

Social Property Relations in the 21st Century: An interview with Ellen Meiksins Wood

— Jordy Cummings

Jordy Cummings¹ (JC): Let's start with Canada. What do you make of the current context of the Canadian state? Is it exceptionally right wing in comparison with earlier governments, for example, on issues like Palestine or the environment? Or are current policies continuous with past policy trajectories?

Ellen Meiksins Wood² (EMW): I don't think the two options here are mutually exclusive. Yes, this government is distinctively right-wing, not least on matters like Palestine and the environment. But, like everything else, it has a history. The simple continuity, of course, is that Canada was and remains a capitalist economy, with all this entails: the imperatives of profit-maximization imposed by the capitalist market, the necessity of constant capital accumulation, the constant need to reduce the costs of labour, the subordination of all social goods including ecological sustainability to the requirements of profit, the inequities and social injustices these imperatives inevitably engender, and the limitations placed on states as long as the economy is regulated by capitalist requirements. But let's be more specific. For

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instance, inequality in Canada today is growing at a faster pace than in most OECD countries, and we have to acknowledge that this isn't entirely Harper's doing.

A previous Liberal government in the 1990s did more than its share in bringing about the current conditions: massive cuts in public spending which have made Paul Martin—who boasted that he had brought public spending back to 1950s standards—a model often cited by the current austerity maniacs. But this doesn't mean that Harper isn't a particularly malevolent development in Canadian history, devoted to reversing as much as he can of what has been best about Canada. It hasn't even been enough for him to undermine the social functions of the state and to do everything he can to create a new culture in Canada which treats the state not as an instrument of social responsibility but as the source of our problems. He has also been conducting a lethal attack on civil society and its independent institutions, undermining everything from sources of public information like Stats Canada to various autonomous human rights and environmental organizations – to say nothing of the ongoing attack on trade union rights. It's all very well to attack other governments as instruments of capital, but this government is undermining Canadian democracy in wholly new ways.

JC: The new buzzword is “austerity.” Like neoliberalism (and sometimes used in combination), to what extent is austerity the specific manner in which the capitalist state is dealing with the current slowdown of capitalist accumulation? In other words, is there a risk that when we talk too much about austerity or neoliberalism and corporations that we risk softening our critique of capitalism?

EMW: That's a good point. We have to be careful that by stressing adjectives like 'neoliberal', or for that matter 'globalized', in the characterization of capitalism (to say nothing of 'market capitalism', as if there were any other kind) we don't obscure as much as we reveal, at least when we're trying to explain capitalist crisis or the damage done by capitalism. Of course we have to understand the differences among various kinds or phases of capitalism. But we also have to acknowledge the problems endemic to capitalism in all its forms. The imperatives of capital inevitably create periods of crisis. We don't have to underestimate the importance of, say, neoliberal ideology in creating the mess we're in today in order to understand that this ideology itself was a response to an already existing problem in the

profitability especially of US capital. The decline started with the end of the long postwar boom, some time after American capital had been challenged by competition from Germany and Japan.

That economic decline was generated by the systemic mechanisms of capitalism, and neoliberalism, set in motion by Reagan and Thatcher, was in large measure an ideological response to that decline. This brought with it attacks on the labour movement, extracting huge concessions from workers, the deregulation of markets, and so on. But the ultimate effect wasn't to correct the problem. On the contrary, it was to make matters worse by reducing aggregate demand, which would be countered by what Robert Brenner has called 'asset-price Keynesianism', the stock market bubble, the encouragement of increasing indebtedness, and so on. Instead of genuine growth in the 'real' economy, there was a kind of 'bubblenomics'. In other words, this 'privatized Keynesianism' and the encouragement of private debt by means of reckless financial practices were designed to enhance capitalist profit without social spending, while, of course, reducing taxes for the rich. So the neoliberal 'solution', like current austerity programs, was an ideologically driven response to an unavoidable structural problem.

I think it would be safe to argue that the solution hasn't worked, to put it mildly, and it has never worked. There are no doubt insurmountable problems in any growth-stimulating alternative, and we will eventually have to confront the whole difficult question of 'growth'—how sustainable it is to have an economy driven by a constant need to accumulate capital and maximize profit. But we'd certainly be entitled to say that even an imperfect kind of Keynesian demand management would work better even now as a mode of crisis management. At the same time, there's no use pretending that even the most democratic and humane mode of state intervention could avoid the recurrence of crisis. That leaves us, as ever, with a political conundrum: it's always tempting to say that, capitalism is capitalism is capitalism, and that since, no matter what we do, capitalism inevitably produces crisis—to say nothing of endemic problems like social injustices and gross inequality—we should maintain our political purity by not settling for imperfect solutions. But the simple truth is that, for most people, imperfect solutions like increased social spending and the raising of taxes on the rich are a far better option than neoliberalism and austerity—which, however driven by big financial interests, don't even seem to work on their own terms.

JC: You have always accepted the label “Political Marxist”, as originally a riposte by Guy Bois to Robert Brenner. Recently, Charlie Post claimed a preference for “capital-centric” Marxist. In any case, whichever way we label it, what is it about political or capital-centric Marxism that so arouses, even to the point of vituperation, such polemical disagreement and criticism?

EMW: I’ve always had my doubts about that label ‘political Marxism’, though I have to take some responsibility for starting it. But I’ve come to accept it, more or less reluctantly, to identify what has become a very fruitful approach to the study of history and social reality. When Guy Bois accused Brenner of this heresy, it was on the grounds that Brenner had adopted a voluntarist kind of Marxism, which placed too much emphasis on ‘social factors’, in particular class struggle, while neglecting ‘the most operative concept of historical materialism’ (the mode of production) and abandoning ‘the field of economic realities’. In my article on ‘The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism’ I argued that this criticism was based on a false dichotomy, because there was no such thing as a ‘mode of production’ in opposition to ‘social factors’. In fact, Marx’s most radical innovation was precisely to define the mode of production and economic laws themselves in terms of ‘social factors’. Political Marxism’, as I understood it, believed in the importance of material factors and the mode of production just as much as economic Marxism did, and it certainly didn’t involve some kind of voluntarist denial of historical causality. But it took seriously the proposition that production is a social phenomenon.

So, the first premise of this approach is that economic relations are social relations, and its primary organizing principle is what Bob Brenner called ‘social property relations’. One of the main points that follows from this is that each specific system of social property relations has its own dynamics, its own ‘rules for reproduction’, and, of course, this is true of capitalism in particular. The old forms of Marxist technological determinism tended to read back into all history capitalism’s laws of motion as if the drive constantly to improve the forces of production by technical means were a universal, trans-historical law. Political Marxism is far more conscious of the specificities of capitalism, and so it can shed more light on how capitalism operates today, why it does what it does, why its crises take the form that they do, and what the possibilities are for the future – though I’d hesitate to call the approach ‘capital-centric’, if only because of its

usefulness in identifying the specificity of other social forms too, not just capitalism. The whole point is that it seeks to be a truly historical approach, as distinct, say, from the teleological tendencies of certain kinds of Marxism.

I'm not really sure why this approach has provoked hostility in certain quarters – though I don't think this should be exaggerated, given the growing number of impressive scholars it has attracted, and the very fruitful and wide-ranging research agenda it has produced. Some of the hostility is probably just the old bad habit of the left, the so-called narcissism of small difference and the kind of sectarianism that tends to be most antagonistic to those outside one's sect but closest to it. But there's no denying that our approach to history represents a significant challenge to certain old orthodoxies, not just the old technological determinism but specific notions like 'bourgeois revolution', an idea that some people regard as sacrosanct even if it no longer serves any useful purpose, theoretical or political. There has also been another kind of criticism, which simply misunderstands 'Political Marxism' in the most fundamental way. One such criticism responds to my arguments about capitalist social property relations and how they generate the specific market imperatives of profit-maximization, constant capital accumulation, increasing labour-productivity, etc., by claiming that this emphasis on market ('economic') imperatives fails to acknowledge the persistence of 'extra-economic' coercion in capitalism, in particular in capitalism's exploitation not only of free wage labour but of unfree labour, and that my analysis of the 'economic' as formally separate from the 'political' in capitalism makes such an approach incapable of recognizing the political implications of 'economic' relations and of dealing with 'extra-economic' factors like race or gender.

This criticism seems to me completely, and astonishingly, off-base for a whole variety of reasons: because the whole point of my argument about the distinctive relation between the 'economic' and the 'political' in capitalism is to insist that the 'economic' is a social, and indeed a fundamentally political, relation; because I, like others who have adopted this approach, have said quite a bit about capitalism's exploitation of unfree labour, to say nothing of my writings on the interactions between capitalism and 'extra-economic' identities like race and gender; because one of the first premises of Political Marxism is Brenner's important observation that the market-dependence of economic actors, which creates its characteristic imperatives, long predates the generalization of wage labour and that its original imperatives were not generated by a relation between capital and wage labour; because

I have elaborated at great length my views on the ‘extra-economic’ power of the state, which, I argue, has always been essential to capitalism and even – in some ways even more – to neoliberal ‘globalized’ capital; and so on and so on. There’s no space to go into this here, so let me just say this: it’s one thing to acknowledge the persistence of ‘extra-economic’ relations and coercion in capitalism; it’s quite another to understand the very specific social property relations that create capitalism’s specific imperatives.

If you want to understand the relations between capitalism and, say, race, gender, or slavery, you obviously need to understand what makes capitalism distinct from other social forms, what generates its very specific operating principles and the distinctive historical dynamic that it has set in motion. Of course it’s important to recognize the ‘extra-economic’ realities of race, gender, or unfree labour. But to say, for instance, that capitalism continued to exploit slave labour, not just wage labour, gets you nowhere in explaining capitalism and why it operates the way it does, which means you can’t even explain how capitalism interacted with, how it affected and was affected by, slavery itself in ways distinct from other slave societies. I’ve said a few things about this in my own work, but, of course, the specialist on this is Charlie Post. Nor can we explain how race and gender operate in capitalist societies, as distinct from other social forms, without understanding the specific dynamics of capitalism.

JC: In relation to criticism of political Marxism, at a recent *Left Forum* panel, one of Post’s critics claimed that political Marxism was fundamentally in error, more than anything else, over its rejection of Leninist and other “classical” theories of imperialism. Speaking personally, one of the things that made the most sense to me when I first read your work was your continuing argument that the early theories of Imperialism presupposed a world in which capitalism was not yet universal, yet today for all intents and purposes, capitalism has penetrated social relations everywhere, it has indeed “created a world in its own image”? What kind of theory of imperialism do we now need?

EMW: I’m not sure who exactly has rejected Leninist and other ‘classical’ theories of imperialism, but at any rate, my own argument has always been that those classical theories, as powerful as they were and remain, belong precisely to, and are most illuminating about, the ‘classic’ age of imperialism, in which major colonial powers were engaged in inter-imperialist rivalries to divide and redivide the ter-

ritories of a largely non-capitalist world. This simply isn't true today, and I've suggested that what we've been lacking is a theory of today's capitalist imperialism, when, among other things, conflicts among capitalist powers take a very different form. I've argued in various places that, for all their strengths, neither Lenin's nor Luxemburg's theories were intended to deal with a new historical reality in which the economic imperatives of capitalism have overtaken old forms of colonial domination and inter-imperialist rivalries. I've also explained, for instance, why I think Lenin's idea of finance capital and his prediction of its growing dominance, however prophetic they may seem, were dealing with a form of financial dominance quite different from what's on display today: when, for example, he adopted Hilferding's notion of finance capital, he had in mind the very particular role of German banks in consolidating industrial production into 'cartels' and thus, in the process, fusing with industrial capital, not detaching speculation from the 'real' economy in the disastrous ways finance capital has been doing, or seeking to do, in our most recent crises.

In any case, his ideas don't, and couldn't have been intended to, offer an explanation of imperialism in our own time, especially given the ways in which the imperialism of his day was still significantly shaped by non-capitalist relations and forces. If we're going to cite Lenin, the least we have to do is apprehend not only what binds the capitalism of his day to our own but also what differentiates one from the other. And what this means above all is that any theory of imperialism today has to deal with the very specific forms of domination made possible by capitalism, not simply capitalism's continuing use of 'extra-economic' forms of colonial domination but its elaboration and universalization of its own specific forms of purely 'economic' coercion, the expansion and manipulation of market dependence and market imperatives, which have really come into their own in barely more than the last half-century.

JC: You have written with cautious optimism about the strength of the Occupy movement that has developed in the last year. What is it about this movement, its ideas, its rhetoric, that gives you this sense of optimism, in comparison, for example, with the global justice movement of the late 90s?

EMW: I guess the most heartening thing about the Occupy movement is how it has started to change the conversation. One of the things that has always struck me about the earlier movements you mention is how they

tended to blame *global* capitalism often less because it was capitalist than because it was global. The principal target of many 'anti-capitalists' was less capitalism than 'globalization', at least in its present form, and particularly transnational corporations, together with the international organizations like the IMF, World Bank, WTO, and G8 that help to organize the world for global capital. There's still a lot of that emphasis today, and it certainly has its place. But I think we're beginning to see more directly anti-*capitalist* sentiment.

I don't want to exaggerate this shift to a focus on capitalism as capitalism. There's probably still too much focus on the greed of bankers rather than on the systemic imperatives of capitalism, which compel even the most socially responsible and least personally greedy capitalist to pursue profit-maximization and subordinate social goods like equity or environmental sustainability. But we may now be seeing something different – for instance, in the growing concern about inequality as endemic to the system, or in an increasing recognition of the ways the capitalist market restricts our choices and our individual freedoms. It's encouraging, too, that at least in some places there are signs of collaboration between Occupy groups and the labour movement. And it's certainly encouraging to see the concerns of the Occupy movement expressed in the most mainstream media, who have clearly been compelled to take notice. We've yet to see the movement take a truly political form with a capacity for organized action, and I'm not entirely convinced that it's well suited to producing that kind of effect. But I'd never underestimate the importance of changing the conversation in – eventually – giving rise to something more.

One thing that may be encouraging in this respect is that the new movements seem more inclined to see the point of national struggles. The old global justice movement certainly had room for very local struggles, but with its focus on global institutions it seemed to suggest that any truly effective political action would have to occur on the global stage, and this in the end may have proved politically disabling. After all, 'global' power is rather hard to target and in the end seems beyond the practical reach of any effective political action, in contrast to national states, which represent more visible, less daunting targets, more susceptible to local struggles and some kind of democratic accountability.

It's not insignificant that globalization theories on the left have tended to emphasize the uselessness of national struggles in globalized capitalism, or even, as in the case of Hardt and Negri, the absence of any identifiable locus of power at which we can aim some kind of organized counter-power. What we may be seeing now is a different perception of where the targets

lie. I don't want to stretch this point too much, but the Occupy movement, while certainly aware of globalization and open to international solidarity, may be more inclined to look closer to home, not just to meetings of the G20 but, say, to Wall Street and Washington, not just as symbols but as identifiable centers of power.

This applies in various ways to other instances of turbulence you talk about, in the Arab Spring or the Eurozone crisis. I can't say much with any confidence about the Arab Spring, given the setbacks we've been witnessing, which are likely to continue – except that it's hard not to be moved by the passionate and courageous demands for freedom and dignity we were hearing at the height of the revolutions, and it's hard not to believe that they have changed the world for good, in both senses of the word. The crisis in the Eurozone may have more immediate implications for the kinds of working class and popular struggles you seem to have in mind. This is a crisis that, like no other in the recent past, has forced a confrontation with the realities of capitalism. The tensions between the purveyors of austerity and their victims can't help but draw the lines more sharply along class lines than we've seen, or been willing to see, for a while.

But there's also something else: as, say, the Greek state takes on the job of doing the dirty work for German banks, there's no mistaking the role played by local states as the primary instruments of capital, however 'global' – or at least regional – capital may be. It is, after all, national states that have been putting more and more of our lives outside the reach of democratic accountability by subjecting us more and more to market imperatives, by privatizing and commodifying ever more aspects of life. What greater 'democratic deficit' is there than the one effected by increasing marketization? And how can this be resisted without directing struggles at the local state? What other struggle is there that can offer Greeks – or Spaniards or Italians – any better hope than a struggle directed at the power concentrated in their own national states? We have to see those struggles as not only a challenge to this or that austerity program but as an effort to restore and expand democracy – and also as a challenge to the long prevailing wisdom that the state has become an irrelevance, not worthy of targeting in struggle.

JC: One aspect of the current Left conversation is an interest in horizontalism, as it is called, and a skepticism towards engaging with state power. What do you make of the continued resilience of this

phenomenon?

EMW: If you're asking me why many on the Left are disinclined to regard the state as a useful target of struggle, or the achievement of state power as a useful objective, I think there are several different kinds of reasons. There are what we might call general structural reasons having to do with the nature of capitalism, which appears to make the state a less relevant player in everyday struggles than the daily struggles of the workplace or the tensions between employers and workers. Then there are historical reasons, not least the dark record of the state in 'actually existing socialism' or the disappointments of social democracy. There's also something specific to the current generation of young people, which distinguishes them sharply from their parents and grandparents.

The generation that went through the Great Depression and World War II and lived to see the golden age of welfare state capitalism had a very particular experience of the state as a source of social goods, from housing to health care to universal education. This was particularly true of Canada. The next generation, the so-called 'baby boomers', may have taken these things for granted, but that's no longer true of the current generation of young people. They are hard pressed to think of any positive example of state action that has emerged in their own life-time, as their grandparents may have experienced the rise of the health service and other public goods. On the contrary, young people today have witnessed deteriorating public services. Long after the decline of postwar capitalism and the end of the postwar boom, they have grown up with both the ideology and the consequences of neoliberalism. I don't think it's too much to say that the objective of neoliberalism has been to destroy the state as an instrument of social solidarity and democratic responsibility. It has left the state bereft of both resources and positive objectives, deliberately destroying, in large part simply by means of cuts in funding, much that has been good about state services. So it's no wonder that this generation finds it hard to think of the state as a positive force in the way that their grandparents did.

Meanwhile, as I suggested before, we're constantly inundated by what's become an almost unchallenged convention: that globalization has rendered the state pretty much irrelevant, a spent force that – for better or worse – can't keep up with global capital. This kind of thing, which we get from the Left no less than the Right, has long seemed to me a particularly disabling idea and, as it happens, not even close to

the truth. I've argued endlessly that global capital needs the state, in many ways more than before, and that it remains a very relevant target of struggle, so I won't go on about it here again. But, again, I think it's worth considering how the current crisis might dramatically bear out the view that struggles at the level of national states may be the most effective counter to the current deprivations of global capital. I certainly wouldn't dismiss the importance of popular efforts to challenge transnational organizations like the G20, but in the EU, for example, take Greece. It's hard to imagine any popular action on the international stage that could have anything like the effects, however limited so far, brought about by the upsurge of popular opinion that led to the rise of Syriza. Even without an electoral victory for that radical party, the rules of the game have changed, not only for the Greek government itself but for the politics of Europe.

JC: Your new book *Liberty and Property*, a companion to *Citizens to Lords* has as an underlying theme the contestation over the meaning of freedom as we currently understand it. What is the significance of this contestation - I'm thinking in particular about the Putney Debates, but stretching from Hobbes and Locke to the Diggers, the original "occupy movement"? In relation to this, can - and should, as recently suggested by Corey Robin - the Left reclaim "freedom" as an animating principle, in our rhetoric, in our organizing strategies, in our guiding principles?

EMW: Of course the Left should 'reclaim' freedom as an animating principle - though I'm not really clear on what it means to suggest that 'the left' has ever abandoned it or what particular left we're talking about. The kind of socialism I've always believed in - and I'm hardly alone in this - has always regarded freedom as a central guiding principle. I might be tempted to add that various postmodernist trends have in their own ways tended to undermine such 'universalistic' principles. But I've said enough about all this too often, so let me try to answer the question as you posed it. For Corey Robin, if I understand him correctly, the issue really has to do with US politics and how the left can challenge the monopoly claimed by the Right on the traditional American ideology of individual freedom and mobilize that ideology in favour of progressive causes. Progressives in the US, he suggests, tend to invoke security or equality as their animating principles, which has the effect of treating people not as free and active citizens but as passive beneficiaries of state intervention, social welfare, redistributive policies, and so on. This may be a useful comment on US political discourse; but Robin's argument may beg the essential

question by conceding too much to rightwing conceptions of rights and liberties, which, in a classically American way, define freedom in opposition to equality and collective solidarity. For me, any convincing idea of freedom has to recognize from the start, for example, that liberty and equality are anything but antithetical and that for vast numbers of people the growing inequality we have today is a restriction, not an enhancement, of individual freedom.

One of the points I make in *Liberty and Property* is that Western conceptions of freedom have long been distorted and constrained by the fact that they owe so much to ideas of 'liberty' conceived not as a defence of democratic freedoms but as an assertion of class privilege and the autonomy of dominant property classes in their conflicts with monarchical states or other claimants to superior jurisdiction. Of course there have been more democratic ideas too, like those of the Levellers and the Diggers whom you mention, and they are more likely to recognize the mutual reinforcement of liberty and equality, individual and collective. But we shouldn't underestimate the influence of the dominant tradition and the ways in which our own ideas are still restricted by it.

The other essential point I make in *Liberty and Property*, as elsewhere in my work, is that our contemporary ideas of freedom haven't adequately acknowledged the new forms of power and coercion created by capitalism. It's not enough to defend our liberties against the power of the state. We also have to consider the compulsions imposed on us by distinctively capitalist forms of coercion – and here I mean not just the excessive power of money in politics, nor even just the power of capital in the workplace, but also the compulsions of the market, its imperatives of profit-maximization and constant capital accumulation. We're so used to thinking of the market as a realm of choice and freedom that we tend to overlook the degree to which it's a form of coercion and domination, which compels us to subordinate all other considerations – fairness, social justice, human dignity, ecological sustainability, and, yes, the freedom of the individual – to the demands of profit.