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Manuscripts Don't Burn

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WORKING PAPERS ON CAPITAL AS POWER

No. 2020/03

Manuscripts Don't Burn

Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan

June 2020

<https://capitalaspower.com/?p=3927>

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Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan¹

Jerusalem and Montreal

June 2020



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1. Flat Reality

The French Revolution changed the world. In the new order, the masters no longer need Monsieur Fouche and the thought police. They don't need guillotines to clip brains and scissors to censor pamphlets. They don't need strategic-studies institutes to manage oppression and navigate conflict. Instead, they prefer to subsidize 'cultural pluralism' and 'critical studies', support centres for democracy and privatization, and promote civil-society networks and global NGOs. They are no longer afraid of words. Or so we are told. . . .

This paragraph opened our paper 'Flat Reality' (Bichler and Nitzan 2005), a short Hebrew tale of a botched review article, commissioned and rejected by the *Journal of Cold War Studies*.

The affair started in 2003, when the journal invited us to review Avi Ben-Bassat's edited volume, *The Israeli Economy, 1985-1998. From Government Intervention To Market Economics* (2002). Ben-Bassat, an economics professor and former research director at the Bank of Israel, assembled a collection of conventional economics articles, all adhering in one way or another to the ruling neoclassical dogma. And the book's title tells you all you need to know about its content: a subsidized hymn to the victory of 'capitalism' over 'socialism'.

The invitation was puzzling primarily because our own book on Israel – *The Global Political Economy of Israel* (Nitzan and Bichler 2002) – debunked pretty much everything the Ben-Bassat volume took for granted. It showed the neoclassical dogma's deep-seated servitude to the Israeli ruling class and the power it imposes on the underlying population, including the occupation of the Palestinians; it demonstrated its anti-scientific rituals and religion-like ability to substitute fiction for reality; and it offered a new alternative – a radical, non-Marxist and non-liberal approach called 'Capital as Power' (CasP) – with which we rewrote the history of Israel and the ways in which it related to the political economy of the Middle East and the world more broadly.

¹ Our title is borrowed from Professor Woland, the Devil in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1995). Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan teach political economy at colleges and universities in Israel and Canada, respectively. All of their publications are available for free on *The Bichler & Nitzan Archives* (<http://bnarchives.net>). Work on this paper was partly supported by the SSHRC.

Now, conservative journals rarely seek non-aligned radicals to demolish mainstream books – let alone obscure writers whose own books were yet to be reviewed. This was surely a mistake, but in order to be certain we decided to ask (emphasis added):

August 19, 2003

Dear Ken Monahan:

Thank you kindly for your request. **A point of clarification: does this invitation imply that you are committed to publishing the review as is?**

Looking forward,
Jonathan

Truth be told, we expected a retraction. Reading our query, a good editorial assistant would have checked our work, realized it was totally unfit and replied that refereed journals cannot pre-commit. But not this journal. Instead of retracting, it committed, *in writing* (emphasis added):

August 20, 2003

Dear Professor Nitzan,

The review will be published as is, aside from minor stylistic editing. You'll receive page proofs before the review is published, and will be given the chance to make any changes.

Are you interested in reviewing the book? If so, let me know your postal address and we'll get it out in today's mail.

Best wishes,
Chitra Ramalingam
Editorial Assistant
Journal of Cold War Studies

David Hume was dead on: although water at sea level always boils at 100 degrees Celsius, there is nothing in our science to tell us it will do so again the next time we try. And the same was true here: conservative journals reject out-of-the-loop radicals as a matter of course, yet the *Journal of Cold War Studies* broke the mould. It committed to publishing our work as is.

We felt a bit dizzy. Maybe there was some truth to the relentless slogans of 'liberalization' and the 'end of history'. Maybe the end of the Cold War had made capitalists more tolerant and their journals more receptive. Maybe it was our *own* prejudice that blinded us, so completely, to the new neoliberal openness.

But new world orders aside, we still had a problem: the Ben-Bassat collection was unreviewable. Its articles were typical ‘professional literature’ – dry, boring, full of banalities and neoclassical irrefutability. They read more like recycled advertisements than novel, vibrant science. Having mulled it over, we decided that instead of dissecting the volume piece by piece we should explain how books like that get written in the first place. In early 2004, we submitted the full review with the following clarification (emphasis added):

January 29, 2004

Dear Ken Monahan:

First, let me apologize for the long delay in submitting the review and for not having contacted you earlier. There were many unexpected hurdles which prevented timely completion. But the review is finally written, jointly by Shimshon Bichler and myself, and is enclosed below.

The review is roughly 1800 words. The significance of this book lies in the historical context in which it emerged, and it was impossible to explain this historical context in a very brief paper. I believe you’ll agree with this assessment after reading it.

Best,
Jonathan

The editor’s office replied, immediately, with forward-looking liberal enthusiasm (emphasis added):

January 29, 2004

Dear Professors Nitzan and Bichler,

Thank you for sending along your review. **We appreciate the time and care you put into it, and will be in touch with page proofs at a time closer to publication.**

All the best,
Philip Redko
Editorial Assistant
Journal of Cold War Studies

And it also gave us the specific where-and-when details (emphasis added):

January 29, 2004

Dear Professor Nitzan,

Your review **will most likely appear in Vol. 6, No. 4 (Fall 2004).**

Best,

Philip Redko

Editorial Assistant

Journal of Cold War Studies

The ride felt smooth and comfortable, as if we were travelling with the neoliberal messiah. But when the Fall issue came out, our review wasn't in it. For its part, the journal remained reassuring. There was absolutely no reason to worry (emphasis added):

November 17, 2004

Dear Professor Nitzan,

The book review will appear in the spring issue of the journal, which means that you will receive the page proofs as a PDF attachment in mid-late January. Please let us know if you are going to be away at the time, and we can arrange to have them sent to you earlier.

Best wishes,

Inna Livitz

Editorial Assistant

Journal of Cold War Studies

There was also an added explanation: the delay was merely a technical matter of over-congestion (emphasis added):

November 18, 2004

Dear Professor Nitzan,

We could only include fourteen reviews in the Fall issue because of page limitations, so ten had to be postponed. I apologize for the delay.

Sincerely,

Philip Redko

Editorial Assistant

Journal of Cold War Studies

So we waited a few more months, only to realize that, for some reason – exogenous, no doubt – the supply and demand for articles were again ‘distorted’, and that our review had been postponed once again (emphasis added):

February 17, 2005

Dear Professor Nitzan,

We are having a special issue in the spring, so your review will appear in the Summer 2005 issue. The issue is going to press this week, and **you will receive page proofs in mid-April.**

Best,

Philip Redko

Editorial Assistant

Journal of Cold War Studies

At this point, we started to doubt our newly found belief in neoliberal publishing. The journal insisted it wanted to print our piece, but judging by its inaction it seemed keen on killing it.

The Editor in Chief, Mark Kramer, was flabbergasted. Our insinuations, he insisted, were completely misplaced. There was no censorship in his journal. Full stop. The real culprit wasn't him. It was MIT Press. The cost-conscious publishing house overcharged for excess pages, and in so doing threw the market off balance and burdened his journal with ridiculous backlogs and undue delays (emphasis added):

February 23, 2005

The delay with your book review has absolutely nothing to do with censorship. I haven't even seen your review, and I have no intention of censoring it irrespective of what it says. Our contractual obligations with MIT Press impose severe page limits on us (limits that I despise but have to live with), so that means that we have often had to defer book reviews. I don't like doing this at all, but it costs \$31/page whenever we exceed the limit, so I don't have much choice. The deferral of book reviews has caused us to develop a large backlog of book reviews, and delays of over a year are unfortunately now the norm. To remedy this problem, we're probably soon going to shift to a different publisher that will not be so obsessed with page limits, but until we switch, we have to live by MIT Press's rules. **I fully understand your frustration, but let me emphasize again that the delay has absolutely nothing to do with censorship.**

Mark Kramer

To be honest, we have heard smarter excuses from liberal censors. So we pushed a bit further (emphasis added):

April 10, 2005

Dear Phillip,

Could you kindly confirm that the proofs of our paper will be sent to this email **within the next week or so** (nitzan@yorku.ca)?

Best wishes,
Jonathan Nitzan

And that extra push was enough. The editors lost their composure and pulled out the scissors. As it turned out, they weren't going to publish our review after all (emphasis added):

April 12, 2005

Dear Professor Nitzan,

We were going to include your review in the summer 2005 issue of the JCWS, **but when we took another look at it recently, it struck us that your piece was simply much too long for a regular book review.** If you can cut your review to the length specified in our original request (about 800-1000 words, give or take a hundred), we can include it in the fall 2005 issue. Alternatively, you could convert it into a review essay, but that would entail adding references and backing up the claims you make. **In addition, we would have to send it out for external evaluation, which does not guarantee acceptance.** On our part, we would much prefer that you simply cut the review, but of course it's up to you. Please let me know what you think.

Sincerely,

Philip Redko
Editorial Assistant
Journal of Cold War Studies

We got it. There is a post-critical space of multidimensional uniqueness and interlaced specificities manifested in the cultural-racist consciousness of friendly-hostile human beings, a space created and recreated by an endless collage of scholarly journals and books that publish an ever-growing number of highly creative articles and manuscripts. But it seems that the greater the diversity of this space and the more colourful its deconstructions, the simpler and flatter the reality it seeks to hide.

2. Marxist Encounters

Bulgakov insists that manuscripts don't burn – but, as Jack London reminds us in *The Iron Heel* (1907), we have no idea how many get suppressed.

There was, of course, an easy way out. It was succinctly summarized for us in a precious historical moment, when a recently-ordained Doctor of Economic Science, attending the 1997 American Economic Association Meeting in New Orleans, informed his adulating friends: 'There is no such thing as an unpublished paper: you start with the top journal and then work your way down until your article gets accepted'. We almost envied his insight.

Our own path took us sideways, or rather upward, to the Marxists. We submitted the rejected review to *Science & Society*, where it got published as 'The Rockefeller Boys' (Bichler and Nitzan 2007). We should perhaps note here that, unlike his hands-off Cold War counterpart, *Science & Society's* Editor, David Laibman, was well aware that we were critical of Marx's labour theory of value and its broader implications – yet he remained tolerant and forthcoming. And that wasn't the first time.

Back in 1993, one of us (Bichler) had been invited by Asher Arian to contribute a chapter to an edited SUNY Press book on the Israeli elections. The invited piece dealt with Israel's 'political business cycle' – particularly the political-business underpinnings of the 1977 rise of the Likud bloc and the radical right and the 1992 attempt to reinstate Rabin's Labour Party and the 'ancient regime'. The article was reviewed, accepted, proof-edited and ready for the printer – yet it never got published. One of SUNY's trustees got a hold of the preprint and presented its editor with an ultimatum: get rid of Bichler's 'vulgar Marxian' chapter or the entire volume would be cancelled. Arian complied in a jiffy. Bichler's chapter was excised, the trustee withdrew his ultimatum and the bleached volume sailed safely to the printer.

The orphaned paper was sent to *Science & Society*, accompanied by a simple request: kindly make sure that the referees are neither Israeli nor pro-Zionist. And it worked. The non-aligned reviewers found the article neither vulgar nor Marxist – in fact, they didn't even think it was particularly radical. But they thought it made an original point and agreed to publish it (Bichler 1994-1995).

During the 1990s and early 2000s, we had pretty good relationships with Marxist writers and editors, particularly those of the older, pre-postist generation. The *Review of Radical Political Economics*, for example, published our article 'Military Spending and Differential Accumulation: A New Approach to the Political Economy of Armament – The Case of Israel' (Bichler and Nitzan 1996). The paper showed the growing bifurcation between the country's dominant capital groups and the small-business sector that surrounded it. And it further demonstrated – for the first time as far as we know – that the differential profits of dominant capital were positively and tightly correlated with the country's increasing military bias and rising military spending.

The *Review of Radical Political Economics* wasn't our first choice, though. Initially, we submitted our article to mainstream journals such as the *American Sociological Review* and the *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, but it was repeatedly rejected, often with open disdain (note that, back then, most observers equated Israel's high military spending with its 'heightened security needs' and thought that connecting these expenditures with the differential profits of dominant capital was bizarre, if not utterly nonsensical). The specific reasons for rejection are too embarrassing to requote here, but one does merit a mention. A learned reader scolded us for

ignoring the innovative empirical work of Michael Shalev – failing to realize that Shalev’s main thesis and empirics relied on our own work. . . .

The *Review of Radical Political Economics* also published our comparative study ‘[Going Global: Differential Accumulation and the Great U-turn in South Africa and Israel](#)’ (Nitzan and Bichler 2001). The paper developed our non-Marxist, CasP approach to explain the apparent movement of both countries from closed, militarized regimes to a less confrontational global order. Surprisingly – and in our view to their great credit – the editors did not seek to clip our theoretical ambitions. On the contrary – they encouraged us to develop them further, even at the cost of trimming the paper’s concrete historical argument. For a journal that struggled for years to emphasize and develop Marxist research, this encouragement struck us as a model of scientific integrity. And it wasn’t alone. Other Marxist journals, such as *Capital & Class*, were also willing to advance our work (Nitzan and Bichler 1996).

3. The Rift

But as the 2000s progressed, our relationship with Marxists cooled off. Many of them started to see our CasP approach as a potential foe to both classical Marxism and its many ‘neo’ extensions. The rift was further deepened by our studies of U.S. involvement in Middle East Energy Conflicts (our term), and of global accumulation more broadly, research that contested conventional Marxist notions of neo-imperialism (for example, Bichler and Nitzan 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2012; Nitzan and Bichler 2006).

And so rejections started to mount. *Le Monde*, for example, agreed to publish our short conference article titled ‘[The End of Neoliberalism?](#)’ (Bichler and Nitzan 2003a) – but quickly reneged once its Editor in Chief, Serge Marti, got to read the actual text. Similarly, *Alternatives Internationales* commissioned a French version of our ‘[War Profits, Peace Dividends and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#)’ (Bichler and Nitzan 2002) – only to refuse it for being ‘too economic’. That latter paper, re-submitted in English to the *London Review of Books*, was politely turned down by its Editor, Mary-Kay Wilmers, with no reason given. Even the ever-tolerant *Science & Society* rejected an invited article on [Imperialism and Financialism](#) – later published by the *Journal of Critical Globalization Studies* (Bichler and Nitzan 2012) – for being ‘too dismissive’ of Marxism. (To be fair, the editor later admitted that our submission, once again, ‘generated something of a hornet’s nest’ at the editorial board meeting, with supporters arguing that, given the quality of our work, the journal ‘should be able to accept something from these fellows’ and detractors resenting our unsubstantiated attempt to ‘replace the entire Marxist tradition rather than develop it’.)

The growing hostility also spilled over into conferences. The organizers of ‘Marx International IV’ Congress, held in 2004 at the Université de Paris-X Nanterre, placed our CasP presentation in one of the conference’s plenary sessions. But when we arrived to deliver it we learned that the paper had been demoted to a peripheral panel on Iran and assorted Middle East issues. And the organizers were hardly apologetic. One of them informed us that the relocation, although unfortunate, was necessary to appease the meeting’s financial backer, a distinguished Canadian professor who demanded that we be so removed.

A year earlier, in 2003, we presented our CasP approach to a plenary session at the ‘Global Regulation’ conference at the University of Sussex. One of the organizers attacked us, quite openly, not for the things we said, but for those we didn’t. Standing up and waving his hands, he suggested/demanded that we spend less time critiquing Marxism and more on ‘building bridges’. At York University, where one of us (Nitzan) teaches and where we hold our international CasP conferences, the situation is even worse. The conferences, which present new and often path-breaking CasP research and critiques from around the world, are routinely boycotted by the university’s Marxist faculty.

Granted, much of this clash has to do with the scientific substance of CasP. Nobody, Marxists included, likes being systematically critiqued, let alone supplanted by a new approach. But it seems to us that some of the enmity has to do with the shifting nature of Marxist scholarship as such. With the spread of postism, Marxist editors have grown less tolerant than their predecessors and are often openly hostile to scientific research altogether. If true, this process bodes ill for the future of this once-innovative science.

4. A Whiff of Plagiarism

And there is another, darker side to this trajectory. Postists love academic fashion, disdain novelty and dismiss science. And since according to many (post-)Marxists there is nothing new under the eternal sun of Marx, Engels and Lenin, we shouldn’t be surprised to see plagiarism rampant.

The *Retort* group of Berkeley, California, for example, published a brilliant Verso book on the oil wars of the Middle East (Retort 2005) along with a detailed summary in the prestigious *London Review of Books* (Boal *et al.* 2005). Both works marshalled an impressive array of novel theoretical claims and empirical findings – most of which were taken, freely and without attribution, from the works of Bichler and Nitzan.

Our response article, ‘[The Scientist and the Church](#)’ (Nitzan and Bichler 2005), exposed Retort’s systemic theft as well as the broader anti-scientific context that made such theft possible to start with. *The London Review of Books*, of course, refused to publish it, offering instead that we write a 1000-word ‘letter to the editor’. Verso didn’t even bother answering. And Retort? Under pressure from us, the University of California, Berkeley, struck an investigative committee that found Retort guilty of scientific dishonesty. But that was it. The honourable committee didn’t think its conclusion merited publication. Instead, its report was safely locked in the offenders’ personal files for five short years and then permanently purged, to a deep sigh of relief from the offenders and their employer. It’s a telling story because Retort’s was neither our first nor our last brush with plagiarists. There have been many more, from respectable faculty to PhD students – but that’s a subject for another paper.

5. Happy Endings, False Restarts

There have also been happy endings, though. In 2016, we received a *Rethinking Marxism* invitation to write a paper for a [special issue](#) on Marxist approaches to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Given that we haven't researched the subject for many years, we offered, instead, to contextualize it as part of the global political economy of the Middle East and the differential accumulation of dominant capital groups more broadly. We also proposed that the paper be written as a 'biography of research', interlacing our theoretical arguments and empirical findings with the way in which they emerged and evolved. To our surprise, the editors agreed enthusiastically.

Two of the three referees disliked our paper. As usual, the issue was our inappropriate 'tone' (read criticism of Marxism), and the offended referees demanded cuts and revisions. One of them even boasted a special Bichler-and-Nitzan expertise, developed and perfected over the years by reading – and disliking – our publications. We almost felt sorry for the Sisyphean scholar. But the issue editors, Oded Nir and Joel Wainwright, didn't budge. They accepted our rebuttals and published our paper – '[Arms and Oil in the Middle East: A Biography of Research](#)' – with only minor modifications (Bichler and Nitzan 2018).

A short while later, in 2019, we receive another Marxist invitation – this time from the bilingual *Revue de la régulation*. The journal was preparing a special issue on '[Accumulation and Politics: Approaches and Concepts](#)' and wanted to interview us on a wide variety of topics. The invite seemed genuine. The special issue's call for papers cited the CasP approach favourably and at some length, and the editors were more than forthcoming. They allowed us to revise the questions if we wanted to and allowed our text to be significantly longer than usual.

Was this the mark of a new beginning? Were younger Marxists growing more self-critical and open to radical alternatives such as CasP? Maybe not – but the invite was simply too tempting to ignore. The *Revue de la régulation* is the flagship journal of the 'regulation school', a broad attempt to extend Marxist analyses of accumulation beyond the narrow confines of its 'material base'. An interview with this journal would have allowed us to introduce our work to the next generation of Marxists, as well as to situate it in the context of competing approaches. All in all, it seemed worthy of our effort, and we spent several intense months writing it up.

But it was all for naught. As it turned out, the enthusiastic special-issue editors had only 'relative autonomy'. In the 'last instance' – meaning when Bichler and Nitzan dismissed Althusser and brushed off other Marxist luminaries – the Editorial Board felt it had to intervene. The length of the interview – which was pre-agreed on – was suddenly 'excessive' and had to be clipped by two-thirds. The questions and answers had to be made more 'personal'. And most importantly, our proverbial 'tone' had to be made 'fairer' and 'less one-sided'. Even the *Journal of Cold War Studies* could not have delivered such a decisive knockout.

Luckily, though, manuscripts don't burn. '[The Capital As Power Approach: An Invited-then-Rejected Interview with Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan](#)' is available, free of changes and charges, on our CreativeCommons website (Bichler and Nitzan 2020).

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