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**Trotsky's Error:
Multiplicity and the Secret Origins of Revolutionary Marxism**

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Abstract

Uneven and Combined Development uniquely incorporated societal multiplicity into Marxist theory. So why did its first application end in Stalinist dictatorship? This paper seeks an answer by turning the idea back on itself, applying it first to Trotsky's doctrine of 'permanent revolution' and then to Marx's original idea of revolution.

Trotsky hoped that Russia's 'revolution of backwardness' would be rescued by 'advanced' revolutions in the West, modelled on the French revolution. But what if – as this paper argues - that event too was ultimately a 'revolution of backwardness'?

Two implications follow. First, Trotsky's 'permanentist' strategy was logically flawed: if all modern revolutions have been internationally-generated catch-up revolutions, then the idea of Bolshevism being rescued by 'advanced revolutions' elsewhere fails. But second, the consequences of multiplicity reach even deeper than Trotsky realised: they underlie and explain the original political formation, and troubled history, of revolutionary Marxism itself.

Keywords

Multiplicity, Marxism, Revolution, Uneven and Combined Development.

Introduction

A key finding of “International Relations in the Prison of Political Science” (Rosenberg 2016) is that ‘the international’, now reinterpreted as ‘the consequences of societal multiplicity’, reaches deep into areas of social life far beyond the traditional remit of the discipline of IR.¹ Social structures, state forms, political subjectivities and cultural production - all these disclose, on closer inspection, an inter-societal dimension that can be traced using an internationally-oriented social theory like ‘uneven and combined development’ (U&CD). Thus not only does ‘multiplicity’ provide the ontological premise for IR as a discipline; the sense of what IR can contribute to other disciplines is dramatically expanded too; and this counters the widespread view that IR’s fate is to be forever only an importer of ‘big ideas’ produced elsewhere.

The purpose of the present paper is to extend this argument into the history of ideas, and to do so by turning it back onto itself: what can the consequences of multiplicity tell us about the origins and fate of the idea of U&CD itself, and of the revolutionary Marxist tradition within which this idea first crystallized?

It might be thought that we already know the answer to this: by incorporating societal multiplicity into the materialist conception of history, U&CD solved the intellectual and political paralysis of the Marxist opposition to Czarism. Its international explanation for the ‘peculiarities of Russia’s development’ showed both why Russia’s modernization was not following the path of its Western predecessors and how this apparent exceptionalism might form part of a dialectical *inter-societal* process by which capitalism would be overcome. Moreover, U&CD was apparently vindicated by the 1917 revolution in which – against the predictions of orthodox Marxism – late-developing Russia became the world’s first socialist-led state.

And yet this happy picture begs an obvious question: if Trotsky was so right about the significance of the international, why did the Russian revolution which he used this insight to predict and guide descend into the totalitarian nightmare of Stalinism? Trotsky’s own answer – the failure of supporting revolutions to materialize in the West – only begs a further question: *why* did the Western revolutions not occur? And these questions are not purely empirical. As we shall see, they uncover a theoretical ambiguity that leads us all the way back to the young Marx, and to the formation of his political ideas in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789-1815. There we shall come face to face with an enormous, unsuspected role played by societal multiplicity in the very origins of the modern idea of revolution. And this role, once revealed, helps make sense not only of the Bolshevik experience, but of the subsequent fate of the Marxist revolutionary tradition as a whole.

In the pages below, this argument is set out in four steps. First we confirm the central role played by societal multiplicity in both the original theory of U&CD and its associated political doctrine of permanent revolution. Next we pose the question of Trotsky’s error: if U&CD was

¹ For helpful discussions during the writing of this paper, I am especially grateful to Chris Boyle, Luke Cooper, Beate Jahn, Zdenek Kavan, Milja Kurki and Kamran Matin. I benefited greatly too from presenting it at an EWIS workshop in June 2018 and a meeting of the Sussex Working Group on Uneven and Combined Development in December 2018. Finally, I thank two anonymous reviewers for extremely stimulating feedback that helped me fine-tune the argument in its final stages.

such a breakthrough, why did it end in catastrophe? Here the failure of the Western revolutions becomes key, and this leads us, in the third step, to the origins of Marx's theory of revolution on which Trotsky based his expectations. These origins, we find, lie in the uneven and combined development of 19th century Europe, and in Marx's frustration at the 'backwardness' of Germany in relation to France and England. But the implication - that revolutionary Marxism itself arises as a modern consequence of societal multiplicity - is widened even further in step four. There we consider the French revolution from which Marx drew *his* model - and which is widely regarded as the source of the very idea of revolution as a modern phenomenon. We find that this upheaval too was formed in an international context of 'belated development'. And it is this realization - that revolutions arise from international unevenness, and not from 'advanced' internal development - which finally explains the failure of Trotsky's predictions of support from 'advanced revolutions' in the West. Bereft of its French archetype, the 'advanced revolution' on which Trotsky wagered his politics becomes a species of event with neither logical nor historical grounding.

What is the significance of this result? On the one hand, it has long been claimed that Marxism has had special difficulty addressing the international dimension (Waltz 1959, Berki 1971, Callinicos 2004). The present argument pushes this claim a step further, suggesting that the revolutionary expectations of Marxism have themselves been both shaped and frustrated by deep-lying effects of societal multiplicity that were only partly visible to it. On the other hand, this also demonstrates that the international - and hence the remit of international theory - extends deep into the 'domestic' history of ideas, in this case throwing new light on one of the most influential political ideologies of the modern era. Finally, as an exercise in reflexive critique, the argument detaches the idea of U&CD from its historical role as the justification for the Bolshevik revolution - a role that has confined it within revolutionary Marxism, preventing it from realizing its wider potential for illuminating the place of the international in the social world. All these results can be unlocked by reflecting on societal multiplicity: they begin to unfold the significance of this premise when it is activated in the field of political theory and practice.

1. U&CD: Rise and Fall of the Classical Idea

It would be hard to imagine a social theory in which societal multiplicity plays a more central role than it does in the idea of uneven and combined development. To see how this is so, we need only recall the historical origins of the idea.

a. The Russian Crucible

Marxists in early 20th Century Russia faced a quandary. Industrial development was occurring rapidly. But instead of producing an independent capitalist class capable of taking power, it seemed only to have strengthened the semi-feudal Czarist state, while also leaving the vast majority of the population toiling on the land as peasants. And yet despite this 'persistence of the old regime' (Mayer: 1981), a politically militant industrial working class had nonetheless come into being in the major cities, demanding the replacement of capitalism by socialism. But '[t]his', wrote Lenin at the time, '*cannot* be' (cited in Deutscher 1954: 113). Socialism, after all, was supposed to arise from the contradictions of advanced capitalism; and Russia, beginning its industrialization a century after the first capitalist nations, had still not

accomplished even the 'bourgeois revolution' which had occurred in England in the 1640s and in France in 1789.² Working class militancy must therefore be laid at the service of this bourgeois revolution in Russia; proletarian *leadership* of such a revolution was unthinkable. And yet, as the Russian Marxists continually complained, the bourgeoisie in Russia was too weak to lead the struggle against Czarism. Willy-nilly, therefore, it was the proletariat that was taking the leading role in the struggle over civil and political rights. And if it took power, it would be unable to confine itself to democratizing the state alone – socialist transformation would unavoidably be on the agenda too. But how could this possibly make sense in a society that was so undeveloped that the peasantry still made up by far the largest segment of the population?

The answer, suggested Trotsky, lay in widening the canvas of the analysis beyond Russia to incorporate the *international* development of capitalism as a whole. This widening revealed that capitalism was spreading and evolving according to an international law of motion that he named 'uneven and combined development'. Once understood, this law explained why Russian society was not following the course charted by the pioneer countries. And it also suggested how a proletarian revolution in Russia, which seemed an absurdity when viewed in isolation, might actually be part of a wider inter-societal mechanism through which the transcendence of capitalism on a world scale would occur. In this way, both the peculiarities of Russian development and the paralyzing anomaly of its politics were resolved by incorporating the fact of societal multiplicity. To see how, let us take each in turn.

Viewed internationally, capitalist development was historically *uneven*. It had not emerged everywhere simultaneously, and its original crystallising in Western Europe had transformed the conditions of its emergence elsewhere. Other societies were suddenly confronted by a 'whip of external necessity' (Trotsky 1932: 5): if they could not reproduce the new sources of Western power inside themselves, they would lose their independence. This was why, in Russia, it was the pre-capitalist Czarist state that had initiated industrialisation, prolonging its own existence and delaying the growth of a politically-independent capitalist class. It was how an industrial working class could emerge under the rule of a semi-feudal state and – because this new proletariat was coterminous with the propagation of more 'advanced' political ideologies elsewhere – how it could take on an explicitly anti-capitalist, socialist orientation even while the conditions for such an orientation did not exist inside Russia.

Russia's precocious working class politics showed that historical unevenness produced not only a 'whip of external necessity' but also a 'privilege of historic backwardness': arriving 'late', political and economic actors in a 'backward' country could import the results of more advanced development elsewhere. This same privilege had also enabled the rapid development of Russian industry, as the latest production technologies (and the loans to pay for them) could be imported from outside, without retracing the steps involved in their original invention (or accumulation). By thus leveraging the possibilities arising from societal multiplicity, Russia was able to 'skip over' those steps. And the result was not simply an

² In Marxist thought, the 'bourgeois revolution' refers to the social and political upheaval by which the pre-capitalist ruling elite is replaced by a constitutional state, and capitalist relations of production (wage labour and private property in the means of production) are enshrined in law. It sets the stage for the thorough-going capitalist transformation of society, which in turn gives rise to basic contradictions leading to the 'proletarian revolution' that later replaces capitalism with socialism.

accelerated, but also a fundamentally reconfigured, process of social change. For it '*combined*' in one social formation historical phenomena (a *pre-capitalist* Ancien Regime, advanced *capitalist* industry, a *post-capitalist* revolutionary ideology) which elsewhere had been separated in historical and developmental time.

Hence, due to the pressures and opportunities of societal multiplicity, capitalist world development could not be unilinear, and must take different forms in different places: 'England in her day revealed the future of France, considerably less of Germany, but not in the least of Russia and not of India' (Trotsky 1932:378). Nor was this a patternless variation that dissolved any stable bases of political action. On the contrary, in Russia it had created an explosive mix of social forces which (through trade, state loans and military alliances) had been integrated into the core structure of world capitalism. Its detonation – causing 'a local avalanche in a universal social formation' (Trotsky 1932: 379) – would send shockwaves into the advanced countries themselves, finally providing the trigger for long-overdue revolutions there too. And in this way, the effects of societal multiplicity upon the periphery of world development would react back onto the whole, providing the last link in the complex inter-societal mechanism by which its forward movement into socialism would be accomplished.

b. the doctrine of 'permanent revolution'

It was this mechanism that Trotsky referred to by the name of 'permanent revolution'. The choice of terms was unfortunate. As many commentators have noted, there is simply no way to interpret the English word 'permanent' so that it points to what Trotsky meant. Indeed, Trotsky himself referred to the term as a 'high-flown and sententious phrase', adding that the apparent implication of never-ending revolution was 'simply nonsense'. As Baruch Knei-Paz notes, 'uninterrupted', (in the sense of 'unbroken', rather than 'unending'), would have been a better word (Knei-Paz 1978: 153-54). For what the theory of permanent revolution actually described was how an uprising against a *pre-capitalist* autocratic state could evolve directly into a movement for socialist transformation, without the need for an intervening epoch of capitalist development.

Knei-Paz describes this upheaval as a drama in three acts (Knei-Paz 1978: 130ff). In act one ('the democratic revolution'), the minority working class, concentrated in the cities and radicalised by 'combined development', provides leadership for a nation-wide uprising against Czarism. It forms part of a broad alliance supporting both the classic middle class demands for a liberal constitutional state, and peasant demands for bread and land. Substituting itself for the missing middle-class leadership, it facilitates the eagerly awaited 'bourgeois revolution'.

In act two, however, ('the proletarian revolution'), this three-way alliance must begin to fracture. For the proletariat, now in power, is compelled to curtail the rights of private property: both in the cities (where it supports the workers against the factory owners); and in the countryside (where it must resist the consolidation of peasant ownership of land; for this would either block further economic development or give rise to a 'kulak' class of agrarian capitalists). As these struggles deepen, Trotsky argued, the minority proletarian state becomes more and more isolated within its own society, raising the prospect of increasing

authoritarianism and gruesome civil conflicts which it could not hope to win: 'Left to its own resources, the working class of Russia will inevitably be crushed by the counter-revolution the moment the peasantry turns its back on it' (Trotsky 1962: 247).

Hence the need for act three ('the world revolution'). Here the causal links would be forged by the international tensions generated by the revolution. In one scenario, (Trotsky 1962: 241), events in Russia would provoke an uprising in German-occupied Poland. Brutal German repression would lead to Russian intervention. War between the Soviet state and Germany would trigger a general strike and insurrection in Germany, from where the revolution would then spread further West, awakening possibilities that were otherwise blocked by the 'over-ripeness' of capitalist development there.³ In this way, the proletarian revolution in backward Russia, far from being the absurdity it had earlier appeared, would prove to be the link necessary to the achievement of revolutions in the advanced countries. And those latter events would in turn release Russia from the deadly logic that had built up in act two. The minority status of Bolshevism inside Russia would be counter-balanced by its new majority standing at the international level (where the leading states would now be socialist), and by the enormous material and political support that was sure to follow from this.

With this third act, the overall mechanism of the 'uninterrupted revolution' would be complete. As Isaac Deutscher noted, this was 'the most radical restatement, if not revision, of the prognosis of Socialist revolution undertaken since Marx's Communist Manifesto...' (Deutscher 1954: 150). After all, the core argument of the *Communist Manifesto* had projected an internalist logic of revolution: capitalism would be overthrown by a majority proletariat which had been radicalised by immiseration and the cumulative effects of cyclical crises of over-production. By contrast, Trotsky's theory re-routed the revolutionary logic through a sequence of *inter-societal* causes and effects: international unevenness leading, via 'combined development', to radically new and explosive configurations of social and political development. It revealed and mobilised the neglected political consequences of multiplicity for the logic of historical change.

c. The Totalitarian Denouement

At first Trotsky's vision seemed vindicated by its ability both to explain the 'peculiarities' of Russian development and to guide the Bolsheviks to state power. And yet no sooner was this conquest achieved than the vision began to unravel due to the failure of the third act to follow as planned. Trotsky had anticipated two versions of this third act: either the Western revolutions would occur, and 'the European working class ...comes to our assistance with its organization and its technology' (Trotsky, cited in Knei-Paz 1978:319); or they would fail, and the Russian revolution, left alone with its inner contradictions, would slide back into violence and tyranny. It was this second scenario that now materialised. And Trotsky himself played a leading role in pushing forward its degenerative logic. Of course, he continued to insist that Bolshevism was doomed without supporting revolutions in the West. But as the weeks of

³ Trotsky argued that due to poor leadership of the Western labour movements, the natural moment for revolution there had passed unutilised. Instead they had become co-opted through institutionalised wage-bargaining, welfare payments, social imperialism and political democratisation. Once pacified in this way, only an external shock could stir them from their torpor.

waiting turned into months and then years, brutal measures initially proposed in order to ensure the survival of the regime until help arrived were increasingly justified instead as necessary steps towards socialism. By 1921, these included not only the suppression of internal dissent and the use of political terror but also proposals for the wholesale militarisation of labour, which he now claimed formed a short-cut to the socialised labour practices of the future (Deutscher 1954:500-01).

By 1924, even Trotsky accepted that the tide of revolution in the West had receded. And although he vehemently rejected the whole idea of 'socialism in one country', he lent his support to proposals – like Preobazhensky's 'primitive socialist accumulation' – which could only mean the massive use of state coercion against the peasant majority to force a social change that had no basis in the existing social structure. In fact, as Deutscher records, when Stalin later plunged the country into a frenzy of totalitarian repression and coerced industrialisation, almost all of his actions had been anticipated by positions taken up by Trotsky as early as 1920-21 (Deutscher 1954:515). Finally, Trotsky himself became a victim of the totalitarian process he had helped set in train. Like Sophocles' Oedipus, he foresaw the fate that would destroy him, and yet he remained oblivious to the steps that he himself was taking on the road to meet that fate. But why?

2. The Question of Trotsky's Error

There is a kind of magisterial coherence to Trotsky's worldview that becomes visible as we piece together its various elements: the multi-linear and interactive texture of the historical process; the radical implications this has for the historical geography of revolutionary opportunity; the logical impossibility of 'socialism in one country'; and the ultimate dependence therefore of the Russian revolution on the Western revolutions it was designed to trigger. All of this is worked out in impressive sociological detail – so much so that we must sooner or later confront a simple question: if Trotsky understood so much about 'the living texture of the historical process' (Trotsky 1970: 20), why was he so catastrophically wrong about the Bolshevik Revolution? Why did it lead to totalitarian dictatorship? What exactly had Trotsky been wrong about? Where, precisely, was his error? And why did he make it?

Let us reason our way through the issues, step by step.

Trotsky was surely right to say that historical unevenness gives rise to an international 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' (Bloch 1977) which is of enormous causal significance for the logic of social change *per se*. The interactive effects of societal multiplicity rule out unilinear development.

Trotsky was also right to believe that during the 20th Century this would lead to proletarian and peasant insurrections in 'developing' countries like Russia. He was right too to think that this could result in a successful seizure of state power by socialist groups there – and that this could even happen *before* any equivalent outcome in the Western societies that were 'objectively' closer to the achievement of socialism.

Finally, he was right to insist, in a counter-factual kind of way, that without the support of more advanced Western revolutions a socialist-led state of this type would first degenerate into authoritarianism and then eventually collapse. Where then lay his error?

According to Isaac Deutscher, the 'fatal admixture of illusion' (1954: 159) lay buried within the last link of Trotsky's belief system, namely his confidence that the Soviet Union would be rescued by advanced revolutions in the West.

It was this confidence that enabled him to evade the question of what would happen if those revolutions failed to occur. As Deutscher recounts, Trotsky again and again raised this question only to dismiss the prospect as unthinkable: 'Really, we need not rack our brains over so implausible a supposition' (cited in Deutscher 1954: 246). And once in control of the Russian state, it was this same expectation which dictated the need to hold out (by clinging to power) until the Western revolutions came. By definition, this entailed an open-ended period in which the Bolsheviks were both internationally isolated and internally confronted with 'the real, central *contradiction* in which the Russian party found itself' (Colletti 1970: 64): a revolutionary regime which, far from resting on the support of the population, was suspended precariously over a vast, hostile sea of peasants. It was this contradiction that drove Trotsky himself to participate in the slide into totalitarianism that he had earlier predicted would occur if 'the German proletariat fails to rise' (cited in Deutscher 1954: 245). And it is Trotsky's mixture of confidence and illusion leading to self-destruction which leads Deutscher to compare him to 'the protagonist of a classical tragedy' (486).

Deutscher, however, does not go on to explore exactly what kind of illusion this was. Was it a purely factual one, a local misjudgment of a political crisis that could well have triggered the outbreak of revolution in the West, but which, for purely contingent reasons, did not do so? To the end of his days, Trotsky insisted that the non-occurrence of the Western revolutions was a 'missed opportunity' – and even one that resulted not from the absence of revolutionary conditions in those countries, but from their 'over-ripeness'. In a not-dissimilar way, the Trotskyist writer Tony Cliff (1963) later coined the phrase 'deflected permanent revolution' to describe Third World revolutions that *ought* to have produced socialist (as opposed to authoritarian statist) regimes. In both cases, the failure of reality to conform to expectations was rationalized in a way that left those expectations fundamentally unquestioned. But what if the error lay in the expectations themselves?

What if, through its reliance on the inevitability of the Western revolutions, Trotsky's entire multi-linear schema remained somehow a hostage to the *uni-linear* expectations of classical Marxism? In order to understand this possibility, we need to trace the problem to its source. For arguably its roots reach back to Marx himself. And they entail an even deeper significance of the international for Marxist (and other) politics than Trotsky himself perceived. Let us investigate.

3. Marx's Two Visions

As is well known, Marx produced not one but two scenarios for the eventual transcendence of capitalism as a form of society. In one of these, laid out briefly in Chapter 32 of Volume One of *Capital*, the transcendence 'is accomplished through the action of the immanent laws

of capitalist production itself' (Marx 1976: 929). As soon as capitalism has transformed society 'throughout its breadth and depth' (928), its own logics lead inexorably on to a final crisis. Specifically, the increasing centralization of capital in fewer and fewer hands, and even the privatised form of property itself, come into sharpening contradiction with the socialization of production and the immiseration of the vast majority of the population. Eventually this contradiction becomes unsustainable:

The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated. (929)

And Marx ends by noting that this will be 'naturally an incomparably [less] protracted, violent and difficult process' than was the historical *emergence* of capitalism. Not only will the conditions for socialist production *already exist* (rather than requiring, as in the case of capitalism's emergence, the forcible dissolution of pre-existing forms of society); but also, the end of capitalism will need only 'the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of the people', whereas its historical emergence had involved the much more arduous and conflictual 'expropriation of the mass of the people by a few usurpers' (930). Perhaps this is why the chapter does not once use the word 'revolution'. The word 'revolutionary' does appear – but this happens in a footnote, right at the end, inside a quotation from another work (the *Communist Manifesto*).

This first scenario implied that the 'integument' would be 'burst asunder' first in England. For, as Marx repeatedly observed, England was 'the *only* country in which material conditions for this revolution have developed up to a certain degree of maturity' (Marx and Engels 1934: 290). And yet, as Michael Levin notes, the *Communist Manifesto* 'contains not so much as one precise sentence' on the struggle for communism in England (544). Instead, as Marx and Engels famously wrote there:

The Communists turn their attention chiefly to Germany, because that country is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution that is bound to be carried out under more advanced conditions of European civilization, and with a much more developed proletariat, than that of England was in the seventeenth, and of France in the eighteenth century, and because the bourgeois revolution in Germany will be but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution. (Marx 1973:98)

This is the second of Marx's two scenarios for the transcendence of capitalism. Here, capitalism will be ended by a violent, ruptural process of revolution. And this upheaval will arise not from 'the immanent laws of capitalist production' but rather from the international unevenness of their realization among multiple co-existing societies, and the peculiar 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' to which this has given rise. Germany's belated development means that its early stages co-incide with 'more advanced conditions' elsewhere; and this produces a proletariat that emerges before the bourgeoisie has established its own rule by overthrowing the semi-feudal Absolutist state. This peculiar jumble of times and places means that the proletariat will 'fight with [i.e. on the side of] the bourgeoisie whenever it acts in a revolutionary way, against the absolute monarchy, the feudal squirearchy and the petty bourgeoisie' (97); but the resultant 'bourgeois revolution' will then 'immediately' be followed by a proletarian revolution; for unlike in the earlier cases

of England and France, an industrial working class, conscious of its interests, will already exist at the point where the pre-capitalist state is overthrown.

But wait: is not this temporal compression of the historical process (due to spatio-temporal unevenness) exactly what Trotsky meant by 'permanent revolution'? It is indeed. And Marx elsewhere uses that very term to identify the political strategy of the German workers: 'Their battle-cry must be: The Permanent Revolution' (Marx 1973: 330).

As Michael Löwy (1981: 15) points out, then, the idea of permanent revolution (though not the theory of U&CD) does indeed go back to Marx. And there too it is a by-product of societal multiplicity, and specifically of international unevenness (in the form of Germany's late development). In fact, if we peer even further back into some of his earliest political writings, we find that the young Marx was obsessed with the historical backwardness of his native country – and understandably so. For he grew up in the Rhineland, a region that had been modernized (both legally and industrially) by the French occupation of 1794-1814, only to be handed over in 1815 to Prussia, the most politically reactionary of the major German states. As late as 1849, the 'Democratic Club' in Marx's hometown of Trier declared that it would campaign for election to the Prussian parliament under the slogan of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' (Sperber 1989: 211). It was therefore with good reason that he claimed that '[t]he struggle against the German political present is the struggle against the past of other nations' (Marx 1975: 247).⁴ And he experienced this condition in explicitly linear temporal terms: '[even if] I negate the situation in Germany in 1843, then according to the French calendar I have barely reached 1789, much less the vital centre of our present age' (245). In fact, for Marx and Engels at this time, conditions in Germany

were always considered in terms of the backwardness/forwardness question; always compared with an external norm; always in competition with a standard of modernization compounded out of an amalgam of, primarily, France and England... (Levin: 542)

Even the 'German ideology', which provided the foil for Marx's first formulation of the materialist conception of history, was identified as a symptom of this condition of historical backwardness: according to Marx and Engels, the Young Hegelians' excessive preoccupation with philosophical abstractions reflected 'the wretchedness of the real conditions in Germany' and even became 'a substitute for the lack of historical development' (Marx and Engels 1970: 37, 62)

Trapped in this position of backwardness, Germany might *never* catch up, but could find itself eternally 'restricted to repeating the hackneyed routines that belong to the past of other nations' (Marx 1975: 248). The only escape from such a fate lay in a revolution, to break the hold of the past on the present, and to leap forward into the future. And as Robbie Shilliam has pointed out, Marx found the rationale for such a revolution in the peculiar results of international unevenness: the Prussian state may well have resisted reform; German *philosophy*, however, had modernized itself 'by watching developments in neighbouring nations' (Marx 1975: 249); and it now stood ready to inject into the emerging German

⁴ In other words: the struggle against the pre-capitalist state in Prussia was belatedly repeating a movement that had already been accomplished elsewhere (in France and England).

proletariat an advanced revolutionary self-consciousness of a kind that even the English and French proletariats did not yet possess (see Shilliam 2006: 363).

Indeed, in Marx's writings, the very idea of the proletariat as a universal class whose emancipation produces universal freedom is prefigured in a similar vision of the emancipatory consequences of Germany's international backwardness: '*Germany, as a world of its own embodying all the deficiencies of the present political age, will not be able to overcome the specifically German limitations without overcoming the universal limitation of the present political age*' (Marx 1975: 253, emphasis in original).

Thus Marx's earliest idea of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism arises from (and mobilizes the dynamics of) the *international* unevenness of capitalist development. It is rooted in the experience of backwardness and the possibility this provides of combining 'advanced' and 'backward' social forms to produce accelerated progressive change. Revolutionary Marxism has an international origin. And this, as we are about to discover, has momentous implications for the vital 'third act' of the permanent revolution.

Where, after all, did Marx derive his original model of *revolutionary* change? Like almost every other radical thinker of the Nineteenth Century, he drew it from the French Revolution. It was this latter event 'alone that provided Marx and Engels with the "classic" prototype of a bourgeois revolution' (Löwy 1981: 4, Furet 1986: 42n, Heller 2017: 1); and even when they criticized the French Revolution for its supposedly bourgeois *content*, they still took over its political *form* as a model for the future. As Gerhard Kluchert puts it:

As to its *content*... Marx regards the 'bourgeois' French Revolution by no means as a model for the future proletarian one. However, the two share something in common: both stand at the transition from one social order to another, and in both cases this takes the form of a revolution. ...As far as the *form* of historical action is concerned, Marx thus holds without question that the bourgeois revolution serves as a valid model for the future proletarian revolution. The prototype of this bourgeois revolution is, however, clearly the French Revolution... it became for him a model of revolution as such (Kluchert 1992: 86-7, emphasis added).

Marx was hardly alone in this. It was the French Revolution, more than any other event, that produced the modern meaning of the word 'revolution' itself (Close 1985: 5-7, Koselleck 2004: 44, Best 1988: 1-6, Armitage 2017:147).⁵ A term which had long denoted a *cyclical* return of prior conditions – as in 'the Glorious Revolution of 1688'⁶ – now referred to the *linear* idea of a radical break with the past and a leap forward into the future. And it was this new meaning that Marx (though, once again, hardly he alone) generalized transhistorically: for he projected it backwards into a long-term progressive theory of history (where 'revolution is the driving force of history' (Marx and Engels 1970: 59) which accomplishes the transition between each form of society and its higher successor); and he projected it forwards too, into his expectation of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. As Koselleck

⁵ Christopher Hill (1993) does his best to push back the modern meaning of the word into 17th century England. But although he can indeed show that it had acquired the sense of 'political upheaval' by then, the idea of accelerated development and a breakthrough into the future is still lacking. Indeed, the first reference to a Seventeenth Century 'English revolution' occurs as late as 1826 in the work of Francois Guizot (Armitage 2017: 156).

⁶ So called because it restored the prerogatives of Parliament, following James II's failed attempt to roll back the anti-absolutist victory in the English Civil War – see Close (1985: 5), and Burke (1968: 111).

puts it: 'The young Marx... formulated in general terms something that could be conceived only in the aftermath of 1789' (Koselleck 2004: 52). Even the phrase 'permanent revolution' seems to originate in the French Revolution, in the usage of the Jacobin club which, at 'moments of revolutionary crisis... would declare itself assembled "*en permanence*" – in permanent session' (Löwy 1981: 8n).

This does not mean that Marx was uncritical of the French Revolution. Not only did he regard its dream of political equality as no antidote to the new unfreedoms of bourgeois society; but he also identified Jacobinism as (in Francois Furet's words) 'the illusion of the priority of the political over the social in its most complete form' (Furet 1986: 15). And here our puzzle deepens.

For the Jacobin predicament was uncannily similar in form to the more extreme situation later faced by the Bolsheviks in Russia. In France too, the revolution was not simply the political ratification of changes that had already occurred at the deeper level of social structure among the majority of the population. There too, the overthrow of royal absolutism was achieved via an initial alignment between revolutionary townspeople and the peasant majority. And this alignment soon broke down in ways that complete the first two 'acts' of Trotsky's permanent revolution, setting the scene for the uncontrolled radicalization that followed. 'The obvious and decisive fact of the radical phase', wrote Barrington Moore, 'is this: the urban *sans culottes* had been able to push the Jacobin leaders into policies that saved the revolution but at the cost of turning the peasants against it' (Moore: 89).

Thus a remarkable prospect now presents itself: could it be that the French experience of 1789-1815, so often presented as the archetypal breakthrough to political modernity, was in fact the first of the modern world's 'revolutions of backwardness' – political explosions generated by 'the internationally uneven spread of capitalist economic development and nation-state formation on a world scale' (Skocpol 1979:19, see also Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015: 198ff)? And did Marx, viewing French development as so far ahead of Germany's, mistake it for a template of the 'advanced revolution' that would accomplish the transcendence of capitalism in the future?

If this designation proves accurate, its implications for Marxist revolutionary politics would be profound. Not only would the general idea of revolution as a triumphant leap into the world's future (rather than a turbulent passage into the international present) be undermined. But also, the more specific idea of 'advanced revolutions' that could be triggered by peripheral explosions – the idea on which the whole strategy of permanent revolution rests – would lose its logical footing too. Bereft of its French archetype, it would become a species of event with neither historical nor sociological foundation. And we would have found, in this unexpected international turn of the plot, the root of Trotsky's error.

But can this claim for a 'revolution of backwardness' in France be substantiated?

4. The French Revolution in the History of Uneven and Combined Development

Historiographically, the French revolution has from the start led a curious double life. On the one hand, there have always existed both liberal and Marxist narratives that present it as, in

Soboul's words, 'a classic model of bourgeois revolution' (Soboul 1973: 3) in which the rise of new classes eventually 'burst the integument' of archaic political structures and opened the way to a capitalist future.

On the other hand, generations of revisionist writers have argued that the French revolution was not strictly a bourgeois revolution at all. As Alfred Cobban pointed out in 1955, the idea that late Eighteenth Century France was a feudal society in which a rising capitalist class led a revolt which installed capitalist relations of production is 'mythical' on all three counts.⁷ And it would indeed be hard to show that the outcome of the revolution was a social landscape in which pre-capitalist relations of production had been replaced by capitalist ones: '80 per cent of the population of France remained on the land in 1820, [and] 89.3 per cent of this total subsisted on five acres or less' (Mooers 1991: 72).

Thus, in a remarkable anticipation of Trotsky's prognosis for the Russian revolution, Marx argued *as late as 1848* that a successful proletarian revolution in France (where Paris was supposedly 'the modern capital of the modern world' (Marx 1975: 206)) would not only *still* depend on the support of the peasantry – that '*chorus without which its solo will prove a requiem*' (Marx 1973: 245n); it would also have to be rescued by a foreign revolution in a more advanced country – namely England (Löwy 1981: 20). Needless to say, a society whose political fate would still be decided by the peasantry is hardly one that – in the unilinear logic of Chapter 32 of *Capital* – stands on the cusp of socialism. And that such a condition still prevailed a half-century *after* 'the most outstanding bourgeois revolution ever' (Soboul 1974: 3, 7) must throw into doubt the whole idea of revolution as the privileged gateway to the future.

How can we make sense of this curious double life of the French revolution – simultaneously the archetype of the modern idea of revolution itself, and yet not corresponding to the role that revolutions were supposed to fulfil? The answer may lie in locating the French revolution in the European history of uneven and combined development, and thereby revealing its international dimension. Many writers have implied as much (Skocpol 1979, Stone 1994, Teschke 2003, Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015). But the affinity this reveals between the French revolution and the theory of U&CD goes further than any of them – or indeed Trotsky himself⁸ – identified.⁹

In Trotsky's account of Russian development, the West appears as a 'foe – but at the same time a teacher' (1932: 4). It was, he says, not the Mongols, despite the threat they posed, who compelled Czarism's internal reforms, but rather the more advanced West whose power could not be resisted if its sources were not emulated (Trotsky 1962: 171). It was this felt need to initiate a developmental process already underway elsewhere which had caused Russia to

⁷ Some Marxist writers have agreed. See, for example, Poulantzas (1973: 173) and Comninel (1987: 2).

⁸ For an analysis of Trotsky's own highly inconsistent pronouncements on the French revolution, see Bergman (1987).

⁹ Skocpol and Stone do not of course use Trotsky's theory. By contrast, Anievas and Nişancioğlu do invoke U&CD directly. However, they use it mostly to corral the international causes of the revolution, referring the reader to Soboul's orthodox Marxist narrative for understanding the sequence of regimes between 1789 and 1815. Perhaps for this reason, they do not extend their use of U&CD into an interrogation of the idea of revolution itself as attempted in the current paper.

experience itself as 'backward' in relation to a more 'advanced' other. As we saw earlier, however, emulation did not, and could not, mean a repetition of the path followed by the 'teacher'. This was partly because Russia's social structure was so different, lacking an independent capitalist class or Third Estate to provide the political leadership. And it was also partly because Russia's modern development, unlike its predecessors', was occurring in the context of already-existing industrialization elsewhere. Hence the archaic Czarist state substituted its own agency for the missing elements and selectively imported ideas and resources from abroad. Traditional and modern elements were hereby 'combined' in increasingly contradictory ways, resulting eventually in the revolutionary politics of 1917.

For Trotsky therefore, Russia's 'revolution of backwardness' was marked off from the 'classic model of bourgeois revolution' (Soboul) by four main elements: the 'foe-teacher' complex leading to international emulation; the understanding (both by contemporaries and by later historians) of this complex in the linear terms of 'advanced' and 'backward'; the substitutionist role of the state; and the resultant process of 'combined development' leading to eventual breakdown. Here, supposedly, lay the difference between 1917 and 1789. And yet, remarkably, if we look more closely we discover that each one of these four characteristics was in fact prefigured in Eighteenth Century France.

'England', wrote a contemporary in the early days of the revolution, 'is our model and our rival, our guiding light and our enemy' (Acomb 1950: 121). How had this come about?

Following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, France and England were engaged in a series of conflicts that stripped France of most of its colonial possessions and reduced the monarchy to a condition of effective insolvency. (Behrens 1968: 141ff). The English state, meanwhile, whose normal revenues were only half those of France, was able to outspend its opponent (Behrens 1968: 149). The lesson was not lost on French intellectuals and policy makers. As Vergennes, Louis XVI's long-serving Foreign Minister put it: England 'has in its constitution and in the establishments which it has permitted her to form, resources which are lacking to us' (cited in Stone 1994: 147).

It was not just the fiscal and military power of the English state that elite French culture found worthy of emulation. Early in the 18th Century, French perceptions of their English neighbour had undergone a radical change. Previously, England had been 'notorious throughout Europe' as a country wracked by prolonged internal conflict (Hill 1969: 119). Now, however, this view was increasingly replaced by Voltaire's image (1734) of a land where limited government, legal equality, religious tolerance and freedom to trade had coalesced to produce a stable society in which not just economic and military power but also the arts and sciences were forging ahead (Voltaire 1994). And this new perception was intensified by the publication in 1748 of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* which identified England as the 'one nation in the world whose constitution has political liberty for its direct purpose' (1989: 156).

As Josephine Grieder documents, this altered view of England gave rise to wave after wave of *anglomanie* which swept over French literate culture, being interrupted only briefly during the American War of Independence, before reaching its height in the run-up to the revolution of 1789 (Grieder 1985: 117). It took the form of imitation of English manners, clothing

fashions, literary forms, agricultural techniques and economic prescriptions, leading, apparently inexorably, to calls for France to adopt the English mode of government too.

Naturally, this enthusiasm produced its counterpart in an exasperated Anglophobia too. 'Has reason located her empire only on the banks of the Thames?' fulminated a Paris magistrate in 1781. 'It seems that Anglomania today is extended over all things alike: this taste for a foreign fashion has advanced by degrees from dress to customs, and from customs to laws' (Acomb 1950: 93).

Franco Venturi once observed that the European Enlightenment was a quintessential product of uneven development. While it viewed itself as a progressive, avant-garde movement for social change, it 'was born and organized in those places where the contact between a backward world and a modern one was chronologically more abrupt, and geographically closer' (Venturi 1971: 31).¹⁰ No country was closer than France; and although France remained the strongest, most populous, and, in absolute terms, the wealthiest state in Europe, its confidence was increasingly undermined as its geopolitical position slipped.

Thus, inspired by the achievements of Newton and Locke, the French Enlightenment 'also became an inquest by the unreformed on their own condition, in the light of the successes of the reformed. The *philosophes*', wrote Ernest Gellner, 'were the analysts of the under-development of France' (Gellner 1988: 30). And 'their objective was a society roughly similar to that in Britain...' (Hampson 1968: 20. See also Hampson and Outram 1995: 55).

In agricultural practices too, 'England was the exemplar' (Huggett 1975: 88). From the middle of the century 'with the English example in mind, the [French] state tried to encourage enclosures' (95) with the aim of reproducing the higher productivity achieved by capitalist agriculture in England. The Physiocrats, who led the most celebrated movement for the reform of the French economy, 'constructed their model in conscious imitation of the triadic social organization of English agriculture' (McNally 1988: 141). In industry meanwhile, 'France lagged behind the scientific and technological culture that had already developed in Britain' – a culture which, through technological transfers, increasingly 'infiltrated France with the conscious encouragement of the state' (Heller 2006: 38-9). Indeed, from the accession of Louis XVI in 1774 onwards, the king's Controllers-General of Finances launched a series of attempted reforms of the French economy. Turgot (1774-6) was himself a Physiocrat who sought to suppress the guilds and to create a free market in grain. Calonne too (1783-7) tried to realize the Physiocratic goal of imposing a universal tax on all landowners and even to stimulate the modernization of French industry by exposing it to English competition (the Eden Treaty of 1786). And Necker (1777-81, 1788-9) 'was a man who honestly sought... a peaceful transition to a constitutional monarchy along British lines' (Lewis 1993: 25).

In the end, as Barrington Moore concluded, this transition proved impossible because 'the underlying structure of France was fundamentally different' (Moore 1966: 105). Agricultural modernization was blocked by the seigneurial form of rural property relations which would have been dissolved by enclosures. And fiscal reform was obstructed by the post-feudal system of venal office-holding which characterized French Absolutism.

¹⁰ More specifically, '*Aufklärer* of all nations revered English government, society and opinion as the pure crystal of the Enlightenment' (Porter 1981: 26; see also Munck 2000: 6).

Here lies a further parallel with the Russian case: Bourbon France too lacked the independent capitalist class which could provide the leadership to replace the Absolutist monarchy with a constitutional state (McNally 1988: 85ff). It was this which had led the Physiocrats to 'invoke the power of the state to impose by authoritarian means the kind of policies for which a land-owning "ruling class" should theoretically have been clamouring' (Hampson 1981: 47). And that in turn explains the widely noted hybrid nature of their economic vision: 'a capitalist economy ruled by a political variant of the feudal state' (McNally 1998:86). But this impulse to substitute state power for a 'missing' social agency had a wider currency in 18th Century France. Whatever 'the ends proposed by the reformers', de Tocqueville later wrote, 'the means were always the same. They wished to make use of the central power, as it stood, for shattering the whole social structure and rebuilding it on lines that seemed to them desirable' (1966: 95). Substitutism, as Trotsky observed, is a characteristic phenomenon of belated development. It arises from the desire to imitate changes that have already occurred in other countries, but for which the social basis does not (yet) exist in one's own. It is a basic mechanism of combined development. And in France its outcome was the contradictory dynamic of 'Enlightened Absolutism': time and again the monarchy introduced constitutional reforms only to back down in the face of vigorous opposition – a pattern which exposed it to alternating charges of despotism and weakness, and eventually resulted in the breakdown of 1789.¹¹

By then, '...what most wealthy propertied Frenchman probably wanted out of the Revolution was something like the English parliamentary system' (Skocpol 1979: 181). Indeed in the debates of the National Assembly in that year, 'the frequency of the appeal to British comparisons' stands out, 'in marked contrast to the absence of reference to other countries, including the United States' (Hampson 1998: 69). And even the Jacobin club, which was to become the leading agency in the radicalization of the revolution, was founded on the model of the London Revolution Society (established in 1788 in centenary celebration of the Glorious Revolution) (Kennedy 1982: 234).

Finally, the French revolution also exhibited, perhaps for the first time, that classic trope of late development which we saw in the young Marx's writings on Germany: it viewed itself 'in terms of the backwardness/forwardness question [and] always compared itself with an external norm' (Levin: 542). This temporal motif was, as one would expect, already a feature of the French Enlightenment: 'The French', wrote Voltaire in 1763, 'come to everything late' (cited in Baker 1999: 214). But it reached its apogee during the radical Jacobin phase of the revolution. '[O]ur task', declared Robespierre in March 1793, 'is to advance liberty by half a century throughout the world...' (Rudé ed. 1967:50). A year later, he situated the revolution within the wide sweep of human history and claimed that '[t]he French people appear to have outstripped the rest of the human race by two thousand years...' (68).

This temporal theme recurs in historical interpretations of the revolution too. 'The Bourbons', noted Gwyn Lewis, 'were trying, haphazardly, to develop a modern state and a modern economy upon the basis of a traditional, hierarchical society' (Lewis 1993: 60). The result, as

¹¹ Palmer too traces the dynamic (and failure) of 'Enlightened Despotism' across Europe to the missing 'social basis of a developed middle class' (Palmer 1959: 375).

Francois Furet put it, was an 'Ancien Regime [that] was too archaic for its modern aspects and too modern for its archaic aspects...' (Furet 1978: 110, see also Tocqueville 1966: 61). And this chronological distemper extended into the political dynamics of the upheaval that followed: 'everything happened as if the French Revolution had failed to coincide with itself, as if it were simultaneously *early* and *late* for itself...' (Poulantzas 1973: 175). It was *early*, we might say, because it arrived before the domestic social conditions for capitalist society were fully present in France; and it was *late* because (in international terms) it would sweep away a royal absolutism that in England had already ceased to exist a full century before.¹² Thus behind the 'backwardness/forwardness question' of linear time lay the spatial – *international* – unevenness of modern European development. The revolution, wrote de Tocqueville, arose from 'this desire of grafting political liberty onto institutions and an ideology [of political Absolutism] that were unsuited, indeed averse to it, but to which the French had gradually become addicted...' (Tocqueville 1966: 188). 'Liberty', of course, was associated above all with the Enlightenment view of England. And Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor who sought to stabilize Europe in the revolution's aftermath, was even more explicit:

Among the causes of the tremendous confusion characterizing present-day Europe is the transplantation of British institutions to the continent, where they are in complete contradiction to existing conditions so that their application becomes either illusory or distorted. The so-called 'British School' has been the cause of the French Revolution, and the consequences of this revolution, so anti-British in tendency, devastate Europe today (cited in Kissinger 1954: 1026).

Thus the outline of an alternative - international historical sociological - explanation for the French Revolution comes into view. It begins with societal multiplicity – more particularly with unevenness in the form of the developmental gap that opened up between France and England in the Eighteenth Century. This gap was experienced in military, economic, constitutional and cultural terms, and it gave rise to both a 'whip of external necessity' (through military and mercantile rivalry) and a (largely abortive) 'privilege of historic backwardness' (via the attempted import of English ideas and models into France). The response of French society to the new international environment involved both self-critique and emulation from below and a series of attempted reforms from above. These reforms failed in their aim of galvanizing the political economy of France, largely because, as Barrington Moore pointed out, they were being implemented in the context of a completely different social structure. They did, however, give rise to a new dynamic of combined development in which feudal privileges were increasingly commercialized and the Absolutist state itself promoted modernizing discourses which ultimately undermined its own legitimacy. Eventually, external pressures and internal contradictions converged in a crisis from which there was to be no exit for the French monarchy.

This interpretation would explain the prominent role of liberal ideas in the self-definition (and subsequent historiography) of the revolution, despite the fact that the indigenous basis for capitalist society was not present. It might also explain how a 'bourgeois revolution' could occur that was not led by a class of capitalist property owners, and which did not directly produce either a liberal form of state or a society dominated by the capital-labour relation.

¹² In Poulantzas' account, 'early' and 'late' refer to different features from those identified above. What he shares with the present argument, however, is the idea of a temporal hybridity (produced by combined development) as central to the causes and progress of the revolution.

Perhaps it could even provide a formula for tracing the radicalization of the revolution itself, as successive regimes struggled with the contradiction between initial liberal intent and the (peasant-dominated) social structures inherited from the *ancien regime*. What the revisionist historians highlighted, it would suggest, are the peculiarities generated by the inter-societal dimension of the French revolution as a historical process.

Adjusting our concepts for time and place, then, the explosion of 1789 may indeed be seen as the first of the great revolutions of backwardness. And here – to return to our original enquiry – lies the rub.

For the Western revolutions on which Trotsky and Lenin wagered their politics in 1917 (and by which they expected to be rescued) were not of this kind or mechanism. *They* expected Western revolutions that would arise from the very different politics of *advanced*, rather than backward, capitalist development – Marx's other, quite different scenario. And this brings us to the key question. By definition, the organic self-transcendence of capitalism in its advanced stages would lack those socio-political dynamics of backwardness that had generated the French Revolution. Why then should it be expected to mirror the latter's political form to the extent of being a revolutionary explosion at all? Why indeed, unless Marx had unwittingly transposed onto his account of the *transcendence* of capitalist society a political model that had been produced by the experience of *catch-up* development *within* it?

The French Revolution may or may not have successfully established capitalism in France - that debate continues (Heller 2006, Davidson 2017). But no-one even *thinks* to pretend that it ushered in a historically new mode of production *per se* (as the Marxist theory of revolution assumes that revolutions do). After all, capitalism already existed, in England. And this suggests that what Marx had generalised as the gateway to the (post-capitalist) *future* (i.e. revolutionary rupture) was at best a contested doorway into the *present*. In actual history, revolutions have occurred not at the leading edge of modernity, but in its international slipstream. And the theory of uneven and combined development, (by analysing the international pressures on late-developing societies), explains why. But it also suggests that the whole model of the Russian (or German) revolution sparking the metropolitan explosion that would rescue it becomes logically flawed: for the social conditions for that explosion result from the peculiarities of late development and hence do not exist in the advanced countries. By this reasoning, the failure of the Western revolutions, and with it the collapse of the entire strategy of 'permanent revolution', were not the product of some unhappy contingency that could have ended very differently. If the idea and socio-economic conditions of revolution were rooted in the social and psychological morphology of 'backwardness', then almost by definition, the 'Western revolutions' (in the sense anticipated by Lenin and Trotsky) were never coming.

If this is so, then must we not conclude that the consequences of societal multiplicity, operating through the historical dynamic of uneven and combined development, played a sorry trick on Trotsky himself? Trotsky was the most internationally-minded of revolutionaries; and yet he was undone by the fact that 'the international' had reached deeper into the historical process (and the formation of Marxist concepts) than even he perceived. More explicitly than Marx, Trotsky was able to render visible the international causes of the revolution of backwardness. But this did not enable him to uncover those same

causes at work in the genesis of the modern idea of revolution *per se*. As a result, he did not question Marx's extension of this idea into a general theory of historical change – where revolutions were seen as 'the locomotives of history' (Marx 1973: 117, cited in Trotsky 1930: 117). But this was an extension that conflated two quite distinct mechanisms of social change: internally advanced development versus internationally uneven development. And it implied (mistakenly) that more developed societies were even more ripe for revolutionary change than late-developing ones, requiring therefore only the shock of peripheral explosion to set them in motion. Here lay the ultimate source of Trotsky's illusion that the Western revolutions *must* be coming.

This interpretation would explain the pattern of revolutionary instability that did in fact engulf central and Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the First World War: while no supporting revolutions actually succeeded, the instability was greatest where military defeat coincided with intense situations of combined development due to historical unevenness.

It would further explain why, as the 20th Century unfolded, the phenomenon of revolution spread only deeper and deeper into the 'developing world', rather than moving closer to the advanced capitalist world where (according to *Capital*) the conditions for socialist transformation were most fully worked out.

And finally it would make new sense too of the subsequent intellectual trajectory of Western Marxism, as it increasingly diverged from Leninist orthodoxy. Fundamental to Gramsci's contrast of East and West was the absence or presence of a 'sturdy civil society', and the corresponding Absolutist or democratic nature of the state, requiring in turn the different approaches of a 'war of manoeuvre' or a 'war of position' (Gramsci 1971). Yet this entire problematic can be seen to arise from the same phenomenon of the historical-international unevenness of capitalist world development. For what is Gramsci's 'sturdy civil society' if not precisely the product of that 'middle class' whose tardiness, political weakness and virtual non-existence in (late) developing societies was the complaint of progressive thinkers from Marx, through Trotsky and even on to the liberal internationalists in our own day? If the state in these societies was vulnerable to a 'war of manoeuvre', this was surely because – as in both Russia in the 1900s and Germany in the 1840s – late development had extended the rule of the undemocratic pre-capitalist elites into the era of industrialisation, with all the peculiar instabilities that such combined development produced. Correspondingly, if the state-society complexes of 'the West' required instead a 'war of position', this was because in more advanced societies the socialization of production was already underway. The political task was thus to give ideological leadership to this tendency, enabling it ultimately to find organic expression in a post-capitalist form of state. In this abandonment of the revolutionary rupture with the existing state of society, Gramsci returned, rightly or wrongly, to the logic of Chapter 32 of *Capital*.

Conclusion

'Marxism', wrote Trotsky, in a moment of unguarded hubris, 'considers itself the conscious expression of the unconscious historical process' (Trotsky 1975:348). The argument of this paper has been that the 'unconscious process' spread its effects much further into the

mental formation of Marxism than Trotsky realized. In his theory of Uneven and Combined Development, the consequences of multiplicity were only partly revealed. Trotsky saw that they now compelled a break with unilinear conceptions of development. But he did not grasp the hidden role they had already played in seeding the modern concept of social revolution itself.

As many commentators have noted, this concept (with its novel temporal connotations of breaks with the past, leaps forward, and compressed, accelerated development) is inseparable from the progressivist worldview of the modern (capitalist) epoch. This is what distinguishes it from both the ancient meaning of the word derived from astronomical cycles and the early modern meaning, which referred to political upheavals and societal cataclysms in general (Armitage 2017: 124). Less noted, however – pioneering analyses notwithstanding (Skocpol 1979, Halliday 1999, Anievas and Nisanclioglu 2015, Lawson 2019) – is its inseparability from the condition of societal multiplicity: the modern phenomenon of revolution crystallised when ‘late-developing’ countries, impacted by the results of rapid and cumulative development elsewhere, experienced themselves as ‘backward’, and sought – through internal rupture with their past – a means of ‘catching up’ with the international reality around them.

Marx too had missed this crucial framing role of multiplicity. Indeed, by over-generalising ‘revolution’ into a trans-historical ‘driving force of history’, he had abstracted it from its inter-societal context, and thereby partly obscured its causal logic. Here lay the unexpurgated internalism to which the multilinear achievement of Trotsky’s thought remained invisibly hostage. And it was this, finally, that laid the basis for Trotsky’s error: his mistaken expectation of supporting revolutions in the West.

This revisionist history of ideas answers the fundamental question posed in the pages above. But it also points to three further implications of our investigation.

First, it supports the wider claim that pursuing the consequences of multiplicity uncovers a much larger significance of the international for the subject matter of other disciplines than is commonly assumed. Marxism’s limitations in IR are conventionally ascribed to its *disconnection* from the international: its ‘domestic’ focus on the vertical relations between classes which pre-empts an adequate account of the horizontal relations between political communities (Waltz 1959, Berki 1971, Linklater 1990). Our analysis, however, has uncovered a deeper, prior point of *connection*: in the very formation of Marx’s revolutionary politics (and in the French example from which he drew his model) the international dimension *came first* and played a formative, if unacknowledged, role – one that also helps explain the subsequent real-world trajectory of Marxism as a political ideology. It would be surprising indeed if, in the history of ideas, these consequences of multiplicity were limited to Marxism in Political Theory, or Political Theory alone among the disciplines. What other subterranean lineages of the international remain to be uncovered?

Second, our analysis also has a major political implication for revolutionary Marxism. As we noted earlier, it was Marx himself who provided the definitive critique of Jacobinism as an expression of ‘the illusion of the political over the social’ (Furet 1986: 15). And yet not only did he remain mesmerized by the syndrome of late development which had produced the

Jacobin reflex; but Marxism itself, from Lenin onwards, became associated with the fundamentally Jacobin idea of the capture of state power and its use to transform society. Perhaps this was inevitable, given that, in line with our analysis, revolutionary instability spread with the experience of late industrialisation itself, and was not generated in the West by the fuller advance of capitalism there. As a result, however, the internal balance of Marxism as a global movement was repeatedly tilted towards the authoritarian, statist forms generated by the unforgiving imperatives of 'catch-up development'. And the consequence was an ever-expanding contradiction within Marxism itself. As Lucio Colletti put it, referring to Stalin's industrialization drive: '[t]he terms of the classic formula of historical materialism on the relationship between structure and superstructure were now turned upside down' (Colletti 1970: 70): the state, which Marx had famously interpreted as a mere excrescence of civil society, was being used to transform society itself. That this should have resulted in tyranny and mass violence should surprise Marxists least of all. Should it, however, lead to a fundamental reconsideration of the central role accorded to revolution in the Marxian politics of emancipation? If emancipation is indeed the goal, it is hard to see why we should even wish to avoid such a re-evaluation. For the grim record of 'actually existing socialism' elsewhere has long been the heaviest shackle on anti-capitalist politics in the West. In particular, the Soviet experience 'has done more to stifle hope than any other event in the [twentieth] century, has helped destroy socialism as an ideal worth struggling for in the minds of generations of industrial workers' (Aronson 1983: 66). If so, then a critical reckoning with its Jacobin heritage, perilous though this may seem, is not a betrayal of Marxism: on the contrary, it may be a necessary precondition for its renewal in the future.

There was surely no error in Marx's claim that capitalist society 'is no solid crystal' (1976: 93), but a dynamic, historically-specific social formation which, like every other before it, will come to an end. Nor need we doubt Trotsky's perception that the path to any overcoming of capitalism, just like the history of its origins and spread, must lie in a process of uneven and combined development overdetermined by the consequences of multiplicity. This, after all, is why his analysis of the 'peculiarities of Russia's development' was so politically prescient in the first place. Trotsky's response - 'Permanent Revolution' - may have been disastrously flawed. But it opened up a basic question: how to rethink political agency in line with the deep-reaching role of the international in human life. Answering this question in the present may well require abandoning the 'fixed abstractions' (Trotsky 1942: 50) that served - or mis-served - earlier generations. But who can doubt that it remains a fundamental challenge facing the dialectical imagination today?

Finally, by turning the idea of U&CD back on itself in a reflexive critique, our analysis may also help detach this idea from its original role as simply the under-labourer for the theory of permanent revolution. This reveals at long last its potential as a general theory of the consequences of multiplicity which can be taken up without sectarian implication. U&CD crystallised within the Marxist tradition; but there is not, nor should there be, anything specifically Marxist in recognizing that the social world is both multiple and (hence) interactive in character. What, after all, if not precisely this, is the unique vocation of International Relations as an academic discipline?

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