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Uneven and combined development: the social-relational substratum of 'the international'? An exchange of letters

Alex Callinicos and Justin Rosenberg¹
King's College London and University of Sussex

What is 'the international' from the point of view of social theory? Can its significance be apprehended from within existing social theories, suitably applied? Or does it necessitate a revision of the most basic shared assumptions of those theories—the 'general abstractions' by which they frame their conception of the social world itself? What, moreover, and in the light of these considerations, is the intellectual and political standing of Realism as an approach to international theory? In the following exchange of letters these questions are debated by two authors who, *though* sharing the language and principles of historical materialism, enter the issue from different directions—and, thus far, with differing results.

Alex Callinicos has, over the years, developed a distinctive argument about the nature of the sociological abstractions deployed by Marx in *Capital* and about the method of applying them to historical events and processes (Callinicos 2001; 2005). In this method of 'non-deductive concretization', the international, particularly in the form of the state system, is one among a number of dimensions of the social world which, though not deducible from Marx's concept of 'capital', must (and can) be critically incorporated in the course of his concretization. One of the benefits of such a strategy, Callinicos believes, is that it would permit the integration of a version of the classical Marxist theory of imperialism into a broader theory of the capitalist mode of production.

From a different starting point—the difficulties encountered by historical sociology in the field of international relations (IR)—Justin Rosenberg has begun reconstructing and interrogating Leon Trotsky's idea of 'uneven and combined development' (Rosenberg 1996; 2006; 2007). This has led him to claim that the challenges faced by Marxism in IR are in fact generic to the legacy of classical social theory as a whole: they arise from the latter's failure to incorporate the multilineal and interactive dimension of sociohistorical development into its basic conceptions of 'society'. Thus, according to Rosenberg, it is not so much in the application of sociological concepts as in the assumptions already built into them as abstractions of the real world that the nub of the issue lies. The peculiar challenge posed by 'the international' for social theory has been long and widely recognized; distinctive to Rosenberg is his belief that the idea of 'uneven and combined development' may provide a solution.

In 2005, Callinicos participated in a forum on a previous article by Rosenberg (Callinicos 2005; Rosenberg 2005). When Rosenberg later sent Callinicos a response

¹The authors would like to thank Alex Anievas and an anonymous reviewer for valuable suggestions in preparing this exchange for publication.

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to that forum (Rosenberg 2007), Callinicos's reply included the draft of a third article subsequently published in these pages (Callinicos 2007). What follows is an edited version of the correspondence that ensued.

Brighton, 6 June 2006

Dear Alex,

I've just read your piece 'Does capitalism need the state system?' (Callinicos 2007), and I find it fascinating, not least because of the way that you progressively refine and deepen the issue being addressed. Your title question is of course one that Marxists have often asked themselves. But it's a slippery one nonetheless, because anyone who wants to avoid asserting a merely contingent relation between these two seems driven, by the very form of the question, towards an unhelpfully functionalist kind of answer. So I think you're wise to begin by reformulating the issue as, in effect, 'why has the end of the Cold War not brought about the end of geopolitical competition between states?' And from this alternative starting point you then proceed to deepen the question, pressing it, on my reading, through two further permutations. First it becomes, roughly, 'how can we integrate the significance of multiple states into Marxist theory without falling into either a reductionism (which misses the causal reality of "the international") or a reification (which, like Realism, treats the existence of multiple states as an independent source of causality)?' And, finally, the conundrum reappears in its most elemental form: 'why *are* there many states in the first place?' (emphasis added).

Now, as it stands, your explanation for why geopolitics has not disappeared with the Cold War seems to me a perfectly good one. Capitalism, you argue, necessarily reproduces the political fragmentation of the state system as a by-product of its tendency to 'uneven and combined development'. The shifting historical geography of competition for surplus-value gives rise to conflicts of interest among state organizations that are differentially located in the global accumulation process. And that in turn means that accommodations among capitalist states represent adjustments to a given, temporary configuration of power, will likely not outlast that temporary configuration and at any rate do not signal an approaching supersession of geopolitics through either a world state or a durable ultra-imperialism.

All this strikes me as a creative extension of the classical Marxist theory of imperialism. And yet I sense that something beyond this is also going on in your paper. With your further permutations of the core question—and this is what I find so intriguing—you effectively lead the argument beyond the familiar terrain of Marxist theories of imperialism and onto the adjacent but much less explored territory of Marxism and the question of 'the international' itself. The difference between these two is that while theories of imperialism take the existence of multiple societies as given, and then analyze the forms of domination operating among them,² international theory also contains a half-buried question about the causal significance of inter-societal multiplicity per se.

In one form or another, *that* question is one to which both hostile and sympathetic critiques of Marxism in IR have returned again and again (Waltz 1959; 1979;

²Here Anthony Brewer's updated study (1990) remains, I think, the authoritative survey.

Berki 1971; Kubalkova and Cruickshank 1980; 1989; Holsti 1985; Linklater 1990). The 'horizontal' fact of political fragmentation, they have variously argued, generates causal pressures and behavioural patterns that cannot themselves be derived from a theory of the 'vertical' divisions of society into classes, as postulated, for example, by Karl Marx's concept of the 'mode of production'. Attempts to deploy the latter in international theory, therefore, will tend towards one (or both) of two outcomes. Either they will superimpose their *intra*-societal categories of social structure onto *inter*-societal phenomena, thus obscuring whatever determinations might arise from the fact of geopolitical multiplicity itself (the 'fallacy of the domestic analogy' [Bull 1966]). Or they will dilute the claims made for those categories by allowing that an additional 'geopolitical' logic, whose source lies somehow elsewhere, modifies or over-determines the more strictly 'sociological' causes that they nonetheless still prioritize (a problem that might be termed 'proto-Realism' [Rosenberg 2006, 337]). Either way, the facticity of 'the international', whether allowed or not, eludes *theorization* by Marxism—as it must, according to these critics, for any 'second image', 'unit-level' form of analysis. And indeed for this latter reason the challenge exists not just for Marxism, but also for all historical sociological approaches to the subject.³

How have Marxists in IR responded to this charge? Have we ever tackled it head on? I wonder—and I think you do too.⁴ My own impression is that we have more usually sought to turn the tables on the Realist orthodoxy. By this I mean that we have concentrated instead on demonstrating how the social character of this multiplicity (and of its causal mechanisms) has in fact varied crucially according to historical changes in the dominant mode of production.

Certainly, a thumbnail review of the major Marxist contributions to IR theory seems to confirm this picture. Over time, the classical theory of imperialism has been joined first by Dependency and World Systems Theory, then by 'neo-Gramscian' and other 'Critical' approaches, then by a kind of historical materialism of geopolitics (whether returning directly to Marx [Rosenberg 1994] or via Robert Brenner's restatement of Marxism as a 'theory of social property relations' [Teschke 2003]) and finally, if fleetingly, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 'postmodern' reflections on 'Empire', together with other 'globalization'-inspired approaches (see for example Robinson 2001). By now, all this amounts to a very rich tradition of ideas, leaving far behind that 'paucity of Marxist scholarship in IR' which Hazel Smith felt obliged to report as late as 1994 (Smith 1994, 145).⁵ And yet insofar as it has addressed the central question of IR—the generic significance of inter-societal multiplicity—the

³ While Marxism in IR has generally attracted the charge of 'domestic analogy' or reductionism, the neo-Weberian strand of historical sociology which has found its way into this discipline, associated with such writers as Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol and Michael Mann, has more frequently been accused of being caught on the other horn of the problem, namely 'proto-Realism'. See, for example, Anthony Jarvis (1989), Stephen Hobden (1998), Buzan and Richard Little (2001), Fred Halliday (2002) and Steve Smith (2002).

⁴ You yourself nicely finger this question of multiplicity towards the end of your 2004 article on 'Marxism and the international' (Callinicos 2004).

⁵ It says something about the limited development of Marxism in international theory that her survey was included in a sub-section entitled 'Partial theories in international relations'. For more recent surveys, see Hobden and Richard Wyn Jones (2005), Benno Teschke (forthcoming). Despite its title, Andrew Linklater's *Beyond realism and Marxism* (1990) is perhaps still the most comprehensive attempt to mobilize the wealth of Marxist thought outside IR in order to focus it on the question of 'the international'.

direction of the argumentation has remained almost entirely one-way:⁶ from the unique historical form of capitalist society to the no less distinctive character of its international relations (IR). And this, as you yourself imply at one point, still ‘begs the question’ (Callinicos 2007, 544) of plurality itself.

In this sense, what Marxism (and other non-Realist approaches) has yet to provide is a *sociological* answer to the question of why the ‘international’ dimension of social reality exists in the first place.⁷ Lacking this, we seem to be driven either to discount its generic effects or, since we can’t derive them from our existing categories, to concede an irreducible reality to them, opening the door once again to Realism.

Now, as you know, I’ve recently come to the conclusion in my own work (Rosenberg 2006) that Trotsky’s term ‘uneven and combined development’, which you apply to the social logic of capital, simultaneously captures, at a more general level, a sociological characteristic of all historical development; furthermore, that it is this sociological characteristic—entailing, as it does, an inner differentiation and interactivity to the historical process—that accounts for the transhistorical fact of geopolitical multiplicity; and finally, that this claim—present, but not worked through, in Trotsky’s own writings⁸—might hold a solution to the intellectual problems that Marxism has faced in IR.

But here’s the rub: if we say that in some wider sense *all* development is ‘uneven and combined’, then I think two important qualifications might have to follow concerning your own argument.

⁶ I say ‘almost’ because Teschke’s recent work (2003; 2005) involves a rising claim about the theoretical significance of ‘the international’ which in many respects parallels my own developing preoccupation. *The myth of 1648* initially proposes a ‘core argument . . . that the constitution, operation, and transformation of geopolitical orders are predicated on the changing identities of their constitutive units’ (Teschke 2003, 7). Yet the work as a whole ultimately exceeds the ‘second image’ limits that such a formula usually entails. Indeed its concluding chapter, which invokes the idea of ‘combined and uneven development’, already contains many pointers to his later call for ‘a general and systematic attempt to elevate the international from the start to a constitutive component of any theory of history’ (Teschke 2005, 10). Whether and how such an exercise would reach into a reformulation of historical materialism itself remains to be specified. But clearly we have arrived, albeit from different directions, on very substantial common ground.

⁷ I use the term ‘the international’ as shorthand for ‘that dimension of social reality which arises specifically from the coexistence within it of more than one society’ (Rosenberg 2006, 308). Since this dimension has always existed, while ‘nations’ have not, the usage must appear anachronistic. Yet the obvious alternative term—‘inter-societal’—brings not dissimilar problems of its own. And, since this same dimension remains for social theory the unrecovered core of *modern* international relations too, I hope that this usage may be allowed, with all the qualifications it requires. For when the qualifications are made, be they ever so weighty, the dimension itself is still there. And the significance of its existence is not exhausted by analyses of its changing historical forms.

⁸ Overwhelmingly, Trotsky uses the term ‘combined development’ to refer to a specifically capitalist phenomenon. Yet he also describes ‘unevenness’ as ‘the most general law of the historic process’ (Trotsky 1980, 5), and adds that ‘[f]rom the universal law of unevenness . . . derives another law which . . . we may call the *law of combined development*’ (Trotsky 1980, Vol. I, 5–6). By implication, therefore, this second ‘law’ must also be universal. Yet though his account of the precapitalist development of Czarism operationalizes this wider, transhistorical meaning of ‘uneven and combined development’ in all but name, nowhere does Trotsky develop its theoretical implications.

First, the issues of why capitalism does not end political multiplicity and why multiplicity exists in the first place overlap but are no longer fully co-extensive. Hence—referring to page 544 of your article—I'd be driven to say that the question 'Why are there many states?' is not (as your 'or' seems to imply) fully reducible to the question 'Is there anything inherent in capitalism that tends to keep states plural?'

And, second, it might also follow that the 'place' where Marxism (or any other historical sociology) really needs to broach the issue of 'the international' is not, in the first instance, at the level of its theory of capitalism (or 'modernity'),⁹ but rather at the more fundamental level of historical materialism itself (or whatever other general abstractions of the historical process are being used). Only then, I think, can one avoid a situation in which the transhistorical circumstance of multiplicity evades theorization at the start, only to return later in the reified form of proto-Realist premises.

Now, I must say that your own intellectual method—progressive but non-deductive concretization—is an ingenious way of controlling for the effects of this problem: it allows for the determinacy of the geopolitical while denying it substantive autonomy. But my question then would be: what exactly is the standing of the determinations that are admitted to the argument in what you describe as the necessary 'realist moment' of a Marxist analysis of IR? To put it another way: where comes the positive non-Realist *theorization* of the geopolitical determinations, which Realism rightly emphasizes but wrongly conceptualizes? After all, just because liberal approaches to IR have infinitely more to say than Realism about the significance of the international economy, we don't correspondingly conclude that there must be a necessary 'liberal moment' to a Marxist analysis of IR. Why should Realist theory be 'cleaner' in this respect, less needful of fundamental reformulation? Or am I being unfair here?

Personally, I think we ought to be able to crack the shell of this reification ('geopolitics') and resolve its contents back into generative sociological categories. But because its historical referent extends back beyond capitalism, that can't be done exhaustively by working from a theory of capitalist development alone. Elaborating 'uneven and combined development' as, in the first instance, a *general* abstraction of the historical process is the only means I've yet found for getting behind this problem in order to crack the reification in its generality (rather than just controlling its effects in the particular cases of Absolutism or capitalism). I try to illustrate this in the 'Interim Synopsis' of the idea contained in my rejoinder to the 'Globalisation Theory' forum (Rosenberg 2007).

So I guess this is the difference between our positions: your position implies, I think, that at any rate there's a great deal more to be said about how capitalism in particular generates 'uneven and combined development'—and I'm sure that's right. My position—mostly a hunch, since I haven't done enough of the work yet—is that even when that 'more' is said, the fact of multiplicity itself and what arises from it will not have been addressed in a way that finally deals with the problem of Realism (and with it the problem of 'the international' for social

⁹Not even where this theory is historicized to locate the emergence of capitalism within an antecedent Absolutist state system, as Teschke (2003) and Hannes Lacher (2002) have both importantly done.

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theory). Hence my enormous, continuing detour through the idea of ‘uneven and combined development’ as a ‘general abstraction’. Perhaps we’ll meet in the middle at some future point—what do you think?

All the best,
Justin

London, 9 June 2006

Dear Justin,

Thanks for your letter, which I found very stimulating. My interim report on the puzzling ideas you have provoked follows:

1. In a general sense, the answer to your concluding question must be yes: we will ‘meet in the middle at some future point’. In principle, there are multiple strategies for ‘crack[ing] the shell of this [and other] reification[s]’. Proceeding by ‘general abstraction’ and a more ‘mode-of-production’-focused analysis are on the face of it mutually compatible strategies.
2. I do, however, have a preference for my strategy, just as you have for yours. In my case this reflects the following thought: ‘general abstractions’ are a necessary part of any conceptual construction in social theory and it is important to acknowledge this rather than kid oneself that one can historicize everything, as with the traditional Marxist hostility to the idea of human nature. So I think it is fine and, as you have amply shown, fruitful to explore ‘uneven and combined development’ as a constitutive dimension of the social. But general abstractions do at the same time carry a risk, recognition of which is the justification for the hostility just referred to—namely that they may give rise to essentialisms that deduce transhistorical elements of the social from supposed properties of human nature. I understand that you are precisely seeking to avoid this in your own, strongly historical treatment of ‘uneven and combined development’, but this doesn’t alter the fact that the danger exists.

My preferred strategy for (to borrow one of your formulations) controlling for essentialism is not to deny the existence of general abstractions, but to seek to contextualize their referents’ operation relative to the structures of some mode of production. This is why I like Brenner’s concept of political accumulation:¹⁰ it provides a materialist way of accounting for part of the extension of your concept of ‘multiplicity’—premodern state-building—by invoking the rules of reproduction of actors in precapitalist production relations (my way of putting it, not his) which avoids any appeal to human nature or the will to power or whatever. I think it is likely that when you move from identifying the wider patterns of ‘uneven and combined development’ you have discussed to explaining them you are likely to push in the direction of mode-of-production analysis of this kind (or perhaps a more complex form of such analysis involving more than one mode of production in the case, for

¹⁰ Because in feudal societies wealth was extracted via political ownership of land and persons, feudal lords engaged in ‘political accumulation’ of territories, persons and the means of violence: ‘A drive to political accumulation, or state building, was the feudal analogue to the capitalist drive to accumulate capital’ (Brenner 1987, 174).

example of the interactions between empires and nomads or of the expansion of European feudalism into its Irish and East European peripheries). Or, if you don't move this way, you will have to give some account of the kind of alternative explanations on which you have relied and of how these avoid the problem of essentialism. But my hunch is that once you seriously explore the inter-societal across some large span of space and time you will be pushed toward cashing general abstractions into more historically specific mode-of-production-based analyses (all this is of course a gross oversimplification: any mode-of-production analysis would have to be combined with all sorts of other things to produce a plausible historical interpretation).

3. Your challenge about the 'realist moment' is a really good one: I have greatly enjoying thinking about how to reply to your question why 'we don't correspondingly conclude that there must be a necessary "liberal moment" to a Marxist analysis of IR'. I have a strong and a weak answer.

The weak answer is that we should so conclude because there *is* a liberal moment, if not in the 'Marxist analysis of IR', then in the larger theory of the capitalist mode of production. We can situate it in the stage of Marx's argument in *Capital*, Volume I, Part 1, where he analyses the structure of generalized commodity production without positing that labour-power is a commodity. This is famously 'the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham', which is subverted once Marx (to put it in Hegelese) posits the presupposition and introduces labour-power as a commodity, so leading to exploitation and the rest.¹¹ One might also see the liberal moment in those famous passages in *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Grundrisse*¹² where Marx highlights the revolutionary and progressive character of capitalism.

My strong answer is that while of course liberalism and Realism are both theoretical ideologies, liberalism is in quite a different class from Realism. It is a much richer and more complex ideology with far more normative resources and the conceptual range denoted by such names as Locke, Smith, Kant, Hegel, Tocqueville, Mill, Keynes, Hayek and Rawls. By comparison, Realism is a much thinner ideology, which may be why it is so easy for contemporary exponents such as Kenneth Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer to axiomatize it (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). It can be worked up into something more dramatic when conjoined with Nietzsche's ontology or Max Weber's sociology, but, on its own, its theoretical content it is not 'cleaner' than liberalism, but much more limited.

I'm inclined to think of Realism as a theoretical articulation of the spontaneous ideology of state managers (which is pretty obvious in the case of its contemporary influence on American policy intellectuals). To that extent it's like neoclassical economics, whose ancestor vulgar political economy Marx criticizes

¹¹ In *Capital*, Volume I Marx argues that the exchange between capitalist and worker in the labour market apparently belongs to 'the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham' (Marx 1976, 280), since the buyer and seller confront each other as legally free and equal property owners each pursuing their own interest. The real inequality between the two, consequent on the worker's lack of access to the means of production, becomes clear when they enter 'the hidden abode of production', where the capitalist's control of the production process allows them to exploit the worker (Marx 1976, 279).

¹² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der kritik der politischen ökonomie* [Outlines of the critique of political economy] (1858).

for systematizing the forms in which capital appears ‘on the surface of society ... in competition, and in the ordinary consciousness of the agents of production themselves’ (Marx 1959, 25; this may help to explain why both are so hospitable to rational choice theory). So Realism is a bit like the kind of conceptualizations of capitalism derived from the perspective of actors on the financial market. If you take these conceptualizations at face value, you get—as Marx points out when discussing the credit system in *Capital*, Volume III—the most fetishized form of capital. He doesn’t deny the kind of self-understanding that actors on the financial markets have *no* reality (the credit system does function, financial assets do allow their holders to appropriate a portion of total surplus-value, and so on), but seeks to expose its limitations by setting them in the context of capitalist production relations as a totality.

So why can’t one think of Realism in the same way: as a cluster of theories that articulate the self-understanding of a specific set of actors (the managers of the state system) and that are therefore not completely false, but that first require contextualization within the larger theory of the capitalist mode of production and of its historical development (including the intersection of economic and interstate competition)? This doesn’t mean simply sticking realist concepts and axioms undigested into a Marxist discourse on capitalism and imperialism, but one way to reformulate concepts is to set them alongside other, unfamiliar concepts.

I’m really grateful to you for forcing me to think through the implications of my position, and would be interested in any further thoughts you had about all this, though I will, of course, quite understand if (particularly because of the piles of scripts that the suspension of the exam boycott has dislodged)¹³ you would prefer to call it a day.

All the best,

Alex

Brighton, 17 July 2006

Dear Alex,

Many thanks for your latest comments. Their clarity and pertinence have been really helpful in pushing me to try to pinpoint exactly why I find the idea of ‘uneven and combined development’ so significant. Reading through my responses set out below, I see that they return again and again to different versions of the same point—a fact that I hope illustrates the many implications of this point, rather than just wearying you with excessive repetition. I’m also struck by the following thought: because you yourself fruitfully invoke Trotsky’s idea in your recent article in these pages, it may be that our difference will eventually reduce to one of degree. At any rate, I shall try below to convince you that the implications of this idea are wider, deeper and, in a way, more indispensable to the success of your own arguments than your usage of it so far implies.

As I see it, you’ve raised three basic issues for us to discuss: the liabilities of working with general abstractions; the ways in which a more mode-of-production-

¹³In the summer of 2006, the University and College Union were engaged in an assessment boycott as part of a national campaign over university funding in the United Kingdom.

based approach might deal with ‘the international’ as an issue; and, finally, the question of how to construe the relationship between Marxism and Realism in international theory. Perhaps inevitably, it was while trying to respond to the last of these that matters really came to a head for me. But, since some necessary clarifications were also forced by your other reflections, I shall work through the three issues in their existing order.

The danger of general abstractions

I must begin by noting a large area of agreement. General abstractions, as you say, are both necessary and risky—permanently prone, in fact, to essentialism, reification and Robinsonades.¹⁴ This means that their relationship to other, more ‘concrete’ categories—and to empirical reality itself—requires extremely careful positioning. The idea of ‘uneven and combined development’ has given me no end of grief on this score, not least because, like any general abstraction, it can appear to say everything and nothing at the same time. But, for what it’s worth, my current assessment of this ‘everything’ and ‘nothing’ is as follows.

At the most basic level, ‘uneven and combined development’ formulates a much-needed alternative conception of the historical process. It invokes that dynamic, interactive (Trotsky would say ‘dialectical’) texture of social reality of which, arguably, both the unsociological Realist conception of ‘the geopolitical’ and Sociology’s monadic, unilinear conception of ‘society’ are one-sided and intrinsically misshapen abstractions.

If this latter diagnosis is correct, it would help explain why the specifically methodological challenge of extending a historical sociological method into the field of IR has proven so intractable: this challenge must initially take the form of trying to reintegrate two dimensions of social reality by using the very same conceptions (of ‘geopolitics’ and ‘society’) through which, at a deeper theoretical level, these dimensions have been externalized from each other. The record suggests that this approach does not work. Either it leads back to the fallacy of the ‘domestic analogy’ where liberal and Marxist sociologies of IR have traditionally been accused of ending up (Bull 1966), or, as I suggested in my previous letter, the interpolation of ‘the international’ takes the form of a proto-Realist *deus ex machina* that leaves ‘the international’ itself untheorized in sociological terms—arguably the point reached by such ‘neo-Weberian’ writers as Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol and Michael Mann.

In such a situation, with the classical inheritance spent to so little avail, we seem entitled to consider more drastic solutions. Perhaps what we actually need is not a combination or rebalancing of existing concepts—not even the ‘dialectical’ one you cite Harvey as proposing (Callinicos 2007, 9)—but a more radical reconceptualizing of the nature of the historical process itself in order to remove the intellectual source of the antimony. And this, I believe, is what

¹⁴ Marx uses the term ‘Robinsonade’ (Marx 1973, 83) to criticize the theories of liberal political economy. In his view, these theories unwittingly generalized the particular historical characteristics of capitalist sociality into transhistorical features of human behaviour—as if Robinson Crusoe’s actions when isolated on his island revealed an unmediated ‘human nature’ rather than transferring into his new environment the norms of his native English capitalist society.

Trotsky's idea provides. By positing 'development' ontologically as the subject matter of the analysis, it identifies the evolution of social structures in historical time as the basis of its explanatory method. It comprises in that sense an emphatically historical sociological conception. However, by simultaneously asserting the 'uneven and combined character' of that development overall, it recovers for social theory those properties of multilinearity and interactivity which would otherwise unavoidably give rise to a sociologically impregnable and rival discourse of geopolitical explanation. I know of no other idea that can do this. And I think it should follow that by concretizing *this* general abstraction—rather than those of 'anarchy' or 'society' which have underpinned the disciplines of IR and sociology—we can finally formulate *sociologically* exactly that dimension of human social existence with which Realism has always been able to trump attempts at sociological explanation in IR.

Yet here, hard on the heels of the 'everything', comes the 'nothing'. By itself, axiomatic assertion of the multilinear and interactive character of human social development cannot tell us much at all at the level of concrete historical explanation, and it cannot provide the basis of a substantive social theory. By itself, after all, it lacks any tools for specifying the causal properties of those processes of social life to whose multiplicity and interaction it draws attention. Whatever the importance of this idea, therefore, it cannot operate as a replacement for the classical social theories whose limitations we are trying to overcome. In fact, without being attached to one of these—historical materialism for example—it cannot reach down to the level of concrete historical explanation at all. The intellectual results of any attempt to turn the general *abstraction* into a general *theory* of 'uneven and combined development' would thus be very slight indeed.¹⁵ In a similar way, and for similar reasons, Kenneth Waltz could squeeze no more than a highly general 'permissive' causality from his early reflection on the international system as a level of determination in its own right (Waltz 1959). Yet there is a difference too. Waltz took the conceptual determinacy of 'the international' as a warrant for theorizing it in abstraction from 'the social'. For me, by contrast, the significance of 'uneven and combined development' lies in its utility for exactly the opposite exercise: namely, for reintegrating 'the international' within the remit of 'the social'. And although this does, as Trotsky's own analyses showed, have considerable intellectual consequences for social theory, radically transforming any logic of historical process derived from it, the overall balance of the equation does, as you suggest, need firm reiteration. More than just an ad hoc caveat for the variety of historical circumstances, but less than a replacement for existing social theory, Trotsky's idea provides the anterior assumptions about the texture of the historical process in which existing theories need to be regrounded if they are to avoid the 'domestic analogy' problem and find their way through to concrete historical explanations of IR.

The conclusion I draw from this is as follows. While general abstractions are both necessary and risky, we also can and must distinguish among the variety

¹⁵ I am grateful to Simon Bromley for impressing this point upon me at an earlier stage of my explorations.

on offer to us in terms of how intellectually ‘fit for purpose’ they are. A general abstraction of ‘society’ as singular is not fit for general use.¹⁶ Harmless though it might be for some forms of analysis, its limitations are starkly exposed whenever it comes anywhere near the field of IR. Nothing requires that the conception of ‘society’ presupposed in Marx’s concept of the capitalist mode of production should be a singular one. Equally, however, nothing in Marx’s thought prevents it from being assumed to be such. And most Marxist approaches in international theory have in fact left this assumption itself untouched. Trotsky’s idea corrects this problem at the level where it needs to be corrected—at the level of the general abstraction itself. By positing unevenness as general, it sublates the resultant fact of inter-societal coexistence into a reformulated general abstraction of society as multiple and interactive. Here, I think, we might possibly agree.

Limits of a mode-of-production approach

Still, one upshot of all this is that, as you rightly say, my own line of argument cannot, in principle, generate historical explanations until it is brought into relation with a ‘more mode-of-production-focused analysis’. Why then do I remain inclined to start with the general abstraction, rather than following your own ‘preferred strategy’ of beginning with the historically specific forms of social development?

The reason relates to your comment on ‘Brenner’s concept of political accumulation’—the concept by which he links the geopolitical struggle for territorial acquisition in medieval Europe to the ‘extra-economic’ form of surplus extraction characterizing the feudal mode of production. This provides, you say, ‘a materialist way of accounting for part of the extension of your concept of “multiplicity”’. Agreed, but that’s a very judicious formulation! Exactly which part does it account for—and which not? I would say it accounts somewhat for the sociohistorical *form* of multiplicity (and thus of geopolitical interaction), but not for the *fact* of it. Does this really matter?

I didn’t use to think so. I used to think that in the face of Realism’s ahistorical claims about geopolitics, historical materialist demonstrations of the changing social forms and dynamics of geopolitical behaviour were all that was required. Now I’m not so sure. As I wrote in my last letter, if the fact of geopolitical multiplicity extends historically beyond any individual form of society then any determinations arising from that fact itself will in principle elude derivation from the particularities of any given mode of production, or even—if such an exercise were possible—of each and all of them considered individually and serially. For the fact itself is not particular, but general (and perhaps therefore something general remains uncaptured—even about contemporary capitalist geopolitics—by your argument about the historical ‘subsumption’ of interstate competition ‘under that between capitals’ (Callinicos 2007, 12)).

Yet, what determinations *do* arise from that fact? Here of course I must beware the essentialism that you rightly warn against. So the limit on what I can

¹⁶ Friedrich Tenbruck (1994) makes this point very powerfully.

say is: that all societies coexist with and interact with others, and that this super-adds a lateral field of causality over and above the 'domestic' determinations arising from each and every one of the participant societies. I cannot from this specify in principle how wide the margin of difference opened up by that 'over and above' will be. In Trotsky's analysis of capitalist development, it turned out to be enormous. But the real issue here is not the scale of difference in any given case, so much as its existence in every case: there *are* no societies whose development has not been fundamentally inflected by relations with others. And there *is* no case of a wider social formation whose developmental trajectory does not include a significant dimension composed of the course of interactions among its parts. We all know this empirically; on what grounds has it been excluded from our theoretical abstractions of 'society' and 'historical process'?

Pressed to choose between Brenner's 'concept of political accumulation' and a Realist explanation of medieval geopolitics, I would do everything I could to avoid making a choice. I would rather turn to Perry Anderson's *Passages from antiquity to feudalism* (1974). There, the dimension I'm referring to is incorporated via a nomenclature of differentiated, interactive temporalities of development within a wider social formation. And the result, *inter alia*, is that historical unevenness plays a quite crucial theoretical role (not least in the climactic explanation of the 'second serfdom'¹⁷), and in ways that could not be approached by invoking 'political accumulation' (or, in Anderson's case, 'parcellized sovereignty') alone.

Thus my second conclusion is that if we're going to 'meet in the middle', we both have (if I may borrow your term) a 'non-deductive' leap to make. I must, and do, accept that the general abstraction of 'uneven and combined development' cannot furnish the particularities of any given mode of production, which, I also agree, are necessary for the general abstraction to be 'cashed in'. But I suspect that you will also reach a point where the acknowledgment of the inter-societal is not something fully derivable from any conventional mode of production approach. And I think 'uneven and combined development' can solve both problems—mine, because the subject of the predicates 'uneven' and 'combined' remains 'development' and that means that this general abstraction can *only* be concretized by specifying particular historical structures—and yours because, conversely, the operation of those same predicates on 'mode of production' means that the inter-societal, and all that goes with it, need not be encountered as a theoretical externality.

To put it another way, there turn out to be not one but two sources of essentialized conceptions of geopolitics of which we must beware. One, as you indicate, comes from misapplication of a general abstraction. The other, however, has a quite different origin. It operates by default whenever the inter-societal

¹⁷ 'Europe', writes Anderson, 'knew two separate waves of serfdom, first one in the West (9th to 14th centuries) and then one in the East (15th to 18th centuries)' (Anderson 1974, 263). The latter, however, which Engels called the 'second serfdom', was no simple repetition elsewhere of the first: 'From the 12th century onwards ... no purely endogenous evolution was ever again possible. The destiny of the East was altered by the intrusion of the West ... [I]t was henceforward irrevocably other than it would have been if it had developed in relative isolation' (Anderson 1974, 263–264).

dimension is not explicitly included in the definition of 'the social' itself. For then geopolitical effects, which are generated beyond the reach of the given 'social' theory, seem to take on either a contingent (hence ungeneralizable) or a strictly supra-sociological appearance.

This, incidentally, is why I'm uneasy with attempts to solve the problem by invoking what you call 'the intersection of economic and interstate competition'. Exactly where, after all (since you yourself allow it an existence extending back beyond its 'subsumption' under capitalism), does the 'interstate competition' *come* from? Perhaps I'm mistaken, but I don't think this question can be answered entirely by working 'upwards' from a conventional mode-of-production-type approach. And at least part of my preference for starting at the other end (with the general abstraction) derives from a professional predicament: working in IR, one inevitably confronts this question very early in any enquiry. Indeed, little else can be 'cashed in' until it is answered.

This brings me to your two ingenious arguments for a 'Realist moment' of Marxist analysis. It may be that I have mis- or over-interpreted these arguments. But at any rate, I have hugely benefited from them; they have forced me to work out in some detail what I now think about Realism. My reasoning may well have gone awry. If you can show me how, I'll be yet further indebted to you. If not, however, I think we may both have quite a lot more thinking to do about the relationship between Marxism and IR.

The status of realism

I'd like to bracket out for a while your 'strong answer' (about liberal riches and Realist poverty), and concentrate first on the methodological parallel you draw concerning Marx's critique of liberalism.

Yes, Marx described the categories of bourgeois economics as 'socially adequate' (Marx 1976, 169), faithfully reflecting the phenomenal or 'surface' form in which the essential relations of capitalist society appear to their agents. Hence, in any intellectual journey from 'the surface' to 'the depths', there will indeed be a 'liberal moment' as we pass through a layer of appearances that are both real and mystifying. Why, you ask, can't we view Realism—the spontaneous ideology of state managers—in the same terms? Allowing it a 'moment' would enable us both to take due account of the 'interstate competition' on which it focuses *and* then to 'expose its limitations by setting them in the context of capitalist production relations as a totality'.

As you'd expect, I have instinctive sympathy for this proposal. But I also have a problem with it, which I'll try to draw out in three steps.

First, as you point out, the 'liberal moment' in *Capital* is rapidly subverted as Marx digs deeper into its presuppositions. Although it retains an authentic *connection* to reality—as a 'form of appearance'—its *explanatory* standing dwindles in the face of an alternative discourse (the 'critique of political economy') which asserts it to be the mystified expression of something else that its own categories cannot comprehend. If the 'Realist moment' you propose for the 'Marxist analysis of IR' is a parallel to this, then would we not also have to include a long, long 'after-moment' of deconstruction? Isn't Realism too 'an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world' of appearances in which, to paraphrase Marx, Monsieur le

Souverain and Madame la Balance de Pouvoir ‘do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things’ (Marx 1959, 830)?¹⁸ You do say of your proposal that ‘[t]his doesn’t of course mean simply sticking realist concepts and axioms undigested into a Marxist discourse on capitalism and imperialism’. But I’m still not yet clear exactly where in the process of critical cooptation of Realism this ‘digestion’ occurs, and into what elements Realist categories are broken down.

Second, this may be just terminological but I can’t help feeling that in order to facilitate the analogy (between the critiques of liberalism and Realism) you may have loosened the definition of Marx’s method beyond what you yourself might wish. Yes, one way of describing Marx’s critique of liberal ideas is to say that it sets ‘them in the context of capitalist production relations as a totality’. But that, I think you’d agree, is a broad description of the result, rather than a tight definition of the method. The latter is approached more nearly when you say that the realm of liberal ideology is ‘subverted once Marx ... posits the presupposition’.

Now, I wonder whether these two spatial metaphors (the horizontal one of widening contextualization, and the vertical one of surface and depth) don’t actually reflect two different intellectual procedures: the latter being Marx’s method for the *construction* of a dialectical abstraction and the former being your own method (and possibly his too) for the *re-concretization* of an abstraction. One could argue that in *Capital* both of these are happening at the same time, but I want, if only for purposes of self-clarification, to separate them out for a moment.

One can, as many of us have tried to show, take the ‘vertical’ approach and ‘posit’ capitalist social relations as the ‘presupposition’ of the abstracted ‘sovereign’ form of the modern state (and, by extension, state system).¹⁹ But my sense is that although you’d agree with that, it’s not quite what you’re proposing here. When you rightly say that ‘one way in which concepts are reformulated is when they are set alongside other, unfamiliar concepts’, I think you have in mind the procedure of non-deductive concretization outlined in your 2001 paper. There the emphasis is upon showing how capitalist determinations reach into zones of social reproduction whose generic properties are not deducible from the concept of capital itself—and whose incorporation correspondingly introduces additional,

¹⁸In a celebrated chapter of Volume III of *Capital*, Chapter 47, ‘The Trinity formula’ (Marx 1959, 814–831), Marx argues that the mystification of capitalist social relations reaches an intellectual climax in the categories of ‘vulgar economy’ which attribute creative powers to inert things—as if ‘rent’ grew out of the earth itself, or as if capital, as a thing to be invested, was itself pregnant with the ‘interest’ that it appears to generate. ‘It is’, writes Marx of such reifying categories, ‘an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things’ (Marx 1959, 830).

¹⁹This is what I attempted in Chapter 5 of *The empire of civil society* (Rosenberg 1994), building on the work of Derek Sayer and Ellen Wood.

irreducible logics of their own into an increasingly concrete concept of capital. (Indeed, you cite this irreducibility as both legitimate and advantageous, and I can see why.)

Now, each of these two procedures might conclude that Realism is a 'spontaneous ideology'—either of the abstracted, capitalist form of state or of some more generic, limited 'worldview' of 'state managers'. But, as I must try now to elaborate in my third step, I no longer think that, either singly or in combination, this says quite enough. To explain what I mean by this, and to answer my own earlier question about what a 'digestion' of Realism might involve, I too would like to draw an analogy with Marx's method.

Once again, I begin with some points on which I think we agree. Central to Marx's method, as you say, is the positing of an undiscovered social-relational substratum to apparently self-evident phenomena and categories, a positing that then generates a radically alternative explanatory idiom. Significantly, however, the first such exercise in *Capital* comes long before any mention of wage labour, or any explicit critique of liberalism. And although it turns out to have enormous consequences for the latter, its scope, as the exuberant claim to have bettered Aristotle himself implies (Marx 1976, 151–152), is far wider. I'm referring of course to Marx's opening engagement with the question 'What is the substance of value?'²⁰

It's logical that this question must precede the more apparently consequential one of 'What is *surplus*-value?', which comes later. Less immediately obvious, though subject to incessant demonstrations, is Marx's assertion that previous attempts to answer this question—let alone our everyday assumptions about its answer—involve either naturalistic or metaphysical premises that, as soon as they are made explicit, are manifestly untenable. The challenge, then, is to identify a human-relational content to the exchange of things that could explain what 'their' value is as a 'social substance'.

And the first part of Marx's answer is where I want to build my analogy. This part is worked out, not by reference to 'the totality of capitalist production relations', but through interrogation of what Marx calls the 'the simple, isolated or accidental form of value' (Marx 1976, 139–154). Here, he says, the hardest part of the question is already posed. In an oft-misunderstood claim, Marx observes that in any act of exchange the relation of equivalence posited between the things exchanged in fact simultaneously relates as equivalent whatever human activities have brought the objects of exchange to this point. Of course, and despite his use of the term, this is not yet 'value'. The relational substance of value—'socially necessary abstract labour time'—comes into systematic being only with modern capitalist society. And, in fact, there's a world of difference between saying that human productive activities are passively equated to each other as an *effect* of exchange and saying that this relation between them actively conditions the

²⁰ In the opening chapter of *Capital*, Marx repeatedly abstracts from the question of what determines the quantitative magnitude of value in any given case in order to pose first and foremost the qualitative (ontological) question of what value *is* as a social phenomenon.

process of exchange itself (hence, I think, the misunderstandings). But why then analyse ‘simple value’ at all? Answer: because a crucial element of the phenomenon that Marx is anatomizing—though it becomes truly significant only in the developed (capitalist) case—is already present, *in nuce*, in every instance of exchange.

There is, Marx argues, something peculiar about the form taken by any human relation—even if momentary, inadvertent and inconsequential—when it is mediated by the exchange of things. On the one hand, it is inverted: an actual social relation between persons (for things cannot exchange themselves) appears to be a quantitative relation between things, governed by the imputed properties—material or spiritual—of the things themselves. And, on the other hand, this perceptual reification expresses a real ‘objectification’ of human agency: it is, after all, intrinsic to exchange as a human act that it is inverted and refracted through ‘the instrumentality of things’ in this way. Still, it is a riddle with a solution, not an illusion without substance. And, according to Marx, it is a riddle that must be solved if the real but mystified surface appearance of capitalist relations is to be penetrated sociologically.

For it is this peculiar potential of inversion and reification, latent in all exchange relations, which is uniquely activated into a generalized phenomenology by the capitalist form of society; this is due to the central role of exchange in production relations themselves. Thus his opening analysis of the inverted relational architecture of exchange *per se* becomes a crucial sociological key to the ‘hieroglyphic’ of capitalist sociality.²¹ Without it, we would have no cognitive procedure for revealing the inverted, reified (capitalist) *relations* encased in the otherwise irreducible materiality of things and their movement. And without *that*, the theory of *surplus*-value would be, well, vulgar: all mathematics and no ontology (indeed, Marx does later—climactically in his discussion of the Trinity Formula—suggest that ‘wage labour’ itself is a mystified category).

Now, the analogy I wish to draw here with geopolitics is imperfect in many ways (interpersonal and inter-societal relations are, after all, quite different orders of phenomenon). Yet I do think the requirement we face—and even something of the solution—is the same. In both cases, what looks like an elemental datum of social reality—exchange of things on the one hand, geopolitical interaction on the other—in fact secretes a further layer of relational constitution which must be excavated *sociologically* if the datum in question is not to license a reifying discourse of ‘vulgar economy’ or Realist geopolitics. Moreover, in both cases, what Marx elsewhere calls the perceptual mechanism of ‘camera obscura’ (Marx and Engels 1976, 36), which makes the appearance seem irreducible, derives not from any given historical form of the datum, but from properties inherent in that particular kind or fragment of human sociation in general. Whenever things are exchanged, in whatever kind of society, the inverted, reified form of social relation which capitalist society uniquely develops into the ‘social substance’ of value is momentarily, even if inertly, posited. It is a latent sociological property

²¹ Marx describes value as a ‘social hieroglyphic’ (Marx 1976, 167)—meaning that (like the ancient Egyptian writing system for those who rediscovered it) the existence of value was unquestionably a human social artefact, but one whose coded form long defeated attempts to decipher it.

of exchange relations per se.²² Something parallel, I shall suggest below, can be said—and must be excavated—concerning inter-societal relations.

Well, you and I would agree that Marx solved his riddle—but can we now solve ours? '[I]t is', say Thucydides' Athenians to their Melian victims,

A general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way. (Thucydides 1972, 404–405)

How can we prevent this statement from legitimating—as in Realist thought it *does* legitimate—a notion of geopolitics as both *sui generis* and extra- or even supra-sociological? Invoking an intersecting 'interstate logic' seems to me only to restate the problem, which, if we strip away the historically (and anthropologically) limited form of relations between states, now reduces to the following question: what *is* geopolitics, *sociologically*?

And here there is a real parting of the ways. One path leads indeed to a pragmatic accommodation: There is a 'Realist moment' in any developed sociological analysis because the geopolitical 'level' or 'dimension' exists and must be included, not least because its effects handily extend the grounds for a critique of liberalism. Viewed from any starting point outside the discipline of IR, this must appear to be (and indeed often is) a genuine augmentation of a sociological analysis. Viewed from *inside* IR, however, talk of a 'Realist moment' appears, however unintentionally, to give the game away. For, as you know, within IR, treating geopolitics, however pragmatically, as an elemental datum of reality is precisely what we're up against. The imputation of autonomous behavioural properties to political entities—whether derived from their nature or from the structure of their coexistence—lends an irreducible, thing-like quality to geopolitics. From this, Realism distils a power-political essence that

²² Arguably, this also explains how Marx could simultaneously claim that the riddle of (exchange-)value is present in all societies and yet solvable (that is, susceptible to a theory of value) only within capitalist society. And I wonder, parenthetically, whether there might be a parallel here too—whether somehow the question of the geopolitical, while general to all societies, becomes analytically soluble only with the rise of capitalism. If so, it perhaps has to do with the latter's universalizing tendency, the way that capitalism constitutes human development as both an empirical and an organic totality, such that the historically general but varying significance of the inter-societal is now systematically activated within a wider social process that renders it susceptible to an actual theory. Herodotus, one might say, echoing Marx's explanation for Aristotle's difficulties with exchange-value, had nothing like this to go on: his totalizing conception, while securing his place as 'the father of universal history', could only be a speculative one. Such an argument, however, would have to cope also with the following claim by Polybius in the 2nd century BCE:

In previous times, events in the world occurred without impinging on one another . . . [then] history became a whole, as if a single body; events in Italy and Libya came to be enmeshed with those in Asia and Greece, and everything gets directed towards one single goal. (cited in Tenbruck 1994, 88)

I haven't yet thought this through.

is simultaneously as sociologically impossible (states do not subsist autonomously) and yet as empirically inextinguishable (states do behave power-politically) as the idea that things have values. I find this echo telling: surely some 'objectification' is at work here. But objectification of what? And how?

This question leads us onto the other path, which points to some kind of parallel to the exercise performed by Marx on the sociology of exchange. But how? How can we break down, or subsume, the *fact* of geopolitics sociologically without dissolving its determinacy and social reality? This is the question that sociological approaches to IR have been unable to answer. It drives them, if they reject the pragmatic accommodation mentioned above, into one version or another of 'domestic analogy'. Thus, if we don't want to end up with either an essentialized or a reductionist notion of geopolitics, we need to posit a presupposition here—one that, like Marx's presupposition of an inverted human relational content in the exchange of things, can provide a sociological key to the hieroglyphic of Thucydidean Realism. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*²³ Needless to say, I would not dare propose such a challenge if I didn't think we already had the answer to it, but such an answer is exactly what 'uneven and combined development', worked through as a *general* abstraction, enables.

In my view, the point about 'unevenness' is not in the first instance that it posits inequalities and differences *among* coexisting societies; it is rather that, posited of social development, it makes sense of the existence of a *plurality* of societies in the first place—and with that, of the extension of a lateral field of interaction which is both intrinsic to and behaviourally distinct within the expanded conception of social development now posited.

I wish I could say that positing unevenness is a big theoretical discovery, but I can't. For, on the one hand, it is a matter of mere historical record that the unevenness of human development has always found expression in a multiplicity not just of the forms, levels, shapes and sizes of society but also, somehow crucially, of its numerical instances; that a number of these instances therefore always coexist concretely in historical time; that all societies thus confront the fact that the human world extends beyond themselves; and that the resultant imperative to manage the 'outside' world, if only minimally for reasons of survival, compels them into interaction with each other, which in turn is part-constitutive of what they are as societies. In sum, a strategic interactive dimension is intrinsic to development itself. And, on the other hand, the enormous theoretical difference made by conceding these empirical points is almost entirely achieved by simply *avoiding* the negative results that their neglect has produced in existing social theories.

Still, the theoretical moral must be drawn, before it escapes and is lost again in the empirical obviousness of all this. The very existence of 'geopolitics', its imputed transhistorical 'logics' and its varying forms and causal weight can all be explained via a generative sociological presupposition—the first two by reasoning from the *general* abstraction of 'uneven and combined development'

²³ 'Here is Rhodes: jump here!' Marx uses this saying (derived from Aesop via Hegel) to dramatize his approaching solution to an apparently insoluble problem—which he is about to address via the procedure of 'positing a presupposition' (Marx 1976, 209).

and the third by developing *concrete* abstractions of the latter's particular historical configurations. For what has been objectified in Realism is the strategic dimension of development—a dimension whose existence in fact expresses the 'uneven and combined' character of development itself.

As with Marx's argument about 'value', the real trick of this point is to see that the question is even there—that there must be a sociological substratum to the fact of geopolitics, rather than just to its changing forms—and that not to pose this question leaves one with unwittingly essentialized assumptions. Indeed it seems to follow that without the idea of 'uneven and combined development' (or some equivalent) the Marxist theory of imperialism—or indeed *any* theory of geopolitics—is rather like the theory of surplus-value without the theory of value itself. It is 'vulgar' in the strict Marxian sense that it operates with reifying categories for which it has not yet found the critical presupposition that needs to be posited. But then here, as I shall hint again several times below, one would be hard pressed to argue that Marx himself provided the actual presupposition that is needed (hence my suggestion, in the opening paragraph of this letter, that the importance of Trotsky's idea for the problems you and I are both trying to tackle may be far greater than any restriction of it to capitalist geopolitics allows).

Where then does the objectification come from? Clearly, the perceptual and real objectifications of geopolitics are not the *same* as those intrinsic to exchange. But, to complete the analogy, they have this much in common: In both cases, there is a sociologically intelligible reason, rendered visible by the presupposition, which explains why the basic ontology of the phenomenon is initially obscured from its own agents. In the case of geopolitics, the reason is that 'uneven and combined development' actually does constitute its agents as political subjects of a simultaneously fragmented but interactive historical process. Within the resultant fragments homogenizing and centripetal processes obtain (not a few sustained by the existence of a differentiated outside), which appear, *post festum*,²⁴ to constitute the nature of society itself. Outside, among the fragments, but nonetheless arising from the selfsame fragmentation, different circumstances, and hence forms of behaviour, apply, generating the appearance of a supra-sociological realm. Because reflection begins from within, it is always the inter-societal which appears as different—a dimension that must either be reduced (analytically or practically) to the likeness of the domestic, or else asserted as autonomous and *sui generis*. But, actually, the multiplicity of the inter-societal is no less intrinsic to this process than is the inward singularity of any individual fragment. Neither is any more or less definitive of 'the social' than the other.

Well, I've tied a bit of a knot for myself here, one that I must now undo if I'm to draw a line under the argument so far. Have I not myself, in the foregoing pages, added a large argument of my own *in favour* of a 'Realist moment'? I find this

²⁴'After the feast'. Marx uses this term to describe the practical starting point of any social-theoretical reflection: namely that it confronts an already completed social reality, in which emergent properties may have developed in such a way that their enduring social foundations are now concealed by their results (Marx 1976, 168). This necessitates a conscious procedure of working backwards from the 'finished form' in order to uncover the generative social phenomena—and without this the problem of reification cannot be overcome.

tricky to answer, but I think the long and the short of it may be as follows. We can, after all, speak coherently of a 'Realist moment' to social analysis in a manner somewhat analogous to the 'liberal moment' you identify in the downward journey of Marx's argument in *Capital*. But, like the liberal moment, the Realist one is a symptom of a problem, not a formula for a cure. Moreover—*Cave! Hic draconis!*²⁵—the presupposition that needs to be posited in order to 'get to the bottom' of the phenomena that Realism describes is not the same as the one used by Marx to break through to the relational substance of value—and it cannot be found in *Capital*. This spells possible danger, I think, for your (otherwise very compelling) method of non-deductive concretization. It raises the possibility that the mystified 'moment' will be incorporated, undigested, for lack of the analytical means to break it down. And this leads me back to my earlier suspicion that the issue of the geopolitical cannot be fully grasped from within a theory of capital. For by then, in a way, it's too late: the problem itself and its solution belong at a higher level—that of the general abstractions of historical materialism itself. To put it another way—and in some tension perhaps with your claim elsewhere about the legitimate irreducibility of a geopolitical logic—geopolitical categories *can* be translated back into a generative sociological discourse, but only if the latter has already been reformulated by incorporating the general abstraction of 'uneven and combined development'. And in the field of sociological approaches to IR, including Marxist ones, this reformulation has yet to occur.

Yet all this, you might say, addresses only the weaker of the two answers you give to the question of how and why a 'Realist moment' can be safely incorporated into a Marxist analysis. You also provide a 'strong answer'—that Realism is a much 'thinner' ideology than liberalism. Whereas the latter expresses the forms of self-consciousness organic to capitalist society as a totality, the roots of Realism extend no further down than the limited worldview of a specialized professional group: it is 'the theoretical articulation of the spontaneous ideology of state managers'. One might make it look deep by attaching it to 'Nietzsche's ontology or Weber's sociology'. But the connection—unlike that between liberal ideology and the underlying wealth of liberal philosophy—would be a kind of rearguard defence of an ideology that 'on its own' has a 'much more limited ... theoretical content'. Liberalism is 'rich'; Realism is 'thin'. Hence the liabilities of allowing a 'Realist moment' are far less.

These days, I'm uneasy with this line of thought. When I first encountered Realism, I formed exactly the impression you describe. And, like you, I still find the substantive political analyses of neo-Realist writers (as opposed to their sometimes splendid demolitions of liberal ideology) to be disabblingly thin. Still, as that mysterious Realist power to puncture liberalism already suggests, the relationship is somehow more complex—and more paradoxical—than any simple contrast of 'rich' and 'thin' implies. In fact, in international theory, I think it would be truer to say that it is liberalism which is intrinsically shallow, and Realism which, for all its problems, is connected to a circumstance of profound significance. How so?

There is a real sense in which liberalism (and actually most Marxist thought) is not, and does not possess, an international theory. What liberalism and Marxism

²⁵ 'Beware! Here be dragons!'

have to say about IR is reasoned not from the circumstance of inter-societal coexistence, but rather from the impact upon that circumstance of social development occurring 'elsewhere'. (Thus Waltz's charge [Waltz 1979] of illicit reductionism has undeniable substance, though I denied its importance for a long time.) Realism, meanwhile, (and neo-Realism especially) is *only* an international theory: it reasons exclusively from the bare circumstance itself, and its results are indeed correspondingly 'thin'.

Yet, to repeat the question: if so thin, why so powerful? Well, I have a suggestion: because Realism is the reified abstraction of a real dimension of the historical process—a dimension, meanwhile, which has been unconsciously repressed by all the theories that Realism criticizes. If this is what Realism is—the return in distorted form of the repressed multilinear and interactive dimension of social existence—then the conundrum of how it can be simultaneously so empty and so strong is explained. Hypostasize this dimension of reality (on its own) and the result will indeed be not just thin but false. Repress it, however, and the resultant social theory will forever be mysteriously vulnerable to the 'return' in question. And since, in my view, it is the repression which generates the hypostasizing, admission of a 'Realist moment' has this paradoxical outcome: while at one level it controls for the effects of the problem, at another level it places the problem itself yet further beyond solution. For then, either the inter-societal is allowed as an irreducible 'geopolitical logic', or it is falsely reduced to the expression of a particular historical form of society.

Correspondingly, I no longer believe (as I once certainly did) that Realism lacks deep normative resources. From the same circumstance of political fragmentation, after all, Realism derives, when so minded, an ontological critique of easy, self-serving universalisms; a highly developed moral and practical sense of the tension between ends and means; and a genuinely tragic appreciation of the anarchically inscribed conflict of particularist (national) and common (international) interests.²⁶

The lines of connection here run back, as you suggest, to Weber and in particular to his preoccupation with 'the ethical irrationality' of the world. But I think that the connection is actually an organic one. And I want to suggest that there's an objective sociological reason why this preoccupation should loom so large in international theory.

Ethical irrationality—the fact that desirable outcomes do not necessarily follow from morally well-intentioned actions—is no peculiarity of IR. Yet it does perhaps assume a peculiar salience there. And the reason does appear somehow

²⁶ I'm thinking here in particular of Morgenthau's *Scientific man versus power politics* (1946)—especially the last chapter, 'The Tragedy of Scientific Man'; Herbert Butterfield's 'The tragic element in modern international conflict', in *History and human relations* (1951); and Carr's *The twenty years' crisis* (1946). There are even traces of this in the sometimes doggedly optimistic writings of Waltz. His 1993 article on the emerging post-Cold-War world ended as follows:

[o]ne may hope that America's internal preoccupations will produce not an isolationist policy, which has become impossible, but a forbearance that will give other countries at long last the chance to deal with their own problems and to make their own mistakes. But I would not bet on it. (Waltz 1993, 79)

to be bound up with the geopolitical fragmentation of human existence. It is that wider circumstance, after all, in which 'domestically' universal identities, interests and purposes are necessarily encountered (by their foreign equivalents) as partial (in both senses of the word) particularisms. Here too, internal concentrations of 'legitimate' violence reappear as non-concentrated, dispersed military potentials, reopening existential issues of security normally suspended within individual societies. And finally, into this particularized, combustible mix, geopolitical fragmentation also adds the special causal unpredictability that characterizes the mutual management of political actors who, whatever differentials of power and leverage exist among them, do not formally control each other.

Identity, mortal violence and anarchy are not unique to the inter-societal dimension, and they are far from the only sources of determination operating there (an international theory that saw only these would be as inadequate as a social theory that could not see them at all). But they do come together in IR in ways that both intensify the experience of existence as 'ethically irrational' and entail wider problems of moral meaning and identity which will tend to pile up, unresolved, at this level.

They will pile up there because in a secular world there is no higher register in which to pose a general idiom for their (intellectual and practical) resolution; and yet they will remain unresolved because at this level of social reality, far from being dissolved in an experience of common humanity, they are only further compounded by the additional existential implications that geopolitical fragmentation necessarily generates. In fact, it is precisely the attempt to find an empirically universal vantage point of moral and political judgment that opens a canvas wide enough to reveal the ways in which the fact of inter-societal plurality generated by unevenness problematizes such a vantage point.

I have no solution to the intractable form in which they present themselves in normative international theory, where they sustain a dichotomy of 'cosmopolitan' and 'communitarian' approaches—neither of which is sociologically any more plausible than the other. Nonetheless, it seems important to say that what they express is a fatality bound up with the specifically 'uneven and combined' character of human social development.

This fatality, I think, is the deeper issue to which Realism is connected. And, as the twisted histories of modern nationalism and internationalism attest, it is by no means a problem for state managers alone. Marx's own journalistic writings and revolutionary political analyses continually encountered it, as one international relationship after another—Franco–German, Russo–Polish, Anglo–Irish, even Euro–Chinese—was perceived as holding (or withholding) the key to metropolitan revolution. Indeed, is it not a specifically inter-societal 'ethical irrationality of the world' with which Marx was indirectly struggling in the following exasperated judgment, a year before his death?

The little bit of republican internationalism between 1830 and 1848, was grouped around France, which was destined to free Europe. Hence it increased French chauvinism in such a way as to cause the world-liberating mission of France and with it France's native right to be in the lead to get in our way every day even now. (Kandal 1989, 38)²⁷

²⁷ Emphasis in original.

Surely there is something important here which merits theorization. But Marx himself does not tell us, theoretically, where it comes from.²⁸ And nor, if the analogy I pursued earlier has any cogency, can Realism. It is driven, as you say, to impute it rather to human nature, or to 'power politics', or—so near and yet so far—to the 'structure' of 'the international'. This is why I persist in my, perhaps quixotic, view of the intellectual status of Realism: thus far, it is the only international theory we have, but it is nevertheless the wrong one. And once again, therefore, it seems that the answer cannot lie with a 'Realist moment', but must rather involve a deeper recapture of these phenomena by a non-Realist social theory.

In conclusion, let me have one last stab at clarifying the theoretical provenance of my overall argument. This time, I'd like to recall one of those back-of-the-envelope formulations of Marx's overall intellectual project that crop up from time to time in his writings. 'The order', he writes at one point in the *Grundrisse*, obviously has to be:

- (1) The general, abstract determinants which obtain in more or less all forms of society ...
- (2) The categories which make up the inner structure of bourgeois society ...
- (3) Concentration of bourgeois society in the form of the state ...
- (4) The international relation of production ...
- (5) The world market and crises. (Marx 1973, 108)

Interestingly, Marx's translator (Nicolaus) says of this schema that Marx subsequently dropped the first step (Marx 1973, 53–54). I think that's only half true. For sure, what we call the '1857 general introduction' did not make it into the first volume of *Capital*. And yet, as I've suggested above, Marx does quite crucially weave the interrogation of a general abstraction (the simple form of value) into the opening movement of Chapter 1. This part of 'the order' therefore stands. But, to come to the point, where in this five-step order should 'the international' come in? My answer would be as follows. There is no period of history in which one cannot find a plurality of societies or social formations coexisting in time. And yet, for reasons I'm not entirely clear about myself, I would hesitate before placing 'inter-societal coexistence' itself into step one—'the general, abstract determinants which obtain in more or less all forms of society'. What I do think needs to be in step one, however, is the general abstraction of that property of social reality which operates to produce a strategic dimension to all social development, irrespective of whether the latter takes the form of juridically differentiated, visibly separate 'societies'. For if 'all forms of society' are not explicitly conceived as 'uneven and combined' in their development, then when the consequences of this fact are later addressed—say in step four—they will either be falsely derived from the historical particularisms of steps two to three, or else they will be encountered as contingencies that have no theoretical depth. In short, neglect the significance of 'uneven and combined development' in step one, and either reductionism or proto-Realism will unfailingly result further down the line.

²⁸ For a fascinating analysis of the subterranean sway of 'international' determinations in the formation of Marx's own revolutionary political categories, see Robbie Shilliam (2006).

Whatever else the achievements of Marxism in international theory, I don't think it (or any other approach, for that matter) has ever cracked this problem. I have yet to think through exactly what would be the cascading implications of a solution for those other steps of the schema. The problem itself, however, is there. And so, I believe, somewhere in this idea of 'uneven and combined development', which I'm still fumbling to unpack, is the solution.

And yet I must wonder, in closing, whether I've said anything in this letter with which you'd actually disagree. After all, part of the distance separating our positions was always down to our different points of entry into the same issue. And even where we might have seemed to be at odds—the question of the 'Realist moment'—my response has been to take up part of your own account of Marx's method and to apply it to 'the international'. On the other hand, I must acknowledge that the more I work with the idea of 'uneven and combined development', the more I find myself carried not only beyond my own earlier thinking but also potentially in directions for which Trotsky's texts themselves provide at best little direct warrant. But then, as the man himself was wont to say, 'Marxism is above all a method of analysis—not analysis of texts, but analysis of social relations' (Trotsky 1962, 196). And surely few phenomena stand in more urgent need of a genuinely 'social-relational' analysis than this thing which we call 'the international'. What do you think?

As ever,
Justin

London, 29 July 2006

Dear Justin,

Thanks very much for another challenging, wide-ranging and penetrating set of thoughts. I hope you'll forgive me if I concentrate on a relatively limited set of issues in this response, three to be specific: the uses of the transhistorical, the limits of the value analogy, and the virtues of Realism.

The uses of the transhistorical

This seems to be the substantive question at issue in our discussion: of what use are transhistorical 'general abstractions'—above all, 'uneven and combined development'—in understanding 'the international'? The line I took in my last letter was to acknowledge the legitimacy of resort to such concepts but to insist that, as far as possible, the main burden of explaining inter-societal relationships and trends should be borne by concepts specifying the structures and tendencies of definite modes of production. Your reply is that accounts that rely on the latter kind of concepts (what as shorthand I call 'mode-of-production analysis') will always leave behind an unexplained surplus that reflects the fact 'that all societies coexist with and interact with others, and that this super-adds a lateral field of causality over and above the "domestic" determinations arising from each and every one of the participant societies'. Failure to thematize explicitly this fact and its implications creates an ideological space that can be filled by Realism and its reifications.

All this is fine and I'm very happy to endorse it (I particularly like the formulation that the inter-societal is 'a lateral field of causality' super-added to domestic determinations). I also take your point that Trotsky's inherently historical conception of 'uneven and combined development' is designed, as it were, to control for the danger of essentialism. So, at this level of generality, we're in agreement. If I stick slightly stubbornly to a preference for pushing mode-of-production analysis as far as it will go, this is because I think this analysis is needed in order to grasp the specific modalities of the inter-societal. I was a bit surprised at your dismissal of Brenner's concept of 'political accumulation', as if it were incapable of registering 'differentiated, interactive temporalities of development within a wider social formation'. In fact, one of his main uses of the concept is to analyse the divergent patterns of state-building in mediaeval England and France—monarchy as, respectively, the class organization of the lords, reinforcing the capacity of each to extract surplus-labour from his own peasants, and as an expanding super-lord whose growing military and fiscal capabilities compensated for the declining extractive powers of individual lords—understood explicitly as a case of 'uneven and combined development':

English feudal class self-government appears to have been 'ahead' of the French in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, not only because its starting point was different, but because it built on advances in this sphere already achieved on the Continent, especially in Normandy. In turn, when French centralization accelerated somewhat later, it was influenced by English development, and was indeed, in part, a response to direct English politico-military pressure. But French feudal centralization did not follow the English pattern and, over time, radically diverged from it. Thus the development of the mechanisms of 'feudal accumulation' tended to be not only 'uneven' but 'combined', in the sense that later developers could build on previous advances made elsewhere in feudal class organization. (Brenner 1982, 52)

This is a case where a theory of the feudal mode of production helps us to understand the specific form taken by inter-societal interactions where, broadly speaking, feudal relations obtain. But mode-of-production analysis is also needed if we are properly to historicize what are too easily described as centre-periphery relations. Robert Bartlett has brilliantly captured the colonizing, expansionist dynamic that thrust the feudal lords of western Christendom into Ireland, Moorish Spain, Outremer and the Slavic lands beyond the Elbe (Bartlett 1993). Is this the same dynamic at work in the later incorporation of the entire globe in the capitalist world system? I don't think so, for reasons given once again by Brenner: where capitalist production relations obtain, economic actors' 'rules of reproduction', reflecting their dependence on the market for access to the means of subsistence, give them an incentive to develop the forces of production intensively which was absent in precapitalist economic systems (Brenner 1986). If this line of reasoning is correct, then the nature of the production relations prevailing in different regions is likely to have a decisive effect on the form taken by inter-societal relations.

Let me emphasize that these examples aren't intended to wash away the inter-social as a 'lateral field of causality' amid a tide of historical specificities. I freely concede its irreducibility and indeed have always done so in our discussions

of these matters. But, as I pointed out to you in our earlier correspondence on your ‘international historical sociology’ piece (Rosenberg 2006), you aren’t the only contemporary social theorist to thematize the significance of the inter-societal. Michael Mann in effect affirms the analytical priority of the inter-societal when he puts forward the idea of the social as power networks in opposition to the concept of society as a closed totality effectively bounded by a nation-state (Mann 1986, Chapter 1).

Granted, by using the concept of ‘uneven and combined development’ to frame the inter-societal, you give the latter a historically dynamic character. But, in a way, so does Mann, albeit in an explicitly essentialist mode, by invoking the ingrained human capacity to outflank established power configurations. For example:

Human beings are restless, purposive, and rational, striving to increase their enjoyment of the good things of life and capable of choosing appropriate means for doing so. (Mann 1986, 4)

Mode-of-production analysis is needed to block this kind of relapse into humanism; more positively, it seems to me that it is also required once you go beyond generic affirmation of the historical and dynamic character of ‘uneven and combined development’ to explore its actual modalities in specific regions and periods. But I can see that I am in grave danger of simply repeating what I have already said, so I shall say no more on this point.

The limits of the value analogy

So far I’m clear enough, whether or not my argument is correct. But I must say that that I found your treatment of my suggestion that there should be a Realist moment in the theory of the capitalist mode of production—just as (I also contended) there is a liberal one in *Capital*, Volume I, Part 1—quite hard to follow. On the one hand, you warn that this amounts to a ‘pragmatic accommodation’ with Realism which leaves its reifications intact. On the other hand, you endorse a much more generous assessment of Realism as a political ideology than I can bring myself to accept. What compounds my confusion is that you seek to bring out the problematic nature of my own strategy by developing an analogy between the kind of move from ‘uneven and combined development’ to the inter-societal which you recommend and Marx’s progression from value to surplus-value in *Capital*. In this section I want to try to puzzle out how this analogy is meant to work before returning to Realism in the next one. Forgive me if I proceed slowly and clumsily, but I am puzzled.

You develop the analogy through a discussion of Marx’s treatment of value at the beginning of *Capital* (excuse me for quoting at length but I can best deal with your argument by working through it fairly pedantically):

Central to Marx’s method ... is the positing of an undiscovered social-relational substratum to apparently self-evident phenomena and categories, a positing that then generates a radically alternative explanatory idiom. Significantly, however, the first such exercise in *Capital* comes long before any mention of wage labour, or any explicit critique of liberalism. And although it turns out to have enormous consequences for the latter, its scope, as the exuberant claim to have bettered

Aristotle himself implies, is far wider. I'm referring of course to Marx's opening engagement with the question 'What is the substance of value?' ...

This ... is worked out, not by reference to 'the totality of capitalist production relations', but through interrogation of what Marx calls the 'the simple, isolated or accidental form of value'. Here, he says, the hardest part of the question is already posed. In an oft-misunderstood claim, Marx observes that in any act of exchange the relation of equivalence posited between the things exchanged in fact simultaneously relates as equivalent whatever human activities have brought the objects of exchange to this point. Of course, and despite his use of the term, this is not yet 'value'. The relational substance of value—'socially necessary abstract labour time'—comes into systematic being only with modern capitalist society ... But why then analyse 'simple value' at all? Answer: because a crucial element of the phenomenon that Marx is anatomizing, though it becomes truly significant only in the developed (capitalist) case, is already present, *in nuce*, in every instance of exchange. (pp. 91–92 above)

I have several problems with all this. First of all, I don't think it's true that Marx answers the question of what value is by interrogating the 'simple, isolated, or accidental form of value'. His discussion of the latter is simply the first step in his analysis of the value-form in Section 3 of *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 1, whose aim is to 'trace the development of the expression of value contained in the value-relation of commodities from its simplest, almost imperceptible outline to the dazzling money-form' (Marx 1976, 139). Moreover, though Marx does praise Aristotle when discussing the simple form of value as 'the great investigator who was the first to analyse the value-form', the solution to the problem that the latter was unable to resolve—what makes qualitatively different use-values commensurable?—has already been settled in the first two sections of Chapter 1 (Marx 1976, 151). It is in Section 1 that Marx explains that the substance of value is socially necessary labour-time and in Section 2 that he introduces the critical distinction between abstract and concrete labour.

You are quite right that Marx develops his theory of value before formulating his account of capitalist exploitation and that he does so even though the law of value only becomes operative in capitalism. This strategy is justified, you say, 'because a crucial element of the phenomenon that Marx is anatomizing, though it becomes truly significant only in the developed (capitalist) case, is already present, *in nuce*, in every instance of exchange'. And you go on to explain how reification is generated by every exchange relation. I'm not at all sure that this is the right way to justify the analytical priority of value over surplus-value. Marx explains that Aristotle couldn't grasp the nature of the value-relation because it only becomes possible to recognize 'the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour' in a system of generalized commodity production where 'the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labour' (Marx 1976, 152). It is in such a system, he goes on to argue in Section 4 of *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 1, that commodity fetishism emerges. The trouble with your *in nuce* formulation is that it can't capture the *systemic* and *coercive* character of the value-relation, the subordination of economic actors to the compulsion, which derives from their own interactions, to increase productivity and reduce costs. By its nature an isolated act of exchange can't convey this. Hence Marx moves from the simple form of value, where only two use-values are exchanged, to forms where

indefinite varieties of use-values are rendered commensurable, and culminating in their universal exchangeability via the money commodity.

Marx constructs the theory of value in Part 1 of *Capital*, Volume I, without consideration of surplus-value and exploitation because he is developing here a model of generalized commodity production—of an economy of autonomous but interdependent and competing commodity producers. He needs to have this model before he deals with exploitation because it gives him a theory of the commodity and, of course, because his claim that labour-power is a commodity is central to his account of capitalist exploitation. He posits the presupposition in Volume I, Part 2, when he draws our attention to the fact that a system of generalized commodity production is one where labour-power itself is a commodity, thereby introducing a new level of determination. We must henceforth distinguish between the actual commodity producers, the sellers of labour-power and those who purchase labour-power thanks to their control of the means of production. This is a good example of what Gérard Duménil admirably calls Marx's method of 'dosed abstraction ... a concretization constructed element by element'—the progressive introduction of more complex determinations (Duménil 1978, 89). These different levels of determination coexist synchronically rather than representing a diachronic process. So you are mistaken when you say that, *stricto sensu*,²⁹ Marx shouldn't have talked of value when analyzing the simple form of value because '[t]he relational substance of value—"socially necessary abstract labour time"—comes into systematic being only with modern capitalist society'. His entire discussion of the value-form identifies distinctive properties of generalized commodity production that—though analytically they need to be introduced prior to the theory of surplus-value—can only be actualized where the capital-relation obtains.

You go on to claim that without 'the prior analysis of the inverted relational architecture of exchange' 'the theory of *surplus*-value would be, well, vulgar: all mathematics and no ontology'. It's certainly true that understanding the 'relational architecture' of generalized commodity production is a prerequisite to grasping the extraction of surplus-value. But Marx's detailed account of the valorization process in Parts 3, 4 and 5 of *Capital*, Volume I is thoroughly relational and, indeed, intellectually and politically revolutionary in the way it treats production as a conflictual social process and not simply the realization of a set of technical conditions. His later suggestion that, as you put it, "'wage labour" itself is a mystified category' has to do with the fact that, as Marx says at the start of Part 6, '[o]n the surface of bourgeois society the worker's wage appears as the price of labour', the monetary expression of the value of labour, an ideological language that is functional to the operation of the labour market but in which 'the concept of value is not only completely extinguished, but inverted, so that it becomes its contrary' (Marx 1976, 675, 677). But the distinction between labour and labour-power and the concept of the value of labour-power constitutive of the theory of surplus-value aren't implicated in this fetishistic inversion. On the contrary, by allowing us to conceptualize the real relations of exploitation, they define the norm relative to which we can say

²⁹ Strictly speaking.

that the idea of the value of labour is 'an expression as imaginary as the value of the earth' (Marx 1976, 677).

As you can probably guess after all this rigmarole, I am sceptical about the analogy that you posit between exchange and geopolitics. You write,

In both cases, what looks like an elemental datum of social reality—exchange of things on the one hand, geopolitical interaction on the other—in fact secretes a further layer of relational constitution which must be excavated *sociologically* if the datum in question is not to license a reifying discourse—of 'vulgar' economy or Realist geopolitics. Moreover, in both cases, what Marx calls the perceptual mechanism of 'camera obscura', which makes the appearance seem irreducible, derives not from any given historical form of the datum, but from properties inherent in that particular kind or fragment of human sociation in general: whenever things are exchanged, in whatever kind of society, the inverted, reified form of social relation which capitalist society uniquely develops into the 'social substance' of value is momentarily—even if inertly—posited. It is a latent sociological property of exchange relations per se. Something parallel, I shall suggest below, can be said—and must be excavated—concerning inter-societal relations ...

Thus, if we don't want to end up with either an essentialized or a reductionist notion of geopolitics, we need to posit a presupposition here—one that, like Marx's presupposition of an inverted human relational content to the exchange of things, can provide a sociological key to the hieroglyphic of Thucydidean Realism. *Hic Rhodus. Hic salta!* Needless to say, I would not dare propose such a challenge if I didn't think we already had the answer to it: but such an answer is exactly what 'uneven and combined development', worked through as a *general* abstraction, enables. (pp. 92–93, 94 above)

I don't dispute the conclusion. But there is an important difference between the 'relational constitution[s]' secreted in exchange and geopolitics. 'Uneven and combined development' is genuinely transhistorical—that indeed is your most general claim, which I have accepted. But generalized commodity production isn't. The thrust of Marx's argument in *Capital* is to show that this form of economy requires the prevalence of capitalist production relations in all their complexity. Inasmuch as you acknowledge that '[t]he relational substance of value ... comes into systematic being only with modern capitalist society' you seem at least partially to accept this. But the effect is to limit the scope of your analogy because in one case the 'relational constitution' obtains right across human space and time while in the other it proves to belong to the inner architecture of a historically specific mode of production. Marx, you say, thought that 'the riddle of (exchange) value is present in all societies and yet solvable ... only within capitalist society', but this solution depends on a detailed analysis of properties that solely obtain in the capitalist mode—as he makes clear especially in his discussion of commodity fetishism. Thus he is not developing what you call a 'generalized phenomenology' if by that you mean a theory of transhistorical scope: the simple form of value may, as you suggest, be a 'general abstraction' inasmuch as use-values are exchanged in a wide range of societies, but Marx treats it only as a step in constructing a theory of generalized commodity production and hence of the capitalist mode of production. The paradox is thus that you stress the insufficiencies of mode-of-production analysis in theorizing the inter-societal

but seek to validate your own approach by building up a detailed analogy with an argument that leads us into the mother of all mode-of-production analyses.

It may seem a bit cheeky of me to be emphasizing so much here the limits of value theory in understanding the geopolitical after making so much of Marx's method in *Capital* in the paper that started off this correspondence. But there I wasn't primarily drawing an analogy with value theory—I was *using* it. To put it more precisely, I was arguing that the Marxist theory of the capitalist mode of production can and should be extended to incorporate a theory of the state system and of the geopolitical—in *capitalism*. I add the last clause to make clear that this argument does not commit me, as you seem to imply, to denying that 'the issue of the geopolitical cannot be fully grasped from within a theory of capital'. Of course it can't, for two reasons: first, in the case of precapitalist inter-societal relations we will need, as I have tried to bring out above, theories of modes of production other than capitalism; and second, we also need, as you argue, 'general abstractions' that can capture the transhistorical surplus of 'uneven and combined development' which escapes mode-of-production analysis.

The virtues of Realism

You yourself point to the limits of the value analogy at a somewhat lower level of abstraction: 'The presupposition that needs to be posited in order to "get to the bottom" of the phenomena that Realism describes is not the same as the one Marx used to break through to the relational substance of value—and it cannot be found in *Capital*.' And you go on to warn that failure to recognize this gives rise to the danger that 'the mystified [Realist] "moment" will be incorporated, undigested, for lack of the analytical means to break it down'. Others have made much the same point—for example, Gonzalo Pozo-Martin in the article on which I comment in my state system paper (Pozo-Martin 2006). I accept there is a danger of this nature, but I'm not sure that there is a general formula for dealing with it. But a relevant methodological point is worth stating to avoid misunderstanding: just because a Marxist theory of the state system would analyse a phenomenon that Realism has made its privileged object would not require it to employ the same concepts as Realism. A good Marxist treatment of the capitalist geopolitical need no more resemble, say, Mearsheimer's *The tragedy of great power politics* (Mearsheimer 2001) than Marx's analysis of the credit system in *Capital*, Volume III, Part 5, a neoclassical text on financial markets (I know, I've slipped into analogizing despite what I said in the preceding paragraph). But, for all the chaotic state of the manuscripts poor Engels had to splice together in order to publish that analysis, it reflects very substantial empirical and analytical work on Marx's part. The work required to develop a Marxist theory of the geopolitical lies before us.

One difference between us is that I think you tend to stress more the conceptual side of this effort. Thus you write,

Geopolitical categories *can* be translated back into a generative sociological discourse, but only if the latter has already been reformulated by incorporating the

general abstraction of uneven and combined development. And in the field of sociological approaches to IR, including Marxist ones, this reformulation has yet to occur. (p. 96 above)

I take it that you have set yourself the task of helping to achieve this reformulation. I certainly await the results of these efforts with interest, but I think more historically and empirically oriented analysis is an essential complement to such conceptual under-labouring and, on the whole, it is what I am personally more interested in. All of which is slightly odd, since I am meant to be the philosopher and you the social scientist, though I suppose this only goes to show how useless disciplinary distinctions are.

I do have some mainly philosophical comments to make on your concluding discussion of Realism. This was another point at which I felt a bit dizzy, since, having warned me against swallowing Realism undigested, you overleapt me with your favourable treatment of the normative dimension of Realism. Thus you challenge my unfavourable comparison of Realism with liberalism as political ideologies:

I no longer believe (as I once certainly did) that Realism lacks deep normative resources. From the same circumstance of political fragmentation, after all, Realism derives, when so minded, an ontological critique of easy, self-serving universalisms; a highly developed moral and practical sense of the tension between ends and means; and a genuinely tragic appreciation of the anarchically inscribed conflict of particularist (national) and common (international) interests. (p. 97 above)

Once again I have a strong and weak answer to this. The strong answer is this: I know that there is a current trend in international theory to explore Realism as a normative theory, but come on! What you evoke here can very easily turn into what one might call the Statesman's Lament: decisions are complex and require a choice of evils, we are constantly defeated by the consequences of our actions, life is tough and cruel but fortunately some of us are man enough to take it on and don the imperial purple (or more usually the counsellor's more modest garb). There are bathetic cases of this kind of discourse—Arthur M Schlesinger's (1965) and Ted Sorenson's (1965) mythologization of John F Kennedy and his 'grace under pressure'—or, worse still, Henry Kissinger's apologies in his memoirs and *Diplomacy* (1994).³⁰

Edward H Carr is a much more substantial figure, but *The twenty years' crisis* reeks of the spirit of Munich. You also cite Hans J Morgenthau's *Scientific man versus power politics*. You aren't the first person to have commended this text to me as evidence of Realism's moral depth. I'm afraid I just can't see this at all. Morgenthau's argument here as elsewhere is rooted in rampant essentialism—the postulation of 'the *animus dominandi*, the desire for power', as a universal and

³⁰ Soon after John F Kennedy's assassination, two of his aides wrote bestselling biographies that sought to provide detailed evidence for the portrayal of his administration as 'Camelot': Schlesinger (1965) and Sorenson (1965). Those still susceptible to such mythmaking should consult the great investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, previously a nemesis of Kissinger, and now Bush's and Cheney's. See Hersh (1997).

irreducible source of human motivation (Morgenthau 1946, 192).³¹ It is, moreover, incoherent, since Morgenthau combines a pertinent critique of liberalism's conception of 'the international' with the affirmation of one of the main premises of utilitarianism (which he rightly treats as one of the principal forms of liberal ideology) and offshoots such as neoclassical economics, namely that the goals of action are, as Parsons puts it, random, so that reason plays a purely instrumental role, selecting the most effective means of achieving these goals. 'Reason, far from following its own inherent impulses, is driven towards its goals by the irrational forces the ends of which it serves' (Morgenthau 1946, 152).

As for the 'tragic appreciation' of 'the international', is this the kind of stuff you mean? '[I]t is only the awareness of the tragic presence of evil in all political action which at least enables man to choose the lesser evil and be as good as he can be in an evil world' (Morgenthau 1946, 202–203). Or again:

To act successfully, that is, according to the rules of the political art, is political wisdom. To know with despair that the political act is inevitably evil, and to act nevertheless, is moral courage. To choose among several expedient actions the least evil one is moral judgement. In the combination of political wisdom, moral courage, and moral judgement, man reconciles his political nature with his moral destiny. (Morgenthau 1946, 203)

Please tell me you don't take this guff seriously—it's pure Statesman's Lament. Liberalism may indeed lack 'an international theory' (I'll come back to that), and its aspirations are inherently liable to Realist debunking, but how are the horizons of these aspirations set? Merely by *liberté, égalité, fraternité*—that is, by the ideological heritage of the great bourgeois revolutions, by the ideals the Marxist critique does not reject but constantly reproaches capitalist society for systematically failing to realize. These conceptions seem to me more than 'easy, self-serving universalisms'. Liberty, equality and solidarity are ideals too powerful to abandon to the likes of Bush and Blair (Callinicos 2000). From a normative point of view, there just is no contest between Realism and liberalism. It's true that there is another form of political bathos that exploits liberal ideals. We are all too familiar with what one might call the Liberal Imperialist's War Song, currently much in use

³¹ Morgenthau's attempt in *Politics among nations* to substantiate this assumption is particularly vulgar:

The tendency to dominate, in particular, is an element of all human associations, from the family through fraternal and professional associations and local political organizations, to the state. On the family level, the typical conflict between the mother-in-law and her child's spouse is in its essence a struggle for power, the defence of an established power position against an attempt to establish a new one. As such it foreshadows the conflict on the international scene between the policies of the status quo and the policies of imperialism. (Morgenthau 1955, 31)

No wonder Waltz developed structural realism to escape such banalities. But then you know all this much better than me, since you write in *The empire of civil society* that 'Morgenthau ... had some rather unflattering and unsophisticated views on human nature, and an embarrassing habit of parading them as the philosophical basis of realism' (Rosenberg 1994, 23). May I commend this excellent book to you as a corrective to your current tendency towards an overindulgent treatment of Realism?

on both sides of the Atlantic to justify Israel's battering of Lebanon and Gaza.³² But isn't one main reason why people so detest Blair's pharisaism that it debases the very ideals to which it appeals? And to resort to Realism in order to overcome the manifest defects of contemporary liberalism is to get trapped in exactly the rat run of mainstream IR theory from which we both want Marxism to offer a way of escaping.

My weak answer is not that different from the strong one. One can find serious expressions of the moral outlook that you evoke. The most important is probably Weber's *Politics as a vocation*³³ and the famous contrast it draws between the 'ethic of conviction' and the 'ethic of responsibility'.³⁴ But there are reasons for exercising care in approaching this text. In the first place, as Perry Anderson has brought out very well, the lecture's rhetoric is informed in part by what he calls Weber's 'vulcanism', his self-image as the embodiment of 'a combination of intense passion and iron discipline', in part by the animus of a German nationalist fiercely unreconciled to the Reich's double disaster of November 1918—military defeat and sociopolitical revolution (Anderson 1992, 191). But, secondly, as Anderson also notes, 'Weber was an early twentieth-century liberal, of a distinctively German kind' (Anderson 1992, 193). John Gray recognizes him as a case of what he calls 'agonistic liberalism', 'a stoical and tragic liberalism of unavoidable conflict and irreparable loss among inherently rivalrous values' (Gray 1995, 1). Weber relativizes liberalism, not only by drawing attention to the mutual incompatibility of its constitutive values but also by stressing its historical fragility, its dependence on 'a unique, never to be repeated set of circumstances' (Weber 1995, 108). But he remains a particularly important and impressive representative of the liberal tradition.

The point of the foregoing is to suggest that serious statements of normative Realism are likely not to articulate a free-standing ideology but to express the values distinctive to Realism in combination with others derived usually from liberalism, as is demonstrable in Weber's case.³⁵ It seems to me that the excessive claims that you make for Realism are motivated by your (entirely legitimate) preoccupations with international theory. Thus, in support of your claim that, 'in International Theory ... it is liberalism [and not Realism] which is intrinsically shallow', you write, 'There is a real sense in which liberalism (and actually most Marxist thought) is not, and does not possess, an international theory.' I think this

³² This letter was written during the Israel Defence Force's invasion and bombardment of Lebanon in the summer of 2006.

³³ *Politics as a vocation* [*Politik als Beruf*] was a lecture given by Weber to the students of Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich in January 1919 and published in October of the same year: see Weber 2004.

³⁴ Thus, in his powerful conservative critique of the United States' grand strategy since the 1940s, Christopher Layne invokes Weber's ethic of responsibility in support of an affirmation of Realism's 'moral sensibilities' (Layne 2006, 203–205).

³⁵ For the sake of my own philosophical conscience, let me just emphasize that I use the expression 'normative Realism' here to refer not to the meta-ethical doctrine of moral realism, which holds that evaluative sentences are true or false in the same way that other assertoric sentences are, but to whatever normative theory might be worked up out of Realism as a positive theory of 'the international'. The terminological confusion is likely to be increased by the profusion of strategic doctrines—'Wilsonian Realism', 'ethical Realism' and so on—being offered by the United States in the wake of the neoconservative debacle in Iraq.

latter statement is true enough, but it only warrants the conclusion of liberalism's narrowness within the domain of international theory, as your initial qualifying clause indeed makes clear. But this tells us nothing about the relative normative resources of the two theories. In *that* respect, my judgment remains that Realism is much the weaker of the two, and that it tends to be parasitic on other, richer philosophical traditions (most usually liberalism, but Nietzsche's ontology of the will to power offers another, albeit in its own way highly problematic, resource).

I certainly agree that Realism 'is the only international theory we have—but it is nevertheless the wrong one'. This seems to be one of the main reference points in our discussion, that we both intellectually respect Realism but want to develop a Marxist theory of 'the international' that can transcend it. Indeed *Hic Rhodus! Hic salta!* One aspect of Realism's strength that you don't discuss is the way in which, particularly in the work of structural realists such as Waltz and Mearsheimer, it thematizes the systemness of 'the international'. You inadvertently touch on this when you cite Polybius in one of your footnotes: 'In previous times, events in the world occurred without impinging on one another ... [then] history became a whole, as if a single body; events in Italy and Libya came to be enmeshed with those in Asia and Greece, and everything gets directed towards a single goal.'

There is of course one way of interpreting this statement, namely that the late Hellenistic Mediterranean world formed what Mann calls 'a multi-power-actor civilization' composed of interacting rival city-states and kingdoms. Here there are definitely dragons in the shape of the kind of comparative international theory practised by Barry Buzan and his associates, which seeks to identify the properties of international systems widely separated in space and time (Buzan and Little 2000). We would probably both agree that this represents an extreme form of reification because it abstracts political forms and geopolitical patterns from the historical processes and social relations in which they were embedded. Yet we both seem also to agree that there is something to this sort of reifying theory—that it captures something about the world that both liberalism and much mainstream social theory fail to address. As you nicely put it, 'Realism is the reified abstraction of a real dimension of the historical process.' You also state what's needed very well—a deeper recapture of these phenomena by a non-Realist social theory'. Plainly we have different strategies for accomplishing this shared objective. This does not mean that the critical comparison of these strategies can't offer illumination. I certainly have gained much from our exchanges.

All the best,

Alex

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