

# Reconciling Tensions in the Analysis of Bourgeois Revolutions: A Critical Realist Approach

Klevis KOLASI

Associate Professor, International Relations, Ankara University, Ankara

E-Mail: kolasi@ankara.edu.tr

Orcid: 0000-0002-4278-4945

## ABSTRACT

When and how do agents consciously reproduce or unconsciously transform social structures? This inquiry is pivotal for advancing a theory of socio-historical development, particularly in addressing a key debate within International Historical Sociology (IHS) surrounding modern revolutions. This debate revolves around the tension between the "consequentialist" interpretation of bourgeois revolutions and the "revisionist" critiques, notably from the "historicist" wing of Political Marxism (PM). This article contends that the tension arises from an inadequate conceptualization of the agent-structure relationship. Drawing on Roy Bhaskar's transformational model of social activity (TMSA) and critical realist philosophy of science, the article proposes a conceptual framework reconciling PM's focus on class struggle to understand the historical specificity of capitalism with the role bourgeois revolutions historically and structurally played for the development of capitalism. Integrating Bhaskar's framework with historical materialism-inspired debates on bourgeois revolutions, the paper suggests that agents' unconscious actions can transform social structures amid social disintegration ("classic bourgeois revolutions"). Conversely, agents consciously seek to preserve and reproduce social structures, as seen in "passive revolutions". This occurs when social structures, marked by inequality and hierarchies, are viewed as historical constructs rather than natural phenomena, particularly in the context of uneven and combined development of capitalism. This analysis contributes to ongoing IHS debates, enriches our comprehension of modern revolutions, and extends TMSA by empirically delineating circumstances wherein agents consciously uphold or unwittingly trigger the transformation of social structures.

**Keywords:** international historical sociology, transitions to capitalism, revolutionary transformation, historicism, transformational model of social activity

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## Introduction

Although revolutions have played a formative role in shaping modern societies, political systems, and global politics, the study of revolutions has not been a central focus within the discipline of International Relations (IR) (Halliday 1999; Anievas 2015). The limited impact of revolutions on IR theory is not surprising, given the prevalent reactionary assumptions that underpin traditional approaches such as political realism. Rooted in counter-Enlightenment, anti-democratic thought, and imperial traditions, much of what is considered "timeless wisdom" in IR thought has effectively absorbed the discourse of radical counter-revolution.

This discourse opposes revolution and social change by depicting them as counterproductive, ineffective, or excessively risky—or as “perverse”, “futile”, and “jeopardizing” to use Albert Hirschman’s (1991: 7) influential articulation. Indeed, despite their differences of subject-matter, emblematic figures of reaction such as Joseph de Maistre, Edmond Burke, and Alexis de Tocqueville share a common perspective on revolution with historians and political thinkers from a broader tradition referred to as “reactionary modernism” (Mirowski 2011), including Carl Schmitt, Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, Herbert Butterfield, Jacob Talmon, Carl Friedrich, Richard Pipes, François Furet, and Ernst Nolte. This shared perspective revolves around their view on the degenerative outcomes of transformative goals and the inevitable tragedy inherent in the universalistic and Promethean drive of revolutions. Hence, the prevailing tendency in the study of revolution within IR has predominantly leaned towards a counter-revolutionary perspective. In this view, revolutions are often perceived as either “futile” or akin to *coup d’états*. Alternatively, they are often attributed to ideological fanaticism and held accountable for the disruptions witnessed in international politics, including violence and mass extermination (e.g., “totalitarian dictatorships”) in the twentieth century. From this standpoint, the logic and roots of events like the Holocaust seem to trace back to the revolutionary tradition spanning from Bolshevism to Jacobinism, rather than being linked to the colonial and imperialist history (Traverso 2017).

In this regard, International Historical Sociology (IHS) has emerged as a crucial contribution, addressing this gap and thereby rescuing the concept of revolution from the “complacent rejection” voiced by conservative theorists and historians (Halliday 1999; Lawson 2011: 1067; Anievas 2015). With its emphasis on the mutually influential connection between the international sphere and state-society dynamics, IHS not only has provided a research program for historicizing the reified view of the “international” prevalent in IR theory (Rosenberg 2006; Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015). It also has delineated a synthetic interdisciplinary field of inquiry, centered on the historical and current intersections of capitalism, revolution, war, and states within the global context (Teschke 2011; Yalvaç 2013). IHS has, therefore, offered fresh perspectives to IR in bringing revolutions in and analyzing them as outcomes of intricate interactions between international processes and state-society dynamics. However, despite substantial advances in systematically engaging with revolution and historical transformation, the concept of “bourgeois revolution” remains contested within IHS (Post 2017; Anievas 2015; Davidson 2012; Teschke 2005).

Efforts to reconceptualize the bourgeois revolution have encountered an impasse, pitting the agency-centric account advocated especially by the “historicist wing” of Political Marxism (PM) against the so-called “consequentialist” or “structuralist” perspectives epitomized recently by the theory of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD) (Anievas 2015; Teschke 2005). The prevailing interpretation of bourgeois revolutions, influenced by “revisionist historiography,” tends to isolate political actions and ideologies from broader social settings, detaching revolutions from class relations and struggle (Cobban 1999 [1964]; Furet 1981).<sup>1</sup> PM, while avoiding the pitfalls associated with the “cultural turn” taken by revisionist

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1 Ronald Suny (1994: 165) highlights a paradox in the study of European revolutions, particularly the French and Russian revolutions. French Revolution “revisionists” challenged Marxist orthodoxy by accentuating political conflict, ideas, and

historiography, upholds the core tenets of “revisionism”: questioning the historical reality of “bourgeois revolutions” asserting they were neither genuinely bourgeois nor characterized by capitalism (Comninel 1987; Wood 1996, 2002; Teschke 2005). This has broader implications beyond theoretical concerns in historical materialism (HM). The debate on bourgeois revolution not only questions the orthodox Marxist interpretation but also raises doubts about Marxism’s overall soundness in understanding modern history (Teschke 2014; Heller 2017; Yalvaç 2021). Finally, it raises a wider question concerning the validity of structuralist strands of IHS for IR. This dispute mirrors broader discussions on the perceived tension between structuralist or scientist and historicist modes of social science (Teschke 2014; Yalvaç 2021). While both UCD and PM in IHS aim to reintegrate social relations into the analysis of “the international” (Rosenberg 2006; Teschke 2014), meta-theoretical debates on social ontology and its impact on conceptualizing the bourgeois revolution remain underexplored. Consequently, a theoretical deadlock persists between “consequentialist” accounts emphasizing “outcomes” to uphold the concept of bourgeois revolution and PM, which rejects the term due to the absence of capitalist agency (Teschke 2005; Anievas 2015).

This article starts with the premise that the historicist wing of PM, exemplified by the work of Knafo and Teschke (2020; 2021), relies on a flawed historicist/structuralist dichotomy, resulting in an inadequate conceptualization of the agent-structure relationship (Yalvaç 2021). This leads to a praxis-oriented and an agent-centered analysis of bourgeois revolutions, which risks throwing the revolution baby out with the bourgeois bathwater. This article aims to explore the potential resolution of this tension through the lens of critical realism (CR). Specifically, it draws on the transformational model of social activity (TMSA), initially developed by Roy Bhaskar and further elaborated by Margaret Archer in her morphogenetic approach, which focuses on the mutability or capacity of society to change. In doing so, it seeks to further develop TMSA by empirically delineating the historical circumstances under which agents consciously uphold social structures or unwittingly instigate their transformation. By engaging with TMSA’s implications for conceptualizing socio-historical change, this article presents an analysis of how CR can offer a framework for synthesizing these seemingly divergent perspectives on bourgeois revolutions, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of historical transformations. I argue that this dispute primarily arises from a historicist perspective on social change and historical development, which leads to a deficient conceptualization of the agent-structure relationship.

To illustrate the effectiveness of CR in reconciling these perspectives, I will first address the limitations of the structuralism versus historicism debate that informs discussions about bourgeois revolution. Subsequently, I will explore how a critical realist social ontology enables us to transcend the perceived fundamental dispute between structuralist and historicist modes of explanation and why TMSA offers a more robust solution to the agent-structure problem. Finally, I delve into the implications of TMSA for reformulating the concept of bourgeois revolution.

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culture. In contrast, the revisionist perspective on the Russian Revolution, moving beyond an anti-Marxist stance that previously centered on ideology and personality, placed more emphasis on social and class analysis.

## Neither Bourgeois nor Capitalist? The Agent-Structure Problem in the Bourgeois Revolution Debate

The relationship between inherited structural conditions and intentional human activity forms a pivotal component of Marxist theory of history. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx famously stated, “Men make history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted.” As Callinicos (2004: xxvi) notes, “[i]t is precisely the connection between history, structural constraint, and creative human agency that Marx evokes in this passage”. While this aphorism aims to address the challenge of integrating structure and agency, it lacks clear guidance on assessing their relative importance at specific historical contexts (Blackledge 2006: 153). Consequently, discussions within HM often take polarized paths, with structuralist branches downplaying agency in favor of emphasizing structure, while historicist branches tend to prioritize agency at the expense of structure (Blackledge 2006; Chibber 2011). The main thrust of PM’s critique concerning economistic, deterministic, and “structuralist” versions of Marxism is their tendency to diminish human agency, portraying it as mere passive carriers of structural effects. TMSA offers a crucial insight by challenging the prevailing tendency in HM to perceive structure as inherently constraining. It does so by conceptualizing structure as social relations, dependent on human activity but not reducible to it, as “structure necessarily predates the action(s) which transform it” (Archer 1998: 202). This critical realist perspective diverges not only from crude “structuralist” Marxism but also from historicist viewpoints that blur the distinction between structures and agents, claiming that structures exist solely through their manifestation in human praxes. It also has significant implications for the theoretical understanding of unintended consequences, a theme that, ironically, plays a pivotal role in PM’s explanation of the origin of capitalism but is undertheorized in its examination of bourgeois revolutions.

### *Agency and Contingency in Shaping Historical Processes: Political Marxism’s ‘Historicist’ Account of Bourgeois Revolution*

PM, rooted in the works Robert Brenner and Ellen Woods, emphasizes the role of class struggle and contingent historical processes in shaping historical development. According to this perspective, historical agency and the specific conditions of each society (social relations) are paramount. PM rejects the idea of a predetermined, natural and inevitable historical direction and the primacy of productive forces, or of the spread of commerce, for understanding the transition to capitalism and its historical *specificity* (Wood 2002). A significant aspect of PM’s contribution is its historical perspective on the emergence of capitalism. It challenges the widely held belief, prevalent not only among liberals but also among the so-called neo-Smithian Marxists, that capitalism is inherently present in some latent form, and merely awaiting liberation from feudal or other limitations (Brenner 1985; Wood 1996; 2002). Instead, following Maurice Dobb’s pioneering work in *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, Brenner (1985) shifted attention to the role of “social-property relations” in shaping historical development and crisis patterns. These crises,

which pertain to the breakdown of surplus-extraction process, intensify class struggles, and the unpredictable outcomes of these struggles determine whether old forms of production persist, or new social-property relations emerge.

One of the major insights offered by PM in the transition debate is its assertion that the transitions toward capitalism cannot be comprehended merely as the gradual expansion of “economic” factors—since the existence of commerce, and private property predates capitalism. Instead, they are better understood as dynamic and context-specific processes of structuring human interactions and the institutions responsible for creating the historically specific consequences of “market dependence” (Brenner 1985; Wood 2002; Düzgün 2022: 32). The emergence of capitalism, as such, resulted from ‘unintended consequences’ of class struggles in the English countryside, where non-capitalist landlords and peasants sought to reproduce their existing class position, beginning in the fourteenth century and culminating in the mid-sixteenth century (Brenner 1985; Wood 2002). In this account, “[i]t was not the developmental requirements of the productive forces that drove the transition, but, rather, the contingent outcomes of the struggle between lord and peasant” (Chibber 2011: 62). It is against this background that PM’s critique of the conventional concept of bourgeois revolution must be situated.

Brenner challenged the traditional concept of bourgeois revolution, arguing that it aligns with an earlier phase of Marx’s thinking influenced by 18th-century Enlightenment mechanical materialism, diverging from his later mature critique of political economy. The ‘orthodox’ concept, evident in Marx’s early works like the *German Ideology* and the *Communist Manifesto*, is problematic due to its teleological inclination, suggesting an inevitable progression of history with the bourgeoisie as the central agent of progress. However, rejecting this simplistic notion doesn’t negate the significance of classic bourgeois revolutions for capitalism’s development, a point contested by some PM proponents (e.g., Comninel 1987; Wood 1996; Teschke 2005; cf. Mooers 1991). Brenner’s argument that the English Revolution originated in agrarian capitalism’s rise, driven by a new class of yeomen and merchants in conflict with the crown, aligns with the classical-Marxist perspective (Maurice Dobb and later work of Christopher Hill), situating the English Revolution as a bourgeois revolution within a framework influenced by ascendance of capitalism (Blackledge 2005). Indeed, as can be seen in Brenner’s *Merchants and Revolution*, he remained unconvinced by the revisionist challenge to the traditional social interpretation of English Revolution, as the revisionists appeared to reduce the Civil War to a conflict over specific individual and group interests. However, Brenner’s structural perspective sharply contrasts with the agent-centered revisionist interpretation predominantly embraced by the historicist faction of PM, which ultimately rejects the notion of a bourgeois revolution.

Revisionist historiography challenged the orthodox Marxist social interpretation of bourgeois revolutions, redefining classic bourgeois revolutions from political acts with social consequences to acts of ideological fanaticism driven by revolutionary rhetoric, thereby diminishing their significance (Furet 1981). The enduring influence of revisionist historiography, exemplified by the French Revolution, challenges the notion that such events fundamentally transformed France’s social structure, a perspective shared by many PM proponents (Comninel 1987; Teschke 2005).

While PM rightly dismisses the idea of an emerging bourgeoisie pitted against a feudal aristocracy, the historicist stance of some proponents tends to swing to the opposite extreme, completely discarding the concept. This results from the perceived lack of capitalist agency in traditional bourgeois revolutions and their failure to produce capitalist social relations. For instance, while the English revolution is considered capitalist but not bourgeois, the French Revolution is viewed as bourgeois but not capitalist (Teschke 2005: 12). According to Comninel, the French Revolution did not significantly alter fundamental social relationships related to production, nor did it lead to the establishment of a capitalist society. Instead, the Revolution reinforced small-scale farming and the collection of agrarian surpluses through extra-economic means (Comninel 1987: 202). Comninel (1987: 200) characterizes the French Revolution as essentially an intra-class conflict over basic political relations intertwined with relations of surplus extraction, describing it as a civil war within the ruling class over power and surplus extraction issues. The term “intra-class conflict” here refers to competition over access to state offices between factions within a ruling class that includes both the nobility and the bourgeoisie (Teschke 2005: 12). However, this perspective, reminiscent of Hirschman’s (1991: 43) “futility thesis,” suggests that any attempt for change is ineffective, with purported transformations being superficial and cosmetic, leaving fundamental societal structures completely untouched.

It is crucial to acknowledge that PM’s agent-centered interpretation of revolution faces limitations rooted in what Knafo and Teschke (2020; 2021) term a “radical historicist” perspective. They seek to counter structuralist tendencies within HM and PM, which, as per Knafo and Teschke, can lead to economistic and deterministic historical accounts. They propose a radical historicist approach as a remedy, focusing on “demonstrating the difference people make in the history of capitalism.” This approach commits to analyzing the world “from the perspective of agency” (Knafo and Teschke 2021: 70). As Teschke (2014: 37) acknowledges, “agents interpret structural imperatives in historically distinct ways,” emphasizing hermeneutics with a focus on epistemology over ontology. Consequently, “the re-admission of history as the terrain of epistemology requires a greater degree of precision” in understanding how agents navigate power relations in practice (Teschke 2014: 44). In essence, Knafo and Teschke (2021: 246) advocate for a historicism that centers on “agency, specificity, and unintended outcomes” in the analytical framework.

Moving towards a historicist critique that dismisses the concept of structure raises several issues. Firstly, this definition of “historicism” echoes the shortcomings found in the “humanist” tradition of Marxism, which reduces Marxism to “a form of cultural or philosophical critique of capitalism” (Creaven 2015: 8). Like E.P. Thompson and György Lukács, who considered embracing a structural ontology as fetishism and reification (Creaven 2015: 15), Knafo and Teschke (2021: 55) argue that the structural frameworks of Marxism tend to lead to economistic interpretations of capitalism and a negation of political agency and social change within capitalism. While Lukács (1971[1923]) viewed social structures as no more than human agents in their daily interactions, ultimately reducible to consciousness, Knafo and Teschke seem to reduce structures to social practices. In their perspective, “social-property relations” (a core concept of PM) can be seen as “lived social praxes” (Knafo and Teschke 2021: 246).

Secondly, despite their emphasis on unintended outcomes, they often equate these outcomes with contingency. Yet, if we discard the idea of structure, which both constrains and enables social behavior, we risk encountering an objective world that becomes ultimately impenetrable. As van der Pijl (2015: 65) points out, “as significant as the indeterminacy of systemic constraints is the implication that all aspects of social relations—the political, economic, external, internal, geopolitical, sociological, and more—become contingent on each other”. To paraphrase van der Pijl (2015: 65), this means that agents are given agency only because the conditions under which they supposedly operate remain uncertain. In essence, this is possible only if we disconnect different social spheres from each other and replace internal necessity with external contingency (van der Pijl 2015: 65).

Moreover, when structures and agents, representing distinct levels within a stratified social reality (Archer 1998) are conflated, it may result in an interpretation of Marxism that leans towards voluntarism. In this perspective, it disregards objective (structural) obstacles to working-class self-emancipation, attributing the workers’ limitations to subjective or inter-subjective factors, primarily rooted in the working class’s underdeveloped consciousness (Creaven 2015: 19). Yet, as Chibber (2022: 125) maintains “where actors are, in fact, structurally constrained, such that they formulate their strategies in order to navigate those constraints, a structural theory does not *efface* agency so much as it helps us *understand* it”.

While Knafo and Teschke (2021) rightly challenge the view of structures as impervious to human influence and solely shaping actors independently, they are mistaken in assuming this represents the only form of structural theory. In other words, acknowledging structure does not necessarily negate social agency (Chibber 2022: 122). A historical approach doesn’t demand the abandonment of the concept of structure. To claim otherwise, as Knafo and Teschke (2020: 2021) do, risks confining historical analysis to voluntarism and phenomenism. Similarly, Post (2021: 109) contends that Knafo and Teschke’s critique of the centrality of structure (rules of reproduction) in Brenner’s later work leads to a radically voluntarist notion of history, thereby “reconceptualizing capitalism in terms of practice.” Ironically, the emphasis on unintended outcomes in understanding the distinct nature of bourgeois revolutions is developed by the so-called consequential approaches, representing the other pole in the debate on bourgeois revolution.

### ***“Consequential” Accounts of Bourgeois Revolution and Uneven and Combined Development (UCD)***

Proponents of PM, emphasizing social-property relations and unintended consequences as primary explanatory factors for the transition to capitalism, paradoxically shift towards an agent-centered analysis lacking structural depth when explaining the non-capitalist nature of the French Revolution. As highlighted by Callinicos (1989), the challenge posed by the revisionist argument to the classical Marxist understanding of bourgeois revolution is valid only if we perceive these revolutions as invariably arising from deliberate actions of the capitalist class. According to Davidson (2005b: 21), the concept of bourgeois revolution under

critique significantly differs from the one embraced by the classical-Marxist tradition.<sup>2</sup> Hill (1980) and Davidson (2005b) cite Isaac Deutscher as an exemplar of this tradition. Deutscher (1967: 27) openly rejects the oversimplified orthodox conception, positing that the bourgeoisie led these revolutions. He contends that these revolts were mainly fueled by the lower middle classes and plebeians, with leaders often being “gentlemen farmers” or professionals like lawyers and doctors. Moreover, these upheavals often led to military dictatorships. This has led many revisionist historians to believe that bourgeois revolutions are almost mythical. However, Deutscher (1967: 22) argues that their bourgeois nature becomes clearer when considering their societal impact, as they “swept away the social and political institutions hindering the growth of bourgeois property”. Deutscher emphasizes that figures like the Puritans and Jacobins, through their actions, unintentionally paved the way for the economic rise and eventual dominance of manufacturers, merchants, and bankers (Deutscher 1967: 22; Hill 1980). Thus, “[b]ourgeois revolution creates the conditions in which bourgeois property can flourish. In this, rather than in the particular alignments of the struggle, lies its *differentia specifica*” (Deutscher 1967: 22).

From this perspective, the concept of bourgeois revolution does not primarily concern the origins of capitalism as a socioeconomic system but rather focuses on the elimination of sociopolitical obstacles to its continued existence and dismantling barriers to its further expansion (Anievas 2015: 4; Davidson 2012: 420). The consequentialist perspective deems a revolution as bourgeois based on its capacity to remove sociopolitical and ideological impediments, especially the pre-capitalist state, establishing the state as an autonomous platform for capital accumulation during capitalism’s development and consolidation (Anievas 2015: 4; Callinicos 1989). Hence, the connection between bourgeois revolutions and capitalism’s development lies in removing feudal barriers impeding the progress of capitalist social relations (Heller 2017). Consequently, there often exists a disparity between the revolutionary actors’ goals and the actual outcomes of their struggles (Callinicos 1989). According to Dobb (1950: 172), this contradictory feature is inherent in every bourgeois revolution because, although the “revolution requires the impetus of its most radical elements to carry through its emancipating mission to the end, the movement is destined to shed large sections of the bourgeoisie as soon as these radical elements appear, precisely because the latter represent the small man or the dispossessed whose very claims call into question the rights of large-scale property”. Therefore, attempting to define bourgeois revolutions by the intentions of the actors involved is misleading, if not unhelpful.

Anievas (2015: 4) contends that whether a revolution acted as a prerequisite for the emergence of capitalism or accelerated pre-existing capitalism hinged on specific circumstances, with France predominantly representing the former scenario and England the latter. It is crucial to recognize that the English transition process was unique, just as the French Revolution had distinctive characteristics. This doesn’t imply that subsequent transitions were incomplete or

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2 This “revised orthodox conception” gained prominence chiefly within the Russian Marxist tradition, with Trotsky standing as a notable exception. It also found resonance in the mechanical Marxism prevalent in much of the Second and Stalinized Third International, which considered the French Revolution of 1789 as the archetype for bourgeois-democratic revolutions (see Davidson 2012).



deviations merely because they didn't mirror the English or French experiences (Blackbourn and Eley 1984). Bourgeois revolutions took varied forms depending on how the uneven and combined expansion of capitalism influenced prevalent social relations of production and political developments in specific cases (Anievas and Waring 2023). Post-1789 revolutions typically fall into two categories: those where states formed by revolutions from below, as exemplified by Napoleon, extended the revolution beyond their borders through war, and those where existing regimes or certain factions internally enforced capitalist social relations using their control over the state machinery, often manifested as wars of territorial conquest and integration (Davidson 2005b: 28; Callinicos 1989). Therefore, German unification, the Italian *Risorgimento*, the Meiji Restoration, and the U.S. Civil War are considered as bourgeois revolutions from above due to their rapid and concentrated political innovations establishing legal and political conditions for a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production (Blackbourn and Eley 1984: 84; Post 2011: 249; Anievas and Waring 2023).

The concept of passive revolution, as developed by Gramsci, arguably better captures the dynamics and specifics of post-1789 transformations. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci explores how the bourgeoisie, faced with potent working-class movements after 1848, shifted from revolutionary aspirations to a more conservative stance. Consequently, the fear of mass movements prompted a shift in the nature of bourgeois revolutions, giving rise to passive revolutions, considered the “characteristic form of bourgeois revolution” (Post 2017: 10; Davidson 2012). Additionally, confronting economic and military rivalry from established capitalist states like Britain and France compelled ruling elites in pre-capitalist European societies to replicate their state and social systems (Post 2017: 10). A passive revolution, therefore, denotes historical instances where social relations are reorganized akin to a revolution but ultimately result in neutralizing popular initiatives and democratic aspirations. This leads to the perpetuation of class domination, resembling a restoration, often described as a “revolution-restoration” situation.

Arguably, the uneven and combined development of capitalism not only rendered a distinct bourgeois-democratic revolution (phase) unfeasible, as Trotsky observed (Davidson 2012: 275), but also ensured that passive revolutions became the norm rather than the exception in transitions to capitalism.

This discussion brings us to the concept of uneven and combined development (UCD), masterfully operationalized by Leon Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution*. UCD emerged as a response to the challenge of explaining the unique characteristics of development and the potential for revolutionary breakthroughs in Russia within the context of uneven and combined development shaped by the global political economy established by capitalism (van der Pijl 2015; Davidson 2012). Specifically countering the theorists of the Second International who advocated the bourgeois stage of revolution, Trotsky argued that the uneven and combined development of capitalism rendered a bourgeois-democratic phase unnecessary and untenable in Russia, opening the path for a proletarian revolution. In the field of IHS, contemporary scholars have further developed UCD into a theory, proposing that historical transformations result from interactions between multiple social formations at various developmental levels, leading to distinct outcomes (Rosenberg 2006; Anievas and Nişancıoğlu

2015). UCD's structural focus on historical unevenness and combined development, allowing for an understanding of social peculiarities in specific countries, distinguishes it from historicist PM. However, attempts to elevate this theory to the status of a transhistorical law, applicable to periods preceding the consolidation of capitalism, face skepticism from both proponents of PM (Teschke 2014; Post 2018) and the consequentialist approach (Davidson 2018). Moreover, UCD theory faces criticism for potentially downplaying the historical specificity of capitalism and succumbing to causal indeterminacy, partly because it implies that a myriad of external factors, such as geopolitical interactions among various pre-capitalist social forms, contributed to the emergence of capitalism and bourgeois revolutions (Post 2018; Düzgün 2022).

## **Between the Scylla of Structuralism and the Charybdis of Historicism? The Difference Critical Realism Can Make**

While CR's potential to enhance Marxism's social theory and theory of history is acknowledged in the literature (Creaven 2015; Yalvaç 2010; 2021; Joseph 2002; Callinicos 2004), its application to specific issues in IHS has received limited attention.

Since CR primarily serves as a philosophy of science, its potential contribution to the debate on bourgeois revolution does not involve providing new empirical or historical insights. Instead, it furnishes a sophisticated account of the agent-structure relationship, offering a nuanced theoretical framework for comprehending and explaining the intricate interplay between bourgeois agency, revolution, and capitalism, hence accounting for the contradictory outcomes of bourgeois revolutions. Agency, whether bourgeois or capitalist, always operates within the complex realm of social relations. This means that understanding unintended consequences of action is challenging when using a method like historicism, which reduces social relations to social practices.

Central to CR is its ability to transcend positivistic and interpretivist/historicist approaches in social science. What sets CR apart is its dual transition: first from epistemology to ontology, and within ontology, from a focus on "events, states of affairs, and the like" to an examination of the structures and mechanisms that give rise to them (Bhaskar 2011: 141). Prioritizing ontology allows us to avoid the epistemic fallacy, preventing the conflation of reality with our understanding of it. The shift toward examining underlying structures urges us to move beyond merely identifying facts as perceived by individuals or interpreting the values and intentions of individual actors.

CR contends that social reality cannot be defined solely in terms of experience or language. The epistemic fallacy has led social scientists to treat non-observable theoretical or macro entities as useful fictions or analytic categories for defining recurring behavioral patterns, rendering the search for depth and structure futile. This fallacy has resulted in the production of truncated ontologies, driven by epistemic anxieties and common sense (see Rumelili 2022). CR addresses this by developing a stratified and differentiated conception of reality based on ontological realism. This tenet suggests that for science to be viable, the real world must have a structure with causal powers existing independently of our knowledge of them (Bhaskar 2008: 9).

Bhaskar (1991: 458) emphasizes that explanatory structures, generative mechanisms, or essential relations are ontologically distinct from, out of phase with, and perhaps in opposition to the phenomena they generate. Like Marx, Bhaskar argues that science's ability to uncover the underlying structure of phenomena, even when it contradicts their outward appearances, is crucial. These assertions imply an ontological distinction between how causal mechanisms function and the patterns of events they collectively shape.

This misalignment between causal mechanisms and actual phenomena forms the basis for Bhaskar's (2008) differentiation of the overlapping domains of the empirical, the actual, and the real. The actual pertains to occurring events that may or may not be perceived, while the empirical refers to our experiences and interpretations of these events. The real encompasses generative mechanisms and structures producing events perceived at the empirical level. Therefore, scientific laws apply not to empirical regularities among events but to the mechanisms and structures underlying them (Yalvaç 2010: 170).

Bhaskar (2008: 7) asserts that structures possess unexercised, exercised but unrealized, and realized but unnoticed powers. In open systems, where controlled environments are absent, mechanisms converge to generate actual events alongside other mechanisms. Contingency implies that complex events are shaped by sets of causal mechanisms, and these sets are not universally repeatable; the components of causally effective sets may vary, suggesting the emergence of causal properties as a tendency rather than certainty. Acknowledging the ontological reality of contingency prompts a departure from seeking consistent event patterns as a standard scientific practice. Yet, despite contingency, events are still propelled by "necessity" (Steinmetz 1998: 177).

### ***Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA): Conceptualizing Reproduction and Change***

Critical realists advocate for understanding the interplay between social structures and human agency from a transformative perspective, avoiding the pitfalls of voluntarism and reification. They argue that the social realm is fundamentally composed of or relies on social relations, with social structures being crucial for human actions by providing the necessary tools, rules, and resources. Society is a precondition for intentional actions, not solely a product of human intentions. While these pre-existing structures are integral to our activities, they are simultaneously reproduced or changed through daily endeavors, precluding treatment as independent entities apart from human agency (Bhaskar 2011: 3).

Key social structures like the economy, state, and family hinge on relationships between groups such as employers and workers, parents and children, or officials and civil servants. These relationships persist over time but are subject to reshaping through human actions. CR underscores the importance of these social relationships in explaining social events and trends, as well as the significance of their transformation for emancipating the exploited and oppressed (Bhaskar 2011: 3). While acknowledging society as the product of active agents, CR recognizes the challenges individuals face in understanding and navigating this complex social reality. These challenges encompass unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, the exercise of tacit skills, and unconscious motivations (Bhaskar 2011: 3).

TMSA emphasizes the importance of social structures while asserting that human actions contribute to both the unconscious reproduction and occasional transformation of these structures (Bhaskar 1998: 37-38). People may not consciously work to sustain the capitalist economy, yet, as Bhaskar (1998: 38) notes, it becomes an unintended consequence and necessary condition for their activity. Changes in social forms are not typically driven by agents' desires to change them but result from the socially and historically contingent interplay of underlying structures, causal mechanisms, and counteracting processes (Joseph 2010: 63). However, this does not rule out the possibility that, under specific conditions, agents may unconsciously contribute to societal transformation. The examination of bourgeois revolutions, such as classical bourgeois revolutions from below and passive revolutions, illustrates both intentional reproduction and unintentional transformation. This nuanced understanding suggests a need to refine Bhaskar's argument to incorporate this overlooked aspect. While TMSA traditionally asserts that agents, in their conscious activities, mostly unconsciously reproduce (and occasionally transform) the structures governing their productive activities (Bhaskar 1998: 38), this article, drawing insights from the bourgeois revolution debate, argues that agents can either consciously uphold or inadvertently trigger the transformation of social structures.

Whether actions lead to unintentional transformation or intentional reproduction of social structures depends on factors like the historical context, agents' positions within the structure, existing constraints, and the scope of available possibilities (Wight and Joseph 2010: 21).

## **TMSA's Implications for Bourgeois Revolutions**

TMSA has crucial implications not only for understanding the shortcomings of a historicist perspective but also for acknowledging the strength of PM's structuralist accounts, hence bridging the gap between PM and consequential approaches. Applying TMSA to reconcile PM's focus on social-property relations in explaining capitalism's historical specificity with the structural impacts of bourgeois revolutions on capitalist development raises a crucial question. TMSA posits that structure and agency are distinct layers in social reality, emphasizing society's dependence on agents and the irreducibility of causal properties in individuals and societies. These include structured interests, resources, powers, constraints, and predicaments intricately woven into positions through relationships (Archer 1998: 201; Porpora 1998). This complexity reveals the manifold effects of structure on agents, crucial for understanding both the relationship between bourgeois revolutions and the growth of capitalism and the contradictory outcomes of bourgeois revolutions, such as the emergence of novel social forms that threatened emerging capitalist relations. For instance, it clarifies that while manufacturers, merchants, and bankers gained economic predominance due to their structural positioning when the Puritans limited the Crown's arbitrary taxation, Cromwell secured a monopolistic position for English shipowners in foreign trade, and the Jacobins abolished feudal prerogatives, they also faced the increasing threat of democracy enabled especially by the rising working-class power as a result of mass mobilizations for war (Halperin 2004).

### ***Bourgeois Revolutions from Below: Agents Unconsciously Transforming the Social Structure***

TMSA posits that agents consciously act within social contexts, yet the outcomes of these actions frequently lead to unintentional reproduction or transformation of underlying social structures, not fully understood by the agents involved. Agents, whether engaged in worshipping God, religious or liberation wars, may unknowingly contribute to the perpetuation or breakdown of broader structural relations, irrespective of their initial intentions (Wight and Joseph 2010: 21).

As Hill (1980: 112) contends, “[a]mong ‘the social forces accompanying the rise of capitalism’ we must include not only the individualism of those” pursuing financial gain, “but also the individualism of those who wished to follow their own consciences in worshipping God, and whose consciences led them to challenge the institutions of a stratified hierarchical society.” Similarly, PM contends that the emergence of capitalism can be explained by “a particular system of class *relations*, within which the participants acted to reproduce themselves *as they were*, with the unintended consequence of setting off a process of development that gave rise to capitalism” (Wood 2002: 58). This not only succinctly describes the causal effects of structures as “unintended consequences” but also directly addresses our inquiry into expanding the TMSA framework to include situations where agents unconsciously contribute to the transformations of social relations. In this context, unintended outcomes of class struggle aren’t seen as arbitrary; instead, they are intricately linked by social relations, “opening up limited patterns of development” (Brenner 1985: 36). This perspective explains why capitalism emerged as a new production relation, resulting in market-dependency, predominantly in England, identified as the weakest link in European feudalism. This suggests that the hindrance to capitalism elsewhere wasn’t solely due to pre-capitalist state dominance like traditional tributary empires and absolute monarchies. Rather, it was made unnecessary by class and property relations relying on economically self-sufficient peasants bound to the land or the constant need to reproduce the forces of production.

PM’s perspective on the transition to capitalism and the English bourgeois revolution underscores the dynamic interplay of causal mechanisms, adhering to certain underlying necessities (Brenner 1985: 36). In the late 17th century, English rural producers shifted to market-dependent agriculture, enhancing productivity and positioning England ahead of competitors like France, Spain, and Germany (Chibber 2007: 135). However, England’s supremacy required a political transformation, seen in the overthrow of the absolutist state during the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The Whig aristocracy’s subsequent capitalist transformation of agriculture and state centralization, funded by increased tax revenues, solidified Britain as a global powerhouse (Chibber 2007: 136).

These intertwined revolutions in early modern England – socio-economic and political – were fundamentally linked to capitalism’s emergence. England’s revolutionary rise in capitalism not only reshaped the political economy but also influenced geopolitical competition. According to Chibber (2007: 136), the resulting geopolitical strength pressured rivals, triggering modernizing reforms among Britain’s competitors. France’s economic

backwardness, exposed through military defeats and the bankruptcy of its absolutist state, led to the French Revolution, propelled by England's advanced social relations and military strength in state competition (Mooers 1991: 93-94).

During the French Revolution, the initially reform-focused bourgeois leadership shifted to a revolutionary approach due to external and internal counterrevolutionary forces, as well as peasant intervention, particularly during the Jacobin era, resulting in the dismantling of the *ancien régime* (Anievas 2015; Callinicos 1989). Examining the years 1789 to 1815, encompassing the dissolution of feudalism, land reforms, the rise of the bourgeoisie, legal changes, mass mobilization, mass conscription, and the concept of citizenship, the French Revolution produced two noteworthy and paradoxical outcomes. It laid the foundation for capitalist development in France (for contrasting views cf. Düzgün 2022; Lafrance 2019) while simultaneously bringing popular rule to the forefront of the political agenda by challenging prevailing beliefs in the natural order of social hierarchies and inequality. These consequences not only set the stage for capitalist development but also sparked an impulse to comprehensively restructure society beyond capitalism.

### ***“Passive Revolutions”:* Agents Consciously Reproducing the Social Structure**

In the post-1848 era, as the working class grew more radical, the bourgeoisie aligned with the aristocracy to hinder democratization. The concept of passive revolution illuminates the limits of democracy under capitalism, showcasing the use of revolutionary means for reactionary political goals (Riley and Desay 2007: 815). Passive revolutions entail ruling classes deliberately addressing the social and national question, including challenges from the working class, by attempting to render privilege, hierarchy, and inequality plebeian once again (Saul 2015). Within this framework, the ruling class acknowledges vulnerabilities and restructures “civil society” to prevent independent actions by the masses (Joseph 2002: 33). The German bourgeois revolution exemplifies this intentional drive to perpetuate capitalist social relations.

Blackbourn and Eley (1984) underscore this dynamic when explaining the German bourgeois revolution. They argue against the notion that bourgeois revolutions entail a direct transfer of political power to the bourgeoisie, emphasizing that in a dominant capitalist economy, direct control of the state apparatus is unnecessary. The German bourgeoisie, not having a political interest in embracing liberalism, favored a semi-authoritarian regime to stimulate capitalism. Support for reform/democracy emerged only under pressure from the working class and peasants. The compromise between the German bourgeoisie and landowners after 1871 was a strategic move to achieve specific political goals, not a lack of political confidence. The bourgeoisie's resistance to further parliamentary reforms was driven by a rational calculation to safeguard their interests against perceived threats, as greater reformation would have favored the left. Hence, the passive character of revolutions from above after 1848 results not from a lack of bourgeois agency but from deliberate efforts to perpetuate reestablished social hierarchies, safeguarding capitalism from democratization threats.

## Conclusion

As Blackledge (2006: 46) argues “Marxist historiography...aims not only to understand the world, but to generate historical examples of other, better, ways of doing things”. In this context, Teschke and Knafo are right to reject historical analyses based on the idea of transhistorical laws and structures suppressing agency, which hinders our ability to recognize that people can influence the course of capitalism’s history. However, understanding the gap between what is possible and what is realized requires recognizing both the creativity of specific actions and the social forces and relations that cannot be reduced to these actions. This article demonstrated that PM’s historicist stance results in a truncated ontology that prioritizes agency at the expense of social relations, widening the gap between PM and consequentialist accounts of bourgeois revolutions. The historicist wing of PM, by incorrectly equating structure with transhistorical laws and conflating unintended consequences with contingency, avoids addressing the objective conditions of action. This not only leads to an overly voluntarist approach to socio-historical development but also obscures the structural process connecting bourgeois revolutions with the advancement of capitalism. Consequently, the concept of bourgeois revolutions is dismissed from this perspective due to its alleged incompatibility with a historical account that places social-property relations at the center of the analysis for understanding the historical specificity of capitalism.

This article demonstrated that adopting a critical realist perspective on the agent-structure relationship resolves the ambiguity surrounding the concept of bourgeois revolution. TMSA, which defines social structure as social relations, provides a framework that integrates historical contingency with causal necessity. Thus, applying TMSA to the bourgeois revolution debate reconciles PM’s emphasis on social-property relations and class struggle for understanding the historical specificity of capitalism with the historical and structural roles played by bourgeois revolutions in its development. This reconciliation is achieved by theorizing how agents’ conscious activities within specific social contexts lead to the (un)intentional reproduction or transformation of underlying social structures.

In the framework of TMSA, unintended consequences, while steering clear of a determinist and unilinear account, are not synonymous with pure contingency or accidents. Although bourgeois revolutions “from below” played a role in the establishment of capitalism, they do not presuppose the prior existence or inevitability of capitalism. Instead, capitalism is better understood as an unintended, though not accidental, outcome of revolutionary transformations involving class struggle within specific historical conditions precipitated by the crisis of feudalism. Thus, it is possible to assert the historical relevance of bourgeois revolutions in the advancement of capitalism without assuming the prior existence of capitalism to explain its rise.

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