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### Basic problems in the theory of uneven and combined development. Part II: unevenness and political multiplicity

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## Basic problems in the theory of uneven and combined development. Part II: unevenness and political multiplicity

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**Abstract** *Where does 'the international' come from? What accounts for its existence as a dimension of the human world? This article attempts an answer, in three steps, using the idea of 'uneven and combined development' (U&CD). First, a depth model is constructed, comparing different ways of linking uneven development with international relations. Thus far, it turns out, these ways have all presupposed the fact of political multiplicity, rather than explaining it. In search of explanation, the article turns, secondly, to the compelling historical sociological argument of Barry Buzan and Richard Little. This locates the origins of geopolitics in the late prehistoric shift from hunter-gatherer to settled agricultural existence, together with associated processes of social differentiation and proto-state formation. Buzan and Little's explanation appears at first to pre-empt the need for the concept of U&CD. Yet closer inspection reveals that unevenness and combination play a key role in their empirical account without, however, being theorized. The third step of the argument therefore seeks to show how these are necessary parts of the process of social change which Buzan and Little describe. And in this way it emerges that the origins of 'the international' do indeed lie in the uneven and combined character of historical development.*

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Leon Trotsky's idea of 'uneven and combined development' (U&CD) was originally formulated in order to explain a single large event: the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 (Trotsky 1980). Its fundamental innovation was to analyse the 'peculiarities' of Russia's social structure as outcomes of a wider and specifically *inter-societal* process of historical development. Recently, attempts have been made to extend this aspect of Trotsky's idea into a revision of the core problematics of social and international theory alike,<sup>2</sup> elaborating Michael Löwy's earlier claim that it comprises 'a general theory of the socio-economic dynamics of the historical process', and even a 'new understanding of human history' (Löwy 1981, 87). But, as the recent forum in the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (CRIA) demonstrated, these attempts have proven controversial (CRIA 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Alex Anievas, Chris Boyle, Simon Bromley, Barry Buzan, Alex Callinicos, George Lawson and Kamran Matin for helpful discussions in the course of writing this article. Thanks also to two CRIA reviewers for important clarifications and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> See for examples Rosenberg (2006 and *passim*) and Matin (2007).

Arising from that forum, and as explained in Part I of this paper (Rosenberg 2009), two basic problems now confront the claims made for U&CD as a social theory of international relations. First, can the existence of 'the international' itself—the political multiplicity of the human world—really be derived from the uneven and combined quality of *social* development? If not, the current revival of U&CD will end as a further, hapless illustration of an old claim: that the essence of the international lies ultimately beyond the reach of sociological categories (Bull 1966; Waltz 1979). Second, even if such a derivation could be made, could the anarchical results of this political multiplicity then be theorized without leading back to political realism at a later point—as has so often been the case with attempts to produce historical sociological alternatives in the past (Jarvis 1989; Hall 1999; Hobden and Hobson 2002)? This latter problem, together with a concluding response to the *CRIA* forum, is reserved for the third and final instalment. Meanwhile, the relation between sociological unevenness and the existence of the international is addressed in the pages below.

The argument is set out in three sections. In the first section, a depth model is presented, distinguishing three levels at which this relation can be posited. The purpose of this is to find the way down to a level of reflection at which the fact of political multiplicity is not already presupposed, and where we are directly confronted with the challenge of explaining its existence. This exercise also pushes us back in time, to a period in human prehistory when political multiplicity did not yet obtain, in order to consider its conditions of emergence. At this point, however, an unforeseen complication arises. For it turns out that certain other writers have not only found their way down to this level before us; they have also used its contents to construct a sociological derivation of political multiplicity which makes no *theoretical* reliance at all upon unevenness and combination. The second section of the article sets out a significant example of this, contained in the work of Barry Buzan and Richard Little (2000). Does their analysis of the late-prehistoric emergence of the international disprove the claims made for U&CD? The third section re-examines their argument with this question in mind. It finds that unevenness and combination in fact play a fundamental role in their analysis—without, however, being admitted into their theoretical framework. This exclusion seems in turn to explain a significant limitation of their perspective: its difficulty in integrating the systems-theoretical analysis of successive pre-international and international systems with their theorization of the historical transition from the one to the other. The remainder of the section therefore seeks to show how this limitation can be overcome by positing unevenness and combination as explicitly *theoretical* premises of a theory of development. In this way, it turns out that the idea of U&CD may indeed provide the necessary basis for a social theory of the international, even at this most foundational of levels: the one that contains the prehistoric origins of the phenomenon itself.

### **A depth model of uneven and combined development**

The problem we must solve does not arise for U&CD alone. Any attempt to elaborate a thoroughgoing *social* theory of international relations needs at some point to answer a deceptively simple question: why *are* there many societies? What feature of social development accounts for this circumstance, from which in

turn all the causal phenomena that we call inter-societal or international flow? Only if we can answer this question from within the social theory we are proposing will those phenomena come organically within its reach. And yet the question is ‘deceptively simple’, because although many approaches (such as Weberian historical sociology, Marxist theories of imperialism, World Systems theory and postcolonial theory) accord great significance to the international dimension, none of them seems to have constituted societal multiplicity itself—as opposed to the play of difference, polarity, inequality and domination across this multiplicity—as a theoretical object. In this respect, Kenneth Waltz was surely right to say that ‘[s]tudents of international politics have had an extraordinarily difficult time casting their subject in theoretical terms’ (Waltz 1990, 21).

Does the idea of uneven and combined development make it possible to overcome this difficulty from within a social theory? As noted in Part I, my own past claims to this effect have lacked substantiation. Instead, they have left a trail of confusion as one formula after another has been adopted, none of them providing more than a temporary stop-gap before giving way to the next. And yet, as I hope to show in this first section, their sequence has not been entirely random. It traces the gradual process of bringing an underlying problem into focus. And hence the very variety of those formulae may now be turned to some use. For they resolve into three ways of posing the relation of multiplicity to unevenness, finding the link at successively deeper levels in the constitution (and hence theorization) of social reality. Arranged in a vertical sequence, these mark out a depth model of possible understandings of this relation—understandings in which, as explained below, it appears first as external, then as intrinsic and finally as emergent (see Table 1).

Only the last of these understandings—the most controversial—offers to overcome the problem of political multiplicity, and to provide a sociological explanation for the existence of the international. But can it be substantiated? By digging our way down from the shallower to the deeper claims, we may perhaps finally ascertain how far an argument about U&CD can legitimately extend—and whether this is far enough to unearth a phenomenon as fundamental as the political multiplicity of human development.

*Level I: external*

At first sight, political multiplicity appears to be simply one dimension among others through which the unevenness of historical development operates. The possible registers of unevenness among coexisting societies are, after all, very numerous. They include, among many other multiplicities: levels of development, types of society, territorial extent, demographic scale, historical experience,

**Table 1.** The relation of political multiplicity to uneven and combined development

Level I	External	Dynamics of political multiplicity over-determine processes of uneven and combined development <i>from without</i> .
Level II	Intrinsic	Political multiplicity, being perennial, is an internal (but untheorized) <i>aspect of</i> uneven and combined development.
Level III	Emergent	Political multiplicity <i>arises from</i> the uneven and combined quality of social development.

geo-ecological situation and so on. What is the relation between all these possible vectors of unevenness, on the one hand, and the existence of political multiplicity, on the other? The answer provided at Level I (see, for example, Rosenberg 1996) is that, although this relation may involve very dramatic causal effects, it remains nonetheless an external one in the following sense. Differential development *among* societies impacts upon development *inside* societies through its consequences for political and military relations *between* them. Uneven economic development, for example, produces effects mostly through pressure on the independence of weaker societies—pressures to which the sovereign authority affected may choose to respond by actions directed either at its own society or at the external source of the pressure. The key point is that in this scenario—sovereign agents seeking to maintain their independence from outsiders—the unevenness of social development, on the one hand, and the context of multiple polities, on the other, are quite separate facts about the world.

Level I corresponds most closely to Trotsky's own (and most subsequent) versions of the idea.<sup>3</sup> Using it enabled him to analyse a range of inter-societal determinations that radically over-determine the course of modern development, both at the level of individual societies and in the movement of the historical process as a whole. These determinations, focused mainly on the impact of military pressure on state formation and the developmental 'leaps' enabled by interactions with more advanced neighbours, rupture the conceptualizing of development as endogenous and unilinear, respectively. They tear it open and let in the fact of inter-societal coexistence:

It is hard to tell how the life of the Russian state would have developed if it had taken place in isolation, influenced by internal tendencies alone. Suffice to say that this was not the case. Russia's social existence was always under constant pressure from the more developed social and state relations of Western Europe. (Trotsky 1971, 21–22)

In this respect, what made Trotsky's Marxism so distinctive was that he conducted materialist analysis of society 'as if the international existed'—that is, as if political multiplicity obtained. At no point, however, does this fact of political multiplicity itself become the object of theoretical analysis: it is not itself being explained by unevenness. Indeed, Trotsky himself, though emphasizing its importance for pre-modern as well as modern *Russian* development, and despite asserting the historically universal operation of unevenness, tended to downplay its general significance for the pre-capitalist era. 'The ancient civilizations of Egypt, India and China', he argued, in a judgment which would not survive scrutiny in the light of later World History studies, 'had a character self-sufficient enough, and they had time enough at their disposal ... to bring their social relations ... almost to ... completion' (Trotsky 1980, 4). Hence, at this first level, the relation of unevenness and multiplicity is external, and even contingent: the unevenness of development takes on additional causal properties as a result of being refracted through a historically given multiplicity of polities/societies. It invites conjunctural but not ontological (re)theorization.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Deutscher (1954), Knei-Paz (1978), Löwy (1981), Davidson (2009). A very significant exception here is Novack (1972), while partial exceptions include Barker (2006) and Allinson and Anievas (2009).

Thus, while this remains one of the most radical revisions in the history of Marxist thought, its limitations are perhaps also evident. Though it incorporates 'the international' into a theory of modern world development, it cannot correspondingly provide a sociological account of the core realist premise of geopolitical multiplicity itself. That process begins only at the next level down, at Level II.

*Level II: intrinsic*

Here political multiplicity is no longer treated as an external influence on development, but is rather posited as one of its intrinsic properties (Rosenberg 2006). Trotsky's own references (1980, 5) to unevenness as 'the most general law of the historic process' point fitfully down to this second level. And, however critically this transhistorical extension of the idea has been received in recent debates, the empirical warrant for such a move seems ineluctable. Human social development, after all, has never been singular. Considered as a global whole, it has at every stage involved more than one instance, and this multiplicity has always been consequential for both the constitution and the evolution of individual social orders. Indeed, what really needs logical support and empirical grounding is surely the contrary, regnant premise of 'ontological singularity'—the traditional conceptualization of development (or at any rate those components of it which can be the object of social theory) as the unfolding of characteristics *internal* to a given society. Time and again—under the several rubrics of 'methodological nationalism' in sociology (Chernilo 2006), 'the territorial trap' in geography (Agnew and Corbridge 1995), the 'myth of the primitive isolate' in anthropology (Lesser 1961; Wolf 1982) and the 'prejudice of the nation-state' in political theory (Wight 1966)—this premise has been exposed as empirically untenable and conceptually dysfunctional (see also Mann 1986; Poggi 1965; Skocpol 1973; Smelser 1992; Tenbruck 1994). It is a fallacy that needs correction not just in the obvious case of capitalist world development but at the more basic level of the conceptualization of 'development' itself.<sup>4</sup>

Thus at Level II the fact of inter-societal multiplicity (and the political multiplicity that accompanies it) is judged too perennial and too consequential a circumstance to be left as a 'historically given' addendum to the theorization of what social development is. Only if it is generically incorporated into that theorization can the class of determinations that derive specifically from the fact of multiplicity—determinations that otherwise regroup into an anomalously distinct 'international theory'—be apprehended for the sociological phenomena they must ultimately be.

And yet, this step too, in which the numerical multiplicity of societies becomes (by dint of its perennial character) one of the properties of unevenness itself, solves one problem only to raise another. Granted that unevenness has always involved numerical multiplicity, *why* should this be? And since, as Neil Davidson (2009) points out, unevenness is also fully manifest *within* societies, without

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<sup>4</sup>Beyond the ever more ancient and further-flung contacts between relatively developed societies which are almost daily revealed by archaeology, anthropology has demonstrated that even very "primitive" cultures are not stable or self-contained entities' (Moore 1993, 948).

always entailing their political fragmentation, how can it be used to account for the fact of political fragmentation *among* societies? If one cannot answer this question, one cannot claim to render the international sociologically intelligible as a dimension of development. And it is this dilemma which must draw us down to Level III. Without pressing further down, we still have only a generalization, however incontrovertible. And we need a derivation.

### *Level III: emergent*

At Level III, for the first time, we no longer presuppose the existence of the international. Here finally, we are forced 'behind' that existence in order to address the more basic question: not *how* the international over-determines social development; not *whether* its existence extends across the full historical reach of that phenomenon; but rather *why* it arises as an apparently perennial feature of development in the first place. Can U&CD frame an answer to this question?

Let us begin by stating three conditions of the problem. First, among the many meanings of inter-societal multiplicity, it is 'political' multiplicity which specifically entails coexisting entities rather than just regional variation within a single entity. Explaining this multiplicity of coexisting polities must therefore be our object. Second, because its origins lie beyond recorded history, no definitive empirical account of them is possible. But any mixture of 'archaeology and inference' we deploy (McNeil and McNeil 2003, 45) must be, at a minimum, consistent with the current evidence, as found in contemporary World History studies. Finally, any explanation we construct must pinpoint a *theorizable* role played by unevenness in the constitution of political multiplicity. It is this which would enable us to specify the latter as an *emergent expression* of the uneven and combined nature of development—rather than being either a contingent over-determination or a perennial but unexplained feature of it.

And yet this third condition, which requires the elucidation of 'unevenness' as a theoretical premise, appears at first to be impossible almost by definition. Everybody knows that actual historical development is multiple, variegated, empirically messy: it is uneven. But can it really be *theorized* so? A long tradition in Western social thought, stretching, in Nisbet's (1969) classic account, all the way back to Aristotle, insists that it cannot. Theory, it is argued, is built upon the regularities and continuities that the phenomenal world exhibits. It can be produced, therefore, only by *abstracting* from irregularities and discontinuities. If so, how *could* unevenness function as a theoretical premise?

Moreover, there seem to be many cautionary examples—including earlier treatments of U&CD—of how the exercise we are proposing can end in thin air. Thus, John Elster has concluded that in the end Trotsky's idea is indeed 'rather vapid'. It belongs, he says, 'to a class of Marxist notions whose suggestiveness is equalled only by their elusiveness' (Elster 1986, 55, 56). Neil Smith (2006) goes even further. There is a reason, he says, why the idea of unevenness, which quite regularly crops up in Marxist thought, always ends by falling rapidly out of fashion again. The reason is that this idea has a history of 'absurd universalization', which has reduced it to 'a theoretical and conceptual embarrassment in the Marxist tradition'. Trotsky himself 'was not blameless either' (Smith 2006, 186, 182). His own scattered claims that unevenness was a 'universal law' were already as senseless as Althusser's later exclamation that

'this law does not concern Imperialism alone, but absolutely "everything in this world"' (Althusser 1979, 201). And Smith has no hesitation in delivering what must seem the obvious, devastating objection:

A law that explains absolutely 'everything in the world' explains nothing, and the fact that 'nothing develops evenly', used as a philosophical justification for such a law, reduces it to triviality. (Smith 2006, 182)

Now, on closer inspection, this objection turns out to be somewhat less definitive than it appears. To say, as Althusser does, that a given 'law' 'concerns' everything is quite different from saying that it 'explains' everything. Moreover, the logical rule that universals cannot be invoked to enhance our understanding of particulars is subject to at least one exception. Where a universal characteristic has been everywhere excluded by the forms of thought used to grasp particulars, its reinsertion may indeed make a positive difference in every instance to our understanding of those particulars. And it has already been implied above that the exclusion of a theoretical premise of unevenness in the tradition of Western thought descending from Aristotle might provide such a case.

Still, these observations only parry an objection. The actual purpose of our journey to Level III was to uncover a link between unevenness and political multiplicity. And we are no further forward with that. Has the patient reader been dragged down here on false pretences? Not exactly, for the materials we need do lie at this level. Suppose, however, that before we can begin our search for them, a different object suddenly catches our eye. Picking it up, we discover that it is in fact a finely crafted link for exactly the kind of gap we need to fill—between a concept of social development and the fact of political multiplicity. Suppose, moreover, that it does indeed produce the sociological derivation of 'the international' which we had argued such a link would enable; and yet, on further examination, it appears to do so *without* using 'unevenness' in the way we had earlier thought necessary. This is the complication with which the present argument is confronted by the remarkable work of Barry Buzan and Richard Little, especially their impressive volume *International systems in world history* (2000).<sup>5</sup> What to do? Once picked up, the alternative link cannot in candour be discarded. So let us first explore how Buzan and Little's work has this significance for the argument so far, before then considering what it says about the Level III claim made for U&CD—the claim that this entire digging operation was originally intended to substantiate.

### **Digging suspended: the achievement of Buzan and Little**

Buzan and Little do not argue against the significance of uneven development. Quite the contrary. Already in 1993, Buzan had suggested that any geographically 'fragmented political structure ... necessarily and automatically generates a pattern in the distribution of capabilities' which in practice, and irrespective of the social form of the units involved, 'is almost certain to be uneven, and probably very uneven' (Buzan et al 1993, 51). By 2000, this became more explicitly an

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<sup>5</sup>The argument in question was, however, already present in less developed form in Buzan et al (1993).

argument about 'the apparent permanence of uneven development'. Uneven development, argued Buzan and Little, has multiple implications. It entails that 'international systems will normally contain structurally differentiated units' (Buzan and Little 2000, 374). As 'a standing feature of world economies', it is bound up with the configuration of 'centre-periphery process formations'. Indeed it even operates as a characteristic of the historical process in general: 'History does not move at the same speed all across the planet' (Buzan and Little 2000, 379, 388). And yet, having thus invoked unevenness quite fulsomely at Levels I and II, Buzan and Little do not, as the present argument is committed to doing, attribute the very existence of 'the international' to the unevenness of development. They do, at Level III, produce a sociological derivation of this existence. But when it comes to identifying the attribute of social reality which enables this derivation, they settle on a quite different candidate: social differentiation. We must therefore suspend further digging while we examine the link they have produced in this way.

'If international systems are considered an important phenomenon,' say Buzan and Little, 'then there is an obligation to be able to tell the story of how they began and how they evolved' (2000, 91). They therefore devote no less than two full chapters to what they call 'pre-international systems'.<sup>6</sup> And what they mean by this term is those patterns of social organization and interconnection which monopolized the human world before the first occurrence of sedentary communities and agriculture. The hunter-gather band (HGB) was the institutional form in which, over a period of about 100,000 years, human groups spread outwards and colonized the planet. These groups were certainly multiple—vastly *more* numerous, in fact, than the states among which the vastly larger human population of today is divided. And they were intensely interactive. Indeed, their interactions could extend systems of material and ideational exchange across continental distances. And yet they were 'pre-international'. Why? Idiosyncratic as this nomenclature of 'international' and 'pre-international' might at first appear, it is their answer to this question which provides the first step in Buzan and Little's sociological derivation of political multiplicity.

A key feature of HGBs, integral to much of their social character and behaviour, is their small size. Typically numbering between 15 and 75 members, HGBs are incapable of autonomous biological reproduction. They are therefore almost everywhere dependent upon exogamous interaction with other bands. Continuous movement around their 'estates' helps enable the regular contacts with multiple other bands which this exigency requires. And it also reinforces a further social characteristic associated with small groups: where every adult must be able-bodied, and where the need for mobility militates against the accumulation of surpluses requiring storage or transportation, powerful pressures operate against internal social differentiation. Meanwhile, insurance or buffering against 'environmental stress' is sought through two other recourses: restriction of the size of the band so that its demands on its environment typically fall well below the latter's 'carrying capacity'; and continuous promotion—through material exchange and periodic festive gatherings—of the blood links forged with the other bands through exogamy.

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<sup>6</sup> For the argument summarized below, see Buzan and Little (2000, 111–162).

Buzan and Little offer several reasons why the interactive multiplicity that proliferated on this basis cannot—despite its remarkable ability to facilitate the near-global spread of the species—be properly described as an international system. Some of these reasons relate more to the ‘system’ side of the term, and others more to the predicate ‘international’. Hunter-gatherer networks, they aver, certainly comprised social systems in the rudimentary sense that they were reproduced through regularized rules and practices. Furthermore, because these rules and practices interconnected large numbers of units, they could, and did, produce system-wide effects, such as the transmission of objects, linguistic elements and ideas across large geographical distances. What they could not typically produce, however, was system-level effects, what Kenneth Waltz (1979) would call ‘structures’. Instead, bilateral inter-group interaction was iterated across long distances; and although this could be highly significant, giving bands access to remote mental and material resources not otherwise available, it did not yield an additional layer of system-level determinations of the kind we conventionally associate with market mechanisms, say, or the balance of power. The reason for this is partly that the interconnections composing this social system were predominantly linear, rather than multi-ordinate in nature; but it is partly due also to the lack of social differentiation within the HGBs themselves. And this brings us to the ‘international’ side of the argument.

In Buzan and Little’s account, HGBs can be described as ‘undifferentiated’ in no less than three senses, each of which, in its own way, plays into the non-international nature of their interconnection. First, their small size and necessary mobility work against the emergence of a division of labour (beyond the residual biological one of the sexes) which could lead to the emergence of a ‘sectoral’ differentiation of, say, economic, political, military and religious functions. Second, and relatedly, they also lack the vertical differentiation of rulers and ruled—stratification—which constitutes ‘the political’ as a distinctive domain. And finally, the symbiotic nature of their reproductive interdependence with other bands obstructs that lateral differentiation from other units without which a clear distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ cannot be established.

These features of prehistoric sociation would not alter significantly until humans began to form sedentary communities, expanded the size of social units through ‘nucleation’ and started to engage in agriculture. As they did so, however, and as this process gave rise first to tribal villages then to chiefdoms and finally to primitive forms of state, the beginnings of an international system began to crystallize for the first time. Buzan and Little’s narrative of how this may have come about is full of contingent interrelations; there are no necessary links, they suggest, between settlement, agriculture and hierarchy. Still, these phenomena do seem to have been interwoven in the developmental process (occurring over some 5000 years) through which the early proto-states first emerged. In the course of this process, the architecture of social existence was quite radically transformed. Out of a pre-existing world of HGBs, a new kind of social unit emerged.

Humans first settled at sites of natural abundance, a move that led both to new possibilities and to new exigencies. For sedentary existence changes the logic of ‘environmental buffering’. With the basic requirement of mobility lifted, seasonal food surpluses can be accumulated and stored to enable year-round subsistence, weakening in turn the direct dependence on other social units. Storage in fixed locations, however, also creates new liabilities, as these surpluses provide a target

for predation by other groups. The new need for security promotes 'nucleation'—the congregation of larger numbers of individuals into units of settlement better able to defend themselves. Nucleation, however, has other effects too. As the number of individuals in a social group grows, non-hierarchical forms of social sanctioning become less effective (due to increased scope for cheating in groups too large for everyone to have equal knowledge of everyone else's behaviour). Organization to meet the needs of security against external threats can be decreasingly supplied by the spontaneous reactions of the group as a whole, requiring concentrated attention of emergent specialists. Moreover, the same stored surpluses that become a target for outsiders simultaneously provide a potential resource for aspiring individuals within the community. Differential access to them (and to the external trade they support) can be used to create alliances and forge networks of clientalism and domination. In these ways, settled existence starts to create both a functional requirement for and a material resource to enable inner social stratification. A key result is the emergence, for the first time, of 'the political' as a dimension of human social organization.

And this inner stratification transforms the nature and logic of relations with outside groups too. As the size of the group increases, the genetic exigency of exogamous symbiosis with other groups relaxes. This is the most basic of many ways in which the group becomes more self-contained—in which, that is, it begins to take on characteristics of social, political and territorial definedness which form part of our definition of 'a society'. With the appearance of political hierarchy, a further, and quite fundamental, shift occurs too. Emergent chiefs and their clients, whose internal position rests on control of surpluses, now have a potential interest in external expansion to augment these surpluses. This is an interest quite alien to the logic of social reproduction in HGBs; and its effects are reflected in the physical fortification of settlements which becomes general quite early on in this process. Chiefs also have an interest in gaining control of relations with other groups, both diplomatically (as an adjunct to their 'domestic' superordination and legitimacy), and materially (as a means of monopolizing items of inter-group exchange which can be used to lubricate the internal hierarchy on which their authority rests). This process is associated also with a significant linguistic development. As political and material relations with neighbours are more and more channelled through the specialized agency of political power-holders and (under their authority) merchants, *lingua francas* emerge as elite languages. These replace the commonly owned vocabularies that HGBs needed to maintain across their inter-group networks of social reproduction. In this way too, then, the emergent 'societies', while not internally homogenized, are nonetheless increasingly cut off from each other at lower levels. And their lateral, external differentiation proceeds apace with their inner, vertical stratification.

Many more steps are involved before this process gives rise to the first 'international' political system—that is, the first system of states in which the inner durability of political hierarchies is sufficient to sustain system-level effects and pressures that can have a history of their own (rather than leading rapidly to the implosion of the participating units). Nonetheless, the overall shape of the story is already manifest in this transitional phase of early chiefdoms. The international, on this highly persuasive reading, came into being only when (and because) a process of vertical social differentiation within early settled communities produced a new phenomenon: the sphere of 'politics'. This internal

emergence of 'the political' was simultaneously reflected in a lateral differentiation of 'inside' and 'outside'. And it was this process (involving strong interactive elements throughout) which gave rise to the phenomenon of 'political multiplicity'.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, as a dimension of the socio-historical world, 'the international' emerges neither from the fracturing of some erstwhile unity (as the term 'fragmentation' might seem to imply), nor from some coalescence into interaction of separately arisen units. Rather it crystallizes within a pre-existing social landscape of interactive multiplicity. And it does so as an emergent expression of development itself (understood as differentiation). Surely any notion that the sociological derivation of the international somehow requires the concept of uneven and combined development has now been decisively contradicted before we have even attempted to substantiate it. Or has it?

### **Digging resumed: uneven and combined development at Level III**

In fact the implications for U&CD of this rich and rigorous argument are not quite as unambiguous as they first appear. In order to explain how this is so, I must at this point recount a peculiar deadlock that my own attempt to think through these issues had reached prior to reading *International systems in world history*.

The link we originally came down to Level III to seek was of a particular kind: it was supposed to enable a derivation of the fact of political multiplicity from the uneven and combined character of development. Such a derivation logically presupposes that socio-historical unevenness comes before political multiplicity. I, however, had already insisted elsewhere (Rosenberg 2006; 2007; forthcoming) that the concept of unevenness itself contained the idea of numerical multiplicity. And I had done so because I believed that if it did not, then this multiplicity, coming from elsewhere, would escape a sociological derivation, and would resume its supra-sociological realist connotations. In this way, however (and as I shall explain in a moment), the truly problematic conflation was my own. Its result was that I was now committed to a claim that, on the one hand, unevenness always involved multiplicity of number, and yet, on the other hand, that it might chronologically have preceded it—meaning that there could have been a time when it did not involve it. Needless to say, I had great difficulty imagining how the obvious contradiction in this claim could ever be repaired. And yet it can.

It was Buzan and Little's argument which unravelled the tangle in which I had caught myself. For it suggested that I had conflated social multiplicity—which is indeed perennial—with political multiplicity (which is not). And it showed how the latter's existence could indeed post-date that of the former, even while the fact of social multiplicity remains operative throughout. Only at a late stage in prehistoric development does *social* multiplicity become *societal* (and hence also political) multiplicity—because politics itself is an emergent result of the process of social differentiation through which 'societies' first arise.

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<sup>7</sup> This also, and rightly, throws into question our earlier construction of Level II, with its implication of the perennial existence of the international as a dimension of the social world.

Thus, while Buzan and Little's achievement appears at first to pre-empt any Level III version of U&CD, it simultaneously removes a major obstacle to such a version being constructed. By making it conceivable how uneven and combined development could precede the fact of political multiplicity, it opens the logical possibility of a derivation, which I shall attempt presently. Moreover, while Buzan and Little's link thus solves a fundamental problem besetting my own approach, we might also ask whether, that problem now being solved, we (or rather Marx and Trotsky between them) might yet be able to return the favour.

The possibility follows from a question that has been left unanswered since we first encountered it (in slightly different words) soon after our arrival at Level III: is a conception of development which admits any amount of unevenness *empirically*, but which does not incorporate it *theoretically*, the optimal one we can have?

This might at first appear an odd question to pose of Buzan and Little's work, for the term 'development' plays no significant role in their argument. The nearest equivalent in their writing—'evolution'—does not figure in the 'theoretical toolkit' (2000, 68–89) by which they organize their analysis. And it is itself heavily circumscribed by warnings about the need to avoid the 'familiar evolutionary story' (137) which posits a fixed series of stages through which all societies must pass. A parallel caveat is also attached to the attempt they nonetheless make to 'tell a plausible story' (160) about the different types of social units and their interrelations whose successive appearance composes the prehistory (and then the history) of international systems. This (wholly reasonable) caveat is that their extreme simplification of this story into a sequence of three types (HGBs, sedentary tribes and chiefdoms) 'mask[s] an enormous amount of variation' (113) in the nature of the social units to which these terms refer. The caveat once made, however, they affirm that the sequence itself composes 'a clear unfolding towards more state-like entities and more international system-like behaviours' (160). Ultimately, therefore, the object of their analysis is a causally cumulative process of change, and one that brings with it an augmentation of human collective capacities. They are seeking, in other words, to conceptualize a process of socio-historical development. And, as suggested earlier, the central element in this conceptualization is the idea of social differentiation.

Now, there is no doubting that their caveat is entered in earnest:

Only in some places did the transition from HGBs to settled tribal villages take place, and only in some of those places did chiefdoms develop. Very special circumstances had to be in play before HGBs became tribal villages and before tribal villages became chiefdoms. Over the whole of the planet there are huge variations in how this story unfolded, and these variations matter for the story we will tell ... about the international systems of the ancient and classical world. (Buzan and Little 2000, 161)

But this raises an obvious question: if (as they would surely agree) such variations matter also for the current story (of the original emergence of the international), then what might be the liabilities incurred by excluding the fact of them from the conceptualization of development itself?

Two features of their overall argument give point to this question. First, in explaining the transition from pre-international to international systems, they introduce a host of fascinating sub-theorizations of particular phenomena and

turning points which connect these two stages of the overall story of progressive social differentiation—but these theorizations do not proceed directly from its premises. Neither settlement nor agriculture nor even the early logic of state formation proceeds from differentiation—though they all, and especially the last, play heavily into it. In the light of Buzan and Little's claim to provide, 'for the first time, a framework embracing a *continuous* narrative of international systems across a period of over 5,000 years' (2000, 52, emphasis original), this is a striking disjuncture.<sup>8</sup> If these quite critical causes (which effectively drive the transition from one stage of development to the next) lie outwith the phenomena grasped by the (general) conception of development, what does this tell us about that conception as an abstraction of the process of historical change? Furthermore, what if these same causes were inseparable from the fact of 'immense variation' which has been, albeit with explicit caveats, placed outside the conceptual apparatus being deployed? Might that not argue for a theoretical incorporation of this fact into the abstraction of development? And what, finally, if it turned out that these two separated sets of causes—those which result *in* increased differentiation, and those which result *from* that differentiation—could be reunited under a general conception of socio-historical development as uneven and combined? As we shall see below, it was this intellectual possibility which was mooted in the earlier suggestion that 'unevenness' might be formulated as a theoretical premise.

Second, Buzan and Little define their goal as a 'marriage of theory and history' (2000, 1). And yet, not only do they disavow any claim that their approach constitutes a theory ('for it contains no single line of cause and effect' [10]); they also place a categorical limit on the kinds of historical explanation which social theory can be expected to provide: 'international relations represents a subject of such immense size and complexity that it is best approached from a systemic or general perspective rather than an event-driven or particularist one' (33). Caution is always well advised. Yet there is more than caution here. The implied contrast between social theorizing and history-writing is reminiscent of the old distinction—which they discuss critically elsewhere (26–27)—between nomothetic and idiographic forms of explanation.<sup>9</sup> Doubtless an element of this distinction will always apply. Still, the exact placement of the divide between them varies between different intellectual methods. And anyone proposing a '*marriage* of theory and history' would want to move as far as possible from a squarely median placement that would produce the conceptual objects of the two approaches as mutually excluded. How far, then, can we legitimately extend the horizon of social theory into the territory of history? Once again it seems worth investigating whether and how the concept of U&CD, applied to the empirical materials that Buzan and Little provide, might enable a deeper incursion than their argument proposes.

In order to pursue this investigation, we need to carry it through three basic steps in the remainder of this article. First, we need to specify the real-world object of a general sociological conception of development. Second, we must establish

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<sup>8</sup> This recalls Barrington Moore's category of 'fortuitous' factors, which Theda Skocpol (1973, 29) diagnosed as symptomatic of a deeper irresolution in his theoretical framework.

<sup>9</sup> For a classic (re)statement of this divide, see Goldthorpe (1991).

the warrant—empirical and theoretical—for reformulating this conception as uneven and combined. And finally we must show how the reformulated conception itself can be used to better explain the emergence of political multiplicity. If all this can be done, then a Level III elaboration of Trotsky's idea—too long delayed, and apparently already trumped by Buzan and Little's achievement—might nonetheless begin to realize the potential that has so far been only speculatively attributed to it.

*The sociological conception of development*

Let us begin with the first step. At its widest, the real-world object of a sociological conception of 'development' must indeed appear impossibly immense and complex. For it comprises nothing less than the process by which biologically modern humans, originating some quarter of a million years ago in East Africa, spread outwards and colonized the planet; a process by which they also at the same time (and subsequently) underwent successive elaborations of their social and material capacities—to the point where the original and persisting genetic unity of the species is now overlain by a deepening, and increasingly self-conscious, interactive unity (or social interconnection) across the global extent of its differentiated parts.

And yet, impossible as it might seem, all the major classical social theorists were led, in their attempts to capture the specificity of *modern* societies, to elaborate wider conceptions of human development which would encompass this process. Marx's 'materialist conception of history', Weber's 'cultural sociology' and Durkheim's analysis of the division of labour and social differentiation—all of these posited, and sought to characterize, a historical process of social development reaching back into an assumed prehistoric stage of 'primitive' societies. Of these three, Marx arguably remained most committed to preserving the unity of 'systemic' and 'events-driven' phenomena, which are fused in the formulation of 'development' above. But it is important to note that none of these authors explicitly included in his general abstraction of development that class of inter-societal determinations which arises specifically from its inner unevenness. This explains the critique that has accumulated in the literature cited earlier on 'internal history', 'methodological nationalism', 'the territorial trap' and so on. And when we attempt, further below, to reverse this exclusion, it will not be in order to stuff the concept of development with the infinite detail of empirical variation and interaction; we shall do so rather in order to work out the generalizations that are needed to theorize the systematic results of unevenness as a property of historical development.

As the archaeological extensions of World History studies have strongly re-emphasized,<sup>10</sup> the heart of the process we are attempting to theorize (human socio-historical development) lies in what Marx and Engels called the 'twofold relation' (1976, 42). The human productive (and imaginative) relation to nature, being always collectively organized in some way, forms simultaneously a key matrix of humans' relations with each other. In fact, the general conception

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<sup>10</sup> 'The progress of archaeology ... gives powerful reinforcement to the view that the central preoccupation of human history must be with man's struggle with his environment' (Moore 1993, 947).

of development set out by Marx and Engels in *The German ideology* (1976) is at once so 'classical' and so powerful that we should pause for a moment to recall it. Doing so will enable us both to reunite Trotsky's predicates ('uneven' and 'combined') with their enduring subject, and also to see what difference their application makes to that subject.

'[A] fundamental condition of all history', write Marx and Engels, is that humans must interact with nature to produce their means of subsistence. It is fundamental both in the sense of providing the prehistoric starting point of social development (once biologically modern humans have emerged), and in remaining its enduring foundation: 'today, as thousands of years ago, [it] must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life' (1976, 42). How humans do this, they add, depends on the particular social and natural conditions and resources confronting them in a given time and place. At the start of history, ecologically given conditions play the overwhelming part. But, even at the start, human adaptation (through production) is a creative, transformative act. Orchestrated through cooperative social relations (initially kin based), it immediately generates new needs (beyond the simple need for physical subsistence), which are specific to the manner in which the 'fundamental condition' is being met, and are embodied in both the technologies and the social relations involved. In this way, the productive transformation of nature impels a dynamic and unending transformation of human nature too, as this basic pattern of the generation and satisfaction of new needs is iterated over time.

Human history, on this view, reappears as a millennial succession of generations, each of which inherits a given total constellation of social and natural relations which it passes on (in a form modified by the outcomes of its own (re)productive activity) to the next (Marx and Engels 1976, 50). And a key result of this succession is the gradual operation of a process of social differentiation, which Marx and Engels (1976, 44ff) chart in terms of a developing 'division of labour'. The idea of such a process, in fact, is common to nearly all classical social theories, and the process itself is described empirically in present-day World History studies too. Its accumulating results find expression in (to use Eric Wolf's categorization [1982]) the succession of kin-ordered, tributary and industrial capitalist forms of society. Each of these forms not only appears later than the last, but also arises somehow out of it. Furthermore, each also involves a step-level augmentation in the intensity (and breadth) of the productive interaction with nature, in the capacity for mobilizing social power and in the cognitive rationalization of social and natural processes. Stripped down to its essentials, and divested of any normative evaluation, this is the core meaning of the classical sociological concept of development. And it is the core of Buzan and Little's concept too.

### *Why development must be uneven and combined*

Now let us move on to the second step: what warrant exists for weaving the predicates of 'uneven' and 'combined' into the basic formation of this concept? A positive answer must show that 'unevenness' and 'combination' identify real-world determinations that are consequential for what development is as a historical process; and the causal significance of these determinations must be such that they cannot plausibly be excluded from any concept that presents itself

as a valid abstraction of that process. How might this be so? ‘The way in which men produce their means of subsistence’, continue Marx and Engels,

depends first of all on the nature of the means of subsistence they actually find in existence and have to reproduce ... All historical writing must set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men. (Marx and Engels 1976, 31)

And yet the natural world is not only the physical foundation of human life; it is also, and especially in the period we are discussing, the largest single source of uneven development. Climatic, topographic and ecological differentiation across geographical space offered an enormous variety of habitats to which human groups adapted as they spread outwards from their East African home. The sheer range of this variety means that the process of human adaptation must have meant very different things (in terms both of practical knowledge of natural processes and of the ‘new needs’ generated by exploitation of them) in different times and places—even while human groups everywhere shared the common characteristics of HGBs. Thus, ‘[a]t the end of prehistory ... we confront a world of human societies more differentiated than ever before’ (Roberts 2002, 36).

Temporally too, the earth was (and is) a dynamic phenomenon, uneven across time. Its possibilities as an interactive extension of human nature changed as successive advances in social capacities—such as language, control of fire, invention of clothing and artificial shelter—enabled human subsistence in more and more areas. But it also brought a temporal unevenness all of its own to late prehistoric human development. Receding ice sheets at the end of the last ice age opened up previously inaccessible areas, allowing for the emergence of new ecological habitats. Meanwhile, consequent rises in sea levels submerged or newly disconnected from each other pre-existing social and physical landscapes, removing, for example, the land bridges between ‘Siberia and Alaska, Japan and China, Britain and Europe, and Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Tasmania’ (Christian 2004, 212).

Thus the process of peopling the earth, largely accomplished by HGBs, was necessarily uneven in both space and time. This unevenness was expressed in (and further compounded by) an ‘enormous variation’ in human socio-ecological adaptation. And that, as we shall now see, was heavily consequential for the course of development both locally and globally.

For this same diversity was also ‘combined’ from the start. As we have already noted, HGBs depended for their biological reproduction on exogamous interaction with other bands, extending networks of consanguinity which provided the basis for periodic gatherings, shared language and security against environmental stress. They also engaged in trade—exchanges with neighbours which, via subsequent relays, fed into larger networks that could transmit objects across large distances. But such trade relied in part upon differential adaptation to unevenly distributed resources; without these, the objects arriving from afar would already have been available locally, obviating the (complementary) rationale of exchange.

And this same point applies also to mechanisms of socio-cultural development arising from the exchange of information and ideas. Analysing these as a process of ‘collective learning’, David Christian points out that potential linkages among the nodes of an information system (such as that composed of the interrelated

HGBs) proliferate geometrically with only arithmetic increases in the number of nodes involved (Christian 2004, 183). Insofar as successive forms of human society have involved more manifold interconnections among social units, this observation helps explain the quantum leaps in the speed of development which this succession of forms exhibits. In fact, Christian uses it to help explain smaller, but nonetheless very significant accelerations even within the Palaeolithic period. And the point to be added here is surely no less important for being so obvious: no information system could account for the developmental mechanism he is modelling—that is, the acceleration of collective learning—if the information it assembled were composed of identical data from all its nodes (Christian 2004, 183): this mechanism of development presupposes unevenness.

Do the points made so far establish a case for introducing unevenness and combination as theoretical premises of a concept of development? Partly. They entail that unevenness ('enormous variation') is a necessary, and not a contingent, fact about global social development; and they pinpoint a role that (re)combination of this unevenness plays in a specific mechanism of material and cultural development. Moreover, the determinations that they bring into the concept are, to say the least, not trivial. Jared Diamond (1997), after all, has parleyed the uneven geo-ecology of human prehistory into an explanation for the distribution of wealth and power in the world today. Meanwhile, Friedrich Tenbruck (1994, 86) has argued that inter-societal interaction (combined development) constitutes the largest source of social change in human history—a conclusion already reached, incidentally, by Robert Nisbet (1969, 280) three decades earlier.

Still, non-triviality, which might equally apply to random, non-generalizable events such as earthquakes, is not by itself enough to warrant the elevation of some factor into a theoretical premise. The key must therefore be sought in the *theoretical* bearing of these points upon the classical conception of development introduced earlier. Few would dispute that historical explanation always requires a mix of the general and the particular. The problem with the classical concept of development, as Nisbet (1969) so devastatingly argued, is that it has no *theoretical* space within itself for particulars. It closes itself off from them within a logic of immanence, building forward the causal sequence that iterates exclusively out of that which it already contains. Left to itself, therefore, it has a recurrent tendency to propagate falsely unilinear analyses of historical processes, to which particulars must then be applied as empirical corrections. Hence the caveat invoked by Buzan and Little. But are empirical corrections enough? If Nisbet was right, then the real correction needed concerns the inner structure of the concept itself. But how can such a correction even be imagined?

By their nature, particulars cannot be generalized; much less can their identity be known in advance. How then can they make an appearance inside a theoretical concept that, like all concepts, is produced by abstraction from particulars? In truth, they cannot. What can appear within a concept, however (not least so that its generalizable implications are brought within reach of the latter), is the *fact* of particularity itself, and what that entails: differentiation, variation—in short, unevenness. Nisbet (1969) believed that this fact of particularity argued the ultimate dysfunctionality of the concept of development itself. But that conclusion follows only if a theoretical solution cannot be found to the conundrum he identified. And interpolating unevenness and (resultant) combination into the concept seems to provide just such a solution. By formalizing within the concept

of 'development' the sociological phenomena of variation and interactivity, this interpolation dismantles its mono-sequential inner structure—the structure that largely accounts for its tendency towards unilinear fallacies of all kinds (Rosenberg 2006). This is the ultimate conceptual warrant for treating unevenness and combination as theoretical premises.

If so, then doing so ought to help also with our third step. It ought, that is, to extend the reach of a general concept of development further into the zone of historical explanation. But does it?

### *Explaining political multiplicity*

Consider again the broad developmental sequence of settlement–agriculture–polities which forms the bedrock of Buzan and Little's sociological derivation of 'the international'. When they themselves try to explain this sequence, unevenness and combination already enter directly into the causal conjunctures invoked. And they need to. For like the sequence of types of society (kin ordered, tributary, industrial capitalist), these early elements of the 'Neolithic revolution' come into their own in a temporal sequence, but in an empirically 'ragged, untidy way' (Roberts 2002, 36). It is so ragged, in fact, that a general concept of development based exclusively on differentiation—or, for that matter, Marx and Engels' 'division of labour'—*must* treat the way they came about as, in effect, empirical givens whose own explanation must be sought elsewhere, via lower-lying theorizations. Adding the predicates 'uneven' and 'combined' does not end this situation, in which the overlap of theory and reality is only partial—nothing could. It does, however, enable us to work into the general concept causal mechanisms that we know to be intrinsic to the empirical processes we are analysing. And that should enhance the explanatory power of the general concept of development. Let us see how.

Archaeological evidence suggests that human settlement first occurred only sporadically, in places where natural abundance allowed for year-round foraging subsistence (Buzan and Little 2000, 136). Sites where this abundance included nutritious plant species pre-adapted for domestication were even fewer (Christian 2004, 230). At any rate, the number of cases in which agriculture is believed to have arisen independently currently stands at less than ten (McNeill and McNeill 2003, 27). What is the significance of this obvious fact that agriculture first arose in some places and not others?

The answer, adjusted for time and place, involves the same perception that Trotsky applied to the much later case of industrial capitalism. Unevenness, first encountered as a descriptive register of particularity—the process began in 'some places and not others'—turns out to have generalizable causal consequences for the working out of the process itself. How?

The element of particularity just identified entails that the human transition to agriculture was neither simultaneous in time nor universal in space. And the point here is not fundamentally about speed: it is about the resultant causal texture of historical process. As soon as non-simultaneity/non-universality is allowed, it follows that the overall transition itself must have been internally staggered and interactive—reaching different places at different times and, insofar as this did not occur through serial, unconnected repetitions, mediated through the lateral interconnection of adjacent populations. These spatio-temporal protractions

of historical process are of quite critical significance. Because of them, an entire class of causal factors materializes which would otherwise have no being inside the developmental process being analysed—and which can be invoked to repair the theoretical disconnections earlier identified in Buzan and Little's narrative. On the one hand, they entail that at any given point the overall pattern of development must comprise an uneven distribution both of socio-cultural forms and of material capabilities among coexisting human populations. And, on the other hand, because these populations coexist and interact, the lateral unevenness of form and capability may itself enter as a factor in their further ('combined') development. If for no other reason than this—a reason not explicitly registered in classical social theory—socio-historical development *must* have a multi-linear and interactive aspect. But by the same token, we can also see that the causal structure of the international is here prefigured *in the spatio-temporal characteristics of development itself*.

At this stage, however, it is only prefigured. After all, as Buzan and Little demonstrate, 'the international' proper is a developmental *outcome* (bound up with the emergence over time of 'the political') and, hence, not something we can derive directly from the nature of development. To find what we are looking for—*political* multiplicity emerging from a process of uneven and combined development—we must examine the third stage of Buzan and Little's developmental sequence: state formation. For it turns out that combined development plays a key role in this emergence of 'the political'.

In Buzan and Little's argumentation, this role is found in the way that sedentary (and agricultural) existence alters the specifically interactive logics of social reproduction and development. Unlike for HGBs, the primary means of insurance against environmental stress now shifts from the mobile maintenance of links with other groups to the storage of surplus food at a fixed location. This, in turn, not only generates a new vulnerability to predation by other groups. It also changes the spatial logic of security—from dispersal to nucleation. Perhaps above all, though, stored surpluses, in the context of the larger stationary groups sustained by agriculture, offer quite new possibilities for the social role of exchange with outsiders. On the one hand, perishable foods can be traded for durable luxuries that can be exchanged for extra food in times of shortage. On the other hand, this use of 'redundant exchange' for environmental buffering creates (quite unlike exchange among HGBs) a stock of fixed 'wealth' which can serve other purposes too. Differential access to prestige goods plays an important role in that consolidation of internal hierarchy through which 'the political' emerges. Control of this access becomes a key link in the construction of paramount authority, for which, therefore, 'social contact with the outside world was absolutely crucial' (Buzan and Little 2000, 155). Moreover, this contact has periodically to supply fresh exotica with which to renew the distinctive position of the paramount chief within the system of hierarchy. Hence '[t]here appears to be a feedback loop linking the intensification of agriculture, the acquisition of wealth, and the emergence of hierarchy' (Buzan and Little 2000, 153). But this evolutionary story, which might otherwise appear consistent with an unreconstructed, 'internalist' concept of development, already contains a crucial *interactive* link: external trade facilitates hierarchy; and hierarchy, by generating 'a constant need for new and exclusive prestige goods', promotes trade (Buzan and Little 2000, 155). If we add in the equally interactive causes arising from the altered

logic of security, it turns out that the inner structure of the developmental process being modelled here (that is, proto-state formation) is an intrinsically 'combined' one: it contains mechanisms arising specifically from the coexistence of more than one social entity.

Buzan and Little argue rightly that this model reveals both the role (neglected in neorealism) of unit-level differentiation (hierarchy) in the emergence of anarchical logics, and the significance of proto-international dynamics in explaining social change. These are valuable results indeed. In such formulations, however, sociological and proto-international causes remain residually external to each other. And this disconnection can now finally be repaired. Viewed instead through the Level III version of Trotsky's idea, these interactive dynamics of social change are no longer, as Nisbet would insist, 'non-developmental' causes. They are dynamics rooted visibly in the spatio-temporally uneven and combined nature of 'development' itself. And, in this way, they reappear within the ambit of a single theory—a *social* theory of international relations, as that term was defined near the start of this article.

As we shall see in a moment, even this is still not enough to complete the derivation we have been pursuing: the derivation of political *multiplicity* from uneven and combined development. But before we complete this third step of the argument, one further observation, followed by a recapitulation, must be added.

In these pages, as elsewhere, I have been arguing for an interpolation of unevenness and combination into the concept of development. At the same time, however (and unlike elsewhere), I have also re-interpolated the concept of development into an extended discussion of unevenness and combination. Without this inverse operation, the problematic unilinearity of classical concepts of development would have been answered by an equally problematic hypostasizing of difference and interaction per se. And the claim that socio-historical development is always uneven and combined would then obscure the equally important recognition that what exhibits these properties (among others) remains nonetheless 'development'—a fact that brings no less important determinations of its own (arising from settlement, agriculture, state formation, etc.) to the argument. This potential problem is of course not Trotsky's but my own, born of my earlier attempts to draw out the significance of his innovation, before reuniting it with the wider system of thought within which it was innovating (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008). But this reuniting must at some point occur. And for this reason, special care has been taken in the present article to reintroduce Marx's concept of development—though the overall point here does not require it to be Marx's. Hopefully, this precaution, undertaken perhaps in the nick of time, will now, in this last step of the current argument, begin to prove its value.

For it entails, as hinted earlier, that the link we have been forging (between U&CD and the existence of the international) will not stand in contradiction to the one already provided by Buzan and Little. It should rather appear to be a more completed version of it—in line with the claim that U&CD allows for a fuller and theoretically more integrated explanation of our common object: political multiplicity. For this third step to succeed, several conditions had to be met: first, we had to establish that U&CD antecedes the international; second, that it

plays a theorizable role in the latter's emergence; and, finally, that this role accounts for the core characteristic of political multiplicity.

Two of these conditions have already been met. As we have seen, uneven and combined development (in the primordial form of the multiplicity and interaction of HGBs) precedes the emergence of 'societies'—units of sufficient size that the most elemental processes of biological reproduction and subsistence could in principle be achieved without fundamental, continuous symbiosis with neighbours. We have also seen that when this emergence does occur it involves more than a simple quantitative congregation; it includes processes of internal differentiation and stratification which create both the new social space of 'politics' inside, and, consequently, a more significant distinction between 'inside' and 'outside'. Here then lies the sociological origin of the international. However, none of the writers considered above—least of all Buzan and Little—treats the developmental sequence that produces this outcome as contained solely within the emerging societies themselves. For everyone, variation among them and interaction between them are either implicitly necessary to generating the empirical configuration of enabling conditions involved, or explicitly part-constitutive of the causal mechanisms of social development itself. Reconceiving development as uneven and combined allowed these factors to take their rightful place within the overall social theory being elaborated.

Nonetheless, our final condition now requires a sociological explanation for the *fact* of political *multiplicity*, and not just the impact of the emergence of 'the political' upon the *form* of multiplicity. And yet with all the preparatory elements now in place, this turns out to be a surprisingly small step. On the one hand, since the level of development of early states does not enable any one of them to engross the whole of the human world, their hardening inside/outside division necessarily congeals into finite entities. On the other hand, because the causal range of social relations and interactions within which they congeal far outruns (via exchange, communication and geopolitics) the reach of any centralized political power, the existence of these early states is likely to stimulate reactive developments of social differentiation and proto-state formation beyond themselves, leading to the emergence of further 'political' entities.

Just such a process seems to have attended the history of the first recorded states system. The Sumerian city-states grew up at the intersection of water-borne and overland trade networks (McNeill and McNeill 2003, 45–46). Though agriculturally fertile, their physical environment lacked key raw materials (timber, metals, stone) that were available in (Syrian, Anatolian and Iranian) hinterlands beyond the reach of military expansion—but not of trade.

The consequence of this for the highland communities of Iran and other peripheries was to accelerate the process of social stratification as local leaders emerged to direct the production of Sumerian-bound exports and control the distribution of imports from Sumer. (Smith 2009, 25)

As with agriculture, then, the developmental process (of social differentiation) that produced 'the political' in one place issued in lateral causes through which, in a staggered and interactive way, *multiple* polities would emerge.

## Conclusion

The depth model deployed at the start of this article was designed first and foremost to force the issue of the relation between sociological unevenness and political multiplicity. And it certainly did that. By progressively bracketing those understandings of the idea which already presupposed the existence of the international, it led us quite rapidly to a level where that existence had instead to be explained.

A second feature of the depth model, however, was that at each successive level the chronological reach—and with it perforce the theoretical meaning and concrete referents—of Trotsky's idea was expanded, inviting the suspicion that such an exercise must end in airy indeterminacy. Yet indeterminacy did not result. And why should it have? After all, Marx's theoretical premise of 'production' holds its force, albeit in very different concrete forms, whether applied to computer chip manufacturing or to primitive agriculture. In a similar way here, multiplicity and interaction were found to be essential properties of development, with specifiable causal consequences for the latter as far back as the eye can see. They change their form as we peer back further into the historical process. But they reach all the way back into the socio-ecological unevenness characterizing the earliest forms of social existence.

If anything, this same trans-historical extension has brought much *greater* determinacy—even historical specificity—to the claim that U&CD explains the existence of the international. For this I have Buzan and Little's work to thank. True, it punctured my earlier hazy assumption that the perennial quality of unevenness and combination meant that the international too must always have existed in some form. That Level II assumption was decisively superseded by their argument that political multiplicity is an emergent property of a wider process of social development with a long (pre)history of its own. But this blow simultaneously opened the door to a far more robust elaboration of Trotsky's idea at Level III. For it invited the counter-question of whether this wider process could be plausibly conceptualized without according an explicitly theoretical standing to the inner multiplicity (the 'enormous variation'), which played such an important empirical role in their own account. This was why the issue of how to frame the general concept of development suddenly loomed so large in the pages above, even though it makes no formal appearance in their own writing. And that in turn compelled a rearticulation of Trotsky's idea *within* Marx's general concept, from which my earlier writings had been in some danger of separating it.

And so, on the basis of all this, we return finally to the original question: can the concept of unevenness explain the existence of political multiplicity? No, it cannot. The concept of 'uneven and combined development', however, fares much better. When Trotsky's predicates are reunited with Marx's subject, then not only can the stages of Buzan and Little's developmental narrative be followed from within a historical materialist analytic; but the concept of development now being deployed makes theoretical sense of dimensions of the narrative which would otherwise require treatment by hypotheses drawn from outside that concept, perpetuating the separation of sociological and 'international' theory. In overcoming this separation, Trotsky's idea does, after all, enable a sociological explanation for the fact of political multiplicity. If the argument made above in

support of this claim is sound, the first of the two basic problems arising from the *CRIA* forum has been overcome. Uneven and combined development is not only the enduring substance of the international today: it is also its antediluvian source.

### Notes on contributor

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