



December 2022

## Reply to Comments

Artemy Magun

Center for Practical Philosophy at the European University at Saint-Petersburg, amagun@eu.spb.ru

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/emancipations>



Part of the [Comparative Politics Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Magun, Artemy (2022) "Reply to Comments," *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/emancipations/vol1/iss4/5>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis* by an authorized editor of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact [scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com](mailto:scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com).

I am grateful for the thoughtful and generous responses to our papers. They go in somewhat different directions, and I wouldn't be able to address everything that has been said.

I agree with most. Certainly, the state got relatively autonomous from the society that it had depoliticized, and turned into a violent monopoly, Weber style. However, unlike the Western version of supra-capitalist state, we are dealing here with an anomic state based on gangster logic. This is reminiscent of the “primitive accumulation” or crisis capitalism of the US in the early twentieth century. Marx and Engels associated the destructive effect of the bourgeoisie on society with the revolutionary destruction. In the classical account of Marx, from the *Capital*, the privatization of land via enclosures allowed the British gentry to accumulate the wealth, which was productive for capitalism, but destructive of the social bond. In our Russian case, there is a combination of emancipation and disaster that differs from the enclosure narrative. There are different sub-species of primitive accumulation, to be further discussed. Both Yudin and I point to the collapse of the global Left, which made a radical right-wing transformation of post-Soviet Russia possible (as well as a not-so-radical right-wing transformation of Ukraine). Any resurgence of the Left would require an internationalist program that would go beyond “struggle against capitalism” toward a theory of the Left-Wing State like the one I develop in *The Future of the State*.

As for the notion of “political capitalism” advanced by Greg, Albena, and also by Volodimir Ishchenko in his powerful recent article, I agree only in part. Political capitalism is actually *feudalism*, as Albena rightly says. Can we analyze it, then, as a subspecies of capitalism, or is it something else? Can we consider a society neoliberal if it provides a decently efficient healthcare, childcare, a universal-if limited-pension system, and if it relies on the rich networks of mutual help among friends and relatives (in spite of the moral individualism)? Can the economic/capitalist struggles really explain the anti-Western “war-of-civilizations” behavior? And is, as a result, Russian politics just a radicalized version of the Western “predatory” neoliberal state?

I think that the answer to all these questions is “no,” and that we fail to recognize the importance of current events if we do not use a *dialectical*, not linear,

methodology, in exploring the logical connection between capitalism and militaristic statism. This is a long conversation, but I claim that:

1. State and capitalist economy are *isomorphic*, but this doesn't mean that the state is simply a capitalist enterprise on a larger scale. Quantity changes into quality here. When a national government follows the logic of a gang ("state capture"), something changes, and the state acts on the mildly anti-capitalist, anti-globalist agenda of post-socialist conservatism. This is a fascist nationalist, corporatist, and a conservative-socialist project that openly denies one of the bases of capitalism (the open market and free entrepreneurship). Its international ideology is that of mercantilism, the opposite of neoliberal economic philosophy. Schmitt rightly showed that when the logic of competition goes to the political level, it changes character and acquires an existential antagonistic nature. In this sense, political capitalism is no longer capitalism, it is not even "normal" politics (in the sense of reflective rational structures), rather, it is an anarchist project alternating between de-politicization and total mobilization.
2. The current Russian leadership practices feudalism, mercantilism, and imperialism, in a dialogue with the West: it reveals the feudal/imperial unconscious of globalist capitalism, and turns into an explicit political form: here is what you actually are; see yourself in our mirror. This is the real logic of the political unconscious (and not what Jameson thinks it is). The state is the symptom of civil society taken as its perverse mirror. However, compare the welfare policies of the 1950-60s in the West: Enzo rightly points out that those were a distorted response to the real, though undemocratically managed, social infrastructure of the Soviet state. The relationship of dialectical mimicry seemed to go in a different direction back then.
3. For these reasons, the Russian state (and to some extent, the Turkish and Chinese states) are not just other versions of Western capitalism, but its determinate negations that, in the Russian case, take a nihilist turn. Any claim that "Trump is the same as Putin" is naïve and objectively erroneous. US society relies on a net of formal conventions and moral limitations that are qualitatively different

from the anomie of the non-Western empires. What is, however, increasingly Russian-like is the degree of polarization and paranoia that characterizes US society and is partly the result of the logic of propaganda underlying the capitalist practice of advertisement and lobbying, and partly of the obsession with the conservative/imperial unconscious of the US as a project. In other words, the US is at its most vulnerable in international relations where it deals with conservative opponents of various sorts: there, it is immediately contaminated by their one-sidedness, in the same way that the Soviet society got increasingly contaminated with fascism.

4. As I have repeatedly argued, there may not be an international Left without recognizing the perspective of the Eastern European and more widely, dissident, Left: the value of the West as a project of democratic and rational Enlightenment that may serve as a regulative ideal for the future world polity. As long as the Western Left reduces the nature of its own society to “capitalism,” it withdraws any hope from the idealistic struggle for universals that the non-Western Left might lead. Here, even though I don’t fully agree with Žižek’s recent belligerent rhetoric, I accept his insistence on the defense of the European project as the site of Enlightenment. (However, going to war with an opponent instead of discussing and establishing global forms of coexistence, is precisely the uncivilized political form which the West had to overcome repeatedly in its history).

5. David Strecker’s long and useful commentary comes down to the same points of contention that have been addressed in the text and in the discussion. When emphasizing the non-economic factors of the war in Ukraine, David speaks to the converted: our analysis, in both papers, originated from the call of Albena Azmanova to reflect on the role of capitalism in these events. And of course, Russian capitalism is not the classical, entrepreneurial version but its rent-based appendage, but running on the same rules.

Of course, there are other factors, too. Russia is not only emulating the West (in a caricature way) but also opposing it, fighting against it: this is the major political element. However, I would not quite agree with David (and partly Greg) that Putin

would be acting against Ukraine as a source of liberal democratic influence. This would be too far from the Russian elites' *subjective* mindset. They are afraid, not of liberalism as such but, more precisely, of *revolution*. It is the new revolutionary legitimacy that poses a direct mortal threat, and in this sense Putin is a Bonaparte with a consciousness of Sacred Alliance.

More important is David's rejoinder: "Would it not be necessary to distinguish clearly between the idea of socialism and the 20th century dictatorships of the state socialist bloc? And how convincing is it to characterize the social democratic policies and institutions in the West, at least some of which having emerged as functional to the reproduction of capitalism and some to uphold authoritarian rule, as socialist forces counterbalancing capitalism?" But this is my entire point. From the point of view of a European critical intellectual, the regime around him/her is essentially capitalism, and social-democratic policies are just superstructure above it, the way it absorbs socialism for its own need. (This is the mainstream of the current Marxist theory of the state, but in my view it unconsciously approaches Weberian subtle apologetics: capitalism is a complex economic system which defines everything and is alienating, but it is a modernist rationality that is better than the alternatives).

In contrast, from the point of view of a Russian or maybe even US intellectual, "quantity turns into quality," and this kind of socialism does partly contradict capitalism. Without destroying capitalism completely, the social-democratic state creates a society where the strong social policies are accompanied by high bureaucratization, high value of solidarity and by the global support of radical democratic movements on the side of the oppressed. To us, it often seems that some movement is only being subjective while it has already taken an objective form and is hypostasized (as, for instance, it would seem to the liberal intellectuals in the late Soviet Union: their anti-Soviet liberal stance was unconsciously motivated by the transformation of the regime itself).

A crisis like the present one only becomes intelligible against a backdrop of a dialectical theory which ultimately has to show that the crisis was a result of the

internal contradiction inside the western liberal capitalist society: the one, very roughly put, between capitalism and social democracy.

6. When we think what is to be done, then, following Enzo's suggestion, we should not focus so much on the case-by-case protection of human rights, but we shouldn't expect the strong "grassroots" movements either<sup>1</sup>. Grassroots, like sunflowers, develop in the direction where dominant ideology goes. The emphasis on spontaneity is a problem in the current pro-revolutionary/democratic side of Western policy. While such emphasis is genuine and welcome in the West, it is counterproductive in the rest of the world. Here, we should, like the neoliberals/ euro-bureaucrats and against them:

1. Form an international transformative force (as Gal rightly suggests)
2. If successful, engage in social engineering, with inventing and constituting new global institutions and local actors who would then be capable of their own agency.

7. I want to thank Albena and everyone for this rich discussion, which clearly went far beyond the specific issue of the causes of the war in Ukraine. We should aim to hold a conference/seminar on the dialectic of capitalism and socialism, at some near point.

---

<sup>1</sup> One thing is to defend dissidents from an a priori oppressive government, another, to support a transformative national force.