The Iranian Revolution in the Mirror of Uneven and Combined Development

Kamran Matin

The Iranian revolution, Foucault once poignantly remarked, ‘irritated a whole lot of people, on the left and on the right’.1 This was so, Foucault surmised, because the revolution displayed a basic peculiarity: it combined religious and secular features. ‘The enigma of the uprising’, he writes, was that the revolutionaries ‘inscribed, on the borders of heaven and earth, in a dream-history that was as religious as it was political, their hunger, their humiliation, their hatred for the regime …’. On the next page Foucault exclaims that the revolution ‘caused a surprising superimposition … [of] a movement strong enough to bring down a seemingly well-armed regime, all the while … [it] wanted to inscribe the figures of spirituality on the ground of politics’. The revolution, Foucault declared, was ‘the most modern and most insane’.2

Now, consider the elements whose combination in the Iranian revolution appeared so peculiar to Foucault: ‘heaven’-‘earth’, ‘religious’-‘political’, ‘spirituality’-‘politics’, and ‘modern’-‘insane’. Each of these ‘irritating’ couplets arguably consists of iterations of the notions of the contested concepts of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ as distilled from European history. Thus, the ‘superimposition’ of ‘spirituality’ and ‘politics’ was ‘surprising’ for Foucault because it was ‘once familiar to the West’ but now appeared in the ‘middle of the twentieth century’.3 The revolution therefore appeared irritating ultimately because according to Foucault it did not seem to repeat Europe’s break from ‘tradition’ towards ‘modernity’ but actually combined them. The intellectual challenge of this tendency was so great that prompted Foucault’s call for constructing ‘another political thought, another political imagination …’.4

But what was that intellectual mode that prevented even a Foucault, the supreme challenger of the Enlightenment thought and the grand narratives of history, from comprehending a form of politics that combined tradition and modernity, the ‘irritating’ course taken by the Iranian revolution?

An important clue can be gleaned from an interview Foucault gave to Baqir Parham, a prominent Iranian intellectual, at the height of the Iranian revolution in September 1978.5 At the end of that interview Parham asked Foucault about ‘structuralism’, of which, he suggested, Foucault was one of the ‘most authentic representatives’. Foucault responded by categorically dissociating his work from structuralism in the sense of a ‘methodology’ that relied ‘more on systems of relations than on explorations of elements and contents’.6 However, Foucault then spoke of a second meaning of structuralism with which his work had

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1 Cited in Afary and Anderson 2005: 250
2 Ibid. 264, 265, 222
3 Ibid. 265. Emphasis added.
4 Ibid. 185
5 Ibid. 183-189
6 Ibid. 187
affinity. This second meaning pertained to a departure from Descartian premise of philosophical thought that privileged the subject over the object and posed the consciousness and freedom of the subject as its key questions. This new mode of thought, Foucault approvingly explained, did not ‘privilege the subject as against the objective reality from the very beginning. Rather it explores the objects, the relation between the objects, and the comprehensibility of objects within themselves’. Foucault then elaborates on this intellectual act of ‘decentring the subject’ with reference to his own work:

My first book was called *Madness and Civilization*, but in fact my problem was rationality, that is, how does reason operate in a society such as *ours*? Well, to understand this issue, instead of beginning with the subject moving from awareness to reason, it is better if we see how, in the *Western* world, those who are not the subjects of reason … those who are mad, are removed from the life process.  

Now, in this passage and throughout his other writings on the Iranian revolution Foucault is quite explicit about Europe or the West as the specific geo-social referent of his political philosophy. Foucault therefore decentres a specifically European ‘subject’ within a specifically European ‘objective reality’. He does so through diachronic contrasts within a European temporality that comprises, sequentially, ‘traditional’ non-capitalist, and ‘modern’ bourgeois forms. The subject is thus uncovered to be discursively constructed from positions ‘outside’ of itself. But this ‘outside’ and the ‘subject’ itself are both European, more specifically, French. Non-European geo-social spaces have no constitutive relation with technological and discursive shifts and mutations within this temporality. In other words, the dynamics of the (re)constructions of European subject is rendered internal to Europe. This is quite consistent with Foucault’s declared dissociation from structuralism in the sense of a strategic methodological focus on ‘systems of relations’. Foucault’s (post)structuralism therefore elides the constitutive significance of non-European societies in modern social change. And that is why when applied to these societies his intellectual mode can only anticipate a historical dynamics that resembles that of Europe. Socialities that involve the combinations of features corresponding to distinct moments of Europe’s lineally conceived temporality become ‘unrecognisable’ and ‘irritating’.

The analytical corollary of this abstraction from societal multiplicity and interactivity in theorizing (modern) social change is an overarching concern with internal socio-economic structures and politico-cultural forms as the independent explainers of the pattern of any particular society’s development. Thus a considerable portion of the literature on the Iranian revolution involves a centrifugation of Iranian history *sui generis* that isolates religion, uneven development of capitalism, or more commonly a combination of both, as the main determinants of the outbreak and specificities of the revolution.  

7 Ibid. 188  
8 Ibid. 188. Emphases added.  
9 1979, 1967  
himself saw Shi'a Islam as a consistent oppositional force in Iranian history and hence the key to understanding the revolution.\footnote{See Afary and Anderson 2005: 209, 247-249, 267-277.} In an uncharacteristic move he attributed an unhistorical anti-statism, and by implication progressive character, to Shi’ism, which he claimed had not ‘ceased through the centuries, to provide an irreducible force to all that which, at the base of a people, can oppose the power of a state’.\footnote{Cited in Almond 2004: 17} This stance earned Foucault many critics on the right and the left who accused him of political naivety for unwittingly justifying the new religious oppression that the victory of political Islamists in Iran entailed. The notion that Shi’ism underlies the ‘exceptional’ character of the Iranian revolution was made by other scholars, notably, Theda Skocpol whose general theory of social revolutions\footnote{Skocpol, 1982: 267. For critical responses see Ahmad 1982; Goldfrank 1982; Keddie 1982} was comprehensively challenged by the Iranian revolution forcing her to reverse the basic structuralist dictum of her theory and suggest that the Iranian revolution was the only revolution that did not ‘come’ but was ‘deliberately made’\footnote{Skocpol, 1979 1982: 267. For critical responses see Ahmad 1982; Goldfrank 1982; Keddie 1982}.\footnote{Marty, Appleby and Scott 1991-1995; cf. Eisenstadt 1999; Keddie 1998}\footnote{Marty and Appleby 1995: 1} But Iran was not the only country where religion seemed to play a key role in modern body politic. The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the growth of various religious movements across the world which generated a large body of literature informed by comparative sociology and politics. A hallmark of this literature was the ‘fundamentalism project’ of the 1990s.\footnote{But see Gellner 1995.} The Iranian revolution was now an instance of the wider phenomenon of political Islam that was in turn part of global movement of fundamentalism representing ‘militant and political religious movements which [had] organized in reaction to the prevailing patterns of modernization’.\footnote{Almond, Sivan and Appleby 1995; Keddie 1998: 699-670}\footnote{Almond, Sivan and Appleby 1995: 402} Contextualization of political Islam in a global context arguably attenuated its purported exceptionalism. But the ‘fundamentalism project’ arguably involves three basic problems. First, the de-exceptionalization of political Islam is achieved through normalizing the opposition or inhospitableness of all non-protestant religions to modernization as sui generis.\footnote{E.g. Beyer 1994: 8} This involves an essentialist conception of religion that obfuscates its socio-historically constructed character. Second, and more importantly, the disruptive impacts of modernization, the main stimulant of ‘fundamentalisms’, are derived from the uneven development of capitalism which itself remains unexplained.\footnote{E.g. Roy 1994}\footnote{Almond, Sivan and Appleby 1995: 402} And third, the novel and hybrid character of fundamentalisms is acknowledged\footnote{Marty, Appleby and Scott 1991-1995; cf. Eisenstadt 1999; Keddie 1998} but is not seen as a provocation to the concept of modernity, which remains firmly Eurocentric.\footnote{E.g. Roy 1994} This ultimately renders fundamentalisms, and hence political Islam, as simultaneously a deviation from, and yet also a contingent feature of, modernity.\footnote{E.g. Roy 1994} These problems are compounded by a sizable body of literature that shows European modernity has itself comprised a variety of instances that diverge, on occasions rather sharply, from the ideal-typical
modernity. The ‘impurity’ of the English bourgeois revolution the pre-modern character of the French Revolution, the ‘special path’ (Sonderweg) of pre-WWII modern Germany, and the aberrational character of the Russian Revolution are but a few examples.22

In this chapter I challenge this Eurocentric mode of analysis and its underlying premise, which, as Justin Rosenberg has argued, is an ‘ontologically singular conception of the social’.23 I therefore argue that the problem of theorizing the Iranian revolution is rooted not in Iran’s purportedly exceptional religio-cultural idiosyncrasies but in an intellectual lacuna in classical social theory itself, namely, the international dimension of social change. For general categories of classical social theory are, as we saw in the case of Foucault, constructed by reference to, and abstraction from, a particular European experience of modernity. Main traditions of social theory, including Marxism, therefore exclude international relations in the construction of their conceptual edifice according them only a contingent analytical status. By international relations I refer to the interactive co-existence of all historical forms of social coherence in mutually recognized integrities.24 Social theories that fail to incorporate international relations in this specific sense systematically obfuscate the interactive, and therefore, multilinear dimension of social change that is concretely manifest in the amalgamation of developmentally heterogeneous social, political, economic, cultural, intellectual and ideological forms. Crucially, these amalgamated forms are, I argue, the concrete content of what are perceived to be peculiarities of non-European experiences of modernity. They are therefore not contingent and external but constitutive and internal to modernity. Their mutative instability is, I shall demonstrate, in fact the political sinew of modern social change in general, and the Iranian revolution in particular.

In sum: the theoretical impasse that Foucault and most scholars of the Iran’s experience of modernity and revolution have encountered is ultimately rooted in an internalist intellectual mode, of which Eurocentrism is one but arguable the most influential variety, that rests on a singular social ontology. The supersession of this mode therefore requires a social theory based on an ontologically plural conception of the social. Such a conception marks Leon Trotsky’s idea of ‘uneven and combined development’.25

In the remainder of this chapter I shall first introduce Trotsky's idea of U&CD, which I shall then deploy to provide a non-Eurocentric longue durée account of the Iranian revolution that fundamentally challenges the notions that it represents either a discreet congealment of, or a deviation from, or a movement against modernity. The argument is that the revolution was the explosive culmination of

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22 Anderson 1966; Comninel 1990; Fischer 1986; Gramsci 1999: 32-36, respectively.
23 Rosenberg 2006
24 Matin 2013b: 3. Recently, there have been welcome calls for ‘connected histories’ by some post-colonial scholars (e.g. Bhambra 2010; Subrahmanyam 1997). But to date they have not offered any explicit theoretical framework and coherent methodology for investigating processes and outcomes of connections among histories.
a prolonged accumulation of socio-political and cultural contradictions that were specifically generated by Iran’s uneven and combined development that involved the continuous amalgamations of capitalist and non-capitalist forms, which while organic to the wider international process of capitalist uneven and combined development remained inorganic to the Iranian society, and therefore, dynamically unstable. The revolution is therefore recast as a specific but organic product of an intrinsic international property of historic process. In the concluding section I briefly spell out the implications of U&CD for historical materialism.

Uneven And Combined Development

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a mechanical materialism with a thoroughly linear conception of history had dominated the Marxist movement through the intellectual authority of the Second International. A key political feature of this approach was the idea of the ‘two stage revolution’, the assumption that a socialist revolution could only follow a successful bourgeois-democratic revolution, which would develop capitalism as the necessary foundation for the higher socialist and communist societies. Given the embryonic nature of capitalist development in Tsarist Russia at the time it was a common belief among Marxists that Russia was ‘unripe’ for a socialist revolution. This view was neatly summarized by Engels who in 1885 claimed that Russia was approaching ‘its 1789’. However, the 1905 revolution and the role of the Russian proletariat in that revolution posed a fundamental challenge to this axiom. Trotsky’s intervention took place against this intellectual and political background.

In his magisterial book The History of Russian Revolution Trotsky begins by making a fundamental statement regarding the nature of social world: ‘unevenness [is] the most general law of the historic process…’. The meaning, in fact the very existence of unevenness as a universal condition, becomes possible and active in the second element of Trotsky’s idea, namely, ‘combination’: ‘From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which … we may call the law of combined development’. Trotsky defines combined development as ‘a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combin[ation] of separate steps, an amalgam[ation] of archaic with more contemporary forms’. Combination is therefore the concrete expression of unevenness because it can only occur when there is a differentiated multiplicity, i.e., the absence of developmental evenness. But combination is also constitutive of unevenness. The interactive fashion in which the differentiated instances of the social, of whatever scale and complexity, are reproduced, recombines the

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26 This and next sections draw heavily on Matin 2013b: Chs. 1 & 7.
27 Cited in Molyneux 1981: 18
28 Unless stated otherwise all the citations in this section come from Chapter 1 of Trotsky, 1985. It should be pointed out that Trotsky did not use ‘law’ in its positivistic conception but as he later explained as ‘a historical reality’ (cited in Davidson 2012: 2). Knei-Paz (cited in Rosenberg 2006: 313) also points out that ‘law’ in Trotsky’s formulation does not refer to a causal determination but to a descriptive generalization. Uneven and combined development can therefore be seen as simultaneously referring to ‘a historical process and the attempt to theoretically comprehend that process in thought’ (Davidson 2012: 3).
existing forms and generates new social forms within societies, which are, of course, the constitutive elements of unevenness itself. In other words, unevenness *ipso facto* conditions, and is conditioned by, developmental processes within and across the interacting societies. It always involves specific combinations of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ social, economic, political, institutional, cultural and ideational products; a process which renders the analytical distinction between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ itself ontologically unstable.

There is a third complementary dimension to the active heterogeneity of the universal in Trotsky’s idea, namely, development. Development is of course a highly controversial concept since for many it smacks of the unilinear stagism of modernization theory and second international Marxism. However, in Trotsky’s idea it is the concrete and dynamic expression of the uneven and combined nature of social change and, therefore, cannot be unilinear, homogenous, or homogenizing. On the contrary, it is interactively multilinear. Development in ‘uneven and combined development’ embodies, and renders visible the interconnected conditions of unevenness and combination, both theoretically and historically. It is the concrete sign of the reproductive activities of living interactive social forms. It was such a decidedly multilinear conception of development that allowed Trotsky to issue at the heyday of the Second International statements such as ‘history does not repeat itself’ ³⁰, or ‘we repeat: history is not made to order’ ³¹, or ‘there can be no analogy of historical development [between England and the colonies] ... but there does exist a profound inner connection between the two’. Similar statements abound in Trotsky’s writings.

Thus uneven and combined development is the conceptual comprehension and expression of the ontological condition of the interrelation of societies’ patterns of development, such that their interactive coexistence is constitutive of their individual existence and vice versa. Three lines of advocacy of Trotsky’s original idea are discernible in contemporary debates: one restricts it to the capitalist period ³³, a second extends it to include the pre-capitalist period ³⁴, and a third, intermediate, approach holds uneven and combined development to have been operative in the pre-capitalist period but only ‘fully activated’ under capitalism. ³⁵

I contend that the intellectual potential of uneven and combined development to provide the theoretical core of a non-ethnocentric social theory cannot be realized if its historical scope is restricted to the capitalist epoch. In fact, a strong case can be made that this restriction is neither logical, nor supported by Trotsky’s own work. As Rosenberg ³⁶ shows, the restricted conception of the idea of uneven and combined development misreads Trotsky’s ‘two-step process of abstraction’ in his exposition of the idea. For Trotsky first shows that the

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²⁹ Rosenberg 2006: 308  
³⁰ Trotsky 1969: 36  
³¹ Trotsky 1969: 131  
³² Trotsky 1972: 67  
³³ E.g. Ashman 2009; Davidson 2006; Löwy 1981  
³⁵ Allinson and Anievas 2009  
³⁶ Rosenberg 2013
peculiarities of Russian development are a common feature of ‘backward’ countries within the wider process of capitalist development and then shows that capitalist development itself takes a non-linear form due to uneven and combined development as the ‘more general laws of history’. Moreover, Trotsky explicitly states that it ‘is necessary to understand … unevenness correctly, to consider it in its full extent, and also to extend it to the pre-capitalist past’.

As we saw above, he also explicitly argues that combined development results from unevenness. Taking these two positions together as we must, then it is not clear why uneven and combined development should occur or assume its full significance only under capitalism.

The cross-epochal character of Trotsky’s idea of uneven and combined development stems directly from its ontologically plural conception of society. This places Trotsky’s idea of uneven and combined development at the level of transhistorical categories and general abstractions. Concrete operationalization of uneven and combined development therefore requires the mediation of auxiliary and intermediate concepts. However, we can glean a number of such concepts from Trotsky’s own work. These are ‘the privilege of backwardness’, ‘the whip of external necessity’, ‘substitution’, and ‘historical reshuffling’.

The idea of backwardness is commonly associated with European colonial discourse of stagist history reproduced in modernization theory and its various reincarnations. But in Trotsky’s formulation, and my use here, it signifies an inherently relational condition pertaining specifically to capitalist modernity. I therefore echo Knei-Paz’s clarification that in using the term backwardness ‘no moral judgement whatever is intended’. I use it in the same sense as Trotsky did, i.e., to demarcate a ‘clear social and historical uniqueness’, which terms such as ‘less developed’ or ‘under-developed’ do not convey. ‘The privilege of historic backwardness’, Trotsky argues, ‘… permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages’. The possibility to ‘adopt’ advanced products and ‘skip intermediate stages’ signify the developmental ‘privilege’ of backward countries while the compulsion to adopt highlights the ‘whip of external necessity’ under which they come. In Trotsky’s, use ‘the whip of external necessity’ is therefore also a primarily modern phenomenon that includes ‘coercive comparisons’ and developmental and institutional contrasts that capitalism imposes on all non-capitalist polities, whose developmental capacities are now rendered qualitatively inferior and self-restricting. As a result, backward polities, their elites and privileged classes in particular, pursue projects of political and economic modernization as a means to maintain or restore political independence. Such projects, and their generative context of backwardness, therefore pertain as much to European as to non-European contexts. They are however particularly pronounced in those non-western societies that escaped direct western colonialism such as Iran.

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37 Trotsky 1969: 148
38 Knei-Paz 1978: 63
39 Barker 2006: 78
40 See Gerschenkron 1962, 1994; Mirsepassi 2000: 11; Shilliam 2009
41 The use of the term ‘backwardness’ is widespread in Iran’s postrevolutionary intellectual and political discourses (Matin-Asgari 2004).
A key element in the projects of modernization and national regeneration undertaken under the whip of external necessity is the phenomenon of ‘substitution’. Trotsky first used the term ‘substitutionism’ in his critique of Lenin’s proposals for reforming party organization. But following the 1905 revolution, he began to view it as a much wider and multifaceted phenomenon, intrinsic to combined development, and operational in the political, intellectual, ideological, economic, and bureaucratic spheres. In this broader sense, substitution involves the mobilization of various replacements, native and foreign, in backward polities, for the agency, institutions, instruments, material, or methods of earlier processes of capitalist modernization in West European countries. A process in which the ‘threatening western foe is also a teacher’. Substitution necessarily involves and generates amalgamated forms that are dynamically tension-prone since they are inorganic to the backward society. Moreover, the substitutions involved in the condition of backwardness create new political and developmental possibilities unforeseen or suppressed by eurocentric or unilinear theories of history. The occurrence of a ‘socialist revolution’ in ‘backward’ Russia, an event Trotsky had predicted and actively pursued, is a glaring example.

The phenomenon of substitution involved in reactive or proactive modernization projects in backward countries is closely linked to the wider phenomenon of ‘historical reshuffling’, which Trotsky describes in terms of the idea of ‘the solution of the problems of one class by another’, which he argued was ‘one of those combined methods natural to backward countries’. More broadly, historical reshuffling involves a change to the developmental sequence of earlier process of modern transformation. A key form of historical reshuffling is the merger or reversal of the economic and political moments of capitalist modernization, as it originally occurred in Western Europe, England specifically. This circumstance essentially results from the international mediation of capitalism’s expansion and is central to understanding the nature, course and consequences of economic industrialization, political modernization, and nation-state formation in the so-called ‘late-comer’ societies.

The Iranian Revolution in the Mirror of Uneven and Combined Development

My account of uneven and combined development of the modern Iran begins from the Safavid period (1501-1722). The apparent paradox of starting from a decidedly non-modern period is due to the fact that the first centralized state encompassing all of the Iranian heartland since the Muslim conquest of Iran was established by the Safavids. The reproductive dynamics of the Safavī state and the manner of its collapse are also crucial in understanding the Shi’a ulama’s autonomy and key role the modern history of Iran. The discussion of the Safavi period also supports my claim regarding the transhistorical character of uneven and combined development.

42 Knei-Paz 1978: 192-199. See also Cliff 1960; Deutscher 1984: 25
43 Trotsky 1985: 25-37
The Safavis’ unification of Iran and pursuit of regional supremacy pitted them against the expanding empire of the Sunni Ottomans. The ideological dimension of this rivalry was the Safavis’ imposition of Shi’ism as Iran’s official religion. The Shi’a ulama took charge of educational and judicial organs and gained socio-political status and influence. But they remained subordinate to the state as the Safavis had successfully claimed prophetic descent which obviated their reliance on the ulama for ideological legitimation. Economically, the Safavis’ revenue flowed from three main sources: state tax, war, and long distance trade. By the mid seventeenth century, the latter two sources were severely curtailed as rising European powers dominated West Asian trade and geopolitics. Unable to pursue ‘geopolitical accumulation’\(^44\), the Safavis intensified internal political accumulation through increased taxation. But they exempted large amounts of their own lands by converting them into charitable institutions or \(\text{waqf}\) managed by the ulama as trustees. With the progressive weakening of the Safavi central state the ulama’s trusteeship transformed into \textit{de facto} ownership, which became the basis of their enduring economic and political autonomy and reached its zenith during the Qajar period (1791-1925). The result was the system of the ‘dual sovereignty’ of the state and the ulama.\(^45\) However Iran’s international relations increasingly undermined this bifurcated sovereignty.

With Europe’s industrial and political revolutions in full swing, European imperialists’ encroachments and pressures on Iran grew. A series of devastating military defeats by the Russian and British empires powerfully impressed upon the ruling Qajar dynasty and the Iranian elites their country’s geopolitical impotence and the danger of colonial annexation. With an eye on the Ottomans' \textit{tanzimat} reforms the Qajars attempted an ill-planned programme of ‘defensive modernization’\(^46\) involving military, financial, and administrative reforms. But in the face of strong resistance from the provincial magnates and the Shi’a ulama, who were set to lose from the reforms, they soon abandoned them. Consequently, the Qajar kings were increasingly forced to maintain their rule and Iran’s formal independence through substituting financial and trade concessions to Anglo-Russian capitalists for military and financial reforms. This preserved the Qajar rule and saved Iran from outright colonization but posed a mortal threat to the interests and status of indigenous privileged classes, especially bazaar merchants. More importantly, the Qajars’ strategy of external balancing through constant granting of concessions to rival European colonial powers did not resolve Iran’s relational condition of backwardness, that is, its geopolitical and geoeconomic vulnerability generated by non-capitalist socio-economic structures that underpinned Qajars’ political rule. In fact, from the perspective of the privileged classes and the nascent intelligentsia, Iran’s comparative economic backwardness had only intensified. This was amply demonstrated during the Tobacco Boycott Movement of 1891-1892, a bazaar-instigated and ulama-led movement against the decision by the Qajar monarch, Naser al-Din Shah, to grant to a Briton full monopoly over the production, sale, and export of tobacco in Iran. The movement was successful but the Qajars’ financial and economic concessions to Anglo-Russian capitalists continued.

\(^44\) Teschke 2003: 95-115
\(^45\) Arjomand 1988a
\(^46\) Matin 2013b: 56-57
A more radical solution emerged in the form of the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), Iran’s first ‘revolution of backwardness’, by which I refer to the basic dynamics of a primarily political revolution in a pre-capitalist society under capitalist pressure that establishes the institutional and ideological bases for bureaucratic rationalization and centralization of the pre-capitalist state, preparing it for a subsequent state-led ‘primitive accumulation’. Emboldened by Japan's defeat of Russia and the Russian revolution of 1905, a heterogeneous alliance of prominent bazaar merchants, influential members of the Shi’a ulama, and liberal and socialist intelligentsia led a democratic revolution against Qajar autocracy. This involved glaring instances of substitutionism and historical reshuffling as decisively non-capitalist classes and agents attempted - in a substantively non-capitalist society - a bottom-up project of state-democratization that in western Europe, especially England, had been carried out by capitalist classes within an already capitalist economy. The revolution modernized Iran’s political structure by introducing a written constitution and establishing a parliament (majles) that was to oversee foreign and trade policies. Directly generated by Iran's entanglement in the wider condition of unevenness and its interactive coexistence with modern European countries, the Constitutional Revolution thus superimposed the political institutions of capitalist-based liberal democracy on a substantively non-capitalist socio-economic structure. This peculiar amalgamation was the first acute expression of Iran’s experience of modern uneven and combined development.

Another international event radically changed Iran’s internal political scene yet again. The 1917 revolution in Russia emboldened Iran’s small but growing leftist forces to overthrow the Qajar state, which had been significantly weakened by the Constitutional Revolution and the First World War. Encouraged and initially supported by the victorious Bolsheviks in neighbouring Russia, the Iranian left sought a radical non-capitalist solution to Iran’s backwardness. As a first step, a Soviet Socialist Republic was formed in the Northern province of Gilan in June 1920. But this state-socialist developmental route was quickly blocked by Reza Khan’s British-assisted coup in 1921. The new Pahlavi autocracy was aided and abetted by important sections of the ulama, merchants and large landlords who were all alarmed by the growth of communism in Iran. Reza Khan’s rise to power strategically fixed Iran on the path of capitalist-oriented modernization. This was reinforced by Iran’s growing geopolitical significance in the US and West European powers’ confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Reza Shah embarked on a project of defensive modernization that involved nation-building, military modernization, bureaucratic expansion, the legalisation of private property in land, and secularization, which, following the example of Ataturk, curtailed the power of the ulama. These reforms further sharpened the tensions within the socio-economic amalgamation of proto-liberal institutions of rule and non-capitalist social structures forged by the Constitutional Revolution. For Iran’s largely feudal-mercantile economy was now overlain with a large centralized-bureaucratic state with which it had no organic link. This was largely due to Reza Shah’s formal recognition of large landlords’ continued authority.

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47 Matin 2012: 47
over the countryside in return for their political support. Reza Shah’s defensive modernization therefore involved a selective, top-down and coercive introduction of modern European political and bureaucratic forms and products in order to buttress an illiberal form of rule over a still substantively tributary social formation. The most salient feature of this process of combined development was the creation of the operative institutions of a nation-state in the absence of a nation in its classical form of the imagined community of abstract individuals of capitalist social organization. Consequently, Iranian nationalism remained an elite phenomenon and Iran’s backwardness, i.e. the entanglement of its non-capitalist temporality with European capitalism, remained unresolved.

A new international circumstance, the Second World War, radically changed the political scene in Iran. Reza Shah’s pro-German sympathies and Iran’s strategic location for supplying the embattled Red Army led to the Allies’ occupation of Iran. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in favour of his son Mohammad Reza and a decade of political freedoms was inaugurated. The left, liberal and religious forces rapidly grew in strength while the power of the young Mohammad Reza Shah became largely ceremonial. Liberal nationalists increasingly saw the control of the oil industry, a British economic enclave since 1907, as the only viable basis for developing Iran’s archaic agrarian economic structure, a project seen as instrumental to the reproduction of the political domination of Iran’s political elites and privileged classes and countering the growing appeal and power of the Iranian left. Mosaddeq’s struggle for the nationalization of oil industry was therefore both a radical struggle for national and economic independence and a politically conservative strategy of development.

However, the US, persuaded by the UK, increasingly viewed Mosaddeq with hostility fearing that he might be unwittingly facilitating the fall of Iran under Soviet influence. Eventually, Mosaddeq was overthrown through an Anglo-American coup supported by conservative ulama and a staunchly pro-western Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was duly restored to power. Thus, if the geopolitical exigencies of the Second World War had created a radical political situation, the post-war American strategy of ‘containment’ led to a conservative restoration. However, although the oil-nationalization episode left Reza Shah’s nation-less nation-state materially unchanged, it supplied a strong popular-democratic element to Iranian nationalism whose abiding influence on Iranian politics remains to this day.

The Anglo-American coup against Mosaddeq was not the last instance of the inflective co-determination of Iran’s internal development by its international relations. In fact, the causal impact of international relations on Iran’s internal development continued in even more profound ways. The success of peasant-based revolutionary movements in China, Korea, Cuba and Vietnam alarmed the Shah’s American mentors, who recommended a reform package - including a comprehensive land redistribution programme and educational, electoral and administrative reforms - that was intended to pre-empt a peasant revolution and balance the restive urban centres with pro-monarchy peasants-cum-capitalist farmers. But the reforms would also sharply reduce the power and influence of big landlords and the ulama. The Shah was initially wary of the implications of a unilateral termination of his post-coup political compromise with the landlords.
and the ulama. But reassured of US political support and emboldened by growing oil revenues, he eventually obliged. Thus, the ‘White Revolution of the Shah and the People’ was launched in 1962. In a new bid for overcoming Iran’s backwardness, the agency of an age-old monarchy was therefore substituted for organic social classes that had originally carried through the process of the ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ in England, the social basis of capitalist modernity.  

However, as with all substitutions involved in the process of uneven and combined development, the Pahlavi revolution from above entailed major contradictions. Land reforms terminated large landlords’ influence over the parliament and national politics but failed to realize its intended goal of the formation of a pro-Pahlavi class of capitalist farmers. In fact, due to its peculiar mechanism of implementation, which was based on peasants’ customary access to land, which excluded more than 40% of the peasants from land redistribution, and the systematic promotion of large capital-intensive agro-business, the land reform component of the Shah's externally induced 'passive revolution' rendered the new peasant-owner class created by imperial fiat economically unviable. This led to a massive rural-urban immigration and the rise of sprawling urban slums where millions lived in abject poverty. By contrast, big bazaar merchants benefited from the reforms in the short run and in absolute terms. But they resented their growing and systematic exclusion from the government’s massive credit schemes and loans that were primarily granted to the comprador industrial bourgeoisie and big multinationals. They also recognized that in the long run the Shah’s industrial bias would erode the mercantile basis of their socio-economic power.

The reforms’ impact on the ulama was also ambiguous. Their loss of economic and social influence under Reza Shah was deepened but they could still collect religious taxes and dues and run mosques, shrines and seminaries. Nonetheless, the Shah’s reforms prompted the ulama to rationalize and centralize their financial and bureaucratic practices. They also established private educational centres mixing modern and religious curricula, which attracted many students from among the religious (petty) bourgeois and state employees. Students and graduates of these schools formed the organizational and ideological backbone of proliferating Islamic associations and societies. This stratum’s intermediary class position, ideological traditionalism and modern educational background enabled them to carry out successful political mobilization of the lower classes behind the ulama-led Islamists during the revolutionary crisis.  

The net result was that the ulama achieved an enhanced ability to exercise their corporate power and ideological and political influence on a nation-wide scale.

Uneven and combined development thus generated a new asymmetric amalgamation. A rapidly growing modern industrial-service sector dominated by an alliance of state elites and foreign capitalists, and a small and socially rootless indigenous bourgeoisie was juxtaposed to a large, native mercantile economy

48 Marx 1990: Part 8
49 Gramsci 1988: 246–274
50 Harman 1994
with established institutions and a powerful ally in the shape of the Shi’a ulama. A significant number of the employees of the vast state bureaucracy and civil service, Iran’s modern new class, had ideological and cultural affinity with the latter. The cumulative impact of this sociological amalgamation generated a hybrid sociality and ideological sensitivity because the Shah’s internationally induced developmental strategy systematically subverted the political consummation of the capitalist property relations it had introduced from above. These relations had been the concrete basis of formal political freedoms and liberal democracy in advanced capitalist countries. But in Iran their politico-ideological expression was suppressed through the substitution of a neo-absolutist state for capitalist classes as the direct forgers of capitalist property relations. Like Russia, in Iran too, capitalism was an offspring of the state. Relations between formally equal and hence politically ‘free individuals’ of capitalist society were directly mediated by the state personified by the Shah. The sociological-ideological form of this contradictory amalgamation was ‘the citizen-subject’, a liminal agency that combined precapitalist and capitalist subjectivities. The precapitalist component of this hybrid subjectivity was marked by a religious ideological sensibility that overdetermined the secular traits implied in its capitalist constituent. The resulting dynamic tension rendered the citizen-subject particularly prone to revolution. But the hegemonic ideological form of the revolution was by no means pre-given in the contradictions of the citizen-subject. Rather, it was established through the praxis of a rising generation of Islamic thinker and activists whose idea of ‘revolutionary Islam’ engaged more than any other ideology the political and cultural sensibility of the citizen-subject. Let us see how.

By the late 1970s, the Shah’s regime was developmentally strained, politically disoriented, and internationally isolated. Sheer repression became the main instrument of internal stability. The economic downturn of the late 1970s and the Carter Administration’s pressure for political liberalization paved the way for the outbreak of a revolutionary crisis. Within this context, a radically reconstructed and highly politicized Shi’i-Islamic discourse was fashioned by a group of Shi’a ulama and religious intellectuals that proved extremely influential on the ambivalent subjectivity of Iranian citizen-subjects, an influence that assumed added efficacy due to the organizational destruction and political crisis of the secular left. The process of formation and the content of this new discourse of 'revolutionary Islam' represented the praxical working out of the process of uneven and combined development in Iran and displayed emergent properties. The mechanism of 'substitution' was a particularly salient feature of the construction of revolutionary Islam. Ali Shari’ati, a key architect of revolutionary Islam in Iran was explicit in this regard. He argued that the traditional form of Shi’i-Islamic theological and philosophical categories and discourse must be retained but their content must be changed in the service of an justice-oriented revolutionary praxis. Shari’ati claimed that this strategy was also used by the prophet Mohammad.\footnote{Shari'ati’s understanding and deployment of the strategy of ‘retaining the form and changing the content’ arguably resonates with Trotsky’s argument that ‘the social mind … prefers to borrow the old, when not compelled to create the new. But even when so compelled, it combines with it elements of the old’ (Trotsky 2008: 437).} In Shari'ati's own variety of revolutionary Islam the strategy of ‘retaining the form, changing the content’ involved a series of
creative and refractory subsumptions of Marxist ideas under and through Islamic notions and was in evidence. Key among these was the substitution of 'oppression' for 'exploitation', 'the people' for 'the proletariat', and 'monotheistic classless society' for 'socialism'.

Shari'ati evolutionary Islam was therefore an ideological Janus, a combined intellectual formation that incorporated the old and the new, the foreign and the native. Consequently, it had a natural resonance with the political subjectivity of the citizen-subject, which had a similar amalgamated constitution.

On the more conservative side of Islamist activists Ayatollah Khomeini also engaged in a reconstructive interpretation of orthodox Shi’a Islam. Unlike Shari'ati whose political discourse aimed at a deep social transformation Khomeini was primarily concerned with the political and specifically the seizure of the state power. His key innovation was therefore a radical reinterpretation in the orthodox Shi'a political theory, which rejected direct political leadership of the Shi'a ulama on the basis of the Shi'a belief that in the absence of the twelfth (Shi'a) imam, Mahdi, all rulers were in essence usurpers and therefore unjust. Khomeini turned this argument on its head by making a crucial distinction between the political and spiritual components of imamat or post-prophetic leadership. He argued that in opposite to what ‘reactionary’ Shi’a clergy has propagated for centuries divine justice in fact necessitated Islamic political leadership in the absence of the twelfth imam to prepare Muslim community for his reappearance, and that most senior Shi’a clerics who meet certain basic conditions regarding knowledge and justice could exercise the same kind and level of political authority as imams without aspiring to, or ever attaining, their level of spiritual perfection. The shorthand for this innovation in Islamic political thought was 'velayat-e faqih' or 'the guardianship of the jurisprudent', which became the key pillar of the post-revolutionary political order. Khomeini almost exclusively articulated his innovation in the idiom of orthodox Shi'a theology that was extremely attractive to less educated and more traditional sections of the Iranian masses, which formed a majority of the population. Nonetheless, his substitution of the Shi’a clerical elite’s political prerogative for those of the twelfth absent imam was no less revolutionary than Shari'ati's substitution of monotheistic classless society for socialism.

Together, Shari'ati and Khomeini therefore crafted a novel discourse of revolutionary Islam that had an elective affinity with the citizen-subject as the emergent agency of the Iranian revolution. The bazaar-backed Shi’a ulama and religious intelligentsia therefore succeeded in attaining ideological hegemony over the revolution and steered it towards an Islamic dénouement. Akin to the developmental pattern that had given rise to it, the post-revolutionary state, the Islamic Republic, is also a tension-prone amalgam of the foreign and the native. The tension between the secular-popular form of sovereignty that the idea of ‘republic’ involves and the divine sovereignty that the ‘Islamic’ identity of the new state implies, lies at the heart of the endemic political crisis that has accompanied the Islamic Republic since its formation and this has yet to be resolved as demonstrated by the 2009 protest movement known as the ‘green movement’.
Conclusion: Uneven and Combined Development and Historical Materialism

I have argued that that so many mighty thinkers and astute observers such as Foucault were baffled by the Iranian Revolution and even propounded unhistorical, even proto-essentialist, explanations of the revolution was not because they were insufficiently historicist but because they operated with a conception of the historical that abstracted from the societal multiplicity and interactivity, or 'unevenness' and 'combination' as an ontological property of social reality. If they did have such a conception of the historical at the deepest level of their theoretical apparatuses then the hybrid form of the Iranian revolution would appear not as an anomalous aberration from modernity but an organic outcome of the wider process of uneven and combined development of which modernity, in its all diverse instantiations, is itself a product.

At this point it seems logical to ask what is the precise intellectual status of the idea of uneven and combined development, especially the nature of its relation with historical materialism, which has been traditionally the wider theoretical idiom in which it has been couched?

Justin Rosenberg has suggested that by itself uneven and combined development 'cannot operate as a replacement for the classical social theories .... In fact, without being attached to one of these—historical materialism for example — it cannot reach down to the level of concrete historical explanation at all.  

But what are the wider and deeper implications of such attachment in theoretical terms?

Explicit interrogations of this relation have been relatively neglected in much of the publications on uneven and combined development. As a leading Marxist thinker and political activist Trotsky himself saw his idea of uneven and combined development as simply derivative of Marxist dialectics and materialist conception of history and as such did not seem to have believed that the idea had any transformative implications for materialist conceptions of history. By contrast I suggest that the plural social ontology that underpins the idea of uneven and combined development invests it with an international 'Midas touch' that necessarily transforms the very basic premises of any ontologically singularist social theory, such as historical materialism, that it comes into contact with. I substantiate this claim though a brief critical engagement with Alexander Anievas's recent explicit discussion of the precise theoretical status of uneven and combined development in relation to historical materialism.  

Using Lakatosian vocabulary Anievas argues that uneven and combined development was a response to the 'emergence of particular anomalies within a Marxist research programme committed to an ontologically singular conception

52 Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008: 86. The attentive reader would have noticed that my own account of the Iranian revolution in the preceding pages is implicitly based on precisely such an attachment.

53 Anievas 2014: 43
As such, uneven and combined development acts, according to Anievas, as a ‘methodological fix’ and ‘progressive problem shift in the larger research programme of historical materialism, … an auxiliary theory consistent with the hard-core premises of that programme’. I call this conception of the relation between uneven and combined development and historical materialism ‘critical conservative’. ‘Critical’ because it explicitly acknowledges that there is a basic problem in historical materialism represented by its recurrent inability to accommodate certain historical phenomena within its explanatory remit. And ‘conservative’ because depicting uneven and combined development as a merely ‘auxiliary theory’ protects the basic premises of historical materialism, its ‘hard-core’ in Anievas’s Lakatosian terms, from the destabilizing effects of the theoretical externalities, Lakatos’s ‘anomalies’.

But how plausible is this assessment?

It seems that the answer to this question hinges on the prior question of whether or not ontological assumptions of historical materialism, or any general social theory, can be seen as constitutive of its ‘hard-core’. In answering this prior question a brief look at Lakatos’s idea of ‘research programmes’ is in order.

According to Lakatos, ‘research programmes’ emerge when scholars attempt to protect the fundamental postulates or the ‘hard-core’ of existing theories against empirical refutations. Two strategies are common to these attempts. The first strategy involves either the restriction of the empirical scope of the hard-core, or the exclusion of the unexpected outcomes as ‘anomaly’ or ‘exception’, or both. This restrictive-repudiative strategy gives rise to a ‘degenerative research programme’ that over time and with the proliferation of ‘anomalies’ completely erodes the explanatory power of the hard-core.

Alternatively, scholars can resolve the anomalies through formulating ‘auxiliary theories’. An auxiliary theory expands the explanatory power of the research programme’s hard-core without adjusting its hard-core. This second ‘expansionist’ strategy leads to a ‘progressive research programme’, which, according to Lakatos, best ensures the growth of knowledge. For Lakatos, embarking on degenerative research programmes or abandoning theories in the face of falsificatory facts, à la Popper, impedes scientific advance and theoretical knowledge. And this second strategy is what Anievas has adopted in his assessment of the relation between uneven and combined development and historical materialism.

However, there is arguably a limit to the growth of knowledge even within the progressive research programmes, especially those whose hard-core is a general social theory. This limitation arises when the protective belt of auxiliary theories enveloping the hard-core becomes over-layered as a result of the growing number of anomalies. As the relation of the auxiliary theories to the hard-core becomes increasingly inorganic the hard-core’s logical cohesion and theoretical parsimony are compromised. The accumulating auxiliary theories neither spring

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54 Anievas 2014: 43
from the macro-theoretical postulates of the hard-core, nor can possess a level of
generality commensurate with that of the pre-refutation hard-core. In other
words, auxiliary theories might ward off specific empirical challenges to the
hard-core but their overgrowth recurrently betrays a constitutive defect in the
hard-core itself, a defect that auxiliary theories can only contingently remedy.
Such constitutive defects are particularly evident when auxiliary theories pertain
to a dimension of social reality that is ontologically at par with aspects of social
reality from which the hard-core’s own fundamental categories are derived. Put
conversely, there might exist a hitherto theoretically undigested dimension of
social reality whose incorporation into the hard-core of a progressive research
programme would either render its auxiliary theories redundant, or intellectually
demote them as concretisations of the hard-core’s general abstract postulates.

Unevenness – which Trotsky defined as ‘the most general law of the historic
process’ – constitutes precisely such a dimension of social reality, which is
arguably absent from the ‘hard-core’ of historical materialism and classical social
theory more generally. And the anomalies that according to Anievas elicited the
original formulation of uneven and combined development by Trotsky are
directly generated by this absence. In fact, this absence is the explicit departure
point of Anieva’s own work and a considerable number of other contributions to
historical sociology and IR that theoretically draw on the idea of uneven and
combined development. Therefore, logically uneven and combined development
cannot be reduced to an ‘auxiliary theory’, which, according to Anievas, is
‘consistent with the hard-core premises’ of the research programme of historical
materialism. Rather, the integration of uneven and combined development into
historical materialism necessitates a modification of its ‘hard-core’ ontological
premises. Venturing out of the Lakatosian discourse I call this assessment of the
relation between uneven and combined development and historical materialism
‘critical-reformist’ in that like Anieva’s ‘critical-conservative’ assessment it
recognises a basic flaw in the hard-core of historical materialist research
programme, but ‘reformist’ because unlike Anievas’s assessment it also calls for
a modification of the hard-core itself.

This is so because as I have tried to explain elsewhere uneven and combined
development’s intellectual premise of the ontological multiplicity of the social
not only exerts a downward pressure on historical materialism’s intermediate
concepts but also an upward pressure on its transhistorical categories. For it
comes into an immediate and productive tension with historical materialism’s
ontological premise of the ‘double relationship’, which Marx and Engels
formulate in The German Ideology. There they write “the production of life …
appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as natural, on the other as a
social relationship”. The ontologically singular conception of the social that
underlies the premise of the double relationship is even more visible in its later
rendition in Grundrisse where Marx asserts that “All production is appropriation
of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of
society”. As it can be readily seen, in both iterations of this basic premise of
historical materialism the site of ‘production in general’ is the individual society.

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56 Matin 2013b
The logic is also operative in Marx’s explicit abstraction from societal multiplicity in *Capital*. 57

In short, historical materialism’s general abstraction of ‘production in general’ involves an implicit but highly consequential abstraction from the fact of societal multiplicity (unevenness) and hence from its consequence of the interactive development of each individual society (combination). And since uneven and combined development has a transhistorical reach – not to be conflated with a supra-historical or unhistorical quality – it cannot be reintroduced into particular forms of production a posteriori as one of many ‘concrete determinations’. This would involve the restriction, if not the suppression, of the causal and constitutive impact of the condition of societal multiplicity, or the international, on the concrete form of the reproduction of the society in question.

Thus, to put it crudely, the logical implication of the idea of uneven and combined development for historical materialism seems to consist of reforming its premise of the ‘double relationship’ as a triple relationship whereby coexistive and interactive relations among societies have a dialectical relationship with their internal social relationships and external relationship with nature. This modification of historical materialism’s social ontology is, I contend, indispensible to the solution of the problem of eurocentrism in Marxism.

**Bibliography**


57 Marx 1990: 727; cf. Althusser 2001: 49


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