Uneven and combined development: a defense of the general abstraction

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Uneven and Combined Development: a Defense of the General Abstraction

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Abstract

This article responds to criticisms of the current revival of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD), particularly those aimed at the idea of a 'general abstraction' of UCD. Three main charges have been pressed: that UCD is not a real theory; that its transhistorical extension has reduced it to an unhistorical reification; and that its language of 'advanced' and 'backward' betrays its enduring Eurocentric foundations. The article argues not only that UCD can be defended, but also that it is the general abstraction which enables UCD to make its strongest contributions to solving problems of theoretical insufficiency, ahistoricism and Eurocentrism in social thought more generally. Finally the article ends by speculating on the reason why the much-maligned general abstraction of UCD should turn out to be of such significance.
Uneven and Combined Development: a Defence of the General Abstraction

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the current literature on Uneven and Combined Development (UCD) has been the attempt by some writers to work out what Michael Löwy once called the ‘new understanding of human history’ contained within Trotsky’s idea (Löwy 1981: 87).¹ This ‘transhistorical’ extension was formulated theoretically in a 2006 article which claimed that a ‘general abstraction’ of UCD – that is, the claim that unevenness and combination were intrinsic not just to capitalist development but to historical development per se – provided a solution to the separation of social and international theory (Rosenberg 2006). The first writer to apply this to a premodern case study was Kamran Matin who used it to analyse state-formation in medieval Persia. In 2010, in dialogue with the World History studies of Buzan and Little (1998), Rosenberg further claimed that the general abstraction could be used to trace the late pre-historic emergence of ‘the international’ as a social phenomenon. A year later, Fouad Makki used it to explore the longue durée of state-formation in Northeast Africa, and suggested that it could also resolve the problematic opposition of production and exchange in the historical debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Makki 2011). And in 2013, Alex Anievas and Kerem Nişancioğlu applied it directly to the same debate, in an argument that they later expanded into their path-breaking study of How the West Came to Rule (2015).

From the start, however, this expansion of UCD has proven controversial. Other advocates of Trotsky’s idea like Sam Ashman (2009) argued that it should be restricted to the modern capitalist period. Some went even further, arguing that it was a phenomenon produced at the moment of industrial take-off in late-developing societies, and would therefore ‘cease when the last peasant has been forced off their land into wage labour and city life’ (Davidson: 2019: 72). And for the critics of UCD, the extended version soon became the main target of their attacks. Kees van der Pijl described the result as ‘a caricature of a theory which, even in its original revolutionary form, has long been overtaken by events’ (2015: 79). For Sebastian Rioux, its ‘obsession with ‘the international’ represents a theoretical dead end as well as an important setback in Marxist thinking’, and even ‘the worst sort of scholastic exercise plaguing modern academic work’ (Rioux 2015: 102, 104). And Benno Teschke was no less damning: the transhistorical version of UCD, he argued, ‘reproduces the theoretical baggage for which a superannuated Neo-Realism has been rightly lambasted for decades: positivism, transhistoricity, self-validation, abstraction, structuralism, and affirmation’ (Teschke 2014: 63).

Are these criticisms justified? Has the transhistorical turn proven to be a gigantic misstep which saddles the project of UCD with intellectual liabilities that could and should have been avoided? The present article considers these questions by reviewing the overall debate provoked by the revival of UCD in recent years. Three main charges have been levelled, which we will address in successive sections: that UCD does not meet the criteria for a theory; that its application beyond the modern capitalist context has transformed it into a profoundly unhistorical idea; and that its image of a world made up of ‘advanced’ and ‘backward’ societies traps it within a fundamentally Eurocentric worldview. Because these charges have come mainly from Marxist and Postcolonial critics, the debate may appear parochial and introspective to outsiders. Yet the issues it raises – the nature of theory, its relation to history, and the challenge of universalism – are fundamental to all the human disciplines, including IR. And in the present case, the debate has revealed something remarkable.

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UCD, it turns out, certainly can be defended against all three of the charges levelled against it. But in each case we shall also find that it is the general abstraction that, despite having provoked most criticism, unlocks UCD’s most important contributions to addressing these same problems of theoretical inadequacy, ahistoricism and Eurocentrism in social thought. In doing so, it reveals the generic significance of ‘the international’ for the social sciences and humanities as a whole. So broad is this significance that UCD arguably stands alongside such currents as feminism, World-Systems Analysis and Postcolonial Theory as a radical – and much needed – revision to modern social thought in general. And that, as we shall note in the conclusion, also tells us something about the fundamental nature of the problem that the general abstraction of UCD addresses, and potentially solves. To see how, let us consider the three charges one by one.

Is UCD a theory?

In a series of engagements, Kees van der Pijl, Benno Teschke and Sebastian Rioux have argued successively: that the general abstraction of UCD is not a theory; that it aspires (but fails) to meet the criteria of a positivist theory; and that it cannot function as a theory of specifically capitalist uneven development. In the pages that follow, we shall see that each of these charges can be answered. But we shall also find that the general abstraction makes a unique contribution by providing metatheoretical foundations for international theory itself – something that no other approach apart from realism has been able to do. And we shall further see that it is this deeper contribution that has been, ironically, the real source of a confusion over the theoretical standing of UCD among proponents and critics alike.

Assessing UCD as a theory presupposes agreed criteria for such an exercise. But in reality ‘there remains no agreement on what constitutes proper theory in IR’ (Dunne et al. 2013:14). Indeed, Oliver Daddow lists no less than eleven views of theory taken from ‘leading thinkers in the discipline’ (2017: 30-31). Still, if we consider all these views together, and combine them with the criticisms levelled against UCD, a broad set of criteria does emerge which we may use to guide the present discussion.

In the most general sense, a theory is a set of interconnected statements about some aspect of reality and how to understand it. Of course, in order to succeed, these statements must be consistent both internally (the claims do not contradict each other) and externally (they are not decisively falsified by empirical evidence). Beyond this, however, and in order for a theory to compete with rival approaches, several further characteristics are often cited. For many writers, a theory must be shown to apply to a range of cases (it should be generalizable). It must offer to ‘get to the bottom of things’ rather than simply identifying regularities and co-variations (it should have explanatory depth). And ideally the knowledge it produces should be non-trivial (it should explain important phenomena), and even counter-intuitive (it should show our common sense understanding to be mistaken, in ways that the theory can correct). Finally, a theory can be either ‘causal’ (meaning that it seeks empirical explanation of real-world phenomena) or ‘critical’ (meaning that it is applied reflexively to the act of thinking itself, uncovering the constitutive role of unacknowledged assumptions in shaping human praxis). To be sure, all six criteria just outlined are endlessly contested. And doubtless others could be added. But their staying power in the literature suggests that each of them points to an important element of what is generally understood by ‘theory’. And together they show that to ask of a given idea whether it is a theory is no empty formalism. It is to measure its potential for enabling systematic knowledge of the human (or natural) world.
Now there has been, it is true, a real uncertainty surrounding the precise intellectual standing of UCD as a theory. And this has not been restricted to its critics. Trotsky himself equivocated over the question of unevenness as a ‘law’, preferring at one point to see it as ‘more of a historical reality’ (cited in Davidson 2016: 34). Some of UCD’s keenest proponents have hesitated too. Kamran Matin suggested that UCD was ‘not a substitute for historical materialism (or any other social theory for that matter)’ (Matin 2007: 440). Rosenberg agreed that the general abstraction of UCD ‘cannot provide the basis of a substantive social theory’ because it does not by itself include the means of analyzing the social forms ‘to whose multiplicity and interaction it draws attention’ (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008: 86). Allinson and Anievas argued that it was ‘not a theory in itself’ but rather a ‘necessary presupposition… in filling out a distinctively historical materialist theory of ‘the international’’ (2009: 56). Anievas went on to describe it as ‘a progressive problem-shift within the larger research programme of historical materialism’ (2016: 662). Buzan and Lawson treat it as ‘a framing device… an analytical shorthand rather than… a theoretical schema’ (2016: 172). Among the critics, meanwhile, Teschke describes it as ‘a background organizing device’ (2011: 1100). Rioux, despite initially announcing that ‘I am not arguing that U&CD… is not a theory’, eventually concludes that ‘there is no such thing as a theory of U&CD’ (2015a: 484, 508). And finally, Kees van der Pijl suggests that UCD ‘makes a theory out of what is really a theorem (a deduction from an axiom) while forgetting about the original theory [of Permanent Revolution] of which it was part’ (2015: 45).

Surely, if both the proponents and the critics agree in this way, that ought to settle the matter? And yet it does not. The reason, as we shall now see, is that UCD fulfills all the criteria for a theory set out above. Let us consider the charges in turn.

Kees van der Pijl describes a theory as ‘a series of integrated, verifiable claims about social development’ (2015: 57). This actually describes the expanded version of UCD rather well.

Consider, after all, the integrated (and empirically verifiable) way in which its five core claims unfold: (1) socio-historical development as a whole is non-unitary and spatiotemporally uneven (i.e. it has never taken the form of a single society); (2) the resultant co-existence of multiple entities entails interactive effects (‘combined development’) in addition to causes internal to individual societies; (3) in the particular historical case of industrial capitalism, this means that its original emergence in some countries would inevitably generate for others both a ‘whip of external necessity’ and a ‘privilege of historic backwardness’; (4) as a result of these additional factors, subsequent industrial take-offs would be both sociologically amalgamated and potentially faster than the originals; and finally, (5) those social amalgams would follow unique developmental trajectories (explained by the specific configuration of their ‘combined development’) which could not be inferred from the pure theory of capitalist development per se. As Trotsky himself liked to point out, these sequential propositions were amply ‘verified’ by their ability to explain the ‘peculiarities’ of Czarism and the counter-intuitive occurrence of anti-capitalist revolution outside the advanced countries where it had earlier been predicted.

It is true, as van der Pijl asserts, that this sequence of claims begins with an axiom (that human social development is plural) followed by a deduction (that there exists an ‘international’ dimension to human history). But he does not explain why, in the light of his own definition, this should disqualify UCD as a theory. After all, historical materialism begins in the same way with an axiom (that humans are both natural and social creatures) followed by a deduction (that ‘modes of production’ are therefore fundamental to analyzing human societies). Is historical materialism to be disqualified too?
But of course, van der Pijl is not alone in his criticisms. Benno Teschke too has questioned the standing of UCD as a theory, focusing his critique largely on a 2013 article which brought UCD into a dialogue with the neorealism of Kenneth Waltz (Rosenberg 2013a). Teschke’s argument has two steps. First, he claims that ‘UCD’s self-definition as a universal law and its status as a general social theory of international relations are constructed and validated by conforming to Waltz’s three criteria of theory-production…’ – a procedure that ‘aligns UCD in IR… by design with positivism’ (Teschke 2014: 29, 31). And second, he asserts that it fails to meet even these criteria due to an inability to distinguish between laws and theories (2014: 32).

The first misunderstanding here lies in Teschke’s belief that the use of Waltz’s method was designed to be definitive for UCD, (rather than enabling an immanent critique of neorealism). For by the time the engagement with Waltz was published, ‘UCD’s self-definition’ had already been ‘constructed and validated’ twice – first in the very un-Waltzian terms of historical sociology (Rosenberg 2006), and then via the completely non-positivist use of ‘Marx’s method for the construction of a dialectical abstraction’ (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008: 90ff). The purpose of the later engagement with Waltz was not to retreat from these earlier constructions. It was rather to establish their significance even more broadly by showing that UCD could reach out beyond the enclaves of historical sociology and Marxism and resolve the central conundrum of international theory – how to conceptualise ‘the international’ without separating it off from the rest of social reality. Waltz, the doyen of Realist theory, had admitted defeat on this score: ‘I’ve thought about that a lot. I can’t figure out how’ (Waltz 1998: 379). But he had also used the occasion to throw down the gauntlet to those critiques of neorealism which had demanded a more inclusive international theory, one not restricted to geopolitics. It was certainly true, said Waltz, that he was unable to produce such a theory; but ‘[n]either can anybody else so far’. Taking up Waltz’s challenge, and showing that it could be met by UCD even in the restrictive positivist terms that he had posed it was designed to prove that the significance of this idea was so fundamental that it could even be rendered in the language of mainstream, as well as critical, approaches.

Still, Teschke further charges that UCD fails in this effort because it cannot meet Waltz’s three criteria for a theory: that a theory must delimit a bounded domain of some kind; that it must then identify law-like regularities within this domain; and that it must, finally, supply a ‘brilliant intuition’ or ‘creative idea’ which enables the explanation of these regularities. And the charge is that in this three-step process – delimitation, laws, theory – UCD conflates laws with theories and is therefore unable to move beyond descriptive tautologies so as to produce an explanatory theory. Does this charge hold?

Waltz, the reader will recall, had used the three criteria to guide his own neorealist theory-construction. First he restricted the object domain of the international to the geopolitical interaction of states, on the grounds that any more inclusive definition could be the object of thick description but not of causal theorization. Second, he identified a series of law-like regularities concerning the power-political behavior of states and how this behavior varied according to the number of great powers and (hence) the distribution of power across the system. And finally, the ‘creative idea’ was that of ‘anarchy’ (or anarchical structure) which explained both the general condition in which states found themselves and the various behavioural logics arising from different structural permutations of this condition (unipolar, bipolar, multipolar). The result was neorealism as an international theory.

How then was this three-step procedure applied to UCD? First the object domain of the international was redefined as ‘that dimension of social reality which arises specifically from the co-existence within it of more than one society’ (Rosenberg 2013:185, 2006:308). In this
way, its remit was allowed to extend beyond geopolitics and even into the domestic realm, but not, as Waltz had predicted, in an uncontrolled, purely descriptive way: for nothing could be included that was not shown to arise causally or constitutively from the fact of the international. In the second step, the work of Alexander Gerschenkron (1962) was used to identify a law-like pattern *beyond* geopolitics, in the 19th Century history of European industrialization – a pattern which derived from the specifically international spread of the process. Gerschenkron showed empirically that the later a country industrialised, the faster its ‘take-off’, and the greater the institutionalized role of large banks and the state in the process. Differential timing therefore provided a retrospective key to the law-like variation among national experiences, apparently demonstrating that the object-domain of the international contained other structured processes beyond the purely geopolitical ones analysed by neorealism. And finally, Trotsky’s claim that development is always uneven and combined was the ‘brilliant intuition’ which explained the existence of *both* sets of law-like phenomena: the geopolitical behavior of states and the structured differentiation of industrialization processes.

‘Rather than being mere collections of laws’, wrote Waltz, ‘theories are statements which explain them’ (1979: 5). In this case, the collections of laws are the observable regularities itemised by neorealism on the one hand and by Gerschenkron’s studies on the other. And the theory – the ‘statement which explains them’ – is the claim that all historical development is uneven and combined. Where is the conflation here? UCD, it is true, was not originally formulated to meet Waltz’s criteria for theory-construction; but as with van der Pijl’s challenge, it seems to have no difficulty fulfilling them when called upon to do so. Here too, then, its status as a theory seems secure.

However, a third challenge has been advanced by Sebastian Rioux (2014, 2015). Rioux argues that the adherents of ‘the transhistorical approach’ to UCD have thus far refused to undertake the real task that their claims for this concept imply: the systematic reconstruction of Marx’s theory of capital in a way that incorporates the insights and determinations of UCD. Until this is done, he says, UCD will remain a wandering transhistorical generalisation, unable to explain unevenness and combination as they manifest themselves in modern world history. For in this period, a specifically capitalist version of these phenomena operates – one that cannot therefore be captured by the idea of UCD as a general abstraction. This – UCD’s missing reconstruction of Marx’s analysis of capital - is presumably what Rioux means by saying that ‘there is no such thing as a theory of U&CD’ (2015: 508). But is he right?

Rioux’s model for a theory derives from Neil Smith’s 1984 work, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*. In this book, Smith suggested that the production of uneven development in the modern world could be theorised by working out the *spatial* implications of capitalism’s core contradictions. Wisely rejecting the siren song of general abstractions, says Rioux, Smith integrated space into Marx’s theory of capital so as to explain the actual source and logic of uneven development today. By contrast, UCD fails as a theory because it invokes unevenness as a transhistorical given, rather than providing, like Smith, a sociological explanation for its production in the modern world.

Now, careful readers will have noticed that what Rioux is calling for here is effectively what has elsewhere been described as a ‘concrete abstraction’ of modern UCD – an account, that is, of its specifically capitalist form (Rosenberg 2006: 319, 2007: 457-59). But the call is a curious one. For this is arguably the one thing that Trotsky himself already provided. In Trotsky’s writings, the theory of UCD *arrived* largely encased within Marx’s analysis of capitalism, an analysis that Trotsky adjusted in line with the effects of the international unevenness produced by capitalism itself.
It was, after all, Trotsky who argued that industrial capitalism, with its accelerated momentum of social, economic and technological development, is the major source of unevenness in the modern world; that its unstoppable geographical expansion ‘prepares, and in a certain sense, realizes the permanence and universality of Man’s development’ (1932: 4), ending once and for all the previously cyclical quality of regional histories by integrating them into a single global system; that this unique situation confronted all ‘late-developing’ societies with both an imperative to reform or disappear and a set of material and ideational resources which, generated as they were by the fact of historical sequencing, had not been available to the ‘pioneer’ countries; that these pressures and opportunities now operated on societies which, in one way or another, lacked the leading social agency of industrialization in those ‘pioneer’ countries, namely a socially powerful class of capitalist property owners; that this agency would therefore be substituted by the actions of a pre-capitalist state, leading in each case to a peculiar ‘social amalgam’; that capitalist world development would therefore not, as the Communist Manifesto had suggested, create “a world in its own image”; and that, contrary to the argument of Capital, political breakdown and socialist revolution would occur first in the late-developing societies due to the sociology of their ‘combined development’, rather than in the ‘advanced’ countries due to the completeness of their capitalist evolution.

What is all this if not precisely a reconstruction of Marx’s vision of capitalism, produced by integrating the phenomenon of UCD into it? And, we might add, its results are both non-trivial (in that it explains major features of modern world history) and counter-intuitive (in that it broke with received expectations about how modern societies develop and change).

If the advocates of UCD felt the need to go beyond this ‘concrete abstraction’, it was not because they were unready to integrate UCD into Marx’s theory of capital. On the contrary, they largely endorsed, repeated and extended Trotsky’s version of precisely this exercise (Rosenberg 2007: 454-59, Allinson and Anievas 2009: 56-8). All three applications of UCD to the First World War, for example, were carried out in this register (Rosenberg 2008, Anievas 2012, Green 2012). But matters could not rest there for three reasons, all of them connected to the general criteria for theory that we outlined at the start of this section.

First, Trotsky’s occasional comments about unevenness as ‘the most general law of the historic process’ (1932: 5), confirmed as they were by the findings of World History studies, suggested that the significance of UCD reached beyond the analysis of capitalism, perhaps even amounting to ‘a new understanding of human history’ (Löwy 1981:87). In other words, UCD might have greater generalizability and hence be a more powerful theory than previously assumed.

Second, this ‘new understanding of human history’ seemed to hold a special promise for the field of international theory. This field has witnessed many attempts – liberal as well as Marxist – to reason in an ‘inside-out’ way from the nature of modern society to the analysis of its geopolitics. Yet these historically and sociologically informed approaches have been haunted by the charge of reductionism. And meanwhile, the realist approach (whose transhistorical reification of geopolitics they ‘lambasted’), remains, unexpectedly, as strong as ever. (As Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik noted, at the very highpoint of post-Cold War liberal ascendancy, ‘Realism remains the primary or alternative theory in virtually every major book and article addressing general theories of world politics…’ (1999: 5.) This impasse bears directly upon the question of UCD as a theory. By itself, the ‘concrete abstraction’ certainly integrates geopolitical factors into its account of capitalist world development. But it does not explain the existence of geopolitics. It is therefore forced, as Alex Callinicos found, (and even recommended), to accept a ‘realist moment’ into the Marxist analysis (Callinicos 2007: 542), hence reproducing realism’s reification of the international. By contrast, as we shall see in the
next section below, the general abstraction of UCD breaks through this reification by showing how ‘the international’ is an emergent property of social development itself, arising from its intrinsically multiple and interactive character (Rosenberg 2006: 327-9). It offers to engage realism by sublating it into a more inclusive understanding of the international, radically increasing the explanatory depth of international theory itself.

Third, the general abstraction of UCD also had a critical potential: applied reflexively to Classical Social Theory, it uncovers a deep set of ‘internalist’ assumptions (strengthened by the modern context of national state-formation) which invisibly structure thought and practice in unilinear and ethnocentric ways. By asserting the interactive, and hence synthetic, nature of human history, it challenges essentialisms and chauvinisms of all kinds – especially those generated by the ‘methodological nationalism’ and ‘banal nationalism’ of modern social thought and practice (Wimmer and Schiller 2002, Billig 1995). And this critical implication extends even to Marxism itself. In 1971, R.N. Berki showed how Marxist ideas and politics had been distorted by one compromise after another with an international context that Marxist concepts could not theorise, but which kept intruding upon the political situations they sought to navigate. By assuming that geopolitical rivalry and war arise specifically from the uneven and combined development of capitalism, the concrete abstraction is in danger of perpetuating Marxism’s long history of denial in relation to international politics. The general abstraction of UCD may not solve the problem of war; but it does at least bring its general condition – the division of humanity into particular political communities – into view, so that Marxists can reflect on why their vision of ‘non-antagonistic diversity’ (Berki 1971: 86) among ‘post-capitalist’ states proved so difficult to realise. In other words, the general abstraction adds a further, reflexive dimension to Marxist international thought, enabling UCD to operate as a critical as well as a causal social theory.

Thus UCD, in its various iterations, meets all six of the criteria outlined at the start of this section: consistency (both logical and empirical), generalizability, explanatory depth, non-triviality, counter-intuitiveness, and the ability to engage in both causal and critical knowledge production. Moreover, it is the general abstraction that is most responsible for the theory’s generalizability, explanatory depth and critical power. Were its advocates wrong then to share in the wider uncertainty over the intellectual standing of UCD? Yes and no. UCD might well pass the test of theory. But the advocates were right to sense that there was a real ambiguity in their enterprise – an ambiguity which we may now finally be in a position to resolve.

On the one hand, UCD was an enlargement of the foundations of historical materialism. It augmented the intellectual premises of Marxism, and without being attached to the latter (or some other social theory) it would indeed lack the ‘tools for specifying the causal properties of those processes of social life to whose multiplicity and interaction it draws attention’ (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008: 86). But it was so attached. And its original purpose was to correct, and not to replace, the materialist conception of history. Thus the concern over UCD’s intellectual standing appears unnecessary: it is a (historical materialist) theory.

On the other hand, the correction it made to the materialist conception of history was carried out at the most fundamental level, raising the question of how far its critical implications for Marxism would extend. As Kamran Matin pointed out, Anievas’ suggestion that UCD was simply a Lakatosian ‘auxiliary theory’ whose effect was to protect the ‘hard core’ premises of historical materialism would be difficult to maintain – for it was precisely the ‘hard core’ that had been adjusted via the addition of a general abstraction of UCD (Matin 2019: 134-37). Moreover, both the general utility of the idea for providing a social theory of the international, and the critical implications it had for Classical Social Theory as a whole suggested that UCD had a paradigmatic significance that extended far beyond Marxism itself. There is nothing
specifically Marxist about the perception that human history is multilinear and interactive, and hence no reason why this core perception of UCD cannot be explored simultaneously within and outside the Marxist tradition – as indicated by the contributions of Hobson (2011) and Buzan and Lawson (2015), and the emergence of the ‘multiplicity’ literature in international theory (New Perspectives 2019).

In the end, therefore, the real dilemma over UCD’s standing arose not because it was less than a theory, but rather from the fact that it seemed to be so much more. It certainly did – as intended by Trotsky – enable a mid-range explanation for the puzzle of 1917. But it also spilled out beyond its original Marxist framing to address a problem – the deep theoretical neglect of ‘the international’ – that afflicted the social sciences and humanities as a whole. Yet this was a sign of theoretical strength, not weakness. It showed that UCD was not only a theory, but also a meta-theory. Moreover the ‘philosophical premises’ (Rosenberg 2013b) of this meta-theory included ontological claims (about the universal ‘unevenness’ and interactivity of human social existence) which pinpointed both the social origins of ‘the international’ and its constitutive significance for all dimensions of human life. Unlike liberalism, constructivism, feminism and even Postcolonial theory therefore, UCD provided not just another international theory, but a metatheoretical grounding for international theory per se. And it was the general abstraction that enabled it to perform this wider role.

Is UCD unhistorical?

And yet in their pursuit of this larger theory, had the advocates of the general abstraction reified the modern international system and projected it anachronistically back across human history, thus reproducing the original sin of realism in international theory? This was the second charge laid against UCD. And the fundamental issue here was the relationship of theory to historical understanding.

As noted above, Trotsky’s analyses were almost entirely focused on the modern period: after all, it was the emergence of capitalism that had set in train the particular process of uneven and combined development which underpinned his strategy of ‘permanent revolution’. For Teschke and Rioux, any attempt to extract a transhistorical ‘general abstraction’ from this historically specific episode falls into the intellectual trap of the ‘Robinsonade’ identified by Marx in the 1857 ‘General Introduction’ (Marx 1973: 83-111). The danger here is well known. Deriving general concepts from the experience of modern capitalist society, and then using them to analyse pre-capitalist societies, commits a double error. It falsely universalizes phenomena which are peculiar to capitalism, obstructing the possibility of understanding the historically specific character of other societies; and it simultaneously naturalizes and thereby renders invisible that which is distinctive about capitalism itself, mystifying it and legitimating it in the process (Rosenberg 1994: 61). Have the advocates of UCD done the same, producing a ‘reification and ontologisation… of the [distinctively modern] categories of the international, society and development’, which they then impose analytically on other periods and cultures in a ‘space-time indifferent’ manner (Teschke 2014: 40)? If so, they have produced a theory that is an obstacle to historical understanding.

Yet matters do not quite stand that way. As we shall see, not only does the charge rest upon a misunderstanding of the nature of general abstractions; but it also turns out that the general abstraction of UCD actually enables a more historically sensitive theorization of concrete outcomes and processes than would otherwise be possible.
The issue of general abstractions (or philosophical universals) is arguably one of the most widely misunderstood aspects of Marx’s thought. It is certainly true that in the ‘General Introduction’ he argues that their misuse can lead to anachronism, tautology and ideological mystification. But this does not mean – as Teschke asserts – that he rejected general abstractions *per se* as ‘bourgeois mystifications’ (Teschke 2014: 39). On the contrary, in the very same text we find Marx himself insisting that ‘all epochs of production have certain common traits’, that some ‘determinations belong to all epochs’, and even that ‘[n]o production will be thinkable without them’ (Marx 1973: 85). And well he might. After all, the materialist conception of history itself is founded on general abstractions such as ‘mode of production’, ‘labour’, and ‘class struggle’ – concepts which, though themselves empty of any specific historical content, are nonetheless held to provide the key to social explanation once they are concretised for a given historical setting. Without these general abstractions there would be no theory of historical materialism. And even when Marx was engaged in anatomizing capital as a unique historical form of society, the use of general abstractions such as ‘labour’, ‘co-operation’, and even ‘machinery’ formed an indispensable part of his method (Marx 1976: 283-91, 443-47, 492-501). As he himself concluded towards the end of his famous meditation on method: ‘[t]he order obviously has to be (1) the general, abstract determinations which obtain more or less in all forms of society… (2) the categories which make up the inner structure of bourgeois society…’ (Marx 1973: 108): for without the general abstraction, it was impossible even to see what was specific about any given historical instance.

The real issue then is not whether general abstractions are admissible; it is rather how they are constructed and used, and, most importantly, whether ‘uneven and combined development’, like Marx’s ‘production’, can legitimately be the object of such an abstraction. Let us take these two caveats in turn.

In an intellectual prelude to the later debates on UCD, the exercise of producing a general abstraction of ‘the international’ was undertaken at some length (Rosenberg 2000: 65-85). All the dangers later emphasized by Teschke and Rioux were already identified and were negotiated by replicating Marx’s own method. Furthermore, the idea that this general abstraction could provide ‘a free-standing explanatory theory which can be applied in an unmediated way to the real world of international politics’ (2000: 81) was explicitly rejected: the general abstraction, it was argued, ‘tells us what to look for in the real historical world; only the historically specific forms of its object can provide the actual basis of explanation’. These cautions were later repeated when the general abstraction of UCD itself was constructed. Such abstractions, it was noted again, ‘are both necessary and risky – permanently prone, in fact, to essentialism, reification and Robinsonades’ (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008: 85). And the general abstraction of UCD was then formally derived using ‘Marx’s method for the construction of a dialectical abstraction’ (2008: 90ff) as deployed in his analysis of the simple form of value in volume one of *Capital*.

But can there be a general abstraction of ‘the international’? Teschke claims that the very notion is disproven by the example of medieval Europe. For here the overlapping jurisdictions of feudal polities provide the strongest visible contrast to the mutually exclusive sovereignties that define the modern international system. ‘Medieval territoriality’, he concludes, ‘was a distinct spatial praxis, grounded in distinct social relations, which nullified any conception of ‘the international’’ (2014:51). Alas, this line of argument only confirms that it is Teschke himself who has reified ‘the international’ in the pattern of its distinctively modern form, and who now projects it backwards across time in order to confirm – not surprisingly – that it does not fit the past. How so?
The misstep here is that of falsely generalizing a particular *concrete* abstraction (of the modern sovereign state system) across history, whereas the whole point of a *general* abstraction is to guide the construction of numerous *different* concrete abstractions that would be specific to the particular historical periods under view (Anievias and Nişancıoğlu: 2018: 175). In a similar way, Marx’s general abstraction of ‘mode of production’ does not entail projecting capitalist relations of production across history; on the contrary, by being concretised differently in each case, it identifies the historical uniqueness of different social environments while nonetheless capturing the shared dependence of all societies on the metabolism with nature. Correspondingly, applying the general abstraction of UCD would never take the form implied by Teschke. Instead, one would begin by asking: What, in the specific conjunction that we are analyzing, was the pattern of uneven development in medieval Christendom? (In other words: what kinds of social entity co-existed there, with what variation of form, condition, size, location, wealth, power and so on?) This would historicize the general abstraction of unevenness. And one would then go on to explore the role played by the interaction (or ‘combination’) of these unevenly developed parts in the historical evolution and transformation of Christendom as a whole. Or does Teschke really wish to claim that medieval Europe was *not* made up of differently developed parts? Or that the interrelations among these parts were of no significance? If not, then the entire critique of UCD as an ‘ontologising’ of ‘the international’ may be set aside as an unnecessary misunderstanding. To be clear: a general abstraction ‘tells us what to look for in the real historical world: only the historically specific form of its object can provide the actual basis of explanation’. It follows that “[t]he simple recognition of different historical forms is… no refutation of general abstractions at all’ (Rosenberg 2000: 81, 84).

But can UCD do more than simply survive the charge of being an unhistorical reification? Can it speak to the widely noted problem of how the supposedly ‘nomothetic’ character of theory can be reconciled with the ‘idiographic’ nature of history (Goldthorpe 1991)? And, after avoiding a repetition of the fallacy of realism, can it go on to solve the riddle of realism itself? Beneath the surface, it turns out, these latter two questions are deeply interrelated. To see how, we must return to our earlier discussion of the ‘realist moment’ in international theory.

For several generations – if not centuries – realist and proto-realist writers have asserted the existence of a distinctive geopolitical sphere ruled overwhelmingly by power-political dynamics. Numerous other writers have challenged this characterization of the international, arguing that other factors – capitalist competition and exploitation, for example, or co-operative interdependence – are also in play, supercharging or mitigating the behavioural logic of anarchy identified by realism. But none of these other approaches has either fully expunged the ‘realist moment’ from their own account or, alternatively, ‘got behind’ realism to provide a non-realist explanation for the phenomena it describes. The citadel of realism, though permanently under siege, has thus never itself been penetrated. Even constructivism, which famously argued that the consequences of anarchy were indeterminate, did not offer to explain why anarchy existed in the first place. As a result, an unexplained source of causality (derived, moreover, from a *negative* aspect of reality: the absence of world government) has persisted at the heart of international theory. Realism, through being the only theory that positively embraces this source, has established its credentials as the only truly international theory we have. And this is despite the fact that, by treating that source as self-sufficient, realism has simultaneously reified it into a self-activating mechanism independent of any other aspects of social reality. In this spirit, Kenneth Waltz referred to ‘the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia’ (1979: 53). Now, as Teschke earlier implied, it is easy to ‘lambast’ this apparently unhistorical claim. And yet from the other end of history, Thucydides appears to echo in agreement with it: ‘…[I]t is’, say his Athenian negotiators to their Melian victims,
How should we respond to this apparent corroboration of realism’s transhistorical claims?

It seems hard to deny that realism has identified something truly important about social reality. And yet it has formulated this insight in contradistinction to the findings of social theory. A successful critical response therefore needs careful calibration. Realism should be neither accepted nor simply rejected. Instead, we must ask what it is that realism expresses in its problematic way, and then try to uncover the real source of what it seems to misdescribe.

The genius of Marx – what makes him a paradigmatic social theorist even for some non-Marxists (Heilbroner 1980: 15-18) – is that he saw that precisely this exercise needed to be performed on the categories of Economics. And this led him to pose a question that classical political economy ‘has never once asked’ (Marx 1976: 174): given that the source and substance of the social world can only be the relations among humans that produce it in a given form, what human relationships are they which produce that property of things which we call their ‘value’, and which mysteriously appears to be intrinsic to them as commodities? We now need to pose a near-equivalent question of realism: what aspect of social reality accounts for the power political dimension of human existence which appears to be intrinsic to ‘the international’, to be independent of any particular form of society, and to operate across recorded history?

If we cannot answer this riddle, then the fact of geopolitics will always lie beyond the reach of social theory, appearing to be a realm unto itself. And correspondingly, any social theory will find its ability to theorize actual historical events heavily circumscribed by the incursion of external factors that compound, deflect or interrupt the operation of its chosen logic of process. This fate has been identified again and again by such writers as R.N. Nisbet (1969), Friedrich Tenbruck (1994), Theda Skocpol (1973) and Aristeide Zolberg (1981). And here lies the link proposed earlier between the riddle of realism and the problematic relationship between theory and history. For if social theory externalizes the fact of the international, it is bound to produce unilinear explanations that cannot theorise the multilinear and interactive outcomes of the historical process. And it may indeed then appear that a Procrustean quality of ‘theory’ (its nomothetic, generalizing character) has been defeated by the infinitely various, idiographic nature of ‘history’. In fact, however, this particular limit upon the theorizing of history (or the historicising of theory) is not a necessary one. It arises from the arbitrary exclusion of societal multiplicity from the fundamental conception (the general abstraction) of the social itself. And it therefore follows that reversing this exclusion, re-uniting social with international theory, should enable theory to reach deeper into the historical process.

What then is UCD’s answer to the riddle of geopolitics? It is that geopolitics (and the international more broadly), far from being a supra-social or non-sociological phenomenon, is an emergent dimension of the social world itself. It arises from the latter’s intrinsic unevenness, which is expressed in the multiplicity and variety of human development taken as a whole. Moreover, through this condition of multiplicity, geopolitics also plays into the constitution of social reality in profound ways. The international may have no other being than the conjunction and interactions of different (and differently evolved) human societies. But this conjunction itself has consequences which are fundamental to how societies are constituted, how they relate to each other and how they (and the social world as a whole) change over time. Some of these consequences – the geopolitical ones summarised by Trotsky as ‘the whip of external necessity’ – have been taken up by realism and systematised into an apparently free-standing theory of geopolitics. (Others have been formulated by liberalism into theories that describe
the benefits and opportunities of interdependence.) Because the multiplicity of social formations is indeed a general feature of human history, this geopolitical dimension (along with its general behavioural consequences) will always be found to exist. Yet because it only ever exists in the form of historically-specific ‘concrete correlations’ (Trotsky 1932: 379) of particular societies, and because these correlations always include much more than a purely geopolitical dimension, realism’s abstraction of geopolitics from society will always feel simultaneously irrefutable and yet inadequate to its object.

This was the impasse that Waltz acknowledged in his own thinking: an international theory which was not restricted to geopolitics would be ‘a lot better than a simple theory of international politics’ (1998: 379), but he could not see how it could be achieved. And it is the problem that UCD overcomes by re-conceiving the international as the multiplicity of co-existing societies. Economies, social structures, psychologies, cultures, literatures – even fashion and food systems – all become objects of international theory because they all, like every other aspect of human life, exist in the form of multiple ‘national’ instances that co-exist and interact in real time. Indeed, their uneven and combined development is a key to explaining their detailed individual form at any given moment. As Trotsky once put it: ‘[t]he peculiarity of a national social type is the crystallization of the unevenness of its formation’ (1962: 24). And we see once again that the general abstraction of UCD which opens the door to this perception, far from being an unhistorical reification, in fact enables theory to reach more deeply and widely into the empirical detail of the historical process. It enables, in fact, something that the false dichotomy of ‘nomothetic’ and ‘idiographic’ would insist is impossible: an analytical method that explains historical events not by subsuming them under a covering law, but by exploring the ‘concrete correlations’ in which they are produced as unique and particular phenomena (Cooper 2013). Perhaps, after all, this was why Trotsky could puzzle himself with the thought that his idea was ‘more of a historical reality’ than a social scientific law. For in some deep sense UCD had removed a major reason for why these were experienced as separate and incompatible in the first place.

To return to the main point: historical materialism cannot predict the variety of modes of production that human existence gives rise to; but it can propose tools for analysing any that do come into being. In a similar way, UCD cannot predict what ‘concrete correlations’ will occur; but it does provide a means of integrating their effects into historical explanation. Nowhere was this more fully historical character of UCD as a theory better illustrated than in its early application to the ‘peculiarities of Russia’s development’. The stagist formulae of orthodox Marxism simply could not make sense of how Russian society was evolving. By contrast, the premise of ‘universal unevenness’, (precisely because it presupposed societal multiplicity, difference and interaction), enabled Trotsky to explain the unique outcome in the Russian case and to fit this into a revised theory of modern world development. And if the more general argument we have made about theory and history is sound, then the historicising potential of the general abstraction of UCD extends far beyond that individual case.

Is UCD Eurocentric?

We are left, then, with the third, and potentially most damaging critique of UCD, which has been advanced by postcolonial theorists. This critique was first made explicitly by Gurminder Bhambra and Meera Sabaratnam in 2011. Bhambra reviewed UCD alongside the neo-Weberian idea of ‘multiple modernities’, and she argued that while both approaches sought to address the question of difference in modern world history, they did so within a framework that remained epistemologically and substantively Eurocentric. For ‘multiple modernities’,
European history provided the ‘ideal type’ against which non-European developments were measured; meanwhile, UCD was based upon the classical Eurocentric ‘model that posits a world-historical centre from which developments diffuse outwards’ (Bhambra 2011: 673). Even worse, UCD’s ‘underlying framework is one of a linear stadal theory’ (675); this assumes that all societies must pass through the same sequence of stages in a universal process of development; and it explains power differentials among societies by reference to how ‘advanced’ or ‘backward’ they are in this process. In this way, the central fact of colonialism is converted from the fundamental source of uneven development into a temporary side-effect of the latter, thereby obscuring its ongoing importance for modern world history.

Several years later, David Blaney and Anne Tickner (2017) reiterated this critique. The modern idea of ‘development’, they argued, (repeating a point earlier made by Beate Jahn (2000)), arose in the colonial context where Europeans translated the spatial diversity of cultural difference into a unilinear temporal hierarchy which justified their imperial conquest and domination of others. Thus ‘development is part of the colonial/capitalist political and economic grammar of knowledge production central to and constitutive of cultural encounters as moments of violence’ (Blaney and Tickner 2017: 74). As Sabaratnam had earlier put it, ‘development’ is ‘a particular remnant of Eurocentric social and political theory that supports – however inadvertently – ongoing neo-racist constellations of power in world politics’ (2011: 3). Thus the infection runs deep, much deeper than can be combatted by simply asserting that all development is uneven and combined. It is the very idea of development that must be cut out. And what would remain of UCD then?

These are powerful charges. And yet it turned out that a possible means of addressing them had already been formulated even before they were laid. For as John Hobson pointed out in 2011 (and Cemal Burak Tansel repeated in 2015) this problem affected in principle only the ‘concrete abstraction’ of UCD which restricted the idea to capitalist modernity. And as we shall see further below, the general abstraction may even turn out to provide a missing intellectual foundation for postcolonial theory itself.

Before we get to that, however, there are some points that need to be made about Trotsky’s use of the term ‘backwardness’. For this term alone, with its shocking connotations of cultural inferiority and even stupidity, might seem to instantly confirm the worst suspicions of the postcolonial critics. Should it not immediately be jettisoned? Well, perhaps no clarification can completely remove the very real dangers associated with this word. But Trotsky’s meaning was by no means reducible to these, and it may be that part of the solution to the wider problem of ‘development’ lies in understanding what he did mean. Three points in particular merit careful consideration.

First, in Trotsky’s writings on UCD, the primary meaning of ‘backwardness’ is not cultural regression or inferiority. As the term ‘privilege of historic backwardness’ indicates, it refers to the chronological fact of beginning or arriving later than the earlier participants in a shared historical process, and to the socio-political consequences of the different external context that this lateness entails. Trotsky, says Baruch Knei-Paz (1978: 104), ‘took the time element to be crucial’ for understanding differential development in the modern era: indeed the paradoxical conjunction of multiple temporalities was the very definition of ‘combined development’ (Trotsky 1932: 6). Now, at the global level, capitalism, with its repeated surges of financial accumulation and techno-social change, periodically throws many of the world’s societies into new situations of relative backwardness in this sense. And this chronological unevenness also produces an imbalance of power and a consequent desire on the weaker side to reduce the gap through emulation and ‘development’. Thus, for example, ‘the use of the term “backwardness”
is widespread [as a *self*-description] in Iran’s postrevolutionary intellectual and political discourses’ (Matin 2013: 23n).

We can already see, therefore, that the single word ‘backward’ in fact plays several different roles. Yes, it routinely acts as an ideological term of derision that legitimates existing power relations by attributing their source to the intrinsic inferiority of the weaker side. But ‘backwardness’ has an analytical usage too, which invokes the specifically temporal dimension of an unevenly evolving social reality. Moreover politically, ‘backwardness’ is often used to expresses the frustration of those trapped in the unequal power relations which result from this temporal unevenness. Of these three roles, the first role is indeed objectionable. And it constantly threatens to rear its head inside the others too. But if we jettison the terms ‘advanced’ and ‘backward’ altogether, do we not also censor the self-expression those trapped in this experience? And what more neutral alternative language could we then find for analyzing the specifically temporal dimension which UCD uncovers? ‘Belated’, ‘ulterior’ or ‘secondary’ development perhaps? The solution is not obvious. (For other discussions of this problem, see Matin 2013: 18, Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015: 55-6.)

But there is a second aspect of Trotsky’s usage which is equally important here: for him, as the idea of a *privilege* of historic backwardness’ suggests, the associations of the term are not all negative. There are also advantages which arise specifically from the relational consequences of belated development. These advantages can enable the ‘leaping over’ of developmental stages which had been necessary to early developers, resulting in accelerated change and growth for latecomers. This is of course a widely noted feature of historical change. As Davidson records (2018: 3ff), in Western thought one can find references to it at least as far back as Leibniz. It is why Trotsky, recounting how Czarist Russia had *overtaken* the West in certain indicators of capitalist development, could add that ‘this does not contradict the fact of backwardness, but dialectically completes it’ (1932: 32). And it finds its counterpart in a penalty of historical priority which, as Trotsky also noted, subsequently *disadvantages* ‘advanced’ first-comers like England (1973: 61).

In fact, one might even – thirdly – make a case for the normative or ideological *recapture* of the loaded terminology of backwardness. This is because for Trotsky its *privilege* extended beyond the economy and into questions of political agency and even world-historical leadership. His related theory of permanent revolution asserted precisely that it was the complex sociology of belatedness which would enable Russia to *arrive first* at a socialist-led revolution, thereby leading the ‘advanced’ countries to a post-capitalist future that they could not achieve on their own. Thus, far from reproducing the temporal hierarchy derived from colonialism, UCD turned it on its head and produced a *valorization* of backwardness which accorded it unique privileges in the drama of global inequality and emancipation. If this seems counter-intuitive, we should recall that it echoes the privileged role given by Marx to the oppressed: only the proletariat, precisely because it had nothing, could be the agent of a universal liberation. And indeed the same inversion is the familiar foundation of messianic thought throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition: ‘So the last will be first, and the first will be last…’ (Matthew 20: 16).

These three points do not remove the problems surrounding the use of the term ‘backwardness’. But they do perhaps pin-point the mistake that some postcolonial critics of UCD are in danger of making: they superimpose a non-dialectical reading of ‘backwardness’ onto Trotsky’s dialectical one; and in the process, they perhaps forget that the whole purpose of the dialectical reading was to *overthrow* the rigid stadial ideology of the Marxist Second International. This ideology denied political agency to late-developing societies in exactly the way done by ‘the colonial/capitalist political and economic grammar’ of ‘development’ today. And it was exactly
this that Trotsky repudiated: ‘[i]t is nonsense’, he declared, ‘to say that stages cannot in general be skipped’ (1962: 116). At a deep level therefore, UCD and postcolonial theory share a fundamental rejection of unilinear and stadiational theories of development. They are, would they but know it, natural allies (Matin 2012: 18, Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2017: 70).

Still, the postcolonial critics are right to remind us that Trotsky’s original UCD visualized the source of the modern historical process as a Europe-centred one. And this, to turn now to the main issue, is why the general abstraction of UCD is once again such an important part of the idea. John Hobson has suggested that it is a ‘failure to historically generalize the concept… [which] leads ultimately into a Eurocentric cul-de-sac’ (2011: 147). But if so, then it is the general abstraction, precisely through being applied to a variety of premodern historical settings, which should reveal whether or not the very idea of UCD is unavoidably Eurocentric due to its reliance on the tainted notion of ‘development’.

Such applications had already been made to medieval state-formation on the Asian steppe (Matin 2007) and to the world history debate on the prehistoric emergence of settled societies (Rosenberg 2010). And these did seem to indicate that the concept of development could be stripped of its Eurocentric and teleological content, freeing it to analyse causally cumulative processes of change. But it was the work of Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, first in 2013 and then in 2015, which transformed the debate on UCD and Eurocentrism. For, in effect, they took up Hobson’s challenge to de-centre both Europe and even capitalist modernity by applying the general abstraction to the origins of capitalism itself (Hobson 2011: 156).

In How the West Came to Rule, Anievas and Nişancıoğlu started their narrative not in the 1780s (with Europe’s dual industrial and political revolutions), not even with the ‘Discoveries’ of 1492, but with Genghis Khan’s unification of the Mongol tribes in 1206 which led to the first mercantile integration of Eurasia. The result of this time shift was dramatic. In the new narrative, it was now Europe that reappeared as ‘backward’ in relation to other parts of the (unevenly developed) human world. It was Europe that was confronted with the ‘whip of external necessity’ and that repeatedly exercised a ‘privilege of historic backwardness’ by drawing upon the results of social and cultural development elsewhere. Moreover, the narrative was now populated – at times even dominated – by the agency of non-European peoples: Mongols, Ottomans, Amerindians, Africans, South Asians and East Asians. But above all, it was the co-existence and interactions of these differently developed social formations that became the organizing principle of the narrative. Far from being an unhistorical reification or a teleological straitjacket, the general abstraction of UCD opened the door to an empirically-grounded, non-Eurocentric history of the emergence of the modern world. And it was a history with major political implications for the present too. For it uncovered numerous ways in which no pure capitalist mode of production had ever existed; rather, it had from the start mobilized (and been shaped by) gendered and racialized forms of inequality too. As a result, the theory and practice of resistance today needed to take on an intersectionalist form, as well as being attentive to the political openings created by the specifically uneven and combined structure of capitalist world development (2015: 274-282).

How the West Came to Rule provoked much debate. But whatever one’s disagreements with it, one point seems incontestable. Writing in 2011, Bhambra had called for ‘a broader dialogue, one that brings the non-West more thoroughly into understandings of the construction of the modern world and, further, that displaces the privileged position of the West within comparative historical sociological accounts’ (2011: 669). By 2015, this call had been answered. As Cemel Barak Tansel wrote in that year, the general abstraction ‘opens up a highly productive avenue in which the specific question of Eurocentrism can be tackled with a rich conceptual toolbox’ (Tansel 2015: 86). The narrower understanding of UCD, he argued, which
limited it to the capitalist era alone, was ‘still susceptible to asserting Eurocentric claims’; by contrast, historical applications of ‘the “generalized” conception... attest to the innate non-Eurocentric foundation of the reformulated U&CD’. And he was not alone in this judgment. ‘Of all the IR books and articles dealing with [the rise of the West]’, noted Ayse Zarakol, ‘this book probably goes the furthest distance in countering the Eurocentric bent of the literature’ (Zarakol 2016: 29).

But UCD did not stop at showing that it could survive the postcolonial charge of Eurocentrism. It returned the favour by providing a solution to ‘a – perhaps the – critical lacuna of postcolonial theory’ itself (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2017:61, see also Vasilaki 2012). Here Kamran Matin led the way (2012). Matin had noticed a paradox at the heart of the postcolonial project. On the one hand, its focus on ‘colonial modernity’ pinpointed an irreducibly inter-cultural process; and this required the use of an intellectual method which was analytically universal, one that positioned itself outside the particular cultures involved so as to be able to visualize their interaction. On the other hand, postcolonial theory had, after its early Marxist phase, taken on a strongly poststructuralist inflection; and its dismantling of the false universalism of Eurocentric thought had been conducted under the banner of poststructuralism’s rejection of all universalisms as necessarily culturally specific and hence falsely homogenizing. Not only did this mean that postcolonialism denied itself the possibility of the general social theory that its subject matter needed. It also meant that the ‘West’ remained as a monolithic and unexplained ‘prime mover’ at the centre of a theory – ‘colonial modernity’ – whose primary aim had been to combat Eurocentrism by ‘provincializing Europe’ (Chakrabarty 2000). What Matin argued was that this impasse could be overcome only if one could find an analytical universalism (or a way of visualizing human existence as a totality) that did not, as Western Enlightenment thought had done, impose the particular cultural assumptions of one social formation onto all the others. And this solution was provided uniquely by the general abstraction of UCD. For the starting point of this idea was of course the ‘universal unevenness’ of historical existence itself – the fact that there was no single form of social development; that human history had thus always involved both a quantitative and a qualitative multiplicity of such forms which co-existed and interacted in real time; and that colonial modernity itself could therefore be analysed as the outcome of a specific ‘concrete correlation’ produced by the spatio-temporal unevenness of world development at a particular point in time.

In a dramatic turn of the argument (2012: 13ff), Matin compared this universalism with that of Hegel, showing how Hegel’s reasoning led, by contrast, to a conception of ‘the universal’ which instead projected the European self-realization of Geist as the analytical and normative measure of human existence as a whole. This was the ethnocentrism that postcolonialism rightly rejected. But it was a universalism based upon fundamentally ‘internalist’ reasoning – the very fallacy which UCD had been originally designed to reject and avoid.

Matin’s argument was later taken up and extended by Anievas and Nişancıoğlu. The postcolonial aim of ‘provincializing Europe’, they noted, was pursued via two main claims: first, that outside Europe, European concepts and influences encountered other social worlds through which, in Chakrabaty’s words, ‘they got translated and configured differently’ (cited in Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2017: 46); and second, that in any case, Europe’s universalist categories must be false because all worldviews originate in particular cultures and therefore necessarily carry that particularism within themselves. Here we see again the logical tension identified by Matin. The first claim proposes a universal sociology of hybrid development whose further elaboration is then interrupted by the second claim, with its denial of the very possibility of universal concepts. And this is despite the fact that Chakrabarty asserts the universal relevance of his claim about hybridity: ‘if this argument is true of India, then it is true of any other place as well, including Europe’ (cited in Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2017: 46n).
But why then the interruption? Exactly how does the claim that all societies are hybrid – or, as UCD would say, ‘combined’ – carry within itself the trace of a disqualifying cultural particularism? Does it not rather demand, as its logical presupposition, that otherness, in the form of multiple, differentially evolved social formations, be recognized as intrinsic to human existence? Is it not precisely the ‘universal law of unevenness’ which provides this presupposition? And does that not mean that the general abstraction of UCD, far from being a recharged Eurocentrism, in fact embodies the general social theory on which postcolonialism implicitly rests? Such, at any rate, is the conclusion reached by Rahul Rao, who suggests that UCD provides ‘an explanation of the structural conditions that give rise to the forms of political culture that subaltern studies investigates’ (Rao 2017: 594.) The scope for dialogue and mutual learning here is surely enormous.

Conclusion

A significant conclusion emerges from our review of the major debates generated by the revival of UCD. In all three debates it is the innovative part of the IR-based revival of UCD, its elaboration and use of the general abstraction, that has been under heaviest attack. And yet in each case this general abstraction has turned out to be not the Achilles’ heel of UCD but rather the key to its strongest contributions so far – whether through its reflexive critique of Classical Social Theory, its ability to narrow the gap between social theory and historical explanation, or its provision of ‘a genuinely anti-hegemonic idea of the universal’ (Vasilaki 2012: 21) that unexpectedly ‘strengthens the broader aims of the postcolonial research programme’ (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2017: 60). But why should this be?

One explanation lies in the sheer scale of the intellectual problem that the general abstraction alone addresses. From at least the Enlightenment onwards, Western social theory has been dominated, as Tenbruck (1994) pointed out, by ‘internalism’ – modes of social explanation based upon the internal characteristics of societies or forms of society. Again and again, critics of this unwitting limitation have exposed it and have drawn attention to its unilinear, teleological and ethnocentric consequences. Yet somehow, and despite their systematic demolitions, they have not successfully formulated a positive alternative framework – one that reaches all the way from the conjunctural analysis of individual events, through the ‘concrete abstractions’ of particular historical societies, and onwards into a reformulated understanding of historical process itself. Thus what we experience today as the marginalization (and self-marginalisation) of IR among the human disciplines is symptomatic of a much wider problem with modern thought. The neglect of ‘the international’ in social theory arises from a fundamental flaw in the conceptualization of the social itself: at the deepest level, the theorization of ‘society’ has not included the universal fact of its co-existence and interaction with others. UCD does not simply criticize this flaw. At the level of the general abstraction it provides the positive premises for an alternative kind of social theory in which the flaw no longer arises. And it is arguably the difference made by these alternative premises which explains the extraordinary fruitfulness of the idea at lower levels of abstraction too.

UCD, then, is not just a mid-range theory – of national transitions to capitalism, for example. Rather, it is an alternative way of thinking about social reality and how we understand it. As with other such ways – like feminism, World-Systems Analysis, or postcolonial theory – it can be applied in many registers and to many different objects. To all of these it brings its unique focus on the interactive multiplicity of social formations and its eye for how spatio-temporal unevenness overdetermines the causal and constitutive structure of the social world. This is of course the secret of its special affinity with IR. For UCD, at a depth that no other idea has achieved, announces the significance of ‘the international’ for the social sciences and
humanities. In doing so, however, it also offers to solve an even larger problem in the history of modern thought: the recurrent framing of social and cultural explanation in ‘internalist’, unilinear and teleological terms. And in the final analysis, this is why the general abstraction of UCD, which addresses this problem, will not, and should not, go away.
Bibliography


