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The Frontiers of Uneven and Combined Development: A Review Essay

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Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*, London: Pluto Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780745336152 (paper); ISBN: 9780745335216 (cloth)

Abstract:

Alexander Anievas' and Kerem Nişancıoğlu's *How the West Came to Rule* is an important intervention within Marxist historical debates which seeks to use the theory of uneven and combined development (UCD) to explain the origin and rise to dominance of capitalism. The argument is shaped by a critique of Political Marxist 'internalist' explanations of the process, to which the author's counterpose an account which emphasises its inescapably 'inter-societal' nature. While recognising the many contributions which the book makes to our historical understanding, this review argues that these insights do not depend on UCD, and could have been arrived at without reference to it. In particular, it will try to show that UCD is inapplicable in periods before the consolidation of capitalism, but might be more usefully extended spatially rather than chronologically.

Keywords:

Uneven and combined development; permanent revolution; Political Marxism; Eurocentrism; Historical Sociology; International Relations.

'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' 'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'¹

1

Alexander Anievas' and Kerem Nişancıoğlu's *How the West Came to Rule* is an important intervention within Marxist historical debates which seeks to use the theory of uneven and combined development to explain the origin and rise to dominance of capitalism. Given the centrality of uneven and combined development to their work, I want to begin by briefly setting out what I understand the theory to involve and outlining the debates to which it has given rise.²

Trotsky first formulated what he called the 'law' of uneven and combined development in the early 1930s. He did so in order to explain the conditions of possibility for the strategy of permanent revolution, which he had first proposed twenty-five years earlier in relation to Russia. The first component of the law, 'unevenness', was of course neither a new concept nor one peculiar to Marxists and, as far as 'combination' was concerned, other Marxists had

¹ Carroll 1982, p. 96.

² The next two paragraphs summarise my account in Davidson 2012, pp. 214-25, 294-308.

previously noted the coexistence of different temporalities within the same social formations, but usually drawing attention to the coexistence of forms rather than their mutual interpenetration. Trotsky, however, was interested in the process by which these forms were fused and – as the connection to permanent revolution suggests – the political effects of such a fusion, first of all in Russia itself.

There, the Tsarist state had been forced to partially modernise under pressure of military competition from the Western powers, but in doing so its former levels of relative stability were disrupted by the irruption of capitalist industrialisation and all that followed in its wake: rapid population growth, uncoordinated urban expansion, dramatic ideological shifts. Uneven and combined development in Russia created a working class which, although only small minority of the population, was possessed of exceptional levels of revolutionary militancy. Thus, for Trotsky, the most important consequence of uneven and combined development was the enhanced capacity it potentially gave the working classes for political and industrial organization, theoretical understanding, and revolutionary activity. But although capitalist relations of production had been established in Russia, the bourgeois revolution – in the sense of a process which establishes a state capable of acting as a centre of capital accumulation – had still to be accomplished. The existence of a militant working class, however, made the bourgeoisie unwilling to launch such a revolution on their own behalf for fear that it would get out of their control. The working class, on the other hand, could accomplish the revolution against the pre-capitalist state which the bourgeois itself was no longer prepared to undertake and – in Trotsky's version of permanent revolution at any rate – move directly to the construction of socialism, providing of course that it occurred within the context of a successful international revolutionary movement.

Trotsky stated his position relatively briefly in *The History of the Russian Revolution* (1932) and never systematically returned to the subject in subsequent writings. Indeed, apart from a handful of fragmentary comments, usually in the context of other subjects, virtually his entire theoretical discussion can be found in chapter 1 and appendix 2 of the *History*. Nor was the theory subsequently developed by Trotsky's followers. Typically, they would summarise Trotsky's discussion in the *History* in a handful of paragraphs as a perfunctory prelude to far lengthier and more enthusiastic focus on permanent revolution. Furthermore, the very few expositions of uneven and combined development in its own right tended to confuse it with uneven development as such – a confusion which, as we shall see, has yet to be completely overcome. And if Trotskyists themselves treated uneven and combined development either cursorily or inaccurately, the approach of the very few academics to consider it was overwhelmingly hostile and dismissive.

This was how matters stood the last decade of the twentieth century when, quite unexpectedly, the status of uneven and combined development began to change out of all recognition; even more unexpectedly, this change began from within the academy. The origin of the process can be dated with some precision to Justin Rosenberg's 1995 Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture, published the following year in *New Left Review*.³ Over the two subsequent decades uneven and combined development became part of the standard theoretical apparatus available to those working in his discipline of international relations, but also increasingly in the social and political sciences more generally.

Opinion among the growing body of those who find the concept useful has, however, broadly divided in two, with both sides able to claim varying degrees support from Trotsky's writings. One school, which includes the present writer, sees uneven and combined development as a process associated with capitalism in its industrial phase, and which only became possible on a global scale during the imperialist era of capitalism, usually seen as

³ Rosenberg 1996.

beginning in the Great Depression of the 1870s, when geopolitical rivalry and colonial expansion partially extended industrialisation from the metropolitan centres to what we now call the Global South. The other sees it as a transhistorical process which can be found throughout human history. *How the West Came to Rule* is, among other things, an intervention in this debate from the perspective of the latter tendency.⁴

How the West Came to Rule is an important book, but not always an easy one to read:

Here again we see how the asynchronic simultaneity of a plurality of coexisting societies (unevenness) came to interact in ways that generated further substantive sociological differences (geopolitical and sociological combination), in turn leading to sharp divergences in their developmental trajectories. This is in fact a hallmark of any intersocietal system: they are *generatively differentiating* through the very interactive plurality of their units.⁵

Here, as Huckleberry Finn said of *The Pilgrim's Progress*: 'The statements was interesting, but tough.'⁶ The issue is not only or even mainly one of literary style; it is what this says about the intended audience. The language is intended to convince other academics of the utility of uneven and combined development. The authors argue that the theory overcomes two symmetrical absences within the social and political sciences, that of 'the historical' from international relations and that of 'the international' from historical sociology. More specifically, they argue that an alternative is needed to an 'analytical indeterminism' which is reliant on 'a purely conjunctural mode of explanation' and based on 'the play of free-floating contingencies': 'As we hope to demonstrate, this is exactly what the theory of uneven and combined development can provide: a more integrative and encompassing *international* historical sociology.'⁷

This would not, of course, be the first time in the history of Marxism that a theoretical concept with strategic implications has experienced a second life as a cure for the methodological or ontological deficiencies of bourgeois social and political science – think, for example, of Gramsci's version of 'hegemony'. Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, like Rosenberg before them, are reacting to the way in which the dominant Realist School within their discipline of International Relations tends to see states and societies as essentially self-contained entities (the so-called 'domestic fallacy') and have – quite understandably – sought to in response to emphasise the extent to which inter-societal cross-fertilisation occurs throughout history. This is an entirely commendable project; the problem is that those aspects of their work which are genuinely innovative – their emphasis on what might be termed the transhistoricity of the intersocietal – is obscured by their obsession with labelling these processes as uneven and combined development. Can, like Humpty Dumpty, they can make these words mean so many different things?

⁴ Like the other contributors to this symposium, I am a participant in these debates. More to the point, the book contains several, mostly favourable, references to my work and the back cover contains an endorsement by me praising the authors; readers may reasonably infer that there is a causal connection between these two facts. Since Anievas and Nişancıoğlu have used my writing to support several of their positions and I am in turn self-confessedly in sympathy with their overall approach, a review of this sort runs two risks. One is to simply make it an occasion for promoting the work of intellectuals whom one regards as allies, effectively reducing theoretical discourse to partisan mutual self-reinforcement. The other, less common, is to attempt dispel all suspicion of such behaviour by adopting a hyper-critical stance which exaggerates real differences to the point of distortion. I have tried to avoid both these extremes: there is no reason to either pretend an admiration that I do not feel or conceal disagreements which have in several cases I have already publicly discussed with the authors.

⁵ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 250.

⁶ Twain 1936, p. 135.

⁷ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 251.

I will return to the point below, but it is important to understand that Anievas and Nişancıoğlu are not only interested in resolving abstract theoretical problems, but also in putting their renovated theory to work as a means of concrete historical explanation. In this respect, no one can reasonably doubt the scale of the ambition which animates *How the West Came to Rule*, although this alone would not of course guarantee that the results are convincing. Single-volume attempts to encompass the whole of human history, like those of Igor Diakonoff, Kojin Karatani, David Laibman or David Priestland, whatever their theoretical provenance, tend to deal with epochal shifts in social organisation, observing these transformations from such an altitude that the local events and processes of which they are constituted remain invisible on the ground.⁸ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu work on a similarly global scale, but are not concerned with the entirety of recorded history, covering instead a mere five hundred years of it from the Mongol invasions of Europe to the French Revolution – still a daunting enough prospect, but one given focus by the specific process which they attempt to explain: the transition to capitalism and the way in which the societies in which it first became established went on to dominate the rest of the world. How well have they succeeded?

2

The currently most influential explanation for the rise of capitalism, in the English-speaking world at least, is that associated with Political Marxism, which sees it as self-generated by processes wholly internal to a handful of territories. For the founder of this school of thought, Robert Brenner, these territories are England, the Netherlands and Catalonia.⁹ For most of his followers, the list is restricted to England alone, and the spread of capitalism is a result of English and later British economic and military pressure forcing other states to adopt what Political Marxists call capitalist ‘social property relations’. For the purposes of this discussion, four aspects of capitalism thus conceived are particularly important. First, it is defined by the subjection of all social classes to ‘market dependence’, meaning not merely the existence of markets, however widespread, but their inescapable domination over all aspects of economic life. Second, capitalism does not emerge from any general developmental tendency within feudalism; indeed, for Political Marxists capitalism is an entirely contingent – or in plain English, accidental – outcome of the indecisive nature of the class struggle between lords and peasants in England: no external factors were involved and the actual outcome could have been different.¹⁰ Third, there is no necessary connection between the form of exploitation constitutive of capitalism and the types of oppression which were present at its origin and which have been associated with it ever since. Fourth, the processes which most Marxists had hitherto classified as bourgeois revolutions were

⁸ Diakonoff 199; Karatani 2014; Laibman 2007; Priestland 2012.

⁹ Of these three, Brenner has the least to say about Catalonia, but see Brenner 1985, 35, 40, 49, note 81 and 52, note 88, and Brenner 1996, 264–72, 276. It is important to note that other scholars have also identified early capitalist development in Catalonia, but in quite different sectors than Brenner; see Torras 1980 and, more recently, Marfany 2012..

¹⁰ In fact, Brenner allows one external influence in the case of England, namely the centralizing drive of the Norman conquerors after 1066, but as Anievas and Nişancıoğlu rightly point out, his references to this are ‘problematic’, since this one ‘external determination’ is not integrated into his account, but ‘appears as an ad-hoc international addendum’ (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 89-90). Apart from anything else, whatever might have been the case immediately after 1066, England was not particularly centralised or united during the Wars of the Roses, which took place during the first half of the period during which Brenner argues that the transition took place, i.e. the 15th and 16th centuries.

irrelevant to the establishment of capitalism: they were merely ‘political’ rather than ‘social’ revolutions. Anievas and Nişancıoğlu dispute all these claims.

First, they disagree with Political Marxists over their definition of capitalism as ‘market dependence’:

Political Marxists...draw a sharp distinction between (noncapitalist) extra-economic forms of surplus extraction and (capitalist) noncoercive forms of surplus extraction mediated by the market. Any mode of surplus extraction that does not conform to the latter market-dependent form, and any social formation characterised by extra-economic forms of surplus extraction, is therefore conceived as non-capitalist. This not only leads to the exclusion of geopolitical forms of accumulation and capital formation, but also justifies the narrow focus on England (and then Europe) as the historically privileged site in which this separation of the political and economic first took place. ... While wage-labour is certainly an integral feature of capitalism – in part defining it – to claim that capitalism can only exist where the majority of direct producers are ‘free’ is unnecessary, if not unhelpful. ... What the Political Marxist conception of capitalism thus erases are the various transitional or mediated forms of labour relations and regimes, involving different combinations of modes of production. Indeed, the idea of ‘combined development’ – as an amalgamation of differentiated modes of production within a social formation – is absent from the Political Marxist discourse, which unduly abstracts from the messy and contradictory reality of ‘really existing’ capitalisms.¹¹

In their introductory theoretical discussion Anievas and Nişancıoğlu also reject all the other commonly accepted short definitions such as ‘generalized commodity production’ and ‘competitive accumulation based on the exploitation of wage labour’, on the grounds that ‘capitalism is of a complexity that resists single-line definition’. They argue that what is required instead is to capture it as ‘a wider complex web of social relations that stretch our understanding of capitalism far beyond what is captured in any of these phrases’.¹² The closest they come to a definition is to suggest that ‘capitalism is best understood as a set of configurations, assemblages, or bundles of social relations and processes orientated around *the systematic reproduction of the capital relation*, but not reducible – either historically or logically – to that relation alone’.¹³ They do not explain, however, what is meant *by* the ‘capital relation’ any more than they do capitalism itself. Capitalism undoubtedly involves specific configurations of social relations and processes, but simply pointing this out does not help determine what they are. The problem is that Anievas and Nişancıoğlu are so concerned with avoiding purely technical and ahistorical definitions of capitalism that they are unwilling to explicitly commit to any definition at all, even though references to the centrality of the capital–wage–labour relation in the sections of the book devoted to actual historical analysis suggest that they are in fact close to the ‘competitive accumulation based on the exploitation of wage labour’ school. This is all the more frustrating in that they clearly not averse to specifying what is involved in other modes of production, as in their excellent discussion of the difference between the feudal and tributary modes.¹⁴

The reason for their reluctance to make this explicit seems to stem from their opposition to the way in which Political Marxists refuse to accept that capitalism can exist in the absence of wage labour – the latter being the specific form taken by ‘market dependence’ of the direct producers. As Anievas and Nişancıoğlu point out:

¹¹ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 30-31.

¹² Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 8.

¹³ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 9

¹⁴ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 96-104.

An exclusive focus on the English countryside tends to privilege the formation of the capital–wage-labour relation in agrarian capitalism. In contrast, we have argued that although this waged sphere is indeed fundamental, it is itself dependent on a variety of different social relations that are irreducible to that sphere alone. Vast assemblages of nonwaged labour regimes – from debt peonage to plantation slavery, from Banda to Barbados – formed the foundational basis on which the (re)production of wage-labour and capital in London and Amsterdam was built. And at the heart of these non-European processes were histories of violence, terror, subjugation and coercive exploitation meted out by ruling classes to populations across the globe. More often than not, states or state-backed institutions were central to these processes. The very ability of the capitalist mode of production to subsume, exploit and integrate (combine) such an array of spatially differentiated production processes (unevenness) is central to its history and logic.¹⁵

Leaving aside the conflation of ‘wage labour’ with ‘free labour’ (it is perfectly possible for wage labour to be subject to varying degrees of unfreedom), the problem with this passage is that it is unclear whether the authors regard nonwage labour regimes as forming part of *the preconditions* (‘foundational basis’) for capitalist relations of production to come into existence and subsequently be sustained, or whether they see these regimes as *themselves* involving capitalist relations of production. These are different propositions, although it is possible to defend both. It could be argued, for example, that after the emergence of capitalism a nonwage labour regime could then be subject to what Marx called capitalist ‘laws of motion’, even if the labour process did not directly involve capitalist social relations. Anievas and Nişancıoğlu do introduce Marx’s distinction between ‘hybrid’, ‘formal’ and ‘real’ subsumption of labour in the penultimate chapter – the first being the most relevant here – but as what they call a ‘digression’ and the explanation for these terms is consigned to a footnote.¹⁶ These concepts are central to their argument, but are not given the prominence the argument requires, with the result that their account of the role of wage labour within capitalism remains ambiguous.

Their second disagreement with Political Marxism involves a similar ambiguity. Anievas and Nişancıoğlu argue that capitalism had much more geographically diffuse origins than Brenner and certainly the majority of his followers will allow:

Simply stated, we argue that the origins and history of capitalism can only be properly understood in international or geopolitical terms, and that this very ‘internationality’ is constitutive of capitalism as a historical mode of production. Although this may seem intuitively obvious to many readers, in what follows we show that existing conceptions of capitalism have hitherto failed to take this internationality seriously.¹⁷

In other words, the very possibility of capitalism initially emerging in one or a handful of territories in Western Europe depended on the impact of complex international (or ‘inter-societal’) relationships extending far beyond its boundaries. The point is forcefully argued with a wealth of example throughout. Here, for example, is how they assess one of the earliest of these: the ‘Pax Mongolica’ during what they call ‘the long thirteenth century’ (CE 1210-1350) in Chapter 3:

The establishment of the *Pax Mongolica* was then a major boon for overland trade connecting East to West, which notably benefited Northwestern Europe. It created a transcontinental trading system in which commerce, trade, technologies and ideas travelled along the Silk Road

¹⁵ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 278.

¹⁶ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 219-221; pp. 352-53, note 29.

¹⁷ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 2.

like never before. ... This was particularly beneficial for the ‘proto-capitalist’ merchants of the Italian city-states Venice and Genoa, for whom Mongolian protection in Central Asia was central to their preponderance and growth in the Black Sea region. The activities of Italian merchants crucially depended on the Mongols’ willingness and capacity to create and maintain favourable trading conditions. ... What is more, the decreased transaction and protection costs across the overland trade routes resulted in an ‘unprecedented expansion of the market for Western European cities’, in turn promoting growing and complexified divisions of labour in most European urban industries. In particular, the expanded international demand for cloth stimulated the textile industry in the Low Countries, which proved critical to the ‘urban-agrarian’ symbiosis that characterised the rise of capitalist social relations in parts of the Late Medieval Netherlands. The widened market for wool in Flemish towns would in turn encourage English landowners in the Stuart period to convert to commercial agriculture. ... In all these ways, the Mongol Empire provided the propitious geopolitical conditions for the extensive development of market relations, trade, urban growth, and perhaps most importantly an increasingly complex division of labour in Western Europe – the latter constituting an integral aspect of the development of the productive forces.¹⁸

I have quoted this at length because it sets out the range and complexity of the interrelations which Anievas and Nişancioğlu see as providing the enabling conditions for capitalism to emerge. As they make clear, however, there was at this point no inevitability about the outcome, since these developments ‘did *not* automatically entail the advent of capitalist relations of production, but it did provide the preconditions for their subsequent emergence. For growing urban centres provided not only the gravitational pull on peasants seeking to escape serfdom, but also a growing demand for agricultural products, which were increasingly produced for the market’.¹⁹ There were, however, no signs of capitalist development emerging within the territories ruled by the Mongols.

The issue here is the ambiguity to which I earlier referred: was the role of societies outside Western Europe ultimately to facilitate the development of capitalism there or could they also have developed into full-blown capitalist societies in their own right? The weight of the argument tends towards the former position. Four out of the subsequent five chapters explore subsequent developments which cumulatively made the emergence and consolidation of capitalism possible, above all the role of colonialism, which they describe as ‘a *key precondition* to Europe’s rise to global pre-eminence’. In the case of Britain in particular, they argue, these external conquests help explain the exceptional nature of industrialisation there: ‘For it was this earlier period of British colonialism that really laid the foundations for its subsequent global primacy, with India in particular providing the material inputs for Britain’s industrialisation.’²⁰

These chapters are a significant contribution to our understanding of the international dimension to capitalist development, yet I am not entirely convinced of the general argument. For one intended to refute Political Marxist ‘internalist’ accounts of the transition, it comes uncomfortably close to sharing one of their key methodological assumptions, namely that there is no inherent tendency for capitalism to grow out of the feudal or tributary modes. In effect, Anievas and Nişancioğlu have greatly increased the number of contributory factors and expanded the territorial area over which they occurred, but without challenging the explanatory logic of contingency, except by suggesting that these factors had a cumulatively transformative effect.

Nor is it clear, in any case, that colonisation played the general role that Anievas and Nişancioğlu claim for it. On the one hand, some Western European states, notably Spain and

¹⁸ Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015, pp. 74-75.

¹⁹ Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015, p. 75.

²⁰ Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015, p. 246.

Portugal, plundered South American and parts of Asia from the late 15th century onwards, but they were *not* the original sites of capitalist development. On the other hand, modernising elites in Italy, Germany and Japan (the latter of which is of course in ‘the East’) were able to overthrow the existing states in the 1860s and make the transition to capitalism in highly compressed timescales, but they only acquired their empires *after* the transition was complete. Only for a handful of states or territories in Western Europe – sequentially, the United Netherlands, England, Catalonia, Scotland and France – and one of their colonial extensions – the USA – could it seriously be argued that their development on a capitalist basis was aided by their expansion beyond Europe, although this will not come as a surprise to readers of *Capital* Volume 1, Part VIII. (In any case, part of Marx’s point was that the process of primitive accumulation was practised first on peasants and small producers *in* ‘the West’, before it was extended to ‘the East’: this is a question of class, not geography.) It is certainly salutary to point to the number of Africans transported from to the Americas as slaves or the amount of cotton transported from India to the North of England as material for manufacture; but these did not themselves lead to changed social relations of production. On the contrary, they were able to feed expansion in these areas only because social relation of production had *already* been transformed. External factors may have allowed space these changes to take place without interruption – this is what Anievas and Nişancıoğlu argue in relation to the conflict between the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires, for example (pp. 94, 114-15) – but those are enabling conditions (as we saw, they refer to colonization as a ‘precondition’), rather than directly causal factors.²¹

One solution would be to point to a general tendency for the productive forces to develop, including in ‘the East’, and early in the book Anievas and Nişancıoğlu do emphasise this against Political Marxist myths of pre-capitalist stagnation.²² However, the only concrete examples of the process to which they draw attention is from the late 14th century and is treated as a specific consequence of the Black Death, rather than a process inherent in feudalism.²³ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu are of course correct to point out that the development of the productive forces is indeterminate in terms of outcome:

...the specific outcomes of their development are not essential or preordained. They are determining, but not deterministic... Productive forces that push forward certain developments or benefit certain groups in particular contexts can have very different consequences in other

²¹ This is not to suggest that there were no general consequences from the conquest of the Americas. Chapter 5, which deals with this subject, is perhaps at its strongest in identifying the European encounter with the New World as the source of both ‘territorial sovereignty and the modern self’: ‘Rather than being derived from some internal impulse, they represented a response to the particular challenges of jurisdiction in these territories produced by historically specific intersocietal interactions. Such state practices and modalities of territoriality then radiated back to the imperial core in Europe, forming a crucial step in the formation of the modern territorially defined state... The significance of our spatially decentred, non-Eurocentric conception of the origins of sovereign state territoriality for understanding the rise of capitalism in Europe and its later ascendancy to global domination is threefold. First, it gives the lie to the dominant myth that the European states system was a product of geopolitical and socio-economic processes *internal* to Europe, while further problematising those accounts that conceive of the European state formation process as an exclusively elite-driven affair. ... Second, the development and consolidation of territorialised state sovereignty and capitalist social relations in Europe was an intimately intertwined and co-constitutive process... Hence, in contrast to influential neo-Weberian and Marxist accounts, the formation of the European system of territorialised sovereign states did not *precede* the rise of capitalism. Instead, the early modern epoch witnessed the co-evolution and transformation of capitalism and the states system in Europe that was ‘overdetermined’ by interactions with the extra-European world. ... Third, the development of territorially bounded state sovereignty was crucial to the subsequent bundle of processes that eventually led to Europe’s ascendancy to global domination’ (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 139-40).

²² Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 24-26.

²³ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 85-87.

contexts, for other groups. The innovations of the Industrial Revolution that solidified ruling class power in Britain led to social revolution in Russia. What matters then is not the primacy of productive forces, but how their adoption and adaptation is plugged into and related to other aspects of a social assemblage.²⁴

Why did the productive forces develop in Britain but not in Russia, meaning that the latter state had, much later, to ‘borrow’ the achievements of the former? Anievas and Nişancıoğlu point, rightly in my view, to the relative power of the pre-capitalist state to contain developments which had the potential to lead to what we now call capitalism. In the East, the state was stronger and therefore more capable of doing so, as they argue here in relation to the Ottoman Empire:

These European ‘privileges of backwardness’ encouraged and compelled its people – both ruling and ruled classes – to develop and adopt new ways of securing their social reproduction... At the same time, the relative strength of the Ottoman social form entailed ‘penalties of progressiveness’: the stability of their structures of social reproduction provided the Ottoman ruling class with various mechanisms through which their power could be sustained, even in the face of social upheaval.²⁵

Part of Anievas’ and Nişancıoğlu’s achievement is to book makes claims for capitalist self-generation by a handful of Western societies more difficult to sustain. It is unlikely, however, that assertions of European ‘backwardness’ and Ottoman or Mughal ‘progressiveness’ will save them from accusations of Eurocentrism, although they argue that their international/intersocietal approach undermines is intended to undermine it. The reason is because the authors still make their focus the Western European societies where capitalism did first become dominant: they demonstrate that societies ‘external’ to Western Europe contributed to this dominance, but the former are still supporting players, without leading roles in their own right. Anievas and Nişancıoğlu themselves see Eurocentrism as having three main aspects:

First, it conceives of the origins and sources of capitalist modernity as a product of developments primarily *internal* to Europe. ... This second normative assumption of Eurocentrism can be termed *historical priority*, which articulates the historical distinction between tradition and modernity through a spatial separation of ‘West’ and ‘East’. ... From these two assumptions emerges a third predictive proposition: that the European experience of modernity is a universal stage of development through which all societies must pass.²⁶

But these are not necessarily Eurocentric positions. The problem with ‘internalism’, at least in the Political Marxist version, is not a fixation with Europe, but rather a ferociously narrow conception of capitalism such that it can only be found in England or a tiny handful of other areas, rather than a general developmental tendency which particular circumstances allowed to become dominant in what had, until then, been some of the more backward areas of the world. It is possible to criticise Political Marxism on many grounds, but the very *accidental* nature of capitalist origins in their account is a defence against accusations of Eurocentrism: it is not as if they are arguing that capitalism depended on the special genius of the English or Western Europeans, after all. Similarly, arguments for ‘historical priority’ are not necessarily ideological: the Italian city-states, the Netherlands, England and Catalonia were either the first sites of capitalist development or they were not, but if they were, how can it be

²⁴ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 56.

²⁵ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 106.

²⁶ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 4-5.

Eurocentric to say so? Nor does the ‘predictive proposition’ necessarily follow. This is the closest of the three to an actual Eurocentric position, and the hands of ‘Western civilization’ boosters it usually is; but it is perfectly possible to accept the first two assumptions, while holding that the full experience of capitalist modernity can be avoided in the Global South – indeed, some Political Marxists from a Trotskyist background (Brenner, Charles Post) would argue that this is possible precisely through the process of permanent revolution that Anievas and Nişancıoğlu themselves see as operative.²⁷

Anievas’ and Nişancıoğlu’s remaining disagreements with Political Marxism seem to me to be far less open to criticism. The third points to the way in which the narrowness its conception of capitalism excludes every aspect which is not directly reducible to ‘capitalist social property relations’:

Politically, there is much at stake in this. The externalisation of ‘extraeconomic’ forms of exploitation and oppression from capitalism ultimately leads Political Marxists to exclude the histories of colonialism and slavery from the inner workings of the capitalist production mode. They argue instead that such practices were rooted in the feudal logic of geopolitical accumulation. While we would not go as far as to claim that Political Marxists ignore colonialism and slavery per se, they do nonetheless absolve capitalism of any responsibility for these histories (p. 31).²⁸

What they describe here is a form of reverse-economism in which, far from ‘the economic’ (i.e. social property relations) determining every aspect of the social totality, those aspects appear to operate in completely contingent ways, at most overlapping with the needs of capital accumulation, in a way oddly similar to the separate jurisdictions allocated to economy, society, politics and culture in Weberian sociology. One strength of Anievas’ and Nişancıoğlu’s own approach is that it integrates activities and relationships into the capital relation such as those involved in, for example, gendered domestic labour, which the capital relation ‘presupposes’ and without which it could not exist. It is, of course, possible to imagine a version of capitalism in which the only inequalities were economically generated, but these dream visions are best left where they belong, among the discarded ideological armoury of social neoliberalism. Anievas and Nişancıoğlu are therefore right to see the persistence of non-economic inequalities as integral to contemporary capitalism as they were at its origin:

Equally, it is possible to point to the continuing prevalence of racial, gender and sexual hierarchies, often reproduced via nonmarket (as well as market) mechanisms, and ask how far these forms of oppression can be included in the Political Marxist critique of capitalism. The answer, it would seem, is that they cannot. ... Narrow conceptions of capitalism typical of Political Marxism risk descending into a politics of myopia, in which the manifold, complex and ‘intersectional’ forms of oppression (re)produced by capitalism are obscured, disavowed and externalised, rather than exposed, criticised and dismantled (p. 31).²⁹

²⁷ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu argue that, although World Systems Theory (WST) is usually regarded as the main alternative to Political Marxism and, because of its global focus, invulnerable to charges of Eurocentrism, it in fact displays the same tendency as its rival: ‘Despite the high degree of emphasis on exogenous, global factors, WST cannot get away from an ontologically singular Eurocentric “logic of immanence”. Consequently, Wallerstein reproduces the typically Eurocentric view that the transition from feudalism to capitalism took place uniquely and autonomously within the clearly demarcated spatial confines of Europe. Although Asian empires displayed signs of potential development towards capitalism, it was the crisis of feudalism in Europe between 1300 and 1450 “whose resolution was the historic emergence of a capitalist world-economy located in that particular geographical arena”.’ (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 17).

²⁸ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 31.

²⁹ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 31.

Finally, Anievas and Nişancıoğlu reaffirm the significance of the bourgeois revolutions in a chapter dedicated to the first three examples ‘from below’: the Netherlands, England/Britain (the authors are thankfully aware of the existence of Scotland) and France. I can see why, for purposes of clarity, the authors wanted to assess these separately, but in some ways consigning them to a single chapter weakens their presentation, as it detaches the revolutions from the socio-economic emergence of capitalism, the connections between which being one of their major themes. Chapter 6 takes us from 1566 to 1815 and beyond – chronologically the stopping point of the period covered by the book; but we then move back in time to survey the Dutch presence in South East Asia and the British colonisation of India. Since the rest of the book proceeds chronologically it is a pity they did not take the opportunity to integrate the revolutions into their narrative. I agree with them about the significance of Britain’s victory over France in the Seven Years’ War in consolidating capitalism as a system, but placing their account of the French Revolution after this would have helped show how different it was from its Dutch and English predecessors, given that it took place, unlike them, in a context where capitalism was going to be the world’s future, one way or another. However, one can only admire the *chutzpah* involved in calling a section, ‘Towards 1757’, given that this is not a date exactly inscribed on the consciousness of most Marxists even now. Beyond these presentational issues, however, this is a very valuable chapter, not least because it is virtually the only account which treats all three revolutions equally seriously: earlier important discussions which discussed the events rather than the concept – such as those by Alex Callinicos or Colin Mooers – began with the English Revolution, thus foreshortening the overall process.³⁰ Here, the Dutch Revolt is given equal weight in an overview which, in all three cases, draws intelligently on the most recent scholarship.

Anievas and Nişancıoğlu deploy the ‘consequentialist’ definition of bourgeois revolution – one to which I am also committed. Broadly, this holds that bourgeois revolutions involve a set of outcomes, above all the establishment of a state dedicated to capital accumulation, rather than leadership by the capitalist class or because they take a particular form (usually based on the French experience); it does not rule out participation by members of the bourgeoisie, it simply does not make this part of the definition. The authors do, however, think that several of their consequentialist colleagues, including the present reviewer, have taken the concept too far:

...in the shift to conceptualising revolutions in terms of their sociosystemic effects, some scholars have fallen into a problematic homogenisation of nearly all revolutions in the modern epoch as essentially capitalist, as the societies came to incorporate elements of capitalism into their social structures. From this perspective, the very different developmental outcomes of revolutions in, say, North Vietnam (1945), China (1949), and Cuba (1959) are all conceived as establishing different forms of ‘bureaucratic state capitalism’ through ‘deflected permanent revolutions’ – the ‘modern version or functional equivalent’ of bourgeois revolutions. While such regimes undoubtedly assimilated features of capitalism over time, to conceive of these revolutions as ‘bourgeois’ is to stretch the concept beyond breaking point (p. 179).³¹

But once you have accepted that bourgeois revolutions can be carried out by Prussian Junkers or Japanese Samurai, there is no logical reason why they cannot also be carried out by Third World Stalinists. This seems to me to be an argument about the validity (or otherwise) of the

³⁰ Omissions which seem to have resulted from lack of space rather than doubts about the nature of the Dutch Revolution, which both authors seem to regard as one of the ‘classical’ bourgeois revolutions from below. See Callinicos 1989, p. 168, note 81 and Mooers, 1991, p. 141.

³¹ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 179.

concept of state capitalism, rather than applicability of consequentialism. It does, however, return us to the period of permanent revolution and, consequently Trotsky's original formulation of uneven and combined development.

3

Attentive readers will have noticed that in the preceding section I discussed several important themes of the book without referring at any point to uneven and combined development. This is because I find myself in the odd situation of admiring the international historical sociology which Anievas and Nişancıoğlu have deployed, and agreeing with many of their conclusions, while at the same time regarding their master category of uneven and combined development as irrelevant to both. During a panel discussion about the book at the London Historical Materialism Conference in 2015, I was in the process of explaining why I thought their understanding of uneven and combined development was different from Trotsky's own, when Nişancıoğlu interjected to the effect that Trotsky was dead. He meant, of course, that we cannot simply restrict ourselves to repeating theoretical positions left to us by our predecessors, but have to extend them and look for hitherto unexamined areas to which they can be applied. I have a great deal of sympathy with this attitude. Nothing is more frustrating or infuriating than to be told by some self-appointed member of what T. S. Eliot once called the 'Guardians of the Faith...the Armies of Unalterable Law' that one has failed to understand What Trotsky Said and that, in departing from it, one has committed Revisionism, or possibly even Opportunism.³² I was not, however, attempting to close down attempts to develop Trotsky's theoretical legacy, which in my view should be encouraged, but to question whether this was what Anievas and Nişancıoğlu had actually done, or whether they were simply using uneven and combined development as a label for processes which could be quite adequately described in other terms, such as the more recently fashionable notion of 'hybridity'.

The project of using uneven and combined development to make concrete analyses is of course very welcome. Even though the modern debate on the subject has been ongoing for over twenty years now, most contributions have involved theoretical considerations of the concept itself, with historical or contemporary examples of the process used to illustrate or support particular arguments, rather than as the subject of substantive examination in their own right. This focus is gradually beginning to shift, with the emergence of work analysing individual societies such as that of Jamie Allinson on Jordan, Luke Cooper on China and Kamran Matin on Iran. Anievas' and Nişancıoğlu's work is on a much grander scale and their achievement has been to identify hitherto unexplored inter-societal relationships which have added to our historical understanding of capitalist development.³³ But why do they regard these as examples of 'uneven and combined development'? To answer this we obviously need to understand what they think it involves.

According to Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, uneven and combined development should be regarded as a methodology 'or set of epistemological coordinates', which both draws on a prior 'ontology of human development...irrespective of historical context' and points towards a theorisation of 'concrete historical processes, be they epochal or conjunctural'.³⁴ Consequently, it is a 'general abstraction' applicable throughout human history similar to 'labour' or 'class'. Uneven and combined development is not then specific to the era of

³² Eliot 1969, p. 30.

³³ Allinson 2016 and Matin 2013 are substantial monographs; Cooper's work to date is concentrated in a series of articles – see for example, Cooper 2016.

³⁴ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 58.

capitalist industrialisation, or even to that of capitalism as such; it is transhistorical, although they prefer the term ‘transmodality’, as this ‘highlights the ways in which it only operates *in* and *through* historically distinct modes of production, which provide the explanations for the specific dynamics, scales and qualitative forms of unevenness and combination’.³⁵ By combination itself they understand the way in which ‘developmentally differentiated societies constantly impact upon one another’s geosocial development and reproduction, which in turn instigates various forms of combined development. From this perspective, social development is conceived as ineluctably *multilinear*, *causally polycentric*, and *co-constitutive* by virtue of its very interconnectedness’.³⁶ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu argue that the two concepts of unevenness and combination can themselves be broken down into their own component parts, with the ‘whip of external necessity’, ‘privilege of historic backwardness’, ‘advantages’ and ‘penalties of priority’, relating to the former and ‘contradictions of sociological amalgamation’, and ‘substitutionism’ to the latter.³⁷ Virtually everyone engaged in these debates, accepts that, throughout history, ‘the whip of external necessity’ in the form of economic or military competition has forced those societies capable of doing so to adopt certain manufacturing technologies, military techniques, or state structures at their highest levels of existing development, rather than undergo the entire process of development which led to that point. This is precisely what constitutes ‘the advantages of backwardness’. In this respect, *uneven* development is a genuinely transhistorical process. The question is whether this also applies to uneven and *combined* development.

It is true that societies have never existed in isolation at any point in human history, but have always interpenetrated each other through conquest, trade, migration or simply borrowing. Consequently, societies are likely to embody fusions of quite different institutions and practices, drawn from different levels of development. One could also add that more developed societies tend to be involved in formal international relationships, for example as subjects of an empire, as components of a military alliance, or through adherence to a common faith. But these interchanges have resulted in radically different forms depending on the historical period in which they occur, and consequently cannot be subsumed in all their variety under a single ‘general abstraction’. Uneven and combined development is something much more specific and chronologically bounded. Trotsky first wrote of it in the *History* as involving a mixture of archaic and more contemporary forms, and these terms could of course be open to relativist interpretations, but from the context the latter clearly means ‘current’ or ‘pertaining to the present’. In any case he thereafter tended to refer to the fusion of ‘backward and modern’, about which there is no ambiguity.³⁸ The immense *difference* between industrial capitalism and previous social forms meant that, from the moment the former was introduced, combination became *possible* in a way that it had not been hitherto; but the structural dynamism of industrial capitalism compared to previous modes of production also meant that combination became *inescapable*, as all aspects of existing society registered the impact on them, to differing degrees, of this radically new means of exploitation. Why does this matter? Trotsky’s point was that the later developing areas subject to uneven and combined development were only able to ‘unblock’ themselves to the extent of making sectional advances in quite specific areas; they were unable to reproduce the overall experience of the advanced. Above all the pre-capitalist state remained untransformed. These societies were trapped in a condition of permanent tension between the archaic and the modern, which Trotsky thought that only permanent revolution could resolve. None of this applies before the emergence of capitalism.

³⁵ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 61, 62.

³⁶ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 46.

³⁷ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, p. 44.

³⁸ Trotsky 1977, pp. 27, 72.

If we exclude transitional forms between non-class and class societies, and see the slave mode of production as having had very limited geographical extent, -class societies before the advent of capitalism tended to be based on either the feudal or tributary modes.³⁹ Both of these were essentially agrarian and based on the exploitation of an unfree class of peasants: the major differences between them were at the level of the state and of inter-ruling class relationships more generally. Because of these underlying similarities it was possible for societies to borrow from each other *and for the borrowings to be fully absorbed*, as Anievas and Nişancioğlu themselves point out:

In reference to nomadic empires, but equally applicable to the tributary mode, Kees van der Pijl calls this relational form of social reproduction ‘caging’. On the one hand, conquered territories would assimilate tributary social relations into their own pre-existing forms. On the other hand, the tributary state would habitually absorb the local customs, laws, forms of social organisation, and individuals of conquered territories. Such ‘caging’ through geopolitical accumulation was a central part of tributary laws of motion and a concrete practice of combined development, in which the developmental experiences of differentiated societies were syncretically merged in an ‘amalgamated state’ form.⁴⁰

It is only once we arrive at the dawn of the capitalist era that ‘combination’ actually leads to the possibility of ‘development’ – that is, of moving beyond the essentially static interchanges between different pre-capitalist societies. But even then Anievas and Nişancioğlu claim too much, describing as examples of ‘uneven and combined development’ what were simply the myriad of different socio-economic forms which emerged during the course of the transition to capitalism. Here for example, is a passage from their otherwise valuable discussion of plantation slavery:

The plantation combined extensive land use with a labour force that was self-subsisting in reproduction but proletarianised in production, operating within an international market for the realisation of goods produced. Hence, we can indeed speak of the slave plantations in the Americas and West Indies as entirely novel ‘combined’ social formations, amalgamating different modes of production (Atlantic African slavery and European merchant capitalism) into new forms and modalities of development entirely distinct from those found previously in Europe, the Americas or Africa. These were, in other words, *sui generis* modes of combined development. And failure to grant explanatory ‘agency’ to these combined modalities of development born and nurtured in the Atlantic furnace is to externalise the intertwined histories of slavery, patriarchy, racism, colonial subjugation and exploitation so fundamental to the making of capitalist modernity (162).⁴¹

But ‘Atlantic African slavery’ is not a mode of production; it is a means of organising the labour process which is compatible with several different modes of production, in this case capitalism in its early mercantile form.⁴²

³⁹ Anievas and Nişancioğlu argue for the existence of a nomadic mode of production, but their own discussion points to the way in which it was a transitional form between classless ‘tribal’ society and class society in its tributary form (pp. 70-71).

⁴⁰ Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015, pp. 102-03.

⁴¹ Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015, p. 162.

⁴² I have argued this at length in a piece originally published in this journal: see Davidson 2015, pp. 133-43; see also Davidson 2012, pp 611-18. It was perfectly possible, of course, for the slave plantations to contribute to the development of capitalism in the metropolitan centres without being fully capitalist themselves. For the contribution of Atlantic slavery to British capitalist industrialisation see, for example, Blackburn 1997, pp. 509-580.

There is one final problem with associating uneven and combined development too closely with what Anievas and Nişancıoğlu call ‘transmodality’. Although the former can involve different modes of production as it did in, for example, pre-revolutionary Russia, it need not. Trotsky himself certainly thought that uneven and combined development could exist in societies where capitalist laws of motion were already dominant, as he argued was the case in China by the late 1920s and which certainly is the case in China today. In other words, uneven and combined development can, and in the contemporary world, must involve combinations of social forms *within* capitalism. Above all, these involve agrarian populations moving to industrial cities, or the industrial cities intruding into formerly rural areas, or both. In the absence of pre- or, alas, post-capitalist modes with which capitalism could combine, making ‘transmodality’ a defining feature of uneven and combined development is to render it a purely historical category. This clearly not the authors’ intention, since they wish to uphold the continued relevance of uneven and combined development. Perhaps more surprisingly, they also want to uphold the continued relevance of permanent revolution.

In their discussion of this subject the authors make an unintentionally misleading statement about the position of other writers:

It is important to note here that although much of the recent scholarly literature on rethinking uneven and combined development as a theory of ‘the international’ has proceeded without any attention to its relationship to Trotsky’s strategy of permanent revolution, the two are, in our view, connected. Thus, in contrast to both Davidson and Rosenberg’s explicit decoupling of the strategy from the theory in contemporary world politics, we will, in this book’s conclusion, tease out some of the (geo)political implications of the theory of uneven and combined development for revolutionary politics. In turn, for the strategic importance of uneven and combined development to be brought out, it must be rehistoricised in ways that reflect the very different sociohistorical conditions of ‘late’ capitalism (in ways that may well depart significantly from Trotsky’s own politics).⁴³

Rosenberg and I have, however, attempted to decouple uneven and combined development from permanent revolution for rather different reasons. In Rosenberg’s case, it is because he has a transhistorical conception of uneven and combined development – quite similar to that of Anievas and Nişancıoğlu – in which permanent revolution is plainly irrelevant for the vast bulk of human history: in which capitalism, and consequently a combination of the bourgeois and socialist revolutions, was not in prospect anywhere. In my case, it is because I see permanent revolution as involving two factors, uneven and combined development and an unaccomplished bourgeois revolution; but now that the bourgeois revolutions have all been accomplished – by which I simply mean that there are no longer any pre-capitalist states awaiting transformation into centres of capital accumulation – then the era of permanent revolution has also passed. *Socialist revolution per se* is still feasible and it is likely that attempts to achieve it are more likely to break out where conditions of uneven and combined development prevail, but it is difficult to conceive of how one can talk of leaping over stages there are no longer any precapitalist stages left. There are better ways of honouring Trotsky’s memory than clinging to his terminology when it no longer corresponds to capitalist reality.

In some respects, this argument is unnecessary anyway, as towards the end of the book, Anievas and Nişancıoğlu suggest ways in which uneven and combined development is politically relevant today:

We therefore consider uneven and combined development to be a potentially useful framework for uncovering the ways in which the multiple social relations of oppression and exploitation,

⁴³ Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015, pp. 300-1, note 64

each originating from a variety of different vectors of sociohistorical development, historically combine and intersect with each other. This would render, for example, an understanding of the historical constitution of racism and patriarchy as tied to, constitutive of, but not reducible to, the emergence of capitalism. In the same way, it would avoid treating struggles that seek to destroy patriarchy and racism as somehow external from – or mere supplements to – the cardinal aim of destroying capitalism. Might it be time to rethink the privileged revolutionary subject (the proletariat) in broader terms than its traditional, singular association with waged-labour? Might this then require a decentring or pluralisation of this revolutionary subject in terms denoting a series of exploitations, oppressions and abjections which subsume individuals in varied, uneven, but intersecting and combined ways? ... we must be cognisant of the necessity for *many strategies*, each irreducible to each other and specific to the particular challenges faced in the course of struggle. And in the spirit of combined development, this would also involve considering how such multiple strategies can be learned from, adopted and modified, or if necessary discarded and ‘skipped over’. That is to say, insofar as unevenness and combination can be understood as limits and challenges to revolutionary politics, they can also be repurposed, reconfigured, reassembled and ultimately weaponised for political measures geared towards abolishing capitalism. (282)⁴⁴

There is much to be usefully debated and acted on in this passage which has nothing to do with permanent revolution.

4

Where should be the future direction of debates on uneven and development, if we are to escape the stand-off between supporters of the narrow and broad understandings of its historical applicability? One way out of the *impasse* might be to extend uneven and combined development, not backwards through time as Anievas and Nişancioğlu have done, but sideways through space: in other words, to consider whether the process has been generated in *every* society which has experienced capitalist modernity, rather than being confined to backward or underdeveloped areas. The authors touch on this possibility at one point, noting that

...it was possible for Trotsky to advocate the strategy of ‘permanent revolution’ for the Black Nationalist movement for self-determination in the United States. Trotsky’s identification of these combined paths of development in some of the most advanced capitalist societies of his time (the United States and also Germany) is particularly significant given the tendency of contemporary scholars to portray Trotsky’s theory as solely confined to explaining late capitalist developers.⁴⁵

But uneven and combined development can exist without necessarily setting the conditions for permanent revolution, as it did throughout much of the West, *even in the era of the Russian Revolution*. The social and cultural experiences uneven and combined development produced were similar across East and West, albeit to different degrees, but the class adversary was quite different (which is why Trotsky’s advocacy of permanent revolution in the USA during the 1930s was essentially a category error). All societies which have undergone the impact of factories and cities have experienced uneven and combined development to *some* degree, with the important exception of England, which completed the

⁴⁴ Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015, p. 282.

⁴⁵ Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015, p. 53.

transition to capitalism before these processes began. Why then have they had such different outcomes, above all with respect to their propensity for revolution?

What determines the form taken by any particular example of combined development is the response to it of the state and – for better or worse – states are multiple and territorially demarcated from each other, and not international, far less global entities. Capitalist states have greater repressive powers than their pre-capitalist forerunners or contemporaries. This is not, however, their only distinguishing characteristic. Equally important is their flexibility, which enables them to make gradual structural reforms in ways that pre-capitalist states, of the sort which existed in Trotsky's lifetime and for several decades after his death, were not; the latter consequently had to be either overthrown by revolution, or destroyed in war. The same type of flexibility is also constitutive of contemporary capitalist states, even those in the Global South or former 'East'. However backward they may be in many other respects, they have a far greater capacity for absorption and renovation under pressure.

We can look forward to Anievas and Nişancıoğlu developing their positions in the future, as part of these debates. For now, they have written a significant work of international historical sociology – but, as I have tried to argue, it is significant for reasons other than the ones they claim for it.

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