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The uses and misuses of uneven and combined development: an anatomy of a concept

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Abstract *A central concern of much contemporary Marxist scholarship in international relations (IR) is to internally relate global capitalism and the state system without reducing one of these systems to an epiphenomenon of the other. A recent attempt at this is Justin Rosenberg's reformulation of Leon Trotsky's idea of uneven and combined development (U&CD). This article examines the internal relations of 'unevenness' and 'combination' as presented by Trotsky and reworked by Rosenberg. From this anatomization of the concept, we focus on the problematic status of U&CD as a transhistorical general abstraction arising from the exchange between Callinicos and Rosenberg (Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 22:1 2008, 77–112) and suggest our own possible solution. We argue that while the uneven and combined nature of historical development represents a truly transhistorical phenomenon, its distinct causal determinations, articulated and expressed through inter-societal competition, are only fully activated under the specific socio-historical conditions of generalized commodity production. These theoretical points are illuminated through three specific historical examples (the Meiji Restoration, the 'Eastern Question' and the origins of the two World Wars). Finally, we illustrate some of the dangers of analytical overextension found in Rosenberg's own ambiguous use of U&CD.*

Introduction

Continually dissatisfied with the ahistorical and asocial premises of mainstream theories of international relations (IR), scholars in the field have turned to the analytical tools of historical sociology. Marxism, traditionally the most critical and historically oriented tradition of social theory, has consequently held a renewed appeal for the discipline. Yet Marxist approaches to IR face a long-standing dilemma—the issue of how, what is apparently, a 'theory of domestic society' (Wight 1995, 23) can capture the distinct causal determinations emerging from the coexistence and interaction of multiple societies. The question Marxists thus face is: How is it possible to internally relate the modern state system and

¹We would like to thank Tarak Barkawi, Alex Callinicos, Neil Davidson, George Lawson, Gonzo Pozo-Martin, Justin Rosenberg, Magnus Ryner, Guido Starosta and four anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article. Alexander Anievas would also like to thank the Cambridge Political Economy Society Trust for financial support.

geopolitical competition to capitalism without reducing the former to an effect of the latter?²

This ‘international problematique’ has often been posed in misleading terms as a chronological issue in both IR and historical sociology. From this perspective, the question is: If the existence of the states system predates the emergence of capitalism, how can this multiplicity of states and geopolitical rivalry be fully explained by the dynamics of capitalism? (See Skocpol 1979, 3–43; Mann 1988, 120; Teschke 2003, 264–265; Lacher 2005.) Reasoning from these premises, many scholars have concluded that the transhistorical existence of geopolitical competition and war necessarily escape attempts to reduce their causal efficacy to a historically specific logic of capital. A standard critique of Marxist theory from both within and without is that it is therefore unable to account for the causal significance of these processes and ‘inter-societal relations’ in general (see also McNeil 1982; Giddens 1985; Halliday 1986; Linklater 1990; Hobson 1998; Teschke and Lacher 2007).

Yet to recognize that socio-political multiplicity and geopolitical competition historically predate the emergence of capitalism does not logically necessitate imputing any transhistorical logic to geopolitics, as proponents of this form of critique often have (Skocpol 1979, 22; Mann 1988, 140–142). One could, for example, reasonably infer that relations among kin are a truly universal historical phenomenon without deducing any transhistorical logic to these relations: the social category of the ‘family’ holds radically different meanings in different times and places. Nevertheless, the question of whether a mode of production-centred analysis of ‘the international’ leaves behind an unexplained surplus of determinations arising from the fact that all societies coexist with and interact with others—thereby super-adding ‘a lateral field of causality over and above the “domestic” determinations arising from each and every one of the participant societies’—is a legitimate one in need of further exploration (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, 88). Or to put the issue in broader terms: How can *any* social theory endogenously explain the causal efficacy of the inter-societal in the constitution of social orders? How can the ‘internal’ (sociological) and ‘external’ (geopolitical) factors in social development be united into a single, coherent explanatory apparatus?

Formulated in these more general terms, the implications of this international problematique extend far beyond the ranks of Marxist IR scholars. For, while Marx (1990, 727, note 2) consciously and famously abstracted the inter-societal from his conception of society and its development, so too, at least implicitly, did all other major classical social theorists. Hence, a common problem of all social theories (past and present) is a tendency to fail to account theoretically for socio-political multiplicity and its effects (Rosenberg 2005; 2006; 2007). And, despite historical sociology’s devout attention to pointing out this inadequacy of ‘societal-based theories’ (Hobson 1998, 288), they too have tended to introduce

² A historical materialist theorization of international relations—or indeed any critical international historical sociology—must reappropriate the concept of geopolitics from realist fetishization. Thus, as used here, ‘geopolitics’ neither denotes a state of anarchy nor necessarily implies competition between *discrete* political units, in which the autonomous logic of this competition dictates their strategies. Furthermore, inter-societal relations should not be reduced to geopolitics, since these include, inter alia, cultural, normative, ideological, and identity-based processes.

'the international' as an untheorized externality to their analyses. It is for this reason that such scholars have all too often been served with the charge of 'attaching an essentialized, realist conception of the international onto historical sociology' (Rosenberg 2006, 310; see Hall 1999; Halliday 2002; Hobson 2007).

Within IR, engagements with this issue have taken a variety of forms: from deductive statements on the character of the international to a theory of the evolution of different intersubjectively held cultures of international relations. However, these specifically *international theories* have problematically excluded any historically grounded conception of society either by explicitly abstracting the international from domestic social processes (Waltz 1979) or by conceiving the former in terms of a supra-historical, abstract sociality (Wendt 1999). These lacunae point to the need for a theory of how societies interact, how they change and the relationship between those processes.

In this article we examine a bold attempt to address this question in the Marxist tradition: Justin Rosenberg's reformulation of Trotsky's concept of U&CD. Within IR, Rosenberg's work has been the first point of contact with Trotsky's idea. We therefore begin our argument through an anatomization of Trotsky's concept of U&CD. Following this, we examine its reformulation by Rosenberg as a 'general abstraction' through which social theory can capture, as theoretically anterior, the 'lateral field of causality' arising from inter-societal relations. Next, we focus on the problematic status of U&CD as a transhistorical general abstraction arising from the exchange between Callinicos and Rosenberg (2008). We then suggest a possible solution through an interrogation of Marx's conceptualization and use of a 'general abstraction', arguing that while U&CD represents a truly transhistorical phenomenon, its distinct causal determinations, articulated and expressed through inter-societal competition, are only fully activated under the specific socio-historical conditions of generalized commodity production. Following this, we take up three specific historical examples (the Meiji Restoration, the 'Eastern Question' and the origins of the two World Wars) to illustrate our theoretical argument. Finally, we examine the ambiguities in Rosenberg's use of U&CD and demonstrate the problems of analytical overextension.

The concept of uneven and combined development

Trotsky's original idea

Despite the decisive importance of U&CD in Trotsky's writings, the idea has, until recently, received little attention. As Neil Davidson (2006a, 10) notes, while many scholars have explored the themes of 'the advantages of backwardness' and 'the disadvantages of priority', these ideas remain within the domain of uneven development. They are by no means unique to Trotsky. The real theoretical innovation of Trotsky comes with his formulation of 'combined development' and its juxtaposition with unevenness.

What then did U&CD mean for Trotsky? Let us begin with unevenness. For Trotsky (1957, 4), unevenness was 'the most general law of the historic process'.³

³ Drawing on historical and anthropological studies, Justin Rosenberg (2006, 313–319) convincingly demonstrates that this 'law'—or, more accurately, tendency—is indeed a characteristic of all social development.

It is expressed in myriad ways throughout pre-modern history, as well as across differing dimensions and planes of internal differentiation within the ontological, though not yet causally integrated, whole of world-societal development. In other words, the ‘*unevenness* of historical development’, according to Trotsky (1936, 15), ‘*is in itself uneven*’.

The natural bases of unevenness lie in the ecologically given conditions that originally confronted the human species. These ecological variations across geographical space, in turn, work to promote further processes of internal differentiation. In the case of Russia—or, more precisely, the networks of social relations constituting what is now called Russia—these ‘natural-historical conditions’ (above all, Russia’s ‘less than favourable geographical situation’ standing between Europe and Asia and ‘sparse population’) were the initial causes for the ‘comparative primitiveness and slowness’ of its social development which retarded both processes of class formation and their relations with the state (Trotsky 1962, 170, 172–173; 1957, 2–3).

As human societies become more complex in their development these geographical determinations become progressively less fundamental in shaping the course of their co-evolution. There are, in other words, emergent layers and axes of the unevenness of human development. Capitalism only emerges from within and through these antecedent processes of unevenness. From this ‘*starting point*’, it ‘gains mastery only gradually over the inherited unevenness, breaking and altering it, employing therein its own means and methods’ (Trotsky 1936, 19). In this sense, Trotsky elucidates the increasingly decisive importance of the socio-economic sources of unevenness, which are only fully articulated with the emergence of capitalism and, subsequently, the ‘imperialist stage’ of capitalist development. For, unlike other social systems, only capitalism exhibits an inherent tendency towards both universalization and equalization, on the one hand, and differentiation and fragmentation, on the other. As Trotsky puts it, in a passage worth quoting at length,

In contrast to the economic systems which preceded it, capitalism inherently and constantly aims at economic expansion, at the penetration of new territories, the surmounting of economic differences, the conversion of self-sufficient provincial and national economies into a system of financial interrelationships. Thereby it brings about their *rapprochement* and equalises the economic and cultural levels of the most progressive and the most backward countries. (1936, 19)

However, by ‘drawing the countries economically closer to one another and levelling out their stages of development, capitalism’ operating through its own self-contradictory ‘anarchistic methods’ thereby works to set ‘one country against another, and one branch of industry against another developing some parts of world economy, while hampering and throwing back the development of others’. Trotsky (1936, 20) goes on to note how it is ‘[o]nly the correlation of these two fundamental tendencies’, organically emerging from the ‘nature of capitalism’, that ‘explains to us the living texture of the historical process’. Therefore, for Trotsky, the dynamic of capital reveals a dialectical nature expressed through the contradictory unity of universalizing and differentiating tendencies. Consequently, capital exerts both equalizing and fragmenting pressures on social development.

Trotsky’s argument retains the notion of a succession of more advanced modes of production on a global scale. Inter-societal competition, the ‘whip of external

necessity' expressed in both geopolitical and economic dimensions, is the mechanism by which these 'material and intellectual conquests of the more advanced' are 'assimilated' by the backward areas (Trotsky 1957, 4).⁴ Thus '[i]t is natural', Trotsky writes,

that under the influence and the pressure of its more differentiated Western milieu, a pressure that was transmitted through the military–state organisation, the State in its turn strove to force the development of social differentiation on a primitive economic foundation. (1962, 173)

Here, we see how development of the Russian state and society occurred under 'hostile' competitive pressures of the more advanced 'neighbouring State organisations' of Western Europe. This indicates that Trotsky viewed competitive pressures of the world economy as well as geopolitical competition as constitutive factors in Russia's internal development. Such an interpretation is further borne out when he (1962, 174) writes that, as a result of the particularly poor 'natural-economy conditions' of the Russian economy, 'relations with other countries bore a predominantly State character' as the 'influence of these countries found expression in fierce struggle for the existence of the State before expressing itself in direct economic competition'. It was through these directly geopolitical rivalries that the economic techniques and organizational innovations of the West influenced the Russian economy via the agency of the state. The exigencies of Russia's self-preservation 'in the midst of better-armed hostile countries' compelled Russia to develop military technologies that would come to have manifold socio-economic implications and consequences in the longer term (Trotsky 1962, 174). It was under such geopolitical pressures that the Russian state undertook reforms to abolish serfdom in 1861. Additionally, Russia's subsequent policy of industrialization was, as Russia's Finance Minister Sergei Witte never tired of pointing out, a direct response to the external threats to Russia's existence coming from the West (Knei-Paz 1978, 73).

The transformative impact of geopolitical competition on the internal constitution of societies was a theme running throughout Trotsky's work—one supported by a variety of similar historical experiences from the same era. The Italian Risorgimento, Japanese Meiji Restoration in 1868, Bismarck's unification of Germany in 1871 and the failed attempts of the Tanzimat Reforms in the Ottoman Empire were all cut from the same cloth of geopolitical necessities unique to the capitalist epoch. Of course, this is not to say that such processes were the sole result of geopolitical pressures. These 'external' determinations were in no way detached from their domestic socio-economic ones. Trotsky was not arguing for a *Primat der Außenpolitik* ('primacy of foreign policy') explanation in the constitution of Russian social development. For had 'the general course of the internal economy' not been 'moving in this same direction ... all the efforts of the [Russian] State', or any of the other states mentioned above, 'would have been fruitless' (Trotsky 1962, 174).

The result of these processes of 'external' pressure is analytically captured in Trotsky's notion of combined development. Combination means the

⁴The use of the term 'backwardness' is in no way intended in a pejorative sense (see Knei-Paz 1978, 63).

'drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms' (Trotsky 1957, 4). Although Davidson (2006b, 212) argues that combination may refer to social and cultural forms, Trotsky's use of the concept derives its causal power from the foundational Marxist concept of the 'mode of production'. Modes of production—capitalist, feudal, slave, etc—form the overarching context from which people develop powers, ideologies and interests that set them in conflict with each other, and through which the possibility of a transition to a new and different mode arises. Combination involves the causal intermingling of these modes in a way that violates their hitherto assumed order of succession: societies are afforded the possibility of skipping a 'whole series of intermediate stages' of development. 'Historical backwardness', Trotsky writes,

engenders an entirely new 'combined' social formation in which the latest conquests of capitalist technique and structure root themselves into relations of feudal and pre-feudal barbarism, transforming and subjecting them and creating peculiar relations of classes. (1976, 583)

Nevertheless, Davidson is correct to point out that an 'articulation' of two or more modes of production within a single social formation is, by itself, insufficient to be considered a 'combined' society. Rather, '[t]he detonation of the process of U&CD requires', as Davidson (2009, 15) argues, 'sudden, intensive industrialisation and urbanisation, regardless of whether the pre-existing agrarian economy was based on feudal or capitalist relations'. Yet such processes of combined development, as we see in contemporary China, do witness the 'combination' of different *phases* of capitalist development—'competitive', 'monopoly', 'neo-liberal', etc—compressed within particularly concentrated periods of time.

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; that is to say, in 'combination' (Davidson 2006a, 22; 2009). In the case of Russia the mode of production capitalism encountered was feudalism. The political apparatus of that mode was simultaneously strengthened and undermined by the penetration of capitalism. It was strengthened in that foreign and domestic capital supported and armed the autocracy. It was undermined by the fact that the price of that support was reliance upon the combative working class produced by the adoption of advanced capitalist technique (see Trotsky 1957). As Knei-Paz (1978, 91) notes, through the inter-societal nature of development the 'backward' countries 'may be said to change not from within but from without, not by evolving but by "grafting on", appending, new ways of life'. The outcome, according to Trotsky (1972, 276), was to generate the conditions for the telescoping of the democratic and socialist revolutions into one 'permanent' process. The concept of U&CD thus originally provided the analytical support to Trotsky's strategic injunction that proletarian revolution was both possible and necessary in Tsarist Russia (see Davidson 2009).

Rosenberg's extension of uneven and combined development

Recently, Justin Rosenberg has extended the analytical reach of Trotsky's concept of U&CD to propose a solution to the international problematique common to social and IR theory. Rosenberg's argument begins from the claim that both

theories suffer from a mutual misconception. International theory, at least its realist variant, has reified the geopolitical consequences of socio-political multiplicity in abstraction from the development of those societies (Rosenberg 2006, 312). Classical social theory has, in turn, always conceived of social development in the singular—the multi-linear and interactive nature of social development ‘repressed’ by this manoeuvre returns in the form of untheorized exogenous factors (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, 17). Realism thus appears here as a kind of theoretical id, crouching in the darkness to waylay the sociological superego.

These points can be briefly demonstrated through a critique of Alex Callinicos’s (2007) recent intervention in this debate. Here, Callinicos attempts to open up a meta-theoretical space that incorporates the relative autonomy and causal effectivity of the states system from a historical materialist perspective by conceptualizing geopolitical and economic competition as two distinct but interconnected logics constituting capitalist imperialism (see also Harvey 2003). Through the application of Marx’s method of ‘non-deductive concretization’, Callinicos (2007, 542) contends that the ‘distinct set of determinations’ of the state system can be theoretically integrated into ‘the larger enterprise of developing a satisfactory theory of the capitalist mode of production’. Therefore, the ‘logic of geopolitical competition’ is irreducible to any logic of capital accumulation and class conflict, thus implying a necessary ‘realist moment’ in Marxist accounts of international relations.

Yet, as Gonzalo Pozo-Martin well demonstrates (2007, 557–559), Callinicos’s ‘realist moment’ is a problematic one; for it is not entirely clear what it entails. If it means Marxist accounts of geopolitics must necessarily incorporate some form of realist mode of explanation, then the well-worn problems of realist theory that historical materialists and others have so thoroughly criticized reappear (see Rosenberg 1994). As Pozo-Martin acknowledges, Callinicos is probably not making such a strong claim, but instead simply pointing out that any Marxist approach to geopolitics must take into account the ‘strategies, calculations, and interactions of rival political elites in the state system’ (Callinicos 2007, 542). Here, however, the vagueness of the realist moment begins to show. For one must surely distinguish between a realist geopolitics and geopolitics as such (Pozo-Martin 2007, 557).

There are, however, more general tensions in Callinicos’s ‘two logic’ theory of imperialism. For he has yet to specify exactly how the determinations arising from the feudal logic of political accumulation, by which he accounts for the *origins* of the states system, have been transferred to a *distinct property* of that system. If inter-state competition has been ‘subsumed under that between capitals’ (Callinicos 2007, 541) how does this sustain his conception of capitalist imperialism as the intertwining of two distinct, but mutually irreducible, forms of economic and geopolitical competition? Furthermore, how can geopolitical competition be a ‘species’ of inter-capitalist rivalry whilst, at the time, the state system is viewed as constituting its own distinct set of determinations expressed through geopolitical competition? Callinicos has yet to fully address these questions, leaving him vulnerable to the charge of ‘proto-realism’ (on the term ‘proto-realist’ see Rosenberg 2006, 337, note 9).

For Rosenberg, the solution to this dual problem facing social and IR theory, and expressed in the tensions of Callinicos’s account, is to reconceptualize social development in general as uneven and combined. Thus, Rosenberg goes beyond

Trotsky to account for the transhistorical existence of the *inter*-societal dimension to social development. Like Trotsky, he begins from the ‘universal law of unevenness’. Human development—in the sense of the increase of productive capacities—is inherently uneven and differentiated. From this apparently banal premise Rosenberg derives two substantive claims. First,

the supposedly ‘irreducible’ fact of political fragmentation which underlies the distinctive problematic of the international can itself be seen to be one embodiment of an analytically more general socio-historical property of human existence—its intrinsic unevenness. (2006, 316)

Thus lies the ‘social-relational substratum’ of uneven development beneath the inter-societal determinations upon which realism exclusively focuses. From this point flows another: combination is a universal phenomenon, consisting of the interpenetration and interactivity of *all* social development (Rosenberg 2006, 320). This formulation seeks to overcome the shared error of international and classical social theory by unifying their two logics in one, uneven and combined, social process. Such a reconceptualization of social development as uneven and combined thus dispenses with any conception of ‘society’ in the ontological singular. Rather than viewing societies as preformed *discrete* entities that then coexist and interact, Rosenberg invites us to conceive of this process of interaction as itself constitutive of these social orders. The primary unit of analysis can no longer be ‘society’ and ‘societies’, but rather social development conceptualized as a differentiated but nonetheless ontological whole.

An important step in Rosenberg’s argument is his extension of the concept of combined development. If we recall, Trotsky used the notion of combination to examine the amalgams of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production within a single social formation. Rosenberg innovates by using the concept of ‘combined development’ in three distinct, but inherently interconnected ways. First, combined development refers to the coexistence and interactive development of all societies throughout history. Second, through these processes of inter-societal development, there results an interdependence of ‘the structures of social, material and cultural life’ (Rosenberg 2006, 324). In other words, the ‘external’ relations of states function as a means to transform the socio-political, cultural and material institutions within society through their institutionalization beyond any given state. This combination integrates the state and society into ‘regional political orders, cultural systems and material divisions of labour’ (Rosenberg 2006, 324), resulting in an amalgam of socio-political orders and cultural institutions. Finally, through this inter-societal (combined) development, there occurs the interlacing and fusion of different modes of production in Trotsky’s original sense.

Rosenberg’s threefold extension of combined development is both novel and useful. While the first of these forms of ‘combined development’ was not used by Trotsky in this way, it was nevertheless implicit. This is because it is only through the interactive development of inter-societal relations that ‘combined social formations’ come into existence. Under the pressures and forces of inter-societal competition, social formations become ‘combined’ in the sense of being the amalgam of two or more modes of production. We agree with Colin Barker’s (2006) claim that this usage is a logical extension of Trotsky’s original concept. Where we part company with Rosenberg is on the question of the transhistorical standing of U&CD as a causally integrated ontological whole

in pre-capitalist eras and its development as a theory unto itself. We now turn to these questions.

The theoretical status of uneven and combined development

On 'general abstractions'

In this section we examine the exchange between Alex Callinicos and Justin Rosenberg (2008) concerning the use of U&CD as a general abstraction. Both agree that U&CD is a transhistorical phenomenon that can be used as a 'general abstraction' but, nevertheless, still needs to be rooted in a mode of production-based form of analysis. This may seem contradictory. If U&CD is a transhistorical phenomenon, to be used as a general abstraction of our social theories, then how can it simultaneously be used alongside a historically limited mode of production-centred approach? The solution to this riddle, we argue, must be sought in Marx's conceptualization of a 'general abstraction'.

Were U&CD to work as an ahistorical abstraction, similar to Waltz's (1979) concepts of anarchy and balance of power, Rosenberg's project of a distinctively *historical materialist* theory of the international would be jeopardized. This relates to the fundamental differences between the neo-realist and Marxian conception and use of transhistorical abstractions. For the former, the abstraction takes the form of the primary *explanans* of the argument, from which all other relevant concepts are to be deduced. From this perspective, the abstraction is in essence the theory itself. For the latter, the abstraction functions as a posited presupposition or assumption that accounts for the existence of a concrete general condition whose historically specific form has to be accounted for by still further *explanans*.

In certain passages, Rosenberg's use of U&CD approaches the latter method, hence avoiding the danger of ahistoricism. On these occasions, he presents U&CD as a 'general abstraction' of historical materialism, accounting for the basic historical fact of the inter-societal, thereby incorporating the surplus of determinations escaping any single or combined mode of production-based analysis, but nevertheless re-rooted in a mode-of-production explanatory framework. Therefore, although Rosenberg conceives of U&CD as transhistorical, the causal capacity of the concept is quite historically specific. The particular historical context in question is the emergence of capitalism and its tendency to exacerbate the inherited unevenness of social development whilst simultaneously unifying its parts into a single ontological whole. Echoing Trotsky's (1936, 19–20) comments on the contradictory unity of capital's universalizing and differentiating tendencies, Rosenberg argues how, with the rise of capitalism,

unevenness itself was increasingly transformed from a latent descriptive fact about human diversity into an active causal structure of determinations and pressures. And correspondingly, the concept of U&CD acquired a new referent: from being a *general* abstraction of the multilinear and interactive character of development *per se*, it could now be formulated additionally as a *concrete* abstraction of the dynamic of capitalist world development as a specific historical process. It could become, in short, a theory of modern world history. (2007, 456–457)

A similar logic is at work in the analogy Rosenberg draws between geopolitics and Marx's analysis of the simple value form in *Capital I* (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, 91). The general point of this analogy can be stated as follows.

Just as Marx was not seeking to build a transhistorical theory of value, but rather dissected the simple value form in pre-capitalist societies as a *methodological step* in his construction of value theory, U&CD can be used in a similar way to construct a distinctively historical materialist theory of international relations. As a means to describe the methodological use (and limits) of U&CD as the posited presupposition from which to theoretically incorporate the inter-societal, the logic of the analogy works. Unfortunately, as a reading of Marx's method, it is somewhat problematic, particularly in its apparent implicit assumption of the now discredited 'logical-historical' interpretation of Marx's method in *Capital*.⁵ Thus, a better analogy might be made between U&CD and such Marxist concepts as 'concrete labour' and 'use-value', which were unequivocally used by Marx as transhistorical general abstractions.

Explaining his method of abstraction, Marx (1973 [1953], 103) writes, 'although the simpler category may have existed historically before the more concrete, it can achieve its full (intensive and extensive) development precisely in a combined form of society'. Further, he argues in relation to labour how this most simple, general abstraction, which 'expresses an immeasurably ancient relation in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society' (Marx 1973 [1953], 105). One might say the same regarding the category of U&CD. But again, it is essential to understand that this does not elevate such a category to the level of a theory. Marx was not seeking to build a transhistorical theory of labour or use-value, but rather introduced these concepts as necessary presuppositions in his construction of a historically specific labour theory of value, applicable only to the capitalist epoch. 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'. Hence, U&CD is not a theory in itself. Although Rosenberg (2008, 86) explicitly recognizes this point, we demonstrate below that he does not consistently follow the logic resulting from it.

Value theory and uneven and combined development

What are the logical implications of our analysis of U&CD as a general abstraction? They are that to *explain* the relationship between U&CD, modes of production and geopolitical competition, we must use *value theory*, rather than simply drawing analogies with Marx's method. 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; 2009). This follows from the inherently expansionary nature of capitalism's 'rules of reproduction', grounded in the capital relation constituted by two antagonistic relationships: the 'vertical' antagonisms between capitalist and labourer and the

⁵ See Callinicos's criticisms of the value analogy (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, 102–106). For a critique of the logical-historical method see Arthur (2002) and Bidet (2007); and, for an insightful analysis of the use of and interrelation between historical and transhistorical categories in Marx's method, see Fracchia (2004) and Sayer (1979, 78–79, 87–88, 91–103, 109–113, 144, 146–147). We would like to especially thank Alex Callinicos for pressing this point on us and Guido Starosta for his extensive comments.

'horizontal' relations among individual competing capitals (Brenner 1986; 2002). It is this latter dimension (inter-capitalist rivalry) which functions as an inbuilt mechanism in capitalism which perpetuates and intensifies the tendency towards the universalization and differentiation of social development described by Trotsky.

Each capitalist is driven to seek advantage at the expense of others. The main strategy to achieve this is by increasing the exploitation of the workers—extending the working day or introducing labour-saving technology without a commensurate reduction in working time. A further strategy is to expand into those areas where capitalist relations do not prevail. The competition among capitals thus leads them to search out new markets and ever greater sources of profit across the globe, thereby unifying the world through the universalization of specific combinatory mechanisms. As the capitalist system matures, more and more societies become locked into processes and structures of interconnection and constitution by the emergence of a world economy. In this way, capital creates 'world-history for the first time' (Marx and Engels 1976, 73). And, therefore, the rules of the game, to use the rational choice jargon beloved of neo-realists, are themselves changed on a global level.

These claims about the political economy of capitalism, though familiar, are nonetheless fundamental to the discussion of U&CD, conceived by Rosenberg as a 'lateral field of causality' over and above the capital relation or, for that matter, any other 'second-image' derived determinations (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, 88). Our point is that capitalist relations are responsible for fully activating the determinations in this lateral field of causality. What then does it mean to speak of 'U&CD' in pre-capitalist epochs?

In what we might call its 'simple form', U&CD does represent a sociological property common to all epochs, having effects beyond the social relations 'internal' to societies. An example of this are the 'knock-on effects' described by Rosenberg (2006, 322) in which China's struggle with barbarians, mediated across the nomadic relations of the steppe, fed into the collapse of Rome and, by implication, led to the emergence of feudalism. These effects did indeed derive from the coexistence of unevenly developing societies; that very plurality which Rosenberg so convincingly accounts for. Yet, although Rosenberg (2006, 321) is correct in arguing that the survival of the pre-capitalist Muscovite state was 'contingent on the management of ... external factors' this is not the same claim that is made for U&CD under capitalist relations of production.

The 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 thus generated may be territorially expansionist ones, as in the example of 'political accumulation' by feudal lords (Brenner 1985). 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. Only under capitalist relations of production does such wholesale transformation occur—we consider some concrete examples of the impact of such relations on Japan and the Ottoman Empire below.

The inherently expansionary and self-valorizing imperative of capital is such that, once it has come into being, the ruling classes of all other modes must submit to it or face extinction. This is only true of the logic of capitalist accumulation, rooted in the value relation. The precondition of such extensive transformations, however, is that one set of social relations is to an unprecedented degree so much

more productive than another as to imperil its reproduction. Trotsky (1972, 38) offers this logic in arguing that the Russian state was able to prevail over the nomadic Golden Horde but was forced to adapt itself to Western competition. Again, it is only the emergence of capitalism that opens up such an enormous competitive gulf between societies (Carling 2002, 110).

The interactions between societies, once the capitalist value relation has come into existence, becomes constitutive in a way qualitatively different to the pre-capitalist inter-societal relations highlighted by Rosenberg (2006, 321–322). This dilemma of pre-capitalist ruling classes facing capitalist competitors is summed up by the young Tancredi in De Lampedusa's *The Leopard*: 'If we want things to stay as they are, things are going to have to change.' One of the themes of this novel deals with a revolution from above due to pressures from without. It is this process that Trotsky analyses in describing Russia's response to the pressures of the more productive Western states. Russia's pre-capitalist ruling class was forced to adopt the social forms of its more advanced competitors by 'the very exigencies of self-preservation' (Knei-Paz 1978, 66). The universalization of the imperative of capital accumulation does not, however, homogenize the units subject to that imperative. Rather, the 'skipping' creates unstable amalgams of capitalist and pre-capitalist relations whose very instability feeds back into the geopolitical dynamics that produced them. Rosenberg (1996, 12) captures the essence of these formations in describing the post-decolonization state system as 'full of potential mini-Czarisms'.

Global transformations from the perspective of uneven and combined development: Japan, the 'Eastern Question' and the Thirty Years Crisis

Uneven and combined development and the Meiji Restoration

Let us now demonstrate these theoretical points with some specific historical examples. Japan's transition to capitalism⁶ is a particularly instructive example of the processes described above; specifically, our argument that U&CD is both a transhistorical feature of human society and yet 'only achieves its full (intensive and extensive) development' (Marx 1973 [1953], 105) under conditions of capitalist production. Although the early 'Japanese' culture(s) were influenced by currents from China and the Korean peninsula, the wholesale transformation of Japanese society only occurred in the era of the worldwide spread of industrial capitalism.

During the Kamakura and Muromachi periods stretching from 1185 to 1573 CE, a process analogous to Robert Brenner's (1985) notion of 'political accumulation' took place in Japan. The evolving samurai class united both physical coercion and economic exploitation of the direct producers as they competed militarily to extend the domains in which they directly exploited the peasantry. As a result, Japanese politics alternated between more and less severe periods of civil war. Thus, in this period, the Japanese archipelago fell under the rule of supreme military commanders—the shoguns at the apex of a shifting pattern of competitive 'political accumulation'. The one outside challenge to the shogunate (*bakufu*) in this era came from the Mongol invasions between 1272 and

⁶Our discussion here draws on the historical works of Hall (1970), Hoston (1986) and Reischauer and Craig (1989).

1281 CE. The failure of these invasions, despite Mongol naval superiority, has been ascribed to divine intervention in the form of the *kamikaze*: the storms that blew away the Mongol fleet. Contingency certainly has its place here; however, the social nature of the Mongol challenge must also be considered. As in Rosenberg's (2006, 321–322) Russian example, the steppe nomads formed a very serious 'external factor' for Japan's divided ruling class. Yet this threat never forced that ruling class to adopt a Mongol-inspired mode of social organization, in the way that Japan was to be transformed by its encounter with capitalist expansionism. The Mongols were fundamentally parasitic upon the existing tributary structures of rule in China. They depended upon the superior offensive capability given by their mobility to dominate such tributary structures (Anderson 1996, 221–224). Once the costs of conquest—for example due to the physical barrier of the sea—outweighed the benefits of loot, the Mongols simply gave up.

The warring samurai and lords (*daimyo*) were to face a more serious challenge from the Far West. By the end of the Muromachi era, Japanese society was in the midst of the highly destructive period of 'warring states' (*sengokujidai*). The result of these struggles was the consolidation of power firmly in the hands of the Tokugawa house at the Sekigahara battle in 1600 CE. Tokugawa rule brought an era of internal peace through which the Japanese polity became progressively unified. The foundations of this stable rule lay in internal repression (particularly through the *sankinkōtai* system) and external closure.

The Tokugawa shoguns exerted a central authority over the *daimyo* and established rigid divisions between the samurai, the merchants and the peasant cultivators who provided the basis of the economy in the form of the rice tribute. As the Tokugawa suspected that foreign influence would lead to intrigues among dissatisfied lords and, even more dangerously, peasant revolts inspired by Christianity, the shogunate enforced an increasingly strict policy of isolationism (*sakoku*). Hence, for the following two-and-a-half centuries, Japan remained on the margins of the developing world capitalist order in the West, and relatively excluded from the world as a whole.

Yet by the mid nineteenth century the 'external' environment from which the ruling class had sought to isolate themselves was being radically transformed. The original European challenge to Japan was posed by Portuguese trading networks that linked distant nodes in non-capitalist societies to provide goods not locally available. The source of their profit was therefore buying low and selling high rather than the exploitation of labour at the point of production (Rosenberg 1994, 107). The determined resistance of the Tokugawa shogunate was thus enough to deter such adventurers. However, the mid-nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans competing to 'open' Japan were of a different sort. They emerged from societies in which competition on the basis of exploitation of labour at the point of production had become predominant. As a result, they had both the technology—in the form of steamships and arms produced by industrialization—and the imperative to conquer Japan. Whichever group of nationally based capitalists could conquer Japan would, it was hoped, reap the windfall profits that accrue to industrialized commodities sold in pre-industrial markets. Britain's success in reducing India and China to non-industrialized colonies provided the examples to be emulated and feared.

No longer were the Europeans beating at Japan's shores with promises of profits from their mouths and Bibles in their hands. Now they were making

forceful threats backed by modern artillery. As Colin Barker (1982, 32) writes, it was one thing for the Japanese 'to refuse admittance to mercantile capitalism; it was quite another to try to refuse entry, in a Pacific basin that was being sucked into the immensely more powerful world of nineteenth century industrial capitalism'. Hence, the question that Japan's traditional ruling class were soon confronted with was no longer 'whether Japan should enter the world system', but 'how, on what terms and under whose power' (Barker 1982, 38, emphasis in original).

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 was the eventual consequence of these international determinations arising from the specific context of an emerging world capitalist economy. This *revolution from above* *pressurized from without* resulted in the paradigmatic case of a successful 'catching up' programme of rapid state-driven industrialization. Japan would take the 'passive revolutionary' hyper-route to capitalist modernity, fitted with all the tensions and contradictions of a 'combined' social formation.⁷ Its example demonstrates well our theoretical points regarding the relations between the international, U&CD and capitalism in the following interconnected ways. First, the intensified and generalized competition among the capitalist powers (British, France, and the northern states of America) compelled them to leave no potential market or strategic asset alone, thus bringing them into direct confrontation with the shogunate. This confrontation caused a general crisis of the shogunate due to the massive and evident developmental gulf between the advanced capitalist powers and Japanese society, resulting in a revolution from above.

In order to survive and compete *geopolitically*, the samurai class that led the revolution realized that it needed to develop a capitalist economy. Second, through this 'whip of external necessity', the more advanced technological and cultural achievements of the Western powers were transferred to Japanese society. Third, this permitted the latter the ability to skip 'a whole series of historical stages'. In this way, the Meiji revolutionaries accrued the 'privilege of backwardness' through which they were able to pursue a successful and rapid state-led process of industrialization. Finally, this resulted in an 'amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms' in post-Meiji society (Trotsky 1957, 4). The inherent instabilities resulting from this 'combined' social formation would subsequently feed back into geopolitical competition through the Japanese expansionism of the early twentieth century, which was, at least partly, an externalization of domestic crises (see Hoston 1986, 247–250).

In these ways, Japan's example was comparable to other societies' developmental experiences in the same era—for example, Germany, Italy and Russia (Bendix 1967; Nakamura 1992). While Japan not only fended off but exceeded its Western tutor-foes in its incorporation into the world economy, an interesting example of the opposite is the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire—the 'Eastern Question' that so troubled the statesmen of the belle époque.

The Eastern Question and the Thirty Years Crisis

The Sublime Porte sought desperately throughout the nineteenth century to reform its internal structures to meet the threat of the British and French empires.

⁷ See Allinson, Jamie C and Alexander Anievas 'The uneven and combined development of the Meiji Restoration: a passive revolutionary road to capitalist modernity?' unpublished manuscript.

The military superiority of those empires was based upon precisely the productive advantages resulting from capitalist relations (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', just as the Russian tsars and the more successful Japanese samurai had done, fed back into international political crisis, as Fred Halliday writes:

[i]n ... Turkey, 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. (Halliday 1999, 197)

Tying the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, and its effects on the ensuing Thirty Years Crisis, into our theoretical perspective the concept of U&CD can assist in accounting for the origins of the two World Wars. In addition to theorizing the international (uneven developmental) context from which the crisis unfolded, it uniquely posits sociological difference and interaction as enabling factors for the wars. In this sense, U&CD marks an advance upon the four major theoretical approaches (*Sonderweg*, Mayer thesis, realism, classical Marxism) of the crisis period.

The perspective of U&CD avoids the essentializing and teleological analyses of the Fischer School, which locates the origins of the wars in the *Sonderweg* ('special path') of German development stemming from its lack of 'bourgeois revolution' and non-transition to modernity. Furthermore, it circumvents the problem of homogenization: the failure to account theoretically for the sociological differences among political actors and the effects resulting from such differences. Although the Mayer thesis, realism and classical Marxism all provide accounts of the two World Wars which correctly identify their causes in a universal crisis—conceived, respectively, as a crisis of Europe's ancient regimes, the European balance of power, and capitalism's crisis-prone transition to monopoly capitalism—they are unable to theoretically explain the starkly varying responses to and effects of this crisis within different states and societies.

The above examples demonstrate that although aspects of combined development can be treated as transhistorical—particularly the coexistence and interaction of societies and the interdependence of their 'structures of social, material and cultural life' (Rosenberg 2006, 324)—only with the emergence of the capital relation does 'combination' in Trotsky's explicit sense of the interpenetration of two or more modes of production in a social formation occur. Moreover, it is only once the capitalist value relation has come into existence, and in particular once it has become universalized through the emergence of world economy, that inter-societal relations become constitutive of individual social formations. This is due to the immense productive gulf opened up between capitalist and non-capitalist societies which, through their interactions, either forces the wholesale transformation of the non-capitalist society or its peripheralization/colonization. We conclude that, just as the *differentia specifica*

of capitalism as a social system lie in how the reproduction of every economic actor becomes dependent upon the market, a distinguishing feature of combined development (as an active causal determination) is that the survival and geopolitical reproduction of every political unit becomes dependent upon the world capitalist economy.

The dangers of overextension: theory of the transhistorical or general abstraction?

Trotsky or Waltz?

Our conceptualization of U&CD reveals some tensions in Rosenberg's work. At points Rosenberg's argument is identical to ours. For example, he explains how, following Trotsky,

capitalism starts to realise the 'universality' of human development because its expansion transforms an historically-given *descriptive* totality of forms, levels and instances of development into an organic totality of interrelated parts, a world-wide division of labour. (2007, 455)

From this, Rosenberg goes on to summarize Trotsky's perspective to the effect that 'capitalism did not just change the world: it actually changed the overall nature of historical change itself' (Rosenberg 2007, 456). At other points, Rosenberg offers a much stronger version of the theoretical standing of U&CD. This version presents it as a kind of transhistorical social logic of anarchy, in which societies develop within a wider 'causally integrated' social whole of 'interacting patterns of development' *prior* to the emergence of capitalist relations (Rosenberg 2006, 321; 2008, 7–8, 20–21). Along these lines, he describes the combined inter-societal development of the Eurasian geographical whole of 1400 as a 'quilt-like' causal 'weft' that 'helps us to imagine an uneven but continuous causal "pattern" without a visual centre'. And, as Rosenberg goes on to claim,

with causal assumptions already decentred or multi-polarised within each of the patches, it becomes easier to conceive as doubly intrinsic to social development that peculiar condition of *latent or active causal interdependence in which, as Waltz once noted, '[e]verybody's strategy depends on everybody else's'*. (2006, 322–323, quoting Waltz 1959, 201, emphasis added)

Waltz's remark here is in turn a quotation from John Von Neumann, the brilliant game theorist on whose work Waltz draws to produce his deductive theory. It would seem then that, like Waltz, Rosenberg is seeking to derive an inherent logic of anarchic competition from the fact of multiplicity itself (Rosenberg 2008, 7–8). This 'international difference' represented as anarchy must be dissolved back into the generative sociological categories from which it emerged: that is, U&CD (Rosenberg 2006, 329). The "'multi-perspectival" causality' captured in Rosenberg's quilt metaphor represents 'an intrinsic property of social development as an overall historical process—traditionally registered in IR as the structural phenomenon of "anarchy"' (Rosenberg 2006, 323). The various 'causal, ethical and cognitive' consequences unique to this condition of multipolarity are thus nothing more than the outward expressions of 'this strategic dimension of combined development'. Elevated to this level of a transhistorical social logic of anarchy, U&CD accounts for

not only the historical existence of the discourse of realism but also its 'normative resources' (Rosenberg 2006, 323; Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, 97–98).

The multiplicity–anarchy–competition assumption

Yet it is not at all clear why and how multiplicity itself generates a condition of competitive anarchy—as Rosenberg seems to assume—or that it can say anything meaningful about the changing forms of geopolitical competition. To move from multiplicity to competition requires the dubious realist assumption that societies necessarily threaten each other. Yet, the syllogism of 'multiplicity–anarchy–competition' only works with the addition of a further intermediary term: 'existential threat'. This surely is the insight, albeit divorced from a political economy of inter-state competition, provided by social constructivists and the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al 1998). Therefore, for competition and war to be logically deduced from geopolitical fragmentation in the way sought by structural realism, these phenomena must be shown to be truly transhistorical. However, without a mechanism of compulsion of the kind at work in our above examples, inter-societal relations would be better described as a process of *diffusion* rather than active causal interdependence.

One can, of course, find instances of widespread warfare and even strategy amongst societies in which there are no apparent class divisions. Nevertheless, there is strong anthropological and archaeological evidence for the existence of durably peaceful coexistence among so-called primitive communities (see, inter alia, Sponsel 1996; Kelly 2000). For example, one anthropological study examining the causes of warfare throughout the centuries lists over 160 'highly unwarlike'⁸ societies, and further suggests that there may be some thousand more (Van der Dennen 1995, 265–269). Thus, while there is certainly no definitive consensus regarding the nature or absence of warfare among so-called primitive societies, there remains much evidence to suggest that the 'Hobbesian state of nature' among coexisting societies is more a social construct than a transhistorical fact. In which case, we need to rethink the multiplicity–anarchy–competition assumption upon which Rosenberg (2006, 323) bases his claim regarding the 'active causal interdependence' of the inter-societal.

The upshot of all this is that although Rosenberg successfully manoeuvres past the Charybdis of a 'proto-realist' reified conception of the international, he nevertheless ends up crashing against the Scylla of an ahistorical theory of inter-societal development. Thus, a 'realist moment'—very different from the one that affects Callinicos' 'two logic' approach—creeps into Rosenberg's theory of the international. And if these tensions and contradictions in Rosenberg's work are not fully addressed, any application of U&CD as a transhistorical theory 'will tend to lose its explanatory edge, acquiring the disabling aura of banality' (Pozo-Martin 2007, 556).⁹

⁸ Meaning those in which war was either relatively absent or primarily defensive in nature.

⁹ This danger rears its head in an article by Kamran Matin (2007), who seeks to apply the 'theory' of U&CD to pre-modern Iran's process of state formation. We hope to address Matin's work in a forthcoming piece.

Our discussion has illustrated three central and interconnected problems with Rosenberg's 'interim' analysis of U&CD, these include: (1) the conflation, or at least non-differentiation, between a 'general abstraction' and theory, which, on our reading, are not synonymous; (2) the upshot of this being the tendency to try to transform U&CD into a transhistorical theory of the inter-societal; and, hence, (3) the equating of U&CD with realism's multiplicity-anarchy-competition syllogism. Furthermore, we claim, in contrast to the arguments put forward by Neil Davidson (2009) and Sam Ashman (2009), that the categorical 'either/or' choice between the use of U&CD as a concrete *or* general abstraction is necessarily a false one. Rather, what is required is a third option: one transcending the 'mutually exclusive choice of transhistorically ontological versus historically specific categories' and, instead, views '*transhistorically abstract* categories as the foundation for the construction of historically specific categories' (Fracchia 2004, 128).

Conclusion

Being committed to the 'ruthless criticism of all that exists' (Marx 1975, 142), Marxists have been sceptical of claims attributing substantive transhistorical properties to structures of the social world, in the manner of realist IR theories. In this article, we have sought to illustrate and address the challenge facing Marxist approaches to IR regarding the irreducibility of the constitutive international dimension of social relations. In so doing, we turned to an anatomization of Trotsky's idea of U&CD and Rosenberg's reformulation of the concept as a means to theoretically internalize 'the international'. While dangers of analytical overextension of U&CD exist, and are illustrated in our analysis of Rosenberg's own contradictory use of the concept, we conclude that it can be used as a general abstraction incorporated into our already existing social theories. Thus, we claim the uneven and combined nature of historical development represents a transhistorical phenomenon, even though its distinct causal determinations, articulated and expressed through inter-societal competition, are, as a general abstraction, only fully activated under the specific socio-historical conditions of generalized commodity production. Our specification of U&CD as a general abstraction provides a useful basis from which to apply the concept for future research. The concept would be particularly apposite in examining not only processes of state formation, but also the specific and changing forms of geopolitical rivalries in the capitalist epoch. We attempted the beginning of such an analysis with our consideration of the Japanese and Ottoman cases and the origins of the Thirty Years Crisis. Future research would benefit from further theoretical and empirical analyses on the relation between U&CD and Gramsci's concept of 'passive revolution' (Morton 2007¹⁰). Here, a particularly stimulating area of research might be to extend these concepts to an examination of the international dimensions of the processes of Japanese state formation and the emergence of German National Socialism.

¹⁰See also Allinson, Jamie C and Alexander Anievas 'The uneven and combined development of the Meiji Restoration: a passive revolutionary road to capitalist modernity?' unpublished manuscript.

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