

Global Elite as Transnational Capitalist Class*

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Globální elita jako transnacionální kapitalistická třída

Abstract: As a contribution to the burgeoning field of multidisciplinary globalization studies, this article evaluates how IR grand theories can conceptualize the phenomenon of global elite. It compares and synthesizes (neo)liberalism, constructivism, feminism and neo-Marxism. Liberal approaches use the analytical tool of transnational actors or transnational networks. In constructivist's perspective, part of global elite falls into the category of epistemic community. Feminists offer the term Davos Men. Neo-Marxist conceptualization revolves around the notion of transnational capitalist class. The paper concludes that neo-Marxist IR theory best accounts for the global elite and therefore, the debates on the transnational capitalist class are thoroughly and critically reviewed.

Keywords: global elite; transnational capitalist class; Davos Men; epistemic community; transnational actors/networks

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Introduction

Mainstream accounts of globalization often portray this crucial phenomenon in rather de-personalized manner. Globalization is said to be produced by almost anonymous forces of (Western) modernity, particularly rationalism, capitalism and technology [*Held et al. 1999: 10–12; Scholte 2000: 89–108*].

However, contrary to this explanation, some scholars stress the human-induced, elite-driven nature of current globalization [*Sklair 2001: x; Sener 2007: 119–120*]. They argue that powerful social groups shape important worldwide developments or even that globalization – far from being spontaneous automatic process (as sometimes suggested) – was caused by concrete political decisions [*Santos 2006: 395*].

Here, we can speak of “global elite(s)”, as this term, loosely conceived, has been established in the journalistic [*Freeland 2011; Unruh – Cabrera 2013*] as well as academic [*Dupuis-Déri 2007; Conti – O’Neil 2007; Rothkopf 2008; Davidson – Poor – Williams 2009; Pakulski 2010; Kakabadse – Kakabadse 2012; Hoffmann-Lange 2012; Robertson 2014; Goxe – Belhoste 2015*] literature, especially in neo-Marxist [*Robinson 2000; Harris 2013*] and feminist [*Eisenstein 2009*] writings. However, in these works (with certain exception of [*Pakulski 2010*]), the key expression “global elite” is not seriously conceptualized and

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theorized, but rather intuitively used as an easy label to denote the small cosmopolite group of the most influential businessmen, politicians, bureaucrats and opinion-makers.

Most strikingly, in the above mentioned texts (with certain exception of [Hoffmann-Lange 2012]), the whole topic is tackled without (explicit) links to International Relations (IR) discipline. Yet IR should be natural part of this pressing debate, since global elite comprises individuals from various countries who meet on different continents and influence the world politics. Moreover, in recent years, IR has undergone the so-called “sociological turn” [Lawson – Shilliam 2010]. In addition, within the field, there is a revived interest in IR (grand) theories.¹

Indeed, IR theories can offer their own peculiar conceptualizations of the global elite entity. Yet, one question remains to be answered: if we are to speak about global elite as IR scholars, which theory should we prefer as the one best equipped to deal with this matter?

Hence, the following review article aims to assess how well the relevant IR theories describe the global elite. In this regard, we summarize and compare (neo)liberalism, constructivism, feminism and neo-Marxism. These theories were selected for two reasons. First, they all represent the so-called “grand theories” [Eriksson 2014: 105] and as such, they should be able to discern and satisfactorily cover (new) “grand themes” as globalization increasingly is and – by extension, yet to a lesser degree – global elite too,² as will be argued below. Second, and most importantly, all examined theories (unlike (neo)realism, which is therefore omitted) place emphasis on non-state actors, including various (transnational) social groups. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask which of these theories recognizes the global elite and offers the most accurate³, elaborated⁴ and widely used⁵ conceptualization for it.

When addressing global elite, liberal approaches can use their analytical framework of transnational actors or transnational networks [Nye – Keohane 1971]. If seen from constructivist’s perspective, part of global elite falls into the category of “epistemic community” [Haas 1992]. Feminists might capture the global elite with their term “Davos Men” [Beneria 1999; Danner – Young 2003]. Finally, neo-Marxist theorizing puts forward the notion of “transnational capitalist class” [Gill 2009 (1990); Sklair 1997; Robinson – Harris 2000; van Apeldoorn 2004; Carroll 2010].

After reviewing these possible conceptualizations, the paper judges that neo-Marxism best accounts for the global elite. Though quite intuitive, this is an important finding,

¹ See the special issue of a top IR journal *European Journal of International Relations* 3/2013, where different views were expressed regarding the present state and the future of (grand) IR theories.

² Admittedly, global elite is not a traditional “grand theme” of IR like, most notably, (inter-state) war. However, as the number and severity of inter-state wars decrease and globalization processes intensify, IR has been refocusing. Critical theorists even claim that global elite more or less drives globalization, which is now a “grand theme” of virtually all social sciences, so why should IR be an exception? Seen from (not only) neo-Marxist perspective, elites promote economic and political integration, which has rightfully been at the centre of much IR research. Moreover, as will be clear later on, global elite concentrates around institutions (the IMF, EU, the Trilateral Commission) that have also been a long standing object of many IR scholars. If only for these reasons, global elite can be considered as an increasingly salient (and perhaps already “grand”) IR topic.

³ Meaning specific and fitting (as opposed to vague and misleading), since only specific conceptualization yields sufficient explanatory power.

⁴ Sophisticated in terms of whether it allows for further analytical internal differentiation, which would give us a more nuanced (hierarchical) picture of the global elite.

⁵ Broad academic usage (support) alias wide (empirical) application of any concept or theory signals its quality.

which corroborates the continued validity of (often overlooked) Marxist ideas, since theoretical approaches should be evaluated according to their capacity to provide an adequate grasp of crucial phenomena [Burchill *et al.* 2005: 23–24] as the global elite undoubtedly is. However, in post-communist countries, Marxist thinking needs to be rediscovered and revitalized, so the present paper also wants to contribute to this task. At the same time, we attempt to foster closer dialogue between IR, political science, sociology and economics, all in line with current appeals for more interdisciplinary scholarship. Finally, our piece responds to recent calls for “a more critical investigation of who the global elite are and how they might be studied” [McKenna – Ravishankar – Weir 2015: 118].

The article proceeds in four main parts, dedicated successively to (neo)liberalism, constructivism, feminism and neo-Marxism. At the beginning of each part, every theory is briefly sketched out, with its origins and general basic principles. Afterwards, we always outline and debate the special conceptualization that the given theory can offer for the global elite. Then, in the section entitled “discussion of the findings”, the evaluation is made and neo-Marxism vindicated because of relative superiority of its notion of transnational capitalist class. At the end of the paper, we add concluding remarks on today’s relevance of Marxism and its research on transnational capitalist class.

Global elite in (neo)liberalism

Liberalism is one of the oldest and richest IR theories. Moreover, right from the beginning, this stream has been characterized by its non-state-centric profile. Instead, quite in line with neo-Marxism, liberal approaches traditionally focus primarily on individuals and social groups [Viotti – Kauppi 1999: 200–209]. Because of this ontological position, liberal accounts are often subsumed under the broader heading of “pluralism”.

At the same time, liberal perspectives generally prioritize economic over security and other considerations. It means that material prosperity is seen as more important (and desirable) goal than, for instance, (country’s) military status, political prestige or cultural self-determination. Yet, again, this “economism” brings liberalism close to Marxism [Moravcsik 1997: 522, note 23].

However, it seems that contrary to Marxists, liberals somehow hesitate to point to capitalists as the most significant social group. This is surprising, since liberals, just like neo-Marxists, contend that states’ foreign policy basically reflects the interests of dominant domestic constituencies [Moravcsik 1997: 516–519].

That said, the leverage of capitalists can hardly be disputed. Obviously, they represent a powerful social group (“class”) that repeatedly succeeded in promoting its own cause. For example, corporate (industrial) interests managed to influence EU governance and discourse and played an important role in completing the internal market [van Apeldoorn 2000]. Similarly, to a large degree, (transnational) business agendas have been shaping all post-cold war U.S. grand strategies of “Open Door imperialism”, regardless of the actual administration in office [van Apeldoorn – de Graaff 2014: 46, 49–50].

It follows that the primary focus on capitalists is more than justified. Indeed, one stream of liberalism has been dubbed “commercial liberalism” [Moravcsik 1997: 528–530]. So, one would expect that (international) business community should be at the center of (at least) this liberal research program, but it is hard to find works of such kind.

Transnational actors: from corporations to terrorists

Although neoliberals principally submit to the key realist premise of states as the main actors [Nye – Keohane 1971: 342], they nevertheless emphasize – just like neo-Marxists – the global interconnectedness (“complex interdependence”) of almost all states as well as markets and societies. Indeed, both neoliberals and neo-Marxists believe that nation-states are increasingly challenged (weakened, bypassed) by various transnational processes [Nye – Keohane 1971: 345; Slaughter 1997: 192, 197].

In this respect, neoliberal IR theory stresses the role of “transnational relations”, which encompass intensifying multilateral interactions (flows of information, goods, people) occurring across and beyond nation states [Nye – Keohane 1971: 331]. Consequently, neoliberals introduced the term “transnational actors” [Nye – Keohane 1971: 330]. These players can operate on global or regional level, in one or more issue-areas [Risse 2002: 255]. They might have formal structures (as firms do), but not necessarily (as transnational movements show).

As already indicated, transnational actors include corporations, activists’ groups (NGOs), but also churches, terrorists (and other criminal organizations) or the so-called governmental networks as coalitions of various domestic officials (bureaucrats, judges, etc.) and their respective counterparts abroad [Slaughter 1997]. However, as will be clear later on, the neoliberal notion of transnational governmental networks seems to be just a subset of a broader constructivist concept of transnational epistemic communities, since both labels denote small interlinked groups of professionals with expert knowledge in given issue-areas.

Apart from transnational actors, neoliberals also propound the almost synonymous notion of “transnational networks” [Nye – Keohane 1971: 331]. Most importantly, it is claimed that transnational actors/networks usually dispose of some autonomy. It means that they can pursue independent “private foreign policies” [Nye – Keohane 1971: 341] and even compete with the states. This might be true especially for corporations, since they often possess wealth that far exceeds that of many (developing) countries.

Interestingly, the neoliberal emphasis on corporations parallels similar obsession in neo-Marxists circles. Thus, in a sense, it can be argued that neoliberals and neo-Marxists share the same object of study, but not the approach to it.

In sum, network theories of world politics [Hafner-Burton – Kahler – Montgomery 2009] are suitable for studies of the global elite. Hence, in neoliberal analytical framework, the global elite can be conceptualized as the key transnational actor (for similar argument see [van Apeldoorn 2004: 162]) or transnational network. However, it is hard to find any publication that explicitly applies this neoliberal category on the topic of the global elite. Nevertheless, in a recent book on Bilderberg Group, the notion of transnational (elite) network is used [Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse 2011].

Global elite in constructivism

Like feminism, constructivism has entered the field of IR quite recently. In fact, both theories gained attention almost simultaneously in the 90th. Moreover, they share some general features stemming from their joint inspiration from sociology.

Feminism as well as constructivism stress that institutions are socially constructed. Accordingly, both schools of thought emphasize the role of nonmaterial (ideational) factors, especially norms, values and identities. As a consequence, many feminist and constructivist works examine the socialization processes (how men internalize masculine gender attributes or how states embrace expected patterns of interaction, for example in various “cultures of anarchy”). Constructivism can also focus on socialization of the global elite. Nevertheless, with regard to IR theory, it would be more productive to relate the global elite to the well-developed constructivist concept of epistemic community. Two reasons justify this attempt. First, like global elite, the term “epistemic community” denotes a relatively small group of people [Haas 1992: 27] who usually form some transnational social/policy network. Second, similar to global elite, epistemic community has (potentially) great influence, since “control over knowledge and information is an important dimension of power” [Haas 1992: 2].

Neoliberal epistemic community: knowledge in service of power

Epistemic communities are said to provide expertise in specific issue-areas. In other words, epistemic community consists of specialists with common “set of normative and principled beliefs” [Haas 1992: 3]. It means that the members stick to the same values. Moreover, they have “a shared policy enterprise” [Haas 1992: 16], which practically amounts to “common interests” [Haas 1992: 18].

Politicians frequently seek epistemic communities for consultations, without which it would be difficult to successfully manage many increasingly complex problems. In addition, epistemic communities can themselves set the agendas and/or influence subsequent decision-making [Haas 1992: 4]. To this end, members of epistemic communities operate from various think tanks, universities, regulatory agencies and they maintain ties with one another through conferences, journals, research collaboration and other rather informal channels. Most importantly, there are transnational epistemic communities that work effectively across state borders. As such, these epistemic communities are examples of the above-mentioned transnational actors [Risse 2002: 256].

The involvement and impact of various epistemic communities have been documented in many different areas of both “low” (environmental protection) and “high” (trade in services and especially nuclear arms control) politics [Haas 1992: 5]. For instance, the economic order after the WWII was influenced by epistemic community of Keynesian economists [Haas 1992: 19]. Today, similarly, many authors stress the existence of epistemic community of neoliberal economists [Chwieroth 2007: 446]. Not surprisingly, the “neoliberal epistemic community” is said to dominate in the global financial institutions like IMF, World Bank, but also in “US Treasury and ministries of finance around the world” [Hulme 2010: 22]. Some scholars use the term “neo(-)liberal epistemic community” with hyphen [Coleman – Skogstad 1995: 242], while others without it [Fisher – Gould – Haughton 2007: 990; Neubauer 2012: 2178].

More fundamentally, this group need not be composed only of economists. Other members of neoliberal epistemic community include right-wing journalists, NGO and think-tanks representatives, but also politicians and businessmen, especially those affiliated with financial sector [Fisher – Gould – Haughton 2007: 992; Neubauer 2012: 2178–2180].

Even (European) central bankers can constitute epistemic community [Verdun 1999: 323] and from neo-Marxist perspective, the same is true for the whole “transnational business elite” [van Apeldoorn 2004: 149].

Simultaneously, one might speak of “transnational neo(-)liberal epistemic community” [Drulák – Königová 2005: 157; Laursen 2010: 48]. As will be clear later on, the character and composition of (transnational) neoliberal epistemic community resembles the transnational capitalist class or at least some of its fractions (the political, technical and corporate one, according to Sklair’s classification). Both labels denote relatively small groups with overlapping membership and, most importantly, with same objective – development, legitimization and promotion of market-friendly ideas and practices. Hence, to translate it into Marxist language, the (transnational) neoliberal epistemic community plays the role of today’s organic intellectuals in the sense of Gramscian notion of hegemony.

Global elite in feminism

Although a newcomer in IR, feminism has already made significant original contributions to the discipline (as well as to the social science as a whole). One of such “value-added” is the feminist approach to the global elite, as will be argued below.

Yet, at the same time, feminism resembles (or directly draws on) some aspects of other IR theories. Most notably, the “gender turn” shares several basic outlooks with neo-Marxism. Interestingly, feminist scholars, just like Marxists, often focus primarily (and critically) on the economy and (division of) labor [Kolářová 2006: 1242, 1244], or to put it differently, on the conflicting ways how (capitalist) monetary (male) commodity production and non-monetary (feminine) social reproduction are structurally organized and asymmetrically interdependent [Acker 2004: 23–25].

In a sense, to paraphrase the famous Clausewitz’s statement, feminism (at least in its more radical forms) could be even perceived as “the continuation of Marxism by other means”. That is why conservatives usually dislike feminism. They believe that it more or less reproduces the sensitive dichotomy of oppressors and oppressed. Of course, in feminism, women (rather than workers) constitute the main oppressed social group and men are mostly the oppressors (in one way or another). Thus, simply speaking, in feminism the class struggle seems to be merely replaced by the conflict of genders and the proletarian internationalism by the “global sisterhood”.

Moreover, there are other striking parallels. Trivial yet important, the notorious Marxist observation establishes that all hitherto existing societies have been class societies. Obviously, similar conclusion can be reached from the feminist perspective: all hitherto existing societies have been patriarchal societies [Hearn 2004: 51]. It means that in (almost) every corner of the world and in any historical period, patriarchy was (and still is) the decisive feature of social realm. Yet, patriarchy might be only a diplomatic expression for male dominance and female subordination (or outright exploitation), which returns us to the notion of social antagonism (or contradictions) so important for Marxists.

One important source of women’s disadvantageous position lies in the economic sphere. Although they constitute approximately half of all world population, women own extremely little wealth. This forces them to work as (low) wage laborers, whereas men (due to assets possession) become capitalists (or political decision-makers) who control

finances and the whole economy [Kolářová 2006: 1246]. As a consequence, there have been debates about the “feminization of poverty” [Gimenez 2004: 90] or “feminization of the proletariat” [Eschle 2004: 113]. So, here again, the overlap between feminist and Marxist explanations is once more evident.

In any case, no one disputes that women have been differently socialized than men. It follows that women were (and still are) not expected to play the same social roles as their male counterparts [Burchill et al. 2005: 224]. More importantly, the typical feminine social roles have been somehow inferior, in terms of accorded social status (prestigious male public vs. overlooked female private engagements) and/or material rewards (paid male public vs. unpaid female private works). Hence, all-pervasive (power) asymmetries can be found in the complex gender relations as in the relations between upper and under classes.

Thus, like neo-Marxists, feminists tend to focus on inequalities (not only gender-, but also race-, and class-based) and various forms of hierarchies. At the same time, feminists, as well as neo-Marxists, stress the possibility of fundamental change by offering their own normative visions of alternative social settings. In accordance with neo-Marxism, feminist “utopias” revolve around the demand of greater social justice – for women, but also for other non-privileged social groups [Danner – Young 2003: 87].

Furthermore, neo-Marxists claim that the existing institutions reflect the interests of the ruling (capitalist) class. From the feminist perspective, the social realm appears very similar: the decisive institutions are also more or less biased, this time in favor of men, or better to say, male gender [Burchill et al. 2005: 218–219]. Hence, we can speak of “masculine institutions” [Danner – Young 2003: 82], since both states and markets (key social institutions in today’s world) have “gendered nature” [Danner – Young 2003: 86].

As neo-Marxism with regard to capitalists, feminist streams see their key social group (men) as the “dominant collective and individual agents of social practices” [Hearn 2004: 59]. Plus, importantly, the crucial Marxist notion of class can be found in gender studies as well. Some pro-feminist authors conceptualize men “as a gender class” [Hearn 2004: 49]. Moreover, men turn out to be the ruling class [Hearn 2004: 61].

In addition, the neo-Marxist, Gramsci-inspired concept of hegemony has also been applied in gender realm. Thus, feminist scholars speak not only of “hegemonic masculinities”, but of outright “hegemony of men” [Hearn 2004: 50] or “male hegemony” [Hearn 2004: 53] – in relation to women, but also children and some other men (and perhaps nature as in ecofeminism).

Nevertheless, every hegemony (class or gender) is based not only on (overt) power/force; it also presupposes (and generates) some degree of consent (although perhaps not reflected) on the part of the subordinated so that almost everyone thinks that the prevailing practices are “natural” or “normal” [Hearn 2004: 54] and thus, the hegemony is not challenged. To this end, mass medias are very instrumental [Hearn 2004: 54] in promoting the required norms and values – just the way it is suggested by neo-Marxist Leslie Sklair [1997] in case of consumerism as the propagated capitalist ideology.

Davos Men as the hegemonic masculinity

In a sense, male dominance and corresponding masculine bias can be traced even in the mainstream theories of globalization [Eschle 2004: 109]. So, like neo-Marxists,

feminists scholars tend to emphasize that globalization is not inevitable, but rather deliberately constructed process. Men elites rule the world and they also profit most from the current order [Kolářová 2006: 1244].

Indeed, the global elite represents the perfect embodiment of patriarchy. Regardless of few notable exceptions, it has been almost exclusively composed of men, who stick to the masculine values like individualism and competitiveness [Benería 1999: 68]. Although not explicitly with reference to the global elite, feminists use the term “Davos Man” when dealing with this exclusive group of people [Danner – Young 2003: 86] who meet annually at the World Economic Forum. As Benería [1999: 68] puts it: “The Davos Man [...] includes businessmen, bankers, officials, and intellectuals who hold university degrees, work with words and numbers, speak some English and share beliefs in individualism, market economics and democracy. They control many of the world’s governments, and the bulk of its economic and military capabilities.”

Hence, Davos man is a symbol of hegemonic masculinity, since masculinity has been traditionally associated with public life [Benería 1999: 70], but also with other attributes like global, theoretical, mobile, flexible, cosmopolite or modern leaning – as opposed to femininity as something (more) local, static, traditional. Indeed, high politics and financial sphere are extremely masculinized, which means occupied by men driven by egocentrism and technical rationality.

Hegemonic masculinity might be even associated with aggressiveness or “at least” controlling [Hearn 2004: 58]. In any case, it relates to men’s propensity for (exercising) power [Hearn 2004: 51]. On the other hand, femininity can be seen as more cooperative and empathetic – not only in romanticizing (stereotyping) idealizations, but also according to scientific experiments [Benería 1999: 71].

Resembling the notion of the transnational capitalist class, the currently dominant form of masculinity is dubbed “transnational business masculinity” [Danner – Young 2003: 87]. This “new style of elite masculinity” relates to “Davos Man” as “men who control the institutions central to economic liberalization” [Danner – Young 2003: 87]. Therefore, in line with neo-Marxists, feminists are quite critical, when it comes to corporate globalization and neo-liberalism in particular.

Yet, due to war on terrorism and associated strengthening of security apparatuses, the commerce-centered transnational business “Davos Man” masculinity is challenged by the “Big Brother” or “control-oriented military style” masculinity [Danner – Young 2003: 87]. Nevertheless, in general, one can argue that the “Davos Man” masculinity prevailed over the “Big Brother” masculinity, just like financial capital took precedence over industrial capital.

Global elite in neo-Marxism

Similarly to liberal approaches, neo-Marxism is not a state-centric IR theory. Like liberals, neo-Marxists focus more on social groups or even individuals. Of course, in neo-Marxist accounts, the most important social groups are classes. Therefore, the class analysis can be considered a distinctive feature (and a method) of almost all neo-Marxist research.

To put it simply, class consists of those members of society who have the same position on the (labor) market, particularly vis-à-vis the means of production. At the same time,

the notion of class makes sense only in presence of other (antagonistic) classes. Last but not least, the class should be able to act collectively in terms of politics [Robinson – Harris 2000: 21]. In practice, however, this is often not the case, especially when it comes to the oppressed (manipulated) classes. Yet, even the ruling class suffers frequently from some internal splits, because in general, within one class, there are different factions (segments) with not entirely identical interests. For example, in his examinations of the (transnational) capitalist class, William Robinson distinguishes industrial vs. commercial vs. financial fraction [Robinson 2004: 37].

Obviously, such reasoning relates closely to what is called (historical) materialism as another principal neo-Marxist presupposition, which maintains that material conditions significantly predetermine cultural and political developments. The current material conditions were shaped by capitalism, which now becomes globalized.

As a consequence, and quite in line with neoliberal assumptions, neo-Marxists believe that in recent times, the traditional role of territoriality and nation-state has diminished [Robinson – Harris 2000: 12]. This shift has profound effects, since capitalism and classes evolve beyond the institutional framework of localized states. It means that the world has entered in a new era of transnationalism. This transnationalization has been driven by the globalization of the production process and the transnational integration of the formerly national capital circuits [Robinson – Harris 2000: 18–20].

The buzzword “globalization” is explained in exactly this vein as a transition “to a new transnational phase of capitalism” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 16]. Accordingly, globalization processes brought about (or at least intensified) transnational class formation. Hence, today, the unification of dominant groups into one class occurs within transnational space. The same is true for workers, but to a much lesser extent.

Transnational capitalist class: CEOs and company

In order to concisely describe the global elite, neo-Marxists scholars can offer the notion “transnational capitalist class” (TCC). This concept has progressively developed in the intersections of several social sciences, especially sociology and (neo-Gramscian) International Political Economy (IPE) as a distinct subfield of IR.

Questions relating to the transnational class formation have been the central focus of theoretical and empirical contributions of the Marxist-inspired Amsterdam school of IR/IPE [van Apeldoorn 2004: 143–144]. In this original research program, the processes of hegemonic elite integration are studied in longer historical perspective. In this connection, it is substantiated that among (Western and primarily Anglo-American or English speaking in general) bourgeoisie, transnational class networking was underway already before “globalization” began. This is best demonstrated by freemasonry as a high society cosmopolitan web of capitalists and other privileged segments across different countries and even regions [van der Pijl 1998: 99–100]. Importantly, many freemasons were also heavily, but informally involved in crucial (revolutionary) political developments [van der Pijl 1998: 100–106] and private or secret organizing of their lodges were more or less imitated by future similarly exclusive transnational policy planning forums [van der Pijl 1998: 100–102], including the British imperialist Rhodes-Milner group that served as a model for Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission [van der Pijl 1998: 108–109, 124, 134].

Yet, the origins of the specific notion of the TCC are associated with Robert Cox and Stephen Gill as two prominent neo-Marxist IR theorists. Already in 1981, Cox coined the term of a politically self-conscious “transnational managerial class” situated at the top of the emerging global socioeconomic hierarchy [Cox 1981: 147]. This elite group was organizing around the Trilateral Commission, World Bank, IMF and OECD. It made “a certain American business culture” hegemonic all over the world [Cox 1981: 155, note 38]. Yet, members of transnational managerial class were not only executives of multinational corporations and high staff of international agencies, but also “those who manage the internationally-oriented sectors within countries” [Cox 1981: 147–148] like finance ministry officials as an example of people whom Leslie Sklair later called “globalizing bureaucrats” (see below).

Some ten years after Cox, in his pioneering monograph on the Trilateral Commission, Gill exposed “the rising hegemony of transnational capital” and a corresponding “transnational capitalist class fraction” with shared interests and institutions linked to liberalized global production and finance [Gill 2009 (1990): 50]. This elite came from the Triad “core” countries (North America, Western Europe, Japan) and coordinated itself via private forums like the Trilateral Commission. Anticipating Sklair’s analytical differentiation of corporate and political fractions of the TCC, Gill maintained that members of transnational capitalist class fraction were big corporate executives and owners as well as leading politicians and civil servants, mostly but not exclusively from advanced capitalist states [Gill 2009 (1990): 94].

Importantly, the Trilateral Commission not only stood at the beginning of IR research on the TCC, it deservedly continues to be the subject of current neo-Marxist studies [Takase 2014].

Indeed, Marxists are the only established scholars who systematically pay attention to private elite clubs that tend to be overlooked by most other academics and overplayed or even demonized by many activists.

Nowadays, the TCC thesis is most fervently championed by two neo-Marxist sociologists – Leslie Sklair and William Robinson. However, they disagree on the precise definition of this concept [Sprague 2009: 500–501]. Robinson (and several other Marxists) advocates a narrower view of the TCC. In his opinion, members of this class are only those from the world bourgeoisie who own and/or control transnational capital [Robinson 2004: 36, note 1] as exemplified by transnational corporations and private financial institutions (for same definition of TCC see [Harris 2012: 2; Takase 2014: 88]). In any case, the TCC should be seen as the “global ruling class” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 12], because transnational capital shapes worldwide production and society. Moreover, due to globalization, capital has gained greater power over labor [Robinson – Harris 2000: 23]. Plus, given the financialization of (Western) economies, (virtual) financial capital possesses an advantage over productive capital and the real economy as a whole.

In addition to that, the TCC has clear awareness of its own interests, or, is “class conscious”, to use the genuine Marxist parlance [Robinson – Harris 2000: 22]. The TCC has even developed consciousness of its transnational character [Robinson – Harris 2000: 22] as it is constantly incorporating more and more representatives of bourgeoisies from previously developing countries [Robinson – Harris 2000: 35–36]. In this sense, the TCC is really the *global* (not only confined to the “Euro-American civilization”) elite.

Nonetheless, more inclusive and nuanced definition of the TCC has been proposed by Leslie Sklair, who does not limit this term to big business CEOs and shareholders. From his perspective, the TCC subsumes individuals with significant financial, but also political, intellectual and symbolic capital [Sprague 2009: 504]. As a consequence, Sklair divided the TCC into four overlapping fractions [Sklair 1997: 521], which were constituted of 1) transnational corporations executives/owners (corporate fraction), 2) globalizing bureaucrats, 3) globalizing politicians and professionals and 4) consumerist (or cultural-ideological) elites like merchants and media bosses (consumerist fraction). Not surprisingly, in this structure, the greatest significance is accorded to the first fraction of the world's biggest corporations executives [Sklair 1997: 525].

Globalizing bureaucrats usually operate in the space between state apparatuses and international institutions. Thus, these individuals can be identified among high-ranking national officials dealing with external (economic) relations, or among those directly working for IMF, WTO, OECD, but also in organizations such as the Bilderberg Group, Trilateral Commission or Rockefeller foundation.

The fraction of globalizing politicians and professionals consists of leading politicians from all major parties as well as of representatives of the influential (neoliberal) think tanks and universities. Ironically, these not so powerful members of the TCC are nevertheless the most visible ones [Sklair 1997: 529].

Finally, consumerist elites constitute the last part (in many respects similar to the corporate executives) of the TCC. This group includes mass media owners and opinion-makers, but also the capitalists of retail sector, especially with regard to shopping [Sklair 1997: 530]. In relation to the rest of society (the "masses"), this fraction has been promoting consumerist values in order to maintain the global capitalist (cultural) hegemony, since "consumerism (is) the most successful ideology of all time" [Sklair 1997: 531].

Importantly and unfortunately, in his later writings, Sklair has complicated the issue by modifying the composition of two of the above mentioned fractions. Nowadays, instead of globalizing bureaucrats, he speaks of "globalizing politicians and bureaucrats" [Sklair – Struna 2013: 751] as being one – political – fraction. At the same time, the group "globalizing politicians and professionals" was replaced by "globalizing professionals" [Sklair – Struna 2013: 751] as technical fraction. Only corporate and consumerist fractions remain the same.

On the margins of this debate, another possible delineation of the TCC has recently been suggested. Kauppinen [2013: 13] argues that while Sklair's definition is too broad, Robinson's is incomplete and should be supplemented by "informational fraction", which is directly connected with the so-called new economy [Kauppinen 2013: 14], or the knowledge-intensive sectors like IT and biotechnology.

In any case, it needs to be stressed that regardless of the exact number and/or denominations of particular fractions, the internal structure of the TCC is highly permeable [Sklair 1997: 521; Sklair – Struna 2013: 751; Kauppinen 2013: 15]. This means that it is the rule rather than exception that some members of the TCC belong simultaneously to more fractions and/or that they move from one fraction to another (for instance, politicians switch to business and businessmen to politics). This is facilitated by the fact that the representatives of the TCC have some common features that relate to their shared transnational character.

In Sklair's terms, almost every member of the TCC exhibits "outward-oriented global" tendencies [Sklair 1997: 521], or to put it simply, cosmopolitan leanings. Furthermore, these people live similar (luxury) lifestyles (be they Russian oligarchs, American magnates, Mexican tycoons or Arab sheiks), meeting and socializing each other in elite schools and exclusive clubs [Sklair 1997: 522].

Transnational capitalist class: not just a theory

After outlining the neo-Marxist conceptualization of the global elite, it is necessary to add that this kind of theorizing has already been backed by an extensive empirical research, which documented the evolution and actions of the TCC in diverse countries around the globe.

In his well-known inquiry, van Apeldoorn [2000] critically mapped the nascent European TCC and its far-reaching impact on the neoliberal course of EU integration process. Upadhyia [2004] established that the Indian contingent of the TCC concentrates around the country's globalized software industry. Sener [2007] depicted how Turkish managers in Istanbul's branch of a multinational corporation identify themselves with the worldwide TCC. Finally, Madrid [2009] implies that through regional economic integration, the TCC has recently consolidated in El Salvador.

More fundamentally, Murray [2014] explicitly argues that the TCC has even developed as the so-called class-for-itself, because (part of) it collectively engages in politics on behalf of transnational class interests. Foreign, but transnationally embedded firms contribute (through subsidiaries) most donations to the US electoral campaigns [Murray 2014: 244, 247] as they consciously try to influence the policies of the current hegemon which sets the global agenda [Murray 2014: 237].

Most crucially, using network analysis and graphic depictions, neo-Marxist sociologist William Carroll and his collaborators [Carroll – Carson 2003; Carroll – Sapinski 2010] revealed the complex web of interlocks among influential CEOs and organizations on the world stage. Based on large datasets and timespans, these studies proved the existence of real interconnectedness between major global companies and the so-called "elite policy groups" (or transnational policy-planning groups) like the Trilateral Commission, the Bilderberg Group and the World Economic Forum.

All these elite policy groups facilitate mediation and consensus building among various (regional) segments of the TCC [Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 525–526]. As such, they link together big business with political actors and opinion-makers [Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 503]. In so doing, the elite groups foster what might be called "political mobilization of transnational capitalists" [Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 511].

In other words, regular private gatherings at Bilderberg or Davos play an important integrative function for the global "corporate-policy network" [Carroll – Carson 2003: 49; Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 530], since they serve as unique meeting platforms for hundreds of corporate directors and public officials, which is especially true for the Trilateral Commission that unites leading European, American and Japanese businessmen [Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 526, 528].

Nonetheless, the Trilateral Commission is closely intertwined with other elite groups like the World Economic Forum or Bilderberg [Carroll – Carson 2003: 45]. To put it simply,

many Bilderberg organizers/attendees are also members/hosts of the Trilateral Commission and/or the World Economic Forum [Carroll – Carson 2003: 46–47]. Thus, all these boards operate and can be regarded as “agencies of transnational capitalist class formation” [Carroll – Carson 2003: 36].

Transnational capitalist class as another clash among Marxists

It is fair to admit that not all neo-Marxists endorse the concept of the TCC. In fact, Sklair’s and especially Robinson’s contentions have been disputed on both theoretical and empirical grounds.

For instance, Huw Macartney [2009] dismisses Robinson’s and Harris’s as well as van Apeldoorn’s inferences. He refutes their alleged overplay of the (contingent) coherence of transnational capital and even more the idea of its disembeddedness from national contexts [2009: 452, 471–472, 479–480]. Though Macartney’s study is limited to EU level, it analyzes the finance (“circulating”) capital which is by definition the most mobile and thus – at least potentially – de-territorialized one. But even British, French and German financial capital, which all pushed for and now operates on an integrated and liberalized EU financial market, is found to be “simultaneously transnationally oriented and nationally rooted” [2009: 480]. So, according to Macartney, “there is no such thing as a global capitalist class detached from nationally oriented social forces and nationally oriented circuits of capital” [2009: 480]. In similar way, two prominent German neo-Marxists stress that classes (and hegemonies) form in the context of state [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 9, 22] and there is no real transnational state, although Robinson presumes some incipient kind of it [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 14–15]. Moreover, classes are not solely defined by their location in the economic process, but also by specific political and cultural requisites [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 9, 14–15]. Yet, although “some of the economic, political, and ideological conditions for the constitution of the transnational capitalist class exist,” they purportedly “remain unconnected” [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 23].

Therefore, the proclamation of a unified TCC is “the product of rushed thinking” confused by the post-cold war “globalization hype” [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 28], since it is premature to posit the emergence of a genuine TCC. At best, it can be said that such entity is evolving, but so far, “the tendencies for the formation of the transnational capitalist class [...] remain weak” [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 28].

It seems that most elites continue to arise in national frameworks [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 14]. Similarly, important global companies still retain their national bases [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 11]. After all, global capitalism appears to need territorially separated political units [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 17]. Hence, the undergoing transnationalization of the capitalist class is balanced by parallel processes of (regional) fragmentations that result in creation of geographically smaller clusters [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 21–22, 28].

This conclusion corresponds with a recent rigorous empirical investigation that also contests the thesis of the rise of the global TCC. Although ignoring politicians and elite policy groups, neo-Marxist sociologists Burris and Staples [2012] conduct arguably the most thorough test of available methods for measuring the robustness of transnational ties among main global firms and/or directors. On this basis, they insist that the worldwide TCC is far from realization and this is unlikely to change in the near future [Burris – Staples

2012: 339]. Nonetheless, there are clear signs of a “regional transnational capitalist class” [Burris – Staples 2012: 336], namely that located within the space of the European Union and particularly between the North-American (U. S.) and European areas [Burris – Staples 2012: 326, 339].

Yet, the modest assumption of one trans-Atlantic capitalist class was also problematized. Although he explicitly challenges only Robinson’s theory, young Greek neo-Marxist points out that too much emphasis on transnationalism underestimates the continuing (inter-imperialist) rivalry of relatively independent national or regional capitalist centers [Oikonomou 2011: 142]. At least in certain areas of military-industrial sphere, even transatlantic elites do not pursue joint strategies. Rather, U. S. and EU defense establishments and weapons producers remain territorially bounded and in a state of mutual competition, which is evident from their diverging political-security ambitions [Oikonomou 2011: 138–139] and separate arms manufacturing [Oikonomou 2011: 141].

Finally, and most fundamentally, all work on TCC faces one difficulty: the lack of its natural counterpart – research that would prove the existence and impact of an adversarial transnational working class (TWC). This is a serious shortcoming, because, as already mentioned above, Marxists believe that classes evolve only in conflictual interaction with one another [Robinson 2004: 37]. Hence, it seems that some TWC is a necessary condition (though not sufficient one) for any conceivable TCC. Yet, compared to abundant and detailed studies on TCC, analogous research on TWC is still largely missing (for exceptions see [Struna 2009]). Robinson himself comments on TWC very briefly. He argues that TWC “is increasingly a reality”, but not yet as a class-for-itself [Robinson 2004: 43]. Nonetheless, although only a class-in-itself, the TWC too should be studied systematically. For if there is no (mature) TWC, how could Marxists consistently speak of (full-fledged) TCC?

Transnational capitalist class in action: pure capitalism everywhere and forever

As the traditional Marxist narrative goes, (modern) history is primarily a sequence of more or less overt class struggles and their outcomes. This basic understanding applies also to the era of neoliberalism that began in the late 1970s [Harvey 2007: 41]. Hence, the advent and triumph of neoliberalism has been explained as an intentional attempt to restore the dominance of the upper class that felt threatened by post-war social democratic welfare state practices which accorded a larger share of the national wealth to the labor [Harvey 2007: 28].

In this regard, one could even say that neoliberalism is something like class revenge, because “it has succeeded in channeling wealth from subordinate classes to dominant ones and from poorer to richer countries” [Harvey 2007: 22]. Not surprisingly, Chile under Pinochet was perceived as a neoliberal laboratory [Harvey 2007: 26], from which the doctrine of the “Chicago Boys” spread to the rest of the world.

Thus, in neo-Marxist theorizing, the TCC is explicitly seen as “agency” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 12]. Correspondingly, globalization is partly “unfolding as the result of agency” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 27]. This is to say that some of the ongoing worldwide processes are not entirely spontaneous. On the contrary, globalization has been actively advanced by the TCC [Sklair 2001: 1, 5], which seeks new opportunities for accumulation by overcoming the constraints (including demands of labor) of the national level.

In this view, the TCC deliberately strives for the expansion and petrification of unregulated capitalism. This should be achieved on the global scale and that is why elites champion economic integration [Robinson – Harris 2000: 29]. Some neo-Marxists call it “the globalist project” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 26] – an effort to “convert the world into a single unified field for global capitalism” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 28–29], or, put differently, “to construct a working and stable system of global accumulation ruled over by the transnational capitalist class” [Harris 2012: 5].

Of course, market liberalization is the hallmark of this endeavor. Hence, the Washington consensus and neoliberalism should have been intentionally produced by the global elite [Robinson – Harris 2000: 28–29]. Yet, some neo-Marxists go even further – they claim that the TCC is almost behind everything. It purportedly dismantled the former welfare states and pushed the projects of EU, NAFTA or APEC [Robinson – Harris 2000: 23–24]. Indeed, all major institutions are said to serve the interests of the global ruling elite [Robinson – Harris 2000: 27–30].

Marxism as conspiracy theory?

As indicated above, it seems that for many neo-Marxists, the TCC is almost omnipresent and omnipotent. Yet, notions of such powerful groups have been typically associated with conspiracy theories, albeit in these (dis)interpretations, the supposed movers are usually somehow hidden (“behind the curtain”), which is not so much the case of the (quite visible) TCC.

But still, what is the difference, to put it straightforward, between the TCC (as an accepted scholarly concept) and the notion of (Jewish?!) “plutocrats” (as a largely discredited political slogan)?

To mention just one example: as a renowned neo-Marxist scholar, and in a top academic journal, David Harvey [2007: 30] openly states that many important world problems were deliberately staged. In this respect, he speaks of “a powerful cabal of bankers” and of actions that “amounted to a (silent) coup d’état by financial institutions against the democratically elected government”.

To be more specific, Harvey suggests that the Japanese recession might have been “engineered by financial agents in the United States to humble the Japanese economy” [Harvey 2007: 33]. He goes even further by saying that the debt crises were intentionally provoked: “Crisis creation, management, and manipulation on the world stage has evolved into the fine art of deliberate redistribution of wealth from poor countries to the rich. [...] These debt crises were orchestrated, managed, and controlled both to rationalize the system and to redistribute assets during the 1980s and 1990s” [2007: 37].

Yet, again: such allegations (with no evidence provided) are usually associated with conspiracy theorists, since proponents of these accounts always suspect that there are powerful malevolent groups which steer important world events, including various crises that serve their hidden agendas. True, most conspiracy theorists use different rhetoric and overall framing, but the core message is almost the same.

To be clear, Harvey is not the only leftist whose writings resemble some features of conspiracy theories. Stuart Shields, the editorial board member of iconic Marxist journal *Capital and Class*, made similar insinuation: “Unemployment and recession is often

wittingly brought about by governments wishing to decompose labour into a more readily exploitable source of labour power [...] Therefore, recession is not simply an unfortunate outcome of neoliberal restructuring in transition and enlargement, but an integral part of the strategy" [Shields 2007: 164].

Likewise, in another context, one socialist polemic leads to general accusation that "global elites [...] are interested in *maintaining* poverty in the Third World" [Vlachou – Escudero – Garcla – Guadilla 2000: 123]. Quite paradoxically, however, similar argument was also made by a Hungarian scholar from Soros' Open Society Institute in Budapest. Using higher educational programs as an illustration, Tomusk affirms that by "tricking the borrowing governments" [2002: 349], the TCC misused World Bank development loans to redirect resources from poorer (post-communist) countries to various Western overpaid "experts" and companies [Tomusk 2002: 345, 349–351].

In Marxist-humanist so-called critical pedagogy, the (transnational) capitalist class is charged with using "lies and deceptions" against the masses [McLaren 2014: 583]. In similar vein, it has been argued that for a long time, the TCC wittingly deceives white (southern) American (working-class) voters by demagogically exploiting the race issue in order to sustain electoral support for its agents from the U.S. Republican party [Patterson 2013: 673–675], who "surreptitiously" [Patterson 2013: 678] promote anti-labor capitalist globalizing objectives in the White House and Congress, and by extension, in the whole world. Moreover, in an attempt to ensure its continued political dominance in the face of intensifying unfavorable demographic changes, the TCC is purportedly tempted to resort to undemocratic measures like future voter suppressions (among citizens of color) and even installation of some kind of fascist regime [Patterson 2013: 686].

Finally, as a notable Greek radical, Takis Fotopoulos [2002] denounces the "New World Order" (NWO), which has been the terminological centerpiece (albeit with other meaning) of many (right-wing) conspiracy theories. Most importantly, Fotopoulos asserts that "in order to secure its unchallenged hegemony", the transnational elite did not hesitate to wage "global war" [Fotopoulos 2002: 235]. The first Gulf War, the military attacks on Serbia and the global campaign against terrorism are all examples of the wars launched by transnational elite against the perceived challenges to the NWO [Fotopoulos 2002: 231], which is synonymous with the capitalist neoliberal globalization.

Interestingly, Fotopoulos rightly predicted that the next war of the transnational elite would be waged against Iraq [Fotopoulos 2002: 236, 241–242]. Yet, regardless of the target, the wars were always staged due to transnational elites, since only they really decided [Fotopoulos 2002: 214] and because these interventions furthered their (hidden) agendas.

In sum, although he rejects the notion of a "capitalist plot" [Fotopoulos 2002: 213], Fotopoulos nevertheless suggests that "the capital-controlled mass media" try to "manufacture consent around the aims of the transnational elite which manages the NWO" [Fotopoulos 2002: 225]. Moreover, the elite is said to be using (among other means) "drug culture" in order to "push the oppressed into passivity" [Fotopoulos 2002: 225]. Yet, if this is really true, why shouldn't we call it a (capitalist) plot?

Discussion of the findings on all theories and their conceptualizations

The paper argues that we must highlight the global elite, if we are to understand crucial worldwide developments and that this understanding should be theoretically grounded and linked to IR discipline. To this end, the article presented four IR grand theories that now merit some comparison.

In nutshell, all examined theories quite often point to same direction. They even speak about same things – but with different rigor, emphasis and phraseology. Here, our core argument is that Marxist language and viewpoint should be privileged as the one most pertinent, penetrating, and thus convincing.

More detaily, the neoliberal and constructivist concepts seem to be neutral, whereas the feminist and neo-Marxist notions have critical overtones. In addition, there are other overlaps between feminism and neo-Marxism. For instance, in feminist accounts, masculinity (or men) plays similar role as (transnational) capitalist class in neo-Marxism. The suggestion that there are (competing) fractions within the ruling capitalist class has its parallel in feminism, which claims that (two) different types of hegemonic masculinity co-exist and indeed, rival with one another. At the same time, both neo-Marxists and feminists stress that the global elite has had a significant impact on the shape of current globalization. In other words, neo-Marxists and feminists explicitly recognize global elite as a powerful social group and they rightfully agree that its members are concentrated around the World Economic Forum (and similar bodies).

Hence, the feminist term “Davos Men” is specific and fitting, though it unnecessarily suggests that the global elite (must) consist exclusively of men and that this gender make-up is its most important feature. Yet, really decisive are ideological leanings, not personal attributes. However, the biggest shortcoming of “Davos Men” conceptualization is the absence of any internal differentiation and a small number of empirical applications (virtually only two articles).

Constructivism deserves similar criticism. The label “(transnational) neoliberal epistemic community” is quite accurate – specific enough and also fitting, because it can subsume the right individuals (market adoring “globalists”) ranging from experts to politicians and even businessmen. In spite of this, the notion does not seem to be the most adequate expression for the global elite, since this small group is not primarily defined by any “episteme”, but rather by its structural position in the global socioeconomic system as suggested by Marxist concept of (capitalist) “class”. Moreover, “(transnational) neoliberal epistemic community” has not been internally differentiated and is not frequently mentioned in the literature, so constructivism cannot be said to provide sophisticated conceptualization with wide applications.

When it comes to (neo)liberalism, this theory fails most dramatically, which might be surprising. The key neoliberal notions of “transnational actors” or “networks” are overly broad and thus vague; as shown above, they encompass too many different entities. Hence, neoliberal analytical tools lack specific indication about the nature, composition and goals of the global elite. In this regard, all the other IR theories offer concepts (transnational capitalist class, Davos Men, and neoliberal epistemic community) that are much more concrete or even succinct. Plus, unfortunately, neither “transnational actors” nor “transnational networks” have been elaborated or directly applied on the global elite phenomenon.

Interestingly, neo-Marxism shares several outlooks with liberal approaches. Otherwise diverse streams of liberalism and neo-Marxism agree on the centrality of transnationalism, economic concerns and corporations in particular. Moreover, both schools of thought believe that states' foreign policy reflects the needs of influential domestic groups. However, only neo-Marxists speak openly about (transnational) business community and offer a distinct terminology for it. In sum, we argue that neo-Marxist IR theory can best account for the global elite. The "transnational capitalist class" appears to be the most apt description, because it puts well the character ("class"), reach ("transnational") and orientation ("capitalist") of the global elite. The term also allows for internal differentiation (see Leslie Sklair's fractions), which is not discussed in the remaining concepts. Last but not least, neo-Marxist theorizing on the transnational capitalist class has already been backed by substantial empirical research. In this regard, it should also be appreciated that neo-Marxists represent the only academic stream that (dare to) focus systematically on important, yet otherwise overlooked private elite clubs like Trilateral Commission and Bilderberg Group.

Indeed, the multitude of TCC proponents (with different academic backgrounds) suggests that we can speak of an established "TCC school". The fact that there are many detailed works on TCC also explains why our review of neo-Marxism was longer than the ones of remaining theories – feminism, constructivism and liberalism simply do not offer so much material to survey.

Yet, of course, the TCC concept too is imperfect and vulnerable. Even Marxists themselves sometimes do not accept it (without qualification). Thus, the previous sections were also concerned with immanent critique of the TCC, so that we can see both its pros and cons.

Concluding remarks on Marxism and TCC research

Although a "winner" in our evaluation, neo-Marxism suffers from several flaws too. Apart from those commonly mentioned, it is necessary to point out that unfortunately, *some* neo-Marxists *occasionally* tend to see (certain members of) the global elite in a controversial way typical for conspiracy theories. Of course, this does not imply that the whole neo-Marxism can be discarded as a dubious conspiracy theory. On the contrary, (neo)Marxism (except its vulgarized versions) is a serious and widely respected academic stream⁶. Prominent neo-Marxists are themselves well aware of the risk that leftists' accounts of "global ruling class" may evoke the specter of conspiracy theory [Sklair 2001: x]. All the more should critical scholars either soften their sharp verdicts or buttress them with solid evidence.

Problematic is also the fact that within neo-Marxist camp, the concept of transnational capitalist class is not universally embraced, let alone uniformly defined. As to the second point, the main disagreement relates to the precise composition and size of the transnational capitalist class. As to the first point, TCC proponents are blamed for exaggerating the unity of capitalists and the trends toward transnationalization. In other words, some

⁶ Just consider the fact that two staunch neo-Marxists were recently elected to serve as presidents of the most prestigious sociological associations – Erik Olin Wright in American Sociological Association (2011–2012) and Immanuel Wallerstein (who has also been a highly influential figure in IR) in International Sociological Association (1994–1998). Leslie Sklair is the current president of the Global Studies Association.

neo-Marxists even question whether the transnational capitalist class has really emerged (and if so, whether on global or rather only regional – Euro-Atlantic – scale) and therefore, if it is not a misleading notion which obscures rather than clarifies (conflicting) relations among various regionally dominant social groups. In any case, the argument for TCC would be stronger if neo-Marxists provide more evidence of the existence and impact of some transnational working class, which is the theoretical correlate (and perhaps even prerequisite) of TCC in itself.

Yet, this lively intra-paradigmatic debate is but another proof that transnational capitalist class is a highly inspiring and thought-provoking concept which deserves attention of all theorists as well as practitioners. At the present moment, the TCC propositions could be tested on the cases of CETA, TTIP and TPP free trade agreements. It is very plausible that here again, the TCC research may provide fruitful insights into the social forces that push these treaties forward and/or are likely to most benefit from them.

For sociology and the whole social science, it would be enriching if the TCC school engage in a closer dialogue with (classic as well as modern) elite theory. Within IR, TCC research could be seen as a challenge to prevailing (neo)realist preoccupations with the ongoing hegemonic transition(s). (Gramscian) Marxism always transcended the old-fashioned narrow state-centric worldview and it still reminds us that enduring popular questions of relative US decline and/or “rise of the rest” [Zakaria 2008] are of secondary relevance, since, in fact, the real hegemon remains the same – transnational capital [Gill 2009 (1990): chap. 5] with its universal discipline which subordinates all mankind to market imperative.

Lastly, existing and future research on TCC could be of great value to the wider public, or at least engaged citizens. For the symbolic “1%” slogan of recent civil protests conveys the same message (factual as well as emotional) as the Marxist notion of TCC – message that we will continue to hear because of increasing structural inequalities [OECD 2015; Oxfam 2015] that are favorable only for the global elite.

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