

Post, Charles. 2011. *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620-1877*. Leiden: Brill. ISBN 978-90-04-20104-0 Cloth: 141.00 USD. Pages: 298.

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Charlie Post's *The American Road to Capitalism* is a magisterial text that deserves a close reading, in particular by scholars attempting to make sense of 20th century capitalism in the United States. Only when armed with knowledge of the peculiarity of the American question can we begin to understand the specificity of a logic that continues to subsume everything in its wake. As well, the book is an explicit defense of the school of thought labeled "Political Marxism" (henceforth PM). Post consciously places his work in this growing body of knowledge that emphasizes historical specificity, empirical clarity and unintended consequences, thus a theory of social property relations. Like Robert Brenner on England or George Comninel on France, Post problematizes both standard and critical accounts of the making of American capitalism. One sees the unintended consequences and class struggles, on a regional and then finally national scale, subsequent to the Civil War. Given what some call the "Americanization" of global capital, the implications of this work are indeed far reaching.

In place of "Political Marxism," Post prefers "Capital-centric Marxism" (2), in that it takes its cues not from Marx's early stagism but from the multilinear specificity found in the three volumes of *Capital*. Thus there is a rejection of a deterministic theory of history, in which changes in social relations are produced by mere clashes between forces and relations of production. This is to critique the importation of such iron laws unto American history, in which case we see the American Revolution and Civil War being two stages in the American "bourgeois revolution." E.P. Thompson famously made the claim that one could not meta-theorize the discipline of historical materialism, rather, as Engels once said "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." This is to say that in order to gauge what constitutes the discipline is to examine its ontological suppositions, and in the case of "political" Marxism, none is more controversial than its allegedly narrow theory of capitalism, a criticism not entirely off the mark. With Post, finally, we have an explicit PM theory of capitalism.

Capitalism exists when "a class of non-producers owns and controls productive property," purchases labour power from wage workers - "direct producers who do not possess means of production" (40). Surplus value is extracted through the former's control of the production process. Commodified labour, means of production and outputs constitute a *social property relation* alongside inter-capitalist competition, which together necessitate both specialization and innovation. This mode of extracting surplus,

capitalism, “shapes a labour process that is the basis of industrialization and its attendant social changes”(ibid.). In other words, Post’s model is a sort of “ABC” of a Marxian theory of capitalism, yet in lieu of finding such capitalism budding in the interstices of non-capitalist social property relations, capitalism is only capitalism when all features are at the very least discernable, in particular the imperative of innovation and competition.

In place of this teleological idea of capitalism, Post uses the American experience to demonstrate that having a fuzzy model of capitalism will disallow the illumination of non-capitalist social relations and their attendant rules of reproduction. Particularly notable is his conceptualization of “non-capitalist independent household production” in which cheap if not free land allowed for commercial life to exist in a non-capitalist sense, that is to say, producers engaged in commodity exchange but had non-market access to the means of production and subsistence. English merchant capital indeed tried to “develop” its colonies by way of the marketization of land ownership, implicitly as imitation of how capitalism itself developed in the English countryside. Success or stalemate in fierce class struggles between household producers, farmers and artisans, often squatters, and merchants sometimes even took the form of armed rebellions. The resulting class settlements and uneven development rendered much of the United States dominated by non-capitalist artisanal or farm-based production for much of its early history.

Southern plantation slavery may well have been umbilically connected to the world market, but was emphatically *not* capitalist in either form or content. Formally, slavery was predicated upon the extraction of maximum absolute labour from slaves, whom as objects could be constituted as constant capital. As opposed to purchasing labour power from proletarians, Masters purchased labourers. This is to emphasize the crucial distinction between the labour discipline of actual violence or worse, in the context of slavery, and the “whip of starvation” in capitalism. The slave economy deprived planters of means with which to innovate due to the lack of ability to increase labour productivity. There was thus a mix of the co-operative labour processes and time management that marked later capitalism with the inability to shrink the labour force redolent of feudalism, though labourers (slaves) could be sold if they were redundant. In the last instance, the only way for Southern farmers to increase their yields was to geographically expand alongside increasing the workday to 14 hours. This produced a mid 19th century conjuncture of increasing global demand for cotton, and a set of vertical and horizontal class struggles that culminated in the Civil War.

Surveying various histories and analyses of the Civil War, Post finds that alone among the ruptures that the Marxist tradition has called “bourgeois revolutions,” the civil war indeed fits the classical schema, but it certainly cannot be reduced to such a conceptualization. Manufacturing as well as agrarian capital on one hand, expansionary slavery on the other, pitted not forces of production against relations of production, rather it pitted two discrete social property relationships, and the eventual victory of

capitalism was an unintended consequence of both ruling classes acting to reproduce themselves, under conditions not merely of competition between each other, often taking on a political form around the still-burning issue of “states rights.” It is equally important to examine the struggles from below, in the form of proletarian struggles in the North and slave revolts in the South. Of course, the North won, but it was not so simple and a real subsumption of southern labour under capital was resisted by former planters as well as freed slaves, the unintended consequence of this struggle being the non-capitalist sharecropping that dominated southern agriculture as recently as half a century ago.

How did these multifaceted class struggles shape the DNA of American capitalist social property relations? Post draws on Comninel’s postulation that the French Revolution, if it had any democratic after-effects, these effects were “anticapitalist,” such as rent and price controls. On one hand, the radical southern demand of 40 acres and a mule was not implemented. On the other hand, the urban proletariat, a vital support base for the north in the Civil War, gained a new found sense of confidence. Against a backdrop of newly confident capitalist classes, they mounted direct actions to shorten the working day. Yet when the new labour movement of the north came close to allying with a multiracial “Farmer’s Alliance” of tenant farmers, Jim Crow laws and disenfranchisement, lynching and the Klan were brought in by the new alliance of former rivals – merchants and planters. The defeat of this coalition and the fragmentation of popular and working classes mars the development of working class political organizations in the United States to this day.

Bannerji, Himani. 2011. *Demography and Democracy: Essays on Nationalism, Gender and Ideology*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press. ISBN 978-1-55130-389-5. Paperback: 34.95 CAD. Pages: 272.

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Himani Bannerji’s latest book is as timely as it is wide-ranging, incisive and thought-provoking. Comprising seven essays written during the span of just over a decade, with a new, substantive introduction, the book sparkles with a genuine sense of freshness and vitality. *Demography and Democracy* is highly relevant to readers concerned with the ongoing impacts of neoliberal capitalism, communal violence and cultural nationalism, and contemporary struggles over democracy in India. But its scope reaches far beyond India’s borders in elucidating how ethnic/religious cultural