Marxism and Patronal Theory

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Marxism and Patronal Theory

Daniel G. Weber
Introduction

The purpose of this paper will be to assess Henry Hale’s Patronal Theory, and analyze it from a Marxist perspective. Patronalism has emerged as the most cogent framework within comparative politics to analyze the post-soviet space. Therefore an assessment of this framework from larger paradigmatic programs is necessary. With Marxism as the paradigmatic focus of this paper, dialectical materialism will necessarily serve as the epistemological foundation of this analysis. The methodological process of dialectical materialism will be supplemented by ontological categories established by important Marxist theorists.

Patronal politics, as described by Hale is defined as,

...politics in societies where individuals organize their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments through chains of actual acquaintance, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorizations… (Hale 10)

But what is the Marxian assessment and analysis of the patronal model? As an analytic framework which traditionally views the capitalist state as necessarily the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie (in its simplest and succinct formulation), is Hale’s framework compatible? Furthermore, as a paradigm which prioritizes material considerations and conditions, can patronalism be compatible within a Marxist framework of analysis.

Analyzing Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective from a Marxian perspective will require an investigation of Hale’s book by section. The logic of expectation, Hale’s exposition of patronalism in this region’s history, constitutions and their role
within patronal societies, networks, power pyramids, and revolutions will be analyzed with the analytical scope revolving around the Marxist method.

**Patronalism**

Hale explains how patronalism distributes power in given states through “roughly hierarchical networks through which resources are distributed and coercion applied.” (Hale 10). This approach to studying the post-soviet space has opened the door to a more sufficient analysis of this region’s politics. When compared to the traditional theoretical models of institutionalization and democratization, patronal theory provides a superior model for analysts in this field of study.

Hale demonstrates these patterns through exploring a multitude of social spheres where patron-client relationships dominate, and mafia-like networks run the show from the scenes of a formal state sphere. State processes in this region cannot be analyzed through regular institutions and political parties. Rather, informal social networks make decisions in accordance to a specific structure which revolves around extended patronal pyramids.

In the post-soviet space, actual power is acquired and utilized by means of favors which clients carry out for patrons, and completion of material acquisition for patrons in exchange for some payout or another by the patron. If a business-owner, for instance, helps a patron in securing electoral victory, will more than likely acquire themselves favorable contracts with the state.

Each country in the post-soviet space has a pyramid structure of its own extending from the top (patron-in-chief, which is usually the literal head of state), down to sub-patrons
(who are usually oligarchs, or directors of state institutions), down to lower levels of the political world, all the way down to the private and personal lives of citizens. Yes, patronalism extends to the daily lives of working-class people who are sure to play the game, lest they be reprimanded by a highly corrupt business and legal sector.

As far as a Marxist analysis of this brief overview is concerned, patronal theory can thus far be classified as compatible and commensurate with a hypothetical Marxist analysis of these states. A Marxian analysis would likely recognize and explore the factors which gave rise to this unique form of social organization in this part of the world (likely exploring the period of hyper-capitalism in the 1990s, superstructural conditions, and so on). Additionally, a Marxist analysis would stress the need to explore the class dynamic in patronalism. While Hale certainly looks at the development of oligarchies, a Marxist might indeed center their analysis around the oligarchs and how they use this informal system to maintain ideological and material power.

**Logic of Expectation**

Henry Hale begins explaining patronalism by describing its fundamentally informal nature. For Hale, the informality embeds corruption and forms the basis of a social equilibrium where, “Given that everyone expects everyone else to behave this way, it makes no sense for an individual to behave differently since she would only wind up hurting herself and possibly those who depend on her, possibly severely.” (Hale 20).

For patronal societies this happens specifically in vertical hierarchical pyramids of power consisting of patrons and clients. The distinction is made clear however between patronalism
and patrimonialism or neopatrimonialism. This is because patronalism is not a concept about rule or domination, but about social equilibrium. That is to say while patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism describe a type of rule, patronalism broadly describes social relations and patterns thereof.

This clearly is something to be filed under the category of the superstructure for the Marxist analyst. The inherently sociological nature of the patronal framework certainly appears to be capable of maintaining compatibility with the Marxist program. That is, so long as social relations as defined by patronal theory can be understood as emerging from a material basis. If this is so, the Marxist is content.

Before laying bare the genesis of patronal social relations, Hale describes how patronal patterns emerged in hunter-gatherer social formations. The Marxist ontological framework refers to this formation as primitive communism, and would agree with Hale’s assessment insofar as Hale states the primacy of personal relationships within this prehistoric social formation. Most Marxists however would likely consider Hale’s statement that, “Patronalism is in fact the norm throughout all recorded human history…” (Hale 28) as utterly ahistorical and false. Henry Hale describes patronalism as a sort of default mode for social organization, which traps humans into a social equilibrium which is less optimal than a formal arrangement.

While personalized networks were absolute in primitive communism, and even important in almost every social formation, this is not what patronalism is. By definition, patronalism is rigidly hierarchical, and by Marxian definition, primitive communism is relatively egalitarian. Furthermore, for the Marxist, humans are not by nature patronalistic. They create patronal circumstances as a result of material conditions. As Frederick Engels put in Origins of the
Family, Private Property, and the State, “According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life.” (Engels)

Therefore the dialectical materialist would almost certainly reject Hale’s implication that patronalism is the natural state of human society, and that it is the default social outcome. The degree to which this problem is relevant will be further examined, but instead of getting caught in the quagmire of anthropological discourse and discourse on human nature, we will turn to Hale’s description of what binds patronal networks.

For this, Hale cites three factors emphasized in classical studies:

(1) The patron’s continued access to valuable resources for rewarding loyal clients (2) the patron’s power of enforcement, his ability selectively to deliver punishments to the disloyal…(3) the patron’s capacity to monitor clients and “subpatrons,” those figures who have clients of their own but who also are themselves the clients of more powerful be patrons. (Hale 31)

These reasons can possibly work within the Marxist paradigm, but lack the obvious unit of analysis in Marxist literature: class. These reasons seem to explain what keep a specific patron or another in power, but do not seem to address what underlies the networks of patronal social relations. When class enters the picture, it can be deduced perhaps that a patron exists to safeguard class privilege, and for this reason, subpatrons endorse a given patron. What would bind patrons, subpatrons and clients would have to be analyzed as a intertwined series of interrelationships with material considerations emerging as primary in the last instance.
Then Hale mentions the literature on ideology and how ethnic and other bonds have been said to bind patronal networks. Hale discredits this view pretty quickly stating that there are very many case-studies which show ideology to be irrelevant in patronal organization. Additionally, ideology for Hale necessarily leads back to a focus on organization and resources.

A de-emphasis on ideology would certainly seem to be compatible with a Marxian outlook, which is typically allergic to idealist justifications of social phenomena.

Hale then goes on to focus on organization and resources which seem to be surfacing over and over again. This is a problem in his model as he explains that low-resource societies can still maintain patronal systems. Additionally, the problem of organization for Hale is one which recognizes that these organizations are made up of clients who carry out the rewarding and punishing and monitoring. The tautology of patrons securing loyalty of clients when clients loyally carry out the will of patrons is resolved through the logic of expectation.

Within the logic of expectation, clients obey patrons when they expect other clients to be obeying patrons. In analyzing this as a Marxist, there should not be a distinction between the logic of expectation and ideology. Hale of course uses ideology in the mainstream sense of the word, which a Marxist might understand as a worldview. Ideology however for a Marxist is a much broader concept which can be understood as consciousness conditioned through socialization within the superstructure to maintain an economic base. With this in mind, the logic of expectation can be seen as the unspoken ideological glue, binding patronal organization which binds socioeconomic class, which then binds a given mode of production.

When placing the logic of expectation within the Marxian category of ideology, Hale’s explanation serves as a compatible description of patronal affairs within a Marxian analysis.
Hale’s analogy of the ‘bank-run’ has the corollary in the Marxist canon of ideological crisis, where prevailing ideas and beliefs are shattered, thus leading to a social transformation. As capitalism, “...has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors” (Marx), a bank-run likewise tears asunder the ties a depositor has with their bank.

It is also within the context of expectation that exploitation takes place. Clients know that fundamentally they are being taken advantage of by their patrons. Labor, within patronal organization, which consists of rewarding, punishing, and monitoring on behalf of a patron, is used to maintain class society which is necessarily exploitative economically. But it is also exploitative in that clients are stripped of their free will and made to live in fear of what other clients may do to them on behalf of their mutual patron. Instead of controlling the patronal system, the patronal system controls people, including patrons who must act in accordance to patronal laws of motion beyond their control. While it is true that social structures control people in all class societies, patronal systems uniquely control humans in a particularly vicious way.

**Constitutions**

“For individuals in highly patronalistic societies, what matters most for one’s material welfare is belonging to a coalition that has access to - and hence can pay out - resources.” (Hale 61). From the materialist vantage point, this section starts off splendidly. This of course however is a reiteration of the fundamentals of patronal logic. As for the rest of the chapter, a traditional Marxist analysis can be tricky task.

Henry Hale elucidates a fundamentally structural hypothesis which resembles what Marxist literature refers to as *form analysis*. The primary hypothesis of form analysis is that
political development occurs parallel to the changing functional needs of capitalist societies. This is not to say that Hale in any way adopts this hypothesis, but rather, an amended form which can then become compatible with a Marxist structural form analysis.

To explain, a basic understanding of Hale’s analysis is necessary. Put simply, three primary constitutional models exist in the post-soviet space; presidential, semi-presidential, and parliamentary. Each come about by means of certain conditions, and each are the primary causes of different political changes.

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The presidential system is highly compatible with an authoritarian political system in many countries, and the post-soviet space is no exception. The post-soviet space however combines the patronal dynamic to establish highly informal and authoritarian systems. In the presidential system, the president almost always serves as patron-in-chief, and keeps tight control of society through subpatrons who dominate state or private monopolies, and state officials and bureaucrats who operate the intelligence services, law enforcement, military, and justice system. Because of the president’s constitutionally privileged access to state-power, presidential systems tend to lean authoritarian, and rigid. Furthermore, except under the condition that the president
is an unpopular lame-duck (which predictably triggers a political disjunction structurally), the president is frequently capable of maintaining one single patronal pyramid throughout the entire society.

The semi-presidential system on the other hand tends to reflect a compromised division of power. In the post-soviet space this has been caused by territorial considerations (see Hale’s exposition of Tajikistan), a facade used to manipulate patronal patterns of development (see Hale’s exposition of Putin’s power-play with Medvedev), or whenever a parity of power exists between two patrons-in-chief that cannot be resolved otherwise except by means of a bloody civil war (see Ukraine). In the semi-presidential system, power is shared between a President and Prime Minister. Often, these each represent patrons-in-chief of competing patronal pyramids. It should also be noted that semi-presidential systems are introduced to provide the illusion of formal weakening of executive power. This of course is an illusion because real power in the post-soviet space is executed through informal networks. Regardless, changes in formal institutions can trigger changes in informal networks as expectations can change and so on.

The parliamentary system distributes power more loosely in contradistinction to constitutional systems with a strong executive branch, and this inevitably correlates to looser patronal pyramids. While Prime Ministers still typically function as patrons-in-chief, they operate at the behest of a parliament which acquires a greater level of autonomy and influence. Because Prime Ministers can be more easily replaced than Presidents, the logic of expectation is altered, and consequently a looser pyramid formation emerges.
Using form analysis, a Marxist consider constitutional changes in light of changing socioeconomic conditions. An empirical research program might try to look at possible correlations between capital concentration and rigid pyramid formation. Furthermore, uneven development which is a noted Marxian prediction of capitalist development, can lead to emerging centers of power which might in fact be concurrent with semi-presidential systems.

While Hale’s analysis of patronal structure is compatible with a structural marxist methodology, an instrumental marxist might also find some use value within the contexts of different constitutions. An instrumentalist might analyze how different constitutional modalities generate alternative state-systems which are then more or less conducive to strengthening and maintaining economic power and control. However, instrumental marxism is definitely an actor-centric model, and therefore patronal theory which leans towards a structural analysis will find more compatibility with structural marxism.

**Networks**

Patronal theory claims that informal networks form informal institutions which are served by formal institutions rather than vice versa. A Marxian analysis should not necessarily take any particular problem or note with this, unless one was interested in a deep thoroughgoing sociological analysis. In terms of political Marxian analysis however, this is all fine and good, so long as the class component and element of class dictatorship are recognized. So does Henry Hale do this in *Patronal Politics*?

Hale actually makes a point compatible with a Marxist analysis by stressing the role of oligarchs. Hale explains how patronal networks emerged from the power of oligarchs and of
state officials. Oligarchic power is totally consistent with Marxian theory, and so is personalistic power derived from state authority. This blending and blurring of state and economic lines actually forms the basis of the theory of State Monopoly Capitalism, which emerged from Lenin to describe, an environment where the state intervenes in the economy to protect larger monopolistic or oligopolistic businesses from threats. (Lenin)

State Monopoly Capitalist theory in the Marxist canon states that it is inevitable for governments and monopoly capitalists to fuse and utilize mutual resources for maintaining power. This seems to have occurred within the post-soviet sphere very clearly, and Hale even does an excellent job of tracking the development of this process in this region.

Hale explains how opportunistic people in the Soviet Union took advantage of the market reforms. The market reforms of the late 1980s brought on the emergence of a new class of people determined to overthrow the Soviet social order. When they succeeded in dismantling socialism, a period of hypercapitalism emerged which proceeded to enrich the few at the expense of the great masses.

State enterprises were sold off at a fraction of their value, as neoliberal economists helped to guide the transition to capitalism. This lead to not only relative immiseration (wages developing a negative relationship to overall economic value creation in the whole economy) but also to absolute immiseration, as Marx stated in *Capital*.

The inordinate surplus-value extracted from the working class then implies a mass accumulation of surplus-value by the capitalist class. This process was extraordinarily pernicious in the post-soviet space.
This process of mass wealth accumulation then developed an obvious relationship with political power, as guarantors of oligarchic power, ie state officials could work within or develop their own patronal networks. Conversely, oligarchs could translate their economic power into material advantages into networks of clients. The base-superstructure dialectic therefore takes motion where a predominately informal culture shapes a context for patronal network formation, and economic power fuels and drives this process in the last instance. As Althusser stated in Contradiction and Overdetermination, “[the sum of individual wills and variegated variables] really embodies determination by the economy in the last instance.” (Althusser)

Meaning that while a variety of factors influence events, the economic variable is primary, and so determines events in the last instance. Hale’s emphasis on oligarchs, and the state officials who enabled them is completely compatible with this view.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the ensuing chaos and confusion on expectations lead to a period of extreme flux. For Henry Hale, patronal networks took time to adjust, before consolidating into systems which encapsulated the entire states they existed within. Leaders and respective clients needed to learn how to navigate the new terrain, with the most capable patrons prevailing by means of natural selection (reminiscent of evolution, a theory lauded by Marx and Engels as a validation of dialectical materialist philosophy).

This section of Patronal Politics discusses the tendency for single-pyramid structures to develop in the 1990s. From well-intentioned liberal democracies, to privatizers, to elite fragmentation, to divided societies, to civil wars and state failure, to resource poor states, to quasi-states, and so on. In each case, single-pyramids developed almost universally.
Focus on and emphasis on the use of state violence to consolidate political power, hierarchical oligarchic influence, and consolidation emerging from crisis are all compatible with a Marxist outlook, but there are a few ways to take an analysis of this phenomena further through the paradigm of Marxism.

As Bukharin states in *Imperialism and World Economy*, “Finance capital seizes the entire country in an iron grip. "National economy" turns into one gigantic combined trust whose partners are the financial groups and the state.” (Bukharin). From this perspective, the state monopoly capitalism thesis can be explored further. The troubles of the 1990s, which gave way for the hypercapitalism and extreme concentration and centralization of wealth which translated into political power. The pool of potential contenders for state power got smaller and smaller as economic power narrowed. From there, oligarchs mostly had to develop their own class consciousness and resolve their own competing interests to establish strong states to maintain the new order.

Marx elaborates his theory (see Capital vol. 3 sec. 3 chapter 15) of the necessary concentration and centralization of capital (which have proven true thus far in modern capitalist societies). Interestingly, in the post-soviet space this did not happen as a protracted result of market competition. This happened in one sweeping period of a few years, and the effects of this on society were immense. Just as it was immense on its political system.

The brief period of wild west style capitalism after the fall of socialism immediately developed into state monopoly capitalism, and Eurasian states were mobilized to protect these interests, and expand them internationally.
Revolutions

Henry Hale was absolutely correct to downplay the nature of the Color Revolutions. While many analysts praised these events as democratic breakthroughs, someone with knowledge of patronal politics would have scoffed. A Marxist who is willing to go out of the conventional comfort zone of orthodoxy, might notice a resemblance between Debord’s Society of the Spectacle theory, and the color revolutions. “The spectacle is a social relation between people that is mediated by an accumulation of images that serve to alienate us from a genuinely lived life. The image is thus an historical mutation of the form of commodity fetishism.” (Debord). This passage from Society of the Spectacle displays how these Color Revolutions were a spectacle. They gave the popular masses the opportunity to feel as if they were taking part in a social transformation. But these were not revolutions. These were facades which coincided with the expected logic and rhythm of regime cycles.

So why is it that these Color Revolutions were merely spectacles, and not capable of changing the real political life of post-soviet society? For the Marxist, the answer is simple. These weren’t revolutions in the first place. In the Marxist paradigm, a revolution is an event by which one class overthrows another and assumes political power. From this vantage point, calling the Color Revolutions, revolutions simply isn’t cogent. With not emphasis on class power, or economic relations, nothing of importance is going to change.

Additionally, while violence is not necessarily a universal component of revolutions, it is almost always necessary. These Color Revolutions exiled some leaders perhaps, but the informal networks remained, and no threat of violence or force against them took place.
If a capitalist social order already exists, and a populace clamors for more liberality, a revolution doesn’t make sense. To create the conditions for greater liberal rights, and bourgeois development, the economic prerequisites should exist first, which means that a prominent middle class, or labor aristocracy should exist.

The labor aristocracy consist of a contingency of the working class loyal to bourgeois development. While they may seek greater privileges, and political representation, they seek in no way to disrupt the capitalist mode of production (see Lenin’s *Preliminary Draft Theses On The Agrarian Question For the Second Congress of the Communist International*).

It’s precisely this group that is capable of expanding bourgeois right. However, the post-soviet space does not yet have a group like this in large enough quantity.

While the color revolutions don’t constitute proper revolutions in the Marxian sense, there are interesting similarities with how Hale and how Marx assess the development of revolution. In each case, there is a structural development which occurs in stages.

Within patronal theory, patronal networks undergo crisis as the result of the logic of bank runs. As described earlier, bank-runs are ruptures of disjuncture where informal networks are torn asunder. It could be argued that populations undergo a consciousness of themselves and of patronal oppression. Because of course citizens of these societies are already familiar with the conditions of patronal society, this would mean ideology more in the sense of how Zizek interprets non-ideology as ideological so long as people still act in accordance to its inscribed behaviors/practices/rituals.
The corollary in Marxist theory would be emergence of class-consciousness which leads to the decisive break with the logic of capital.

Conclusion

Since Marx and Engels, Marxists have developed deep relationships with non-Marxian theories to understand them within the Marxist worldview. In anthropology, history, sociology, political science, and so on, mainstream interpretations of things have been assessed and analyzed within the Marxist canon to help increase its body of knowledge. This for Marxists is a dialectical process of intermingling with other ideas, as well as a scientific process in which theories have an objective basis to be assessed critically. In this sense, it is my view that patronal theory as developed by Henry Hale could be reimagined within a Marxist context and used to help build upon the Marxist political science.

The reimagining process is vital, so as to not establish a theoretically incommensurable perspective which does neither the Marxist, nor the patronal theorist any justice. On these grounds, patronal theory must be understood in the following ways to be compatible with Marxism.

First, patronalism absolutely cannot be considered ahistorically as a universal human phenomena. A Marxist cannot reasonably interpret patronalism in this way. Therefore, if a Marxist wishes to refer to patronal theory, it should be done almost exclusively in the context of contemporary politics. If one wishes to apply the lessons of patronal theory to Soviet history,
one must be really careful to understand the economic base, and careful to understand the deep interrelationships, structures, and systems which existed within the previous political context.

Second, an analysis of the current post-soviet economies and their relationship to the political systems is vital for a Marxist theorist. A robust understanding of world systems, imperialism, and how the average rate of profit across these economies is influencing political behavior is essential.

Third, any Marxist theorist will have to make sure they are conforming patronal theory to a developed state theory. Instrumentalism, Structuralism, Derivationism, Systems-Analytic, Organizational-Realism, and the Strategic-Relational Approach all encompass dominant theories in this field. In fact, patronal theory would likely help explore hypotheses in different Marxist state theories to provide empirical evidence for and against the different theoretical models.

Fourth, a Marxist should not get fooled by the discourse of ‘revolutions’ as it exists in mainstream literature. Fortunately, Hale explains how these ‘revolutions’ reproduce patronal logic, which works for us, but it is our role to explain why this happens on a deeper level.

With these considerations in play, how can a Marxist use patronal theory? First, the dialectical method requires a diagnosis of contradictions. A research program dedicated to that could be thoroughly robust, but some examples of contradictions to be analyzed and explored are the contradictions between formal and informal structures, between patrons and clients, between post-soviet states and western states, and so on.

Second, the material basis of patronal logic should be uncovered. Profit rates are crucial to this, as it is the allocation and distribution of profits which maintain social reproduction.
Additionally, the effects of the relative immiseration of working class wages in proportion to economic development are highly important to look at. This is largely because this process is precisely preventing the development of a labor aristocracy, and therefore the backbone of a more liberal society.

Third, any Marxist thinker must recognize their role within the context of class struggle, and not assume to be removed like an objective and neutral third party. Marxists tend to embrace their role as the intellectual vanguard of working class struggle, and seek truth in order to change the way things are. For a Marxist, Patronal politics should be thoroughly understood in order to dismantle patronal systems in this region and establish a new social order based on working class liberation.