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## **What about class struggle? Critical reflections on Uli Brand's HMPA**

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Keywords: historical materialism, policy analysis

Uli Brand's development of an HMPA is very welcome. Nevertheless, I argue in this short piece that he overlooks two important dimensions of a historical materialist analysis: (1) the wider structuring conditions of capitalism; and (2) social class forces as key collective actors. Both are necessary to retain the emancipatory dimension of historical materialism.

### **Und was ist mit Klassenkampf? Kritische Anmerkungen zu Brands HMPA**

Schlüsselwörter: historischer Materialismus, Policy-Analyse

Uli Brands Ausarbeitung einer historisch-materialistischen Policy-Analyse ist eine sehr willkommene. In diesem Text argumentiere ich, dass allerdings zwei wichtige Dimensionen vernachlässigt werden: (1) die strukturellen Bedingungen des kapitalistischen Systems, und (2) soziale Klassen als kollektive Schlüsselkategorie. Beide sind notwendig, um den emanzipatorischen Anspruch des historischen Materialismus aufrechtzuerhalten.

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The article *State, context and correspondence. Contours of a historical-materialist policy analysis* by Uli Brand is important. First, because the development of a Historical Materialist Policy Analysis (HMPA) challenges dominant liberal approaches of policy-making head-on by providing an alternative Marxist conceptualisation. Second, it complements more agency focused historical materialist analyses with an emphasis on the role of the form of state in policy-making. Finally, it distinguishes an HMPA from related interpretative policy analysis approaches. Drawing on the work of Nicos Poulantzas and his understanding of the state as a social relation, i.e. a material condensation of relations between classes and class fractions, Bob Jessop and his strategic-relational approach to the state, as well as Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Uli Brand conceptualises well in what way policy-making is shaped and influenced by particular forms of state. The state is thereby not neutral, but its strategic selectivity privileges some strategies and agents over others.

And yet, considering that the ambition is to develop a historical materialist analysis of policy-making, I am left with two queries. First, it is clearly important to conceptualise the institutional constraints and enabling features of the state form on policy-making. However, are there not more significant structuring conditions at work within capitalism? Because the capitalist social relations of production are organised around the private ownership of the means of production and wage labour, not only workers, but also capitalists have to reproduce themselves via the market. As Marx noted, "under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him" (Marx 1867/1990, 381). Capitalists are in constant competition with other capitalists over market share and larger profit rates. "If accumulation is not carried on, if the apparatus of production is not constantly modernized, then one's own enterprise is faced with the threat of being steamrolled by competitors who produce more cheaply or who manufacture better products" (Heinrich 2012, 16). Hence this innovative dynamic of capitalism and its relentless focus on competitiveness and higher profit levels. Equally, however, capitalism is characterised by the tendency towards periodic crises. Precisely because capitalism is so dynamic and innovative, crises of overaccumulation occur on a regular basis, when surplus labour and surplus profits can no longer be brought together in an effective way (Harvey 1985, 132). Finally, in order to overcome crises there is a constant outward expansionary dynamic around uneven and combined development as capital strives to incorporate new space into the capitalist social relations of production or re-establish existing links between core and peripheral spaces in novel ways. As Leon Trotsky already observed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, "in the process of its development, and consequently in the struggle with its internal contradictions, every national capitalism turns in an ever-increasing degree to the reserves of the 'external market', that is, the reserves of world economy" (Trotsky 1929/2007, 137). Would an HMPA not have to take into account these wider structural dynamics of the capitalist social relations of production and the way they impact on policy-making as well as constrain and shape the relative autonomy of the state, identified by Poulantzas (1978)?

Let me elaborate on this issue a bit further. For Poulantzas it was clear that capital in general had to sacrifice the interests of a particular capital fraction at times in order to secure its medium- to long-term interest in continuing surplus accumulation. Hence, his concept of the relative autonomy of the state, facilitating these processes. In these struggles, it was not only class forces in the power bloc, but also dominated forces, which played a role in shaping policies. The post-war period, for example, was a moment in industrialised countries when the dominated forces could push the power bloc to make concessions for workers. Nevertheless, these possibilities will ultimately always be limited by the structuring conditions of the capitalist social

relations of production around competitiveness, the crisis tendency and uneven and combined development. When the rate of profit started to decline in the late 1960s and a global economic crisis ensued throughout the 1970s, capital quickly renounced the national class compromises of the post-war period. Thomas Piketty's (2014) analysis of income inequality across industrialised countries has found a huge and unexpected response in media, politics and (the liberally minded) academia. To those who are more concerned with the fundamental logic of capitalism, his findings are hardly surprising, although they serve as a nice empirical confirmation. Unlike Piketty's focus on the redistribution of wealth, however, a historical materialist analysis focuses on the way production is organised. Hence, an HMPA must include the structuring conditions of the capitalist social relations of production in its analysis.

My second observation is about agency. Who are the agents to analyse in policy-making from an HMPA? Uli Brand speaks of societal actors, but who are these supposed to be? Personally, I think from a historical materialist perspective the key agents have to be classes and class fractions, which could also be called social class forces. Ultimately, a historical materialist analysis is class analysis, or, to be more precise, the analysis of open-ended class struggle. Would this not also be necessary for an HMPA? Clearly, when pursuing such a focus on social class forces and, more precisely, class struggle, it is not enough simply to look at struggles at the workplace between workers and employers or between trade unions and employers' associations as their institutional expressions. A focus on social class forces and class struggle requires that work and workers as well as their institutional expressions are defined in a broad way. Social class forces act within and through different organisations such as political parties, interest groups, etc., and they intersect with other identities along ethnic and gender lines (Bieler 2014). These dynamics need to be taken into account. In the following, I want to introduce two different ways of how class struggle could be considered in a broader way.

First, when reflecting on the increasing number of struggles of the late 1960s and 1970s, Harry Cleaver asserts that "the reproduction of the working class involves not only work in the factory but also work in the home and in the community of homes [...]; the working class had to be redefined to include nonfactory analysis" (Cleaver 1979/2000, 70). Analysing the "social factory" allows Cleaver to take into account all the other forms of unwaged activities including child rearing, education, which are necessary for the reproduction of workers and the continuation of capitalist accumulation, but take place outside the workplace. Drawing on the work of the so-called Italian New Left around Mario Tronti and Antonio Negri, he concludes that "the identification of the leading role of the unwaged in the struggles of the 1960s in Italy, and the extension of the concept to the peasantry, provided a theoretical framework within which the struggles of American and European students and housewives, the unemployed, ethnic and racial minorities, and Third World peasants could all be grasped as moments of an international cycle of working-class struggle" (Cleaver 1979/2000, 73).

Another attempt to include struggles outside the workplace into class analysis is made by Kees van der Pijl. He argues that neo-liberal capitalism is characterised by the fact that capitalist discipline has now also been further extended within the entire process of social reproduction, involving the exploitation of the social and natural substratum. In response to the commodification of social services and the intensified destruction of the biosphere as well as the disruption of traditional life, a whole range of new, progressive but also nationalist right-wing social movements have emerged to defend the environment and sphere of social reproduction (van der Pijl 1998, 46–48). This has to be analysed as class struggle as much as exploitation and resistance to it in the workplace. In other words, resistance in the sphere of social reproduction can equally

be understood as class struggle. They become class projects in that moment, when they entail “a direct challenge to the circulation and accumulation of capital” (Harvey 1996, 401). In short, provided work and workers are defined broadly a focus on class struggle has no problems with incorporating struggles over gender, ethnic and environmental divisions into an analysis of policy-making.

In sum, the article by Uli Brand is excellent in that it brings historical materialism to the discussion of how to analyse policy-making. Nevertheless, he too quickly accepts an exclusive focus on policy at the expense of a more holistic approach. He too quickly follows a mainstream, positivist understanding, which separates out distinctive areas for enquiry. Economics is analysed without reference to politics and vice-a-versa, policy is analysed as if politics did not matter. As a result, the internal relations (Ollman 2003) between the various fields of study are overlooked. What is still required in my view is, therefore, further reflection on how to analyse social class forces as key collective agents as well as how to conceptualise class struggle taking place within the wider structuring conditions of the capitalist social relations of production and not only the institutional state form. Unless this is done, there is the danger that the analysis of policy-making remains within a bourgeois social science understanding of traditional policy-making analysis. There is the danger that the horizon of research is limited to analysis within capitalism, but unable to conceptualise and reflect on policies beyond, thereby losing the emancipatory dimension of historical materialism.

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