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The “Law” of Uneven and Combined Development

Part 1: Sources and Components

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Introduction

The two concepts for which Leon Trotsky is perhaps best known are his version of the strategy of permanent revolution, first outlined in *Results and Prospects* (1906), and the “law” of uneven and combined development, introduced in *The History of the Russian Revolution* (1930) and intended to explain the conditions which made the former possible. The term “permanent revolution” can be traced to the 1840s and the concept further back still. Trotsky infused it with a new meaning, but for tactical reasons during his struggle with Stalin in the 1920s he often claimed that his conception was essentially the same as that used by Marx in 1850 (Trotsky 1976: 308; 1981: 349–351) and then by some of his contemporaries, particularly Mehring and Luxemburg between the 1905 and 1917 revolutions (Trotsky 1975a: 102; 1975b: 209). Uneven and combined development was Trotsky’s own coinage, but it too had an antecedent in the notion of “uneven development,” which appears as early as the eighteenth century. Trotsky was more prepared to accept the novelty of his own concept, but tended to downplay its theoretical significance, writing shortly after the term first appeared in print: “As a law it is rather vague; it is more of a historical reality” (Trotsky 1972: 116).

Trotsky was being too modest. I will argue in due course that uneven and combined development is in fact one of the most important of all Marxist concepts, but it has not—until relatively recently—received the attention it has deserved, even from his followers. Typical in this respect is an otherwise important book by Michael Löwy called *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development*. The first part is perhaps the most accurate and detailed exposition ever made of permanent revolution, but the promise of the title remains unfulfilled. Löwy devotes precisely three out of two-hundred and thirty-one pages to the subject—which goes unmentioned in the index—whose political implications he seeks to discuss (Löwy 1981: 52, 89–90). However, over the last twenty years uneven and combined development has gone from being a concept confined to the Trotskyist left, and on the margins of discussion even there, to part of the standard theoretical apparatus available to academics. Much of this transformation is due to the efforts of Justin Rosenberg. Awarded the Deutscher Memorial Prize in 1994 for *The Empire of Civil Society*, Rosenberg took the occasion of the Prize Lecture to argue that uneven and combined development provided no less than “the key to the lost history of international relations” (Rosenberg 1996: 9, and 6–10 more generally). While Rosenberg has continued to develop his own approach (see, for example, Rosenberg 2013), the concept has been adopted by scholars working in the broader field of Historical Sociology (see, for example, Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015). For Rosenberg, this is because uneven and combined development offers the possibility of overcoming two symmetrical absences within the social and political sciences, that of “the international” from Historical Sociology and of “the historical” from International Relations (Rosenberg 2007: 479). But the concept has also proved useful to those working in quite different fields, including that of World Literature (see, for example, WReC 2015).

As one of the major theoretical innovations to have emerged from the region, uneven and combined development would in any case be of interest to readers of *East Central Europe*, but its recent rise to academic prominence makes an investigation of its origins and formation distinctly timely. For, as in the case of other concepts appropriated from the classical Marxist tradition (think of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, for example), growing popularity can come

at the cost of forgetting or overlooking the historical context in which the concept was developed and the political purpose it was intended to serve. This is not to suggest that the use of concepts should never be extended beyond what they were originally meant to explain, but complete detachment from their intended application can lead to concepts being reduced a fashionable label for theoretical positions of a quite different provenance. There is some evidence that this is happening in the case of uneven and combined development.

In this first part of a two-part article I will reconstruct what I call the “sources and components” of uneven and combined development, in particular the strategy of permanent revolution, the conditions for which it was intended as an explanation, and the theory of uneven development, which Trotsky had to extend in order to provide that explanation. In what follows I will move between the concepts of permanent revolution and uneven development, tracing their historical development from emergence in the eighteenth century—long before either was named—until the era of the first Russian Revolution. By this point a relationship between the two had begun to be established by Marxists on the centre and left of the Second International, and in turn made possible the formulation of the “law” of uneven and combined development, to which the second part of the article is devoted.

Origins of Uneven Development

During the first half of the eighteenth century, French Enlightenment thinkers developed a stages theory of social development through a series of three increasingly complex modes of subsistence: hunting-gathering, pasturage, and agriculture. By mid-century their Scottish contemporaries added a fourth, commercial stage. In the initial formulations at least, most peoples or nations were expected to traverse all of these stages, albeit at different historical times, until they reached the fourth and final one. A small minority of Enlightenment thinkers, however, allowed that certain stages could be compressed or bypassed. The first example of this type of exceptionalism was formulated, appropriately enough, in relation to Russia. During the reign of Peter the Great (1672–1725), Russia was forced by pressure from the more advanced absolutisms of Western Europe, particularly that of Sweden, to develop naval and military forces of comparable strength. This led in turn to the need for an indigenous manufacturing sector capable of at least of producing ships and cannon. In the short term, Peter imported not only the technology and technicians, but also intellectuals who could advise him on the type of educational system capable of training Russians in engineering and other skills. Many of these were Germans who may have seen in the Czar a monarch of the type necessary to unite the divided German-speaking principalities. One of these hired savants was Leibniz, who had earlier made some of the most famous statements of staged development in early Enlightenment Europe. Yet his self-proclaimed “Law of Continuity” is contradicted in a letter he wrote to Peter in 1712, claiming that from a position of backwardness, even blankness (“*tabula rasa*”), Russia could borrow what it needed from Europe and Asia, but discard in the process what is unnecessary or contingent (Leibniz 1951: 596–597). This may be the first reference to what would eventually be called uneven development, although it would find no echo for nearly forty years.

Then, during the 1750s, Turgot opined that his own country, France, “whom Spain and England have already outstripped in the glory of poetry,” might benefit from her current economic position behind England: “France, whose genius finishes forming itself only when the philosophical spirit begins to spread, will owe perhaps to this very backwardness the exactitude, the method, and the austere taste of her writers” (Turgot 1973: 58). But the suggestion was made only in passing and in relation to culture, not society. It was Turgot’s great intellectual successor, Condorcet, who broadened out the conception to non-European peoples, although still in purely intellectual terms: “The progress of these peoples is likely to

be more rapid and certain than our own because they can receive from us everything that we have had to find out for ourselves, and in order to understand these simple truths and infallible methods which we have acquired only after long error, all that they need to do is to follow the expositions and proofs that appear in our speeches and writings” (Condorcet 1955: 178).

Ironically, it was in Scotland, where the four-stage theory was first formulated, that the alternative was elaborated in the greatest detail. Having helped to establish the organic metaphor of development (childhood, maturity, and decline) in theory, the reformers simultaneously set about subverting it in practice. In the successful attempts to overleap several of the stages which England had passed through in moving from the Age of Agriculture to the Age of Commerce, we see for perhaps the first time the brute fact of unevenness being the basis for a developmental strategy. The radical Presbyterian minister, Robert Wallace, observed in 1758: “In a smaller nation, where good agriculture and manufactures have been lately introduced, improvements will be more sensible, than in a kingdom of greater extent, more populous, and where good agriculture and extensive commerce have been of longer standing. For this reason, though England is much richer than Scotland, and the improvements of the English much greater, the improvements in Scotland may be more striking and sensible.” After outlining the “advantages” possessed by the English in their skill at agriculture, manufacturing and trade, Wallace argues that their very priority had led them into difficulties. The English “have less curiosity than the Scots” and “confine themselves to fewer branches of trade or manufactures,” which, although allowing them to master these specialisms, led to new difficulties: “All these are so great advantages, that it is scarce to be thought, the English have not made proportionally greater advances than the Scots; unless it is supposed, that their more early application to trade, and their having carried it to greater a height before the Revolution [i.e. of 1688], hath rendered it impossible, or very difficult, for them to multiply their trade in the same proportion, as may easily be done by the French or Scots, who may have more lately applied themselves to trade” ([Wallace] 1758: 107, 137–138). Here we see the first intimations of “the advantages of backwardness” (in relation to Scotland) and “the disadvantages of priority” (in relation to England). By the second decade of the nineteenth century Scottish writers were reflecting, with some astonishment, how far they had progressed in a matter of decades (Anonymous 1815: 537; Scott 1972: 492). Because Scotland could draw on what England had already accomplished, it was able to make up the same ground in much shorter period of time; but it was so overwhelmingly successful in doing so that—with the exception of the Highlands—the socio-economic differences between Scotland and England had been overcome by 1815, and the political differences by 1832. No other country in Europe or the West more generally would ever complete the transition from feudal agriculture to capitalist industrialisation so quickly or completely. The moment was too brief, the result so uniquely decisive, for any theoretical generalisation from this experience to be possible.

There are several differences between the Enlightenment concept of a mode of subsistence and the concept of a mode of production introduced by Marx and Engels. For our purposes the most important is that Marx and Engels were not proposing a universal succession of stages. Those modes of production that they listed in various places were chronological only in two senses: one is that they are each more developed than the original classless societies; the other is that it indicates the order in which these modes of production arose historically; it does not suggest that every social formation is fated to pass under the dominance of each of them in succession. In fact, Marx and Engels seem to have regarded only one transition as universal, that from primitive communism to different types of class society (Asiatic, slave, tributary, and feudal). Beyond that, they seem to have regarded the transition from feudalism to capitalism as a possible outcome which was in fact occurring during their lifetime, which in turn opened up the possibility for another, final transition from capitalism to socialism. But neither of these

two transitions was automatic or inevitable. Two main anticipations of uneven development appear in their work.

The first consists of a cluster of references to a particular form of unevenness arising from colonial settlement. In *The German Ideology*, written in the mid-1840s but unfinished and unpublished during their lifetime, they reflected on how these settlements could be established on the basis of a purer, more advanced version of the dominant mode of production than the societies the settlers left behind. On the one hand, where the settled territory was uninhabited: “Thus they begin with the most advanced individuals of the old countries, and, therefore, with the correspondingly most advanced form of intercourse, even before this form of intercourse has been able to establish itself in the old countries.” On the other hand, where the colonised territory was inhabited by peoples at a much lower level of development: “A similar relation issues from conquest, when a form of intercourse which has evolved on another soil is brought over complete to the conquered country: whereas in its home it was still encumbered with interests and relations left over from earlier periods, here it can and must be established completely and without hindrance, if only to assure the conqueror’s lasting power, when they received the most perfect form of feudal organisation” (Marx and Engels 1975a: 83). The examples on which they tended to draw later in their careers were from the feudal period (Marx 1973c: 490; Engels 2005b: 565). They do not seem to have specifically considered that capitalism might also develop in this way.

The second anticipation is a single passage in review of a book by Frederick List written by Marx during 1845. List had argued that Germany should seek to follow the same path of economic development as England (List 1904: 156). Marx rejected the idea—and not only in relation to economic development:

To hold that every nation goes through this development [of industry] internally would be as absurd as the idea that every nation is bound to go through the political development of France or the philosophical development of Germany. What the nations have done as nations, they have done for human society; their whole value consists only in the fact that each single nation has accomplished for the benefit of other nations one of the main historical aspects (one of the main determinations) in the framework of which mankind has accomplished its development, and therefore after industry in England, politics in France and philosophy in Germany have been developed, they have been developed for the world, and their world-historic significance, as also that of those nations, has thereby come to an end. (Marx 1975a: 281)

But just because nations *can* start from the highest point previously achieved in a particular area does not mean that they *will*. A social force capable of starting from that point is required. It was at this point in their careers that the question of agency appeared to be resolved by the possibility of permanent revolution.

Permanent Revolution as Bourgeois Revolution (1)

What level of capitalist development was necessary for socialism? At one point in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels seem to suggest that the forces of production would need to exist at a globally even level of development before socialism was possible (Marx and Engels 1975a: 49, 51). During the later 1840s their attention became focussed on Europe and its colonial-settler extensions in North America, which they saw as decisive and where the situation was relatively straightforward. Capitalism was the dominant mode of production only in parts of Western Europe and the eastern seaboard of the United States of America, and industrialization was still more narrowly focussed. Elsewhere the bourgeoisie were still politically and socially

subordinate to the Old Regime. The task for Communists was therefore to encourage the bourgeois revolutions which would overthrow the feudal absolutist states, remove the structural obstacles to capitalist development and thus create the material basis for the international working class that would make socialism a possibility.

The very fact that the bourgeois revolutions involved such a comprehensive reordering of society meant that, even before 1848, the bourgeoisie could not be the only or even necessarily the major social force involved in the process, since it remained a minority class, if a larger one than that of the existing rulers. Its leaders, consciously or unconsciously, had to mobilize the masses under ultimately deceptive slogans of universal right, necessary for a minority class to lead the coalitions that overthrew the old regimes, but disguising or simply avoiding the fact that exploitation would continue, albeit in new forms. But Marx was also aware that more than deception was involved here. The **popular masses** had an interest in overthrowing absolutism, and their methods were required to achieve and defend both the English and French Revolutions, methods from which the bourgeoisie themselves shrank: "Therefore, where they stood in opposition to the bourgeoisie, as for example in 1793 and 1794 in France, [the plebeians] were fighting for the implementation of the interests of the bourgeoisie, although not *in the manner* of the bourgeoisie. The *whole of the French terror* was nothing other than a *plebeian manner* of dealing with the *enemies of the bourgeoisie*, with absolutism, feudalism and parochialism" (Marx 1973b: 192). This raises two questions.

One question concerned the revolutionary capacity of the bourgeoisie even at its most radical. The issue here was not simply the lack of social weight possessed by the bourgeoisie and its consequent need for allies; it was that the majority of its members would not *in any case* have demanded the necessary action without being pushed from below (Marx 1976b: 319). Marx's contrast between economic readiness and political vacillation suggest that the self-restraint of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class and the consequent need for representatives of another social class to substitute for it in the realm of political action did not begin in Germany in 1848, but had a longer lineage dating even further back in time even than the French Revolution. From the Dutch Revolt onwards, popular forces had been necessary to ensure victory over the absolutist regime, but has also threatened to take the revolutions in a more radical direction than the bourgeoisie themselves were prepared to contemplate, above all in relation to democracy. The French Revolution showed this process in the most developed form and both its most committed opponents, like Burke, and members of its extreme left, like Babeuf, understood the logic of escalation, whether as a threat, in the case of the former, or as a promise, in the case of the latter (Burke 1970: 345–349; Babeuf 1920). In reality, however, both men misunderstood what the outcome could have been. For even in France between 1789 and 1794, the social forces involved were incapable of sustaining the new society of equality, with the result that it fell back into what was historically possible at the time, in other words, a bourgeois regime. The second question facing Marx and Engels as 1848 drew near was therefore whether this was *still* the only viable result that could be expected from the incipient German Revolution.

Marx warned in 1847 that central though the plebeians would be to victory over the *ancien régime*, they would not hold onto power: "If therefore the proletariat overthrows the political rule of the bourgeoisie, its victory will only be temporary, only an element in the service of the bourgeois revolution itself, as in the year 1794, as long as in the course of history, in its 'movement,' the material conditions have not yet been created which make necessary the abolition of the bourgeois mode of production and therefore also the definitive overthrow of the political rule of the bourgeoisie" (Marx 1976b: 319). In 1847 Marx believed that the material conditions did not exist for the proletariat to overthrow bourgeois rule; by 1850 he argued that if not already existent, they could be established in a very short time: this change of position was the basis of the new strategy of "permanent revolution."

Marx and Engels may have been among the first people to refer to the notion in print in 1843 and 1844 (Marx 1975b: 222; Marx and Engels 1975b: 123). It was not, however, a concept exclusive to them but one common to members of “the Democracy,” the alliance of the petty bourgeoisie, peasantry, and working class to the left of the bourgeois liberals. Their goal was the Social Republic—not socialism, but a regime modelled on the Jacobin state at its most radical; in other words one that went beyond the limits of bourgeois acceptability. During the course of the German Revolution of 1848 Marx and Engels held three versions of permanent revolution, each successively more radical as the unwillingness of the bourgeoisie to confront the absolutist regime grew more apparent. In the first, the bourgeoisie would ally with the Democracy to overthrow the existing regime, after which the Democracy removes the bourgeoisie to establish the Social Republic. The second, formulated when it became apparent that the bourgeoisie were more concerned with a potential threat to their property than with absolutism, involved the Democracy striking out on its own for the Social Republic—still remaining within the boundaries of capitalism, but intent on opening up the way for rapid capitalist development while a new revolution was being prepared. The third, formulated when it also became apparent that the leaderships of the non-working-class elements of the Democracy were no more willing to take the revolution forward than the bourgeoisie proper, involved the proletarian revolution as the only alternative to counterrevolution, but on the basis of an international movement led by the more advanced working classes, most importantly in France and Britain. Here finally is the idea that the escalation characteristic of the French Revolution would, in the new conditions of more advanced capitalist development, lead to the victory of the proletariat.

It is the third and final version of permanent revolution that is incorporated in the most radical text written by Marx or Engels during this period: the “Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League” of March 1850. Two themes emerge from the main body of this work: first, that the liberal bourgeoisie and the social-reformist Democracy would be the most dangerous enemies of the working class when in power; second, and consequently, the working class needed to retain absolute organizational and political independence (Marx 1973a: 323–324). The reference to “make the revolution permanent” in the address and the concluding sentence (“their battle-cry must be: The Permanent Revolution”), might lead to the conclusion that Marx anachronistically saw socialism as being immediately realizable. In fact, apart from this climactic rhetorical flourish, Marx argues for a more realistic agenda throughout. In the immediately preceding paragraph he writes: “Although the German workers cannot come to power and achieve the realization of their class interests without passing through a protracted revolutionary development, this time they can at least be certain that the first act of the approaching revolutionary drama will coincide with the direct victory of their own class in France and will thereby be accelerated” (Marx 1973a: 330). German workers must maintain their organizational and political independence from the petty bourgeoisie, to push the latter class beyond the satisfaction of its own demands and to continue pressing their own class interests even after the feudal-absolutist state has been decisively overthrown. Marx confirmed this position later in the same year in “The Class Struggles in France,” the significance being that he had always pointed to France as being the most advanced working movement and the one to which German workers should look for inspiration. Yet even here further capitalist development was necessary (Marx 1974: 45–46).

For Marx and Engels workers not only *could* not retain power, they *should* not seek to do so. “We are devoted to a party which, most fortunately for it, cannot yet come to power,” said Marx at a meeting of Central Authority of the Communist League late in 1850: “If the proletariat were to come to power the measures it would introduce would be petty-bourgeois and not directly proletarian. Our party can only come to power when the conditions allow it to put *its own* views into practice” (Marx 1978: 628). In the same year Engels extended the

argument back in time to the dawn of the bourgeois revolutionary era. He wrote of Thomas Müntzer's role in the German Peasant War of 1525 that, while he represented the communist aspirations of the peasantry, these were unrealizable at the time since the only social force actually capable of achieving them, the working class, did not yet exist in sufficient numbers to play this role. As a result, all that Müntzer could have hoped to achieve were the goals of the bourgeoisie, "the class for whom conditions are ripe for domination," even though they had signally failed to enter the field on their own behalf (Engels 1978: 469–470). In fact, it is questionable whether the German Lands were even ready for domination by capitalism at this period. Part of the case Engels wanted to convey is that the German bourgeoisie has always been vacillating and untrustworthy, in 1525 as in 1848, even though this meant rather overemphasizing the possibility of their coming to power at the former date.

It is true that in 1850 Marx and Engels assumed that only a short period of time would be necessary for capitalism to develop to the point where the socialist revolution was possible. However, as early as 1858 Marx wrote to Engels admitting that capitalism had a much longer future ahead of it than either man had thought possible in 1848, and that consequently socialism might be a more distant prospect than they had initially hoped (Marx to Engels, 1983: 346–347; see also Engels 1990: 513). In the meantime, what were the implications of what Marx called "this little corner of the earth" bringing the rest of the world under colonial domination? In the Preface to *Capital* he wrote that: "The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future" (Marx 1976a: 91). He was not suggesting that all countries would take the same length of time to reach the future as the original metropolitan powers, nor that arriving there would have the same implications for late developers, but neither was he suggesting that they could bypass sections of the road.

Uneven Development Revived

It was the Russian Populist, Alexander Herzen, who in the 1850s became the first thinker since the Scottish Enlightenment to notice a decisive fact about late development: "Human development is a form of chronological unfairness, since latecomers are able to profit by the labours of their predecessors without paying the same price" (quoted in Berlin 1960: xx). Herzen himself held analogous views to those of Marx on Germany concerning the prospects for socialism in Russia; Marx concerning the possibility made the same point in relation to his own country in the late 1860s (Herzen 1956: 578). Others among his Populist comrades were more optimistic. "History, like a granny," wrote Nikolai Chernyshevskii in *A Critique of Philosophical Prejudices against Communal Ownership* (1859), "is terribly fond of younger grandchildren." This was not merely a piece of Russian folk-wisdom: "We were concerned to answer the question of whether a given social phenomenon has to pass through all the logical moments in the real life of every society, or whether under favourable circumstances it can leap from the first or second stage of development directly to the fifth or sixth, omitting the ones in the middle, as happens with the phenomena of individual life and in the processes of physical nature." Chernyshevskii's own answer was unequivocal: "under the influence of the high development which a certain phenomenon of social life has attained among the most advanced peoples, this phenomenon can develop very swiftly among other peoples, and rise from a lower level straight to a higher one, passing over the intermediate logical moments" (Chernyshevskii 1983: 187, 188). Vasily Vorontsov made similar comments in *The Fates of Capitalism in Russia* (1882): "The countries which are latecomers to the arena of history have a great privilege in comparison with their foregoers, a privilege consisting in the fact that accumulated historical experience of other countries enables them to work out a relatively true image of their own next step and to strive for what the others have already achieved not instinctively but

consciously, not groping in the dark but knowing what should be avoided on the way. To these peculiarly privileged countries belongs also Russia” (quoted in Walicki 1969: 115–116).

Asked to comment on Russian developments, Marx suggested, for the first and only time, that capitalist development there could be circumvented altogether. In 1877 Marx argued that Russia did not need to undergo capitalist development but could move directly to socialism through the institution of the peasant commune or *mir*. If not, then Russia would be condemned to suffer all that the peasant populations of the West had suffered. But Marx also makes two qualifications. First, although the Russian peasant commune *may* provide the launching pad for the advance to communism in Russia, the advance of capitalism is already undermining the possibility of that happening. Second, even if the latter development does come to fruition, it will not replicate exactly the earlier process in Western Europe (Marx 1989: 199, 200; see also Marx to Zasulich, 1992: 72). Under what conditions might the peasant commune play the role that Marx has suggested for it? These were outlined the following year in a preface, published under the names of both men, for the second Russian edition of the *Manifesto*. Here, revolution in Russia that may act as the spark, but success is still dependent on victory of the proletariat in the West (Marx and Engels 1989: 42). That the victory of a revolutionary movement in the West could establish a socialist context for Russian development and thus avoid the fate of capitalism was in their view a possibility, but by no means a certainty. By the early 1890s it had become clear which direction events had taken and Engels changed his position accordingly. In his last writings, he drew up a balance sheet that is clearly loaded against those who still expected the peasant commune to act as the social basis of the Russian revolution. In the absence of revolution in the West, and the beginning of capitalist development in Russia, the opportunity to bypass bourgeois society had passed (Engels 2005a: 214; 1990: 423, 424, 431).

The second generation of Marxists took as their text on development a passage from the same work by Marx in which he identified the different epochs of human history, the “Preface” to *A Contribution To The Critique Of Political Economy*: “No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new and superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society” (Marx 1975c: 425–426). As subsequent debates around the nature of the forthcoming Russian Revolution were to show, the significance of this passage depended on whether it was interpreted as meaning that material conditions had to be “mature” in every single state before socialism could become a practical possibility, or simply a number of the more advanced states, in which successful revolutions could come to aid of the less advanced. The theoretical leaders of the Second International tended towards the first interpretation and the nation in which this position was articulated and upheld more rigorously than any other was, appropriately enough, Russia, in whose future Marx and Engels had briefly glimpsed a possible alternative, before Engels ultimately dismissed it.

The key figure on the Russian Marxist left was Georgi Plekhanov. Given the opposition which Plekhanov showed for the Russian Revolution towards the end of his life, it is important not to read back later positions onto those of an earlier period, for Plekhanov was perhaps the most sophisticated thinker of his entire generational cohort. His recognition of the necessity for capitalism in Russia was accompanied by an insistence that the working class which it was bringing into being had to struggle against the new bourgeoisie as hard as it did against the feudal-absolutist state against which both classes were ostensibly opposed. Indeed, he was initially prepared to echo Marx’s more unorthodox pronouncements concerning the prospects for Russian development (Plekhanov 1961a: 79). But this element of his thought was quickly submerged by the need to emphasise the necessity of capitalist development against the Populists. The ultimate outcome of the revolution in Russia, given the preponderance of land-

hungry peasantry, could only be the more extensive implantation of capitalist economy in the countryside, not the agrarian communism predicted by the Populists (Plekhanov 1961b: 364–366). If this was true for Russia, then it was even more so for those states, like China, which were further east in geographical terms and further behind in developmental terms: “The West European revolution will be mighty, but not almighty. To have a decisive influence on other countries, the socialist countries of the West will need some kind of vehicle for that influence. ‘International exchange’ is a powerful vehicle, but it is not almighty either” (Plekhanov 1961b: 357–358). This is a more pessimistic perspective conclusion than that of Engels. It is important to note that, for Plekhanov at least, this was not a racist or paternalist discourse. He maintained essentially the same position in relation to the history of Western Europe: “Everywhere there has been imitation; but the imitator is separated from his model by all the distance which exists between the society which gave him, the *imitator*, birth and the society in which the *model* lived.” Plekhanov correctly notes that Locke was the greatest influence on French philosophers of the eighteenth century: “Yet, between Locke and his French pupils there is precisely that same distance, which separated English society at the time of the ‘Glorious Revolution’ from French society as it was several decades before the ‘Great Rebellion’ of the French people.” His conclusion? “*Thus* the influence of the literature of one country on the literature of another is directly proportional to the similarity of the social relations of those countries. It does not exist at all when that similarity is near to zero” (Plekhanov 1961c: 704, 705).

But what if there were similarities, but only in particular areas of social life? In this context, we should note remarks from 1896 by Labriola, Trotsky’s most important philosophical influence, not least because of his emphasis on totality (Trotsky 1975b: 123–124, 133). Russian industrialization, Labriola wrote, “seems destined to put under our eyes, as in an epitome, all the phases, even the most extreme, of our history” (Labriola 1908: 133). But even here Labriola suggests the coexistence of forms rather than their mutual interpenetration. A more important forerunner to Trotsky in this respect was Luxemburg in a brilliant article, also from 1896, on the Ottoman Empire.

Luxemburg noted that until the end of the eighteenth century, Turkey had been oppressive for the majority of the people but stable. These conditions changed during the nineteenth century: “Shaken by conflict with the strong, centralised states of Europe, but especially threatened by Russia, Turkey found itself compelled to introduce domestic reforms [that] abolished the feudal government, and in its place introduced a centralised bureaucracy, a standing army and a new financial system.” The cost of these reforms was paid in taxation and duties by the population, burdens that went toward maintaining a hybrid form of state: “In a strange mixture of modern and medieval principles, it consists of an immense number of administrative authorities, courts and assemblies, which are bound to the capital city in an extremely centralised manner in their conduct; but at the same time all public positions are *de facto* venal, and are not paid by the central government, but are mostly financed by revenue from the local population—a kind of bureaucratic benefice.” The effect was “a terrible deterioration in the material conditions of the people”: “But what made them particularly unbearable was a quite modern feature that had become involved in the situation—namely, *insecurity*: the irregular tax system, the fluctuating relations of land ownership, but above all the money economy as a result of the transformation of tax in kind into tax in money and the development of foreign trade.” As Luxemburg notes, these changes were “in a certain respect, reminiscent of Russia.” But with one crucial difference, whereas in Russia the reforms of 1861 and after established the basis for capitalist development and industrialisation, “in Turkey an economic transformation corresponding to the modern reforms was completely lacking” (Luxemburg 2003: 38–40).

We do not know whether or not Trotsky was aware of Luxemburg’s article. Given the extent of her influence on Kautsky prior to the Russian Revolution of 1905, Luxemburg’s

observations may well have inspired his brief contrast between Russia and Turkey in “The American Worker,” a work that in turn influenced Trotsky’s original formulation of permanent revolution (Kautsky 2009b: 621–625). Nevertheless, her discussion of the destabilizing effects of capitalist modernity was not reflected in Kautsky’s article nor was it a central feature of Trotsky’s original argument.

Permanent Revolution as Bourgeois Revolution (2)

The term “permanent revolution” re-entered Marxist debates simultaneously with these discussions of unevenness. The first person to revive it seems to have been the Russian revolutionary David Ryazanov during his 1903 critique of the draft programme of *Iskra*, the paper of the RSDWP (Ryazanov 2009: 131). Within a year, however, it had once more become part of general discourse of the centre and left wings of the Second International in Central and Eastern Europe, as a means of encapsulating how the working class would have to carry out the bourgeois revolution in Russia. In addition to Ryazanov, Kautsky, Lenin, Luxemburg, Mehring, Plekhanov, Parvus, and Trotsky all held this perspective, with only Lenin refusing the actual term “permanent revolution” and only Trotsky investing the term with a significantly different content. But even Lenin’s refusal was semantic rather than substantive. During a discussion about the need to prepare for a forthcoming struggle between the rural proletariat and the peasant bourgeoisie, written during the revolution of 1905, he wrote: “For from the democratic revolution we shall at once, and precisely in accordance with the measure of our strength, the strength of the class-conscious and organized proletariat, begin to pass to the socialist revolution. We stand for uninterrupted revolution. We shall not stop half-way” (Lenin 1962: 237–238).

It is important to insist on this relative unanimity, since there is a long-established tradition, widely held in the Trotskyist movement but also influential in some academic accounts, of reducing pre-revolutionary views about the nature of the Russian Revolution into a tripartite structure established by Trotsky. In a late article he summarized the “three conceptions of the Russian Revolution” associated respectively with the Mensheviks, Lenin (in fact representing the collective Bolshevik position), and himself (Trotsky 1973b: 71–72). It is accurate insofar as it deals with the division of opinion within Russia between the revolutions of 1905 and October 1917, but “Lenin’s position” was in fact a variant of the dominant position of the centre and left of the Second International, which, before the first of these dates at least, was also shared by the Mensheviks. Löwy added a fourth conception to this list, associated with Parvus and Luxemburg, and a fifth associated with Kautsky occupying a position halfway between those of Lenin and Luxemburg (Löwy 1981: 43; see also Larsson 1970: chapter 9 for a slightly different list). I do not find this approach, which could be extended until there are as many different “conceptions” as there were participants in the debate, particularly helpful. It might be more useful to see the second conception, between those of the Mensheviks and Trotsky, as involving a continuum of views, the main difference between them being the extent to which they regarded the peasantry as capable of independent activity, the nature of the relationship between the working class and the peasantry, and whether one or both of these classes would either seek to form a post-revolutionary government or abdicate immediately in favour of representatives of the bourgeoisie (for these debates, see Day and Gaido 2009: 32–54; Geras 1976: 252–304; Larsson 1970: 206–304; and Löwy 1981: chapter 2). Two figures were most responsible for Trotsky’s radicalization of the concept and for rendering it quite different from that of anyone else in the Marxist tradition: Parvus and Kautsky.

Trotsky had a close intellectual and political partnership with Parvus during the latter half of 1904 and all through 1905. Parvus had recognized affinities with his own work in Trotsky’s article “Up to the Ninth of January” and wrote a preface for the first edition, which appeared

early in 1905. In particular, Trotsky seems to have been influenced by what, in comparison to his own work at this time, was the far greater historical depth of Parvus's work, particularly in relation to the origins of the Russian state and, later, to the emergence of capitalism in Russia, but also his sense of how Russia existed with a world system in which the world powers were gearing up for war (Parvus 2009: 252 [editorial note]). Parvus rightly rejected the notion that large-scale capitalists themselves had ever been revolutionary, but saw that previously the lower levels of the economic class, those closest to the petty bourgeoisie, had acted as a revolutionary force. In addition to its fear of the working class, the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie as a historical latecomer was that it did not have this more plebeian wing to act as a stimulus and support for its "noneconomic" element, the liberal professions and those groups that were only beginning to be classified in Germany as the New Middle Class. The former had been important as a component of revolutionary movements between 1789 and 1848, and the latter would become an equally important component of revolutionary movements later in the twentieth century; but in the contemporary Russian context, Parvus pointed to their fragmentation and vacillation (Parvus 2009: 265). But why was the Russian proletariat so prone to "revolutionism"? Parvus offers the beginning of an explanation in his comments on the formation of "factory cities and centres of world trade": "The very same pattern that hindered the development of petty-bourgeois democracy served to benefit the class consciousness of the proletariat in Russia, namely, the weak development of the handicraft form of production. The proletariat was immediately concentrated in the factories" (Parvus 2009: 268).

Until the end of his life Trotsky continued to pay homage to the influence that Parvus exercised over him during this period. But, like everyone else during the 1905 Revolution apart from Trotsky himself, Parvus never imagined that it could have a socialist outcome. As Trotsky wrote of Parvus's position: "His prognosis indicated, therefore, not the transformation of the democratic revolution into the socialist revolution but only the establishment in Russia of a regime of worker's democracy of the Australian type, where on the basis of a farmers' system there arose for the first time a labour government which did not go beyond the framework of a bourgeois state." Trotsky rejected this comparison (the only one available to Parvus at the time) on the grounds that Australia had developed within a capitalist framework from the start, that the government was based on a relatively privileged working class, and that neither of these conditions applied to Russia (Trotsky 1973b: 68–69).

Kautsky's *general* theoretical influence on Trotsky was great, as it was on most Marxists, at least until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. "Kautsky was undoubtedly the foremost theoretician of the Second International," wrote Trotsky in 1919, "and for the better part of his conscious life he represented and gave generalized expression to the *best* aspects of the Second International" (Trotsky 1977: 29–30; see also Trotsky 1973a: 9–10). Kautsky's *specific* theoretical influence on Trotsky's version of permanent revolution seems to have been through two texts, one published before Trotsky had begun the process of rethinking the concept, the other after Trotsky had completed it but before he published a detailed presentation of his conclusions: in the latter case Kautsky was mainly responsible for deepening the historical and sociological foundations of Trotsky's argument. In the first text, "Revolutionary Questions," from November 1904, Kautsky argues the widely accepted case that a revolution in Western Europe would have a detonative effect in the eastern part of the continent, but he then goes on to make the bolder and less conventional argument, in effect allowing that the spatial priority of influence might be reversed: "They [the Eastern European nations] may even come to the foreground because they are not hindered by the ballast of traditions that the older nations have to drag along. . . That *can* happen. But as we already said, we have gone beyond the field of discernible *necessity* and are present considering only *possibilities*" (Kautsky 2009a: 219).

The second text by Kautsky to have influenced Trotsky was an article of February 1906, “The American Worker,” to which I have already referred, in which the former attempted to establish the circumstances in which a working class can emerge without being “hindered” by “tradition.” Here, Kautsky tried to establish, for the first time since the less developed remarks by Parvus the previous year, not only why the working class in Russia *is* politically militant but also why it is *more* politically militant than those areas of the West that are the most developed in capitalist terms:

It is certainly a peculiar phenomenon that the Russian proletariat [of all national sections of the working class] should show us our future—as far as, not the organization of capital, but the rebellion of the working class is concerned—because Russia is, of all the great states of the capitalist world, the most backward. This seems to contradict the materialist conception of history, according to which economic development constitutes the basis of politics. But in fact it only contradicts that kind of historical materialism of which our opponents and critics accuse us, by which they understand a *ready-to-hand model*, and not a *method of inquiry*. (Kautsky 2009b: 621)

Kautsky then develops his argument with reference to the nature of the Russian absolutist state—again deepening the insights of Parvus. Here his comparison is not a more advanced state like the United States, but a more backward one: Turkey. In the case of both Russia and Turkey the state grew militarily, bureaucratically, and fiscally in order to compete in geopolitical terms with the Western European powers, accruing a massive national debt in both cases. There was, however, a major difference between Turkey and Russia: “Turkey has become so helpless that it must inevitably submit to the dictate of foreigners. It exists as an independent state only thanks to the jealousy of the different powers, none of which can have the whole booty alone. . . . But Russia was not as helpless as Turkey.” Russia had access to capital from the West where capitalists looking for new areas of investment and provided the basis for a historically unprecedented process of industrialization: “This transformed a great part of the Russian proletarians from lumpen proletarians or indigent small peasants into wage-workers, from timid and servile beggars into decided revolutionary fighters. But this growth of a strong fighting proletariat was not paralleled by the growth of a similarly strong Russian capitalist class.” The proletariat has the possibility of uniting all the most vital national forces around it in the struggle against foreign-based capital and the absolutist state that protects it: “In this way, the Russian workers are able to exert a strong political influence, and the struggle for liberation of the land from the strangling octopus of absolutism has become a duel between the Czar and the working class; a duel in which the peasants provide an indispensable assistance, but in which they can by no means play a leading role” (Kautsky 2009b: 624). The nature of the Russian state helped condition the nature of the working-class response, as did the nature of the American state, but in the opposite direction: “As soon as the [Russian] proletariat began to move, it immediately came across almost insuperable obstacles in every direction, experienced in the most painful way the insanity of the political situation, learned to hate it, and felt compelled to fight against it. It was impossible to attempt to reform this situation; the only possible course was a complete revolution of the established order. . . . The **American** worker has not been, up till now, forced to inquire into and oppose the *totality* of the existing social order” (Kautsky 2009b: 642–643).

With the publication of this article, the intellectual components out of which Trotsky would produce his first breakthrough were in place. All that remained to complete his thought, as far as permanent revolution was concerned, was the fact of the 1905 Revolution itself.

Theorising Uneven Development

We will return to the 1905 revolution in part two of this article. It was the aftermath that the concept of uneven development was properly theorised for the first time, thus providing the final component of what would become the concept of uneven and combined development. Central to this were a group of Marxist thinkers who noted the way in which more backward states did not recapitulate the entire history of capitalist development again, but began at most advanced forms of technology and the labour process. The Austro-Marxist Rudolf Hilferding formulated the position in more general terms immediately prior to the First World War, in his classic work *Finance Capital*:

Capitalist development does not take place independently in each individual country, but instead capitalist relations of production and exploitation were imported along with capital from abroad, and indeed imported at the level already attained in the most advanced country. Just as a newly established industry today does not develop from handicraft beginnings and techniques into a modern giant concern, but is established from the outset as an advanced capitalist enterprise, so capitalism is now imported into a new country in its most advanced form and exerts its revolutionary effects far more strongly and in a much shorter time than was the case, for instance, in the capitalist development of Holland and England. (Hilferding 1981: 322–323)

Marxists like Gramsci who, unlike Hilferding, supported the Russian Revolution, identified the same process but also saw in it a means of avoiding capitalist development. Some of Gramsci's early comments on uneven development are merely banal, including such revelations as "capitalism is a world historical phenomenon, and its uneven development means that individual nations cannot be at the same level of economic development at the same time" (Gramsci 1977a: 69). Gramsci did, however, make rather more penetrating comments in 1917 in an article entitled "The Revolution against *Capital*," in which he welcomed the October Revolution as a practical rejection of the stageism of the Second International:

Why should [the Russian people] wait for the history of England to be repeated in Russia, for the bourgeoisie to arise, for the class struggle to begin, so that class consciousness may be formed and the final catastrophe of the capitalist world eventually hit them? The Russian people—or at least a minority of the Russian people—has already passed through these experiences in thought. It has gone beyond them. It will make use of them now to assert itself just as it will make use of Western Capitalist experience to bring itself rapidly to the same level of production as the capitalist world. (1977b: 36)

For Gramsci the Russian experience of uneven development was a further extension of what had already occurred within the capitalist system: "In capitalist terms, North America is more advanced than England, because the Anglo-Saxons in North America took off at once from the level England had reached only after long evolution" (Gramsci 1977b: 36).

These insights were not restricted to Marxists. In 1915 the radical American economist Thorstein Veblen claimed—with some exaggeration—that in both economic and political terms Germany in 1870 had been 250 years behind England. By the time of the First World War Germany had overcome this lag, but only in some respects. Like Japan, "Modern technology has come to the Germans ready-made" (Veblen 1939: 65–66, 85–86). Veblen did recognize, however, that such technologies would not necessarily overcome ideological or political backwardness, with which it could coexist for a period at least.

By the First World War then, a group of politically diverse thinkers had arrived at broadly similar conclusions about how capitalism had developed since the first epoch of bourgeois

revolutions from above had ended in 1871. Specifically, they recognised that there were advantages in starting from a relatively backward position. It was possible to begin industrialisation with the most advanced forms of technology and industrial organisation, rather than work through all the stages of development that their predecessors had experienced. Indeed, it was impossible for them to avoid doing so if they wished to enter the competitive struggle between national capitals with any hope of success.

Down to this point uneven development had largely been a descriptive concept, without specific political implications. The outbreak of war in 1914 changed that. In *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) Lenin wrote that “the uneven and spasmodic development of individual enterprises, individual branches of industry and individual countries is inevitable under the capitalist system” (Lenin 1964: 241). Essentially, he argued that by the beginning of the twentieth century uneven development had acquired three main aspects. The first, which as we have seen was widely recognised, was the process by which the advanced states had reached their leading positions within the structured inequality of the world system. The pressure of military competition between the actual or aspirant great powers forced some of the absolutist states among them to adopt the level of economic and industrial development already achieved by their capitalist rivals: those who did so, in Germany, Italy, and Japan had leaderships that realized that this was a necessity if they were to have any chance not just of continuing to successfully compete in geopolitical terms but of surviving near the summit of the states system. In very compressed timescales they had been able to adopt the socio-economic achievements of Britain to the extent that they became recognizably the same kind of societies, without necessarily reproducing every characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon pioneer: where backwardness remained it tended to be in the nature of the political regimes led by monarchs or emperors supported by a landowning aristocracy. By the outbreak of the First World War membership of the dominant states was essentially fixed. What remained was the second aspect of uneven development: the ongoing rivalry between the great powers that involved them constantly trying to catch up and overtake each other in a contest for both economic and geopolitical supremacy that would continue as long as capitalism itself. This rivalry led in turn to a third aspect: the developed imperialist states collectively but competitively asserting their dominance over two other types, described by Lenin as “the colonies themselves” and “the diverse forms of dependent countries which, politically are formally independent but in fact, are enmeshed in the net of financial and diplomatic dependence,” like Argentina and Portugal (Lenin 1964: 263–264). Colonial expansion prevented some of the societies subject to it from developing at all, and in the case of the most undeveloped, the peoples involved suffered near or complete extermination and their lands were taken by settlers. More often the peoples survived, but their social systems were immobilized by imperial powers interested in strategic advantage or plunder, or both.

The central point here is very few states were capable of joining the ranks of the imperialist powers; their existence acts as a block to the less developed repeating the experience of Scotland in the eighteenth century or (to use Lenin’s own examples) of the United States, Germany, and Japan in the nineteenth. But some states, of which Russia was pre-eminent, could at least adopt aspects of the more developed, even if they could not reproduce their socio-economic structures in their entirety. The implications, previously noted by only a handful of Marxists like Labriola and Luxemburg, were that different temporalities could coexist within the same social formations. What remained lacking, on the eve of the October Revolution, was any sense of what the social and political implications were.

Trotsky built on the positions which I have discussed here—but also transcended them. His innovations came in two stages. The first, in 1905–1906, involved his unique perspective on permanent revolution in which the working class is not only the driving force of the bourgeois revolution, but also potentially capable of moving directly on to socialism, given the right international conditions. The second, in 1930, was his insight that where differing temporalities existed within a social formation, they did not simply sit side-by-side (“unevenness”), but impacted on each other in ways which were greatly conducive to revolutionary explosions (“combination”). These are the subject of part two.

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