



International Relations — The ‘Higher Bullshit’: A Reply to the Globalization Theory Debate

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This article replies to an earlier forum (*International Politics* (42.3) on ‘Globalization Theory: a Post Mortem’. Whereas the ‘Post Mortem’ had criticized Globalization Theory largely for its neglect of Classical Social Theory’s *achievements*, the current paper emphasizes its reproduction of one of Classical Social Theory’s greatest *limitations*: the failure to incorporate ‘the international’ into its theorization of historical development. This limitation, it is argued, may be overcome using the idea of ‘uneven and combined development’, an idea which is first reformulated (in order to re-connect the premises of social and international theory), and then used as a vantage point from which to respond to criticisms of the ‘Post Mortem’. ‘The international’, it turns out, is not the fading reality postulated by Globalization Theory but rather a fundamental dimension of social existence that IR, uniquely among the social sciences, encounters as its core subject matter. *International Politics* (2007) 44, 450–482. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ip.8800200

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Introduction

Some years ago, when I began teaching at LSE, the Master’s level international theory lectures were in the capable hands of the late Philip Windsor. Eager to learn the ropes, I asked him one day whether I might attend. To my surprise, he told me that, as a matter of courtesy among colleagues, such mutual surveillance was not encouraged. Undeterred, I asked whether, in that case, he could at least tell me something of what was in the lectures, for I was curious to know how he framed the subject. ‘Oh, you know’, came the laconic reply: ‘it’s the higher bullshit.’

There the conversation ended. Yet in my memory it gradually took on an intellectual life of its own. For despite Windsor’s self-deprecating irony, the phrase ‘higher bullshit’ had conjured up in my mind a prospect which has, over time, preoccupied me more and more: the idea that there exists a level of reflection at which the particular theoretical categories of International Relations (IR) can be resolved into a more general, ‘supradisciplinary’ idiom,



providing not just a point of integration with, but also a distinctive contribution to the wider field of social theory. For a long time, the idea was only a question: does IR actually *have* a ‘higher bullshit’ of its own in this sense? Or does the question of ‘the international’, whatever its concrete significance for particular empirical explanations, ultimately dissolve without theoretical residue as one rises to the level of abstraction at which only the most general premises of social theory remain? To put it another way: is ‘the international’ just a historically contingent sub-category of ‘the social’, vacant of any general determinations of its own? Or does it, on the contrary, have implications which reach, or should reach, back into the very definition of ‘the social’ itself?

It was *en route* to this latter suspicion that, as George Lawson and John Hobson both suggest, ‘Globalization Theory: a Post Mortem’ marked a kind of ‘way-station’. In subsequent work, I have been trying to formulate the suspicion more systematically by interrogating Leon Trotsky’s ‘theory of uneven and combined development’. And though still incomplete, that interrogation provides the best vantage point from which to respond to the very valuable replies to the ‘Post Mortem’ published in this journal. For it turns out that much of the controversy over ‘globalization’ hangs on this intellectually prior question of ‘the international’ — a question which, as Jan Aart Scholte observed (2005a, 396), was never fully clarified in the ‘Post Mortem’. Thus, before replying directly to my critics, I must briefly summarize where my later work has been leading.

Part I: Uneven and Combined Development — An Interim Synopsis¹

In an initial sense, the social ontology of IR — for that is what we are pursuing here — is not difficult to excavate.² If we define ‘the international’ descriptively as ‘that dimension of social reality which arises... from the co-existence within it of more than one society’ (Rosenberg, 2006), then three quite radical implications follow from only the slightest reflection. Since human societies have always co-existed with others, it follows that the social world has always included an inter-societal field of multiplicity and difference, whose behavioural characteristics cannot be derived *in toto* from the internal particularities of the societies involved. (Here lies the rational kernel of the Realist conception of ‘the international’ as a transhistorical phenomenon.) From the fact that all societies thus confront an outside world which must be managed, it follows that this imperative enters into the conditions of reproduction of individual societies themselves — entailing that social development is not just multiple but also interactive and tendentially interdependent. And from that circumstance in turn, it follows that internal patterns of development can be interrupted by



external events, overdetermined and redirected by external pressures, and even pre-empted or accelerated by the introduction, ready-made, of the results of development elsewhere. Indeed, in a social world of more than one society, not only *can* this happen; it *chronically* happens, to the extent that it must be regarded as a circumstance intrinsic to the theorization of development itself as a historical phenomenon: in effect, all societies subsume within their evolving historical being the accumulated — and still accumulating — consequences of their co-existence with others. At first blush, then, the ‘higher bullshit’ of IR can be straightforwardly apprehended: it comprises the implications of its particular subject matter — inter-societal co-existence — for the ontology of the social sciences. And these implications — superimposing multiplicity and interactivity onto the concept of ‘society’ — are clearly enormous.

And yet there is something not quite right about these formulations. The premise of ‘more-than-one’ has been invoked as a descriptive generalization, which is then critically applied to a pre-existing conception of social development. This gives us the importance of ‘the international’ for social theory, but it does not yet deliver a reformulation of social theory itself in which ‘the international’ no longer figures as an externality. In this respect, it provides an *inter-disciplinary* idiom, but not yet the *supra-disciplinary* one that our earlier definition of ‘higher bullshit’ requires. We therefore need to break off from this line of reasoning, to step back further behind the problem, and to begin again, from a different starting point. For, as I hope will soon appear, this initial way of ordering the material sets an all too early limit to how far the argument can extend. But have we not now set ourselves an impossible task? If inter-societal co-existence really is a transhistorical fact about the social world, how *can* we step ‘behind’ it to search for our alternative starting point? The answer can only be that we must identify some yet more general characteristic of social reality, by virtue of which inter-societal co-existence is intelligibly intrinsic to it — rather than stalking it like some mute, uncomprehended shadow. And such a characteristic does exist.

Human social development is — and always has been — uneven. Viewed as a whole, it has always comprised a multiplicity of organizational types, cultural forms and geographical scales, proceeding at varying tempos — and under a multiplicity of political authorities. Consequently, each of its many instances has indeed always co-existed with others, in varying degrees of interconnection — an interactive combination which, as World Historians never tire of illustrating, has been significant both for the nature of individual societies and for the intermittently cumulative movement of the historical process as a whole. From these two ‘well-known, massive facts of history’ (Tenbruck, 1994, 87) — from, that is, the intrinsically uneven and combined character of social development — arise, in fact, both the very existence of ‘the international’ (or



inter-societal) as a dimension of the social world and the myriad determinations which it super-adds to the constitution of 'the social' itself.

For the unevenness of development finds expression not just in the qualitative variation among its historical forms but also in the quantitative multiplicity of its instances — that most basic premise of any conception of the geopolitical or international. From the multiplicity of instances follows (with varying significance) the fact of intersocietal co-existence as a universal dimension of socio-historical development. And from that fact follow in turn both the existence of an additional lateral field of (again, variably developed) interaction between societies and a dimension of 'intra-societal' development itself, deriving from relations with others.

Now, all this might appear only to repeat in a different order what has already been said. Yet there is a crucial difference. Reasoning from our alternative premise, 'the international' no longer appears as a mute, irreducible circumstance (inter-societal co-existence) whose effects interfere with the separately derived premises of social theory. Instead, it can be seen to arise from an anterior sociological attribute of development itself — its intrinsic unevenness. Moreover, with this more general sociological postulate now in place, the socio-historical variability of its referents — from the bare fact of (unconnected) co-existence in time (Byzantine and meso-American civilizations, for example), to situations of intensely differentiated, intensely interactive development (such as 19th century Europe), and even including those cases (such as European feudalism) where it applies without entailing juridically distinct 'societies' at all — can be left open for empirical specification without diluting its analytical validity. What we today call 'the international' therefore is a crystallization, in a particular historical form, of this wider attribute of social development — its generic unevenness.

A basic methodological problem, which has plagued the modern social sciences, may lie open to solution in this way. Well-known and massive the 'facts of history' referred to above may be; yet their theoretical significance has nonetheless fallen through the cracks dividing the academic disciplines. As Friedrich Tenbruch argues, Sociology, in a tradition extending back to the writings of classical social theory itself, has almost always conceptualized 'society' in the ontological singular — thereby excluding the inter-societal dimension from its *theorization* of development. And in International Relations this prior separation of 'the social' from the 'inter-societal' has found its unhappy correlate: a detaching of the 'inter-societal' from 'the social' — leaving it to become the property of political Realism. Indeed, 'the sociological' and 'the geopolitical' have hardened into methodologically distinct logics of explanation — the one proceeding from the varied nature of individual societies, the other built exclusively on the 'irreducible' fact of their universal co-existence.



Neither of these one-sided premises by itself contains the means to undo the debilitating effects of their separation. Instead, the (non-interactive) sociological premise, when extended to explain international relations, generates the ‘reductionist’ fallacy of the ‘domestic analogy’ (Bull, 1966; Waltz, 1979). The geopolitical premise, meanwhile, drawing new life from every sociological shortfall, tends in the opposite direction — towards ever more abstract formulations of anarchy, as if it were a supra-sociological phenomenon. The double result of this stand-off is well known: as ‘the international’ has been a missing link of social theory, its absence rendering indecipherable the concrete patterns of social development (Skocpol, 1973), so ‘the social’ has been the missing content of ‘the geopolitical’, without which its cycles of ‘recurrence and repetition’ (Wight, 1966, 25) remain cognitively as well as normatively meaningless.

Nor does an *empirical* recombination of these premises, exemplified in Theda Skocpol’s (1979) pioneering work, solve the underlying problem. Brilliantly interpolated into a dynamic historical sociology of modern revolutions, ‘the international’ intruded powerfully into her sociological method without, however, itself being grasped as a sociological phenomenon. In this way, the ‘domestic analogy’ fallacy was certainly avoided — but at the price of ceding ‘the international’ once again to Realism. Neither in Skocpol’s work, nor in that of her many successors, does one find a sociological definition of ‘the international’ itself. And yet, as noted above, it has no other source than the uneven (and hence intrinsically multilinear and interactive) character of *social* development. ‘Unevenness [is] the most general law of the historic process’ (Trotsky, 1980, I, 5): here, I am arguing, is a premise which offers to undo — from ‘behind’ — the methodological separation of social and international theory, and to unlock thereby the social ontology of the international.³

This claim for a wider transhistorical remit for Trotsky’s concept is not as heterodox as it first appears. Trotsky himself repeatedly invoked a premodern narrative of how Russian society, caught within the wider geo-social unevenness of Eurasian development, participated in a succession of interactive pressures and linkages whose cumulative result was the crystallizing of the ‘national’ peculiarities of Czarism. And whatever the uniquely universalizing tendencies of capitalist society, it was these anterior properties of multiplicity and interactivity (general to the historical process overall) which entailed that no unilinear conception — even of capitalist development — could capture the actual shape of its movement in historical space and time: ‘England in her day revealed the future of France, considerably less of Germany, but not in the least of Russia and not of India’ (Trotsky, 1980, III, 378).

Yet here, as we move onto the more familiar (modern, capitalist) terrain of Trotsky’s idea, we must tease out an irreducibly dialectical connection. Capitalism, as we have already seen, neither invented nor abolished the uneven



and combined character of social development; yet it has radically transformed its meaning. Indeed, capitalism, wrote Trotsky, 'prepares and in a certain sense realises the universality and permanence of man's development' (1980, I, 4). And this statement bears careful parsing. For Trotsky is suggesting not simply that capitalism expands onto a world scale; his claim is rather that its developmental tendencies (which include the latter outcome) in fact work a much deeper alteration in the texture of the historical process itself. How?

Earlier instances of development, however individually magnificent — Trotsky mentions Egypt, Rome and China — had risen and fallen in different regions. None had impacted on every other during the period of its own flourishing. And each in its decline, therefore, had left at least some — usually most — others to build their own foundations of development. Viewed as a whole, therefore, (and whatever achievements might contingently have been transmitted across space and time), human social development retained an essentially 'provincial', 'episodic' and even 'cyclical' character (1980, I, 4). Under such conditions, one could certainly say of the historical process what we have distilled above: namely, that it was always uneven and everywhere combined. But this would be a wandering descriptive generalization, applying locally and in different ways to all its parts, rather than an identification of any overall logic. Causally speaking, after all, there *was* no single overall process to which such a logic could apply.

Trotsky's characterization of pre-capitalist development verges on caricature: it needs qualifying, heavily and in many ways. Yet four elements of the contrast which he builds upon it do seem to survive the necessary qualifications. First, capitalism starts to realize the 'universality' of human development because its expansion transforms an historically given *descriptive* totality of forms, levels and instances of development into an organic totality of interrelated parts, a worldwide division of labour: 'Our entire planet, its land and water areas, the earth's surface and its subsoil provide today the arena for a *worldwide* economy, the dependence of whose various parts upon each other has become indissoluble' (1972/1937, 71).

Second, however, this historically sudden widening of interconnection (the 19th century emergence of a world market) brings with it a radical change in the very nature of interconnection. More than simply an intensification of 'external' interaction between societies, capitalism's proliferation of points of exchange (arising from the commodified form of its own productive relations) comprises in fact a spatial extension (and interpenetration) of its inner circuits of social reproduction themselves. Here lay what Trotsky called 'the secret power of the world market' (1975, 13) — its mysterious ability not just to transmit pressures and effects over large distances but to carry them into the productive foundations of remote societies.



As with all trade, this new social process involves the mutually functional exchange of use-values (in the concrete form of given products). Yet, thirdly, a further element has entered in: attached (at first only on one side) to a dynamic of surplus accumulation in which the cheapening of labour power through technical advance plays an increasingly central role (Marx's 'relative surplus value'), this process of exchange now also exercises a historically rising pressure of relative devaluation among the societies involved in it, capitalist or otherwise.

Hence, and finally, 'development' — in the novel sense of the unending techno-scientific rationalization of production — now becomes, for the first time, a *geographically* universal imperative of human societies, mediated by the *abstract* universal language of exchange-value, within an *empirically* universalizing social structure: the world market.

As a consequence of all this, human development also now becomes 'permanent': its accumulating results increasingly no longer require — or even allow — serial repetition either later in time or elsewhere in space. For the episodic and cyclical character of the millennial historical process has been ruptured not just in one place (by the emergence there of a systemic and linear logic of advance) but also (through the outward proliferation of capitalist exchange relations) at the level of human social development as an interactive, spatio-temporal whole.

In short, for Trotsky, capitalism did not just change the world: it actually changed the overall nature of historical change itself. Previously, three different referents of the term 'development' — empirical eventuation, societal trajectory and the 'species-level' increase of human capacities — had borne only a contingent, intermittent and haphazard relation to each other. With the emergence of capitalism, however, these were now tendentially fused in the interactive dynamic of a single worldwide social formation.

Marx himself, of course had earlier commented that in such ways, capital had 'produced world history for the first time' (1974, 78). Yet if so, then why *should* French, German, Russian and Indian patterns of development differ categorically? Here we must attend to the other moment of the dialectic. For the answer, it turns out, lies in an admixture of causes deriving from the unevenness of worldwide development and now expressed through specifically inter-societal dynamics.

After all, long before the universalizing tendencies of capital could create 'a world after its own image' (Marx, 1973, 71), their first effect was to deepen the existing unevenness of worldwide social development, while simultaneously drawing its parts into a single system. With this conjunction, unevenness itself was increasingly transformed from a latent descriptive fact about human diversity into an active causal structure of determinations and pressures. And correspondingly, the concept of uneven and combined development acquired a



new referent: from being a *general* abstraction of the multilinear and interactive character of development *per se*, it could now be formulated additionally as a *concrete* abstraction of the dynamic of capitalist world development as a specific historical process. It could become, in short, a theory of modern world history.

The major elements of this theory need only the briefest mention here. The early effects of capitalist development in North West Europe confronted other — latecomer — societies with a ‘whip of external necessity’ by which they were ‘compelled to follow after’ (1980, I, 4–5); yet this emulation produced not replicas of some original pattern of development, but rather ‘dynamic social formations which have no precedent and have no analogies’ (1964, 162). For on the one hand, the same temporal lag which created the pressure also yielded a ‘privilege of historic backwardness’, enabling a ‘skipping over [of] intermediate steps’ (1980, I, 5) of technical development and financial accumulation through importing their most advanced results from outside, hence scrambling the sequence earlier followed by the model societies; and on the other hand, the non-capitalist states which orchestrated this catch-up modernization sought simultaneously to preserve their foundations in the pre-existing social structures which it inevitably tended to decompose — compounding the ‘amalgam’ (1980, I, 6) of advanced and primitive features with historically innovative fusions of capitalist with non-capitalist forms of society. The expansion of the world market thus simultaneously created and absorbed these hybrids of ‘combined development’ into its overall social structure (for the ‘combinations’ thus generated also entailed in every case a tightening causal interconnection of the inside with the outside), such that the emerging ‘universal social formation’ (1980, III, 379) was itself a dynamic amalgam: Czarist Russia, empowered by Western weapons and loans ‘to intervene in all the political relations of Europe’ (1971, 26) in order to obstruct political liberalization among its neighbours; the material expansion of the United States drawing its political interests outwards, absorbing the socio-political tensions ‘of the whole world into the foundations of her structure’ (1970, 8); England, already overtaken, paying the price for its early priority and now, in its relative decline, ‘leading the United States to hegemony’ (1973, 25). Everywhere, in fact, the ‘national and international’ determinations of combined development pre-empted and ‘cut across’ (1970, 197) the simple, classical model of capitalist class formation and struggle. And finally, it was the complex relational configuration of this overall social structure (at once trans- and inter-societal) that governed the direction of capitalist world development, with results which essentially unilinear conceptions of the historical process were unable to grasp. ‘The logic of international relations’, wrote Trotsky, transferring the reference from inter-state relations to this wider configuration, ‘is stronger than the logic of diplomacy’ (1962, 245).



Now, what is so striking about this theory is just how many of the causal mechanisms at work in the production of ‘combined development’ operate through specifically international circumstances, which are themselves in turn derivable from the sociological premises of uneven and combined development. We can list these international causal mechanisms as follows.

It is, first and foremost, due to the uneven, politically fragmented character of ‘the process of development in its entirety, that is, taken in its fullest scope’ (1962, 116) that the emergence of capitalism gives rise to a ‘whip of *external necessity*’ at all. The ‘privilege of historic backwardness’ too is a function of the overall unevenness of development, expressed as an interactive ‘simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous’ (Bloch) of the societies involved. It is this same phenomenon (viewed now in its qualitative aspect of difference) that entails that the social conditions of capitalist development crystallizing first in one part of the world find no necessary indigenous parallels elsewhere. It is nonetheless the imperative elsewhere to maintain geopolitical independence which provokes the transformative agency of the ‘backward’ state — just as it is, once again, the mediation of inter-societal difference (in the effort to preserve its pre-existing social foundations) which makes that agency perilous and contradictory, mutating foreign influences in the very act of importing them — driving the outcome yet further beyond any unilinear recapture.

In other words, when we dismantle the complex causality of capitalist combined development we uncover a nexus of powerful determinations at the heart of modern world history that arise specifically from the inter-societal dimension of that history. At each step of the way, social forms being transmitted between societies are in fact pushed and pulled into different shapes by imperatives, constraints and opportunities simultaneously generated by the manifold circumstance of inter-societal co-existence. The inter-societal, then, is no empty space, no posterior contingency and no ‘subsidiary circumstance’ (Marx, 1976, 727). Yet neither are the determinations which populate it ‘supra-sociological’ causes: like the very existence of ‘the international’ itself, they are expressions of the generically uneven and combined character of social development.

Still, to be clear, the inter-societal determinations thus identified by Trotsky do not replace the ‘organic tendencies’ of capitalist development formulated by Marx. On the contrary, they are themselves continually reconstellated and reactivated by new rounds of technological innovation in the advanced centres of production, new geographies of accumulation and crisis, and ever-renewed pressures towards the expansion of commodification as a social process. The point is rather that conceptualizing the latter in abstraction from the premise of unevenness and its consequences externalizes ‘the international’ and its systematic causal significance from the theory; and this procedure must end, it seems, by opening an unbridgeable gulf between a theory of capitalist



development and its actual shape as a historical process. This problem, however, is not peculiar to Marxism. To a greater or lesser extent, it has bedevilled all theories of development (Nisbet, 1969). And in this respect, the potential contribution of IR to social theory is quite fundamental.⁴

Viewed in this light, the 'Post Mortem' was indeed a transitional piece. For there the concept of 'uneven and combined development' functioned, one might almost say, *à la Skocpol*. It posited geopolitical co-existence as an 'external' circumstance whose consequences reached into the process of development, deflecting its course from what it would otherwise have been. But that 'otherwise' marked, in effect, a hangover of referential failure in the overall conception (sustained in part by the Post Mortem's exclusive focus on modern capitalist development). Since development is always multilinear and interactive, there is in principle no 'otherwise' to which this 'deflecting' can refer. And this confirms that 'uneven and combined development' is not — as its positioning in the 'Post Mortem' perhaps implied — a posterior overdetermination of 'the social' by 'the geopolitical'. It is rather an anterior, neglected feature of 'the social' itself. It is the missing social ontology of 'the international' — the 'higher bullshit' of IR.

And yet — gulp! — is not all of the above simply another way of expressing, without uttering, 'the global'? It's time to meet the critics. And Hobson's response to the 'Post Mortem' provides an early opportunity to answer this question.

Part II: Uneven and Combined Development vs Globalization Theory

Hobson: World History and Globalization

Hobson beckons me onto the field of World History and asks, in effect, whether I will accept the cumulative implications of what is to be found there. To wit: (1) that for most of recorded history the most advanced societies lay outside the West; (2) that the assorted results of their development, transmitted to Europe by processes of 'historical-global' diffusion (2005, 373), were essential to the West's own 'progress', including the industrial revolution which raised it to a dominant world position; (3) that this later ascendancy was then falsely read back into the past via a search for purely endogenous causes which could explain 'the European miracle'; (4) that the corollary of this search was a designation of non-European societies as unchanging and non-innovative; (5) that Marx himself participated in this Eurocentric falsification, deriving the origins of capitalism from a sequence of developments which reached back into European history alone; and finally, (6) that if I accepted the need for a rectification of Marx's errors in this regard, I would be placing myself in an implausibly paradoxical position: having asserted the claims of classical



(Marxian) social theory against Globalization Theory, I would then have to submit the 'fundamentals' of Marxism to a correction which chiefly involved the recognition of the neglected role of 'global' forces in history.

This is a nicely turned argument. What may I safely concede to it without being dragged all the way to its conclusion? The answer, actually, is that I *must* concede almost everything. After all, what Hobson invokes is essentially — if he will permit the paraphrase — a history of unevenly developing societies, in which the results of more 'advanced' instances radiate outwards and enter into the ongoing conditions of development elsewhere. Taken as a spatio-temporal whole, he is saying, Eurasian social development has an uneven and combined dimension which needs grasping in any enquiry into the origins of the modern world. Amen to that — and also to his critique of the Eurocentric fallacies (including, alas, those of Marx (Anderson, 1974, 462–549)) which have contributed to the neglect of this dimension. The version of Trotsky's theory deployed in the 'Post Mortem' was oblivious to the wider, world-historical scope of this dimension. In terms of how it therefore needed to widen, Hobson was well ahead of me.

Yet with so much conceded to his argument, how can I resist its conclusion? Fortunately, he has given me ample means. For a key feature of Hobson's piece is the projection backwards into world history of the term 'global'. Indeed, it is on the prior designation, in step two, of premodern inter-societal exchanges as 'global' that *any* link between steps five and six hangs. We must therefore enquire further into this designation.

What does the term 'global' actually connote in Hobson's account? As usual, the one meaning it *cannot* have is the *only* one intrinsic to the word itself — namely the property of being co-extensive with the globe. Instead the term settles, here as almost everywhere else, on those networks of communication and exchange which extend beyond individual societies to compose regional, or even supra-regional, frameworks of social action and causality. Now, since such frameworks are an emergent phenomenon of inter-societal co-existence itself, evidence of their operation can be traced back beyond even the Neolithic period. Yet, are we seriously to describe the Paleolithic transport of flints between human groups several hundred miles apart as a 'global' phenomenon?

Beyond such descriptive dilemmas, however, lurks a deeper methodological problem, which we can elucidate by recalling our earlier discussion. 'Uneven and combined development' posits the asynchronous interaction of *societies* as the object of analysis, hence embedding the study of interactions within a wider ontology of social reproduction — and *vice versa*. The idea of 'the global', however, shifts focus to the things that are circulating, the range and manner of their circulation and, in the end, the very fact of their circulation. The danger of this procedure is that the material and ideational artefacts of social reproduction then reappear, in Hobson's words, as 'autonomous global forces'



(p. 374). But ‘autonomous’ exactly from what? Surely not from the overall developmental process which — when conceived as uneven and combined — already includes these phenomena. The solution to a non-interactive conception of development cannot lie in an equally problematic hypostasizing of interconnection *per se*. Yet that is where historical usage of the term leads.

In Hobson’s account, the ‘transmission’ and ‘diffusion’ of ‘Oriental globalization’ (p. 374) seem to operate between societies as if traversing a causal vacuum. But this is at best a theoretical shorthand. As we saw above, the inter-societal realm is no inert medium — for the radiation of ‘resource portfolios (ideas, institutions and technologies)’ (p. 377) or anything else. The unevenness and recombination which compose it involve also discontinuities and innovative fusions which are essential to the specific forms of causality which it adds to the social world. A concept of transmission that cannot focus these simply detaches its objects from their historical sociological integument. And there is nothing in the concept of ‘global’ itself which can focus them.

Of course, the hypostasizing tendency need not be realized. C.A. Bayley, for example, manages to deploy the term ‘global’ to describe early modern inter-regional exchanges in an analysis which roots their shape and meaning in an underlying cultural anthropology of the participant societies. He succeeds in this however, only because he first strips the term of any intrinsic determinations of its own, recasting it as an ‘ideal-type or heuristic device’ for posing the changing historical forms of cross-cultural linkages, exchanges and inter-penetrations (2002, 68). And yet even this — although it enables him to counter the anachronistic assumption that inter-regional phenomena are historically novel — is not enough to inoculate his text fully from the liabilities of the term. On careful reflection, for example, a description of ‘the concept of the Second Rome and succession to the Caliphate’ as ‘both globalizing concepts’ (2002, 51) must surely breed confusion all round. And since he himself notes that ‘some historians have long... analysed globalisation without benefit of modish jargon’ (2002, 49), one is left wondering whether — in World History as everywhere else — this term is not simply more trouble than it is worth.

I suspect therefore that when Hobson moves beyond the valuable exercise of listing empirically the many ‘Eastern’ innovations which contributed to ‘Western’ development — that is, when he attempts to theorize the historical process involved — the role of the term ‘global’ in his account will be revealed for what it is: a descriptive placeholder for phenomena which it provides no means of analysing. And at that point an additional set of questions will also reveal itself, multiplying further the demand for a substantive, historical sociological theory. Imperial China sustained its developmental lead over several centuries; yet the radiation of its achievements never produced in Europe anything like the long, convulsive process of combined development



which capitalist industrialization in Europe almost immediately initiated in China. Why not? Similarly, the thick interconnection of the Old World generated by Islamic trading civilization at its height was probably unprecedented in its combination of geographical scale and mercantile innovation; yet for all the interconnection, no sustained dynamic of time-space compression resulted. Why not? The answers to these questions must lie in a reintegration of the study of interconnection with the analysis of structures of social reproduction themselves.

Tarak Barkawi has recently noted that a penalty of using the word 'global' to describe inter-societal processes in general is that no term then remains to distinguish phenomena which are, literally, global (2006, 18, 97). And this insight has a world-historical, theoretical correlate: if inter-societal connections throughout history are all treated as incipiently 'globalizing', then do we not lose the ability even to see that the actual, and unique, globalizing dynamic of modern capitalism needs to be explained? And for that task, Marx's social theory, relieved of Eurocentric baggage, seems as indispensable as ever.

In the meantime, until it can be shown that the use of the term 'global' to describe 6th century Eurasia identifies anything other than phenomena more appropriately designated as 'inter-societal', step six of Hobson's argument will simply not follow from the preceding five. Nor would it help his own intellectual project if it did. For the story of *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (2004) is the story of a multilinear and interactive development of social formations which the idea of 'globalization' is not equipped to conceptualize.

Still, most of the responses to the 'Post Mortem' focussed not on this general world-historical theme, but on the question of capitalist world development more specifically. The 'Post Mortem' (and *Follies* too) had identified two sets of problems with Globalization Theory in this respect, charging that it misunderstood both the implications of capitalism for international relations and the enduring significance of 'the international' for capitalism. Where do the critical responses leave these claims? In the remainder of this article, I shall try to take stock of this, moving gradually from the first to the second set of issues. At a certain point in this movement, however, the direct concern with Globalization Theory will start to peter out. But then, as Lawson pointed out: I have already supped too long at the table of Globalization Theory — and in truth the fare has not been very nourishing.

Scholte: Globalization Theory — the Retreat Continues?

The 'Post Mortem' was provocative — and no one could accuse Jan Aart Scholte of failing to rise to the provocation. Alone among the respondents, he challenges the argument on all three levels at which it was pitched. At the



(‘meta-theoretical’) level of social theory he finds: a rigid, non-dialectical conception of cause and effect; a reductionist account of the social significance of space; a misreading of the writings on globalization; and a dogmatic rejection of any dialogue between classical social theory and later ideas which respond to a changing historical object of analysis. Meanwhile, the historical sociological section of the ‘Post Mortem’ exhibits: a failure to define either ‘sovereignty’ or ‘international’; and a neglect of the literature, much of it Marxist, examining ‘the altered conditions’ (p. 397) of both interstate relations and capitalist accumulation. Indeed, the ‘equivocations’ of which I accuse Globalization Theory are avoided in my own argument principally ‘by refusing to acknowledge and engage with counterevidence’ (p. 398). And finally, the empirical historical argument — tying the rise and fall of the *Zeitgeist* of globalization to a historical conjuncture now in the past — is in the end ‘disconcertingly empty’ (p. 391). For a whole battery of statistical indicators continues to record the ongoing march of the phenomenon — as real-world event, as object of government policy and as framework of academic analysis.

With liabilities such as these being wilfully incurred at every step of my argument, the gathering thrust of Scholte’s critique can be delivered and redelivered with the lightest of touches, and to potentially devastating effect. Confronting the ‘illusory degree of clarity’ which the Post Mortem purchases by its devotion to ‘linear causation from a single source’, and which it now demands of others, he politely demurs:

Better it might be for theory to show greater sensitivity to, respect for, and encouragement of plural experiences and possibilities in history. Given the often harmful societal and ecological consequences of a century of ‘social science’ hubris (from both Marxism and other quarters), it might not be such ‘folly’ to allow alternative methodologies a hearing.... So let us please not pull the plug on globalization research before an incipient enquiry with potentially major benefits has had sufficient opportunity to mature (pp. 7, 11).

What reasonable being could possibly turn down such a plea? And more alarmingly: is that one-eyed intellectual ogre really me?

Well, in retrospect there certainly was something rather wild-eyed in my claim that the term ‘globalization’ was disappearing from public discourse, and Scholte was generous not to make more of this mistake — even if the term’s survival does have more to do with reasons discussed in Jonathan Joseph’s ideology-critique of the idea (2006) than with its intrinsic intellectual coherence. But did I really argue that ‘it is not possible for aspects of social life to figure as both cause and effect’ (Scholte, 2005a, 394)? *Follies* actually began by noting that it was ‘intrinsic to the nature of historical change’ that ‘the consequences of a particular historical development may indeed go on to



become significant causes in their own right' (Rosenberg, 2000, 3). And far from denying 'that social space has sufficient importance to merit its own dedicated programme of research' (Scholte, 2005a, 394), I too invoked the 'field of Human Geography' to recall the 'well and long established' insight that differing social and cultural constructions of space and time 'have themselves been highly consequential for the constitution of social orders' (Rosenberg, 2000, 4).

But there's no denying that I did feel that things had gotten out of hand when I saw Zygmunt Bauman fixing the meaning of 'globalization' by saying that '[a]ll [*sic*] other socially produced factors of constitution, separation and the maintenance of collective identities — like state borders or cultural barriers — seem in retrospect merely secondary effects of [the lack of] speed' with which they could be physically traversed (1998, 15). I did become puzzled when I came across claims for 'the supplanting of modernity by globality' (Albrow, 1996, 4), for they made me wonder exactly what was involved by the 'spatialisation of social theory' (Featherstone and Lash, 1995, 1) which the concept of globalization was purportedly promoting. And when I saw that the most widely referenced social theorist in this new literature was Anthony Giddens — who had indeed long argued for a spatio-temporal revision of classical social theory — I did begin to wonder whether there was not something about the concept of globalization itself which recurrently generated this kind of intellectual claim whenever it was subjected to theoretical development. (Here, incidentally, is the apparently elusive 'whereabouts of Rosenberg's reputed "Globalization Theory"' (Scholte, 2005a, 394), a group of writers selected not for their use of the term, but rather for their common tendency towards what it describes.)

I then noticed, however, that in not a single case where claims of this kind were generated — not Giddens, not Beck, not Castells, not Bauman, not Held and McGrew and not even, or especially, Scholte — were they allowed by their authors to play the analytical role which these same authors nonetheless mooted for them. 'Globalization', it seemed, was a concept that, though certainly answering to observable features of historical reality, persistently generated theoretical assumptions that apparently could not be substantiated. Was it really such a leap to hypothesize that this might signal some systematic problem with the way the concept was being deployed?

Perhaps the *explanans/explanandum* device was not the best language with which to locate the tipping point at which undeniable descriptive statements were mysteriously translated into unsustainable theoretical arguments. But it was never — not even in the 'Post Mortem' (Rosenburg, 2005, 42) — asserted as an *a priori* criterion of judgment. '[I]mpossible to substantiate *a priori*', (Rosenberg, 2000, 13) its purpose was to enable the formulation of a hypothesis (and a prediction) about the analytical failure of Globalization



Theory which precisely did not rest on a denial of the empirical reality of deepening worldwide interconnection. So far as I know, this prediction — that the syndrome of the ‘folly’ will recur with every fresh attempt to distil an explanatory essence from the descriptive concept of ‘globalization’ — has yet to be falsified. And, perhaps wisely, Scholte’s response to the ‘Post Mortem’ does not try. Instead, he argues that ‘it is possible to invoke globalisation as an organising theme...’ (p. 394). But this was never at issue. ‘The entire problem’, I wrote in *Follies*, ‘would... disappear immediately if only writers on the subject reined in their theoretical claims and allowed the term ‘globalization’ to resume its original, purely descriptive role’ (Rosenberg, 2000, 90). If this is what is now happening, well and good. But an ‘organizing theme’ is something less than a ‘paradigm shift’ (Scholte, 1999).

How much less? My impression is this: in his earlier work, the grand claims of Globalization Theory were to the fore, but were always undercut by retractive qualification. Here, however, it is the other way round: the qualified version of ‘globalization’ (*explanandum*) is now foremost, but it remains subject to occasional re-eruptions of bolder claims from within. This retreat from forward positions certainly makes the ‘Post Mortem’ now look like an extreme over-reaction — but does it remove the underlying problem? Let’s have a look.

On the evidence of Scholte’s response, exactly what now is the intellectual role or standing of ‘globalization’ in his approach to social analysis and explanation? It is, in the first instance, a descriptive feature of the contemporary world, arising from ‘multifaceted dynamics of social change’ that it simultaneously “‘promotes”, “encourages” and “advances”” (p. 395). ‘Globalization’ is ‘a shift in the structure of social space’ which is ‘interconnected (as both cause and effect) with concurrent shifts in social structures of knowledge, production, governance and identity’ (p. 395). What is the name of this wider social change in which ‘globalization’ is participating? In fact, it receives no name, even though Scholte describes his approach to it as ‘systemic and holistic’ (p. 395). But never mind: for no one could regard such a definition of globalization as overweening. On the contrary — in a judgment which has, if anything, been sharpened in the second edition of his book — Scholte asserts that globalization ‘has thus far shown few signs of bringing an end to capital, state, nation and modern rationality’ (2005b, 6). We must therefore ask once again: exactly what transformations *are* being ascribed to this phenomenon? What in the end *does* ‘a serious globalization thesis in relation to contemporary history’ (p. 397) residually comprise? And what are the ‘mounds of evidence’ which I have ‘ignored’ (p. 398) actually evidence *of*?

It is here — exactly where one would expect it — that the re-eruption begins. For their implications converge, apparently, on three propositions: that ‘the



mode of governance has been shifting away from the statist mould of earlier times' (p. 396); that 'the geography of capitalism has significantly altered' such that accumulation increasingly operates in 'spaces that are substantially supraterritorial' (p. 398); and finally that since the 1960s, developments such as these have occurred which 'at least partly transcend the nationalist-statist-territorialist framework of "international relations"' (p. 398).

Thus, the defining claim of Globalization Theory — unfailingly generated by every attempt to distil an analytical definition of 'globalization' — begins to rear its head again after all: for the 'nationalist-statist-territorialist framework' is none other than the Westphalian System under another name. I dare not try the patience of readers by rehearsing yet again what is so historically problematic about that idea. But I do think that it really should now either be defended or given up. For its idiosyncrasies directly obstruct exactly the kind of *social* theory of globalization that might indeed provide the field with 'sufficient opportunity to mature'.

Specifically, by placing the rise of 'supra-territoriality' somewhere in the 20th century, this 'myth of 1648' (Teschke, 2003) obscures the fact that capitalist exchange relations have always been implicitly 'supra-territorial'; that the interconnections which they proliferate generate a 'real-time simultaneity' between societies which is the effect not just of interconnection *per se*, but rather of its altered social form; and finally, that the historical tendency of these phenomena has never been towards the dissolution of sovereignty, but rather towards that particular differentiation of 'the economic' and 'the political' which produces the sovereign state in its abstracted modern form. For these suggestions too, after all, there are 'mounds of evidence' — much of it concerning the 'globalizing' character of British power in the 'quintessentially territorial' (Scholte, 2000, 57) Westphalian 19th century.

At any rate, to reground the phenomena of contemporary 'globalization' in a historical sociology of capitalist development is not to deny evidence of their reality. Nor need it tie explanation to 'linear causation from a single source', as I shall try to illustrate later on. Conceptualizing them in abstraction from any such wider historical sociology, however, does restrict analysis to essentially short-term theoretical speculations that cannot distinguish between conjunctural and epochal orders of historical change. Attempts to fill that gap by constructing 'globalization' itself as a world-historical *explanans* (the procedure of Globalization Theory), now seem to have ended — hence the 'post mortem'. But the need for a truly social theory remains. And perhaps inevitably, if Scholte feels that my approach to theorizing forecloses too much, I find his approach too open-ended: for it remains unclear to me how far a 'systemic and holistic understanding loosely derived from complexity theory' (p. 395) actually constitutes a definite theory at all.



Lawson: Agency and Structure in Historical Sociology

But have I paid a corresponding price for my own approach? George Lawson thinks so. By concentrating on the ‘easy targets’ of ‘liberal globalization theory’, says Lawson, I have wasted energies which would have been better spent tackling problems in my own alternative account of the 1990s (2005, 382). For that account, he argues, is excessively ‘structural’: it obscures the role of ‘agency’ — a role which ‘in times of structural upheaval (as the 1990s clearly were) ... assumes an exceptional importance’ (p. 384). The problem runs deep: ‘Agency cannot be merely grafted onto an existing structural theory.... Without bringing in agency as, at least in part, *constitutive* of processes of social change, Rosenberg can give us only a partial picture — one that, albeit unintentionally, can look like an inevitable tale or a pre-determined narrative’ (p. 384). I have met with this criticism before. And though I cannot claim to have overcome it — else it would not recur — I must now try to engage it.

Let us begin by agreeing that any ontological counterposition of structure and agency is nonsensical. ‘Structure’, after all, is no more than a heuristic device for exploring the emergent properties and accumulated consequences of particular relational praxes and sequences of actions — in short, of human agency. And ‘agency’ itself is neither constituted nor exercised outwith given relational contexts and sequences of interactive actions and events: there is no such thing as ‘extra-structural’ agency. Of course, individuals and groups often set their face against particular structures of regularized relationships and accumulated circumstances. But to reserve the term ‘agency’ for this alone is to evacuate from the concept of ‘structure’ exactly that reproductive and sequential agency whose patterns and results the concept exists to delineate. ‘Structures’ then really would appear as non-human automata. But, paradoxical as it seems, this would be the result of a radical *underestimation* of the scope and multiple dimensions of human agency itself.

What then is meant by describing a particular explanation as too ‘structuralist’? It cannot involve a denial of the social structural dimension of human agency *per se*, since without that phenomenon in some form, it is hard to see what object a distinctively *sociological* analysis could have. Presumably then, it means that the abstractions used to explore this dimension and its properties have become disconnected from empirical reality, taking on the appearance of a mechanical life of their own, and usurping the inalienable role of human individuals and collectivities as sole subjects of the historical process.

The danger is real enough. But it reflects only one half of a wider methodological challenge intrinsic to historical sociology. And if instead we follow Lawson’s prescription to work our way up inductively from a ‘messy’ empirical reality (p. 384), building our explanations from such patterns as we



can uncover descriptively, then sooner or later we shall meet the other half. Without a general theory of some kind to orient this procedure, analysis will generate only localized 'middle-range' hypotheses, which lack the capacity to penetrate aspects of causality (or agency) which extend more deeply into social space and historical time. Of course, whether such deeper aspects even exist is not given: their substantiation hangs on whether invoking them enables a fuller historical explanation. For now, however, the point is simply that Lawson must be right when he says that '[g]eneral abstractions soon reach their limits' (p. 384). As the 'Post Mortem' put it: 'There can be no unbroken line from theory — any theory — to historical explanation' (Rosenburg, 2005, 27). But what applies to theory applies to empirical analysis too.

It was for exactly this reason that I sought to reconstruct the idea of 'historical conjuncture' — to find a mediating level of abstraction at which the structuring of agency posited by a given social theory could be searched for *within* the 'messy' infinitude of empirical actions and events — enabling that theory to act in turn as a multiplier of, rather than a substitute for, properly historical explanation. My application of this in the historical section of the 'Post Mortem' was admittedly rather groping. Yet it had a certain logic: the conjunctural analysis of the 1990s made in effect three passes over the same material, each time extending the theoretical argument more deeply into it and, in the process, expanding the historical scale and intellectual depth of the explanation.

On the premise that '[a]ctual historical causes exist only [at the level] of empirical events' (Rosenburg, 2005, 33), the first pass was primarily descriptive, identifying Western restructuring and Soviet collapse as the events whose intersection at the start of the decade played a dominant role in shaping the course of what followed. Tracing this role was already, I thought, sufficient to explain where the *Zeitgeist* of 'globalization' had come from and what, broadly, it had misinterpreted. It barely began, however, to provide an alternative historical sociological explanation of the conjuncture itself.

That task was taken up more directly on the second pass, where Marx's analysis of the peculiarly capitalist form of state was brought to bear on the fate of political sovereignty in the 1990s. Could the distinction which it encouraged between 'the state' and 'statism' make more sense of the pattern of empirical changes than did the idea of a 'Westphalian system' besieged by transnational forces, as put forward by Globalization Theory? Certainly, the 'neo-liberal' shape of these changes conformed on a vast scale to Marx's account of the recurrent tendency for the state to be re-subordinated to capital — a tendency re-activated in this case by the extended period of recessions and intensified social conflict which had followed the end of the long boom.

But this 'vertical' social structural explanation was still incomplete in two vital respects. International in the scale of what it addressed, it nonetheless



identified no specifically international structuring of the agency at work. Moreover, a key ingredient of the story — namely the very existence of the Soviet Union, whose collapse would prove so consequential — lay outside the analysis, diluting its claim to comprehend the overall movement of the conjuncture. These two problems turned out to have a common solution, made finally visible when the third pass interpolated Trotsky's idea of uneven and combined development. It should have come earlier: for what it revealed was that 'combined development' is a tendency internal to the inter-societal spread of capitalism as a historical process. And this in turn was as fundamental to understanding the origins of the Soviet Union as it was to grasping the latter's many-sided impact on the Cold War conjuncture whose sudden dissolution so misled the Globalization Theorists. Nonetheless, its late addition now made it possible to revisualize the complex overall structure of the 1990s too as an intelligible conjuncture in the longer-term development of capitalism as a world historical process. 'International Relations' — which Globalization Theory discounted as a fading reality — really did turn out, at a deeper historical and theoretical level, to have been the crucial missing dimension of analysis.

At the time, then, it seemed to me that the method was working — that with each pass, the further refinement of the theoretical abstraction (structure) was simultaneously assimilating more and more of the empirical detail of the historical process (agency) into the emerging explanation. In this respect, the addition of Trotsky's theory seemed to carry the argument, in Colin Barker's words, onto 'a new level of concreteness' (2005, 19). Indeed, at just this point, the 'Post Mortem' paused, not to 'graft agency onto structure', but to clarify 'how the (abstractly identified) pressures conducing to this end were at one with the real-world interests of the actors [governments, corporations, international organisations and "civil society" groups alike] through whose dilemmas, decisions and policies it actually came about' (2005, 57). And here again, the fit — though all too briefly surveyed — seemed real enough.

When agency and structure fit together to this extent, it may be because theory is pre-selecting evidence in a self-fulfilling way, and the heuristic of 'structure' has hardened into a reification. Alternatively, however, it may be because theory is actually doing its job — or at any rate passing a basic test of retrodictive adequacy or explanatory power. To be sure, there is a line to be drawn between these two. But to show that a narrative is on the wrong side of this line (and hence too 'structuralist'), would we not need to produce substantial empirical evidence which falsifies the shape of the historical abstraction on offer — or, alternatively, a demonstrably different and superior theorization of the same empirical events? There are more than enough large holes in the 'Post Mortem's' argument to invite both of these responses. But the fact that Lawson does not attempt the first of them suggests that his unease has more to do with the exposition than with the substance of the (historical)



argument. And as to the second, does anyone seriously believe that the idea of ‘globalization’ has either the historical precision or the sociological determinacy to guide such a theorization?

Gamble: Getting the Big Picture Right?

Does even Andrew Gamble believe it? What precisely does he mean by suggesting that globalization theory, for all its excesses, nonetheless ‘got the big picture right’ (2005, 365–366)?

The events of the 1990s, says Gamble, did constitute ‘a momentous set of changes’, and the globalization theorists were ‘not wrong in trying to focus’ on these (p. 366). More, the ‘Post Mortem’ itself provides indications that they should be seen as opening a fourth major conjuncture of capitalist world development — a judgment which perhaps only my polemical opposition to the exaggerated claims of globalization theory prevents me from making more explicit.

This opposition, he suggests, leads me to miss a potentially crucial shift — not least in the nature of international relations — which the ‘globalization’ of the 1990s pressed further towards completion. Since the 19th century, says Gamble, the balance between formal and informal empire has — despite a major wobble between 1914 and 1991 — ultimately tipped in favour of the latter. Under these circumstances, there is a rising collective need for hegemonic regulation and enforcement of the processes and norms of capitalist accumulation — for the stable subordination of all states to capital. The proliferation of international organizations in the 1990s, says Gamble, can be read as evidence that a ‘collective hegemony’ is emerging. And in that light, my own implication of a rapid return to power politics appears to be based on a falsely zero-sum equation — either global society *or* power politics — which made it impossible for me to register the nature of the shift which was actually occurring.

Ah well, that’s polemics for you: arguments get sharpened so far that they cut clean past the positions which balanced reflection would recommend, slicing their way into a posture of diametric opposition which mirrors, as much as it opposes, the original object of critique. This was perhaps what produced the mistaken claim that the term ‘globalization’ was disappearing from public discourse. Has it happened again here, on a larger scale? I’m not so sure.

Clearly, a major restructuring of the international system occurred in the 1990s — involving both a reconfiguration of the core relation between sovereignty and the world market and a dramatic and many-sided geo-social expansion which dissolved the ‘three-world’ shape of the Cold War period. If ‘getting the big picture right’ meant only noticing this, then, as Gamble says, the Globalization Theorists ‘were not wrong’ in what they focussed on. But



that — need it be said again? — was never the issue, either in my own critique or in others, such as that provided by Linda Weiss. ‘The dispute between globalists and sceptics’, she wrote, ‘is *not* about the *reality* of change; it is about the nature and significance of the changes under way as well as the driving forces behind them’ (1999, 59).

On the other hand, if ‘getting the big picture right’ means correctly identifying the overall character of the process — including both the inner shape of its causal structure and its wider historical meaning — then I would have to say on the contrary that it is precisely at this summative level of analysis that all the many problems with Globalization Theory came together to ensure that it could only get the big picture wrong. The way it did so is not unconnected with Gamble’s second point — his suggestion that — in effect — the thickening of international organization in the second half of the 20th century realizes a longer-term trend towards a ‘collective hegemony’, which may finally transcend the ‘power political’ international relations of old. Well, maybe it will — we can’t know. But three points, of rising significance, give me pause.

Consider first the logical form of the reasoning here. A trend-line — in this case, ‘the drive towards an integrated global economy’ (p. 370) — is traced across the course of past events. And by assuming — not necessarily wrongly — its continuation into the future, judgments are then made about the meaning of events in the present. Now, in any such procedure, *contrary* events in the past, being outwith the trend, do not enter into the logic of explanation. And from this it may be seen that there is in principle — and quite legitimately — a gap of some kind between the identification of a trend and analysis of the overall historical process across which that trend is held to operate. However, if ‘the big picture’ really is one’s object, then one cannot afford to have too much of that historical process accumulating in the category of ‘outwith the trend’. And in Gamble’s argument that category includes the entire ‘period between 1914 and 1991... during which the problems of the international system overlaid and obscured the drive towards an integrated global economy’ (pp. 369–370). It is, in short, full to bursting. And this must imply that however real the trend he identifies, it cannot, on its own, provide the key to ‘the big picture’. (Conversely, when we look again at the trend-line itself — how it is drawn, and what it externalizes — then the key to its limitation appears precisely in its (ultimately unilinear) abstraction from the uneven and combined character of the historical process.)

Second, not only did the ‘multilateralism’ in vogue during the 1990s subsequently enter a more difficult phase; but also, it would be quite misleading to see that later phase as a ‘broken promise’, departing fundamentally from the international relations of the 1990s.⁵ For at no point did ‘multilateralism’ actually suspend — let alone supplant — the anarchical



character of ‘the international’. And this always placed an important limit on what could — and could not — be read into it. Crossing that limit (via the counterposition of ‘international’ and ‘global’) was a key mistake by which Globalization Theory managed to get ‘the big picture’ so wrong. The mistake was unnecessary. And we should watch out, lest ideas of ‘collective hegemony’ lead us to make it again.

Finally, I find myself increasingly wary of interpretations of the *current* conjuncture that are formulated — as Gamble’s seems to be — in abstraction from the uneven and combined configurations of world politics. Not only, as already noted, do they tend to externalize vast swathes of past events; but they also tend to factor out the specifically geo-strategic significance of unevenness in the present. In this respect, it is surely symptomatic that the 1990s discourse of achieved multilateralism arose simultaneously with characterizations of that same decade as — of all things — ‘the unipolar moment’. Realist commentators were not slow to point the moral: liberal enthusiasts might be mistaking a bandwagoning stimulated by apparently preponderant power for a superannuation of power–political relations *per se*. But this suggestion — about the unique conjunctural consequences of American power — could be extended back without too much difficulty across the last half-century of intra-core relations — enlarging the question mark to overhang the postwar rise of international organization in general.

I am not disputing the expanded reality of international organization. Thus far, however, it has subsisted within a very particular international configuration of uneven development. One feature of that configuration — US preponderance within the socio-political structure of the world market — appeared with the Soviet collapse to enjoy an unprecedented augmentation; yet this occurred at the very time when, as we now know, developments elsewhere were accumulating in ways which already presaged its significant dilution.⁶ Whether any project of ‘collective hegemony’ will survive the resultant tectonic shifts now underway remains to be seen. If it does not, however, that would not be the first time that claims for the tendential pacification of inter-capitalist relations, issued in disregard of the unevenness of the historical process, had come to grief. Norman Angell, after all, made not entirely dissimilar claims in 1911. But let me widen the argument at this point, in order to focus the problem more clearly.

There is now a rich and varied Marxist literature on the ‘current conjuncture’, offering a range of ‘big pictures’. Though even a representative summary does violence to the variety on offer, four principal themes shape this literature. Thus, for example, Karl Beitel (2003) has redeployed the Leninist conception of inter-imperialist rivalry, a conception meanwhile directly challenged by Simon Bromley (2003) and Peter Green (2000) among others. Giovanni Arrighi (2005a, b) has interpreted recent events through the lens of



'hegemonic cycles' derived from World Systems Theory, while Peter Gowan (2004) has argued that US international power is a 'cycle-breaker' which calls into question the existing category of 'hegemony' itself. From a standpoint not dissimilar to Gamble's, Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin (2003) have re-absorbed the contemporary question of military force (and imperialism) into the longer-run history of capitalist 'informal empire' and its shifting geo-social exterior — while Gopal Balakrishnan (2005) has meditated on how far the historical rise of the US has produced not just a conjunctural demilitarization of intra-core relations but — albeit within that restricted zone — a deeper, functional superannuation of military power *per se*. Finally, William Robinson (2001) has developed a globalization-type transnational class analysis which has been usefully debated by Philip McMichael (2001) among others.

Inter-imperialist rivalry, hegemony, informal empire, transnationalization: all of these correlate the geosocial spread and historical evolution of capitalism to the changing forms and logics of international relations. And fruitfully so. It would be grossly inaccurate to say that for all of them geopolitics is merely the spume on an underlying, world-historical wave of capitalist development. (Indeed Bromley, for one, has elsewhere (Bromley and Smith, 2004) deployed the idea of uneven and combined development very effectively.) Yet insofar as the directional logic of the argumentation here is as described — from the evolving nature of capitalism to the changing forms of geopolitics — a question may be asked: what would follow if instead we explicitly conceived the international relations of capitalist development as belonging within the motional physics of the wave itself?⁷ By pursuing this question, we can try to pinpoint the methodological significance of 'the international' for historical explanation. And, as I will explain when I elaborate the point in the next section, if there is a criticism here, it is one that applies to the methodological labours of the 'Post Mortem' too. Alex Callinicos' response leads us, I think, into the heart of this matter. What does he say?

Callinicos: The Abstract, the Concrete and the International

Callinicos provides a searching interrogation of the method of conjunctural analysis developed in the 'Post Mortem'. Contrasting it with other versions available within the Marxist tradition, he worries that it 'operates with too undifferentiated a concept of the conjunctural' (2005, 355). Nor is this concern purely methodological. For, if I understand him correctly, he argues that the counterpart to this is a correspondingly abstract account of the 'organic tendencies' of capitalist development which, in turn, cannot avoid '[c]ounterposing the state and capitalism' (p. 361). And the 'surprising' result is that the narrative provided in the historical part of the 'Post Mortem'.



mimics a certain kind of liberal historical sociology that portrays 1989–91 as, not the End of History, but the resumption of history, the cancellation of the caesura, the aberration represented by the ‘short twentieth century’ of 1914–91, when the liberal world economy was suppressed or restricted by the prevalence of different forms of economic statism (p. 361).

Against this, Callinicos argues that varieties of statism have a longer-standing presence in the historical dynamics of capitalist development. This presence needs to be grasped at a level of abstraction intermediate between those of epoch and conjuncture as defined in the ‘Post Mortem’. For if the contrast between invariant (epochal) organic tendencies and the ceaseless (conjunctural) change of empirical history is drawn too sharply, this will obscure the fact that the organic tendencies themselves unfold, evolve and mutate in historical time. It took several readings before I appreciated the real force of this point: for on it hangs both the entire question of the relationship between capitalism and international relations and, with that, the interpretation of 20th century world history. Nonetheless, I think that the methodological procedures of the ‘Post Mortem’ deserve some further defence. Indeed, if there is a problem here, its solution lies not in choosing a different road but rather in pressing further down the one already chosen.

Two main issues need to be addressed: first, the alternative constructions of conjunctural method; and second, the place of ‘statism’ in capitalist world development.

The first of these may be largely definitional. The ‘Post Mortem’ used the term ‘epoch’ to refer to the *longue durée* of capitalist world development, and ‘conjunctures’ to characterize the succession of shorter periods which, though differing from each other, collectively compose that *durée*. Against this, Callinicos invokes the more conventional Leninist and Gramscian usage, in which ‘epoch’ refers to a particular phase of capitalist development, (e.g. ‘Imperialism’), while ‘conjuncture’ indicates the typically overdetermined configuration of ‘the current moment’ (e.g. ‘1917’). What hangs on this contrast?

Well, if one examines the fascinating discussion of his own method to which Callinicos refers the reader (2001), key elements of our differences do indeed turn out to be only terminological. For he too seeks a way of explaining differentiated periods and varieties of capitalist development which does not submerge the operation within them of determinations which are general to it across space and time. He too is driven to reflect upon the nature of social theoretical abstractions, and upon what is involved in the (re)concretization which enables these abstractions to inform historical explanations. In this respect, his ‘intermediate’ level of ‘epochal’ analysis and my ‘intervening abstraction’ of ‘conjunctural analysis’ answer to exactly the same need.



And yet we do arrive at differing substantive interpretations of 19th and 20th century capitalist world development. In particular, he cleaves to the Leninist argument that from the late 19th century, organic tendencies of capitalist development — specifically the deepening competition and concentration of capital — gave rise to an entire epoch of increasing state intervention and interstate competition and conflict. The resultant, continuing, Epoch of Imperialism comprehends not only 19th century colonial expansion and the world wars, but also the Cold War: for in this perspective, the Soviet Union itself was only the most extreme instance of a more generalized ‘state capitalism’ brought about by the knock-on effects of the competition and concentration of capital. It therefore comprised not an aberration, but a form of state ‘functional to capital’ (p. 11) in an epoch generated by the unfolding of tendencies organic to capitalist development *per se*. ‘Statism’, in other words, is not a phenomenon which can be assigned a purely conjunctural standing: it emerges stadially within the evolving organic tendencies of capitalist development itself. This realization, Callinicos suggests, was the specific achievement of the classical Marxist theory of Imperialism, which thereby also closed the conceptual gap between theories of capitalist development and of international relations. And it explains *historically* how and why, from a certain point onwards, ‘inter-state conflict must be conceptualised as a specific form of competition among capitals’ (2001, 243).

Now, I don’t think that my (re)definition of conjuncture did necessarily entail what is being criticized here — a neglect of the dynamic historicity of the organic tendencies themselves (and not just of their ever-changing empirical forms). Nonetheless, Callinicos has put his finger on a real problem in my account, one which can be overcome only by pressing further the existing argument. For though I argued there that state-*formation* was an organic tendency of capitalist development, the principal *theoretical* explication I provided was Marx’s argument about the internal relation of capitalist society and the ideal-typical *liberal* form of state. And though this remains, in my view, a valid way of ‘asserting the priority of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode over its historically variable forms’ (Callinicos, 2001, 237), Callinicos is surely right: it is not enough.

The problem arises from the level at which I inserted the phenomenon of uneven and combined development. Introduced only after the discussion of conjunctural analysis was over, it was (unintentionally) relegated almost to the level of a purely empirical feature of modern world history. It should really have come first, such that capitalist development was posited ontologically of societies, and hence as intrinsically staggered and interactive — as *all* development is.

For then it would have emerged more clearly that this phenomenon is not simply a side-effect of modern international relations but instead a property of



capitalist development itself — one of its ‘laws of motion’ in fact, and one which rather finds its highest *expression* in the causal field of the international. One can perhaps see why this ‘law of motion’ would not attract Marx’s concentrated theoretical attention, for it derives ultimately from a general feature of the historical process which is not particular to capitalism. Indeed, in this sense, Marx was perhaps right not to include what it describes among the *organic* tendencies of *capital*. Nonetheless, the penalty of neglecting it has been enormous, bequeathing to later theorists the impossible task of instead deriving its effects within a residually unilinear conception of capitalist development.

I wonder if this problem reappears in Callinicos’ account of ‘statism’. The idea of ‘state capitalism’ certainly has the virtue of insisting that the Soviet experience, despite its efforts, remained somehow internal to the overall process of capitalist world development. Yet its implication of functionality for capitalism, however finessed, does seem problematic. Was it really functional for capitalism that private ownership in the means of production was outlawed, that the productive labour of Soviet society was largely removed from the world market, and that geopolitical support was given to other societies which attempted the same? I don’t think that Callinicos actually intends this implication — yet it does seem to be incipient in any attempt to tie back the emergence of hybrid and even anti-capitalist social forms into an essentially unitary definition of the historical process, in which historical change must ultimately be referred back for explanation to the inner (albeit dynamic and mutating), logic of capital itself. By contrast, viewing the Soviet experience as interactively produced within an explicitly uneven and combined process (which its own peculiarities further compounded) grounds it equally firmly within the wider history of capitalism — but without generating Procrustean definitional requirements.

There is a larger point to be drawn out here. In 1965, E.P. Thompson delivered a ferocious critique of the ‘one size fits all’ conception of ‘bourgeois revolution’, a conception all too often derived within the Marxist tradition by treating the concentrated explosion of the French Revolution as archetypal. The resultant model, Thompson argued, had rendered invisible the no less complete character of the earlier English ‘bourgeois revolution’ which, by contrast, was distributed across a ‘great arch’ (1978, 257) of historical events and struggles stretching over several centuries. If ‘bourgeois revolution’ means the radical transformations involved in the socio-political consolidation of capitalism, then history, he concluded, warrants no singular model: ‘It happened one way in France, and another way here’ (269). Thompson had a rare gift for felling opponents with such deceptively obvious statements. And yet there was always something more to be said here. For when capitalist development is viewed internationally, the result is not simply the dissolution of a singular conception of ‘bourgeois revolution’ (or anything else) into a



differentiated comparative series of national instances. It is also the uncovering of a yet greater ‘arch’: the emergence and spread of capitalist society as a protracted, world-historical event, of which the many national instances are themselves interrelated parts. And in that perspective, Thompson’s adage needed basic adjustment: ‘it happened another way’ in France in part *because* it had already happened ‘here’.

We are back then to what I earlier called the ‘wave’ of capitalist world development, within which, I also suggested, the social ontology of the international somehow plays a crucial role. And we can now see what that role comprises. For — to stick now with Thompson’s metaphor — this greater ‘arch’ reveals an entire dimension of interactive historical causality which not only links the national cases in space and time, but also, (not least via the causal significance of the ‘timing and sequencing’ of industrialization), plays a large part in explaining why they took the differing forms that they did. It thereby pinpoints the existence of what might be called a ‘diagonal’ dimension of historical causality which, operating through specifically inter-societal relations, both integrates and sublates the ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ dimensions drawn from (multiple) path-dependent and (singular) system-wide moments of analysis.

In this perspective, Stalinism no longer appears as either the outer extreme of, or even an ‘external’ interruption to some unitary ‘secular’ trend of things. As a further round of combined development, it arose within the texture of an irreducibly international historical process. Of course, the concept of uneven and combined development provides no guarantee of adequate historical explanation here. Without it, however, (or some equivalent), the ‘diagonal’ dimension cannot be theoretically visualized at all. And since this whole dimension subtends at a deeper level on that co-existence of more than one society deriving from the intrinsic unevenness of social development, we seem entitled to say that the social ontology of International Relations is nothing short of indispensable for making theoretical sense of modern world history.

Which then is it to be? Was 19th and 20th century ‘statism’ a system-wide unfolding result of the concentration of capital — or was its (highly variegated) spread driven by the interactive pressures of uneven and combined development? (Might it even have been, as Bendix once suggested, a historical correction to a broader underestimation of government in much of classical social theory, which ‘unduly generalize[d] from a very limited phase of the English experience’ (1967, 325) in the 18th and early 19th centuries?) Perhaps the ‘either/or’ here is misleading. But even a ‘both/and’ makes the crucial difference: it admits the social ontology of the international into the historical laws of motion of capitalist development.

And helpfully so: for not only do states not wait for capitalism before they become interested in international competition; but arguably, the first major



instance of (proto)capitalist ‘statism’ came not with the protectionism of the Great Depression but with the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution — and that was caused not by the concentration of capital, but by the crisis of a trajectory of combined development in which Bourbon France had been increasingly enmeshed throughout the 18th century.

So I am suggesting — I hope not unfairly — that ‘the international’ has not penetrated deeply enough into Callinicos’ ‘intermediate’ conception of capitalist development, (nor into the account of conjunctural analysis provided in the ‘Post Mortem’). Better still, it ought to operate there as a result of its prior interpolation at a higher level of abstraction — that of the historical process in general. Lenin, for all his discussions of ‘uneven development’, never quite took this step. But Trotsky, for all his protestations of orthodoxy, implicitly did. And I’ve never understood why the Trotskyist tradition has for the most part shown so little interest in this breakthrough. For as Neil Davidson has recently remarked, ‘uneven and combined development has barely been discussed at all’ (2005, 1).

Conclusion

Searching for the ‘higher bullshit’ of IR, we have found, in ‘uneven and combined development’, an idea that not only satisfies the definitional requirements of that term, but seems, if anything, to exceed them. Corrective premise of social theory, principle of historical sociological method, integrator of ‘domestic’ and ‘international’ within a theory of modern world history: it must appear wild to lay so many possibilities — and there are more besides — at the door of a single idea. In reply, I would turn the point around: what this rather indicates is just how many intellectual problems (not least those surrounding the notion of ‘globalization’), have been generated for social science by the classics’ neglect of the social ontology of ‘the international’. Reversing that neglect is therefore, almost by definition, bound to have consequences which extend beyond IR — even, perhaps, beyond the social sciences themselves: after all, the varied objects of intellectual history, literary theory and cultural studies — to name but three — are not constituted outwith the uneven and combined texture of social development. Trotsky himself made this link, if a little formulaically: ‘Russian thought’, he wrote, ‘like the Russian economy, developed under the direct pressure of the higher thought and more developed economies of the West’ (1962, 173–174).

Still, even within the social sciences, Trotsky’s is by no means the only creative response to the theoretical neglect of ‘the international’. The basic perception underlying his idea has a wider — though generally secondary and reactive — currency in modern social thought where it has played resurgent counterpoint to the recurrently dominant, unilinear reflexes of ‘social



evolutionism'. It can also be found, for example in Thorsten Veblen's contemporaneous analysis of Wilhelmine Germany, and more programmatically in Alexander Gerschenkron's later study of *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*. Indeed, Gerschenkron's work has inspired a rich literature on the causal significance of historical 'timing and sequencing' for, *inter alia*, the varieties of modern social stratification (Bendix), regional state-formation (Lustick) and diplomatic behaviour (Gordon). This literature partly overlaps and sometimes goes well beyond what can be found in Trotsky's writings where, it must be admitted, the idea of uneven and combined development itself suffers real deficiencies: its exposition is fragmentary and impressionistic; its application is subject to sectarian contortions and wild leaps in the argument; and inevitably its dialectical principle is artificially suspended, frozen in the shapes of a now long past historical conjuncture.

For all that, however, Trotsky's place within this wider literature is enduringly foundational. And the reason is straightforward enough. To a greater or lesser degree, all these other instances remain in the end localized, reactive interventions, across a variety of thematic settings, against an evolutionist orthodoxy which they successfully falsify without ever positively displacing at a more foundational, social theoretical level. (Bendix perhaps comes closest to overcoming this limitation — diverted, it seems, only by fidelity to the logical requirements of his Weberian epistemology.) By contrast, the idea of uneven and combined development simultaneously recasts the underlying ontological premises of social theory and provides a corresponding reformulation of the overarching shape of the world-historical process. It potentially transposes a counterpoint of qualification into the more positive register of a social scientific paradigm. And, at the very least, it thereby revokes the long exile of 'the international' to the disciplinary march lands of Realist theory.

'*Notabene*', wrote Marx in 1857: 'in regard to points to be mentioned here and not to be forgotten: *Secondary and tertiary* matters; in general, *derivative, inherited*, not original relations of production. Influence here of international relations' (1973, 109). Did Marx subsequently 'forget' 'the international'? In one sense, its effects run through his work like a seam, separating the political economy of *Capital*, focussed on the 'classical form' of English development, from the political writings that more often take their cue from the quite different character of class struggles on the Continent. These political writings, as Michael Löwy has suggested, contain more than the germ of Trotsky's idea of 'permanent revolution' (1981, 8–9). And towards the end of his life, Marx's reflections on Russian development led him to argue that the asynchronous simultaneity of Russian society with its more industrialized neighbours could be of decisive significance not just for Russia, but for the course of world development as a whole (Marx, 1983, 102–103). And yet, as



Löwy also pointed out, these intimations of uneven and combined development co-existed in unresolved tension with more ‘stagist’ conceptions. At any rate, Marx never returned theoretically to the synoptic level of the *Manifesto* in order to revise the essentially unilinear vision of capitalist development presented there. Had he done so, he might — just might — have reconsidered whether the ‘influence... of international relations’ really did belong among the ‘secondary and tertiary’ dimensions of social reality. And, among much else, the subsequent history of International Theory, in which the unique potential of Marx’s social thought has persistently been stymied by something somehow invisible to its categories, would arguably look very different today.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to Chris Boyle, Simon Bromley, Andrew Davenport, George Lawson, Kamran Matin and Benno Teschke for helpful discussions during the preparation of this article; to all the critics of the ‘Post Mortem’ for their highly stimulating interventions; and to the Editor for his infinite patience.
- 2 To avoid stepping into unsavoury metaphors, I shall frequently substitute the term ‘social ontology’ for ‘higher bullshit’ in what follows, treating the two as synonymous.
- 3 The argument so far is developed at much greater length in Rosenberg (2006).
- 4 Once again, this point is developed in detail in Rosenberg, 2006.
- 5 Alex Callinicos first suggested this to me — albeit, I think, with a different explanation in mind.
- 6 I owe this point — missing in the ‘Post Mortem’ — to discussions with Simon Bromley.
- 7 Here I intend of course that meaning of ‘international relations’ which Trotsky described as ‘stronger than the logic of diplomacy’ — to include, that is, not just relations between states but also the wider process of uneven and combined development which those relations are managing.

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