

## Reorienting the Critique of the Capitalist World System beyond the Dichotomy between Trade vs. Production Relations

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“... the expansion of foreign trade, although the basis of the capitalist mode of production in its infancy, has become its own product, however, with the further progress of the capitalist mode of production, through the innate necessity of this mode of production, its need for an ever-expanding market.”

-Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III

The question of ‘capitalist transition’ has been one of the central themes of Marxist scholarship including world-system analysis,<sup>1</sup> and much effort has been made to identify how the capitalist mode of production came into being at a particular time in a particular location, and what historical conditions gave rise to it. The debate between Andre Gunder Frank and more broadly world-system analysis and Robert Brenner in the 1970s constitutes one of the key instances of this debate. Since Brenner called world-system analysis ‘neo-Smithian’ and criticized it for confusing the generic concept of market economy with capitalism (namely, capitalist social relations), the debate over capitalist transition has often been described as a contention over whether trade or production should be given primacy in explaining the emergence of capitalism: has the expansion of the market through intensifying *trade* linkages, or the establishment of social relations of *production* caused the rise of capitalism (see Bergesen 1984)? Furthermore, as Bergesen points out in his essay, the debate between Frank (and Immanuel Wallerstein) and Brenner also reflects their different views on the concept of ‘capitalist society,’ particularly in terms of its boundary. While the former takes the totality of the world-economy as the unit of analysis and brings to the fore questions of *global* inequality and the unequal distribution of wealth, the so-called core-periphery relations, Brenner emphasises ‘internal’ social relations of production and class struggle, thereby projecting the notion that society in the capitalist mode of production is a nationally contained entity. Bergesen (2015) detects an irreconcilable tension between world-system analysis and more traditional Marxists such as Brenner, stating that “[m]ode of production and world-economy, then, are two different economic systems, and there is no way to move theoretically from relations between whole zones of the world to relations between classes within a zone.”

The apparent irreconcilability between world-system analysis and Marxist analyses that are implicitly based on a form of methodological nationalism seems obvious enough. Brenner and his followers emphasize, time and again, the historical specificity of capitalism as distinct from previous modes of production in relation to class relations based on wage labour and the ways in which the dominated get access to the means of subsistence. It is implied in this approach that capitalist transition is assessed by the degree to which “forced

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<sup>1</sup> While Bergesen discusses Wallerstein’s work and approach as ‘World-System Theory’, in this paper, I refer to it as ‘World-System Analysis.’ Wallerstein has recently re-emphasized his original intention in coining the term to put forward “neither a theory nor a new paradigm, but a call for a debate about the paradigm” (see Wallerstein 2011: xxx).

labour” such as serfdom has been transformed to “free” or wage labour by way of proletarianization, within a given (national) society. On the other hand, world-system analysis tends to define capitalist transition rather loosely, namely as the initial transformation of feudal Europe into a capitalist world-economy, and the subsequent incorporations of extra-European, non-capitalist systems into the expanding capitalist world-economy. To the extent that capitalist transition is defined in this way, world-system analysis is more susceptible to seeing continuities between different modes of production, especially in the composition of the ruling class and the persistence of what it regards as features of non-capitalist modes of production, such as slavery and serfdom in the capitalist world-system.

The seemingly irreconcilable difference between these two positions appears to have been widened further with the publication of *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998) and Frank’s subsequent book *ReOrienting the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (2014).<sup>2</sup> While capitalism, according to Brenner, is so distinct from other non-capitalist epochs that seeing the continuities between different modes of production will de-historicize it, capitalism according to Frank does not constitute a significant departure from the single world-system whose structure has remained unchanged for the last 5,000 years. In search of what Bergesen (2015) describes as “the essential operational logic of the world-trade-economy away from the historically contingent, and always changing, world-economy based upon the capitalist mode of production,” Frank finds in multilateral trade linkages the constant aspects of the political economy of the world-system.

Bergesen’s article on Frank’s new approach thus seems to open up again an important yet unresolved debate in assessing the origins and evolution of capitalism, particularly concerning the relations between trade and production on the one hand, and the relations between “the national” and “the global” on the other hand. In what follows, I will critically assess Brenner’s critique of world-system analysis and Frank’s *ReOrient* as exemplars of the two main poles of scholarship that place the primacy either on production and disjuncture or trade and continuity in explaining the origins and evolution of capitalism. I argue that Brenner’s and Frank’s positions both fail to conceptualize the mutual constitution of trade and production relations in capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, both propose affirmative visions of capitalism: Brenner idealizes industrial capitalism as the driving force of progress juxtaposed to stagnant and backward non-capitalist modes of production, while Frank, by replacing his critique of core-periphery relations generated by the capitalist mode of production with the notion of an eternal (Sinocentric) world system, effectively eliminates any elements of a critique of the *capitalist* world-system. I argue that both Frank and Brenner arrive at a non-critical theory of capitalism because they fail to conceptualize capitalism both in terms of its *historically specific* mode of production and exploitation and at the same time in terms of its civilizational *continuities*. I will discuss an alternative theoretical framework for the relations between trade and production, and continuity and discontinuities of the capitalist mode of

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<sup>2</sup> There seems a consensus that Frank has an intellectual break to the extent that his intellectual trajectory can be categorised into the two phases, namely Frank I and Frank II (see Kay 2011).

<sup>3</sup> A problem common to Brenner’s version of Marxism and world-system analysis in general is the lack of a concept of the capitalist state as political form of capitalist social relations and social domination. Both see the state as a mere instrument for class rule, implying that it can be utilized for the purposes of whichever class enjoys possession of the state. Against this functionalist perspective, I would hold that the existence of the state *itself* is indicative of class domination and exploitation. As a result, world-system analysts seem to think the socialist transcendence of capitalism entails the creation of a world state that corresponds to the world-economy as opposed to the multiple nation-state system. For Brenner socialism means minimising uncoordinated competition between economic and national actors, implicitly endorsing central state planning (see Postone 2007). For a critique of the form of the capitalist state see Song (2011, 2013a).

production with reference to Marx and von Braunmühl (1978), and will point to possible conclusions in relation to what a critique of the capitalist world-system should entail.

### **Brenner: From Historicising to Idealising Capitalism**

One of the key propositions that Brenner famously makes against world-system analysis (Frank and Wallerstein) is that it confuses markets/trade/commercial/circulation relations with the social relations of capitalist production. Brenner argues against the view that the global division of labour through the expansion of the world market determined the rise of capitalism and development/underdevelopment on a global scale, and maintains instead that particular class relations that emerge out of class struggles explain the rise of capitalism and the course of economic development. According to Brenner, by prioritizing the global division of labour by “market/trade relations,” world-system analysis fails to understand the distinctive class relations in capitalism, that is the existence of “free labour” (in the double sense of free to enter into contracts and freed from ownership of any means of production) as opposed to “forced labour” such as in serfdom and slavery.

... the rise of trade is not as the *origin* of a dynamic development because trade cannot determine the transformation of class relations of production. Indeed, precisely because it does not do so, the historical problem of the origins of capitalist economic development in Europe comes down to that of the process of ‘self-trans-formation’ of class relations from serfdom to free wage labour – that is, of course, the class struggles by which this transformation took place (Brenner 1977: 38, emphasis in the original).

An important implication resulting from Brenner’s assertion of class relations as a key reference in assessing the capitalist mode of production is to emphasise the historically unique dynamics that it unleashes: the existence of “free labour” or the commodification of labour power separates the capitalist dynamic from previous epochs by compelling the enhancement of labour productivity through relative rather than absolute surplus extraction.

That is, under capitalism, surplus is systematically achieved for the first time through increases of labour productivity, leading to the cheapening of goods and a greater total output from a given labour force. This makes it possible for the capitalist class to increase its surplus, without necessarily having to resort to methods of increasing absolute surplus labour which dominate pre-capitalist modes – i.e. the extension of the working day, the intensification of work, and the decrease in the standard of living of the labour force (Brenner 1977: 30).

Being unable to grasp this historically distinctive characteristic of capitalism, world-system analysis is based on “an ahistorical, non-class concept of the division of labour, which fails to notice that the very development of the trade-based division of labour can only be product, not the source, of the development of the productive forces (the productivity of labour)” (ibid: 56).

Brenner’s critique of world-system analysis was followed by a debate amongst scholars from various intellectual traditions (for instance, Bergesen 1984; Laclau 1977; Skocpol 1977), within which Brenner’s critique was unquestioningly seen to represent the Marxist account. Brenner’s emphasis on concepts such as “class struggle” and “class relations of production,” and his copious use of quotations from Marx seemed to justify this

reception. However, I would like to argue that the “historical materialism” that underpins his position not only renders his critique of world-system analysis ineffectual, but also in important ways fails to differ from a liberal framework.

Brenner’s critique of world-system analysis for being “ahistorical” is based on his schematic demarcation between the different modes of relative surplus and absolute surplus extraction, each of which corresponds to capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production, respectively. However, Wallerstein’s introduction of the term “historical capitalism” (1996) precisely refers to the fact that the capitalist mode of production that is analyzed by Marx in *Capital* in terms of abstractions based on observations made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century needs to be examined on a richly concrete historical level. Instead of attempting to propose an alternative theory of capitalism (hence world-system *analysis*, not world-system *theory*), Frank and Wallerstein trace the historical unfolding of global capitalism in order to highlight how much and to what extent features of capitalism that many Marxists describe as “regular” and “dominant” are neither regular nor necessarily dominant, particularly in the context of the periphery. This is the starting point of world-system analysis, at least as practiced by Wallerstein (and Amin 1978, 2013): to shed light on the actual historical evolution of global capitalism that seems to deviate from the ways in which the “pure” capitalist system is supposed to operate.

Furthermore, Brenner’s emphasis on the social relations of production as determined by nationally contained internal class struggle leads him to deny that class relations themselves are inseparable from what he understands to be “external” and “trade” relations. In other words, within Brenner’s framework, questions concerning hierarchies and differences between the developed and the developing countries do not arise other than as interactions between “national societies” assumed to be separate entities, each of whose development prospects and outcomes is supposed to be *equally* determined by internal class struggles. There are numerous examples that point to structural and perpetual *unequal* patterns of the global division of labour and to poor development prospects of developing countries which cannot be explained solely by “internal” class struggle. For instance, as of 2011, in garments, footwear and toys, 90% of contract manufacturing is located in developing countries (including Less Developed Countries). It is also historically observable that the so-called successful “catch-up” economies, e.g. South Korea and Taiwan, industrialised through specializing in the low end of value-added manufacturing products in the world market, particularly by receiving declining industrial facilities from developed countries (Japan), which in turn to a great extent set the conditions in which particular class relations are formed and transformed (Song 2013b).

It is still a contentious issue whether “the development of underdevelopment” of a social formation in the periphery is the outcome of its integration into the capitalist world-economy, as scholars of world-system analysis (notably early Frank and Amin) suggest. However, one of the important insights that world-system analysis offers is a relational view on the developed (core) and the developing (periphery) countries—the rapid industrialization in one part of the global economy can be caused by de-industrialization in another part. Further, they allow us to be attentive to the structural features of capitalism that limit development prospects of social formations that are “late” in world time, which to some extent determines the location at which and the manner in which a social formation is integrated into the capitalist world-economy, which in turn sets the conditions for the “internal” class relations to be formed. In this respect, the point at which Brenner *arrives* is the point from which Wallerstein and other scholars of world-system analysis *depart*.

Brenner’s ill-placed critique of world-system analysis based on his exclusive emphasis on the historically specific aspects of capitalism manifests itself, ironically, as an ahistorical and idealist account of capitalism in two ways. First, his definition of “capitalist

transition” measured by the degree to which labour force is converted to “free labour” or proletarianized within a single social formation is idealistic to the extent that, if his definition is applied, no social formation that exists today has ever “completed” its transition to capitalism. A form of labour such as “forced” or “non-wage labour” that Brenner posits as antithetical to capitalist “free labour” is persistent not only in the so-called periphery, but within core capitalist countries, e.g. women’s domestic labour. In short, the more Brenner addresses the historical disjuncture of the capitalist mode of production one-sidedly, the more he presents an idealist account of capitalism: capitalism that accords with his “pure” form does not and arguably cannot exist in reality.

Second, in contrast to Brenner’s argument that capitalism is characterized by its relentless drive to enhance labour productivity through relative surplus extraction, the ultimate drive of capital is surplus value, which does not necessarily result in revolutionizing production techniques and productivity enhancement. In other words, as long as absolute surplus extraction is more profitable on an immediate basis, there is every reason for capital to stick to old techniques and reproduce traditional social relations. Capitalism has historically shown a tendency to destroy and transform old social relations, and at the same time a tendency to maintain and reproduce old forms of labour such as family farming, semi-servitude and semi-proletariats, which might partially account for what Frank famously described as “the development of underdevelopment.” These contradictory dynamics of the movement of capital are captured by Marx when he suggests that capital’s sole interest in value production at the expense of everything else (e.g. natural wealth, the environment) in fact undermines its own reproduction and retards productivity growth: “The *real barrier* of capitalist production is *capital itself*” (Marx 1984: 250, emphasis in the original). By characterizing capital one-sidedly as a productive and revolutionizing force, Brenner proposes an idealized vision of capitalism that is not fundamentally different from a bourgeois vision of capitalism as productive, dynamic and progressive, as opposed to unproductive, static and stagnant pre-capitalist modes of production.

### Frank: From Eternalizing the World-System to Abandoning a Critique of Capitalism

If Brenner’s position represents an approach that one-sidedly emphasises the primacy of production over trade relations in explaining the origins of capitalism, Frank’s *ReOrient* and *ReOrienting the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* represent the opposite end of the spectrum by placing the primacy on trade in analyzing the dynamics of the world-system.

Frank criticizes his own previous conceptualization of *bilateral* core-periphery relations for being too simplistic to grasp the North’s colonial, imperialist or neo-colonial relations with the South. He then proposes *multilateral* trade relations or series of combinatorial/intersecting triangular trade relations as a central explanatory aspect of the evolution of North-South relations and the world-system. Bergesen derives three main merits in Frank’s new approach. Firstly, Frank challenges a ‘production-centred’ vision of the world-system by bringing to the fore the trade base of British dominance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the trade foundation of the world-system in general. He argues that the dominance of Britain in the global economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century cannot be explained by its industrial revolution and its exporting “machine-made, factory-assembled, capitalistically-organized, and industrially-produced commodities but by its advantageous trade position through the global network of world trade and its complicated system of im/balances, through which it derived from abroad interest, profits and rent.” Secondly, Frank gives due importance to what Bergesen calls the “global-political” aspects of the political economy of the world-system. The fact that the dominance of Britain did not accrue from its industrial power but from

various “invisible services” (e.g. colonial administration charges and disproportionately high shipping charges) imposed on and paid by colonies, notably India, points to the importance of *political and military* components of the world-system that created and sustained Britain’s position as the apex of the trade triangle. Thirdly, to the extent that complex multilateral structures have been operating since time immemorial independent of the varying modes of production, Frank concludes that the world system originated 5,000 years ago. Further, the world-system has always been Sinocentric, except in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Europe accidentally and momentarily rose due to Asia’s decline. It is thus envisioned that the multilateral trade structures will continue to operate and that the recent rise of China indicates the return to the “normality” of the Sinocentric world-system. From this, Bergesen (2015) argues that Frank’s new approach “represents a radical departure from present efforts to map properties of the historical moment, or moments past, or speculate upon moments to come,” and call for a shift in our focus to the continuous and persistent aspects of the world-system.

It should be recognised that Frank’s new approach has important merits in his attempt to challenge “production-centred,” “economic-deterministic,” and “Eurocentric” visions of the world-system. Moreover, as Bergesen rightly points out, Frank’s new framework is better able to analyze the dynamics around the rise and fall of the sea-power based hegemons of the capitalist world-system, and grasp the geopolitical dimensions in creating and maintaining them. Particularly his emphasis on the structural continuities of the world-system can counter a production-biased Marxist analysis of capitalism as seen above with reference to Brenner’s critique.

However, while Frank’s stress on multilateral trading relations/intersecting triangular trade relations as the characteristic of the world system is empirically illuminating and historically informative, on the theoretical level, it is either redundant or hardly adds anything new to world-system analysis. As Wallerstein succinctly writes, “[i]f there is a division of labour, there must be trade, which will almost necessarily be multilateral” (1999: 356). Furthermore, the “capitalist-world economy” within the framework of world-system analysis is defined as “an economic division of labour, which is overlaid by a multicentric system of states as opposed to a ‘world-empire,’ where economic division of labour is incorporated within a single overarching state apparatus. Scholars of world-system analysis made it explicit that the political system of capitalism is posited not as the state [as a single unit], but as the larger competitive system” (Chase-Dunn 1981: 36). From its inception “the capitalist mode of production has been ‘imperialistic’ in the sense that it constitutes a hierarchical division of labour between core areas and peripheral areas” (ibid: 30; see also Bergesen 1984). In other words, within the concept of the capitalist world-economy it is already implied that the state system, state-building and geopolitics are political dimensions of the same process that is integral to the rise and operation of the capitalist mode of production.

Seen in this way, the fact that Frank extends the basis of the world-system from bilateral to multilateral relations, and the fact that he adds geopolitics as an important component of the world-system in addition to other aspects, e.g. the economic, is no more than restating what is already addressed by world-system analysis. Alternatively, this only amounts to the confession that Frank himself hitherto held an “economistic” perspective that takes as given the apparent dichotomy of geopolitics and economy. The inseparability between politics and economy is a proposition upheld not only by world-system analysis scholars, but one even shared by Otto Hintze, a representative thinker from the Weberian and “political autonomy” school:

All in all, the war years and the decade that has elapsed since offer no evidence of an autonomous economic development of capitalism, wholly

detached from the state and politics. They show rather that the affairs of the state and of capitalism are inextricably interrelated, that they are only two sides, or aspects, of one and the same historical development (Hintze quoted in Wallerstein 2011: xxii).

However, a more serious problem of Frank's new approach seems to stem from his flawed understanding of the relations between trade and production. In the same way Brenner places primacy on production over trade in his analysis of the origins of capitalism, Frank merely reverses the emphasis within the same framework. However, Frank's dichotomy between trade and production is even more extreme to the extent that recognizing the primacy of one means discarding the other. From the existence of multilateral trade relations/structures prior to the capitalist mode of production, the existence of the latter is to be denied altogether. As Bergesen (2015) states:

If the world economy has to be between continents, which by definition is more about trade than production, and if world trade relations historically pre-exist the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, does this suggest that the modern world-system is not, in fact, based upon the capitalist mode of production, but is part and parcel of a much larger and historically longer world economic system of multilateral trade relations?

In other words, the relations between trade and production become zero-sum relations—the mode of production belongs to the realm of the national/the social, while trade belongs to that of the global, and these two systems cannot co-exist analytically. This remarkable conclusion is associated with the fact that within the framework of the “Frankian Triangle,” trade relations exist only externally to production relations, so that there is no communication between the two parallel structures.

While it is perfectly legitimate for an individual to pursue, as a matter of focus, research on the lasting and overarching structural aspects of the world-system as opposed to the changing variables within the structure, this has different theoretical and political implications to arguing that the global and the social, trade and production relations, do not mutually constitute and influence each other. In effect, Frank suggests that the multilateral trade structure has been immune to different modes of production and to any changes in the *content* of trade—e.g. trade patterns, trade volumes and intensity under different modes of production. In other words, what is being traded and how goods and services are produced in the first place, and what drives and shapes a particular pattern of global division of labour move outside the purview of inquiry.

As noted above, the fact that 90% of contract manufacturing in the capitalist world-economy today is located in developing countries points to the hierarchical and unequal structure of the global division of labour. However, this does not amount to a primordial class neutral structure of the world-system, as Frank and Bergesen suggest. Rather it is an outcome of the historically specific dynamics of capital that relentlessly seeks a high rate of profit (a higher rate of exploitation), typically moving away from militant labour as it searches for lower wage costs on the global scale. In other words, the historically specific mode of production based on value production alters the content, purpose and patterns of foreign trade itself, and foreign trade (and colonialism) are expressions of the intrinsic dynamic and contradictions of the capitalist mode of production:

Capitals invested in foreign trade can yield a higher rate of profit, because...there is competition with commodities produced in other countries with inferior production facilities, so that the more advanced country sells its goods above their value even though cheaper than the competing countries. .... As concerns capitals invested in colonies ... they may yield higher rates of profit for the simple reason that the rate of profit is higher there due to backward development, and likewise the exploitation of labour, because of the use of slaves, coolies, etc. (Marx 1959: 238).

Apart from vulnerabilities on the theoretical level, Frank's one-sided emphasis on the conserved structure of the world-system based on multilateral trade has devastating consequences as a critique of capitalism. By turning his focus to an eternal and unchanging multilateral trading structure, his approach effectively loses any elements of critique against the capitalist mode of production—if there is no such thing as capitalism as a historical system there is nothing to be transcended. Similarly, within this framework—what Amin calls 'flattened history' (Amin 1999: 293)—Frank's critique of eurocentrism is affirmative of capitalism by way of making capitalist norms invisible: his critique, in fact, elevates non-Europe (China) to the level of Europe in terms of how much it has been productive and developed. His critique is emptied of the core content of the concept of eurocentrism, namely the one thing that has made Europe central to the modern world in the first place: *capitalism*.

### Re-directing a Critique of the Capitalist World-System

The limits of Brenner's and Frank's positions throw up the question what a critique of the capitalist world-system should mean and entail. While each of these two approaches offer valid accounts of aspects of the capitalist world-system, they both fail to understand the mutual constitution of trade and production in both the origin and the continued operation of capitalism: while intensifying and deepening trade relations makes capital accumulation possible for industrial production, expansive industrial production also presupposes the world market and its expansion. In Marx's words, "the colonies created world trade, and world trade is the condition of large-scale industrial enterprise" (Marx 1977: 167); the "tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself" (Marx 1973: 408).

Brenner's approach with its focus on production and capitalism's historically specific aspects can be complemented by world-system analysis that focuses on the more long-term and persistent aspects of the capitalist world-system. However, the continuing characteristics that permeate different modes of production are not an unchanging trade structure emptied of class content as Frank suggests, but the perpetual reproduction of class societies and domination. Referring to the apparent contraction between the capitalist world-economy and the nationally-organized inter-state system, von Braunmühl offers an alternative vision against the dichotomy of trade and production as to how the current political system based on a plurality of nation-states is "essentially due to the domination which characterises relations within *all previous societies* and to the *specific form* this domination takes under capitalism" (1978: 173, emphasis added):

The capitalist mode of production then comes into being within these pre-existent bounded territories, where authority and competition prevail. In the capitalist mode of production, domination is reproduced in the mechanism of economic functioning itself and yet needs *politically* regulative and repressive safeguarding precisely because as anarchically exercised authority it is incapable of being adequately assured

by the operation of the laws of production (von Braunmühl 1978:173, emphasis in the original).

Analysed from the perspective of von Braunmühl, transcending the limits of Brenner and Frank should be more than merely synthesising the two different emphases. What is ultimately required for the critique of the capitalist world-system is the *simultaneous* recognition of the historical specificity of the capitalist form of social domination rendered by generalised commodity (value) relations and its place in a civilizational continuity of class domination.

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