Guest Editorial

**Transnational historical materialism:
the Amsterdam International Political
Economy Project**

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Introduction to the Special Issue

More than once the Marxist tradition in International Relations (IR) has been pronounced dead, or at least moribund. Each time, however, the critics have been proved wrong regarding the vitality of this so-called third perspective. This is in spite of the fact that we are now in the so-called fourth debate or even beyond. After the ‘critical theory’, ‘reflectivist’ and ‘post-structuralist’ assaults on the bastion of United States (US) neo-realist/neo-liberal orthodoxy, a particular idealist version of ‘constructivism’ has now quite cosily nestled alongside what used to be the ‘neo-neo’ mainstream as to which all sides agree to be a reasonable alternative. Indeed, if one were to focus on the mainstream debate within the US one would be forgiven for believing that the increasingly friendly debate between rational choice and so-called constructivism is the only game in town. In Europe, fortunately the picture looks somewhat more differentiated. As regards those perspectives grounded in a Marxist tradition, arguably one ‘school of thought’ — developed in fact on both sides of the Atlantic — has been particularly important in keeping this tradition alive and taking it beyond what some outdated textbooks still take as *the* Marxist perspective, dependency and world-system theory. I refer here to so-called neo-Gramscian International Political Economy (IPE), and more specifically to the approach dubbed (by Stephen Gill and David Law) *transnational historical materialism*.

A theoretical approach and related research programme that can be identified as belonging to this broader perspective, but whose origins in fact predate the whole ‘neo-Gramscian turn’, is formed by what we have called here the Amsterdam International Political Economy project. Far from constituting a separate school — and certainly not aspiring to become one — this project must instead be seen as reflecting one particular contribution of what was originally a single group of researchers from the University of Amsterdam to what has since become a much broader perspective. What the Amsterdam

Project (AP) shares with this broader perspective is both the attempt to disengage historical materialism from the economistic structuralism with which it has become tainted by reclaiming the transformative role of (class) agency, as well as the effort to radically break with the often still dominant state-centric approaches by coming to grips with the fundamental *transnational* reality of the global political economy. What makes this project distinct, however, from the work of others within this broader research programme is its specific endeavour to ground the abovementioned dual objective in a particular class-theoretical framework. It is this specific theoretical orientation that binds the authors of this issue together and it is in this sense that the articles before you reflect the ongoing concerns of what was once a project tied to a single location/institute, but which has now itself been transnationalized.

In this framework, the formation of (capitalist) classes transnationally is here seen as a key process through which politics itself is increasingly transnationalized. The agency of transnational fractions of the capitalist class — locked in a constant struggle for hegemony — is expressed through what the AP has termed *concepts of control*. Simultaneously grounded in the structures of capital accumulation *and* constructed through the class-conscious agency of particular social forces, it is the transnational operation of such concepts through which, the AP claims, we can better understand the transnationalization of contemporary world politics.

The concept of control that rose to hegemony in the 1990s is, with important regional and national variations, that of neo-liberalism and it is the analysis of transnational neo-liberalism that has in fact been the most constant empirical preoccupation of the AP. In contrast to most of the rest of IPE as well as much of comparative politics, the Amsterdam research programme has consistently sought to explain neo-liberalism not as some kind of externally induced paradigm shift nor as an ideological shift endogenous to so-called domestic politics of several nations, but as a project on the part of particular *class* fractions, a project moreover constructed within an increasingly transnational space. It is thus that through this analysis the AP has sought to come to a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the dynamics of neo-liberalism and what that implies in terms of emancipatory practice, whether at the level of world order or of 'European order' (as constituted by the process of European integration) or within a particular national context.

At 15 years after the first special issue (in the *International Journal of Political Economy*) stemming from the Amsterdam group was published, this issue reflects both a moment of stock-taking, hopefully showing how past work has culminated into a number of shared insights, as well as a moment of looking at how our shared concerns may be taken forward into new avenues of research and into new projects which, however, continue to be illuminated by the insights of the original Amsterdam research programme. Thus, although

the authors of the issue before you no longer form a research group in the strict sense of the word we continue to be motivated by our effort to better understand the contradictions — and both the constraints and opportunities implied by them — of contemporary neoliberal globalization. Rather than seeking to set ourselves apart from the many colleagues and friends who share this concern, we merely hope that with this issue we make some contribution to this critical project and make the reader interested in the more elaborate studies underpinning our understanding of contemporary world politics. Finally, in this way we also hope to show the continuing relevance of historical materialist approaches to IR/IPE.

This issue would not have come about if it had not been for the original idea and constant support and encouragement of the then editor, and now consulting editor, of the *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Zlatko Šabič. His commitment to the project of this special issue is gratefully acknowledged. Although it is up to the reader to judge how far we have been successful in presenting our ideas to hopefully a wider critical audience, it is certain that we would at least have been less successful in this, had it not been for the incisive comments and criticisms of all the referees as well as of the current editors of the Journal, Stefano Guzzini and Milan Brgelez. I want to thank the latter for their critical guidance through the final stages of this project.

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Guest Editor