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Regulation Theory and its Applicability to Studies on Globalization and Social Change

by

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At first, I want to make a little remark on the subject of this paper: It is, strictly speaking, a theoretical one. This means that I will not deal with actual processes of globalization and social change, but try to sketch out the applicability of Regulation Theory for a general analysis of the international - nation state - systems and their transformations. That refers particularly how changing patterns of dominance and dependency within the "world order" can be analysed. Therefore, I will only incidentally refer to actual processes.

1. What is the question?

The world is changing rapidly. During the 1970s, world capitalism went into a secular crisis which is still unsolved. As a part of this crisis, the Soviet System broke down and the hegemonic position of the United States is seriously questioned by new competitors such as Japan or Western Europe. Some of the so-called newly industrializing countries seem to be able to close in on the old metropolises, while others, like those of Latin America, were severely hit by the debt crisis of the 1980s and its results. Parts of the former capitalist periphery find themselves uncoupled from any industrial development. Important regions of the world system are threatened by marginalization and misery. National states are splitting up and breaking down, resulting in a growing number of conflicts and civil wars. Whole nations and regions are fighting against peripherization and trying to fit themselves into new dependency relations to the capitalist core regions. This is a main reason for the recent outburst of nationalism, racism and fundamentalism. The military conflicts, e.g. in the Balkan and in Eastern Europe, can only be understood within this context.

The "new world order", which former US-president Bush announced at the beginning of the Gulf War, in fact looks much more like a growing global disorder. And corresponding to that, existing theories of the world-system seem to be considerably disoriented.

One result of the ongoing crisis and the processes of restructuration is the fact, that it becomes more difficult than ever to speak of a "first" or a "third world" as delimited parts of the global system. That does not mean at all that "third world" conditions are disappearing, as some authors like to argue. But the relation between the capitalist core and the periphery becomes more complex and fluctuating. Inside the core there are developing "third-world" -areas, like in New York, Los Angeles or London, and at the same time some parts of the former capitalist periphery seem to become, at least, capitalist sub-metropolises.

The crisis of the old world order also provoked a disorder within the traditional frameworks of economic, social and political theory. The theory of international relations has, for example, some problems to deal with the new situation of "after hegemony". Keynesianism lost its position in the field of economic theory and was replaced by neoclassic and monetarist theories. These show, in turn, remarkable problems in explaining what is going on. It is obvious at least, that the market does not solve all problems of society. Classical theories of imperialism, development or underdevelopment seem no longer valid and are in many aspects empirically refuted. That holds for both dominating conceptualizations, which can be generalized as the "modernization" approach and the "dependency" approach. We have to ask, whether there are any new theoretical frameworks which are able to meet the shortcomings of all this traditional approaches. The question is whether Regulation Theory can contribute with a solution. This theory was developed as a reaction to the world crisis of the 1970s and was estimated to meet the shortcomings of existing economic theories. And, interestingly enough, Regulation Theory can be grasped as a new attempt to renovate the theory of capitalism in the Marxist tradition. Whether these pretensions really fulfill expectations needs to be discussed.

In the following parts I will not refer systematically to the reasons, dynamics and outcomes of the actual globalization process. Regulation theory has done a fairly good job in explaining the crisis of Fordism which marks the starting point of this whole development. It should, however, be kept in mind that this process is not the result of any economic logic or historical trajectory. It is a decisive political strategy by the internationalized sectors of capital in cooperation with neo-liberal governments. Its aim is a world-wide and systemic rationalization process, based on internationalization, deregulation and flexibilization, which is expected to re-establish the profitability of capital after the crisis of Fordism. Obviously this has important effects for all societies, states, as well as the world system.

2. What is Regulation Theory ?

Understanding the concept of Regulation Theory is a complex matter. This is, in fact, because Regulation Theory is no comprehensive and completed framework, but a rather many-sided and complex one. In itself, it comprehends very different theoretical approaches, e.g. the so-called "value theoretic" and the "price-theoretic, the more economic and the policy- and state-theory-oriented ones, etc. It is outside the scope of this essay to relate to these differences. The only thing I can try to do, is to sketch out my understanding of some of its basic features. It is important to realize, that Regulation Theory, which was mainly launched by a group of French

researchers during the 1970s and 1980s, is itself a reflection to the crisis of world capitalism which developed in these years and to the connected reorganization of international structures of dominance and dependency. The pioneering book on US-capitalism by Michel Aglietta aimed to explain the hegemonic power of the United States in the postwar area. His thesis was, that this American position was mainly due to the development of a superior mode of political, social and economic regulation within this country, i.e., so-called "Fordism" one. It was the fact that in the first half of this century the United States was able to develop a very special and new type of capitalist society, that provided a long lasting growth period, a decisive superiority in work productivity and technological dominance. It was, therefore, the organisation of the whole society in economic, social and political terms which made this country overwhelmingly competitive. Other nations were forced to adapt to this structures. This resulted in the establishment of what is called the "American Century" or "Global Fordism". That means, that international economic and political dominance by the US was seen not so much as a result of its size, the availability of capital, of educated manpower, of natural resources or pure military power but mainly determined by internal socio-economic structures and processes. Regulation Theory shifted the focus from international relations between states and economies, taken as closed units, to the level of internal societal, economic and political structures.

Regulation Theory points out that capitalism is not homogeneous with stable structures, and that its historical development is not predetermined by objective laws, showing variations in various social formations. If, however, capitalism is spatially and historically different, if its specific national formations are both diverse and changing, what are the theoretical tools enabling us to understand it? The fundamental object of Regulation Theory was to develop a framework for the analysis of specific historical formations of capitalism, their development, their crises and transformations.

Seen with this background, the most fundamental question of Regulation Theory was: How can capitalism, as a highly fragmented society which is characterised by competing and struggling individuals and opposite classes, be stable at all and how does it reproduce itself? That was, as you know, the question of classical political economy and that of Marx too. The basic thesis is, that this cannot be explained by pure economic mechanisms, as Marx as well as liberal economic theory seem to have done it. What needs to be explained above all is why and how individuals adjust to contradictory, repressive and exploitative social relations in such a manner that the accumulation of capital is possible and the capitalist class conflict does not destroy the whole system at any moment. This is what makes it necessary to analyse norms of social behaviour, social institutions and social value-setting.

3. The theoretical framework of Regulation Theory

The answer to this question was the development of so-called "intermediary" analytical terms which allow to describe different capitalist formations beyond the existing general structures like capital relation, surplus value production, accumulation, class, state etc. The fundamental terms in this respect are "accumulation regime" and "mode of regulation".

Accumulation regime means, in short, the concrete manner how surplus value is produced, which technology is used, which labour processes are prevailing, which patterns of consumption are relevant, how the production-goods sector and the consumption-goods sector are interrelated, how capitalist and non-capitalist sectors of the economy are combined, how the produced value is distributed between classes etc. In this respect, one can differentiate, for example, between "extensive" regimes of accumulation without mass consumption and "intensive" ones, which are based on the total integration of the working class into the valorization process.

Mode of Regulation means, in contrast, the cultural and institutional forms which make individuals behave in a manner corresponding to the process of accumulation. That is, for example, the way wage-relations is institutionalized, how the money-mechanism functions in institutional terms, how social norms and values are produced and reproduced, how the whole political system is shaped. Regulation thus comprehends so different aspects as family structures, the banking system, trade unions, political parties, churches, intellectual circles and universities, the state administration, etc.

The concept of regulation aims at answering questions such as why capitalism can reproduce itself despite of, by, and through its fundamental contradictions, how economic antagonisms and class struggles can be managed and how people are fitting themselves into repressive and exploitative social relations.

Each accumulation regime must be socially and culturally regulated to work, but it does not simply create a corresponding mode of regulation. The development of specific accumulation regimes and modes of regulation are fundamental different processes and both spheres of societalization have their own structures and determinants. The relation between accumulation regimes and modes of regulation should not be seen as causal, but as a relation of articulation. This refers to structural Marxism in Althusser's terms, which is an important baggage of Regulation Theory.

At the same time, capitalist societies only can be stable and growing if both spheres correspond. The development of specific accumulation regimes and modes of regulation is a matter of social struggle and conflict. Therefore, both the emergence and the form of a specific capitalist formation is not pre-determined by objective laws, but, as Lipietz calls it, an "object found". That means, that the process of capitalist development is a fundamentally open one. New stable formations can emerge out of the crisis of the older one, but that is not by necessity or objective law.

To show one example: The resolution of capitalist crisis at the beginning of this century was attempted through a massive technological rationalization process based on Taylorism and mass production. To be workable, this accumulation regime had to be regulated in a totally new way. Welfare state capitalism with strong unions, social state interventionism, corporatism and reformist governments provided necessary components to the solution. Fordism was created. But this mode of regulation did not emerge automatically. It was the result of revolutions, social battles and wars. Indeed, the crisis of the 1930s can be explained by the fact that the new accumulation regime had not yet found its corresponding mode of regulation.

This has important consequences for the theory of crisis and development of capitalism. In terms of Regulation Theory, crises are not seen as linear and uniform processes, but are singular to each historical formation. Generally spoken, they cannot be understood as pure economic processes, but are the result of a disarticulation between the accumulation regime and the mode of regulation. This disarticulation is due to the fact that both spheres have their own structure and determinants. Main crises are, therefore, always economic, political and ideological crises. This also means, that capitalism cannot be stable over time. There must be secular crises when accumulation regimes and modes of regulation are disarticulating. This is the way Regulation Theory explains the so-called "long waves" in capitalist development. Such waves do not develop automatically. How crises develop and how they are solved, if and how a new formation is emerging from the crisis of the old one, that is mainly a matter of social practices, of relations of force and of social and political struggles. All in all, it can be seen that Regulation Theory in fact provides for a rather new concept dealing with the relation of "structure" and "action", replacing the old metaphor of basis and superstructure by a more complex framework, equally it offers a totally new concept opposed to "economic law".

4. Regulation Theory and international relations

Starting from the question of how international relations of dominance and dependency can be explained, and answering it by primarily focusing on the internal structures of individual societies, Regulation Theory shifted more and more to the analysis of special social formations. The main point was the development of Fordism in the metropolitan regions of world capitalism, the reasons of its crisis and the question of if, how and which kind of "Post-Fordism" can replace it. Some attention was given to the structure of what is called "Global Fordism", some was likewise given to the different types of Fordism which developed in the capitalist core countries. This work was, however, more empirical than theoretical. There were, if I am not totally wrong, not very many attempts to develop a comprehensive theory of international relations in terms of the regulation approach. What was done in that field was a series of empirical studies - mainly on Latin America - which tried to explain the crisis-ridden development of these countries in the context of Global Fordism and its crisis. And they surely brought interesting results.

The lack of a comprehensive concept for international regulation exists despite the fact that Regulation Theory obviously has something to say about this sphere. Let me mention only few examples:

- It can explain the development of international hegemony structures, as it did by analyzing the base of US-Hegemony and the causes of its decline. This reason mainly was seen in the fact that Japan and some European countries were able not only to copy the American model but to develop their very own types of Fordism and that this process could fit in and operate into the structure of Global Fordism guaranteed by the U.S. That meant, not least, the reconstruction of the world market based on the Bretton Woods system and the fast going internationalization of capital which became possible within the framework of this regime. The regulationist theory of hegemony shows what the so-called capitalist "triade" actually is and how it functions: namely as a competitive relationship not so much of equal capitalist metropolises, but of very different social formations which are trying to develop their own modes of Post-Fordism.
- Regulation theory can explain why international hegemonic structures and dependency relations cannot be stable over time, since they are founded in specific accumulation regimes and regulation modes which must change in a crisis-ridden way. Accumulation regimes have their own logic of development and it is very unlikely that their relation to existing modes of regulation can be stable over time. Hegemony can work when one nation is able to

develop a superior social model, to make it internationally dominant and to give dependent nations a chance to develop within this framework. "Hegemony" is therefore much more than economic, political or military dominance. Really established, it is a relation which provides to some extent mutual benefits if the hegemonic nation is prepared to make some material sacrifices as the US did in the post-war period. The present situation, on the other hand, is characterized by the fact that the US is no longer able to meet this task. This concept of hegemony could, therefore, provide for an interesting approach to renovate or supersede traditional theories of imperialism.

- It showed that the crisis of Fordism was mainly a crisis of international regulation and that its breakdown - mainly marked by the end of the Bretton Woods System - intensified crisis processes on the national levels. The breakdown of Fordist international regulation was mainly due to the fact that US-hegemony was weakened and that at the same time the internationalization of capital was growing under the auspices of Global Fordism. In turn, that means that a solution to the present crisis is only possible if a relative stable system of international regulation can be reestablished. And that renews the question of hegemony.

- It can explain that the end of fordist hegemony, the pluralisation of capitalism and the breakdown of international regulation is a main reason for growing international inequalities and the obvious failure of traditional development concepts. The reason is that international competition is growing fast and there is no power available to guarantee a stable international economic order.

- It can, equally, explain the reasons for the few success-stories within the former third world, i.e., those which are found mainly in East-Asia. This refers to both of the deviating cases in respect to the traditional theories of the world system: On the one hand, the success of the so-called East-Asian "tiger-states" has its reason not, as neoliberal ideologies proclaim, in the effectiveness of pure market forces, but much more in specific cultural traditions and social structures like, for example, a strong state which is equipped with a remarkable degree of relative autonomy and which is able to effectively organize the whole society, the enforcement of land reforms with its decisive consequences for class structures etc. On the other hand, the failure of the import substitution strategy of development, which was characteristic for most Latin American countries, cannot be simply explained by the negative effects of state interventionism and protectionism or economic dependency on the outside.

More important are again internal social structures and power relations, such as the predominance of an agrarian oligarchy, a weak, privatized and corrupt state administration, a highly segmented post-colonial social structure, etc.

To summarize: Regulation Theory understands the international system not as a stable hierarchy, but as a complex and changing network of social formations, which are characterized by special modes of accumulation and regulation. Internal social structures and power relations are fundamentally important for each country's position within the world system, and, in turn, this position strongly influences the development of its own accumulation and regulation mode. Because the fact that accumulation/regulation complexes on both national and international levels are structurally crisis-ridden, the structure of the capitalist world system cannot be stable over time. Secular crises of capitalism are necessarily crises of hegemony, which shift the whole dependency structure. The hegemonical position of Great Britain and traditional colonialism disappeared with the establishment of Fordism since the 1930s of this century. They were followed by US-hegemony, Global Fordism and what was called "neo-colonialism". This global formation was characterized by the separation of the "first" and the "third" world - not to forget the "second" world of state socialism which was an important component of this whole system.

These times have also passed. The capitalist core has, due to its own structures and processes, split off into a plurality of strongly competing parts, the fordist mode of international regulation has broken down and with it disappeared the basis for traditional development strategies. Economic nationalism, as proclaimed by several liberation movements, was bound to the Fordist mode of international regulation and lost its former basis totally. That means, on the other hand, that international inequalities and marginalization processes became faster and deeper. And with them, the periphery became as differentiated as the former metropolises. The breakdown of the Soviet System in Eastern Europe, which is itself a fall-out of the global crisis of Fordism, provided the term "periphery" with a totally new meaning. Today, the battles in the international arena are not so much struggles against peripherisation, but against pure marginalization. In fact, the main danger for most of the non-dominant countries is not so much to be a dependent part of core-centered system of world capitalism, but to become totally de-linked from the international capitalist production system and the world market.

5. A regulationist theory of international relations ?

The question is now, how could there be a comprehensive regulationist theory of international relations. Let me make only some short remarks on the possible dimensions of such an approach.

Looking at the structures and processes within the global capitalist system, the internal conditions of individual societies are fundamentally important. This refers to social and political institutions, institutionalized class relations, political, cultural and value systems. The importance of the nation-state level is due to the fact that only at this level do the institutional preconditions to establish a relative stable mode of accumulation and regulation exist. However, these national regulation systems can only remain stable if they are interlinked with other accumulation/regulation complexes in a way which allows their self-reproduction. That is what makes domestic national growth models work during periods of time. The development of each individual society depends, therefore, on both external and internal factors, which are interrelated in a very complex way. I think, that this conceptualization could provide for important tools to overcome some of the shortcomings of traditional modernization and dependency theories.

The stability of such a national/international system of accumulation and regulation, a "world order", depends largely on the possibility to establish a more comprehensive form of international regulation. Historically, that was bound to the existence of a hegemonic nation which was willing and able to secure it. Actually, a fundamental question to be faced is, if and how a system of international regulation can be established without an hegemonic force; what would practically this mean in terms of a "cooperative hegemony". In this respect, it would be interesting to confront regulation approaches with the concept of international regimes within the theory of international relations, which actually deals with this problematic too, but it obviously neglects economic processes and the internal processes within the different states.

Because the capitalist accumulation process is structurally crisis-ridden and given accumulation/regulation-complexes are not stable at all, the development of the global economy and national society must necessarily be uneven and unequal. The intensifying differentiation processes in this field are driven both by the competition among individual states seeking to provide profitable sites for capital and, on the other hand, by the strategies of international firms using regional and national differences for their "worldwide sourcing". The global accumulation process is, therefore, characterized by a contradictory unity of homogenization and fragmentation. So long as capitalist relations of exploitation exist, a homogeneous "world society" cannot develop.

With the conceptions of Regulation Theory, we now can try to specify a little more what dominance, hegemony, and dependency in international relation mean:

- Dominance should be seen as the power of one country to set social and technical norms - a mode of accumulation and regulation - which allows for a powerful national growth model and which forces other countries to adapt and to submit to. This, in turn, makes a country able to use the potentialities of others for its own economic expansion;
- Hegemony should be seen as the ability to stabilize such a structure of dominance by making material concessions to the dependent countries, to establish and to support a system of international regulation which allows for all countries a certain development within this given framework. That was, for example, the characteristics of Global Fordism, guaranteed by the US in the postwar area.
- Dependence is characterized by a national system of accumulation and regulation which, to a high degree, is unlinked and disarticulated, both separately connected with external relations and thus more open to pressures and influences from the outside. Such defectuous regulation systems are hardly able to allow for stable and self-sustaining economic and social development. They can, once established e.g. by colonialist relations, reproduce and enforce themselves. But they are, on the other hand, not simply and "structurally" given. They can be changed by internal social forces and struggles which establish new social and political institutions, social networks, new social norms and patterns of behaviour. This form of "social revolution" would be much more important than only political ones or simple dissociation from the world-market, as dependency theory tended to suggest.

6. Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, the concept of regulation theory is still not well attuned to analyse international relations. But, as I have tried to show, it could provide a theoretical framework which is more elaborated, more complex and more comprehensive than existing theories; a framework which is neither economistic nor politically biased, but which could provide for a real "political economy" in that field. But to arrive there, there is still much work to be done. Theoretically, two important problems remain: One is state theory. If the national state systems are fundamental for the process of regulation, it is necessary to define the state, how it functions, why a plurality of nation states is a necessary precondition for the reproduction of capital, etc. But

state theory seems to be somewhat like a black hole within Regulation Theory. Secondly, if the development of specific accumulation/regulation-complexes is a matter of social practice, the problematique remains of how institutions are created and transformed. Regulation Theory is in its essence an institutionalist theory. But, surprisingly, there is no theory of institutions available which could fit into the framework of this approach. Both aspects, to mention it, are concerns which our Frankfurt group is doing work on. We believe, that this task is one which is really worthwhile.

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