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International Sociology 2012 27: 179

DOI: 10.1177/0268580911427994

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Review essay

Provincial Europe

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International Sociology

Review of Books

27(2) 179–188

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DOI: 10.1177/0268580911427994

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Abstract

This review essay argues that József Böröcz reverses explanations that have served as the basis not only for Eurocentric accounts of global social change and the 'rise' of Europe but also for the latter's critics coming from Marxist, postcolonial and world-systems perspectives. Most notably, the review considers why on the basis of Böröcz's work we have to reject the classic question of how and why Europe and the West have become rich and/or 'progressive'. The essay considers the wide implications of Böröcz's novel analysis which focuses on weights of different political entities that he sees as crucial in understanding geopolitical manoeuvring of wide-ranging historical and present-day actors such as the European Union, western colonial powers, as well as state socialist countries and blocs, thus offering a fresh and provocative perspective on global social change.

Keywords

critical geopolitical economy, economic weight, elasticity of weight, European Union, global social change

József Böröcz, *The European Union and Global Social Change: A Critical Geopolitical-Economic Analysis*, Routledge: London and New York, 2009; 242 pp.: ISBN 9780415481021, US\$120.00 (hbk), 9780415595179, US\$39.95 (pbk), 9780203873557, US\$35.99/US\$39.99 (ebk)

This book offers a truly provocative and thoughtful historical-sociological macro-analysis of global social change concerning the last 500 years. The reader is constantly reminded that mainstream (and even not so mainstream) knowledge and ideas s/he has learnt concerning the rise (and the current fall) of Europe and the West are not only wrong – as they are biased and mis-focused reflections of reality – but also deceptive. They mislead not only interested scholars and students of macro-historical structures, but also those politicians, business people and geopolitical experts who truly want to see

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why Europe and the West are losing power and control, regardless of their previous privileged position.

The critique advanced by József Böröcz is largely based on data from a public-access data set produced by economic historian Angus Maddison (www.ggdc.net/MADDISON/oriindex.htm). Maddison's data offer estimates for population, GDP and GDP per capita for select data points since the year 1 [*sic*]. From this, Böröcz utilized the series since 1500. In the first chapter, he introduces the long-term changes in both population development and economic performance of Europe, European political entities (states, empires or later blocs such as the EU, NATO, Warsaw Pact, Comecon, etc.) versus relevant other areas of the world concerning the period between 1500 and 1950. In the bulk of his analysis, he focuses not only on rates of development (such as GDP per capita, termed ratist approach below), but also on the weights of different political entities, which he sees as crucial to understanding geopolitical manoeuvring. Böröcz does this weight analysis in two ways. He considers percentage shares in world population or world economy, and even when he looks at rates, he expresses them as percentages of the world average in the given year.

In the second chapter, he builds a dynamic network model of colonization since 1500, focusing on links between colonizers and colonized areas. This allows him to make a nuanced analysis of global governance during the period of imperialism. In this analysis he uses a unique database of colonial governors, including all colonized areas from the 15th century to the present, published in 1970 by David P Henige. The author further advances a large-scale comparative and quantitative examination of involvements in war by different types of empires – empires with ‘overseas’ territories or contiguous empires where political control is expanded to neighbouring territories and not remote areas. Here, yet another database is utilized, once again in a novel way, published in a 1983 book on *War in the Modern Great Power System* by Jack Levy.

Chapter 3 focuses on the geopolitical-economic performance of state socialist countries and their various blocs by looking at both the weights and the rates of these countries using the Maddison databank and some additional data. This historical investigation leads logically to an analysis of the birth and geopolitical positioning of the European Union, presented in Chapter 4. Thus this is a very complex analysis with, as already noted, surprising comparative historical results, making the readers uneasy about their views of long-term global development.

Böröcz's work is especially scathing because it reverses those explanations which have served as the basis not only for Eurocentric accounts but, partly, also for the latter's critics coming from Marxist, postcolonial and world-systems perspectives. Most notably, the author sharply refuses the exclusive use of what he labels the ‘ratist’ account in which per capita wealth is the ultimate focus of historical sociological analysis. In other words, he rejects the classic question of why Europe and the West have become rich and/or ‘progressive’ on a country or regional level – a question that underlies not only the work of all the classics of sociology, among them Marx, Smith, Durkheim and Weber, and mainstream economic historians such as Jones (1981), Landes (1998) or North (1990), but also, to some extent even André Gunder Frank (1998, 2000), Immanuel Wallerstein (1979, 1997), Karl Polányi (1957 [1944]) or Samir Amin (1989). Putting aside internal debates, the main difference between Euro-apologist and Euro-critical authors has been

only that the former group praised European attitudes towards institutions such as the market, private property, accumulation, while others drew attention to the exploitative-disintegrative nature of world capitalism especially towards non-Europeans and the colonized. This latter group also made very important steps towards looking at asymmetrical global relationships. These mechanisms are accepted by Böröcz also. Nonetheless, they could never answer how this hierarchical system is *not eternal*. Most earlier work conceptualized that it could be challenged politically, and that it may shift in terms of centres and hegemonies within the system. But one had the overall feeling that the present system was somehow almost inevitable and definitely universal. Studies of the capitalist world-system thus acquired an ahistorical character, regardless of their theoretical insistence that it was a historical phenomenon that will definitely disappear.

In sharp contrast, József Böröcz is able to show the fragile nature of this system by simply looking at the relative size of the actors and the historical structures of global weight. This may look like a simple move, but the implications are huge – at least in understanding the comparative history of economic weight and public authority including colonialism, state socialism and the European Union.

This book offers an unusual combination of topics. Few scholars may claim expertise in all these issues and there are even a number of unresolved conflicts among the specialty fields involved. Scholars of EU integration never look at state socialism and forms of integration in the state socialist bloc since the EU is regarded as superior to, and hence effortlessly overtaking, socialism in Eastern Europe (see, among others, Archer and Butler, 1992: 145–157; Bideleux and Taylor, 1996; Heenan and Lamontagne, 1999: 209–220). And they rarely borrow ideas from postcolonial critics who fight Eurocentrism. For most EU-analysts, ‘Europe’ is seen as eternally good as also shown, among others, by Böröcz elsewhere (Böröcz, 2006; Judt, 1996). Students of state socialist history generally maintain a rather superfluous totalitarianism simile (socialism seen through the mirror of Nazism, with an extreme degree of Eurocentrism), and postcolonial thinking is the last thing they turn to for ideas or inspiration (see, among others, Davies, 1996: 896–1136). If the notion of imperialism is of any interest to them at all, it is ‘Soviet/Russian imperialism’, a notion that has no real link to postcolonial thought (see, among others, the debate on ‘Central Europe’ versus Russia; Lord, 2000). Meanwhile, scholars committed to a postcolonial critique often ignore state socialism. Nonetheless, colonialism/imperialism/socialism/European integration are surely some of the key points in global history and we need to link them, as they have formed a global dynamic during the modern period. These systems interacted with each other and this interaction has been a key engine of global social change.

To be sure, the author’s suggestion to look at weights and rates in combination seems empirically sound. Regardless of the popularity of ratist measures and conceptualizations of development, size does matter even in the eyes of ordinary people. Recent survey results show that even when people are asked to rate the development of several countries, they tend to ‘overrate’ countries of larger size. Even in the eyes of East Europeans, China, India and Russia are countries that clearly receive higher ranking as compared to their GDP per capita ranking (Melegh et al., 2010). So, regardless of the dominance of ratist accounts, size does matter – and we lack a proper historical sociology of how it is combined with rates of wealth. In spite of the cult of big powers in popular and scholarly

world history writing, this has never been done so systematically; earlier work combined Eurocentric hierarchies and actual military and economic capacities in relation to conflicting countries in deciding which country could be considered to be a great power (Kennedy, 1989). The book by Böröcz is not such an account. It is a complete, systematic historical sociological analysis of weight and rates of development as related to global averages.

The author has one major starting point, namely that – in terms of global weight, in terms of population size and commercial embeddedness – Europe and the West were marginal till the 18th century and their relatively small size remained a key problem even throughout the period of colonial and postcolonial dominance. This focus on weight in itself is a clear blow to Eurocentric universalism. In terms of rates of wealth and production, these relatively small and previously marginal states could claim advancement and they could understand themselves as being the focal point of hierarchical development put onto a linear scale of ratist measurements. In terms of size, by contrast, the importance of European states has been surprisingly limited, with the exception of the British Empire at points where it included such giants as India, as well as parts of what was to become the United States. It was not until the turn of the 20th century that the latter could transform itself into what the author calls a ‘heavy-weight’ core country. Even today, European countries are small in size as compared to states such as India, China, Brazil or Russia. How could they become, then, ‘masters’ of the world for a while and how could and can they lose this supercontrol?

This supercontrol, or at least an image of superiority, is even today much accepted by people living in the once-dominated areas and much criticized by postcolonial thinkers – among them Chakrabarty (2000), who sought to ‘provincialize’ Europe intellectually for the sake of a better account of modernity and global history by deconstructing the Eurocentric hierarchical thinking (see O’Brien, 2006, writing about ‘Provincializing the first industrial revolution’).

But what if Europe has always been provincial and there is no need to historicize it further? Why don’t we take this as a starting point? The figures offered by Böröcz concerning 450 years of global history, based on Maddison’s data (which actually somewhat underestimate the pre-capitalist GDP of some major non-European powers such as India: see the paper by Stephen Broadberry and Bishnupriya Gupta, 2011), clearly show this provinciality throughout. Historical statistics show how fragile the ‘major’ European powers have been and why they needed, and continue to need, so much the ratist accounts reduced to linear scales to show them as significant. These states have not been key structural agents of global social change, as has already been pointed out by Frank in his provocative work on the long-term continuity of one world system (Frank, 1998). Böröcz offers new and systematic ideas to restart and refocus this debate.

He not only demonstrates how small they are, but actually bases some of his arguments concerning the rise of European ‘supercontrol’ over the world on that insight. Böröcz does not refute the already known mechanisms of unequal exchange towards land-based agrarian societies and the impact of colonialism. In light of this, it is not surprising that he does not spend much time on those economic historical arguments which explain ‘Asian divergence’ on the basis of institutions (among others Jones, North, Landes, cited earlier), or for instance on the more specific arguments of Ken Pomeranz’s

(2000) non-institutionalist (meaning, in this case, not believing in the privileged role of special western economic and social institutions in a Weberian sense) account that focuses on natural resources and access to them in China and India, both of which were already well-developed in terms of highly integrated markets, high level technology and massive industrial production (Pomeranz, 2000; see also Gupta and Ma, 2010; or concerning social institutions such as family, role of women and inheritance, the pioneering works of Goody, 1983, 1990).

Böröcz focuses, instead, on colonial networks and the repositioning of Europe concerning global trading circuits in addition to the incorporation of the Americas into its trading circuits as being a major push towards a fragile but global dominance. The network model is truly interesting as it foregrounds, on the basis of a simple data source of a list of colonial governors covering more than 500 years, how the colonial network ties increased in size, density and complexity and what dominance Europe achieved in this respect. The key point is not only the network analysis in terms of focal nodes, but the actual visual representation of how network colonization, or in his words global 'segmental governance', worked. In this form of global governance, the colonial encounter happened between one colonial point and the colonizer, which was, in turn, increasingly involved in other not directly related colonial links. The colonizers by and large avoided conflicts with each other and they formed a *de facto* coalition outside Europe up until the First World War. This is an important key to understanding how they could become successful in subjugating the rest of the world. In other words, it was not due to their superior institutions and economic strength, but rather that this competitive edge did not exist. Lilliputian Europeans could tie Gullivers by a subtle set of global colonial ties. One only has to think of the creation of the various India Companies and India missions in the 18th century, a process that formed a powerful 'Lilliputian' combination of business, religious and scientific interests including scientific and industrial espionage (see Jensen, 2011). The author does not emphasize that this network system of colonization was already used by the ancient Greek or Venetian maritime merchants and colonizers (for the network hypothesis, see Malik, 2003), but the point he makes is relevant and contributes to the understanding of the unequal exchange between small-size colonizers and vast 'undeveloped' territories of the world. Similar to Greek colonization, O'Brien also makes the relevant point that in British success, the navy played a crucial, if not decisive role and this secured geopolitical and even internal strength and defence during the otherwise sluggish British transition during the 17th and 18th centuries (O'Brien, 2006). Segmental governance was the underlying structure of imperialism and immediate post-imperialism, and, with the collapse of the global colonial system, it had to give place to a new arrangement, characterized by a combination of regional integration and the elasticity of weight as exemplified by the European Union.

But the post-Second World War EU integration and its key innovation, something the author calls 'the elasticity of weight', cannot be understood without the state socialist challenge that appeared exactly during the period when colonial-imperialist structures collapsed. Beyond some theorizing on whether socialism was really a challenge to a world capitalist system (Boatcă, 2006; Chase-Dunn, 1999: 203–213; Wallerstein, 2000) there has been little real empirical research into the integration of the state socialist economies into the world economy. The dominant approach, including the massive literature

on transitology, has argued that Eastern Europe could not be integrated into the world economy fully as it should have been. These Eurocentric ideas on state socialist economies (among others see the so-called reform economist groups in Eastern Europe such as Csaba, 1990; Kornai, 1992; or economic historians such as Sutcliffe, 1999) have always claimed lack of openness and adaptability as factors that made these economies inherently ‘backward’, excessively bureaucratic, constrained only by supply, too informal, too hierarchical, lacking market mechanisms, etc. and with such arguments they did their best to create the myth that socialism was inherently abnormal (see also Böröcz, 1998; about the internalization, see, Melagh, 2006). Historically, this ideological claim just followed the previous socialist ideologues arguing that socialism was superior to capitalism either directly (in terms of its social relationships, the elimination of private property, the effective presence of society-wide planning, etc.) or indirectly, due to its ability to combine distinct phases of development. With few exceptions, there has been basically no analysis of how these economies functioned *within* the world-systemic relationships and how they actually performed.

In this respect this book by Böröcz is one of the first systematic attempts to look at the state socialist economies’ real performance in terms of size and development. The analysis is subtle, and does not help ideologues on either side of the capitalism–socialism superiority debate. First, although far from following a homogeneous pattern, those socialist economies which were not in a constant civil war performed relatively well until the 1980s; but then, with the exception of the socialist economies in Asia, they started or continued stagnating in regard to relative size and relative development. Thus East European socialist countries with significantly different conditions and institutions did not react very differently, but had some common problems – most probably, as Böröcz argues, related to technological shifts and levels of individual consumption. But we cannot say definitely that the state socialist system as a system went bankrupt, especially if we compare the performance of the non-Asian economies to their trajectories after the collapse of state socialism. After state socialism, the later collapse in relative size and development is rather apparent. So we have to look for alternative explanations to understand state socialist development, arguments that do not search for simple, inherent characteristics but locate their key variables in the hierarchical world-system historically (both in terms of real economy and related cognitive patterns), and take into account the totality of world capitalism. We may wonder, for instance, if socialist economic policies also ignored the emerging new international division of labour in the 1980s and the more open functioning of the global market – changes that actually stripped these East European economies of their comparative advantages, especially with regard to some Asian economies (see, for instance, comments by Frank, 2006). China and Vietnam have not only maintained state control over their economies in the era of globalization, but actually have the reserves to reinforce their positions in a world economy – while getting further and further from any kind of a ‘socialist’ ideal of humanized labour relations.

In Eastern Europe, this loss of comparative advantage is coupled with an additional factor, namely, the fact that they voluntarily offered all their assets to ‘Europe’ in order to be allowed to re-enter a symbolic sphere loaded with two centuries’ worth of superiority claims. They became auctioneer states, as Böröcz put it in an earlier piece (Böröcz, 1999). But this leads us back to the regional concept of Europe and a new form of global

governance termed ‘elasticity of weight’, which is the last part of the story presented by Böröcz.

This is related to the development of the European Union. In the mid-20th century, both decolonization and the loss of a dozen or so countries opting for state socialism actually shattered world capitalism. The developments almost followed Trotsky’s prophecy that world capitalism would collapse after the Second World War. In this respect, Marshall Aid – analysed in the book – was an oxygen mask, a device that actually saved western capitalism. West European capitalism had to find a new form of global governance. Small-size European states, stripped of their colonies, had no alternative to seeking help from the United States – already a well-developed heavy-weight economy as shown in some of the graphs in the book. They looked for this help not only in Europe, but everywhere they had a stake, including Vietnam (see, for instance, Lawrence, 2007) and other colonies. It is a wickedly funny exercise to read the letters of previous colonial experts when – for instance during the Second World War – they already offered themselves, including their colonial possessions, to the United States tantalized by its new global position. These letters also reveal how these West European former colonial powers tried to get the US into their lost colonial businesses. Forging the ‘great combination’ is how Lawrence puts it when describing the post-Second World War British efforts to convince an unwilling US to take over Indochina to save the interests of France with its colonial obsessions (so much supported by the European Union founder Schuman), as Britain did not want to help and did not have the resources to help (Lawrence, 2007; Thomas, 2007). Nonetheless, they were sure about the need to have a ‘great combination’ to maintain European rule. Clearly, there was a sense of European weakness inside and out, a weakness that had to have always been there – as Böröcz shows us – even when segmental governance gave European nations dominant positions in the late 19th century. This minority complex, being the crucial point of Böröcz’s argument, would prove dramatic after the Second World War, and West European states had to look for new strategies of regional power. The solution was to secure a space for manoeuvring among circles of power and to create overlapping blocs and clubs. In other words, the European Union is not a state or a federal system but a certain mechanism of global positioning.

According to Böröcz, the European Union has found such a peculiar mechanism of global positioning in the arrangement that allows it to switch between different arrangements of power in order to counterbalance the long-term stagnation and decline in the relative size of European states and to secure ratist privileges in terms of wealth. In military affairs they are part of NATO, a supra-state organization that is, in turn, dominated by the US; in certain systems of global competition they create a public authority called the European Union supplemented by other blocs such as EFTA (the European Free Trade Association). There are also sharply demarcated zones within the EU, such as the euro-zone or the zone of the free movement of labour. In other respects, they maintain a ‘sovereign’ nation-state status, as do all other states. In certain cases they can individually maintain historical privileges – permanent seats in the Security Council of the UN, for example – maximizing their global influence without having real global weight behind them. Recurrent ‘enlargements’, constant shifts between ‘western’, EU-level politics and nation-state politics characterize this arrangement. Elasticity of weight is

certainly a very fragile system of global positioning, and leads to ongoing rearrangements. The recent crisis of the euro clearly shows this as ‘rogue’ member states easily follow free rider strategies. Greek economic policy-makers enjoyed the low interest rates of the euro-zone without having any economic base behind it, behaving almost like Europe when confronted with the rest of the world.

But beyond the description of this form of global governance, Böröcz offers some more disillusionment concerning the ‘goodness of Europe’ and the hope many have concerning regionalism. As it turns out, the advancement of the integration of ‘Europe’ even including the already dead CMEA (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) has increased global inequality if compared to a scenario that views the EU as a conglomerate of nation-states. Thus it could very well be that we need less Europe in the present format if we want to confront inequality globally. I do not know the answer, but I am absolutely sure that Böröcz’s sobering findings concerning the ‘European miracle’ will allow us to see some of the large-scale global problems of world capitalism in the 21st century without being fooled by false, racist, Eurocentrist hierarchies. Nonetheless, the problems inherent in the recent restructuring of world capitalism may provide us little time to think peacefully in provincial Europe.

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Résumé

L'essai de revue soutient que József Böröcz renverse les explications qui ont servi de la base non seulement pour les comptes rendus Eurocentraux de changement social global et 'la hausse' de l'Europe, mais aussi pour les critiques du dernier venant du Marxisme, du perspective post-colonial et des perspectives de systèmes mondiaux. Le plus notamment, la revue considère pourquoi sur la base du travail de Böröcz nous devons rejeter la question classique de comment et pourquoi l'Europe et l'Ouest sont devenus riches et-ou 'progressifs'. L'essai de revue considère les larges implications de la nouvelle analyse de Böröcz qui se concentre sur les poids d'entités politiques différentes qu'il voit comme crucial dans la compréhension de la manœuvre géopolitique de larges acteurs de jour historiques et présents s'étendant comme l'Union Européenne, des pouvoirs coloniaux Occidentaux, aussi bien que des pays socialistes d'état et des blocs, offrant ainsi une perspective fraîche et provocatrice sur le changement social global.

Resumen

El ensayo de revisión argumenta que József Böröcz invierte las explicaciones que han servido como la base no sólo para las cuentas Eurocéntricas de cambio global social 'y la subida' de Europa, pero también para los críticos últimos que vienen del perspectivas Marxista, postcolonial y estas de sistemas mundiales. El más notablemente, la revisión considera por qué sobre la base de trabajo del Böröcz tenemos que rechazar la pregunta clásica de como y por qué Europa y el Oeste se han hecho ricos y/o 'progresivos'. El ensayo de revisión considera las amplias implicaciones del nuevo análisis de Böröcz que enfoca en los pesos de entidades diferentes políticas que él ve como crucial en la comprensión de la maniobra geopolítica de amplios actores históricos y de dia que se extienden, como Unión Europea, poderes Occidentales coloniales, así como países estatales socialistas y bloques, así ofreciendo una perspectiva fresca y provocativa sobre el cambio global social.

Biographical note

Attila Melegh is a sociologist, economist and historian by training. He has taught in the United States, Russia, Georgia and Hungary, and is now Associate Professor at Corvinus University, Budapest and Professor at Pal Tomori College as the head of the International Studies Programme. He also works for the Demographic Research Institute as senior researcher. His central research interests are in sociological and historical aspects of globalization, global social change and international migration. He has authored books in English and Hungarian, and published over a hundred scientific publications.