

UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT LECTURE 1: CARTOGRAPHIES AND CHRONOLOGIES

Opinion among the growing body of those who find the concept of uneven and combined development useful has broadly divided in two, with both sides able to claim varying degrees support from Trotsky's writings. One sees uneven and combined development as a relatively recent process which only became possible during the imperialist era of capitalism – usually seen as beginning in the Great Depression of the 1870s – when geopolitical rivalry and colonial expansion partially extended industrialisation and urbanisation from their original capitalist heartlands to the remaining European absolutist states and what we now call the Global South. The other side sees uneven and combined development as a transhistorical or transmodal process which can be found throughout human history, although some adherents of this position accept that it only achieved a truly systematic character during the late nineteenth century.

What I will address here is whether uneven and combined development can indeed be extended, not backwards through time, but sideways through space: in other words, whether the process has been generated in *every* society which has experienced capitalist modernity, rather than being confined to backward or underdeveloped areas. It may be useful to begin the discussion by reminding ourselves of the famous passage from *The History of the Russian Revolution* where Trotsky introduced the concept:

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

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

Trotsky first formulated what he called the 'law' of uneven and combined development in 1930, in order to explain the conditions of possibility for a particular strategy, that of permanent revolution, which he had first proposed twenty-five years earlier in relation to Russia. In this scenario, capitalist relations of production had been established and were perhaps even in the process of becoming dominant, but the bourgeois revolution had still to be accomplished. The existence of a militant working class, however, made the bourgeoisie unwilling to launch such a revolution on their own behalf for fear that it would get out of their control. The working class, on the other hand, could accomplish the revolution against the pre-capitalist state which the bourgeois itself was no longer prepared to undertake and – in Trotsky's version of permanent revolution at any rate – move directly to the construction

of socialism, providing of course that it occurred within the context of a successful *international* revolutionary movement.

The societies which Trotsky originally identified as subject to uneven and combined development and to which he devoted most attention, were ruled by absolutist or tributary states which had been forced to partially modernise under pressure of military competition from the Western powers. As he noted, ‘the Great War, the result of the contradictions of world imperialism, drew into its maelstrom countries of *different* stages of development, but made the same *claims* on all the participants’. Combined development in Russia was therefore generated by attempts on the part of the absolutist state to overcome the backwardness attendant on *uneven* development; but the former levels of stability typical of feudal or tributary societies are disrupted by the irruption of capitalist industrialisation and all that it brings in its wake: rapid population growth, uncoordinated urban expansion, dramatic ideological shifts.

Other Marxists had noted the coexistence of different temporalities within the same social formations. Antonio Labriola, perhaps Trotsky’s most important philosophical influence, wrote that Russian industrialization ‘seems destined to put under our eyes, as in an epitome, all the phases, even the most extreme, of our history’. Even here, however, Labriola is drawing attention to the coexistence of forms rather than their mutual interpenetration. Trotsky, however, was interested in the process by which these forms were *fused*, the result permeating every aspect of society, ideology as much as economy. The archaic and the modern, the settled and disruptive overlap and merge in all aspects of the social formations concerned, from the organization of arms production to the structure of religious observance, in entirely new and unstable ways, generating socially explosive situations.

Trotsky’s position is often misunderstood, albeit in diametrically opposite ways. From one perspective, uneven and combined development sees the non-West permanently trapped in a subordinate role, while from another, the Rest of the World slowly ascends the developmental ladder towards the same level as the West, without ever arriving. In fact, Trotsky held neither position. It is true that he emphasizes the partial nature of their adoptions from the advanced countries:

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

Within these spheres and limits, however, backward societies could however attain *higher* levels of development than in their established rivals: ‘At the same time that peasant land-cultivation as a whole remained, right up to the revolution, at the level of the seventeenth century, Russian industry in its technique and capitalist structure stood at the level of the advanced countries, and *in certain respects* even outstripped them.’ These adoptions had, however, did not in themselves necessarily undermine the state, since: ‘The [backward] nation...not infrequently debases the achievements borrowed from outside in the process of adapting them to its own more primitive culture.’ Indeed, initially at least, ‘debased adaptation’ helped *preserve* the pre-capitalist state in Russia. From 1861 tsarism established factories using the manufacturing technology characteristic of monopoly capitalism in order to produce arms with which to defend feudal absolutism. The danger for the state lay in what these factories required in order to run, namely workers – and workers more skilled, more politically conscious than that faced by any previous absolutist or early capitalist state. Uneven and combined development in Russia created a working class which, although only a small minority of the population, was possessed of exceptional levels of revolutionary militancy. ‘Debased

adaptation' was intended to preserve the existence of the undemocratic state; but to the extent that the former was successful it helped provoke the working class into destroying the latter. Thus, for Trotsky, the most important consequence of uneven and combined development was the enhanced capacity it potentially gave the working classes for political and industrial organization, theoretical understanding, and revolutionary activity

Trotsky was not alone in seeing the possibilities for Russia to avoid supposedly necessary stages of development; but those who shared his vision tended not belong to the ranks of his fellow-Marxists, but to be among the community of modernist writers and artists whose work – as we shall see below – was in many ways a response to or cultural expression of uneven and combined development. In his novel *Petersburg*, completed on the eve of 1917, Andrei Biely wrote of Russia needing to accomplish 'a leap over history' in order to escape the tensions caused by its multiple temporalities, even though he envisaged this occurring in quite a different way than Trotsky did.

Capitalist Modernity: Industrialisation and Urbanisation

I said earlier that uneven and combined development was a consequence of 'capitalist modernity', but how does the meaning of this composite term differ from those of 'capitalism' on the one hand and 'modernity' on the other? Some authors have criticised the concept for relativism and there would be some force in these criticisms if the term was generally used in the sense of indicating that every successive era in human history was equally modern in relation to those which preceded them. This was of course the original meaning of the term and continued to be so from the fifth century CE down to the dawn of the Enlightenment. It is also true that even some of the classic nineteenth-century discussions of modernity, such as those of Baudelaire, carry this meaning. Like most contemporary commentators, however, I do not intend to deploy the notion of modernity in this way, but rather to indicate a break in temporal continuity, a way of dividing history into 'before' and 'after'. In other words, it is not the case that every age has its own modernity; the modern age begins after a certain point in historical time. At what point did it become possible to *imagine* a future in which one could be interested because it was radically different from the past? One obvious historical turning point would be the emergence of capitalism. There are however, two reasons why a simple identification of capitalism with modernity is untenable.

One concerns the future. Marx saw modernity, not only as characterising the capitalist present, but also pointing towards the socialist future. With the exception of Deep Green advocates, or related 'back-to-hunter-gathering' anarcho-primitivist tendencies, most left-wing movements since Marx's time have accepted that socialism will complete modernity. We can imagine the balance of continuity and change that a socialist modernity might involve: the majority of people would not abandon the cities for rural communes, although the cities would now be fully habitable for their denizens; they would not revert from industrial to artisanal production, although industry would be designed with the needs of the workers and their environment; we would not cease to use electricity, although this would no longer be produced by fossil fuels or nuclear power, but by wind or solar power. We will continue to be modern after the socialist revolution.

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

labour process and is outlined by Marx in *Capital* vol. 1, in his discussion of the difference between the ‘formal’ and ‘real’ subsumption of labour. In other words, the way in which pre-existing ways of working can remain in place even during the initial phases of capitalist development. It may be possible for historians to retrospectively identify when the transition from feudalism was complete, but this does not mean that direct producers at the time understood that they had entered a new historical period. The other concerns *outputs*, and in particular the productive capacities of the first fully capitalist states compared with the great Eastern empires which had once been impossibly more wealthy and civilised than the poverty-stricken lands of European feudalism. The industrial world was in the West, but it only arose there relatively late, and certainly not the latest-manifestation of Western superiority, claims for which would have for most of history produced mocking laughter from the East. Indeed, even after the transition to capitalism the formerly backward Western European states, above all England, did not immediately catch-up and overtake those of the hitherto more advanced East. GDP in both areas was similar and, in the Chinese Empire at least, standards of living may have even been higher than in Western Europe and North America. It took until 1880 for *per capita* income there to reach double that of the East, and until the eve of the First World War for it to reach three times the size.

In fact, it was the advent of *industrial* capitalism which initiated ‘the great divergence’ between West and East, and the overwhelmingly uni-directional impact of the former on the latter. It is important to understand, however, that the decline of, for example, Imperial China was not simply an effect of direct or indirect Western intervention, but of its own internally generated limits to development. It therefore seems reasonable to argue that it was only with the British Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century that modernity received its material form. Indeed, if we accept the notion that we have entered into a new epoch of geological time known the Anthropocene, then the discontinuity is even greater than these writers could have imagined. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer argued in 2000 that the epoch of the Holocene – the 11,500-year era contiguous with human civilization – had come to an end as a result of industrialisation, which they date as symbolically beginning in 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine and began the use of fossil energy as the basis for economic activity.

Yet it was not industrialisation alone which impacted on members of the new factory proletariat, but the fact that many of their new workplaces were situated in towns and cities. Indeed, many of the greatest European cities, including London, had never been truly industrial, but administrative and commercial, and this point can be generalised to some other historic cities whose existence long predated capitalism, let alone industrialisation. Vienna and Berlin were much more typically “modernist” than London and Paris which underwent slower and more organic growth. But Vienna and Berlin were not equivalent either: of the two, Berlin was far closer to the American model – although the latter too need to be differentiated. There is unevenness *between* the cities of capitalist modernity as well as combination *within* them. But even those cities which remained administrative and commercial rather than industrial centres were shaped by the requirements of industrialisation, not least the necessity for railways.

The experience of rural populations encountering the city are not essentially the same at any point in history. At one level it is obviously true that the size, noise and populousness of cities has often been bewildering for rural populations forced to cross their boundaries (although for some rustics they also provided a welcome relief from the narrowness and conformity of the countryside); but modernity involves a qualitatively different situation. In fact, the experience of urban life under industrial capitalism was quite different from any predecessor: The initial impact of city life on the first generations of the industrial working class was destructive, but as urban development stabilised and living conditions slowly

improved, it began to take on a more multi-faceted aspect for new arrivals in particular. Beyond positive or negative experiences, life in the city was simply, vastly *different* from what inhabitants had previously known, creating new forms of consciousness. Some inhabitants still found this deeply disturbing. but there were others for whom the modern city of ‘thought and consciousness which never ceases’ was not a source of ‘dreadful strain’ but something to be willingly embraced for providing experiences which were simply unimaginable earlier in human history, experiences which would simply not have been available to an Italian country-dweller visiting first-century Rome, or, for that matter, an English one visiting sixteenth-century London. They were, however, available in late nineteenth-century Petrograd. Nevertheless, uneven and combined development in the West began some decades earlier than in Russia, but for the most part, and in most cases, it occurs contemporaneously. There is, of course, one major exception, to which I will turn first: England.

The English Exception

Memoirs of individuals who lived in England through most of the nineteenth century often reflect on the scale of the transformation which occurred during that period. The historian Godwin Smith, for example, recalled the difference between the town of Reading at the time of his birth in 1823 and on the eve of the First World War. At the former date:

It is a very quiet place. The mail-coaches travelling on the Bath road at the marvellous rate of twelve miles an hour change horses at The Crown and the Bear. So do the travelling carriages and post-chaises of the wealthier wayfarer. The watchman calls the hour of the night. From the tower of old St. Lawrence's Church the curfew is tolled. My nurse lights the fire with the tinder-box. Over at Caversham a man is sitting in the stocks. ... From this state of things I have lived into an age of express-trains, ocean greyhounds, electricity, bicycles, globe-trotting, Evolution, the Higher Criticism, and general excitement and restlessness. Reading has shared the progress. The Reading of my boyhood has disappeared almost over the horizon of memory.

Yet England had completed the transition to capitalism over a century before Smith was born and these changes began. It was not, of course, the only territory to have done so, as it was preceded by both the Italian city-states and the Netherlands. Capitalist relations of production were considerably more highly developed in England than in either of these, but England was also able to absorb their genuine innovations and those of states which failed to make the transition, then put them to more effective use than in their places of origin, a process for which the possession of an effective capitalist state apparatus was essential.

Recognising the uniqueness of England at this time should not lead us to exaggerate the immediate impact of the transition to capitalism in the countryside there. For well into the eighteenth century labour in the English countryside under the capitalist mode of production, whether in agriculture or handicraft production, was still carried out in the natural daylight hours and – in the case of the first, at any rate – according to the rhythms of the farming seasons, within the framework of long-established customary rights and traditions. By the latter half of the eighteenth-century rebelliousness in defence of customary ways was not resistance to capitalism, but a reaction to the transition from the ‘formal’ to the ‘real’ subsumption of labour. In this respect, only the Northern states of the US, particularly those on the North-Eastern seaboard, underwent a comparable development to that of England. There too an established agrarian capitalist economy, under an existing bourgeois regime, made the transition to industrial capitalism, initially with industry servicing the farming sector in what was effectively an ‘agro-industrial complex’. It is unsurprising therefore that in these areas within the US the class struggle also took the form of a defence of an earlier form

of socio-economic life, although this lasted later into the nineteenth century than it did in England.

The move from field or cottage to the factory as a workplace constitutive of real subsumption is one of the most unsettling and disorientating experiences human beings can collectively undergo. And to make the experience even more disruptive of previous forms of life, labour increasingly took place in an urban context. As Engels noted in 1845, previously, the workers had been ‘shut off from the towns, which they never entered, their yarn and woven stuff being delivered to travelling agents for payment of wages – so shut off that old people who lived quite in the neighbourhood of the town never went thither until they were robbed of their trade by the introduction of machinery and obliged to look about them in the towns for work – the weavers stood upon the moral and intellectual plane of the yeomen with whom they were usually immediately connected through their little holdings’. In this and preceding passages Engels may be guilty of over-romanticising country life, but his summary of the conditions to which they were subsequently subject in Manchester cannot be accused of exaggeration: ‘In a word, we must confess that in the working-men's dwellings of Manchester, no cleanliness, no convenience, and consequently no comfortable family life is possible; that in such dwellings only a physically degenerate race, robbed of all humanity, degraded, reduced morally and physically to bestiality, could feel comfortable and at home.’

Edward Thompson noted that ‘industrialization is necessarily painful’ involving as it did ‘the erosion of traditional patterns of life; but adds to this general assessment that ‘it was carried through with exceptional violence in Britain’. Thompson’s reassertion of the ‘cataclysmic’ view of the English industrial revolution is defensible in the context of a discussion which sought to overturn the economic vulgarities of the ‘standard of living’ debate, but does not require that we regard that country as having undergone a uniquely traumatic experience. Indeed, when we consider the experience of Brazil, India, Africa, the USSR and even the USA, his claim for the singularity of the English experience in relation to both physical and ‘psychic’ violence is extremely difficult to uphold. For our purposes, the point of distinguishing the English experience from that of what Thompson used to call Other Countries is not the respective severity of their industrialisations, but why the experience did not lead to the same type of revolutionary upheavals which were to convulse Petrograd and Shanghai a hundred years later. There was certainly a high level of class struggle in Britain between the 1790s and 1840s but, with the possible exception of 1831-2, at no point was there a revolutionary threat to the state. The reason why capitalist modernity in England did not produce a social nor artistic revolutionary movement lies with the two unique conditions under which industrialisation and urbanisation took place.

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

capital, and that state had a far greater capacity for absorption and renovation under pressure than rival pre-capitalist states. While Britain, or perhaps England, appeared to represent an *ancien regime*, this concealed what was actually a supremely adaptive modernity, which is only now reaching its limits. As I noted in Part 2, the absorbent character of the English state had had nothing to do with democracy as such: no section of the working class was granted the vote until after industrialisation and urbanisation were well advanced. It is rather that, on the one hand, the different sections of the ruling class were fundamentally united and presided over a series of protective structures and enabling institutions which had developed over a prolonged period of time. This did not simply involve repression or control: confronted by major working class insurgency they were collectively prepared to make gradual compromises over non-essentials rather than risk losing what meant most to them: their capital.

Second, the internal pressures to which England was subject were in any case more containable than in later-developing states because of the extended timescale in which industrialisation took place. At least in part this was because it faced no real economic competition in capitalist terms until the latter third of the nineteenth century and was therefore not subject to the types of pressure to which all other subsequent developers, with the exception of the United States, were subject. Consequently, notwithstanding the significance of industrialisation, even it did not have an immediately transformative impact on every aspect of social life. This is partly because the effects were cumulative and partly because, initially at least, industrialisation took place within a broader pre-existing non-industrial context. The gradual, dispersed and unplanned nature of the process in England had implications for both the structure of the working class and the nature of the class struggle, both of which are in stark contrast to the forms these took later under actual conditions of uneven and combined development. Workplaces remained relatively small until very late in the nineteenth century, not least in London. As a result, trade union struggles were typically defensive of traditional or at least transitional forms of labour. This was one of the reasons Trotsky identified for the greater implantation of Marxism among the working classes of Russia than in that of Britain. Elsewhere in the West the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation would fall between the English and Russian extremes.

The Western Origins of Uneven and Combined Development

The most important new capitalist nation-states to follow Britain – the USA, Italy, Germany and Japan – unified (or re-unified) and consolidated themselves between 1848 and 1871. France achieved this slightly earlier – 1830 is the French 1688, in the sense of concluding the era of its bourgeois revolution; but French industrialisation takes place essentially within the same time frame as these later developers. These involved transitions to capitalism which were virtually contemporaneous with industrialisation and urbanisation, rather than preceding them, as had been the case in England. The very existence of the British imperial state altered both the context for subsequent capitalist development and the pace with which it occurred. The latter was faster, partly because the long period of experiment and evolution characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon pioneer could be dispensed with, but partly because of the urgency involved in acquiring the attributes of capitalist modernity in the face of military and economic competition from Britain. In very compressed timescales these emerging rivals adopted Britain's socio-economic achievements to the extent that they became recognisably the same kind of societies, without necessarily reproducing every key characteristic – an impossible task anyway, given their very different histories and social structures. In fact, *all* of the second wave capitalist nation-states simultaneously faced in two directions, although usually inclining more towards one than the other.

One direction was *forward* to conditions which would later emerge in Russia and to anticipations of permanent revolution. The increased tempo of development meant that the process of capitalist modernisation, and consequently the character of the class struggle, took respectively more intense and explosive forms – first of all in the country which was also geographically closest to England, and which since 1707 had been joined with it in the United Kingdom of Great Britain: Scotland. From the suppression of the last Jacobite attempt at counter-revolution in 1746 through to the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, Scottish society was marked by two processes, both in sharp contrast to the English experience: one was the extraordinary speed with which capitalist agriculture and the foundations of industrialisation was introduced in the Lowlands; the other was the concentrated effervescence of the Enlightenment, which was both a programme for agrarian transformation and a theorisation of the process. Even a society accelerating out of feudalism at this speed would however inevitably retain some of the characteristics of pre-existing conditions, one aspect of which was the Highland/Lowland divide. This was not, however, the inert juxtaposition of two mutually sealed societies but their mutual interpenetration, first through the imposition of capitalist social relations on Highland land occupancy, then – a virtually inevitable consequence of this – the migration of now landless Highlanders into the industrialising Lowland towns and cities, above all to Glasgow. Migration was then and remains now one of the great catalysts for uneven and combined development. In this respect as in many others, Scotland was a forerunner for what was to follow more widely later, as external migration from Ireland was at least as significant as internal migration from the Highlands in providing the labour force for industrialisation.

Although industrialisation took place more or less simultaneously in both England and Scotland, the latter largely ‘skipped the intervening stages’ between peasant self-sufficiency and wage labour which the former had experienced. ‘Scotland entered on the capitalist path later than England,’ wrote Trotsky in 1925, ‘a sharper turn in the life of the masses of the people gave rise to a sharper political reaction’. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, the enormous tensions produced by industrialisation were heightened by the repressive weight of undemocratic state forms retained from the Union of 1707 until the Great Reform Act of 1832. These tensions and expressed themselves in moments of sharp class struggle, above all the unsuccessful 1820 general strike for male suffrage, first such action in history, involving around 60,000 workers – a substantial section of the global working class at the time – and two attempts at armed insurrection. However, because Scotland *did* make the transition to the ranks of the advanced societies, albeit as a component part of another national formation, the revolutionary moment passed – not because the tensions of uneven and combined development had all been resolved, but because after 1832 a suitably adaptive state form had been extended to Scotland which was able to contain them. Uneven and combined development was resolved as uneven development, with Scotland as a whole ‘catching up and overtaking’ England, within the overall British social formation.

The possibilities for proto-permanent revolution were sometimes retained at a local level even when nation-states (or stateless national territories like Scotland) attained overall ‘developed’ status – particularly where backward areas were deliberately preserved at a level of development below that of society as a whole as a source of labour or raw materials, and then experienced rapid regional industrialisation and urbanisation. In so far as uneven and combined development could be found in the USA, for example, it was mainly in the ex-Confederate states, which provided a reservoir of agricultural raw materials and acted as an “internal colony”, forming a steady market for the industrial products of the North and without large-scale industry within their own territory until the Second World War. It is unsurprisingly then, that when forms of industrialization did finally arrive in the South

immediately before the First World War, they gave rise to situations more typical of Saint Petersburg or Shanghai than Memphis, Tennessee.

The other direction faced by the second wave nation-states was *back* to the English experience in the sense that they were able to accomplish the bourgeois revolution from above – 1688 being the model rather than 1640 or 1649 – and transform the state, albeit over a much more compressed period of time, in order to direct rapid industrialisation and contain the social tensions which it produced, often within the context of archaic socio-cultural forms. The process is perhaps best illustrated by the only Asian country to undertake this form of development in the closing decades of the nineteenth century after the bourgeois revolution from above known to history as the Meiji Restoration of 1868: Japan. Trotsky wrote in the 1930s, ‘we observe even today...correlation between the bourgeois character of the state and the semifeudal character of the ruling caste.’ The former outweighed the latter. Mark Elvin argued that ‘Japan does not have to become identical to the present-day West to be ranked as comparably “modern”.’ Indeed – but we should note the similarities between the British and Japanese states after 1868. Between 1870 and 1914, both consciously emphasised the role of their monarch-emperors, the pre-existing symbolism of the crown being used to represent national unity against two main challenges: external imperial rivalry and internal class divisions. Both were capitalist states that could be strongly contrasted with feudal absolutist Austria-Hungary or Russia, even down to the role of the emperor and empresses. The state structure was crucial, as in many respects Japanese development was far more rapid than Russia’s, the differences being sharply demonstrated by the Japanese victory over Russia in the war of 1904-5. In effect, the post-Meiji Japanese state represented a way of *containing* the tensions created by uneven and combined development, even though these grew greater during and immediately after the First World War.

If Japan is most extreme example of ‘contained’ uneven and combined development, all the states which emerged at the same time display similar characteristics, to one degree or another. Yet discussions of their trajectories tend to emphasise *either* the feudal archaism which they retained *or* the capitalist modernity which they embraced. In relation to the former, it is often suggested that archaism was expressed through military dictatorships (in the case of Japan) or fascist regimes (in the cases of Italy and Germany). From the opposite perspective entirely, it has been argued that to treat the Nazi dictatorship and its dreadful consequences as an aspect of pre-modernity is in effect to avoid confronting our own culpability. Neither position captures what ‘combination’ actually meant in Germany – or indeed any of the other countries which underwent comparable trajectories. One way of understanding the tensions within German society after 1871 is through the notion of ‘nonsynchronism’, first used by Ernest Bloch in 1932: ‘Germany in general...is, unlike England, and much less France, the classic land of non-synchronism, that is, of unsurmounted remnants of older economic being and consciousness.’ According to Bloch, this condition was ‘not dangerous to capitalism’: ‘on the contrary, capital uses that which is nonsynchronously contrary, if not indeed disparate, as a distraction from its own strictly present-day contradictions: it uses the antagonism of a still living past as a means of separation and struggle against the future that is dialectically giving birth to itself in the capitalist antagonisms.’ We might say that ‘nonsynchronism’ is the form taken by uneven and combined development in situations where the state had already been restructured in the interests of capital, but where it was now threatened by the most modern force of all, a potentially revolutionary labour movement, which capital seeks to repulse by mobilising pre-emptive counter-revolution under the banner of a mythical past.

The generally conservative or even reactionary politics of ‘non-synchronism’ suggest that what Trotsky called ‘debased adaptation’ is not only a feature of backward societies seeking to preserve themselves with the help of therapeutic inoculations of capitalist modernity.

Trotsky saw it as a much more general phenomenon, necessarily caused by the need to maintain bourgeois hegemony over the exploited and oppressed in an era of revolution and which reached its apogee in the United States. In an address to the First All-Union Society of Friends of Radio in 1926 he warned of the counterrevolutionary possibilities of the technological form his listeners had come to celebrate:

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

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

Today, not only in peasant homes but also in city skyscrapers, there lives alongside of the twentieth century the tenth or the thirteenth. A hundred million people use electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms. The Pope of Rome broadcasts over the radio about the miraculous transformation of water into wine. Movie stars go to mediums. Aviators who pilot miraculous mechanisms created by man’s genius wear amulets on their sweaters. What inexhaustible reserves they possess of darkness, ignorance and savagery!

The political implications of this have become apparent at several points in US history, most recently in the religious element within the Tea Party and in (highly regionalised) support for Donald Trump which nevertheless – due to the vagaries of the US Electoral College – delivered him victory in the 2016 Presidential elections. The dominance of religion in public life is not, however, the key element of ‘debased adaptation’ in a US context. For there is a sense in which, more than Germany and Japan, more even than the UK, the US has sustained a pre-capitalist inheritance from its emergence as an independent state which persists to this day: the Constitution. This continuing element of archaism at the heart of the most-self-consciously ‘modern’ of societies should caution against claims that that there are no longer any forms pre-dating capitalist modernity with which it can combine, even in the West. But these considerations take us close to the present and will be fully addressed below; before turning to that discussion, however, we need to return to the country whose historical trajectory uneven and combined development was first intended to explain.

Eastern Variations

Trotsky began to identify uneven and combined development in countries other than Russia from the late 1920s. Some modern writers like Fouad Makki have argued that this involved overestimating ‘the significance for the non-Western world of the specific political experience and pattern of development of early twentieth century Russia’ on the grounds that ‘Russia was a major territorial empire in its own right, and its absolutist state was able to relate to the geo-political and economic exigencies of its Western capitalist milieu from a position of relative political autonomy.’ This is true, but of limited significance, since the key point is not whether particular states are able to compete externally in geopolitical terms, but

the internal relationships and experiences produced by the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation – whatever the reasons for which they were undertaken.

A stronger case for Russian exceptionalism has been made by Tim McDaniel, who argues that the Tsarist Empire tended to produce a revolutionary labour movement in four ways. First, it eliminated or at least reduced the distinction between economic and political issues. Second, it generated opposition for both traditional and modern reasons – the defence of established religious practices on the one hand, and of wages and conditions on the other. Third, it simultaneously reduced the fragmentation of the working class and prevented the formation of a stable conservative bureaucracy, thus leading to more radical attitudes. Fourth, it forced a degree of interdependence between the mass of the working class, class conscious workers and revolutionary intellectuals. McDaniel claims that, since the emergence of the Russian labour movement under tsarism, a comparable set of conditions has only arisen in Iran during the 1970s. It is true that the Pahlavi state bore some similarities to that of the Romanovs, although these are largely formal since the former was a capitalist state and the latter was not; but more importantly, McDaniel ignores the way in which working class movements comparable to and contemporary with those in Russia arose in societies with quite different state formations. What then were these other types of society identified by Trotsky as subject to uneven and combined development?

One was exemplified by China and the post-Ottoman Arab Middle East after the First World War – formerly analogous state forms now past the point of collapse and disintegrating under Franco-British imperialist pressure. Here it is the *absence* of any centralised state which forms the context. Instead of being directly colonized, these newly fragmented territories saw agents of foreign capital establish areas of industrialization under the protection of either their own governments or local warlords, both of which presented the same blocks to *overall* development. As this suggests, even where industrialisation and urbanisation did occur, uneven and combined development did not necessarily follow, as sometimes the archaic and modern may be too distant from each other to fuse, as in the case of Beijing in 1918. It was Shanghai, rather than Beijing, where the different temporalities fused to such an extent such that the city became both a centre of capitalist modernity and of the opposition to it, serving as the venue for the launch of the CCP. Combined development was experienced throughout the entire texture of urban life where capitalism took hold. Shanghai was in the vanguard in terms of both production and consumption, as J. G. Ballard recalls from his childhood in the 1930s:

...Shanghai was a waking dream where everything I could imagine had already been taken to its extreme. The garish billboards and nightclub neon signs, the young Chinese gangsters and violent beggars watching me keenly as I pedaled past them, were part of an overlit realm more exhilarating than the American comics and radio serials I so adored. Shanghai would absorb everything, even the coming war, however fiercely the smoke might pump from the warships of the Whangpoo River. My father called Shanghai the most advanced city in the world, and I knew that one day all the cities on the planet would be filled with radio-stations, hell-drivers and casinos.

These were not simply childhood impressions. The city had textile mills before anywhere in the Southern states of the USA and by 1930 was home to the largest mill in the world; the first cinema in Shanghai opened only five years after the first large cinema opened in San Francisco.

The most dramatic changes affected the working class. After 1918, workers were mainly former peasants or rural labourers, who were now subject to the very different and unaccustomed rhythms of industrial urban life without intervening stages. In this respect the Chinese working class closely resembled its Russian forerunner, not least in the openness to

Marxism which these conditions tended to produce: ‘The fact that the students and workers...are eagerly assimilating the doctrine of materialism’, wrote Trotsky, ‘while the labour leaders of civilized England believe in the magic potency of churchly incantations, proves beyond a doubt that in certain spheres China has outstripped England.’ In these cases ideology outstrips economy, for ‘the contempt of the Chinese workers for the mediaeval dull-wittedness of [Ramsay] MacDonald does not permit the inference that in her general economic development China is higher than Great Britain’.

Trotsky also identified a third type of society as experiencing uneven and combined development: these were among the actual colonies, although not every colony did so. ‘Commercial, industrial and financial capital invaded backward countries from the outside’, he wrote, ‘partly destroying the primitive forms of native economy and partly subjecting them to the world-wide industrial and banking system of the West.’ ‘Defensive modernization’ was not enough to protect these societies from Western incursions. Once the race for imperial territory began in earnest during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, it became strategically necessary for the Western powers to seize territories which were often of no value in themselves – indeed, which were often net recipients of state expenditure – but which it was necessary to retain in order to protect those territories which *were* of economic value, like India. Colonial rule could of course throw societies backward, as in the case of British-occupied Iraq. Ruling through the Hashemite monarchy after 1920, the regime deliberately rejected any attempts at modernization, except in the oil industry. Instead, it reinforced disintegrating tribal loyalties and semifeudal tenurial relationships over the peasantry. Nevertheless, even in this type of colonial context, *some* industrialisation took place. The British in India, for example, were unwilling to allow full-scale industrialization in case it produced competition for its own commodities, but was prepared to sanction it in specific circumstances for reasons of military supply or where goods were not intended for home markets – a form of ‘licenced industrialisation’, particularly in textiles

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

One was *renewal*, where capitalist modernity led to existing cultural practices being maintained in new ways *which were then assimilated to tradition*, such as wearing the burkah or the office of the Ayatollah, both late-19th century inventions. These examples illustrate one extreme. At the other we find *adoption*, a similar embrace of modernity – or at least one version of it – and rejection of tradition that we have already encountered in Russia and China. A third response lies between these extremes, all the more interesting because it can be seen as a potential bridge from one to the other – *adaptation*, where ‘contemporary’ forms of class struggle were deployed in order to defend ‘archaic’ forms of religious observance, as occurred around the jute weaving industry in Bengal during the 1890s. During this period the Scottish mill managers both introduced night working and attempted to prevent workers – many of whom had only recently arrived from the countryside – from attending religious festivals, to which the mainly, but by no means exclusively Muslim weavers responded by rioting and striking.

Capitalist States and Bourgeois Hegemony

Thus far, I have drawn examples from the areas identified by Trotsky as experiencing uneven and combined development and having the potential for permanent revolution, roughly from

the period encompassed by his own lifetime. Ankie Hoogvelt speaks for many commentators when she describes the process outlined by Trotsky as leading to a ‘historically unique situation which is ripe for socialist revolution’. How ‘unique’ was the situation though? Peter Thomas writes of one important case: ‘Italy, along with much of Western Europe, had experienced a “belated” modernity not qualitatively dissimilar from that which preceded the Russian Revolution’. Indeed, in the case of Italy – one of the established, imperial capitalist powers – these developments were occurring *contemporaneously* with those in Russia. As we shall see in Lecture 3, this led to comparable artistic outcomes for, despite the diametrically opposite political affiliations of the Constructivists in Russia and the Futurists in Italy – themselves indicative of the different outcomes to the crises in these countries – their artistic practices were comparable, suggesting similar responses to a common experience. How could a virtually universal *socio-economic* process generate such similar *cultural* responses while simultaneously leading to such different *political* results?

All societies which have undergone the impact of factories and cities have experienced uneven and combined development to *some* degree, with the important exception of England, which completed the transition to capitalism before these processes began. Why then have they had such different outcomes, above all with respect to their propensity for revolution? First, Trotsky never claimed that all revolutionary situations were or would be the result of uneven and combined development: the working class insurgencies which convulsed Britain in 1919, France in 1968 and Poland in 1980-1 do not require the concept in order to be understood. Second, even where revolutionary situations were made more likely by the existence of uneven and combined development, it is scarcely the only relevant factor; some decisive trigger event such as wartime defeat (Germany 1918), military coup (Spain 1936), external aggression (Hungary 1956), or economic crisis (Egypt 2011) is usually necessary to detonate the socially combustible material. Whether these situations develop into actual revolutions, and whether these revolutions are subsequently successful is partly dependent on subjective factors – such as the existence and quality of leadership – on both sides. Equally important, however, is the political context in which revolutionary situations arise; in particular, whether the state is pre-capitalist or capitalist or in nature and, if the latter, whether or not the ruling class is capable of exercising hegemony. These questions make reference to another, overlapping discussion in the Classical Marxist tradition unavoidable.

Between the victory of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927 Trotsky tended to treat the question of permanent revolution as an essentially historical one, relevant only to Russia, which he seems to have considered as *sui generis*, uniquely situated exactly half-way between West and East. Permanent revolution was unnecessary in the West where the bourgeois revolution had been accomplished and inapplicable in the East where the working class was not yet of sufficient size or militancy to move directly to the socialist revolution; in the East, Lenin’s original formula for Russia, the bourgeois-democratic – now rechristened ‘national-democratic’ – revolution was still relevant. Stalin’s disastrous adherence to this supposedly necessary stage of the revolution in China led Trotsky to generalise the strategy of permanent revolution beyond Russia, but also provoked him into formulating uneven and combined development as an explicit ‘law’, rather than an implicit but untheorized set of conditions which made permanent revolution possible. Thereafter, he tended to regard countries where some level of capitalist industrialisation had occurred, but which were still subject to pre-capitalist states of one sort or another, as subject to uneven and combined development and consequently as possible sites of permanent revolution. He did not, however, ever consider whether uneven and combined development might also exist in the West, except perhaps as a historical phenomenon long since surpassed; he wrote, for example, of the consequences ‘when the productive forces of the metropolis, of

a country of classical capitalism . . . find ingress into more backward countries, like Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century’.

At one level this geographical delimitation was unsurprising. One of the major debates in the Communist International, while it was still a forum for genuine debate (1919-1924), was the extent to which the more advanced countries – above all, Germany – required different strategy and tactics from those which had proved successful in Russia. The initial view of the Bolshevik leadership was that assumptions about the universal applicability of the Russian experience were deeply problematic. The West was different from Russia in two key respects: on the one hand, it lacked a *revolutionary* peasantry, but on the other hand it possessed a more confident, experienced bourgeoisie and a far stronger reformist tradition. The conclusions were drawn by Lenin the following year in ‘Left-Wing Communism – an Infantile Disorder’ (1920). However, from around the time Lenin’s article was published, the direction of Bolshevik and Comintern leaderships began to move firmly away from this kind of differentiation towards an ever-greater emphasis on the universal significance of the Russian experience, including, in Lenin’s own work. There seems to have been two reasons for this reversal.

One was the need to counter the twin problems of centrism and ultra-leftism within the Comintern. The former downplayed or the need for a revolutionary *strategy* on the grounds that Western parliamentary democracy rendered an insurrectionary overthrow of the state unnecessary; the latter tended to reject Bolshevik *tactics* – above all the united front and participation in parliamentary elections – on opposite grounds, namely that under Western conditions these would simply lead to a strengthening of reformism; both in their different ways started from the differences between the West and Russia, which in turn led the Bolsheviks to minimise them. This was justified in relation to centrist vacillations, but the problem was that the Dutch, German and Italian ‘ultra-left’ had a serious point, however misguided were the political conclusions they drew from it.

A second reason for Bolshevik denial of Western difference was the conflation of the issue with another: the universal need for Communist Parties on the Russian model. This was a powerful argument, since the only country to have developed this kind of organisation was also the only one to have achieved a successful revolution, but it did not require pretending that there were no significant differences between Russia and the West. Indeed, in the absence of the socially explosive situation produced by uneven and combined development in Russia, it might have been argued that the revolutionary party is actually *more* important in the West, not least in developing and maintaining working class consciousness. The point is rather that organisational forms and revolutionary strategies have to be appropriate to the situations in which the former have to operate and the latter have to be advanced.

In any event, even before the consolidation of Stalinism in the late 1920s, there were no longer serious attempt within the ‘official’ Communist movement to argue for different strategy and tactics in the West than in Russia. When the argument did revive, it did so from the inside of the fascist prisons in which Trotsky’s great contemporary, Antonio Gramsci, was incarcerated from late 1926. Gramsci was originally aware of the similarities between Italy and Russia, but shifted his position to one which, while not retreating from his estimation of Italian working-class militancy, was instead concerned with explaining why the outcome of the class struggle had been so different from that in Russia – and not only in Italy. Around the same time that Trotsky was formulating the law of uneven and combined development, Gramsci was criticising the very strategy of permanent revolution which it was designed to explain, in lines which have perhaps become the most famous in the Prison Notebooks, and which summarise his revised position:

In the East, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relationship between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there was a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying – but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country.

In his critique of this passage, Perry Anderson accepted the distinction between East and West but argued that it was not in fact the greater strength of civil society which distinguished the West from the East, but nature of the state. And while Anderson was right to draw attention to the *extent* of the differences between capitalist and pre-capitalist states (and ‘Tsarism’ can act as stand here as a synonym for all the different varieties of the latter) and these have to be incorporated into any discussion of uneven and combined development. He is at least partly wrong, however, about the *nature* of those differences.

First, capitalist states do indeed have greater repressive powers than their pre-capitalist forerunners or contemporaries. This is not, however, their only distinguishing characteristic. Equally important is their flexibility, which enables them to make gradual structural reforms in ways that pre-capitalist states, of the sort which existed in Trotsky’s lifetime and for several decades after his death, were not; the latter consequently had to be either overthrown by revolution, or destroyed in war. The same type of flexibility is also constitutive of contemporary capitalist states, even those in the Global South or former ‘East’. However backward they may be in many other respects, they have a far greater capacity for absorption and renovation under pressure.

If the states in question need not be ‘democratic’, then this suggests a second difficulty with Anderson’s argument, namely his claim that representative institutions in and of themselves form a second ‘bulwark’ against overthrow. The role of democracy had been emphasised during the debates in the early 1920s. The significance of democracy is, however, not so great as it might first appear. In fact, if we take bourgeois democracy to involve, at a minimum, a representative government elected by the adult population, where votes have equal weight and can be exercised without intimidation by the state, then it is a relatively recent development in the history of capitalism. Indeed, in the context of his discussion of modernity, Anderson himself noted that down to the close of the Second World War: ‘In no European state was bourgeois democracy completed as a form, or the labour movement integrated or co-opted as a force.’ Far from being intrinsic to bourgeois society, representative democracy has largely been introduced by pressure from the working class and extended by pressure from the oppressed. It is true that that mass suffrage has not proved as dangerous to capitalism as the bourgeoisie initially feared it would; but recognizing this does not involve accepting the much more sweeping claim that it is the main source of popular legitimacy for the capitalist state. Most capitalist states in the West and the system over which they presided were afforded legitimacy by their working classes *before* the vote was extended to them. In the case of Britain, the Representation of the People Act which finally introduced suffrage for all men and women over the age of 21 was only passed in 1928, two years before Gramsci composed his note.

The key factor in securing the adherence of the subaltern is surely not democracy, but the concept most closely associated with Gramsci, hegemony, which may include democratic institutions, but not necessarily so. Above all, it is not exercised solely through the state, but through a wide-ranging series of articulated institutions (understood in the broadest sense) and practices – from newspapers to educational organisations to political parties – by means of which a class and its allies engage their opponents in a struggle for political power. These are some of the mechanisms through which hegemony is maintained; its content need not be wholehearted endorsement of capitalism. All that capitalism requires to do is maintain a

majority of the working class in circumstances which are bearable compared to the imaginable alternatives. One reason why an irreplaceable component of capitalist hegemony is nationalism, both as a source of psychic compensation and means of political mobilization.

The social and cultural experiences produced by uneven and combined development were similar across East and West, albeit to different degrees, but the class adversary and consequently the nature of the state was quite different. In a sense, it is where uneven and combined development is present but hegemony is absent that the conditions for permanent revolution arose. To conclude: there is no necessary connection between uneven and combined development and permanent revolution, as the former existed throughout much of the West, outside of North-Western Europe, even into the era of the Russian Revolution.