration of the types of issues that may generate conflict in the future” (Holsti 1990: 22).

According to Andreas Osiander (1994), the study of major Peace Congresses shows us that the stability of an international system rests on certain shared assumptions. He argues that there has been a prevailing congruence among states in relation to certain structural concepts that he labels: “consensus principles” (Osiander 1994: 5-9). English School and Constructivist scholars find a progressing propensity for states to recognize shared normative ordering-principles around some fundamental questions such as sovereign independence, security, law and economic and social welfare. The diachronic approach sees IPS as historical steppingstones in the incremental development of an increasingly integrated international society. However, these approaches fail to ground their historical investigations of major international conferences within the wider domestic and international socio-economic and socio-political settings that inform the signatories’ respective foreign policies (Teschke 2020). Consequently, the analysis of the development of the international normative framework fails to account for the qualitative differences class-specific socio-economic interests make and the role particular foreign policies play in the development of the international normative architecture. In sum, historical specificity is lost, and foreign policy innovation overlooked amid an inexorable stadial progression of norm-convergence which unfolds through successive settlements.

These shortcomings, however, are not confined to the English School and Constructivism but are also inherent to more critical approaches. Marxism’s engagement with the difference IPS make to the organization of international order has been ephemeral at best.

The Problem with Structuralism – Marxism and International Peace Settlements

To overcome what was perceived as a Marxian tendency to regress into Eurocentric or internalist explanations of world history, the subfield of International Historical Sociology (IHS), and Marxist IHS in particular, has proposed largescale comprehensive theories that have sought to socialize the co-constitutive aspects of the international and domestic spheres (Duzgun 2018: 285-286). One of the results of this tendency toward grand theory-building is that Marxist

analyses that deal directly with singular world-shaking events such as International Peace Settlements have been remarkably scarce. Where analyses of these events have taken place, they have generally tended to locate these international conferences within wider economic developments or to subsume them under meta-analytical categories such as hegemony – World-Systems Theory (WST) and Neo-Gramscian IR – or the results of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD). By way of illustration, this paper will look at two Marxist treatments of IPS – Wallerstein (2011: Ch. 2) on the Congress of Vienna and Anievas (2014) on the Treaty of Versailles – to show how adopting grand theory-building, prevalent in the above approaches, downplays the broader efficacy of foreign policymaking and under-specifies the role historical agents play in the formulation of foreign policy and grand strategy.

Immanuel Wallerstein on the Congress of Vienna

For Immanuel Wallerstein (2011: 39), the Congress of Vienna needs to be placed within the wider structure of World-System hegemony. Vienna marked the definitive triumph of Great Britain in its “150-year-long struggle for hegemony in the world system” with France. With hegemony secured, Wallerstein (2011: 38) argues that Britain set out to “concentrate the worldwide accumulation of capital within [its] frontiers” based on the relative free movements of goods and capital. Strategically this meant propping up the restored liberal government of its erstwhile rival, France, whose support was necessary to counter the reactionary forces of Russia, Austria and Prussia, that now represented the main threat to Britain’s geopolitical and economic interests (Wallerstein 2011: 39-41). It also required Britain to “rationalize the role of the state”, that is, to liberalize its institutions to facilitate the accumulation of capital through trade and foreign investment. The Congress of Vienna thus represented the first steps in the gradual institutionalization of the liberal state, which was to become “the new political model for states located within the core zone” and to serve as a “key element in the legitimization of the capitalist world economy” (Wallerstein 2011: 21).

The core issue with Wallerstein’s analysis of Vienna stems from a deeper problematique rooted in the difficulties of reconciling history and theory in IR theory-building. According to Wallerstein (1974), the world system is defined by a trade-based international division of labor that cleaves the capitalist world system into 3 zones – the core, semi-periphery and periphery. Hierarchy between the zones is sustained via a system of politically constituted unequal terms of trade. At the apex of this world-structure sits a hegemon that “is able to impose its set of rules on the interstate system, and thereby create a world political order as it thinks wise and advantageous to itself” (Wallerstein 2013: 13). WST positions itself as a broad-spectrum theory that looks to capture the history of the capitalist world-system in its totality.¹ Yet the more a theory is abstract and nomothetic, intending to speak to a wide range of cases, the more it necessarily generalizes and must neglect historical specificity (Knafo and Teschke 2020). Extensive passages in Wallerstein’s (2011: Ch. 2) work – for example, his discussion on Castlereagh and Metternich’s competing notions of order or the party-political and ideological conflicts over the shape of the British and French states – are historically rich and replete with historical nuance and contingency, however in his theoretical analysis of the conference

1 Wallerstein dates the beginning of the modern world-system to “the long sixteenth century”, starting in Europe.

Wallerstein endeavors to shoehorn these complex and eventful episodes into his overarching structure of hegemony grounded on a commercialized conceptualization of capitalism (Brenner 1977).² Since WST's conception of hegemony is centered on a deep structural functionalism – power is functionally derived from a state's position within the economic structure of the international system – diverse strategies of reproduction and territoriality are overlooked in favor of a unitary and functionally deduced strategy which is always to gain control over the redistribution of trade-surplus between the (semi-)periphery and the core.

Following WST, the deliberations between the great powers at the Congress of Vienna are therefore viewed in a monothetic way. Britain essentially sought – as all other hegemons did before it – to concentrate the flows of international trade within its national borders. Foreign policy agency is entirely discounted as the summit's participants could hardly have done otherwise. Concomitantly, the little attention that is afforded to internal class dynamics in the prosecution of its grand strategy is principally centered on a ruling class solely dependent on trade for their social reproduction, thus the notion of the national interest is entirely derived from and is tantamount to commercial interests. Absent from this perspective is any genuine analysis of class conflict and the domestic contestation between multiple strategies of reproduction that continuously interacted leading to the constant revision of the national interest in the face of diverse national and international pressures.

Relatedly, another uncomfortable historical question arises; it is now well documented that trade and the issues pertaining to trade were “hardly discussed” and definitively off of the agenda at Vienna (O'Brien and Pigman 1992: 94; Ward and Gooch 1922; Webster 1963; Bridge and Bullen 2005) thus for the Wallersteinian understanding of the capitalist system, which is primarily grounded around trade and the politics of trade, the historical and theoretical difficulties are plain. One could argue that claiming that the capitalist world-system is essentially a trade-based system does not automatically entail that discussions among the major powers necessarily dealt with trade, however for Wallerstein this would certainly diminish the world-historical importance of Vienna, something that he does not concede in his study.

Alexander Anievas on the Versailles Treaty

In his article on Versailles, Anievas (2014) sets out to counter standard Realist and Liberal interpretations of Wilsonianism. Rejecting the given taxonomy of Woodrow Wilson as the archetypal liberal politician, Anievas rightly highlights the contradictory and illiberal foundations of Wilsonianism. In the introduction Anievas (2014: 621) maintains that one of the aims of the article is to “take the motivations of actors seriously” by providing “an accurate understanding of the ideological framework guiding their action” (2014: 621). The effort to move away from the most abstract strand of theory that conceives of UCD as a universal law of world history – perhaps best summarized in the work of Justin Rosenberg (2006) – is worth acknowledging, however as the argument unfolds it becomes clear that relaxing UCD's rigid framework of analysis is easier said than done and the goal of providing a more nuanced and

2 For the Brenner-Wallerstein debate on the origins of capitalism and the world-systems perspective, see Brenner (1977); for a good summary of the debate and how it impacts IR, see Denmark and Thomas (1988).

agent-centered approach ultimately recedes into the background. While Anievas' interpretation of Versailles offers an important corrective to dominant mainstream accounts, I will argue that his analysis suffers from three interrelated problems: the reification of "the international"; a lack of class agency and a failure to engage with international politics writ large.

Anievas (2014: 633-634) criticizes conventional IR for its "socially 'thin'" treatment of the peace settlement as they have tended to "exclude the dimensions of modern international order-formation arising from the historically pervasive crucible of war, imperialism and revolution". According to Anievas, incorporating "the international" into the analysis leads us to understand Wilsonianism as a reaction to two manifestations of combined development, the Bolshevik Revolution and domestic social unrest. To overcome these twin threats, Wilson sought to institute a postwar global order that would prevent the spread of revolution and reform "traditional atavistic forms of imperialism" (Anievas 2014: 636). In short, and in UCD parlance, US foreign policy at Versailles was geared towards, "the geopolitical management of combined development and its consequences" (Anievas 2014: 634); a grand strategy already identified by Rosenberg (1996: 12) as the major social content of US foreign policy during the Cold War. Firstly, inferring the same broad lines behind US foreign policy despite two diametrically different postwar circumstances does little to dispel the notion that UCD is unable to transcend hyper-structural conceptualizations of IR, accommodate human agency and historical specificity. (Teschke 2008; Rioux 2014; Van der Pijl 2016; Von Pfaler and Teschke 2024). In the same way that agency in WST is reduced to gaining control over the redistribution of trade-surplus between the periphery and the core, for UCD, it is hard to see past how the leading liberal-capitalist states can ever do otherwise than seek to manage the effects of developmental unevenness.

Anievas bids to counter the implied analytical shift into abstract reasoning by injecting a dose of agency through an examination of "the guiding ideological framework" undergirding Wilsonianism. He concludes that Wilson's determination to institute a "rule-based and racially hierarchical order" can be traced back to his own personal experience of the combined nature of US capitalist development (Anievas 2014: 626-629). Wilson's ideological framework then is conceived as an outcome of the sociological results of compressed capitalist development. Yet the continuous recall of prior causes to explain foreign policy decisions, which were taken *in situ* and in real time, obscures the impact of the multi-lateral negotiations and the difference Wilson and his team of foreign policy specialists made to the final Versailles settlement. Thus, the pivotal contribution of the Inquiry, the commission set up by Wilson's national security advisor, Edward House, for the planning of a favorable territorial, economic and political postwar order is neglected in Anievas' history of the peace settlement (Smith 2003). The Inquiry's pre-conference role in the formulation of strategy is substituted instead by the abstract and systematic requirements of "the geopolitical management of combined development". Ultimately, by perpetually folding the analysis back into antecedent causes, Anievas' goal of providing a more agent-centric approach ultimately fails to deliver.

The concomitant failure to engage with the sub-fields of international politics and grand strategy formation leads to a devaluation of the diplomatic encounter. For example, the clash between the US, Britain and France, over their competing visions of empire and different

conceptions of global order at a time of rising worldwide nationalist insurrection does not feature as a meaningful explanandum in the paper. As a result, the paper fails to recognize how the mandate system was in fact a hybrid construction originating in the interaction between the “Big Three’s” qualitatively different colonial strategies and how the negotiations themselves were instrumental in the shaping of the postwar world order and the expansion of US capital abroad.

Furthermore, the departure from historical materialism’s usual concerns with social property relations and class conflict, I argue, means that “the international” develops into an elusive metaphysical entity, difficult to isolate and to pin down. Thus, the role of class interest and the social relations of early 20th-century US capitalism (Sklar 1988), are completely disregarded as a foundation for shaping foreign policy and devising grand strategy. The lack of engagement with multi-lateral diplomacy and the significance of *Innenpolitik* – domestic politics – leads to a one-dimensional reading of the peace settlement as merely the outcome of horizontal state competition predicated on unevenness, and misses the vertical dynamic, the class struggle embedded in the settlement, that helps us to understand one aspect of the Versailles settlement as a conservative “pre-emptive counterrevolution” by the reactionary forces of Europe (Mayer 1967).

In short, for the reasons highlighted above, Anievas’ attempt to accommodate agency within what remains a highly structural general theory falls short. The structural-functionalism inherent in UCD’s method leads Anievas to devalue the significance of the diplomatic encounter, instead, the key focuses of US foreign policy and grand strategy, even if correctly identified, are continually attributed to abstract processes beyond the grasp of the people on the ground, while diplomatic praxis is reduced to the effects of higher structural requirements. What emerges as the genuine subject of the conference is not the manner in which situated historical agents navigated the historical environment thrown up by World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, but rather how Wilson managed, or failed to manage, the ‘sociological vectors’ derived from unevenness. It is in fact these “vectors”, endowed with power to determine social action, that take on the role of key players in the analysis, relegating the conference’s participants to a peripheral position. However, power, influence, and international ordering are not conferred through an abstract notion of capitalist development that generates programmatic policies but are instead formulated by state managers and disseminated internationally through “statecraft, foreign policy, war and diplomacy – geopolitics in the standard sense” (Teschke and Wyn Jones 2017: 19). What is therefore required to move beyond abstract structural theorizing for recovering the significance of these important international conferences that have generated novel, *sui generis*, international order-building strategies is a theory of international politics that takes seriously the role historical agents have played in the building of international orders.

The Promise of Geopolitical Marxism for the Study of International Peace Settlements

Geopolitical Marxism (GPM) in IR has grown out of the innovations of PM, most notably the contributions of Robert Brenner (1985) and Ellen Meiksins Wood (1991 and 2002) in the intra-Marxist debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Brenner and Wood’s

contributions problematized the structural Marxist belief that capitalism generates predictable and identical results whenever and wherever it is established.³ Employing a comparative approach, Brenner (1977) highlighted that similar structural circumstances such as the uptick in European medieval trade, widely believed to have caused the transition from feudalism to capitalism, had in fact had different outcomes in different parts of Europe – the development of capitalism in England and the entrenchment of feudalism in Poland. Brenner emphasized the crucial historical role of class conflict in the development of capitalist, yet politically constituted, social property relations in England. In other words, Brenner and Wood underlined that what differentiated capitalism as a social system from contemporary modes of social reproduction was its “inner logic”, the way it shaped the relations among the members of a society subject to its dynamics, as opposed to a system born out of a crude quantitative leap in exchange (Wallerstein 1974). Thus, in lieu of traditional ahistorical structural analyses, PM shifted the focus toward an approach that privileged a “historicism” centered on class agency and contextualized socio-political conflicts.

Within the field of IR, Benno Teschke (2003) and Hannes Lacher (2006) drew out the implications of Brenner and Wood’s approach for the study of international relations. The key observation for both these scholars, and GPM more generally, was that capitalism emerged into a pre-constituted state-system. It therefore follows that if geopolitical practices constitutive of the modern state-system pre-dated the development of capitalism then, *contra* structural IR Marxist approaches, it is important to refrain from drawing strong causal links between the abstract categories of capitalism and geopolitics. Developing PM’s historicist method, GPM historicizes the geopolitical practices of international relations by detailing how specific social property relations define the institutional contexts of foreign policy and grand strategy formation which in turn lead to distinct and qualitatively diverse international “spatialization strategies” (Lacher 2006: 121). GPM therefore moves beyond the inherent functionalism bestowed by a theorization of international relations that reifies the consequences of the development of capitalism, and points instead toward a theory centered around socializing and historicizing IR – the goal being to move beyond IHS to provide a genuine Historical Sociology of International Politics (Teschke 2021). Fundamental to this sociology of geopolitics lies the open-ended encounter between different spatialization strategies – i.e., foreign policy/grand strategy as historically contested social relations – within the realm of international politics. It seeks to illuminate the processes by which states deal with the political tensions posed by international multiplicity, interactivity and conflict. In the instance of applying a GPM approach to critical historical junctures such as IPS it considers how states, and their representatives approach the politically and historically contingent driven question of “how to win the peace after winning the war?”

Structuralist theories of IR are inclined to dismiss the efficacy of foreign policy and the influence of diplomacy in international relations in favor of systemic meta-analytical categories like Capitalism, Hegemony or the Balance of Power. Thus, singular events such as IPS have tended to be overlooked or devalued as higher logics that play out over time are held to produce superior, more comprehensive outcomes. However, these system-level

3 For the “Brenner debate”, see Aston and Philpin (eds.) (1987).

nomothetic models fall prey to the charge of reductionism since they inevitably imply that agency and autonomy, notably within the sub-field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), is neglected to the detriment of unit homogeneity and foreign policy uniformity (Singer 1961). Marxism's failure to engage with FPA in any meaningful way remains an important lacuna for the tradition (Teschke and Wyn Jones 2017). One of the consequences of this neglect is that the major IPS have not received the attention they deserve. This is perhaps due to their nature as disrupters of the status quo that fit poorly within accepted IR structural theories and representations of international order. Yet these world-historic moments of disjuncture that produce profound (micro-/macro-) social and political transformations, I would argue, need to be recovered by the tradition of historical materialism and their importance brought to the fore, not as instantiations of wider structural logics but as important self-determining moments of international order-building in their own right.

If we recognize that IPS act as crucial turning points that engender the re-organization of international order following long periods of disorder, and we acknowledge that power is articulated at the highest echelons of the state and projected abroad through statecraft, diplomacy and foreign policy, then centering our inquiry on these important junctures necessarily implies that we turn our attention to the agents present *in situ* – the state managers, the diplomats, the foreign policy elite. This fact is however always somewhat problematic for left-leaning academics whose common inclination is to distance themselves from the history of “great men” and center their analysis instead on “histories from below” and the destructive tendencies of capitalism. However, GPM “does not” claim to “look over [the statesman’s] shoulder when he writes his dispatches; we [‘do not’] listen in on his conversation with other statesmen; we [‘do not’] read and anticipate his every thought” (Morgenthau 1985). What GPM “does” work toward, is a radical social and political historical reconstruction of the contextual milieu in which agents operated to comprehend how both national and international pressures came to affect strategies, decisions and outcomes. Put differently, a GPM analysis of international conferences works to counter the naturalization of outcomes as putatively deducible from antecedent structural determinants in favor of an analysis that highlights and specifies diplomatic agential creativity in its interaction with, and adaptation to, structural factors. It examines the way in which agents subjectively internalize and work through internal and external structural constraints whilst it simultaneously remains accommodating of unintended consequences and at times counterintuitive outcomes in the making and re-making of geopolitical order – thus unlocking “the black box” of foreign policymaking in a non-reductionist manner.

The framework of analysis for the recovery of these singular events proceeds in four steps (Teschke 2020; 2021). First, we must identify the key players – i.e., the summit’s most powerful nations whose influence on the proceedings is most decisive (I acknowledge this is somewhat of a subjective call, however common sense should apply here). Secondly, once the peace parties have been identified, we must carry out a social account of state power by accounting for the participants’ social property relations that underpin their respective regime types, concurrently, this will help to establish the polity’s economic performance as well as revealing where public revenue is being generated and where it is being directed. The third step involves situating foreign policymaking and grand strategizing within their institutional contexts. An institutional account of foreign policymaking looks at how a state’s institutions

for foreign policymaking help frame policy choices and shows how disparate interests and worldviews – usually shaped by the national political environment – come to define the national interest, “showing how the open-ended question to what purpose power is being used and being deployed is being resolved” (Teschke 2021: 115). Finally, firmly anchoring this research agenda within the field of IR and IHS and by the same token avoiding the pitfalls of purely inside-out analyses of foreign policy, we start from the premise that foreign policy and grand strategy cannot be logically deduced from the study of domestic politics alone. Rather what is required to move beyond deterministic accounts of foreign policy is an Historical Sociology of International Politics. This suggests that relational agency among international actors – how agents interpret ongoing geopolitical processes – must feature in the analytical framework if we are to underline the degree to which geopolitics influences foreign policy and grand strategy formation and to deliver on an original research agenda that transcends so-called methodological nationalism and Realism’s third-image fetishism in order to unite geopolitical and domestic sociological dynamics in a substantial social theory of IR.

The Congress of Vienna: British Grand Strategy and the Building of the *Pax Britannica*

Vienna in IR Theory

Within the IR literature, the Congress of Vienna has been portrayed as a critical moment in the emergence of the 19th-century’s relatively peaceful international order. Mainstream analyses have concluded that Vienna represented a triumph for prudent great power diplomacy founded on the establishment of a European equilibrium. Classical realists emphasize the priority given to the political redistribution of power among near-parity actors for the restitution of the balance of power over constitutional questions related to the domestic structures of its participating members. (Webster 1963; Sked 1979; Morgenthau 1985; Kagan 1998; Kissinger 1994; 2000). For Henry Kissinger (2000: 32) British policy “reflected the policy of an island power” and “a social structure conscious of such uniqueness”. Britain undertook the role of “offshore balancer” adhering to a policy of disengagement and non-intervention vis-à-vis the continent, except in circumstances that threatened its national security.

English School, liberals, and constructivists understand Vienna as a partial rejection of the old balance-of-power system in favor of an institutionalized order organized around shared norms and international constitutional arrangements. For Osiander (1994: 239), Vienna witnessed the development of the “great-power-principle” which signifies that the pentarchy arrogated to itself the supervision of the international system, governing the system through “consensus”.

Neo-Gramscian scholars take their analysis a step further by challenging the Realist external-balancer thesis. They invert the conventional perspective by connecting power-balancing to Britain’s foreign policy rooted in domestic bourgeois hegemony. This connection, in turn, paved the way for British liberal hegemony within the global economy. According to Robert Cox (1987: 124), “Castlereagh’s policy aligned seamlessly with the interests of British economic expansion and the British bourgeoisie”.

On this basis, I suggest that realists, despite producing an accurate empirical reading of the British-sponsored Vienna settlement, fail to provide an appropriate social explanation of British grand strategy. Liberals and constructivist on the other hand by failing to ground their analysis on the signatories' different social property relations, their different regime-types, their socio-political differences and their socially anchored foreign policies, overemphasize homogeneity and underspecify power asymmetries between the contracting parties. Finally, while Neo-Gramscians succeed in recentering the analysis back to the social structure of capitalist Britain and move to propose the concept of "hegemonic order" as a solution to the question of "how to win the peace?", they misinterpret the purpose of British grand strategy and fail to recognize the illiberal and non-hegemonic character of *British primacy*. Overall, these theoretically informed interpretations provide a broad, yet incomplete, reading of Vienna and an inability to fully capture the uneven outcomes of the congress.⁴

The Blue-Water Policy: Strategic Power Balancing, Colonial Expansion and Pacifying Social Unrest

The Congress of Vienna reconfirmed a century-old British-dominated world order. After the final allied victory at Waterloo that halted the hegemonic advances of French republicanism on the European continent, the victorious powers – Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia – convened, with France, to settle the unresolved questions provoked by the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and to establish a durable peace plan. Yet how is Britain's unique grand strategy at Vienna – characterized by a combination of offshore-balancing and non-interference toward Europe alongside aggressive economic expansion overseas – to be explained? I propose that this policy was not without precedent; rather, it was devised and officially codified a century earlier in the Peace Treaty of Utrecht – The Blue-Water Policy (Baugh 1988; Teschke 2020; 2021).

The Blue-Water Policy had emerged in the early-18th century as a composite world-ordering strategy that amalgamated Tory and Whig strategic preferences vis-à-vis the continent and its overseas colonies. The strategy involved on the one hand, military engagement in Europe – favored by the Whigs – and on the other, an aggressive naval mercantilism – preferred by the Tories (Teschke 2021: 121-122). Through the eighteenth century, a commitment to overseas empire-building through an aggressive brand of mercantilism, public enthusiasm for expansion as a way of securing commercial returns as well as the intensifying transoceanic competition with France following the Seven Years' War, combined with a growing averseness to direct geopolitical involvement in Europe (Black 2016: 89-107), resulted in a decisive strategic shift toward colonial expansion and continental disengagement (O'Brien 1999).

By 1815, Britain had established a considerable material advantage over its European counterparts based on the endogenous development of capitalist growth which resulted in a dynamic home-market underpinned by high productivity, technological innovation and rapid industrialization. Long-term as well as short-term fiscal reforms – the land tax and Pitt the Younger's war-time income tax respectively – provided the British state with a taxation system which allowed for "the efficient mobilization of resources necessary for effective action in

⁴ An exception is Schroeder (1992).

international relations” (O’Brien and Hunt 1999: 90). Militarily, large investment in the Royal Navy established Britain as the world’s leading naval and commercial power. Britain’s mastery of the seas, its dynamic home-market and its domination of world-trade meant that Britain attended the conference in a position of strength.⁵

As the only capitalist power at Vienna, Britain’s foreign policy had come to express the secular interests of the polity. The rise of agrarian capitalism in the English countryside led to the reform of the British political system. The British state became a centralized “formally autonomous state which represented the private, ‘economic’ class of appropriators in its public, ‘political’ aspect” (Wood 1991: 28). In other words, capitalism transformed the British state; its fundamental role coming to be the preservation of its private property regime (Teschke 2003: 256). The development of capitalist social property relations and this new form of sovereignty entailed a revolution in public administration. By 1815, foreign policy was extensively debated in Parliament and was principally determined by the government in office as a secular affair (Black 2004). Whereas foreign policy remained the prerogative of Emperors and Princes on the continent, the British parliamentary system led to foreign policy and grand strategy coming to embody the interests of Britain’s private proprietors, its ruling classes – the landed aristocracy and the emerging manufacturing class – and the political parties that represented them in Parliament – the Tories and the Whigs.

On the continent, because farmers retained customary rights in the Old Regimes of Europe agricultural practices did not acquire a capitalist dynamic as they had in England (Brenner 1985; Lafrance 2019). As Russian, Prussian, Austrian and French social property relations were not conducive to capitalist development, limited economic dynamism and international competitiveness meant that markets could not be obtained through economic means. Europe’s absolutist states thus continued to understand expansion in purely territorial terms underscored by pre-capitalist principles and strategies that viewed land mass as a basis of power and security. These territorial ambitions resulted in the war-time Treaty of Kalisch (1813) which divided the central European territories of Poland and Saxony between Russia and Prussia respectively. It was therefore quantitative expansion, rather than qualitative as in Britain, that led to “geopolitical accumulation” – through alliance-formation, inter-dynastic marriage and territorial aggrandizement – remaining the dominant and preferred method of (geo-)political reproduction for the Old Regimes of Europe (Teschke 2003).

In 1815 Britain was a nation in transition and the socio-political structure of the polity was rapidly evolving “as the logic of agrarian capitalism and industrial capitalism continued to transform British social relations” (Žmolek 2013: 611). While the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars marked a pause in conflict abroad, within Britain, internal unrest persisted as society grappled with bread riots, labor strikes, and large-scale protests, occurring against a backdrop of economic downturn and increasing rural poverty (Thompson 1963; Hobsbawm 1977). Despite the growing challenge of the industrial-capitalist class to the political hegemony of Britain’s ruling agrarian-capitalist elite, the political landscape at the time of the Congress of Vienna was marked by the so-called “Tory Reaction.” This period saw the concentration of

5 Britain’s naval supremacy was compounded with victory over the French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar (1805) (Bartlett 1963).

landed wealth, a proliferation of titles, and a Parliament controlled by the landed aristocracy (Žmolek 2013: 611-613).

At Vienna the reactionary Liverpool Government was represented by Lord Castlereagh, who adopted Britain's now tried-and-tested Blue-Water Policy. During negotiations, Castlereagh's principal objective on the continent was therefore to re-establish the stability of the European state-system to dissuade any future hegemonic bids, "to appease controversy, and to secure, if possible, for all states a long interval of repose" (Castlereagh in Public Record Office 1817). Armed with the Pitt Plan – a plan devised in 1805 by Pitt the Younger for the geopolitical redistribution of territory in Europe⁶ – and in a position of strength due to Britain's role as "paymaster of the coalition" (Ward and Gooch 1921: 392), Castlereagh redefined the borders of Europe. He federated the German principalities in order to "lay the foundations of a counterpoise in the center of Europe" (Castlereagh in Public Record Office 1817: 405); he negotiated the expansion of Prussia into Saxony; with the support of Metternich and Talleyrand, he negotiated the annulment of the Treaty of Kalisch, countering Russian aspirations regarding Poland by partitioning it amongst the three Eastern powers (Osiander 1994); he insisted on the neutrality of Switzerland and enforced the redistribution of French post-revolutionary territorial acquisitions by founding the Kingdom of the Netherlands under the House of Orange which incorporated Belgium – "that pistol pointed at the heart of England" – creating a buffer zone between France and Britain.⁷

The second strategic principle of British foreign policy, contained within its wider Blue-Water Policy, was assuring its continued dominations of the seas and world trade. Thus, throughout negotiations with its allies at Vienna, "maritime rights" were definitively kept off the agenda at British insistence (Bridge and Bullen 2005). Furthermore, Britain negotiated on a bilateral basis, independently from the Alliance, securing its maritime position in the Mediterranean, the route to India and commercial privileges in Latin America.

The third strategic vector – and for Britain the most perplexing one - was how to align the regional security architecture of the three Eastern Crowns with its continental and global interests. The diplomatic literature frequently credits Metternich, acknowledging his role in engineering a European consensus on the principle of legitimacy while curbing Russian and Prussian aspirations in mainland Europe (Kissinger 1994). Metternich's endeavors resulted in Castlereagh securing the majority, *though not all*, of his objectives during the negotiations in Vienna. During the conflict, to preserve the anti-French alliance, the restoration and affirmation of the principle of legitimacy had to be recognized. This resulted in Britain having to reluctantly participate in an "uneasy" relationship with the "backward" Eastern powers in a postwar European system for the management of international affairs: the Concert of Europe, from which it would eventually disengage after the Congress of Verona (1822). Britain's failure to provide hegemony, in its most comprehensive Realist sense, meant that the Holy Alliance – that "sublime piece of mysticism and nonsense" (Castlereagh in Bridge and Bullen 2005: 38) – which codified the rights of intervention among its members to suppress the forces of republicanism, liberalism, and secularism across Europe and the globe also had to be

6 For work that covers the 'Pitt Plan', see Webster (1921) and Kissinger (1994).

7 'Pistol pointed at the heart of England' was a phrase used by Napoleon to describe the port of Antwerp, Belgium.

factored into the terms of the treaty. These concessions to legitimism would ultimately set in motion a series of unintended geopolitical events that would play out on the other side of the Atlantic in the so-called “Western Question” and the US declaration of the Monroe Doctrine (1823).⁸ Yet Britain’s support for the conservative reaction against European radicalism also had a view toward pacifying Britain’s domestic unrest.

Thus, Vienna confirmed an international order generally consonant with British interests. *Vis-à-vis* Europe British foreign policy was non-territorial, it sought to balance between the three conservative powers according to the principle of “legitimacy” and support the parcellation of Europe to prevent the rise of another continental hegemon. This was not indicative of a British patronage of “self-determination” nor was it, as has been claimed, a desire to export its constitutional model to the rest of Europe (Wallerstein 2011; Chapman 1998). Instead, British strategy was defensive and geared toward its own security interests, however this was not an inevitable outcome derived from the properties of the international system under conditions of anarchy as suggested by Waltz (1979). Rather British foreign policy denotes the conscious strategic manipulation of the balance of power as an innovative diplomatic policy conceived and activated by British foreign policymakers in response to the dynamics of international politics for the furthering and protection of the British national interest.

The historical reconstruction of this singular international event, that moves from the domestic to the international contexts, highlighting in the process the ways in which agents responded to the shifting contextual determinants, shows that the international order bestowed by Vienna cannot be captured by standard IR approaches. To understand world order in terms of the Balance of Power, as we have seen, fails to register the power inequalities between the various nations. The concept of Hegemony, commonly used to decipher international order is also found wanting. For realists that understand Hegemony in terms of capabilities, the problem lies with the fact that, while Britain “ruled the waves”, it was not a hegemon in terms of military power on the European theatre as it chose not to translate its industrial and financial superiority into military dominance. Nor does the more fluid neo-Gramscian concept of Hegemony, that highlights power and social purposes and is held to illuminate the role of the British capitalist class in trans-nationalizing liberal principles fundamental to the development and legitimization of capitalism, adequately capture British-European relations (Cox 1987). As I have shown, there was no European consensus-formation around shared regimes of accumulation, instead Britain’s persistent goal of maintaining economic primacy through its colonial empire, pushed rival European powers to pursue more conservative avenues of modernization, retarding industrialization and consolidating anti-liberal political forces across Europe (Lacher 2006; Lacher and Germann 2012).

In sum, Vienna emerges as a critical IPS that institutionalized a British-led “global” project, constructed around some key British ordering principles for the management of international politics and the political geography of Europe and Empire. Instead of reading Vienna as the deductive outcome of one of IR’s orthodox meta-analytical categories, using the

⁸ For an excellent article on the “Western Question” see Blaufarb (2007).

methodology proposed by GPM allows us to see Vienna as a creative multidimensional answer to the early nineteenth century structural environment informed by Britain's Blue-Water Policy and the diplomatic mission led by Tory Foreign Minister Castlereagh, to further British geo-economic and geopolitical interests while simultaneously pacifying domestic social strife. In essence it provided an answer to the question of how to win the peace after it had won the war, reaffirming an age of British dominance in international relations.

Conclusion

Historical Materialism remains an important tradition for the discipline of IR. The “historical turn” in the 1990s entailed a “boom” in Marxist studies set on critiquing the orthodoxies of mainstream historical IR. This Marxist effervescence energized and revolutionized the way in which international change and international dynamics were theorized. The degree to which these Marxist critiques have penetrated and instigated introspective adjustments within mainstream IR, and the sub-field of IHS more specifically, however remains uncertain. One reason for this is that grand theory building prevalent in the “Marxist historical turn” has been frequently (and hypocritically) charged with being over-structuralist, and, as this paper has argued, there remains some validity to this criticism.

GPM, as I have shown, offers an antidote to the issues beholden to structuralist historical Marxism. By providing an open-ended, yet theoretically and methodologically controlled, agent-centered radical historicist approach, GPM sheds light on the intrinsic importance of examining IPS and proposes a fundamental rethinking of how these significant world-historical events, these important moments of order-building, should be understood and the way they profoundly shape international relations. As I have shown with reference to Vienna – but the methodology is transposable to different historical moments and locations – GPM emphasizes the novel and creative ways in which historical agents have interpreted the structural terrain; but while structures continue to matter, they cannot by themselves explicate and historically specify why certain decisions and courses of action are taken. The challenge of Marxism to conventional IR narratives alongside GPM's challenge to other Marxist traditions has generated a new dynamic research agenda within IHS. Building on the work of “second-generation” GPM scholars (Teschke 2003; Lacher 2006) there has been a recent proliferation of GPM-informed research that challenges extant “derivative” notions of geopolitics and focuses instead on the active construction of foreign policy and grand strategy formation across diverse settings and timeframes (Pal 2020; Salgado 2020; Teschke 2021; Koch 2023; Parris and Van Rankin Anaya 2024). This renewed Marxist intervention into longstanding IR debates patently defy the long-held and erroneous notion that Marxism and IR remain mutually exclusive.

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