CHAPTER 4

Marxist Theory and the Origins of the First World War

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Introduction

Despite the profound importance of the First World War in transforming Marxist thought and praxis – notably including the hugely significant works on imperialism produced by Luxemburg, Lenin, Bukharin and others – subsequent Marxists (at least within the English-speaking world) have paid very little attention to theorising the war's origins. The few studies that have addressed this issue in any systematic way have remained either situated within the original classical Marxist theories of imperialism or have produced works of a more theoretically eclectic nature with as many family resemblances to neo-Marxism as liberalism. This dearth of inquiries into the origins of the war may very well have to do with the long legacy cast by Lenin’s theory of imperialism and the orthodoxy this imposed on many subsequent generations of Marxists. Whatever the reasons may be, the time to reassess the contribution Marxist theory can make in explaining the war’s genesis is long overdue. For, as examined below, while both the original Marxist theories of imperialism and later theories of ‘social imperialism’ focusing on the anachronistic pathologies of the German polity have illuminated significant processes and elements vital to any adequate theorisation of the war’s causes, both sets of theories are hamstrung by particular methodological and theoretical deficiencies.

These theoretical problems cut to the heart of ongoing historiographical debates over the origins of the First World War in which, unfortunately, Marxist

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1 This chapter draws on and further develops (particularly empirically) arguments first made in Anievas 2013. My thanks to Josef Ansorge for his comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. Usual disclaimers apply.

2 See, for example, Hobsbawm 1987; Callinicos 2009.

3 Most notably, those works associated with the Sonderweg (‘Special Path’) perspective and the Old Regime thesis, both of which are amenable to liberal iterations of the ‘democratic peace thesis’. See, respectively, Wehler 1985 and Halperin 2004 and Mayer 1981.
theories have been entirely side-lined. This concerns the persistent division between whether a *Primat der Aussenpolitik* (‘primacy of foreign policy’) or *Primat der Innenpolitik* (‘primary of domestic policy’) perspective best explains the causes of the war.\textsuperscript{4} The ‘Long Debate’ has then been left at something of an analytical stalemate. For, over the years, historiographical trends have tended to move back and forth between these two conflicting modes of explanation: the Versailles ‘war guilt’ charge blaming Germany as the primary cause for war was replaced by the ‘comfortable consensus’ of shared responsibility among the belligerents developed in the 1930s and particularly after the Second World War;\textsuperscript{5} this was then overthrown by Fritz Fischer’s ‘historiographical revolution’ re-identifying Germany as the main culprit which has now given some way to more ‘global’ and ‘de-centered’\textsuperscript{6} perspectives sharing some common ground with earlier ‘primacy of foreign policy’ approaches.\textsuperscript{7} Indeed, one author has gone so far as to claim that ‘[b]y the early 1990s, the emerging consensus on the origins of the First World War was that even if Germany was primarily to blame, her motivations were primarily power-political and largely unrelated to any domestic impasse in 1914’.\textsuperscript{8} While likely an overstatement regarding the supposed renewed hegemony of ‘primacy of foreign policy’ perspectives in the historiographical debates, the overall orientation of these debates remained centred around questions of domestic or international primacy.

While scholars have insisted on the need to integrate both domestic (‘unit-level’) and international (‘system-level’) factors in offering a more satisfactory explanation of the war,\textsuperscript{9} there remain few – if any – substantive theoretical advances in providing such an explanation.\textsuperscript{10} Instead, attempts at offering such an integrated theory have primarily taken the form of a ‘mix and match’ of different domestic and international determinations whereby internal and external factors are conceived as relating to one another as ‘independent variables’ incorporated at different, discretely-conceived ‘levels of analysis’. The problem with such theoretical models is that the objects of their analyses (the

\textsuperscript{4} For recent overviews of these historiographical debates see Mombauer 2002; Hamilton and Herwig 2003; Joll and Martell 2007; Mulligan 2010.

\textsuperscript{5} See Mombauer 2002, pp. 105–18, 121–6.

\textsuperscript{6} Eley this volume.

\textsuperscript{7} Such recent works include Schöllgen, 1990; Mulligan 2010; Clarke 2012; Simms 2013, Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{8} Simms 2003, p. 286.

\textsuperscript{9} Blackbourn 2003, p. 335.

\textsuperscript{10} The closest we have to such an integrated approach is Gordon 1974.