International Relations and the Political Economy of Truth

Choosing another Fate

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16th April 2013

Much of IR theory has been dominated by the realist and idealist traditions. Deriving largely from Hobbesian thought, the realist tradition is one that tends to view the state as a rational agent that seeks to maximise its objective interests on the world stage. From Kant’s idealist thought, we have the affirmation of a common humanity and the idea that states should seek to co-operate and to achieve the goals of universal peace, justice, hospitality and so on.

Quite justifiably, there have also been attempts to deconstruct these traditions. First that it is in the real interests of all states to co-operate and to maintain common ideals and practices in the face of common global problems – in other words, real interests are not simply given but are constructs and can be modified according to context. Second, ideals always have to be embodied in real terms in order to have any efficacy.

However, there is also a third perspective that, to my knowledge, has not been so well developed in IR theory: materialism. Materialism has to be considered as quite distinct from both idealism and realism. In philosophical terms there is considerable ambiguity surrounding this term. Broadly speaking there are two main perspectives: (i) scientific materialism, where everything is viewed as reducible to material processes (physical, chemical, biological and so on); and (ii) discursive materialism, where everything is viewed as belonging to a contingent discursive formation.

But the status of ‘everything’ in these two perspectives is precisely the issue. And it is here that an alternative approach to materialism presents itself. This type of materialism problematizes the very idea of ‘everything’ and can be encapsulated in the paradoxical phrase that ‘everything is not-all’, or ‘reality is not-all’.

For the origins of this type of approach, we have to look at the world’s first quantum theorist: Hegel. Slightly joking. This is a response to Stephen Hawking’s view that ‘philosophy has not kept up with developments in modern science’ (2010: 13). In fact the opposite is true: it is only now that modern science is catching up with the philosophical thought of Hegel.

Hegel is usually seen as an idealist; in fact, the ultimate or absolute idealist. Was it not Hegel himself who declared that all philosophy was idealist? Of course, what he meant by this was that whenever philosophers try to assert some kind of ultimate material presence (atom, string or whatever), then this can only be done in notional terms as universal concepts. The point for Hegel, however, is that no notional structure ever manages to complete itself. Hegel does not assert any independent substance (substance is spirit) or primary matter as the source of his materialism. On the contrary, materialism arises precisely as the result of an inability of any idealist structure to complete itself or to become All (or One). For Hegel, we always arrive at a certain non-all or incompleteability.

It is against this background that we can understand Hegel’s notion of the absolute Idea. The absolute Idea has no content of its own but rather reflects the point at which content passes over into a pure kind of form that is revealed as for-itself, or as self-reproducing (Hegel: 304). What is shown in the absolute Idea is not anything substantial but its very ‘system of determinations’ or ‘currency of moments’ (Hegel: 304). The absolute Idea represents the point at which the subject-object field of reality is perceived/experienced as something that is delimited as a frame of being. It is the whole that organizes and makes sense of the particular moments as a characteristic for-itself economy/configuration. In a way, it is both pure form and pure content. That is to say, the absolute Idea expresses both the nature of form as a particular kind of content (i.e. delimitation as such as the universal content) and of content as a particular kind of form (the characteristic articulation of its moments as universal form). What is real for Hegel is the process of differentiation as such, and the delimited fields of differentiation that emerge from it historically in the guise of necessity.

As Solomon argues, absolute knowing’ in Hegel has nothing to do with ‘knowing everything’ (Solomon, 1983: 639); it is not a question of a development in the quantity of knowledge but of its quality (Solomon in Solomon & Higgins, 1993: 193-194). Absolute knowing is rather the recognition of the absolute limitation of the frame of being as such. The In-itself can never be grasped in a tangible sense because the In-itself is nothing but the frame of being produced through delimitation. Put in other terms, what absolute knowing ‘finds’ ultimately in the search for the In-itself is the field (or field-ness) of the search itself.

This distinguishes Hegel not only from Kant but also from contemporary interpretivists who tend to argue although we are bound by interpretivist discourse there is nonetheless a world ‘out there’ that exists in independent terms. For Hegel any such independence is a delusion. Just as the north and south poles of a magnet exist only in relation to each other, being itself can only be achieved through the basic principle of distinction (i.e. through constitutive otherness). Developing this metaphor further, we might say that reality itself is structured as a kind of magnetic field that is generated by the scissional tension between the poles of subjectivity and objectivity. These poles have no particular content in and of themselves, yet their mutual dependence and mutual thwarting is capable nevertheless of producing a tensional field of phenomenal reality.

This is also where contemporary views of science (philosophy of) – from Bhaskar to Meillasoux – take a wrong turning. That is to say they remain too wedded to the quantitative model of knowledge – where science is viewed as something that gains progressively on the real – and misses precisely this qualitative shift in the unfolding of knowledge towards an appreciation of absolute limitation. As Žižek points out, the problem of epistemology is ultimately a problem of ontology. This has been demonstrated in the quantum physics of people like Niels Bohr who have shown how the more science closes in on the basic units of material existence, the more indeterminate they become (see Barad, 2007: 127-28; Žižek, 2012: 924-25). It is not that epistemology reaches a certain limit while reality remains ‘out there’ in full independent terms (so that we have multiple ‘interpretations’ of something that already exists); it is rather that reality itself is ontologically, and constitutively, incomplete. The indeterminacy and incompleteness of reality is not something that can be epistemologically overcome; they are rather the very in-itself of reality as such.

It is against this background that we can understand Hegel’s argument that substance is also subject. Subject is not a separate entity, but the inherent negativity of substance itself. Equally, substance has no independence ‘out there’; it is rather a continuous process of differentiation driven by this negativity. When Harris speaks of Hegel as positing a ‘self-moving substance’ (1997: 87), we should perhaps add two further points: first, in its basic nature, substance is nothing but movement; second, this movement is generated by a kind of absolute inertia: namely, inward opposition and the essential failure of substance to achieve full being. As Hegel states, ‘it is contradiction that moves the world’ (Logic: 187).

From this point of view, science cannot be regarded as a continuum of neutral knowledge that gains progressively on an indifferent world/substance; precisely because there is nothing substantial to be gained. We cannot penetrate to an underlying objectivity reality because we are already included within the negativity that moves the world and thus do not have an independent standpoint. In this sense, we are always in a condition of being *in medias res*. The first quantum theorist, Max Planck, makes a similar point:

‘Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are part of nature and therefore part of the mystery that we are trying to solve’ (Where is Science Going? 1981: 217).

The point is not that there reality outside of us, but there is no us outside of reality. The distortion of reality – its incompleteness and so on – persists precisely because we are active participants in the distortion (observation itself collapses the wave function and gives rise to phenomenal consistency).

What does any of this have to do with IR? Hegel is highly consequent for IR. To begin with, when we are dealing with the field of IR we are always dealing in some sense with an idea of universality – common rules of engagement, standards regarding the treatment of combatants and civilians, arms control and so on. In Kant, the basic idea was that eternal peace could be secured through an alliance of princes/states capable of strengthening the dimension of universality and of neutralizing particular antagonisms and conflicts. But in Hegel we cannot simply eliminate particularity. A state for Hegel is essentially a ‘particular will’ – even a federation of states will establish its own particularity – and as such it will always give rise to its Other; its opposition or enemy. In other words, there is always this inherent dimension of negativity that particularizes every universality as a certain cut (concrete universality) and which defines it through logics of exclusion/opposition. This means that war in some form or another is essentially a reflection of a more basic condition of inherent negativity, contradiction and so on, that is constitutive of every particularity as a particularity.

So for Hegel, war and peace do not exist independently or exclusively of each other; rather they subsist together as a kind of oppositional or dialectical unity. Peace itself requires the dimension of conflict/war. As Hegel puts it, peace is something that is won through ‘means of war abroad’. Similarly war is something that is conducted on the basis that it is temporary and that it always already contains the possibility of peace as its outcome. So the Kantian approach is not only mistaken, but if it were taken to its ultimate conclusion of establishing a world government with a world citizenship, would lead to far more intense and widespread forms of conflict. That is to say, the very commitment to establish a universal peace would itself create a climate of intense hostility to all those national movements asserting the right of self-determination and particularity in some way. We may very well ask the question as to whether we are already approaching this condition today – i.e. increasing divisions between states that form part of today’s global capitalist empire and the excluded ‘rogue’ states. In fact, is this not a condition that is emerging not only between states but precisely within states as well – the top 20% versus the 80% of the global poor, the homeless, slum-dwellers, the *sans papiers*, the displaced and stateless and so on.

This is also indicative of Hegel’s approach to the idea of totality. A totality refers not simply to what there is but, even more significantly, what there is not. A dialectical totality is crucially defined through its exceptions and failures and the way in which it takes these into account. The truth of a totality is determined at this level of exclusion, deliquescence, what is pushed to the background or shaded out of the picture. International relations is very much part of what might be considered a totality’s political economy of truth.

A clear exception today is the DR of Congo. Recently there have been attempts by the UN to address the horrors that exist there, especially as regards the systematic use of rape (even of children and infants). And this is undoubtedly a horror. But the problem here is a general tendency towards a de-politicization of the situation and which consequently allows that situate to continue as before. There exists a kind of hyperactivity (liberal outrage, the mobilization of humanitarian agencies and so on), but no real action that would effectively change matters or to address its political economy of truth. In short, what is overlooked is the horror behind the horror.

The reality of Congo is that it is integrated directly into the cycles of capital. Through intermediaries, multinationals (like Sony and Motorola) trade with local warlords for the supply of minerals and especially the supply of coltan-tantalum which is used in our cell phones, computers, electronic surveillance, internet, satellite systems and so on – basically all the hardware for the reproduction of today’s information-driven virtual capitalism. So the Congo is not simply an horrific aberration, it is precisely part of the existing capitalist totality; its power base and economy of terror are directly supported and facilitated by the existing framework of global capitalism.

Another example: French intervention in Mali, which has been largely justified on the grounds of containing Islamic radicalism. Again, what this overlooks are the conditions of poverty and social deprivation that are the direct consequence of global capitalist forces. France is protecting its economic interests; especially access to iron and uranium in the surrounding regions (Chad and Niger) on which its extensive nuclear programme relies. But the key issue concerns Mali’s main export, cotton, which is produced in a highly efficient way and to a very high standard. However, because the US government massively subsidizes its own cotton barons (more than $26 billions over the last ten years or so), this has encouraged over-production which has driven cotton prices down. As a condition of its loans from the IMF/World Bank, Mali, by contrast, is not allowed to provide subsidies to its own cotton farmers.

In Hobbes there are three main dimensions involved in international relations and international conflict: gain, glory and security. But we should also add a fourth dimension that mediates/overdetermines the other three: the dimension of fantasy or belief. In psychoanalysis, which has a clear Hegelian pedigree, fantasy is not something secondary or superfluous. On the contrary, fantasy plays a central role in the structuring and organization of reality. Fantasy, in a way, provides the missing ingredient of perspective that fills in the incompletion and allows reality to appear and take on some kind of phenomenal consistency.

For the same dialectical reasons, Hegel argues that always a complex interplay between faith and knowledge. The great appeal of fantasy and belief is that it mediates knowledge and information even when it appears contrary. There is a well-known book entitled *50 Facts that should Change the World* that provides startling information about inequality, disease, social deprivation and so on – it basically proves that modern capitalism is not working. And yet it is clear that these facts continue not to change the world (same thing can be said about *The Spirit Level*). What is revealed here is the structure of fantasy – ‘we know very (that there are insurmountable problems) but…nonetheless we continue as if we do not know’. You know something but you suspend its efficacy; you know it but you don’t believe it.

This becomes even more complicated in the field of inter-subjectivity where you have to try and take into account what the Other also believes. So, for example, in the current economic crisis banks will only lend if they believe that other banks also believe in meeting financial risks and so on – so you have this objective economy of belief; belief layered upon belief. This is why Walter Benjamin argued that ‘capitalism is a religion of pure cult, without dogma’; it constantly generates a kind of superego guilt (nothing is ever quite good enough, so you must go on) without any sense of atonement; it is a kind of anti-religious religion in this sense.

Is there not something of this order in the current crisis in the Korean peninsula? That is to say, it is not enough to simply dismiss Kim Jong-Un as involving himself in straightforward posturing – if he believes that the West do not believe he is serious then this could make matters truly critical; not believing could bring about the actualization of the rhetorical threats. So there is this game of believing in the threats (taking them seriously), while at the same time knowing implicitly that these are basically bluffs and rhetoric. So again there is this almost ritualized process or objective economy of belief that has to be gone through; that becomes its own necessity. If you wish to test this objective economy of belief with real consequences, I suggest you go to an airport and joke to the security that you have a bomb in your luggage.

It is against this background that we can understand Hegel’s notion of ‘the loss of the loss’. The central point here is that we never had what we appear to have lost. In the beginning there was already a loss, nothing substantial, and it is precisely fantasy that tries to fill in for this loss – so what you lose is, in fact, the fantasy that was already based on loss. The Arab Spring revolutions are exemplary here. In overturning the previous political order, the people of Tunisia and Egypt have effectively lost nothing (nobody really believed in the idea of the desert traditions, tribal authority and so on). So what the loss of the loss identifies is precisely the fact the preceding stability was in fact false; that is to say, it was held together by a fantasmatic network of beliefs that sustained the authority of the Arab dictatorships. The demonstrations in Tahrir square established a clearing of political space. This was a very open moment. And it was quite telling that Islamic Brotherhood actually played a very small part in these revolutions, precisely because its own sense tradition, organic unity was also deeply threatened by the clearing effect of these mobilizations. In Syria we might say that Assad is caught between the two losses. On the one hand, the symbolic efficiency of the Syrian state – its economy of belief – has been completely shattered, but on the other this state has not yet been swept away.

Today’s economy of belief tends increasingly to be based on indirect forms of spirituality. If Protestantism was the spirit of early capitalism, the spirit of today’s forms of capitalism is a strange mix of new ageism, Buddhism and increasingly Taoism – they lack any real orthodoxy (in the best sense of the word), you believe at one remove so-to-speak, integrating aspects of the spiritual into modern life where its practical. And this also applies to the emerging form of authoritarian capitalism. In Tiananmen Square, twenty-two years after the massacre of students and protesters demanding change, a new 31-foot bronze of Confucius has been erected. Having previously denounced and outlawed Confucianism, the Communist Party now actively promote it and there are now many state-funded cultural centres that are devoted to its expansion – translating Confucianism into a kind of mass folklore – the Cultural Revolution has now come full circle. This ‘Confucius fever’ continues to spread throughout the regions of China, and it is to see why. If we take the best-selling book by Yu Dan, *Confucius from the Heart*, we see the following types of message (p.21 and p.187).

So this is doing the old job of ideology – depoliticizing the state of affairs, naturalizing hierarchies, connecting modern conditions to a pacifying sense of fate and so on. Essentially what we see is an attempt to control the public imagination through the privatization of truth and spiritual meaning. From Tahrir Square to Tiananmen Square – though in different ways – there is the same kind of approach to absorbing and neutralizing political rage and opposition through religion and spirituality. But perhaps what we need today is more of a fighting spirituality, dare I say even a materialist religion.

And here perhaps Kant was in a way right. We do need more universality in the world, but the question of what type? It should certainly not be an abstract universality (universal human rights etc.) – when you reduce people to abstractions you pave the way fro extreme violence and terror (on behalf of the abstract victim). It should rather be an embodied universality, or what we might call a dialecticized universality. Here we might take a lead from Jacques Rancière who refers to a universality of the excluded. On this basis, you would have a dynamic form of universality; one that identifies directly with the destitute and outcast of any given situation. This universality reflects the current the fate of humanity, and which presents at least a chance of choosing another fate.