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INTRODUCTION

From International Relations to World Civilizations: The Contributions of Robert W. Cox

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Robert W. Cox has been a key figure in so-called critical approaches to world politics and though his work defies conventional labelling, his deeply historical and relational approach has challenged the very core of the discipline of International Relations (IR). He is said to have the honour of penning the most quoted line in IR from his seminal article in *Millennium* ‘Social forces, states and world orders’ (1981)—that theory is always ‘for someone and some purpose’—a sentiment that continues to push the discipline to engage its theoretical and normative assumptions. The book that followed, *Production, power and world order* (1987), offered one of the first inroads of such a critical engagement within the field developing an account of political transformation through social forces: forms of states, political economy, and the future of world order. In another seminal article, ‘Gramsci, Hegemony and IR’, also published in *Millennium* (1983), was central to the introduction of Gramscian approaches to both IR and International Political Economy (IPE) that remains so influential today. Across all his work, Cox has furthered an interest in processes of historical change that have seen led to significant developments in International Historical Sociology, especially in terms of method and theory. His contribution to IPE has been no less fundamental than in IR, offering insights into the nature of capitalism, the state, and development. Having worked for two decades in the International Labour Organization, Cox was also a leading scholar in the field of international organizations and his first book *The anatomy of influence* (with Harold Jacobson) (1974) examined eight agencies in the United Nations. His more recent work on inter-civilizational encounters, particularly the essays in *The political economy of a plural world* (2002) and *Universal foreigner* (2013), have served to develop yet another under-theorized dimension of world politics, one that seeks to promote dialogue across civilizations and post-hegemonic forms of human community.¹

This Special Issue provides an entry-point into Cox’s work and came about through discussions around the inaugural International Studies Association Theory Section Distinguished Scholar Award that was presented to Prof. Cox in 2014 (Toronto) and the panel in the following

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year ‘On Robert W. Cox’s contribution to International Relations, International Political Economy and International Sociology’ (New Orleans). It was at these events that it was agreed a volume dedicated to key aspects of Cox’s work—his legacy and future—should be undertaken. Each contributor was selected on the basis of their engagement with Cox’s work in their own research and to promote a diverse range of perspectives that ensures a vibrant plurality of voices on the subject. This cross-section of transdisciplinary and heterodox scholars establishes linkages between ‘old’ and ‘new’ generations of Coxian researchers, in ways that respectfully engage with the legacy of Cox’s work and identify future potentials in this fecund area for the study of world politics. The volume is not, however, a festschrift but a *critical exercise*. Indeed, when Prof. Cox was originally approached about the book, he insisted on this being so—something his opening statement places at the forefront of the volume. Cox’s insistence that the project be a ‘critical exercise’ has meant that the papers do not merely celebrate his work but are intended as a critique to build upon and extend the limits of his scholarship. Whilst each article is distinct, shared themes related to history, theory, political economy, and civilizations do emerge, and the papers have been loosely grouped together in this manner.

After Richard Falk’s ‘Preface’ (2016) that discusses the impact and ongoing legacies of Cox’s work, the volume begins with a series of articles looking to themes related to history and historical change. Sinclair (2016) takes up Cox’s Method of Historical Structures, extending the pragmatism of this method so it can be more effective as a framework for understanding world order in the twenty-first century. Devetak and Walter (2016) examine the historiography that is required in Cox’s version of the ‘critical theorist’ and their capacity to discern social structures and the possibilities for transformation. Attempting to guard against dangers of systematic anachronism in philosophical history, they put forward Giambattista Vico’s historical-empirical approach as better serving Coxian ambitions. Germain (2016) extends these themes, by exploring what he calls the ‘historical idealism’ in Cox’s thought aligned to the work of Collingwood, Vico, Braudel, and Carr. For Germain, this variant of historicism provides deep intellectual coherence across Cox’s work, linking historical structures, diachronic change, intersubjectivity, and civilizations.

Bridging these historical concerns with IR theory, Persaud (2016) investigates the limits of the neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony. For Persaud, if this approach is to explain the rise and consolidation of the modern world system, it must pay attention to postcolonial analysis of the persistent violence against the Third World and dominance of racism in the production of successive world orders. Building on this engagement with the implications of Cox’s thought related to theory, I (Brincat, 2016) examine the relation between Cox and Max Horkheimer as distinct—though allied—ways of approaching ‘critical’ theorizing. In contrast, Kubalkova (2016) argues that Cox has been ‘framed’, even co-opted, as a critical theorist—something that has led to a number of analytical and political problems in Cox’s legacy for IR theory.

Turning to themes related to IPE, Phillips (2016) uses Cox’s insights to explore production, labour, and governance. She links labour exploitation in the global value chains based global economy to shifts towards transnational private governance and the evolving strategies of organized labour. In similar fashion, Mittelman (2016) uses Cox’s understanding of global governance—the ideational dimensions of intersubjectivity—to look at global knowledge production and dissemination. Focusing on universities as specific spheres of authority, Mittelman examines how the actors and processes in the university are redesigning global knowledge governance and how Cox’s theorization may be expanded to analyse this dynamic.

Expanding on the growing interest in the theme of civilizations in Cox’s later work, Karavas and I (2016) examine the linkage between modernization and development in China as an

example of what Cox, following Susan Strange, called ‘Business Civilization’. We argue that China’s development narrative for the commercialization of agriculture converges with Western conceptions of development exemplified in the World Bank and look to points of resistance against this imposition by traditional civilization. To close the volume, Suliman (2016) rethinks civilizations through the politics of migration in the era of climate change. For Suliman, Cox’s idea of ‘inter-civilizational’ politics helps us to both rethink cosmopolitics in the Anthropocene and envisage alternative, post-hegemonic, world orders.

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Disclosure Statement

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Note

- 1 For a detailed introduction to Cox’s approach to IR, see Cox and Sinclair (1996). For an account that focuses on his legacy and relation to other approaches, see Leysens (2008). For an interview in which Cox reflects on his own work, see Cox (2012).

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