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The “Law” of Uneven and Combined Development: Part 2: Scope and Developments

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Abstract

The article begins by reconstructing the theory of uneven and combined development from Trotsky’s own writings in relation to Russia. It then looks more closely at the notion of the “modern” which in Trotsky’s account combines with the “archaic” or “backward,” before arguing that role of modernity suggests that uneven and combined development has been a far more widespread process than solely in the Third World/Global South. Drawing attention first to the English exception, the article then surveys examples from both West and East before concluding with an assessment of the relative durability of both permanent revolution and uneven development in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

Trotsky – uneven and combined development – capitalist modernity – industrialisation – urbanisation – permanent revolution – English exceptionalism – capitalist states – modes of production.

Introduction

In Part 1 of this article I traced the pre-history of the law of uneven and combined development through the emergence and extension of two historically prior concepts: the descriptive one of uneven development, from the early period of the European Enlightenment (although the term was only used from the late nineteenth century); and the strategic one of permanent revolution, from the upheavals of 1848–49. Both were deployed by the thinkers of the centre and left of the Second International from the beginning of the twentieth century, but not explicitly linked. It was Trotsky who was eventually to do so. Unlike all other variants of permanent revolution, his distinct and unique version held that the coming revolution in Russia had the potential to transcend the purely bourgeois nature which orthodoxy demanded, providing it could receive support from other successful revolutions in more developed capitalist nation-states. His prediction was eventually fulfilled in 1917, but it was only in the process of defending his initial thesis from attack by the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy that he finally provided an explicit theoretical basis for permanent revolution, and one which was generalizable beyond Russia: the “law” of uneven and combined development.

The emergence of Trotsky’s version of permanent revolution has already been recounted in a number of works, including one by the present author, and I will not do so again here (Davidson 2012: 214–236, 284–308; Day and Guido 2009: 32–58; Knei-Paz 1978: 27–174; Larsson 1970: 256–304; Lowy 1981: 30–99). In Part 2 I will therefore first attempt to reconstruct the theory from Trotsky’s scattered writings on the subject, but then depart from

the history of ideas and move instead onto the field of historical sociology proper, to assess the universality or otherwise of the process which the theory seeks to explain.

On a handful of occasions Trotsky endorsed a transhistorical or transmodal interpretation of his theory, most famously in his last major work, *The Revolution Betrayed*, where he wrote, in passing: “The law of uneven development is supplemented throughout the whole course of history by the law of combined development” (Trotsky 1937: 300). However, this is incompatible with his earlier and more substantial discussion in *The History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), where he describes it as involving “a peculiar mixture of backward elements with the most modern” (Trotsky 1977: 27, 72). ‘Modern’ here is not a relative concept (as in the notion that every successive age has its own modernity), but denotes an epochal divide associated with the advent of capitalism. If the application of uneven and combined development is to be extended, it not *backwards through time*, but *sideways through space*: in other words, the process has been generated in virtually *every* society which has experienced capitalist modernity, rather than being confined to backward or underdeveloped areas. As we shall see, this also has implications for the strategy of permanent revolution since, if it is a universal aspect of capitalist modernity, then uneven and combined development can exist in situations where the former no longer feasible.

It may be useful to begin the discussion by reminding ourselves of the famous passage from *The History of the Russian Revolution* where Trotsky introduced the concept:

The privilege of historic backwardness—and such a privilege exists—permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which for want of a better name, we may call the law of combined development—by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms. (Trotsky 1977: 27–28)

Alongside this passage, however, we also need to consider another by Trotsky, written shortly before his murder in 1940: “Only a minority of countries has fully gone through that systematic and logical development from handicraft through domestic manufacture to the factory, which Marx subjected to such detailed analysis (Trotsky 1940: 41). In fact, the minority consisted of only one country, England, although there were also a handful of territories within countries (the North-East of the USA, Catalonia before its incorporation into Spain) which had similar trajectories. The very shortness of the list does, however, support the argument I intend to make. For if the overwhelming majority of even the advanced capitalist states did not undergo the “systematic and logical development” to which Trotsky refers, then surely they too must have “skipped intermediate stages” and “drawn together the different stages of the journey”? Before turning to these issues, we need to explore Trotsky’s original argument in more detail.

The “Law” of Uneven and Combined Development

Trotsky first formulated what he called the “law” of uneven and combined development in 1930, in order to explain the conditions of possibility for the particular strategy of permanent revolution which he had first proposed twenty-five years earlier in relation to Russia. In this scenario, capitalist relations of production had been established and were perhaps even in the process of becoming dominant, but the bourgeois revolution 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:

The irrevocable and irresistible going over of the masses from the most rudimentary tasks of political, agrarian and national emancipation and abolition of serfdom to the slogan of proletarian rulership, resulted...from the social structure of Russia and the conditions of the worldwide situation. The theory of Permanent Revolution only formulated the combined process of this development. (Trotsky 1977: 907)

The societies which Trotsky originally identified as subject to uneven and combined development and to which he devoted most attention, were ruled by absolutist or tributary states which had been forced to partially modernise under pressure of military competition from the Western powers. As he noted, “the Great War, the result of the contradictions of world imperialism, drew into its maelstrom countries of *different* stages of development, but made the same *claims* on all the participants” (Trotsky 1972c: 249). Combined development in Russia was therefore generated by attempts on the part of the absolutist state to overcome the backwardness attendant on *uneven* development; but as Trotsky pointed out:

Historical backwardness does not imply a simple reproduction of the development of advanced countries, England or France, with a delay of one, two, or three centuries. It engenders an entirely new “combined” social formation in which the latest conquests of capitalist technique and structure root themselves into relations of feudal or pre-feudal barbarism, transforming and subjecting them and creating peculiar relations of classes. (Trotsky 1976: 584).

The former levels of stability typical of feudal or tributary societies are disrupted by the irruption of capitalist industrialisation and all that it brings in its wake: rapid population growth, uncoordinated urban expansion, dramatic ideological shifts. “When English or French capital, the historical coagulate of many centuries, appears in the steppes of the Donets Basin, it cannot release the same social forces, relations, and passions which once went into its own formation” (Trotsky 1972a: 68). Trotsky was particularly interested in the process by which these forms were *fused*, the result permeating every aspect of society, ideology as much as economy. The archaic and the modern, the settled and disruptive overlap and merge in all aspects of the social formations concerned, from the organisation of arms production to the structure of religious observance, in entirely new and unstable ways, generating socially explosive situations. It is tempting to describe these as mutations, except that the inadequacy of the language involved led Trotsky to reject the biological metaphors in which stages of development had been described from the Enlightenment through to the Third International in its Stalinist phase—and which is continued in the present-day notion of “hybridity”: “The absorptive and flexible psyche, as a necessary condition for historical progress, confers on the so-called social ‘organisms,’ as distinguished from the real, that is, biological organisms, an exceptional variability of internal structure” (Trotsky 1972c: 251). Trotsky himself pointed to the existence of such forms in general terms in his notebooks on dialectics from the mid-1930s:

Some objects (phenomena) are confined easily within boundaries according to some logical classification, others present [us with] difficulties: they can be put here or there, but within stricter relationship—nowhere. While provoking the indignation of systematisers, such transitional forms are exceptionally interesting to dialecticians, for they smash the limited boundaries of classification, revealing the real connections and consecutiveness of a living process. (Trotsky 1986: 77)

The “uneven” aspect of uneven and combined development is demonstrated by the partial nature of its adoptions from the advanced countries:

Russia was so far behind the other countries that she was compelled, *at least in certain spheres*, to outstrip them. ... The absence of firmly established social forms and traditions makes the backward country—*at least within certain limits*—extremely hospitable to the last word in international technique and international thought. Backwardness does not, however, for this reason cease to be backwardness. (Trotsky 1977: 906; my italics)

Within these spheres and limits, however, backward societies could however attain *higher* levels of development than in their established rivals: “At the same time that peasant land-cultivation as a whole remained, right up to the revolution, at the level of the seventeenth century, Russian industry in its technique and capitalist structure stood at the level of the advanced countries, and *in certain respects* even outstripped them” (Trotsky 1977: 30; my italics).

These adoptions had, however, did not in themselves necessarily undermine the state, since: “The [backward] nation...not infrequently debases the achievements borrowed from outside in the process of adapting them to its own more primitive culture” (Trotsky 1977: 27). Indeed, initially at least, “debased adaptation” helped *preserve* the pre-capitalist state in Russia. From 1861 tsarism established factories using the manufacturing technology characteristic of monopoly capitalism in order to produce arms with which to defend feudal absolutism (Treblcock 1981: 281–284). The danger for the state lay in what these factories required in order to run, namely workers—and workers more skilled, more politically conscious than that faced by any previous absolutist or early capitalist state (Trotsky 1977: 55). Uneven and combined development in Russia created a working class which, although only a small minority of the population, was possessed of exceptional levels of revolutionary militancy. “Debased adaptation” was intended to preserve the existence of the undemocratic state; but to the extent that the former was successful it helped provoke the working class into destroying the latter.

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 organisation, theoretical understanding, and revolutionary activity: “when the economic factors burst in a revolutionary manner, breaking up the old order; when development is no longer gradual and ‘organic’ but assumes the form of terrible convulsions and drastic changes of former conceptions, then it becomes easier for critical thought to find revolutionary expression, provided that the necessary theoretical prerequisites exist in the given country” (Trotsky 1972b: 199). S. A. Smith describes the trajectory of one Russian worker who had his mind opened in this way to “critical thought”:

For Kanatchikov, discovery of evolutionary theory came like a lightning bolt... His discovery of Darwin was soon complimented by his discovery of Marx: by 1902, aged 23, he had painfully mastered the first volume of *Capital*. This furnished him with a scientific understanding of society and the determination to dedicate himself to the cause of overthrowing capitalism. (Smith 2008: 78)

Kanatchikov exemplifies a general tendency identified by Tim McDaniel, namely that the militancy of Russian workers was “the product of leadership by a militant proletarian core of advanced workers employed in modern industry,” not of “disorientated workers of peasant origin and to young recruits into industry.” In his view, with which I agree, accounts “which emphasise the ‘spontaneity’ and unpredictability of worker militancy” end up “denying to it the coherence and ultimate rationality ascribed by Trotsky” (McDaniel 1991: 125).

Ankie Hoogvelt speaks for many commentators when she describes the process outlined by Trotsky in relation to Russia as leading to a “historically unique situation which is ripe for

socialist revolution” (Hoogvelt 1997: 38). How “unique” was the situation though? Peter Thomas writes of one important case: “Italy, along with much of Western Europe, had experienced a ‘belated’ modernity not qualitatively dissimilar from that which preceded the Russian Revolution” (Thomas 2009: 202). Indeed, in the case of Italy—one of the established, imperial capitalist powers—these developments were occurring *contemporaneously* with those in Russia. How could a virtually universal *socio-economic* process lead to such different *political* outcomes?

Trotsky never claimed that *all* revolutionary situations were or would be the result of uneven and combined development: the working-class insurgencies which convulsed Britain in 1919, France in 1968 or Poland in 1980–81 do not require the concept in order to be understood. Second, even where revolutionary situations were made more likely by the existence of uneven and combined development, it is scarcely the only relevant factor; some decisive trigger event such as wartime defeat (Germany 1918), military coup (Spain 1936), external aggression (Hungary 1956), or economic crisis (Egypt 2011) is usually necessary to detonate the socially combustible material. Whether these situations develop into actual revolutions, and whether these revolutions are subsequently successful is partly dependent on subjective factors—such as the existence and quality of leadership—on both sides. Equally important, however, is the political context in which revolutionary situations arise; in particular, whether the state is pre-capitalist or capitalist or in nature and, if the latter, whether or not the ruling class is capable of exercising hegemony.

Between the victory of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927 Trotsky tended to treat the question of permanent revolution as an essentially historical one, relevant only to Russia, which he seems to have considered as *sui generis*, uniquely situated exactly half-way between West and East, as he explained in this speech from early in the 1920s:

We Russians find ourselves—in terms both of sociology and geography—on the border-line between those countries which possess colonies and those which are themselves colonies. We are a colony in the sense that our largest factories in Petrograd, in Moscow and in the South were obtained by us ready-made from the hands of European and American finance capital which formerly drew off the profits. That a Russian industrial capitalist was merely a third-rate agent of world finance capitalism—this fact tended immediately to invest the struggle of the Russian worker with an international revolutionary character. Russian workers had before their eyes: on the one hand, the combined money-bags of Russia, France, Belgium, etc.; and on the other—the backward peasant masses, entangled in semi-feudal agricultural relations. At one and the same time we thus had in our country both London and India. This, despite all our backwardness, brought us flush up against European and world tasks in their most developed historical forms. (Trotsky 1973a: 176)

Permanent revolution was unnecessary in the West where the bourgeois revolution had been accomplished and inapplicable in the East where the working class was not yet of sufficient size or militancy to move directly to the socialist revolution; in the East, Lenin’s original formula for Russia, the bourgeois-democratic—now rechristened “national-democratic”—revolution was still relevant. Stalin’s disastrous adherence to this supposedly necessary stage of the revolution in China led Trotsky to generalise the strategy of permanent revolution beyond Russia, but also provoked him into formulating uneven and combined development as an explicit “law,” rather than an implicit but untheorized set of conditions which made permanent revolution possible. Thereafter, he tended to regard countries where some level of capitalist industrialisation had occurred, but which were still subject to pre-capitalist states of one sort or another, as subject to uneven and combined development and consequently as possible sites of permanent revolution. He did not, however, ever consider whether uneven and combined development might also exist in the West, except perhaps as a historical phenomenon

long since surpassed; he wrote, for example, of the consequences “when the productive forces of the metropolis, of a country of classical capitalism...find ingress into more backward countries, like Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century” (Trotsky 1972b: 199). In fact, the experience of uneven and combined development was nearly universal, but to understand why, we need to situate the process in the broader context of capitalist modernity.

Capitalist Modernity

Modernity did *not* emerge with the capitalist mode of production in its original mercantile, financial or agrarian forms, but only with the beginnings of capitalist industrialisation and the related, but partially distinct process of urbanisation in Europe, North America and Japan. In other words, it is associated with a particular *stage* in capitalist development. The establishment of capitalism as a mode of production does not in and of itself immediately transform the lives of subaltern classes. There are two reasons for this.

One concerns the labour process and is outlined by Marx in *Capital* vol. 1, in his discussion of the difference between the “formal” and “real” subsumption of labour. In the case of the former, rather than “a fundamental modification in the real nature of the labour process...the fact is that capital subsumes the labour process as it finds it, that is to say, it takes over an *existing labour process*, developed by a different and more archaic modes of production” (Marx 1976: 1021 and 1019–1038 more generally). In other words, the pre-existing ways of working can remain in place even during the initial phases of capitalist development. It may be possible for historians to retrospectively identify when the transition from feudalism was complete, but this does not mean that direct producers at the time understood that they had entered a new historical period.

The other concerns outputs, and in particular the productive capacities of the first fully capitalist states compared with the great Eastern empires which had once been impossibly more wealthy and civilised than the poverty-stricken lands of European feudalism. The industrial world was in the West, but it only arose there relatively late, and certainly not the latest-manifestation of Western superiority, claims for which would have for most of history produced mocking laughter from the East: even after the transition to capitalism the formerly backward Western European states, above all England, did not immediately catch-up and overtake those of the hitherto more advanced East. GDP in both areas was similar and, in the Chinese Empire at least, standards of living may have even been higher than in Western Europe and North America. It took until 1880 for *per capita* income there to reach double that of the East, and until the eve of the First World War for it to reach three times the size (Hobsbawm 1987: 15).

In fact, it was the advent of *industrial* capitalism which initiated “the great divergence” between West and East, and the overwhelmingly uni-directional impact of the former on the latter. As Justin Rosenberg points out: “Imperial China sustained its developmental lead over several centuries; yet the radiation of its achievements never produced in Europe anything like the long, convulsive process of combined development which capitalist industrialization in Europe almost immediately initiated in China” (Rosenberg 2007: 44–45). For Ronald Hartwell, industrialisation is “*the great discontinuity of modern history*” (Hartwell 1971: 57). Indeed, if we accept the notion that we have entered into a new epoch of geological time known the Anthropocene, then the discontinuity is even greater than these writers could have imagined, with the Holocene—the 11,500-year era contiguous with human civilisation—being brought to an end as a result of industrialisation (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016: 3, 50–53).

Yet it was not industrialisation alone which impacted on members of the new factory proletariat, but the fact that many of their new workplaces were situated in towns and cities. Indeed, as Jürgen Osterhammel notes, “urbanization was a much more widespread process than

industrialisation: cities grew and became more dense even where industry was not the driving force.” After noting that many of the greatest European cities, including London, had never been truly industrial, but administrative and commercial, he concludes: “Urbanization is a truly global process, industrialization a sporadic and uneven formation of growth centres” (Osterhammel 2014: 149–50). Osterhammel’s point about London can be generalised to some other historic cities whose existence long predated capitalism, let alone industrialisation. “In a very important sense Vienna and Berlin were much more typically “modernist” cities, almost along the lines of American cities like Chicago, than were cities like London and Paris which underwent slower and more organic growth,” writes Scott Lash (1990: 207). But Vienna and Berlin were not equivalent either: of the two, Berlin was far closer to the American model—although the latter too need to be differentiated: “If Vienna is not Berlin, neither is Boston Chicago” (Frisby 1985: 177 and 165–177 more generally). There is unevenness between the cities of capitalist modernity as well as combination within them.

Even those cities which remained administrative and commercial rather than industrial centres were shaped by the requirements of industrialisation, not least the necessity for railways. Marshall Berman has identified “the unease and uncertainty that comes from constant motion, change, and diversity” with “the experience of modern *capitalism*” (1983: 19–20). At one level the size, noise and populousness of cities has often been bewildering for rural populations forced to cross their boundaries (although for some rustics they also provided a welcome relief from the narrowness and conformity of the countryside); but Berman is drawing attention to a qualitatively different situation, for the experience of urban life under industrial capitalism was distinct from any predecessor: “In comparison with the village or ‘pre-modernist’ city, not just the sense of time but the experience of space was altered,” notes Lash (1990: 207). Beyond positive or negative experiences, life in the city was simply, vastly *different* from what inhabitants had previously known, creating new forms of consciousness based on experiences which were simply not available to an Italian country-dweller visiting first-century Rome, or, for that matter, an English one visiting sixteenth-century London.

The impact of uneven and combined development in the West began some decades earlier than in Russia, but for the most part, and in most cases, such as that of Italy, the process chronologically overlapped with that in Russia. There is, of course, one major exception, to which I will turn first: England.

English Exceptionalism

England had completed the transition to capitalism by the late seventeenth century. It was not, of course, the only territory to have done so, as it was preceded by both the Italian city-states and the Netherlands (Arrighi 1994: 36–47). Capitalist relations of production were considerably more highly developed in England than in either of these, but England was also able to absorb their genuine innovations and those of states which failed to make the transition, then put them to more effective use than in their places of origin, a process for which the possession of an effective capitalist state apparatus was essential. As Marx noted in the chapter from *Capital* on “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist”:

The different moments of primitive accumulation can be ascertained in particular to Spain, Portugal, Holland, France and England, in more or less chronological order. These different moments are systematically combined together at the end of the seventeenth century in England; the combination embraces the colonies, the national debt, the modern tax system, and the system of protection. (Marx 1976: 915–916)

This is not “combination” in Trotsky’s sense, however, as *all* the forms referred to by Marx are “contemporary.” The reason why capitalist modernity in England produced neither a social nor artistic revolutionary movement lies with the two unique conditions under which industrialisation and urbanisation took place.

First, the capitalist state in England was consolidated at the completion of the bourgeois revolution in 1688, at a time when its economy was still dominated by agrarian, mercantile and financial capital. None of the other early capitalist states achieved this. The Italian city-states refused to unite and indeed were involved in ferocious competition with each other which left them exposed to conquest and enforced regression at the hands of local feudal lords and ultimately the Spanish Empire by the beginning of the sixteenth century. The United Netherlands, although formally a unified state even before the revolt against Spain in 1567, did not possess an integrated economy, but rather a highly fragmented one in which competition between cities and provinces was unimpeded. More importantly, in this context, the state itself remained resolutely decentralised and unable to pursue initiatives in the interest of Dutch capital as a whole, with power lying in regional governments which tended to be dominated by particular capitalist banking and mercantile interests (Davidson 2012: 563–564, 580–582). It was, as Perry Anderson points out, “a hybrid between a city-state and a nation-state” (Anderson 2016: 92). As a result, industrialisation in both areas was largely postponed until nation-states were finally consolidated in the mid-nineteenth century. Industrialisation in England, however, arose within the context of a society where the state was already dedicated to the accumulation of capital, and that state had a far greater capacity for absorption and renovation under pressure than rival pre-capitalist states.

Second, the internal pressures to which England was subject were in any case more containable than in later-developing states because of the extended timescale in which industrialisation took place. At least in part this was because it faced no real economic competition in capitalist terms until the latter third of the nineteenth century and was therefore not subject to the types of pressure to which all other subsequent developers, with the exception of the United States, were subject. As Sydney Pollard writes: “Unlike the experience of the following countries which were faced with a fairly comprehensive package of mutually reinforcing changes, the British [sic] evolution was slow, piecemeal and unconscious, in the sense of being unperceived as a whole” (Pollard 1996: 377). Consequently, notwithstanding the significance of industrialisation, even it did not have an immediately transformative impact on every aspect of social life. This is partly because the effects were cumulative and partly because, initially at least, industrialisation took place within a broader pre-existing non-industrial context. The gradual, dispersed and unplanned nature of the process in England had implications for both the structure of the working class and the nature of the class struggle, both of which are in stark contrast to the forms these took later under actual conditions of uneven and combined development. Workplaces remained relatively small until very late in the nineteenth century, not least in London. As a result, trade union struggles were typically defensive of traditional or at least transitional forms of labour (Calhoun 1982: 60–84, 149–182; Zmolek 2013: 509–792). This was one of the reasons Trotsky identified for the greater implantation of Marxism among the working classes of Russia than in that of Britain. In the case of Russia itself:

...the proletariat did not arise gradually through the ages, carrying with itself the burden of the past, as in England, but in leaps involving sharp changes of environment, ties, relations, and a sharp break with the past. It was just this—combined with the concentrated oppressions of czarism—that made Russian workers hospitable to the boldest conclusions of revolutionary thought—just as the backward industries were hospitable to the last word in capitalist organization. (Trotsky 1977: 33)

Describing the situation prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917, Gareth Stedman Jones has contrasted “the revolutionary maturity of the Petrograd proletariat, uniquely concentrated in the most advanced factories of the capitalist world” with Britain, “the most advanced capitalist country,” where “the structure of the metropolitan working class still looked back to pre-industrial divisions of skill and status”: “A few large plants were lost in an ocean of small workshops” (Stedman Jones 1984: 346). These conditions were conducive to the formation of Bolsheviks. Elsewhere in the West the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation would fall between the English and Russian extremes.

Western Origins

The most important new capitalist nation-states to follow Britain—the USA, Italy, Germany and Japan—unified (or re-unified) and consolidated themselves between 1848 and 1871. France achieved this slightly earlier—1830 is the French 1688, in the sense of concluding the era of its bourgeois revolution; but French industrialisation takes place essentially within the same time frame as these later developers. These involved transitions to capitalism which were, as Robert Looker and David Coates put it, “virtually contemporaneous” with industrialisation and urbanisation, rather than preceding them, as had been the case in England (Looker and Coates 1986: 112–113). The very existence of the British imperial state altered both the context for subsequent capitalist development and the pace with which it occurred. The latter was faster, partly because the long period of experiment and evolution characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon pioneer could be dispensed with, but partly because of the urgency involved in acquiring the attributes of capitalist modernity in the face of military and economic competition from Britain. In very compressed timescales these emerging rivals adopted Britain’s socio-economic achievements to the extent that they became recognisably the same kind of societies, without necessarily reproducing every key characteristic—an impossible task anyway, given their very different histories and social structures. Harry Harootunian writes of Marx’s comments on German uneven development (in the “Preface to the First Edition” of *Capital* Volume 1) that he “was proposing that capitalist modernization is inevitably destined to produce the co-presence of colliding temporalities, contemporary non-contemporaneities forcing people constantly to navigate their way through different temporal regimes as a condition of becoming modern” (Harootunian 2015: 62; Marx 1976: 91). The point is capable of being generalised beyond Germany: in fact, *all* of the second wave capitalist nation-states simultaneously faced in two directions, although usually inclining more towards one than the other.

One direction was *forward* to conditions which would later emerge in Russia and to anticipations of permanent revolution. The increased tempo of development meant that the process of capitalist modernisation, and consequently the character of the class struggle, took respectively more intense and explosive forms—first of all in the country which was also geographically closest to England, and which since 1707 had been joined with it in the United Kingdom of Great Britain: Scotland. From the suppression of the last Jacobite attempt at counter-revolution in 1746 through to the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, Scottish society was marked by two processes, both in sharp contrast to the English experience: one was the extraordinary speed with which capitalist agriculture and the foundations of industrialisation was introduced in the Lowlands; the other was the concentrated effervescence of the Enlightenment, which was both a programme for agrarian transformation and a theorisation of the process. Even a society accelerating out of feudalism at this speed would however inevitably retain some of the characteristics of pre-existing conditions. One aspect of what Fredric Jameson calls “the co-existence of radically distinct zones of production and culture” is the Highland/Lowland divide (Jameson 1991: 405). This was not, however, the inert

juxtaposition of two mutually sealed societies but their mutual interpenetration, first through the imposition of capitalist social relations on Highland land occupancy, then—a virtually inevitable consequence of this—the migration of now landless Highlanders into the industrialising Lowland towns and cities, above all to Glasgow. Migration was then and remains now one of the great catalysts for uneven and combined development. In this respect as in many others, Scotland was a forerunner for what was to follow more widely later, as external migration from Ireland was at least as significant as internal migration from the Highlands in providing the labour force for industrialisation. Although industrialisation took place more or less simultaneously in England and Scotland, the latter largely “skipped the intervening stages” between peasant self-sufficiency and wage labour which the former had experienced. “Scotland entered on the capitalist path later than England,” wrote Trotsky in 1925, “a sharper turn in the life of the masses of the people gave rise to a sharper political reaction” (Trotsky 1974b: 37). By the early decades of the nineteenth century, the enormous tensions produced by industrialisation were heightened by the repressive weight of undemocratic state forms retained from the Union of 1707 until the Great Reform Act of 1832. These tensions and expressed themselves in moments of sharp class struggle, above all the unsuccessful 1820 general strike for male suffrage, first such action in history, involving around 60,000 workers—a substantial section of the global working class at the time—and two attempts at armed insurrection (Davidson 2000: 167–186). However, because Scotland *did* make the transition to the ranks of the advanced societies, albeit as a component part of another national formation, the revolutionary moment passed—not because the tensions of uneven and combined development had all been resolved, but because after 1832 a suitably adaptive state form had been extended to Scotland which was able to contain them. Uneven and combined development was resolved as uneven development, with Scotland as a whole “catching up and overtaking” England, within the overall British social formation.

The other direction faced by the second wave nation-states was *back* to the English experience in the sense that they were able to accomplish the bourgeois revolution from above—1688 being the model rather than 1640 or 1649—and transform the state, albeit over a much more compressed period of time, in order to direct rapid industrialisation and contain the social tensions which it produced, often within the context of archaic socio-cultural forms. The process is perhaps best illustrated by the only Asian country to undertake this form of development in the closing decades of the nineteenth century after the bourgeois revolution from above known to history as the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Trotsky wrote in the 1930s, “we observe even today...correlation between the bourgeois character of the state and the semi-feudal character of the ruling caste” (Trotsky 1976: 66). The former outweighed the latter. Mark Elvin argued that “Japan does not have to become identical to the present-day West to be ranked as comparably “modern” (Elvin 1986: 212). Indeed—but we should note the similarities between the British and Japanese states after 1868, to which Christopher Bayly has drawn attention. Between 1870 and 1914, both consciously emphasised the role of their monarch-emperors, the pre-existing symbolism of the crown being used to represent national unity against two main challenges: external imperial rivalry and internal class divisions (Bayly 2004: 104). Both were capitalist states that could be strongly contrasted with feudal absolutist Austria-Hungary or Russia, even down to the role of the emperor and empresses: “Russia represented the opposite pole to Japan within the spectrum of authoritarian monarchy—no corporate regime strategy, much depending on the monarch himself” (Mann 1988: 200). The state structure was crucial, as in many respects Japanese development was far more rapid than Russia’s, as Trotsky himself noted (Trotsky 1972e: 291). In effect, the post-Meiji Japanese state represented a way of *containing* the tensions created by uneven and combined development, even though these grew greater during and immediately after the First World War. If Japan is most extreme example of “contained” uneven and combined development, all

the states which emerged at the same time display similar characteristics, to one degree or another. What factors made “containment” possible?

Although 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. Jeff Goodwin’s “state-centred” approach identifies a number of “practices” or “characteristics” which can make the emergence of revolutionary movements or situations less likely. The most relevant to our discussion is “political inclusion,” which:

...discourages the sense that the state is unreformable or an instrument of a narrow class or clique and, accordingly, needs to be fundamentally overhauled. ... Accordingly, neither liberal populist politics nor authoritarian yet inclusionary (for example) “populist” regimes have generally been challenged by powerful revolutionary movements. (Goodwin 2001: 44, 46–47)

If the states in question need not be “democratic,” then representative institutions in and of themselves are not necessarily the reason for their apparent imperviousness to overthrow. In fact, if we take bourgeois democracy to involve, at a minimum, a representative government elected by the adult population, where votes have equal weight and can be exercised without intimidation by the state, then it is a relatively recent development in the history of capitalism (Therborn 1977: 4, 17). Indeed, in the context of his discussion of modernity, Anderson noted that down to the close of the Second World War: “In no European state was bourgeois democracy completed as a form, or the labour movement integrated or co-opted as a force” (Anderson 1984: 105). Far from being intrinsic to bourgeois society, representative democracy has largely been introduced by pressure from the working class and extended by pressure from the oppressed. The authors of an important study of the relationship between capitalism and democracy are therefore right to reject any automatic correspondence between the two:

It was not the capitalist market nor capitalists as the new dominant force, but the contradictions of capitalism that advanced the cause of democracy. ... The relationship between working-class strength and democracy may be summarised in the following way: a diachronic analysis within each of the Western European countries reveals that the growth of working-class organizational strength led to increased pressure for the introduction of democracy; a synchronic analysis reveals that these pressures led to the development of stable democratic regimes where the working class found allies in other social groups. (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992: 7, 142–143)

It is true that that mass suffrage has not proved as dangerous to capitalism as the bourgeoisie initially feared it would; but recognizing this does not involve accepting the much more sweeping claim that it is the main source of popular legitimacy for the capitalist state. Most capitalist states in the West and the system over which they presided were afforded legitimacy by their working classes *before* the vote was extended to them. In the case of Britain, the Representation of the People Act which finally introduced suffrage for all men and women over the age of 21 was only passed in 1928.

The key factor in securing the adherence of the subaltern is surely not democracy, but the concept most closely associated with Gramsci, hegemony, which may include democratic institutions, but not necessarily so. Above all, it is not exercised solely through the state, as Peter Thomas explains:

A class's hegemonic apparatus is the wide-ranging series of articulated institutions (understood in the broadest sense) and practices—from newspapers to educational organisations to political parties—by means of which a class and its allies engage their opponents in a struggle for political power. This concept traverses the boundaries of the so-called public (pertaining to the state) and the private (civil society), to include all initiatives by which a class concretizes its hegemonic project in an integral sense. (Thomas 2009: 226)

Hegemony need not be wholehearted endorsement of capitalism, but rather a sense of the impossibility of change. In this context all that capitalism requires to do is maintain a majority of the working class in circumstances which are bearable compared to the imaginable alternatives, while those for whom it is not bearable fail to understand why this is so and consequently are no position to alter their situation (Crehan 2016: 60; Lester 2000: 72). One reason why an irreplaceable component of capitalist hegemony is nationalism, both as a source of psychic compensation and means of political mobilisation, is to prevent the most oppressed and exploited from acquiring this understanding (Davidson 2000: 24–46).

The social and cultural experiences produced by uneven and combined development were similar across East and West, albeit to different degrees, but the class adversary and consequently the nature of the state was quite different. Ranajit Guha once described colonial India as a situation involving “dominance without hegemony,” but this could be found throughout the East (Guha 1997). In a sense, it is where uneven and combined development is present but hegemony is absent that the conditions for permanent revolution arose. To conclude: there is no necessary connection between uneven and combined development and permanent revolution, as the former existed throughout much of the West, outside of North-Western Europe, even into the era of the Russian Revolution.

But equally, what Trotsky called “debased adaptation” is not only a feature of backward societies seeking to preserve themselves with the help of therapeutic inoculations of capitalist modernity. Trotsky saw it as a much more general phenomenon, necessarily caused by the need to maintain bourgeois hegemony over the exploited and oppressed in an era of revolution and which reached its apogee in the United States. In an address to the First All-Union Society of Friends of Radio in 1926 he warned of the counterrevolutionary possibilities of the technological form his listeners had come to celebrate:

It is considered unquestionable that technology and science undermine superstition. But the class character of society sets substantial limits here too. Take America. There, church sermons are broadcast by radio, which means that the radio is serving as a means of spreading prejudices. (Trotsky 1973b: 257)

Once the notion of combined development was available to him, Trotsky saw this appropriation of advanced technology as the obverse of the ideological advances made by Russian and Chinese workers. “In America we have another kind of combined development. We have the most advanced industrial development together with the most backward—for all classes—ideology” (Trotsky 1972d: 117). In a striking passage in an essay of 1933 considering the nature of National Socialism, Trotsky commented on the persistence of archaic or at least pre-modern ideas, not only in Nazi Germany but also more generally across the developed world:

Today, not only in peasant homes but also in city skyscrapers, there lives alongside of the twentieth century the tenth or the thirteenth. A hundred million people use electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms. The Pope of Rome broadcasts over the radio about the miraculous transformation of water into wine. Movie stars go to mediums. Aviators who pilot

miraculous mechanisms created by man's genius wear amulets on their sweaters. What inexhaustible reserves they possess of darkness, ignorance and savagery! (Trotsky 1975: 413)

These are obviously not merely historical observations. The political implications of this have become apparent at several points in US history, most recently in the religious element within the Tea Party and in (highly regionalised) support for Donald Trump which nevertheless—due to the vagaries of the US Electoral College—delivered him victory in the 2016 Presidential elections. The dominance of religion in public life is not, however, the key element of “debased adaptation” in a US context. For there is a sense in which, more than Germany and Japan, more even than the UK, the US has sustained a pre-capitalist inheritance from its emergence as an independent state which persists to this day: the Constitution. In Bloch's words this is not only “not dangerous to capitalism,” but positively beneficial for it. Daniel Lazare is exaggerating only slightly to describe the USA as “an eighteenth-century republic that has come to resemble a democracy in certain respects, but which at its core remains stubbornly anti-democratic”: “While the United States might look like a democracy and sometimes even act like one, it was fundamentally a holdover from the days when not even the most radical politicians believed that the people should be free to run the government as a whole” (Lazare 2001: 9). This continuing element of archaism at the heart of the most-self-consciously “modern” of societies should caution against claims that there are no longer any forms pre-dating capitalist modernity with which it can combine, even in the West.

Eastern Variations

By 1938 Trotsky was to describe permanent revolution as “the general trend of revolutionary development in all backward countries” (Trotsky 1973d: 138). We should not take these comments too literally. Trotsky was perfectly aware that what he called “the hierarchy of backwardness” involved enormously varied levels of development *across* the colonial and semi-colonial world (Trotsky 1976: 582). As a result, the size of the working class and its ability to influence events was also subject to massive differentiation. Trotsky accepted that a certain degree of social weight was necessary on the part of any working class before it could aspire to taking power; what was possible in India and China would not necessarily be possible in equatorial Africa or Afghanistan. Where the working class existed it was always necessary to establish organisational and political independence, but: “The relative weight of the individual and transitional demands in the proletariat's struggle, their mutual ties and their order of presentation, is determined by the peculiarities and specific conditions of each backward country and—to a considerable extent—by the *degree* of its backwardness” (Trotsky 1973d: 138). Not every backward country experienced uneven and combined development, although ironically, those that had not tended to be those that had escaped colonisation like Ethiopia. From the late 1920s Trotsky began to identify those countries other than Russia where uneven and combined development *had* created the possibility of permanent revolution. There were two main types, neither of which resembled the Tsarist feudal-absolutist regime.

One was exemplified by China and the post-Ottoman Arab Middle East after the First World War—formerly analogous state forms now past the point of collapse and disintegrating under Franco-British imperialist pressure. Here it is the *absence* of any centralised state which forms the context. Instead of being directly colonised, these newly fragmented territories saw agents of foreign capital establish areas of industrialisation under the protection of either their own governments or local warlords, both of which presented the same blocks to *overall* development. The result in relation to China was made by one of Trotsky's then-followers, Harold Isaacs:

The pattern of Chinese life is jagged, torn, and irregular. Modern forms of production, transport and finance are superimposed upon and only partially woven into the worn and threadbare pattern of the past. (Isaacs 1961: 1)

As this suggests, even where industrialisation and urbanisation did occur, uneven and combined development did not necessarily follow, as sometimes the archaic and modern may be too distant from each other to fuse. Smith quotes an assessment of conditions in Beijing in 1918 by a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Li Dazhao, in which he describes how “the gap in time between old and new is too big, that the spatial juxtaposition is too close”:

Wheels and hooves move side by side, sirens hoot, there is the sound of cars and horses, of rickshaw pullers spitting and cursing each other. There is diversity and confusion, complexity to an extreme degree. ... The new resents the obstacles posed by the old. The old resents the dangers posed by the new. (quoted in Smith 2008: 18)

It was Shanghai, rather than Beijing, where the different temporalities fused to such an extent such that the city became both a centre of capitalist modernity and of the opposition to it, serving as the venue for the launch of the CCP: “Shanghai thus served as a polyvalent symbol; an emblem of consumer affluence and of class exploitation, of foreign imperialism and patriotic resistance, of individualism and mass society” (Smith 2008: 18). Combined development was experienced throughout the entire texture of urban life where capitalism took hold. Shanghai was in the vanguard in terms of both production and consumption. The city had textile mills before anywhere in the Southern states of the USA and by 1930 was home to the largest mill in the world; the first cinema in Shanghai opened only five years after the first large cinema opened in San Francisco (Pye 1981: xv).

The most dramatic changes affected the working class. After 1918, workers were mainly former peasants or rural labourers, who were now subject to the very different and unaccustomed rhythms of industrial urban life without intervening stages. Jean Chesneaux writes that the main characteristics of the Chinese proletariat were “its youth, its instability, its swollen lower ranks and its lack of a developed labour elite” (Chesneaux 1968: 50). In this respect the Chinese working class closely resembled its Russian forerunner, not least in the openness to Marxism which these conditions tended to produce: “The fact that the students and workers...are eagerly assimilating the doctrine of materialism,” wrote Trotsky, “while the labour leaders of civilized England believe in the magic potency of churchly incantations, proves beyond a doubt that in certain spheres China has outstripped England.” In these cases ideology outstrips economy, for “the contempt of the Chinese workers for the mediaeval dull-wittedness of [Ramsay] MacDonald does not permit the inference that in her general economic development China is higher than Great Britain” (Trotsky 1977: 1220).

The other type of society identified by Trotsky as experiencing uneven and combined development were among the actual colonies, although not every colony did so. “Commercial, industrial and financial capital invaded backward countries from the outside,” he wrote, “partly destroying the primitive forms of native economy and partly subjecting them to the world-wide industrial and banking system of the West” (Trotsky 1940: 41). What Peter Curtin calls “defensive modernization” was not enough to protect these societies from Western incursions. In the case of the Merinian monarchs of Madagascar, for example: “They not only failed to modernize beyond adopting Christianity and superficial European fashions, they failed to build a kind of society and government administration that would perpetuate their own power” (Curtin 2000: 150). Once the race for imperial territory began in earnest during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, it became strategically necessary for the Western powers to

seize territories which were often of no value in themselves—indeed, which were often net recipients of state expenditure—but which it was necessary to retain in order to protect those territories which *were* of economic value, like India (Hobsbawm 1987: 67–69). Colonial rule could of course throw societies backward, as in the case of British-occupied Iraq. Ruling through the Hashemite monarchy after 1920, the regime deliberately rejected any attempts at modernisation, except in the oil industry. Instead, it reinforced disintegrating tribal loyalties and semi-feudal tenurial relationships over the peasantry. Peter Gowan describes the British initiatives as “the creation of *new* foundational institutions of landownership in order to *revive* dying traditional authority relations, resulting in economically and socially regressive consequences, undertaken for thoroughly modern imperialist political purposes—namely, to create a ruling class dependent upon British military power and therefore committed to imperial interests in the region” (Gowan 1999: 167). Nevertheless, even in this type of colonial context, *some* industrialisation took place. The British in India, for example, were unwilling to allow full-scale industrialisation in case it produced competition for its own commodities, but was prepared to sanction it in specific circumstances for reasons of military supply or where goods were not intended for home markets—a form of “licenced industrialisation,” particularly in textiles (Bayly 2004: 182; Osterhammel 2014: 663). This could not lead to general economic development, it is true, but as Osterhammel writes, “even at the end of the nineteenth century, the socially and economically ‘backward’ regions of Europe were certainly not ahead of the more dynamic ones of India or China” (Osterhammel 2014: 664).

As in the case of absolutist states like Russia, there were examples among the fragmented former empires and the outright colonies of how it was possible to pull ahead in particular areas or industries of all but the most developed areas of the West. Here too the outcomes were not always straightforwardly revolutionary, but leaving aside complete rejection of capitalist modernity, there were three possible responses to it, all of which I illustrate here with examples from the history of modern Islam.

One was *renewal*, where capitalist modernity led to existing cultural practices being maintained in new ways *which were then assimilated to tradition*. Hobsbawm has written of “the invention of tradition” that “we should expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which “old” traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable, or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators prove no longer sufficiently adaptable and flexible or are otherwise eliminated” (Hobsbawm 1983: 4–5). Here is one, highly pertinent example of this process from the late nineteenth century:

In the Muslim world, the Islamic *burkah*, the full body covering of Muslim women, was growing in popularity. Often wrongly regarded as a mark of medieval obscurantism, the burkah was actually a modern dress that allowed women to come out of the seclusion of their homes and participate to a limited degree in public and commercial affairs. Even in this insistence on tradition, therefore, one glimpses the mark of growing global convergence. (Bayly 2004: 15)

Indeed, as even one of the arch-defenders of the “clash of civilizations” thesis points out of another innovation: “The office of ayatollah is a creation of the nineteenth century; the rule of Khomeini and of his successor as “supreme Jurist,” an innovation of the twentieth” (Lewis 2002: 127).

These examples illustrate one extreme. At the other we find *adoption*, a similar embrace of modernity—or at least one version of it—and rejection of tradition that we have already encountered in Russia and China, here in 1940s Iraq:

The impact of the [Marxist] theory, particularly on minds that lived on ancient ideas—ideas that assumed that poverty and wealth were something fated, unalterable features of life—can be imagined.

An Iraqi of a religious family, who had been brought up according to the traditional Shī'ī precepts and became a member of the Politbureau of the Communist party in the forties, recalled in a conversation with this writer how when reading a forbidden book he first came across the idea that distinctions between men were not God-given but were due to human and historical causes, the idea was to him “something like a revelation.” There was nothing in his previous experience to suggest anything different. He had taken for granted the Qur'ānic injunction: “And as to the means of livelihood we have preferred some of you to others” (Batatu 1978: 481).

A third response lies between these extremes, all the more interesting because it can be seen as a potential bridge from one to the other—*adaptation*, where “contemporary” forms of class struggle were deployed in order to defend “archaic” forms of religious observance, as occurred around the jute weaving industry in Bengal during the 1890s. During this period the Scottish mill managers both introduced night working and attempted to prevent workers—many of whom had only recently arrived from the countryside—from attending religious festivals, to which the mainly, but by no means exclusively Muslim weavers responded by rioting and striking. Anthony Cox writes of their motivations: “In part, this growing militancy was encouraged, if not fostered, by notions of fairness and honour held by Indian workers.” In particular, they held to notions of customary rights (*Dasturi*), fairness (*Instaf*) and social honour (*Izzat*). Much the same spurs to action can be found in the great strike wave of 1920–22 in which individual disputes were often responses to assaults by supervisors on children or women (Cox 2014: 57, 119).

The Persistence of Uneven and Combined Development

Can we still discern the process of uneven and combined development in contemporary capitalism? A common theme on the left since the late 1980s in particular, more or less coincident with the consolidation of neoliberalism, has been what they tend to call the elimination of the non-synchronous or, in terms of this article, the evening-out of unevenness and the stabilisation of combination. Guy Debord, reflecting in 1998 on his twentieth anniversary of his critique of the Spectacular Society, argued that it now had reached a point of total integration in which where all forms predating capitalist modernity had been absorbed and rendered affectless: “Beyond a legacy of old books and old buildings, still of some significance but destined to continual reduction and, moreover, increasingly highlighted and classified to suit the spectacle's requirements, there remains nothing, in culture or nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry” (Debord 1998: 10). More recently, although rather less comprehensibly, Harmut Rosa, one of the main proponents of “accelerationism” has argued:

The ubiquitous simultaneity of late modernity...is thus, strictly speaking, no longer a simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous, since that presupposes the idea of a temporalized, directed, and moving (though asynchronous) history. Instead, it is, as it were, a static, situational, “timeless,” and orderless *simultaneity of historical fragments*. (Rosa 2014: 292–293)

It is the theorists of postmodernism, however, who have been most insistent in claiming that the contradictions of capitalist modernity have been overcome. Jameson, perhaps the most influential of these figures, claims that everything associated with “pre-modernity” had “finally been swept away without a trace”:

Everything is now organized and planned; nature has been triumphantly blotted out, along with peasants, petit-bourgeois commerce, handicraft, feudal aristocracies and imperial bureaucracies.

Ours is a more homogeneously modernized condition: we no longer are encumbered with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization (at least from the perspective of “the West”). (Jameson 1991: 309–310)

As is quite often the case with Jameson, it is unclear whether the quoted passage expresses his own view or is simply intended to reflect a widely-held belief, which it certainly does: but in either case, does the belief correspond to reality?

One response to such claims might be to argue that uneven and combined development still persists, but that the mechanisms by which it produces its effects is no longer the same as in Trotsky’s lifetime, precisely because there are no longer any pre-capitalist survivals with which capitalist modernity can combine. “Today,” writes Joseph Choonara, “uneven and combined development is best conceived as a drawing together of successive phases—including, crucially, capitalist phases—in novel forms within countries of the Global South” (Choonara 2011: 182). Choonara stands in the Trotskyist tradition, but similar positions have been taken by writers outside it (see, for example, Pieterse 2000: 129–137). In fact, although uneven and combined development can involve what used to be called “the articulation of modes of production”—and actually did so in, for example, pre-revolutionary Russia and pre-Independence India, it need not. Trotsky himself certainly thought that uneven and combined development was possible in societies where capitalist laws of motion were already dominant, as he thought they were in China by the late 1920s (Trotsky 1974a: 162). Regardless of intellectual pedigree, however, it is true that the combination of different phases of capitalist development can produce entirely new social consequences. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discovers such a process in Latin America, in passages which echo Trotsky’s remarks about the effect of English or French capital being transplanted onto the steppes of the Donets Basin. “From the perspective of stages of development,” they write, “one might think that through the contemporary export of industrial production, an auto factory built by Ford in Brazil in the 1990s might be comparable to a Ford factory in Detroit in the 1930s because both instances of production belong to the same industrial stage.” According to these authors such a thought would however be mistaken:

...the two factories are radically different in terms of technology and productive passages. When fixed capital is exported, it is exported generally at its highest level of productivity. The Ford factory in 1990s Brazil, then, would not be built with the technology of the Ford factory of 1930s Detroit, but would be based on the most advanced productive computer and information technologies available. The technological infrastructure of the factory would locate it squarely within the information economy. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 287)

But does uneven and combined development today *only* involve the transplantation of the newest technologies into those areas which had never experienced the older versions, or does it still involve the impact of capitalist modernisation on peasants and rural dwellers? The latter scenario does rather depend on the continued existence of a peasant class to be impacted upon, which several leading Marxists thinkers have suggested is no longer the case. In the final volume of his history of the “short” twentieth century, for example, Hobsbawm identified the most significant social change to have taken place in its second half, the one which broke decisively with the entire previous history of humanity, as “the death of the peasantry” (Hobsbawm 1994: 289, 415). But if peasants are still “flooding” out of villages—as Hobsbawm acknowledged they were—then this implies that reports of their death as a class have been greatly exaggerated. As might be expected from his previously quoted comments, Jameson sees the supposedly disappearing peasantry as an important aspect of how everything which

pre-existed capitalist modernity is being obliterated, and is particularly concerned with the effect on our sensibilities:

... when the premodern vanishes, when the peasantry shrinks to a picturesque remnant, when suburbs replace the villages and modernity reigns triumphant and homogenous over all space, then the very sense of an alternative temporality disappears as well, and postmodern generations are dispossessed (without ever knowing it) of any differential sense of that deep time the first moderns sought to inscribe in their writing. (Jameson, 2003: 699)

There is a degree of telescoping involved in both accounts. The decline of the peasantry as a proportion of the global population is undeniable, though it has been slower and more varied than expected—indeed, it is possible that peasants still constitute the largest global class (Harman 2009: 47). The majority of the world industrial working class—79 per cent in 2010—are now based in the Global South, but this does not mean that the majority of people there are industrial workers; by 2010 only 23.1 per cent were (Smith 2016: 101–104). In this respect, proletarianisation in the Global South presents a paradoxical picture and one which does not simply repeat earlier patterns:

The historical pattern of capitalist industrialisation in the West and Japan was accompanied by the kind of industrialisation and employment generation there that led to the decline of the rural population to the point that it constitutes, at most between 2 and 8 per cent of the overall population in the advanced countries. For countries like Brazil, India, China and Mexico the rural population is currently a majority. In due course it may well become a minority, but well above the proportions now prevailing in the earlier industrialising countries. (Vanaik 2014: 8)

Furthermore, while proletarianisation is an ongoing process it is not always simply a case of abandoning the farm and entering the factory in a once-and-for-all break. The move from peasant to worker involves people retaining links, moving back and forth between rural and urban areas, with a correspondingly complex development of class consciousness. The process is also spatially uneven: in some regions the “new enclosures” and other processes associated with the emergence of the neo-liberal trade and food regimes push small and middling peasants and their offspring off the land and into the cities (though not necessarily into factory work), while in others a degree of “re-peasantisation” in the form of partial reliance on small-holdings for subsistence/income by urban workers still continues in the formal and informal sectors (Bernstein 2001: 38–40). In the early 1980s Neil Smith wrote of how: “Pre-capitalist modes of production had been integrated into the world capitalist system as ‘internalized externals’. As such they have not made the complete transition from formal to real integration, and the real integration of the global space-economy is necessarily incomplete” (Smith 2010: 188–189). These types of complexities in the capital/labour relation, rather than smooth transitions from formal to real subsumption, or straight binary oppositions between capital and labour are of course exactly what uneven and combined development would lead us to expect.

China was the first country outside of Russia for which Trotsky argued that a strategy of permanent revolution was possible. As in the Russian case, this was because the process of uneven and combined development had produced—among other things—a working class which was small relative to the overall population, but possessed of an exceptional degree of revolutionary militancy. Even the dramatic changes which occurred in China during the first three decades of the twentieth century have, however, been overshadowed by the contemporary impact of uneven and combined development, which resumed late in 1978, when the party-state began to reinsert China into the world economy, and which is currently experiencing uneven and combined development in its most intense form. Mike Davis is surely correct to say: “Two hundred million Chinese factory workers, miners and construction labourers are the

most dangerous class in the planet” (Davis 2011: 15). What the outcome also suggests, however, is that the state has developed the adaptability to absorb or “contain” the effects of uneven and combined development, just as earlier capitalist states had done. Ironically—given the persistence of Western leftist fantasies about the socialist nature of the regime—one reason for this ability is that it continues to perform what has historically been one of the main functions of the capitalist state, but one which has been weakened in the West by both decades of neoliberalism and more recently by experiments in right-wing populism: representing and managing the interests of national capital as a whole. Walker and Buck note how neoliberal developments since 1978 (or “the transition” as they describe it) “has reconfigured the *form* of the state in a way that has unleashed the powers of capitalism.” One aspect of this has been the devolution of power to the metropolitan and prefectural levels, giving local governments the ability to annex territory and existing urban areas, and to raise revenue through local taxes and rents. The authors entirely correct view that China “has followed a path not so distant from those of Europe and North America” leaves Walker and Buck with “a final question” which is why China’s polity has not liberalised in line with the neoliberalisation of its economy (Walker and Buck 2007: 65). The obvious answer is, as I have already suggested, that there is no necessary connection between capitalism—certainly not the neoliberal variant—and democracy. In China what David Goodman calls the “intermediate middle classes” are not yet demanding reform, let alone overthrow of the state: “On the contrary...[they] are fundamental supporters of the contemporary Party-state, even if at times some are also the most articulate critics of specific actions and policy settings of the Party-state, particularly wanting it to be more efficient and just” (Goodman 2014: 155). If an insurgent working class is one central problem facing the Chinese party-state then the other is precisely whether the devolution of power to individual capitalists and bureaucrats has begun to undermine its ability to perform its role as central authority for the system as a whole.

Conclusion

At the time of Trotsky’s murder in 1940, the viability of the strategy of permanent revolution in any particular state depended on the existence of two factors. One was that the bourgeois revolution had not yet been accomplished and would have to be achieved, then superseded, by the working class leading an alliance of the exploited and oppressed. In this context, “bourgeois revolution” primarily means the destruction of pre-capitalist states, be they absolutist, tributary, colonial or some combination of these forms. The other factor was uneven and combined development, the rapid intrusion of industrialisation and urbanisation into hitherto mainly agrarian societies, the galvanic impact of which drove working classes, although a minority of the population, into the type of revolutionary action uncommon in the more stable, wealthier states at the core of the capitalist system. The two are connected, not only by the agency of the working class, but by the nature of the states against which permanent revolution could be waged. Precisely because they were not capitalist nation-states, they lacked the flexibility and adaptability to accommodate worker insurgencies through reform or concessions, and relied on repression, which tended to intensify revolutionary pressures. What is the situation today?

On the one hand, the last remaining bourgeois revolutions were all achieved decades ago, with in the final stages of decolonisation, and in most cases the working class played a marginal role, for reasons for that fall beyond the scope of this article (but see Cliff 2003 and Davidson 2015, xviii–xxi, 203–216, 29–231). The key point is that nowhere are there any longer “pre-capitalist” stages to be overtaken. It is possible of course, to substitute the absence of democracy as a stimulus to permanent revolution as Trotsky himself sometimes did, for example in relation to Spain (1973c: 307). Under capitalist conditions, however, while the

simple absence of democracy, or even its restriction, can and has provoked resistance, it is quite different from the immovable obstacle presented by the pre-capitalist state. Above all, democracy can and has been granted, resulting not in an escalation to socialist revolution, but demobilisation. Consequently, permanent revolution has to be considered as a strategy which was potentially possible of achievement down to the last quarter of the twentieth century, but is now a purely historical category, since one of its conditions of possibility no longer exists.

On the other hand, uneven and combined development has, if anything, intensified since the mid-1970s, not least because of the shift in manufacturing from the metropolitan centres of capitalism to the global south, above all in China. In these cases it is not the fusion of pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production which is producing the socially explosive situations identified by Trotsky nearly a hundred years ago, but the experience of peasants thrown into industrialising—and often newly-created—cities of the Pearl Delta. The extraordinary levels of day-to-day worker resistance to their conditions suggests that the *effect* of uneven and combined development has not changed in the intervening period.

We are therefore left with a paradox: Trotsky theorised uneven and combined development as an explanation for the possibility of permanent revolution. Yet his theory, and the social reality that it seeks to comprehend, has outlasted the viability of the strategy it was intended to support. Does this mean that uneven and combined development is now detached from the revolutionary process? Quite the contrary. As I have tried to demonstrate, not only was uneven and combined development a universal aspect of capitalist modernity in Trotsky's own time, but it is also an ongoing one which will only cease when the last peasant has been pushed or pulled off their land into wage labour and city life. Nuclear holocaust, environmental collapse or even the socialist revolution are likely to have occurred long before humanity ever reaches that point: it is a process which will never conclude while capitalism subsists. It is rather that the connection is no longer with the possibility of revolutions in states which have still to be transformed by capital, but is now with those which have not only been so transformed, but which are now central the existence of the system.

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