

11 Approaching ‘the international’

Beyond Political Marxism

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Introduction

In rebuke to those mainstream IR scholars who identified Marxist thought with Soviet diplomatic practice, the years since the collapse of the USSR have seen a flourishing of Marxist writing in the field. This trend has been stimulated, in the best traditions of praxis, by the need to account for actually existing international politics: in the debate on ‘globalization’ in the 1990s and the subsequent ‘return to empire’ in the early years of this century. For many Marxists, the issues of empire and imperialism had never really died away. These ‘revived’ debates have, however, revealed the persistence of a series of dilemmas in Marxist thought on international relations. In what follows, we focus on one dimension of these many issues—specifically what has been termed the ‘problematic of the international’ (Rosenberg 2000, 65). Most generally stated, this can be defined as the myriad theoretical, political, normative, and philosophical problems flowing from the division and interaction of humanity into a multiplicity of political communities. Here, we enquire into the theoretical issues emerging from Marxism’s engagement with this international problematique, noting some of its political implications.

In our original contribution to the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* section, we attempted to address some of these issues through an exploration of Leon Trotsky’s concept of uneven and combined development (U&CD) and Justin Rosenberg’s more recent reformulation of this idea into a transhistorical theory of ‘the international’. We sought to demonstrate that although characteristics associated with U&CD can be found throughout history, it is only under the generalized commodity production of the capitalist epoch that U&CD’s distinctive effects, articulated and expressed through inter-societal competition, are *fully* activated. From this perspective, we criticized the ambiguities in Rosenberg’s use of U&CD as both a ‘general abstraction’ to be incorporated into our theoretic assumptions and a theory unto itself, whilst further illustrating the qualitative differences between ‘simple’ and fully-formed modes of U&CD in the pre-capitalist and capitalist eras, respectively.

We remain committed to this general line of argument. Nevertheless, it became apparent to us that our argument suffered from some haziness which, given our own criticisms of Rosenberg, needed to be addressed. In particular, the precise differences between pre-capitalist and capitalist forms of U&CD required further clarification.

We thus address some common issues raised in recent Marxist debates on the international whilst seeking to elaborate themes first brought out in our original contribution by further specifying some of the problems in applying U&CD to pre-capitalist world politics. In doing so, we work through a critical interrogation of the 'Political Marxism'² approach associated with Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood and, in particular, the works of Hannes Lacher and Benno Teschke in IR. Given the latter's sustained and rigorous attention to the international problematic, as well their engagement with Trotsky's U&CD concept, this seemed an appropriate starting point for our investigation. We begin by examining the key theoretical claims of Political Marxism in relation to their 'solution' to the dilemmas derivative of Marx's basis/superstructure (*Basis/Überbau*) metaphor through which we then explore the larger problematic of the international in Lacher and Teschke's work.

Political marxism and the international

Social property relations and the basis/superstructure problem³

A central claim of historical materialism is that the 'direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production' (the production 'basis') determines 'the specific form of the state in each case' (the political 'superstructure') (Marx 1981, 927). As critics argue, however, the correspondence between any given relations and forces of production to particular states or politics is anything but direct. The Political Marxist concept of 'social property relations' is a parsimonious attempt at solving this basis/superstructure problem within historical materialism. In understanding the importance of the property relations concept, and its implications for the traditional historical materialist basis/superstructure conceptualization, it is helpful to briefly examine the theoretical origins of Political Marxism.

The works of Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Wood and their students emerged as a loose-knit theoretical project intended to re-instate the crucial role of class agency to Marxism. They sought in turn to reconnect the severed link between abstract theory and concrete historical analysis viewed as symptomatic of the more structuralist forms of historical materialism influential at the time of their original interventions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The dissociation of theory and history charge was particularly directed against the works of the Althusserian Marxists, World Systems Theory, and GA Cohen's (1978) seminal *A Defence of Karl Marx's Theory of History*. According to Brenner and Wood, these held a mechanistically reductionist conception of Marx's basis/superstructure metaphor, resulting in an overly techno-determinist analysis of the origins and development of capitalism and a 'de-socializing' of the materialist basis. In a critique leveled at Marxism in general, but which appeared primarily directed at the structuralists, Wood (1981, 68) charges historical materialists with adopting

modes of analysis which, explicitly or implicitly, treat the economic 'base' and the legal, political, and ideological 'superstructures' which 'reflect' or 'correspond' to it as qualitatively different, more or less enclosed and 'regionally'

separated spheres. This is most obviously true of orthodox base-superstructure theories. It is also true of their variants which speak of economic, political, and ideological 'factors', 'levels' or 'instances', no matter how insistent they may be about the *interaction* of factors or instances, or about the remoteness of the 'last instance' in which the economic sphere finally determines the rest.

Following from this, Brenner and Wood stressed the ahistoricism of Marxist structuralism, and the consequential naturalization of capitalism, thereby reproducing the very bourgeois reifications Marx so chastised the classical political economists for.

Traditional Marxist explanations of the rise of capitalism have generally viewed it as a centuries-long process whereby capitalist relations *immanently* emerge within the *interstices* of feudal (or, more generally, pre-capitalist) societies. This was the result of the expansion of trade and exchange relations, quantitative accumulation of wealth and/or development of the productive forces. Yet, in assuming 'the operation of norms of capitalist rationality in a situation where capitalist social relations of production did not exist', such conventional explanations lapsed into a 'neo-Smithian' (that is, bourgeois) mode of theorizing (Brenner 1977, 45). Explaining the origins of capitalist development and modern economic growth in terms of *pre-capitalist* agents' responses to the spread of market exchange opportunities or new technologies take for granted precisely what needs to be explained: the existence of capitalist social relations (see Brenner 1986; Comninel 1987; Wood 1999; 1995, 49–75; Teschke 2003).⁴ The 'neo-Smithian' model of capitalist development is thus charged with being inherently teleological; a philosophically idealist 'history-in-becoming' is no history at all.

In moving beyond the ahistoricism and techno-determinism associated with the basis/superstructure architecture, Political Marxists have developed Brenner's idea of social property relations. These identify the 'rules of reproduction' to which actors are subject within historically-bounded social systems. As Brenner (1986, 46) defines them, social property relations are conceived as specifying

the relationships of possession and coercion among economic actors—the producers and producers, the exploiters and exploiters, the producers and exploiters—which make it possible for them to have the regular access to the means of production and/or the economic product which is necessary for their maintenance (reproduction) as they were.

Accordingly, these 'property relations will, to a large degree, determine the pattern of economic development of any society'. They set both the 'possibilities and limits for economic action by individuals and collectives' whilst inducing 'the adoption by these agents of specific strategies as the best way to pursue their interests' (Brenner 1986, 26; Harman and Brenner 2006, 137). The aggregate result of the carrying out of these strategies, or 'rules for reproduction', constitutes the historical 'logic of process' (as Wood terms it) unique to modes of production.

So far, these claims pose little challenge to the more traditional interpretations of Marx. However, Brenner cuts through the problem of basis and superstructure by making the *form of state itself constitutive of all modes of production*, whilst further severing

this state-form from any relationship to the development of the productive forces. In pre-capitalist production modes, the direct producers (notably peasants) generally held full access to the means of subsistence—that is, they possessed the land, tools and labour-power necessary to maintain themselves *independently* of the market.⁵ Consequently, the agrarian exploiting classes (or lords in European feudalism) necessarily relied on what Marx termed ‘extra-economic coercion’ to appropriate the surpluses necessary for their own reproduction. In almost every historical case, pre-capitalist ruling classes were ‘thus obliged to construct, and maintain membership in, *political communities* ... that could maintain effective coercion and control’ necessary to appropriate the product of the peasants. Crucially then, the capacity of the exploiting classes to reproduce themselves depended *not* on their participation in the production process—that is, by organizing and managing production through a specific labour process (or division of labour)—but in their ability to organize themselves *politically* (Brenner 2001, 178; see Brenner 1986). Hence, as Teschke avers: ‘the economic process of production precedes the political process of exploitation, defined by rents in kind or in cash. The moment of exploitation is not economically built into the relations of production’. With some ‘partial exceptions’, he goes on, ‘there is virtually no production relation between the lord and the dependent peasant’ (Teschke 2003, 75fn9). Pre-capitalist social relations are, therefore, always (to use Brenner’s term) ‘politically constituted’ forms of property relations.

The social property relations approach, therefore, dispenses with the idea of basis and superstructure. Modes of production are distinguished by the patterns and relations of distribution of access to the means of production. Only under capitalist property relations do we see the structured differentiation of the political and economic into distinct institutional spheres as methods of surplus-extraction become uncoupled from ‘extra-economic’ coercive means. In other words, under capitalism extra-economic coercion (that is, state power) and economic coercion (the compulsion to sell one’s labour in order to access the means of production) are necessarily separate. ‘As in every other exploitative system’, Wood (2006, 15) writes, ‘there are two “moments” of exploitation: the appropriation of surplus labour and the coercive power that sustains it. In capitalism, however these two “moments”: are uniquely separate from each other’. This institutional differentiation of the political and economic is thus taken as the *differentia specifica* of capitalism. What are the implications of this analysis of capitalism and its origins for international relations?

Capitalism and the states system

For Brenner’s students, the development of capitalism in England during the 17th century is taken as both the paradigmatic case of capitalism as well as its originating context.⁶ Starting from this idea that capitalism first emerged as an entirely novel ‘mode of exploitation’ within post-1688 England, Hannes Lacher and Benno Teschke problematize conventional interpretations of the co-evolution of the modern international system of sovereign states and capitalism shared by most Marxists and IR theorists alike. Teschke (2003) declares the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years’ War—commonly described in mainstream IR as

inaugurating *modern* international relations—as the foundational ‘myth’ of IR theory. A central corollary of this re-periodization of the origins of capitalism and the international states system is that the latter then preceded the former. How so?

According to the Political Marxists, the feudal social property relations gave neither peasant nor lord incentive to introduce more productive technological methods: Rather the lordly interest lay in extracting more surplus by directly coercive means. This could be done by pushing the peasants to the limit of subsistence or by seizing the demesnes of other lords. The latter course resulted in a process of ‘political accumulation’ amongst the lords themselves—a war-driven process of state formation. The lords left standing at the end of this process formed the basis for the absolutist state.⁷ In contrast to classical Marxist conceptions of absolutism as a *transitional* or hybrid social formation—a transformed version of feudalism conducive to the development of capitalism—Lacher and Teschke (following Wood 1999 and Conninell 1987) view it as ‘a *sui generis* social formation, displaying a specific mode of government and determinate pre-modern and pre-capitalist domestic and international “laws of motion”’ (Teschke 2003, 191; Lacher 2005, 31–34).⁸ Absolutism is thus conceived as a distinct ‘mode of exploitation’. Unlike capitalism, the direct producers are subject to extra-economic coercion but, unlike feudalism, the coercive authorities are centralized. This conceptualization of the absolutist state follows from Lacher and Teschke’s collapsing of the basis-superstructure relation into the social property relations concept and, their commitment to an almost ‘platonic’ conception of capitalism as a theoretical abstraction of which empirical reality must conform or remain something outside.

It is not at all clear, however, why a single economic structure (in this case, feudalism) cannot have varying ‘corresponding’ state forms, as Lacher and Teschke (2007, 571) allow for capitalism. In denying such co-variations between basis and superstructure, Lacher and Teschke tends towards the same fault for which Wood (1995) had so convincingly criticized structural Marxism: that is, an unnecessarily abstract and determinist conception of production modes which, among other things, results in a gnawing gap between the concrete-historical and abstract-theoretical.⁹ For, what ‘really existing’ capitalist society corresponds to their abstract model of capitalism as defined by the differentiation of the political (state) and economic (surplus extraction/market) spheres?¹⁰ What particularly concerns us here is the consequences of this restrictive conception of capitalism in Lacher and Teschke’s theorization of its relationship with the states system and geopolitical rivalry.

From this historical analysis of the emergence of capitalism within the context of an antecedent states system, Lacher and Teschke claim that the ‘interstate-ness of capitalism’ cannot be derived from the nature of the capital relation itself. Rather, it must be ‘regarded as a “historical legacy” of pre-capitalist development’ (Lacher 2002, 148; 2006, 60; Teschke 2003, 145–46). ‘Taking the international character of global capitalism to be a *contingent* aspect of capitalism’, the states system is conceived as being structurally internalized within the totality of capitalist social relations through the spatio-temporally differentiated and geopolitically mediated development of capitalist social relations (Lacher 2006, 60, emphasis ours: see Lacher and Teschke

2007). For Lacher and Teschke then, there is neither any structural connection between capitalism and a multi-state system nor anything inherent to the nature of capitalism which would necessarily perpetuate it: the relationship is conceived as an entirely contingent one. As Teschke (2003, 144–45) puts it, ‘there is no constitutive or genetic link between capitalism and a geopolitical universe’. ‘Counterfactually’, Lacher and Teschke (2007, 574) claim,

it is perfectly possible to imagine that had capitalism emerged within an imperial formation—let us say, the Roman Empire—it would not have required its political break-up into multiple territorial units. Capitalism did not develop out of itself the system of territorial states that fragments capitalist world society; inversely, capitalism is structured by an international system because it was born in the context of a pre-existing system of territorial states.

Lacher and Teschke’s main theoretical influence, Robert Brenner (2006a, 84), has arrived at a similar conclusion: ‘Abstractly speaking, a single state governing global capital is perfectly conceivable and probably most appropriate from the standpoint of capital’.

Such reasoning is not universally shared by Political Marxists. Ellen Wood (1999; 2002; 2006) has, for example, persistently argued against the idea of global capital superseding the international system, insisting upon a necessarily systemic relationship between global capitalism and a multiplicity of states. Wood’s position, however, seems theoretically tenuous: falling back on a ‘soft functionalism’ without specifying the precise mechanism(s) linking the requirements of capital to a multi-state system (Chibber 2005, 157; see Callinicos 2007). For the determinate relationship between capital and the states system is, according to Political Marxism, simply that economic and coercive power are separate. Since all states share the characteristic of separating economic from ‘extra-economic’ coercion, little can be said about the reasons for their multiplicity and competition in terms of that separation.

The social property relations approach therefore encounters a particular problem when dealing with multiple competitive states under capitalist relations. Despite Wood’s resolve in claiming that ‘the specific division of labour between political and economic power’ constitutive of capitalism ‘means that global capital needs the fragmentation of political space’, she seems to acknowledge Political Marxism’s difficulty in actually theorizing this relationship, conceding that it ‘is not something that can be grasped entirely on the theoretical plane’. ‘To a large extent’, Wood continues, ‘this proposition is a lower-level practical observation about the impossibility of sustaining on a large geographical scale the close regulation and predictability capital needs’ (Wood 2006, 32, 26). The Political Marxists are led to this conclusion because of the enforced—if admirably rigorous—characterization of social property relations, from which the conceptual requirements of capital are to be derived like a problem in calculus. Yet, at what point do such dissociations between theory and ‘empirical reality’ become problematic for theoretical explanation?

Socially uneven and geopolitically combined development

To circumvent this empirical/theory disjunction, Lacher and Teschke (2007) turn to Trotsky's notion of U&CD, alternatively conceived as 'socially uneven and geopolitically combined development'. However, U&CD seems difficult to match with Lacher and Teschke's social property relations approach. The reason for this is that it depends upon the premise of 'development'. The underlying logic of Trotsky's position was that the developmental subject was the forces of production, 'the productivity of labour' (Trotsky 1977, 31), involving a dialectical relationship between the forces and relations of production. Yet, the overall thrust of social property relations is to deny explanatory weight to these forces, while rejecting the notion of their development in non-capitalist societies. Brenner argues that 'for the most part, new forces of production were readily assimilable by already existing social classes' (Harman and Brenner 2006, 138). This position seems at least partially contradictory with Teschke's argument, with which we agree:

developmental potential of regionally differentiated sets of property régimes generates inter-regional unevenness, which translates into international pressures that spark sociopolitical crises in 'backward' polities. These crises activate and intensify the domestic fault lines in regionally pre-existing class constellations—processes that lead to power struggles within and between polities that renegotiate and transform class relations, territorial scales and state forms. These social conflicts result in highly specific combinations of the old and the new. The dynamics of domestic trajectories are thus accelerated, their sociological composition transformed, and their directionality deflected in unforeseen ways, while their results react back on the international scene.

(Teschke 2005, 19)

Productive forces seem here to matter in the form of 'developmental potential' and the fact such potential inherent in one 'set of property regimes' exercises pressure on another implies some ranking amongst them. This claim suggests the kind of dialectical interaction between property regimes and forces of production Trotsky had in mind. It is the presence of these more advanced forces (emergent from the greater developmental potential of capitalist property relations)—*not in and of itself the balance of class relations*—that forces the adoption of the new property relations in the differentiated regions.¹¹

Drawing out the implications of Teschke's accurate position above, however, we are led to a conception of U&CD rather different to his general use of 'socially uneven and geopolitically combined development'. The latter seems analogous to a 'mixed-actor' system such as that which prevailed in early modern Europe 'dominated by absolutist states which had a systemic need to accumulate geopolitically on an ever-expanding scale due to their precapitalist property relations' (Teschke 2005, 150). These claims are vital because it is this system whose 'historical legacy' Lacher and Teschke claims is responsible for the persistence of geopolitical multiplicity and competition under capitalism. The 'combination' occurs at the systemic level where absolutist states with different property relations interact with the Hanoverian British

state in which capitalist property relations prevailed. This claim is different to the notion of 'highly specific combinations of the old and the new' inside states which then feed back into the international scene. Indeed, the latter characterization, which we support wholeheartedly, jars with the abstract definition of capitalism used by Lacher and Teschke. The very rigour and parsimony of that definition seems to rule out transitional or combined social formations—hence their rejection of Perry Anderson's (1974b) characterization of absolutism. In the face of continued inter-imperialist rivalries and the unevenness generated by capitalism, these are no mere theoretical objections.

For Lacher and Teschke, interstate rivalries and U&CD are part of the absolutist legacy bequeathed to capitalism—war is a nightmare from which capital is trying to awake. Their claims that there is then nothing inherent to capitalism which would have created multiple states in the first place leads to a degree of ambiguity regarding the possibility of contemporary processes of transnational state-formation. Here the property relations approach confronts empirical reality and comes off the worse. If, as Lacher and Teschke maintain, 'the concept of capital entails a global state', capital is seemingly unaware of its own conceptual requirements as 'the idea of a global state formation is hopelessly exaggerated'. Nevertheless, they admit, capitalist modernity remains 'characterized by certain elements of interstate competition' (Lacher and Teschke 2007, 566, 574–75; see also Teschke 2003, 267–68; Lacher 2006, 162).

This idea of some natural correspondence between capital and a hypothesized global state would seem to be based on an understanding of capitalist development as solely characterized by globalizing and equalizing tendencies. In critiquing Callinicos' explanation of the persistence of the territorial states system in terms of capitalism's tendency to uneven and combined development, Lacher and Teschke question to what degree U&CD is inherent to capitalism. 'If anything', they claim,

capitalism developed unevenly not because it is in its nature—conceptually, of course (that is, abstracted from history and agency), it should even itself out internationally through world-price formation and the long-term equalization of profit rates—but because its spatio-temporally differentiated historical origin and expansion was from the first suffused with non-capitalist (and often anti-capitalist) elements that produced and kept reproducing unevenness, manifested in differential strategies of late development and catching-up.

(Lacher and Teschke 2007, 579)

The concept of U&CD, they go on (2007, 579), is 'only meaningful only due to something that *lies outside the pure notion of capitalism ...*'. If this is to mean that *combined development* is only meaningful as lying outside any abstract conception of capitalism then this is clearly correct; combination, in Trotsky's sense, implies the fusion of different production modes within societies. But Lacher and Techke appear to be saying more than this when they claim that capitalism 'developed unevenly not because it is in its nature'. This suggests a view of *uneven development* as another historical hang-over from the feudal-absolutist eras.¹² Yet, this theoretically

conflates the transhistorical fact of unevenness (in part accounting for political multiplicity) with the particulars of European feudalism/absolutism: Hence, Lacher and Teschke's conceptualization of the states system as a 'historical legacy'. But, if the states system is conceived as being internalized through capitalism's 'logic of process', whence does it cease to be simply a 'historical legacy'? And what of the unevenness of capitalism?

We may legitimately pose these questions on the basis of a rich and extensive body of Marxist and non-Marxist literature in the fields of human geography, economics, and development studies elucidating the many ways in which capitalism, *more than any other historical mode of production*, universalizes and systematizes the sources of unevenness (see, *inter alia*, Mandel 1970; Krugman 1981; Brett 1983; Agnew 1987; Weeks 2001; Rugman and Verbeke 2004; Kiely 2005; Harvey 2006). Many of these studies and others focus on the myriad ways capitalist industrialization is an inherently disequilibrating force, structuring and restructuring the uneven territoriality of social relations (see especially Storper and Walker 1989; Smith 1990; Harvey 2006; Ashman this volume). The problems with Lacher and Teschke's rejection of U&CD as a constitutive tendency of capitalism are illustrated in their accounts of contemporary geopolitics.

Teschke (2003, 256) for example, points to a Kautskian world on the horizon noting that since capitalism is not posited on a logic of domestic political accumulation, 'we should expect it to bring about the decline of external geopolitical accumulation that defined the war-driven international conduct of the feudal and absolutist ages'. He goes on to describe international organizations as providing an 'arena of peaceful inter-capitalist conflict resolution', whilst concluding that 'the major lines of military conflict run between states that are locked out of the world market and those that reproduce the political conditions of the world market, backed up by the principle of collective security' (Teschke 2003, 267). This would seem the logical conclusion of any strict interpretation of the social property relations approach which conceives the separation of coercive power and economic relations as the *sine qua non* of capitalist modernity thus making any war-assisted mode of capital accumulation seemingly irrational (cf. Balakrishnan 2004, 157–58). From such a perspective, however, we cannot begin to understand, let alone respond politically to events such as the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. For, again, how can historical legacies explain the persistence of geopolitical rivalry and war?

A common theme runs throughout Lacher and Teschke's work: the non-correspondence (or misrecognition) of conceptual abstractions ('capital') and empirical realities (a rivalrous states system). We might then ask when reality might begin to impede upon our conceptions of it? The social realm is certainly a messy, complex affair; full of accidents, contingencies and the untheorizable. A grand theory of everything is unlikely. Problems emerge, however, when the central objects of our theories (the modern states system, geopolitical rivalry, war) are considered pure contingencies in relation to the abstractions we seek to use in explaining them. Wood (1995, 55–56) criticized the Althusserians as viewing the relationship between the state and mode of production within actually existing social formations as having 'little to do' with capitalism's structural logic, thereby appearing 'almost accidental'. Might not the same be said of Lacher and

Teschke's conceptualization of the relationship between capitalism and the states system? Accidents may happen.

Despite our criticisms, Lacher and Teschke's work is illuminating in broaching the theoretical issue of the causal implications of geopolitical relations on social development. In doing so, they tackle the problematic status in Marxist theory of an apparently unified basis producing a multiplicity of competitive 'superstructural' entities. However, despite Lacher and Teschke's recognition of the distinctive properties of 'the international', they lack an adequate theorization of it and, further, with their emphasis on the 'pre-capitalist legacy' of the states system, a viable theoretical framework from which to explain contemporary patterns of *capitalist* geopolitical rivalry. To address this question, we move beyond the Political Marxist approach and examine Justin Rosenberg's reconceptualization of Trotsky's U&CD.

Uneven and combined development: from Trotsky to Rosenberg and back again

Extensions of uneven and combined development

Moving on from the Political Marxist influences of his earlier work, Justin Rosenberg has extended the analytical reach of Trotsky's concept of U&CD to propose a solution to the international problematique common to both social and IR theory. Rosenberg's argument begins from the claim that both theories suffer from a mutual misconception. International theory, particularly in its realist guise, conceptualizes the structure of international relations (anarchy) in abstraction from its underlying constitutive social relations, thus perpetuating a reified, ahistorical conception of the international (Rosenberg 2006, 312; Rosenberg 1994). Classical social theory, in turn, continually suffers from a unitary conception of society, theorizing the structure and dynamics of societies as if they developed in isolation. Consequently, the 'repressed' multi-linear and interactive nature of social development returns in the form of un-theorized exogenous factors (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, 17).

For Rosenberg, the answer to this dual problem facing social and IR theory is to reconceptualize social development in general as both uneven and combined thereby deriving the political multiplicity underlying the international problematic from the transhistorically multilinear and interactive nature of development. His formulation thus seeks to overcome the shared error of international and classical social theory by unifying their two logics in one, uneven and combined, social process. An important step in Rosenberg's argument is his extension of the concept of combined development. In Trotsky's original conception, combination sought to capture the interlacing or fusion of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production within a single social formation; the 'drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms' (Trotsky 1977, 27). Rosenberg innovates by using the concept of 'combined development' in three distinct, but interconnected ways. First, combination refers to the co-existence and interactive development of all societies throughout history. Second, this interactivity integrates states and societies into 'regional political orders, cultural systems and

material divisions of labour' (Rosenberg 2006, 324) resulting in novel amalgams of socio-political orders and cultural institutions. Finally, through this inter-societal development, there occurs 'combination' in Trotsky's original sociological sense noted above.

Rosenberg's threefold extension of combined development is both novel and useful: For it is only through the *process* of interactive inter-societal development that 'combined social formations' come into *effect* (see Barker 2006). In particular, it dispenses with any notion of societies as pre-formed discrete entities, only subsequently interacting in causally consequential ways. Rosenberg's approach seeks to provide a solution to the Marxist dilemma of why the same production basis could demonstrate such 'endless variations and gradations in appearance' as Marx (1981, 927) noted. If successful, it would then also overcome the problem of the non-correspondence between basis and superstructure, so central to Political Marxism. It seems no coincidence that Rosenberg began his investigations of the international problematique through the prism of a Political Marxist-influenced framework. For, if the state is viewed as constitutive of society's basis, as Rosenberg (1994, 54) claimed, it seems logically to follow that *interstate* relations (used interchangeably with the inter-societal) are also constitutive.

Capitalist and pre-capitalist forms of uneven and combined development

We accept Rosenberg's claim that unevenness and certain forms of combination appear to be transhistorical phenomena. The general historical condition of co-existing and interacting societies determining each other's development is not in dispute. Where we part company with Rosenberg is on the question of the nature of U&CD's transhistorical standing—the extent to which we can project back the *specificities* of the capitalist form of U&CD to pre-capitalist eras—and U&CD's development as a theory unto itself. The problem concerns the boundaries of operation of U&CD, which we characterized as only 'fully' operative under generalized commodity production—a usage in need of further specification (see Allinson and Anievas 2009).¹³ If U&CD is a transhistorical phenomenon, to be used as a 'general abstraction' (Rosenberg 2006), much then hangs on the precise meaning of 'general abstraction', its functions in our theories, and how we conceive the qualitative differences in scale and scope between capitalist and pre-capitalist forms of U&CD and what accounts for these differences.

It is often assumed that transhistorical categories played no role in Marx's framework. This is, however, an incorrect view of Marx's method as numerous studies have convincingly demonstrated (see especially Fracchia 2004; Sayer 1979). Marx worked with a number of transhistorical categories: 'use-value', 'labour', and 'production in general'. Nevertheless, Marx's use of transhistorical categories is strikingly different from their employment within much traditional IR. For Realism, for example, a theoretical abstraction such as 'anarchy' or 'international system' takes the form of the primary *explanans* of the argument, from which all other relevant concepts (such as the balance of power) are to be deduced. From this perspective, the abstraction forms the theory itself. In contrast, for Marx the abstraction functions as an assumption which accounts for the existence of a concrete general condition whose historically

specific form has to be accounted for by still further *explanans*. Marx was not seeking to build a transhistorical theory of labour or use-value, for example, but rather introduced these concepts as necessary presuppositions in his construction of a historically specific social theory of value. In like fashion, we argue that U&CD can be utilized in a similar (though not identical) way in filling out a distinctively historical materialist theory of 'the international'.¹⁴ Hence, U&CD is *not a theory in itself*. It is rather a methodological fix in the larger research programme of historical materialism.

Rosenberg's own use of U&CD as a general abstraction, however, seemed to waver between these two very different conceptions (compare, for example, Rosenberg 2007, 455, 456–57 to Rosenberg 2006, 321, 322–23; 2008, 7–8, 20–21). At its strongest, U&CD is presented as a meta-theory; a paradigm rupture with all classical social theory (see especially Rosenberg 2006). Yet, for such a claim to be sustained, specifically in regards to Marxist theory, it would need to be demonstrated how historical materialism's abstractions are immune to the methodological incorporation of inter-societal determinations. Despite Marx's (1976) own employment of the 'pernicious postulate',¹⁵ historical materialism's guiding abstraction ('modes of production') in no way logically presupposes society in the ontologically singular. As Eric Wolf (1997, 76) rightly claimed, one of the great benefits of the mode of production concept is that it 'allows us to visualize intersystemic and intrasystemic relationships'—the former representing 'interconnected systems in which societies are variously linked within wider "social fields"'.

To approach these issues from another angle, we are concerned here with the standing of U&CD within the apparatuses of historical materialism as a whole, which relates to the question of a fully operational U&CD. We base our claims on the core proposition that humans are embedded in a productive metabolism with their environment and that the development of this metabolism is the subject of historical materialism. That development is unevenly distributed, humans are consequently always dealing in some way with other 'stages' or forms of such development. Unevenness—and hence the potential or simple form of U&CD—extends in time and space beyond modes of production. However, it is only the capitalist form of the metabolism that contains essentially within it the impulse to transform all others. How is one to distinguish then, between U&CD in capitalist and pre-capitalist eras?

Notwithstanding our above criticisms of Political Marxism, we do accept Brenner's rigorous characterization of capitalist production relations. Unlike previous modes of production, every productive unit under capitalism is brought into '*coercive comparison*' with each other: The logic of capital is to bring these units into a relationship of universal equivalence (Barker 2006, 78; Ashman 2006). This follows from the inherently expansionary nature of capitalism's 'rules of reproduction'. As Brenner notes (2002), the capital relation is formed of two mutually constitutive dimensions: The 'vertical' antagonisms between capitalist and labourer and the 'horizontal' relations among individual competing capitals. This latter dimension functions as capitalism's inbuilt mechanism perpetuating and intensifying the tendential universalization and differentiation of development as described by Trotsky (see Ashman and Callinicos' essays in this volume). Hence, once capitalism emerges somewhere, the self-expanding and totalizing nature of capital locks 'all against all' in the battle to cheapen

commodity production through an historically unprecedented development of the productive forces.

This inherently self-valorizing imperative of capital thus necessitates the ruling classes of all other modes to submit or face extinction. It does so via the enormous competitive gulf opened between capitalist and non-capitalist production units (Carling 2002, 110). The attempt to imitate this competitive dynamic of the capitalist mode provides the key inter-societal causal mechanism for the 'combinations' within social formations. Such 'combinations' then feed back into the system that first produced them, resulting in 'countless mini czarisms' (Rosenberg 1996, 12). This feedback loop is another distinguishing feature of modern forms of U&CD, again hinging on the specific nature of capitalist production relations. This form exerts a set of determinations in the international sphere that are neither purely 'social-internal' nor 'geopolitical-external' but greater than the sum of the two.

Our point is that we can pinpoint the specific dynamic of the capitalist mode that leads to the attempt to 'turn the foe into tutor'. This cannot be said of other modes. The uniqueness of capitalist U&CD lies in its ability to enforce its logic of societal reproduction through the abstract mechanism of market exchange mediated through economic and/or military-geopolitical relations. Such is the logic of the 'coercive comparison' which Barker speaks. By contrast, pre-capitalist instances of U&CD refer to pressures upon ruling classes within certain rules of reproduction given by particular modes of production. The pressures generated may be territorially expansionist ones, as in the example of 'political accumulation' by feudal lords (Brenner 1982). However, these pressures arise from the logics of production within the conflicting entities, not from the relations between them. *They do not force the wholesale transformation of those logics via abstract mechanisms as witnessed under capitalist rules of reproduction.* During the era of mercantile expansionism, for example, the transformation of less developed societies came through their direct military conquest, colonization and societal annihilation. While capitalism also expands and transforms societies through such direct means, it additionally does so through the abstract pressures and imperatives of the world capitalist market expressed in both military-geopolitical and economic forms of competition.

What are we to make of the very significant instances of the diffusion of productive techniques and ideas during the pre-capitalist era? The principles of mathematics, navigational inventions, arts of war, key military technologies, and even *haute cuisine*—all originated in the more advanced East eventually passing to the backward West predominately during the Christian Middle Ages (McNeil and McNeil 2003, 117–18; Abu-Lughod 1989, 112; Goody 2006). Around 1400AD, for example, European shipbuilders' began combining the lateen rig borrowed from the Arabs with the square rig of their own traditional model, thereby providing the key technological 'innovation' leading to the gun-bearing sailing ship—an invention instrumental to enabling the Portuguese and subsequent Europeans to expand into Asia (Wolf 1997, 235). Such examples demonstrate the advantages of historic 'backwardness,' (Hobson 2004, 192) accrued to the late-developing Europeans as a result of the transhistorical fact of unevenness, and given sufficient interaction ('combined development') between the uneven poles. In no way, therefore, would we want our

argument to be construed as viewing these diffusionist processes (see below) as insignificant to European development: far from it. As John Hobson (2004, 301) notes, 'at every major turning point of European development, the assimilation of superior Eastern ideas, institutions and technologies played a major part'. Hence, the very categories of 'East' and 'West' are themselves problematized: The imperial encounter is constitutive of the imperial entity itself (Barkawi and Laffey 2002).

Nevertheless, it seems theoretically problematic to deny the massive qualitative differences between pre-capitalist and capitalist U&CD. The technical innovations imported into the West from the East affected the processes of production (and destruction) and were only put to full use by transformed relations of production. There was, in other words, a dialectical relationship between the forces and relations of production mediated through inter-societal interactions. Although conflict between Islamic states and Europe's feudal and later absolutist polities was a feature of Europe's entire history between the antique and capitalist epochs this did not result in imitative attempts at social re-organization by those polities—unless we are to take military pressure by the Ottoman Empire as a reason for the emergence of European absolutism. This relationship is the closest we can find to a thought experiment on the likely effects of a fully-formed pre-capitalist U&CD. The various medieval Islamic dynasties were more scientifically advanced than the Europeans with whom they were in close commercial and military contact but neither side of this relationship could be classified as capitalist.

To take this example further, the Ottoman state under Sulayman the Magnificent commanded tribute greater than any European absolutism. At its height, the Empire exerted great military pressures on the European (incipient) absolutist states in the 16th and 17th centuries. Yet those states were not compelled to adopt the Ottoman social structure in order to compete with it. The reverse was true. Once the capitalist ball was rolling, after the late 18th and early 19th centuries the Ottomans were forced to attempt to restructure along the lines of a 'rational' European state (Bromley 1994, 50). However, the Ottoman attempts to regularize administration and revenue necessarily clashed with the tax farming and tribute taking social structures on which the empire had hitherto relied (Tell 2000, 37; Bromley 1994, 51). The resulting crises and centrifugal pressures not only provided the opportunity for Western powers to grab parts of the Empire, but also created the conditions in which the 'Young Turks' of the Committee for Unity and Progress came to power in 1908. The Young Turks aspiration to 'turn the foe into tutor' fed back into international political crisis. 'In ... Turkey', Fred Halliday (1999, 197) argues, 'there was a direct link between the political upheaval, the Young Turk revolt and the subsequent world war. The new regime in Istanbul, espousing a more assertive Turkish nationalism, became embroiled in the Balkans war, the direct prelude to August 1914'. The case of the Ottoman Empire thus represents a particularly stark contrast between pre-capitalist and capitalist inter-societal relations.

Our argument here may seem to run the risk of the Eurocentrism associated with classical Marxism and so sharply criticized by John Hobson (2004; 2007) and other IR scholars (Barkawi and Laffey 2002). There is no denying that Trotsky often slipped into Eurocentric modes of analysis replete with the unfortunate clichés of his

time such as 'Asiatic despotism' and 'Eastern barbarism'. Yet, the logic of his position need not lead in such directions. As noted, the diffusion of technical advances to Europe and their adoption was indeed crucial in the transition to capitalism. And, this was only possible because of Europe's 'privileges of historic backwardness' afforded in that period. Here again, we emphasize our agreement with the importance of analyzing the effects of diffusionism and its resulting cultural-political hybridity (see Shilliam 2009). Such emphasis is indeed necessary to avoid the essentializing, self-aggrandizing discourses of some internally-explained 'European miracle'. However, we also need to recognize the huge difference between the effects of pre-capitalist and capitalist 'combined development'.

What happens when we extend a fully-formed U&CD to pre-capitalist epochs? In a series of stimulating articles Kamran Matin (2006; 2007), a former student of Rosenberg, has attempted to do this by applying the 'theory' of U&CD in capturing the 'constitutiveness' of the inter-societal dimension of pre-modern Iran's state-formation process. In doing so, Matin draws a distinction between capitalist and pre-capitalist versions of U&CD: the expansionist logic of capitalism forces 'backward' polities to transform their fundamental social relations, whereas the pre-capitalist version results in political combination as it 'occurs within an uneven international space which has not yet been transformed into an organic totality under the unifying (but not homogenizing) impact of capitalist sociality' (2007, 428). As argued above, this distinction deserves far greater weight than Matin accords it.

This relates to the questions of the nature of the combined formations and the apparent abandonment of the notion of development (the progressive development of the productive forces) that we identified as problematic in the usage of U&CD by Political Marxists. In Matin's work we come full circle back to the Political Marxists, for he identifies amalgamations of pre-capitalist political forms as constitutive of U&CD. He describes pre-modern Iran as an example of an 'amalgamated state formation', meaning:

a combination of different forms of authority (corresponding to different modes of socioeconomic organization) ruling over a particular geopolitical space within which they related to the (pre existing) social reproductive texture without (necessarily) transforming ... the actual process and organisation of labour and/or the basic forms and mechanism of surplus extraction.

(Matin 2007, 429)

This extension of the concept of combination, however, cuts it loose from its explanatory foundation in modes of production and the consequences this has on societal developmental dynamics. As noted, combination denotes the interpenetration of different production modes within a single social formation in ways violating their hitherto assumed order of succession—that is, providing the possibility of skipping a 'whole series of intermediate stages' of development (Trotsky 1977, 26). Yet, by loosening the scope of the concept of 'combination' to incorporate *any* amalgamation of different political systems and cultural institutions, Matin seems to run the risk of triviality: For what society does not exhibit some type of

combination in this much less specific sense?¹⁶ Indeed, almost all state/societies consist of some mix of socio-political orders and cultural institutions which have been incorporated from abroad or 'survived' from the past. For example, the British state consists of a monarchy, an established Church of England and various other 'aristocratic' sociopolitical and cultural institutions, all of which are historical 'hang-overs'. But, to describe Britain as a 'combined' society would tell us very little. This in turn relates to a further problem.

Matin (2007, 429) argues that U&CD can refer to the political interpenetration of 'reproductively similar' non-capitalist societies. Yet, the essence of Trotsky's argument is quite the opposite; it is the yoking together of *reproductively dissimilar societies* so that one is compelled to adopt itself to the reproductive rules of the other. We see here again the affinity of this argument to a Political Marxist perspective replacing a sequence of modes of production with the concept of 'social property relations', the emergence of which is a contingent outcome of class struggle. On this basis, Matin reverses Trotsky's scheme of unevenness, in arguing that 'the almost unbroken geopolitical pressure of Turkish tribal nomadism on the Iranian sedentary society' resulted in a particular amalgamated state formation (Matin 2007, 430). However, Trotsky is quite explicit (and for good reasons) in regarding Russia's Eastern nomadic neighbours as a less productively advanced formation, from which the Russian state did not experience the same pressure as from Western Europe. Trotsky could be wrong on this point of course. But, if so there seems little content left to his concept of U&CD. Matin's characterization of the pre-modern Iranian polity as an amalgam of tribal nomadic tax takers and settled taxpayers is surely correct. Yet would this insightful analysis not be better couched in the concept of 'articulation' rather than U&CD?

Diffusion, articulation, combination

Our question here leads us to sum up the preceding discussion by drawing a distinction between three concepts relating to inter-societal interaction: diffusion, articulation and combination. The first two of these hold for pre-capitalist epochs. The concept of diffusion simply refers to the spread of cultural traits and institutions—whether it be technologies, religious customs, political institutions, social habits etc.—from one social formation to another through migration, war, trade or any other means of inter-societal contact. The technological innovations we discussed above exemplify these diffusionist processes. However, the incorporation of these elements is not—in itself—enough to lead to the transformation of the mode of production in the recipient social formation. Often as a result of such diffusionist processes, two or more production modes can coexist and interconnect in a single social formation. Thus, following Nazih Ayubi's (1995, 28), 'modes of production ... are often not singular and uni-dimensional but rather are articulated'.¹⁷ Ayubi uses the articulation concept in relation to the contemporary Middle East. However, there seems no reason why it cannot be characteristic of certain pre-capitalist social formations, as Matin's analysis well demonstrates.

In our reading of articulation, modes coexist and interlink with each other but do not necessarily impel the transformation of one by the other. Combination is a subset of articulation, but with the crucial difference that one of the modes—and only capitalism

displays this characteristic—impels the transformation of the other. However, this transformation is never into an ideal type of capitalism but often of hybrid forms of 'countless mini-czarisms'. Neil Davidson is, therefore, correct to point out that an 'articulation' of two or more modes of production within a single social formation is not identical to a 'combined' society. Rather, '[t]he detonation of the process of U&CD requires sudden, intensive industrialization and urbanization, regardless of whether the pre-existing agrarian economy was based on feudal or capitalist relations' (Davidson 2009, 15). The result of uneven development, therefore, is that the logics of different modes of production interact with one another in consequential ways in 'backward' countries. Hence, the synthetic nature of the notion of combination—itsself flowing from the dialectical nature of the whole conceptual triplet (development + uneven + combined)—which seeks to capture the 'the real connections and consecutiveness of a living process' (Trotsky 1998, 77).

Conclusion: what's at stake in 'the international' debate?

A fellow traveller amongst Marxist circles—though not a Marxist himself—once asked us what was all the fuss about U&CD and 'the international'. In exasperation with the whole debate, he threw up his hands declaring: 'This uneven and combined shit is the dog's whistle that only Marxists can hear.' Hopefully, this chapter has clarified what's at theoretical stake in this debate over 'the international'.

If we have persisted, perhaps rather stubbornly, in stressing the qualitative differences between pre-capitalist and capitalist forms of U&CD, as well as the theoretical standing of the concept as a methodological fix *within* rather than paradigm shift *from* historical materialism, it is because much politically rests on such issues. For, if 'combination' in Trotsky's specific sense was a feature of all historical epochs and social formations, then very little remains of his strategic analysis of the Russian Revolution. Of course, this has much wider implications than the single case of Russia; rather, it is significant for the possibility and form of all radical democratic projects in any contemporary late-developing country, most especially in those regions at the receiving end of imperialism's whip.¹⁸ Indeed, a significant lacuna within the recent IR literature on U&CD concerns the precise theoretical relationship between U&CD and a theory of capitalist imperialism: whether they are internally or only indirectly related. In our (tentative) view, a theoretical articulation of U&CD in the capitalist epoch would need to incorporate and sublimate the classical Marxist conception of imperialism, providing a much richer and multi-dimensional understanding of imperialism. But, of course, this is much easier said than done and the difficult theoretical and empirical work still lies ahead.

Notes

- 1 This chapter builds on our article in the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2009) section. We'd like to thank Colin Barker, John Hobson, Kamran Matin, Gonzo Pozo-Martin and Justin Rosenberg for their insightful comments.
- 2 'Political Marxism' is used here as shorthand for those basing their arguments on Brenner's notion of social property relations.

- 3 We employ the 'basis' rather than 'base' metaphor as Marx used the former when writing in English. Pointing this out, James Furner (2008, 4) further notes: 'Basis has the advantage over "base" in rarely being used to refer to the bottom of physical objects' the latter denoting 'that by which something else is sustained or supported'.
- 4 This neo-Smithian conception of modern economic development, according to Brenner (1989) and Wood (1995, 60fn13), is also symptomatic of the work of the 'young' Marx still developing under the baggage of classical bourgeois political economy and Hegelian idealism.
- 5 On the distinction between the means of subsistence and production, the former only being necessary for the emergence of capitalism see Brenner (2001, 178fn1).
- 6 In contrast, Brenner views capitalist property relations as developing earlier in such regions as Catalonia and the United Provinces in the late 15th and early 17th centuries, respectively (Brenner 1985, 49fn81; 2001).
- 7 This process is a complement to Brenner's (1982 and 1985) main thesis, that capitalism emerged in England because of the outcome of a class struggle in which the lords were too weak to re-impose serfdom, but the peasants not strong enough to maintain their independence from the market.
- 8 Lacher and Teschke's position here jars with Robert Brenner's (1982, 81) view of French absolutism as a 'transformed version of the old [feudal] system'—a perspective much closer to Anderson (1974b).
- 9 Such problems have also been a key concern of many scholars associated with the ideas of Tony Cliff; see particularly Barker (1997), Davidson (2005), Callinicos (2009) and Ashman (this volume). Their critique is tied to Cliff's theory of 'bureaucratic state capitalism' which holds that the Soviet bloc states represented a form of capitalism. *Irrespective* of whether one agrees with such theory, the Political Marxist conception of capitalism is unnecessarily restrictive.
- 10 Lacher and Teschke acknowledge the interventionist role of the state in maintaining and reproducing capitalist property relations (and thus, the economic/political separation). However, the possibility of state power functioning as a means of *surplus* or *tribute* extraction falls outside the scope of their conception. Not only does this fail to explain 'deviant' or 'unpure' forms of capitalism (such as antebellum slavery or heavily statist late-developing capitalisms), it also fails to recognize that the capitalist state itself appropriates a fraction of the surplus produced within society through taxation. The ability of the state apparatus to reproduce itself thus directly depends upon exploitation. In a fascinating piece, Colin Barker (1998) makes a case for developing the categories of tax and state tribute in theorizing the capitalist state.
- 11 An argument resembling Alan Carling's (1993) 'competitive primacy thesis'.
- 12 This argument is contradicted by earlier statements made by Lacher (2005, 43), as well by their key theoretical influences, Brenner and Wood, whom view unevenness as a constitutive feature of contemporary capitalism (see Brenner 2002; Wood 2002, 29, 32–33, 35–36; 2003, 136). For similar criticisms see Callinicos (2009, 95).
- 13 We are indebted to Kamran Matin for pushing us on this point.
- 14 We doubt Rosenberg would disagree with much said here regarding the interweaving of the general and particular in social theoretic explanation as his discussion of Marx's method of abstraction illustrates (Rosenberg 2000, 69–73).
- 15 As Charles Tilly (1984, 11) terms the singular society abstraction.
- 16 Matin is scarcely the first Marxist employing U&CD to run into this problem (see Trotsky 1972, 117; Novack 1972, 118–20).
- 17 For an excellent critical discussion of the notion of articulation which implicitly points to the international problematique see Foster-Carter (1978, especially 64–67, 71–73). We thank Justin Rosenberg for alerting us to this piece.
- 18 For an analysis stressing the contemporary relevance of 'Permanent Revolution' in the Middle East see Naguib (2007).