

# **Uneven and Combined Development: Modernity, Modernism, Revolution**

NEIL DAVIDSON

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1. THE CLASSIC FORMS OF UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT**

- 1.1. The ‘Law’ of Uneven and Combined Development**
- 1.2. Eastern Variations**

### **2. CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, CONSTRAINTS**

- 2.1. Capitalist Modernity: Industrialisation and Urbanization**
- 2.2. Modernism: The Cultural Logic of Uneven and Combined Development**
  - 2.2.1. Theories of Modernism: Lukács, Greenberg, Jameson**
- 2.3. Capitalist States and Bourgeois Hegemony**

### **3. CARTOGRAPHIES AND CHRONOLOGIES**

- 3.1. The English Exception**
- 3.2. The Western Origins of Uneven and Combined Development**
- 3.3. Uneven and Combined Development in Russia after 1917: from Revolution to Counter-revolution**

### **4. CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES**

- 4.1. The Persistence of Uneven and Combined Development**
  - 4.1.1. The End of Pre-capitalist Survivals?**
  - 4.1.2. ‘Dual economy’, ‘Hybridity’, ‘Syncretism’**
  - 4.1.3. Uneven and Combined Development in the West – An Incomplete Process**
- 4.2. New Developments in Urbanism and Ideology**
  - 4.2.1. Mega-Cities**
  - 4.2.2. Political Islam**

### **5. CHINA: WHERE ALL ROADS MEET**

- 5.1. China in the Neoliberal World Order**
- 5.2. Three Aspects of Uneven and Combined Development in Contemporary China**
  - 5.2.1. Internal Migration**
  - 5.2.2. Worker Resistance**
  - 5.2.3. State Transformations**

## **IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION**

## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary debate over uneven and combined development began with Justin Rosenberg's 1995 Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture.<sup>1</sup> Since then, opinion among the growing body of those who find the concept 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.<sup>2</sup> The other side sees it 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.<sup>3</sup> I have recently tried to assess the relative merits of these positions, from the perspective of the former, and will not repeat that discussion here.<sup>4</sup>

What I will address in this chapter 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.'<sup>6</sup> In fact, the minority consisted of only one country, England, although there were also a handful of territories within countries

---

<sup>1</sup> Justin Rosenberg, 'Isaac Deutscher and the Lost History of International Relations', *New Left Review* I/215 (January-February 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Ashman, 'Capitalism, Uneven and Combined Development, and the Transhistoric', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 22, no. 1 (March 2009); Neil Davidson, 'Putting the Nation back into the "International"', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 22, no. 1 (March 2009), pp. 16-18.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Anievas and Kerim Nişancıoğlu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), pp. 57-63; Justin Rosenberg, 'Why is there no International Historical Sociology?' *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, no. 3 (September 2006); Justin Rosenberg, 'The "Philosophical Premises" of Uneven and Combined Development', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3 (July 2013); for the argument that uneven and combined development takes on a qualitatively different aspect towards the end of the nineteenth century, see Alexander Anievas, *Capital, the State and War: Class Conflicts and Geopolitics in the Thirty Year's Crisis, 1914-1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Davidson, 'The Conditions of Emergence for Uneven and Combined Development, in Alex Anievas and Kamran Matin (eds), *Historical Sociology and World History: Uneven and Combined Development over the Longue Durée* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1930–32], *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto 1977), pp. 27-28.

<sup>6</sup> Leon D. Trotsky, 'Karl Marx', in *Leon Trotsky Presents the Living Thoughts of Karl Marx* (London: Cassell, 1940), p. 41.

(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.

## 1. THE CLASSIC FORMS OF UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT

### 1.1. The ‘Law’ of Uneven and Combined Development

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 irrevocable and irresistible going over of the masses from the most rudimentary tasks of political, agrarian and national emancipation and abolition of serfdom to the slogan of proletarian rulership, resulted...from the social structure of Russia and the conditions of the worldwide situation. The theory of Permanent Revolution only formulated the combined process of this development.<sup>7</sup>

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’.<sup>8</sup> 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 as Trotsky pointed out:

Historical backwardness does not imply a simple reproduction of the development of advanced countries, England or France, with a delay of one, two, or three centuries. It engenders an

---

<sup>7</sup> Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 907. For the trajectories of both the strategy of permanent revolution and the law of uneven and combined development, see Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), pp. 214-236, 284-308.

<sup>8</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1924], ‘In Defence of the Russian Revolution’, in *Leon Trotsky Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1976), p. 249. Or, in the words of a distinctively non-Marxist historian: ‘Industrialization was, from the start, a political imperative.’ See David Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969), p. 139.

entirely new ‘combined’ social formation in which the latest conquests of capitalist technique and structure root themselves into relations of feudal or pre-feudal barbarism, transforming and subjecting them and creating peculiar relations of classes.<sup>9</sup>

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. ‘When English or French capital, the historical coagulate of many centuries, appears in the steppes of the Donets Basin, it cannot release the same social forces, relations, and passions which once went into its own formation.’<sup>10</sup>

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’.<sup>11</sup> 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. It is tempting to describe these as mutations, except that the inadequacy of the language involved led Trotsky to reject the biological metaphors in which stages of development had been described from the Enlightenment through to the Third International in its Stalinist phase – and which is continued in the present-day notion of ‘hybridity’: ‘The absorptive and flexible psyche, as a necessary condition for historical progress, confers on the so-called social “organisms”, as distinguished from the real, that is, biological organisms, an exceptional variability of internal structure.’<sup>12</sup> Trotsky himself pointed to the existence of such forms in general terms in his notebooks on dialectics from the mid-1930s:

Some objects (phenomena) are confined easily within boundaries according to some logical classification, others present [us with] difficulties: they can be put here or there, but within stricter relationship – nowhere. While provoking the indignation of systematisers, such transitional forms are exceptionally interesting to dialecticians, for they smash the limited boundaries of classification, revealing the real connections and consecutiveness of a living process.<sup>13</sup>

Trotsky’s position is often misunderstood, albeit in diametrically opposite ways. On the one hand, Razmig Keucheyan writes:

The theory of uneven and combined development, which is found in particular in Trotsky, refers to the idea that the development of ‘advanced’ countries has as its inevitable counterpart the under-development of ‘laggard’ countries. In other words, the lag in question is not in fact a lag, but strictly contemporaneous with the ‘advance’ of the western countries. In this sense, the underdevelopment of some is the direct result of the development of others – hence the idea of

<sup>9</sup> Leon D. Trotsky, [1938]. ‘Revolution and War in China’, in *Leon Trotsky on China*, edited by Les Evans and Russell Block (New York: Monad, 1976), p. 583.

<sup>10</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1908–1909/1922], *1905* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Labriola [1896], ‘Historical Materialism’, in *Essays on the Materialist Conception of History* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1908), p. 133.

<sup>12</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1932], ‘In Defence of the Russian Revolution’, p. 251.

<sup>13</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1933–5], ‘The Notebooks in Translation’, in *Trotsky’s Notebooks, 1933–1935: Writings on Lenin, Dialectics, and Evolutionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 77.

‘combined’ uneven development. This thesis has significant strategic consequences. Among other things, it assumes breaking with the idea that a country must be ‘mature’ for socialist forces to unleash a revolution in it. Such maturity is impossible to achieve, since underdeveloped countries are maintained in a state of underdevelopment. This idea has been developed by ‘world-systems’ theorists, among them Wallerstein and Arrighi.’<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Gurminder Bhambra complains:

We were all seen to be headed in the same direction and Europe, or the West, simply provides the model of where it is that the rest of the world would arrive. ... The narrative of historical transition, in this case of ‘uneven and combined development’, is reified as the narrative of history – where ‘unevenness’ points to difference and ‘development’ to the universal framework within which those differences are to be located – and the histories of the rest of the world are understood within the problematics of this narrative.<sup>15</sup>

From one perspective then, uneven and combined development sees the non-West permanently trapped in a subordinate role, while from the other, the Rest of the World slowly ascends the developmental ladder towards the same level as the West, without ever arriving. Keucheyan assimilates Trotsky’s position to another (World Systems) of which he approves; Bhambra does likewise to another which she rejects (Eurocentrism). 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.’<sup>17</sup>

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.’<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> The danger for the state lay in what these factories required in order to run, namely workers – and workers more skilled,

---

<sup>14</sup> Razmig Keucheyan [2010], *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 114; see also Warwick Research Collective, ‘World Literature in the Context of Uneven and Combined Development’, in *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 8 for similar parallels with World Systems theory.

<sup>15</sup> Gurminder K Bhambra, ‘Talking among Themselves? Weberian and Marxist Historical Sociologies as Dialogues without “Others”’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3 (May 2011), p. 678.

<sup>16</sup> Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 906; my emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30; my emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Clive Trebilcock, *The Industrialisation of the Continental Powers, 1780-1914* (London: Longman, 1981), pp. 281-284.

more politically conscious than that faced by any previous absolutist or early capitalist state.<sup>20</sup> 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:

...when the economic factors burst in a revolutionary manner, breaking up the old order; when development is no longer gradual and ‘organic’ but assumes the form of terrible convulsions and drastic changes of former conceptions, then it becomes easier for critical thought to find revolutionary expression, provided that the necessary theoretical prerequisites exist in the given country.<sup>21</sup>

S. A. Smith describes the trajectory of one Russian worker who had his mind opened in this way to ‘critical thought’:

For Kanatchikov, discovery of evolutionary theory came like a lightning bolt... His discovery of Darwin was soon complimented by his discovery of Marx: by 1902, aged 23, he had painfully mastered the first volume of *Capital*. This furnished him with a scientific understanding of society and the determination to dedicate himself to the cause of overthrowing capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

Kanatchikov exemplifies a general tendency identified by Tim McDaniel, namely that the militancy of Russian workers was ‘the product of leadership by a militant proletarian core of advanced workers employed in modern industry’, not of ‘disorientated workers of peasant origin and to young recruits into industry’. In his view, with which I agree, accounts ‘which emphasise the “spontaneity” and unpredictability of worker militancy’ end up ‘denying to it the coherence and ultimate rationality ascribed by Trotsky’.<sup>23</sup>

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 in the Part 2 – 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.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1924], ‘For the Internationalist Perspective’, in *Leon Trotsky Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1972), p. 199.

<sup>22</sup> S. A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> Tim McDaniel, *Autocracy, Modernization, and Revolution in Russia and Iran* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> Andrei Biely [1913-16], *Petersburg* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 65. Trotsky’s own assessment of Biely was deeply unsympathetic and, while not entirely misconceived, is so fixated on demonstrating that the latter was uncomplicatedly embedded in Russia’s pre-revolutionary past that he misses Biely’s contradictions and consequently the parallels with his own position. See Leon D. Trotsky [1923], *Literature and Revolution* (London: Bookmarks, 1991), pp. 79-87.

## 1.2. 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.’<sup>25</sup> 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 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> It is true that the Pahlavi state bore some similarities to that of the Romanovs, although these are largely formal since – as we shall see in Part 4 – 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. The result in relation to China was made by one of Trotsky’s then-followers, Harold Isaacs: ‘The pattern of Chinese life is jagged, torn, and irregular. Modern forms of production, transport and finance are superimposed upon and only partially woven into the worn and threadbare pattern of the past.’<sup>28</sup> 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. Smith quotes an assessment of conditions in Beijing in 1918 by a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Li Dazhao, in which he describes how ‘the gap in time between old and new is too big, that the spatial juxtaposition is too close’:

---

<sup>25</sup> Fouad Makki, ‘Reframing Development Theory: The Significance of the Idea of Uneven and Combined Development’, *Theory and Society*, vol. 44, no. 5 (2015), p. 486.

<sup>26</sup> Tim McDaniel, *Autocracy, Capitalism and Revolution in Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 41-47.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407.

<sup>28</sup> Harold R. Isaacs [1938], *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (Second revised edition, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 1.

Wheels and hooves move side by side, sirens hoot, there is the sound of cars and horses, of rickshaw pullers spitting and cursing each other. There is diversity and confusion, complexity to an extreme degree. ... The new resents the obstacles posed by the old. The old resents the dangers posed by the new.<sup>29</sup>

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: ‘Shanghai thus served as a polyvalent symbol; an emblem of consumer affluence and of class exploitation, of foreign imperialism and patriotic resistance, of individualism and mass society.’<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

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. Jean Chesneaux writes that the main characteristics of the Chinese proletariat were ‘its youth, its instability, its swollen lower ranks and its lack of a developed labour elite’.<sup>33</sup> 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

---

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China*, p. 18. These comments reflect unevenness within cities of the Global South, but unevenness also existed quite as starkly between cities. During a visit to Brazil in 1963, Eric Hobsbawm contrasted Recife, the impoverished capital of the north east with São Paulo: ‘It is astonishing to think I am in the same country as Recife. The skyscrapers spout, the neon lights glow, the cars (mostly made in this country) tear through the streets in their thousands in typically Brazilian anarchy. Above all there is industry to absorb the 150,000 people who stream into this giant city every year—north-easterners, Japanese, Italians, Arabs, Greeks.’ See Eric J. Hobsbawm [1963], ‘South American Journey’, in *Viva la Revolución: On Latin America*, edited by Leslie Bethell (London: Little, Brown, 2016), p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China*, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> J. G. Ballard, *The Kindness of Women* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 18-19. This passage, from one of his more autobiographical novels, is effectively an unreconstructed memoir, as can be seen by comparing the relevant sections of his actual autobiography. See J. G. Ballard, *Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton, an Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), pp. 3-36.

<sup>32</sup> Lucien W. Pye, ‘Foreword’, in *Shanghai: Revolution and Development in an Asian Metropolis*, edited by Christopher Howe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. xv.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Chesneaux, *The Chinese Labour Movement, 1919-1927* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 50.



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’.<sup>34</sup>

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.’<sup>35</sup> What Peter Curtin calls ‘defensive modernization’ was not enough to protect these societies from Western incursions. In the case of the Merinian monarchs of Madagascar, for example: ‘They not only failed to modernize beyond adopting Christianity and superficial European fashions, they failed to build a kind of society and government administration that would perpetuate their own power.’<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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. Peter Gowan describes the British initiatives as ‘the creation of *new* foundational institutions of landownership in order to *revive* dying traditional authority relations, resulting in economically and socially regressive consequences, undertaken for thoroughly modern imperialist political purposes – namely, to create a ruling class dependent upon British military power and therefore committed to imperial interests in the region.’<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup> This could not lead to general economic development, it is true, but as Jürgen Osterhammel writes, ‘even at the end of the nineteenth century, the socially and economically “backward” regions of Europe were certainly not ahead of the more dynamic ones of India or China’.<sup>40</sup>

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

---

<sup>34</sup> Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 1220.

<sup>35</sup> Trotsky, ‘Karl Marx’, p. 41.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Curtin, *The World and the West: The European Challenge and the Overseas Response in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 150.

<sup>37</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), pp. 67-69.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Gowan [1991], ‘The Gulf War, Iraq and Western Liberalism’, in *The Global Gamble: Washington’s Faustian Bid for World Dominance* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 167.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: 1780-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 182; Jürgen Osterhammel [2009], *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 663.

<sup>40</sup> Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*, p. 664.

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*. Eric Hobsbawm has written of ‘the invention of tradition’ that: ‘we should expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which “old” traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable, or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators prove no longer sufficiently adaptable and flexible or are otherwise eliminated’.<sup>41</sup> Here is one, highly pertinent, example of this process from the late nineteenth century:

In the Muslim world, the Islamic *burkah*, the full body covering of Muslim women, was growing in popularity. Often wrongly regarded as a mark of medieval obscurantism, the burkah was actually a modern dress that allowed women to come out of the seclusion of their homes and participate to a limited degree in public and commercial affairs. Even in this insistence on tradition, therefore, one glimpses the mark of growing global convergence.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, as even one of the arch-defenders of the ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis points out of another innovation: ‘The office of ayatollah is a creation of the nineteenth century; the rule of Khomeini and of his successor as “supreme Jurist”, an innovation of the twentieth.’<sup>43</sup>

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, here in 1940s Iraq:

The impact of the [Marxist] theory, particularly on minds that lived on ancient ideas – ideas that assumed that poverty and wealth were something fated, unalterable features of life – can be imagined. An Iraqi of a religious family, who had been brought up according to the traditional Shi’ite precepts and became a member of the Politbureau of the Communist party in the forties, recalled in a conversation with this writer how when reading a forbidden book he first came across the idea that distinctions between men were not God-given but were due to human and historical causes, the idea was to him ‘something like a revelation’. There was nothing in his previous experience to suggest anything different. He had taken for granted the Koranic injunction: ‘And as to the means of livelihood we have preferred some of you to others’.<sup>44</sup>

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. Anthony Cox writes of their motivations: ‘In part, this growing militancy was encouraged, if not fostered, by notions of fairness and honour held by Indian workers.’ In

---

<sup>41</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’, in *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 4-5.

<sup>42</sup> Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (London: Phoenix, 2002), p. 127.

<sup>44</sup> Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: a Study of Iraq's Old Landed Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 481.

particular, they held to notions of customary rights (*Dasturi*), fairness (*Instaf*) and social honour (*Izzat*):

For many Julaha weavers, the imposition of night working and the attack on their rights of worship, as well as challenging concepts such as *dasturi* and *insaf*, also challenged their sense of honour as Muslims and must have underlined the alien, colonial character of the mill managers and supervisors, making them more receptive to the nationalist and Pan-Islamic rhetoric of Indian nationalism and Muslim reform organisations respectively. The militancy of the workers, though, went much further than was thought politic by many nationalists and Pan-Islamic leaders.<sup>45</sup>

Much the same spurs to action can be found in the great strike wave of 1920-22 in which individual disputes were often responses to assaults by supervisors on children or women:

The patriarchal character of social relations within the jute workforce, encompassing ideas of personal honour or *Izzat*, undoubtedly contributed towards male workers coming to the defence of women and child workers. It is also clear that the heightened political atmosphere that accompanied, and contributed towards, the labour upsurge of the time played a major role in the jute workers' willingness to challenge paternal despotism.<sup>46</sup>

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'.<sup>47</sup> 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'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, in the case of Italy – one of the established, imperial capitalist powers – these developments were occurring *contemporaneously* with those in Russia. As Gail Day notes:

In Italy and especially in Russia the peasant-based life 'of the past' and the urban life 'of the present' co-existed side-by-side on the cities' borders. ... It seems to have been that the existence of sharp contrasts between the old ways of life and new ones that gave the [artistic] movements in Italy and Russia their sense of greater urgency – an urgency that was bound up with the social and political crises that both countries faced.<sup>49</sup>

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?

---

<sup>45</sup> Anthony Cox, *Empire, Industry and Class: The Imperial Nexus of Jute, 1840-1940* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> Ankie Hoogvelt, *Globalisation and the Postcolonial World: The New Political Economy of Development* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997), p. 38.

<sup>48</sup> Peter D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009), p. 202.

<sup>49</sup> Gail Day, 'The Futurists: Transcontinental Avant-Gardism', in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, edited by Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with The Open University, 1999), p. 209.

## 2. CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, CONSTRAINTS

### 2.1. Capitalist Modernity: Industrialisation and Urbanisation

I wrote in Part 1 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? Perry Anderson once dismissed the very notion of modernity on the grounds that it is so ‘extensive’ that it risks ‘dilution and banalization’: ‘If the modern is simply the new, and the passing of time assures its progress, everything in recent or current experience has acquired equal validity and meaning.’<sup>50</sup> Jack Goody has expressed similar views, but extends the indictment from ‘modernity’ to encompass ‘pre-modernity’ and ‘post-modernity’: ‘From the viewpoint of everyday usage, these terms do not make much sense, since modern, like contemporary, is a moving target and cannot represent a periodization or a style, except in a fleeting or ambiguous sense.’<sup>51</sup> There would be more force in these criticisms if the term was generally used in the relative 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.<sup>52</sup>

It is also true that even some of the classic nineteenth-century discussions of modernity carry this meaning. During the 1860s, for example, Baudelaire wrote that ‘every old master has his own modernity’ and asserted the necessity for any ‘modernity’ to be worthy of one day taking its place as ‘antiquity’.<sup>53</sup> 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. ‘The Middle Ages were interested in eternity, the Renaissance was interested in the past’, writes Boris Groys: ‘modernity was interested in the future.’<sup>54</sup> 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. As Peter Osborne points out:

There is a widespread tendency to counterpose the categories of ‘capitalism’ (Marx) and ‘modernity’ (Durkheim and Weber) as competing alternatives for the theoretical interpretation of the same historical object. Yet there is no obligation to continue to use terms in the way in which they have been most consistently abused.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Perry Anderson [1985], ‘Postscript to “Modernity and Revolution”’, in *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 47. Anderson oscillates between two positions. The remarks quoted here are from the ‘Postscript’ to his review essay, ‘Modernity and Revolution’, but there it is modernism rather than modernity which is denounced as ‘a portmanteau concept whose only referent is the blank passage of time itself’. See Perry Anderson, ‘Modernity and Revolution’, *New Left Review* I/144 (March-April 1984), p. 113.

<sup>51</sup> Jack Goody, *Capitalism and Modernity: The Great Debate* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 67-75; Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 9-13.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Baudelaire [1863], ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Boris Groys, ‘Modernity and Contemporaneity: Mechanical vs. Digital Reproduction’, in *In the Flow*. (London: Verso, 2016), p. 137.

<sup>55</sup> Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, pp. 199-200.

On this reading, the concept of ‘modernity’ is a way of avoiding references to capitalism while effectively describing the same reality. Accordingly, Fredric Jameson argues that ‘the only satisfactory semantic meaning of modernity lies in its association with capitalism’ and recommends, in order to demonstrate this, ‘the experimental procedure of substituting capitalism for modernity in all the contexts in which the latter appears’.<sup>56</sup> Derek Sayer has similarly argued that capitalism and modernity are identical and furthermore claims that this was Marx’s position.<sup>57</sup> There are however, two reasons why a simple identification of capitalism with modernity is untenable.<sup>58</sup>

One concerns the future. As Jameson himself writes elsewhere in the work cited above, we should ‘entertain the possibility that modernity is incomplete because it could never be completed by the middle class and its economic system’, which suggests that modernity could continue to exist after the overthrow of capitalism.<sup>59</sup> Anderson is more definitive: ‘The energies of modernity, once generated by capitalism, are now ever more trapped and compromised by it.’<sup>60</sup> In other words, modernity may owe its existence to capitalism, but is not necessarily confined to it. David Frisby notes that ‘Marx himself was not a modernist in the sense of identifying himself with the experience of modernity that he outlined’.<sup>61</sup> Instead, Marx saw modernity, not only as characterising the capitalist present, but also pointing towards the socialist future. Perhaps more than any other interpreter, Marshall Berman has emphasised this dual aspect of Marx’s attitude:

The basic fact of modern life, as Marx experienced it, is that this life is radically contradictory at its base... ..miseries and mysteries fill many moderns with despair. Some would ‘get rid of modern arts, in order to get rid of modern conflicts’; others will try to balance progress in industry with neofeudal or neoabsolutist regression in politics. Marx, however, proclaims a paradigmatically modernist faith... ..a class of ‘new men’, men who are thoroughly modern, will be able to resolve the contradictions of modernity, to overcome the crushing pressures, earthquakes, weird spells, personal and social abysses, in whose midst all modern men and women are forced to live.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: An Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 13, 215.

<sup>57</sup> Derek Sayer, *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 24.

<sup>58</sup> It is of course possible to argue, as Ellen Wood does, that modernity – which she narrowly identifies with Weberian ‘rationality’ – had no necessary connection with capitalism at all. Wood argues that this form of rationality could not be detected in seventeenth-century English countryside, where capitalist social property relations prevailed, but could be found in eighteenth-century urban France under the absolutist regime, which leads Wood to further conclude that the Enlightenment itself had no connection with capitalism – like apparently everything else in history not immediately reducible to ‘capitalist social property relations’. See Ellen Meiksins Wood [1999], *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 187. For a critique, see Neil Davidson [2006], ‘Enlightenment and Anti-Capitalism’, in *Nation-States: Consciousness and Competition* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), pp. 129-141 and *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, pp. 589-594.

<sup>59</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 11. Here Jameson is partly endorsing the description of modernity as ‘unfinished’ given in Jürgen Habermas [1981], ‘Modernity – an Incomplete Project’, in *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> Anderson, ‘Postscript to “Modernity and Revolution”’, p. 55. Note, as an example of the inconsistency to which I have already referred, that this argument assumes modernity is a historical phenomenon. For a more recent ‘accelerationist’ argument for ‘socialist modernity’, see Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*. (London: Verso, 2015), pp. 69-83, 178-181.

<sup>61</sup> David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), p. 27.

<sup>62</sup> Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 19-20. The identification of Marx as a modernist was more common in continental Europe than the USA before Berman’s seminal work appeared, although still relatively rare. But see Henri Lefebvre [1962], *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959-May 1961* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 169-175, 231-238, which

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.<sup>63</sup> ‘The socialist and communist movements were fully set within the framework of the cultural program of modernity, and above all the framework of the Enlightenment and of the major revolutions’, writes Shmuel Eisenstadt: ‘Their criticism of the program of modern capitalist society revolved around their concept of the incompleteness of these modern programs.’<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> We will continue to be modern after the revolution.

The second reason for questioning the equivalence of capitalism and modernity – and the one most relevant to this chapter – 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. Political Marxists in particular have stressed that capitalism, as a set of (what they call) ‘social property relations’, is radically different from all pre-existing exploitative modes of production: ‘Only in capitalism is the dominant mode of appropriation based on the complete dispossession of direct producers, who (unlike chattel slaves) are legally free and whose surplus labour is appropriated by purely “economic” means.’<sup>66</sup> This is true, but less significant than is sometimes claimed, since the establishment of capitalism as a mode of production does not in and of itself immediately transform the lives of subaltern classes. There are two reasons for this.

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 the case of the former, rather than ‘a fundamental modification in the real nature of the labour process...the fact is that capital subsumes the labour process as it finds it, that is to say, it

---

also invokes the same speech by Marx. See Karl Marx [1855], ‘Speech at the Anniversary of the *People’s Paper*’, in *Surveys from Exile*, vol. 2 of *Political Writings*, edited David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin/New Left Review, 1974).

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Aric McBay, Derrick Jensen and Lierre Keith, *Deep Green Resistance: Strategy to Save the Planet* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011), p. 439 and John Zerzan [1993], ‘Postscript to *Future Primitive or the Transition*’, in *Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2002), p. 117.

<sup>64</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’, *Daedalus* 129 (Winter 2000), p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Löwy, ‘The Revolution is the Emergency Brake: Walter Benjamin’s Political-Ecological Currency’, in *On Changing the World: Essays in Political Philosophy, from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin* (Second expanded edition, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), pp. 186-189.

<sup>66</sup> Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, p. 96 and pp. 94-105 more generally. Central to this conception of capitalism is the notion of ‘market dependence’ (or even ‘market compulsion’) and the claim that this only emerged as the result of a purely internal process in England, and even there only in the countryside. I have discussed the problems with this approach elsewhere (Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, chapter 17), but one point needs to be made here. This definition is an ‘ideal type’, not one which has actually existed in pure form anywhere – a point which Robert Brenner, the founder of this school, has himself made: ‘I do not contend that such economies ever existed in pure form, though rough approximations can be found in seventeenth-century England and seventeenth-century northern Netherlands.’ See Robert Brenner, ‘Competition and Class: A Reply to Foster and McNally’, *Monthly Review*, vol. 51, no. 7 (December 1999), p. 44.

takes over an *existing labour process*, developed by a different and more archaic modes of production’:

For example, handicraft, a mode of agriculture corresponding to a small, independent peasant economy. ... The work may become more intensive, its duration may be extended, it may be more continuous or orderly under the eye of the interested capitalist, but in themselves these changes do not affect the character of the labour process, the actual mode of working. This stands in striking contrast to the development of a *specifically capitalist mode of production* (large-scale industry, etc.); the latter not only transforms the situations of the various agents of production, it also revolutionizes their actual mode of labour and the real nature of the labour process as a whole.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, the 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 particularly 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. Peer Vries notes: ‘The type of growth that became normal in the industrial world had simply not existed in the past.’<sup>68</sup> 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, as Kenneth Pomeranz notes, down to around 1800:

Far from being unique...the most developed parts of Western Europe seem to have shared crucial economic features – commercialization, commodification of goods, land, and labour, market-driven growth, and adjustment by households of both fertility and labour allocation to economic trends – with other densely populated core areas in Eurasia.<sup>69</sup>

It is possible that Pomeranz is being insufficiently attentive to the difference between capitalist and non-capitalist social property relations here, but the central point is accurate: 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. Our estimations of GDP for both areas were 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.<sup>70</sup>

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. As Justin Rosenberg points out: ‘Imperial China sustained its developmental lead over several centuries; yet the radiation of its achievements never produced in Europe anything like the long, convulsive process of combined development which capitalist industrialization

---

<sup>67</sup> Karl Marx [1867], *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin/New Left Review, 1976, p. 1021 and pp. 1019-1038 more generally).

<sup>68</sup> Peter Vries, *Via Peking to Manchester: Britain, the Industrial Revolution, and China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003), p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern world Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 107.

<sup>70</sup> Hobsbawm *The Age of Empire*, p. 15.

in Europe almost immediately initiated in China.<sup>71</sup> It is important to understand, however, that the decline of Imperial China was not simply an effect of direct or indirect Western intervention, but of its own internally generated limits to development:

After 1800, things changed very fast. Conditions in Asia deteriorated sharply, as continuing population growth ran into the traditional energy and land limits that constrain all organic societies. Indeed, it is reasonable to think that Europe and Asia had similar material conditions because prior to industrialization *all* societies were limited in what they could produce by the ability of farmers to produce food with organic inputs and muscle power, and of manufacturers to produce products with organic raw materials and wind and water power.<sup>72</sup>

For both reasons then, ‘it seems reasonable to argue that it was only with the British Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century that modernity received its material form’, as Krishan Kumar explains:

Partly this is because of the very explosiveness of the development – a speeding up of economic evolution to the point where it took on revolutionary proportions. Modernity therefore has a before-and-after quality that is also the hall-mark of revolution. With the Industrial Revolution, such a quality increasingly became evident to contemporaries, to the extent that for many of them the only significant division in human history appeared that between pre-industrial and industrial civilization.<sup>73</sup>

For Ronald Hartwell too, industrialisation is ‘*the* great discontinuity of modern history’.<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup>

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, as Osterhammel notes, ‘urbanization was a much more widespread process than industrialisation: cities grew and became more dense even where industry was not the driving force’. After noting that many of the greatest European cities, including London, had never been truly industrial, but administrative and commercial, he concludes: ‘Urbanization is a truly global process, industrialization a sporadic and uneven formation of growth centres.’<sup>76</sup> Osterhammel’s point about London can be generalised to some other historic cities whose existence long predated capitalism, let alone industrialisation. ‘In a very important sense

---

<sup>71</sup> Justin Rosenberg, ‘International Relations – the “Higher Bullshit”: A Reply to the Globalization Theory Debate’, *International Politics*, vol. 44, no. 4 (2007), pp. 44-45.

<sup>72</sup> Jack Goldstone, ‘Capitalist Origins, the Advent of Modernity, and Coherent Explanation: A Response to Joseph M. Bryant’, *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2008), pp. 125-126.

<sup>73</sup> Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>74</sup> Ronald Max Hartwell, *The Industrial Revolution and Economic Growth* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 57.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, ‘The ‘Anthropocene’’, *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP) Global Change Newsletter* 41 (May 2000); see also Christophe Bonneuil and Jean Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (London: Verso, 2016), p3, p. 50 and Robert Macfarlane ‘What have we done?’ *The Guardian* (2 April 2016). The Anthropocene has itself subdivided into three stages, respectively beginning around 1750, 1945 and 2000, for which see Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, pp. 50-53.

<sup>76</sup> Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*, pp. 149-50.



Vienna and Berlin were much more typically “modernist” cities, almost along the lines of American cities like Chicago, than were cities like London and Paris which underwent slower and more organic growth’, writes Scott Lash.<sup>77</sup> 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: ‘If Vienna is not Berlin, neither is Boston Chicago.’<sup>78</sup> There is unevenness between the cities of capitalist modernity as well as combination within them.

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. Berman has identified ‘the unease and uncertainty that comes from constant motion, change, and diversity’ with ‘the experience of modern *capitalism*’; Wood however claims that this is merely ‘the age-old fear and fascination aroused by the *city*’, and what Berman has to say ‘about the experience of “modern life” could have been said by the Italian countrydweller arriving in the ancient city of Rome’.<sup>79</sup> Now, it is certainly the case that Berman’s specific example (Paris in the 1760s) could be challenged on the grounds that capitalism was not highly developed in France at this time, but Wood is making a general argument that rural populations encountering the city are 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 Berman is drawing attention to a qualitatively different situation.

In fact, the experience of urban life under industrial capitalism was quite different from any predecessor: ‘In comparison with the village or ‘pre-modernist’ city, not just the sense of time but the experience of space was altered’, writes Scott Lash.<sup>80</sup> There is evidence for this from first-hand observations of the English industrial cities. Here is Engels reporting on the changed forms of human interaction in Manchester during the 1840s:

The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other, are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? And have they not, in the end, to seek happiness in the same way, by the same means? And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd, while it occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance. The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space. And, however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow selfseeking, is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city.<sup>81</sup>

Engels is here registering the destructive impact of city life on the first generations of the industrial working class, 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

---

<sup>77</sup> Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 207.

<sup>78</sup> Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p. 177 and pp. 165-177 more generally.

<sup>79</sup> Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, pp. 17-18; Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, p. 187.

<sup>80</sup> Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*, p. 207.

<sup>81</sup> Frederick Engels [1845], *The Condition of the Working-Class in England: From Personal Observations and Authentic Sources*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 4 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p. 329.

inhabitants still found this deeply disturbing. Writing in the early 1870s, the Scottish poet James Thompson drew on his personal experience of Glasgow earlier in the century to invoke a city constructed from ‘ruins of an unremembered past’:

The City is of Night, but not of Sleep;  
 There sweet sleep is not for the weary brain;  
 The pitiless hours like years and ages creep,  
 A night seems termless hell. This dreadful strain  
 Of thought and consciousness which never ceases,  
 Or which some moments' stupor but increases,  
 This, worse than woe, makes wretches there insane.<sup>82</sup>

But for every nay-sayer like Thompson, 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. George Simmel, writing in Germany before the First World War, described the impact of urbanism on city-dwellers in this evocative passage from his essay, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’:

The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli. Man is a creature whose existence is dependent on differences, i.e., his mind is stimulated by the difference between present impressions and those which have preceded. Lasting impressions, the slightness in their differences, the habituated regularity of their course and contrasts between them, consume, so to speak, less mental energy than the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli. To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions – with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life – it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organisation as creatures dependent on differences, a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence.<sup>83</sup>

These are 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. How were these experiences represented in culture?

## 2.2. Modernism: The Cultural Logic of Uneven and Combined Development

It is difficult to disagree with the Warwick Research Collective that ‘the *cultural* aspects of Trotsky’s initiating formulation concerning the “amalgamation of archaic with more contemporary forms”’ have received little attention – certainly in comparison with current interest levels in International Relations and the social and political sciences more generally.<sup>84</sup> The authors of this assessment apart, applications of uneven and combined development in the field of culture have often involves attempts – like those of Bhabra and Keucheyan in other disciplinary contexts – to treat it as synonymous or at least compatible

<sup>82</sup> James Thompson [1874], *The City of Dreadful Night* (Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1993), p 30, lines 36-37; p. 31, lines 71-77.

<sup>83</sup> George Simmel [1903], ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’, in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, edited by Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 325.

<sup>84</sup> Warwick Research Collective, ‘World Literature in the Context of Uneven and Combined Development’, p. 6.

with more contemporary notions, above all, ‘hybridity’. Take, for example, this sentence by Gareth Williams:

The radically hybrid bearing of Latin American literary expression – a hybridity that emerges as a result of the historical realities of uneven and combined development; as a result of the disjunctive simultaneity of its subaltern/metropolis articulations; and ultimately as a result of Latin America’s profoundly nonunitary geopolitical location within world history – embodies and reproduces (perhaps) the discursive tensions (the encounters and disencounters) that are capable of opening up the supply-lines of reflection to a certain kind of futurity.<sup>85</sup>

Amid the general incomprehensibility of this passage, one relatively clear statement presents hybridity as a function of uneven and combined development; but the former was characteristic of human societies long before the emergence of capitalism, let alone capitalist industrialisation.<sup>86</sup> As Eric Wolf has demonstrated, the notion that the Americas consisted of self-contained, indigenous societies was false at least a hundred years before Columbus inadvertently ‘discovered’ them:

Conquest, incorporation, recombination, and commerce...marked the New World. In both hemispheres populations impinged upon other populations through permeable social boundaries, creating intergrading, interwoven social and cultural entities. If there were any isolated societies these were but a temporary phenomenon – a group pushed to the edge of a zone of interaction and left to itself for a brief moment of time. Thus, the social scientist’s model of distinct and separate systems, and of a timeless ‘precontact’ ethnographic present, does not adequately depict the situation before European expansion; much less can it comprehend the worldwide system of links that would be created by that expansion.<sup>87</sup>

Of course, once capitalism had emerged it increased the number and intensified the extent of these encounters, mainly through moving people, often forcibly, around the globe, by slavery, colonialism and migration. ‘Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic’, writes Edward Said, who also notes that this is as ‘true of the contemporary United States’ as it is of the Global South.<sup>88</sup> But even within the context of multiple oppressions resulting from conquest and colonization, at least some of the populations which inhabited both North and South America were able to draw on techniques and styles of European origin in their own forms of cultural production, as Peter Wollen explains:

---

<sup>85</sup> Gareth Williams, *The Other Side of the Popular: Neoliberalism and Subalternity* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 155. Anyone looking examples of bad writing with which to update George Orwell’s discussion of the subject should start with this quotation. For his original examples, see [1946]. ‘Politics and the English Language’, in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 4, *In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 157-158.

<sup>86</sup> For examples dating back to the fifth millennium BCE, see Jerry H. Bentley, ‘Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History’, *American Historical Review*, vol. 101, no. 3 (June 1996).

<sup>87</sup> Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the Peoples without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 71. It is only fair to note that Rosenberg draws on this and other passages from Wolf to support his case for a transhistoric interpretation of uneven and combined development; but although the latter is here surveying the world around 1400 CE, the type of social interpenetration he describes can be found much further back in history. If every type of human group interaction can be encompassed by the notion of uneven and combined development, however, then the term is virtually co-extensive with history itself, at which point it has lost any analytic specificity. See Justin Rosenberg, ‘Why is there no International Historical Sociology?’, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, no. 3 (September 2006), pp. 314-316.

<sup>88</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. xxix.

...the flow from core to periphery and its appropriation by artists on the periphery is nothing new. The rich nineteenth-century tradition of Haida soapstone carving developed directly because of the new market of sailors and travellers, who began to visit the Northwest Coast [of North America] for trade or tourism. ... Spanish baroque was appropriated by indigenous artists in Mexico, and increasingly complex forms emerged (as we can see in the work of Frida Kahlo and, more recently, artists on both sides of the Mexican-United States frontier). Indeed this new baroque once again is beginning to redefine Americanness, in a complex composite of differential times and cultures.<sup>89</sup>

The direction of fusion has by no means been all one way. If Kahlo absorbed aspects of Spanish Baroque in Mexico, then her contemporary, Jackson Pollock, absorbed those of the Mexican muralists – which were themselves hybrids – and the Native America Navajo tribes in the USA.<sup>90</sup> It is the temporal and not merely geographical distance between the elements which are brought together that differentiates the cultures of uneven and combined development from those of pre-existing forms of hybridity.

The experience of capitalist modernity was one of the conditions for the emergence of modernism, of which Kahlo and Pollock were leading representatives. Trotsky himself was alert to the relationship between modernism and the experience of capitalist modernity in its urban form, as in these remarks on Futurism: ‘Urbanism (city culture) sits deep in the subconscious of Futurism, and the epithets, the etymology, the syntax and the rhythm of Futurism are only an attempt to give artistic form to the new spirit of the cities which has conquered consciousness.’<sup>91</sup> He did not, however, explicitly link modernism as a general movement with uneven and combined development except in a handful of passing comments. Reporting on the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 he wrote:

Like all backward countries, Bulgaria is incapable of creating new political and cultural forms through a free struggle of its own inner forces: it is obliged to assimilate the ready-made cultural products that European civilization has developed in the course of history.

However, in addition to referencing technological and political forms, Trotsky then goes on to mention ‘other spheres’: ‘Bulgarian literature lacks traditions, and has not been able to develop its own internal continuity. It has had to subordinate its unfermented content to modern and contemporary forms created under a quite different cultural zenith.’<sup>92</sup> Ten years later, he similarly noted how ‘the backward countries which were without any special degree of spiritual culture, reflected in their ideology the achievements of the advanced countries more brilliantly and strongly’. Eighteenth and nineteenth German philosophy was one example of this, but so too was Futurism, ‘which obtained its most brilliant expression, not in America and not in Germany, but in Italy and Russia’.<sup>93</sup>

### 2.2.1. *Theories of Modernism: Lukács, Greenberg, Jameson*

Few discussions of modernism have, however, attempted to explicitly relate it to Trotsky’s concept. One writer who might have been expected to do so was Clement Greenberg, doyen

<sup>89</sup> Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 209.

<sup>90</sup> Leanhard Emmerling, *Pollock* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2007), pp. 14, 18-22; Steven Naifeh and Gregory Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), pp. 285-289; pp. 298-302; pp. 337-338; Kirk Varnedoe with Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), pp. 25-27, 32-33.

<sup>91</sup> Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p. 195.

<sup>92</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1912], ‘In a Backward Country’, in *The Balkan Wars, 1912-13: The War Correspondence of Leon Trotsky* (New York: Monad Press, 1980), p. 49.

<sup>93</sup> Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p. 158.

of post-war American art critics and himself a former Trotskyist sympathiser. In a late interview from 1967 Greenberg actually invoked combined development to explain why New York took over from Paris as the world centre of Modernist painting in the 1940s:

...we Americans felt so much further behind the French, or behind Paris, that we tried much harder to catch up – just catch up. Then what Marx called the law of combined development came into operation: the strenuous effort you make to catch up sends you ahead in the end; you don't just catch up, you overtake.<sup>94</sup>

Marx had no theory of combined development and the process to which Greenberg refers ('catch up and overtake') is in any case an example of *uneven* development. Nevertheless, Greenberg's rather more cogent earlier writings constitute, along with those of Georg Lukács and Fredrick Jameson, one of the three most important Marxist attempts to periodise and define modernism. Reviewing these in order of their appearance will allow us to see how uneven and combined development offers a more general and comprehensive alternative to them.

For Lukács, modernism is indicative of bourgeois decline. Realism, from Shakespeare and Cervantes onwards, had been the literary tendency most expressive of the bourgeois world view during its prolonged struggle against the feudal nobility and the absolutist state. The realist novel in particular was the form which played that role between the French Revolution in 1789 and the failure of the revolutions of 1848–9. Lukács held consistently to the position that the connection between class position and aesthetic form remains even after the revolutionary phase of bourgeois history is over, but to different effect, for the art of the subsequent period is therefore the obverse of that produced earlier. Lukács is absolutely explicit about the date after which this reversal takes place, writing that 'the decline of bourgeois ideology set in with the end of the 1848 revolution'.<sup>95</sup> From around that date – and certainly no later than 1871 – the bourgeoisie are said to have abandoned the struggle to reconstruct society in its own image, and settled instead for an alliance with their former aristocratic enemies against a now infinitely more threatening proletariat. In other words, the bourgeoisie had gone from a class challenging for power and anxious to reveal the workings of the society they were in the process of conquering, to one in control, all too aware of the class threatening their position, and as anxious to conceal the reality of this new situation as they had been to confront the old.

The realist novel therefore enters a decline after 1848: 'The evolution of bourgeois society after 1848 destroyed the subjective conditions which made a great realism possible.' In the first place, these changes affected the novelists themselves: 'The old writers were participants in the social struggle and their activities as writers were either part of this struggle or a reflection, an ideological and literary solution, of the great problems of the time.'<sup>96</sup> Dissatisfied with the world which the bourgeoisie had made, but unable to embrace the alternative, the novelists first retreated to reporting the surface of events, to mere naturalism: 'As writers grew more and more unable to participate in the life of capitalism as their sort of life, they grew less and less capable of producing real plots and action.'<sup>97</sup> Then, in a further declension, came the retreat inwards signalled by the rise of modernism. 'Modernist literature thus replaces concrete typicality with

---

<sup>94</sup> Clement Greenberg [1967], 'Interview Conducted with Lily Leino', in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 304.

<sup>95</sup> György Lukács [1952], *The Destruction of Reason* (London: Merlin Press, 1980), p. 309.

<sup>96</sup> György Lukács [1950], *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, Gorki and Others* (London: Merlin Press, 19720), p. 140.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

abstract particularity.<sup>98</sup> Lukács does allow, however, that this shift did not take place uniformly. In societies which had neither experienced the bourgeois revolution nor completed the transition to capitalism, the conditions still obtained for great realist writing to take place. In particular he refers to the work of Heinrich Ibsen (1828–1906) in Norway and, in particular, Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) in Russia, but this could only be a temporary salvation for the form.<sup>99</sup> Lukács thus accounts for some late exceptions in a manner compatible with his general thesis. In the case of others which are clearly associated with the triumphant bourgeois world, however, he simply – and not very convincingly – cites *uneven* development without any attempt at explanation: ‘Of course we can find many latecomers – especially in literature and art – for whose work this thesis by no means holds good (we need only mention Dickens and Keller, Courbet and Daumier).’<sup>100</sup>

Largely consistent up till this point as a purely historical argument, Lukács now shifts ground and asserts that, far from being tied to a bourgeoisie which no longer has any need for it, realism has the potential instead to become a method appropriate to the cultural politics of the working class. Thus, in one of his contributions to the debates of the 1930s, he wrote that:

Through the mediation of realist literature the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great progressive and democratic epochs of human history. This will prepare it for the new type of revolutionary democracy that is represented by the Popular Front... Whereas in the case of the major realists, easier access produces a richly complex yield in human terms, the broad mass of the people can learn nothing from avant-garde literature. Precisely because the latter is devoid of reality and life, it foists on to its readers a narrow and subjectivist attitude to life (analogous to a sectarian point of view in political terms).<sup>101</sup>

Is realism a method destined to decline with the revolutionary potential of the bourgeoisie which gave it birth then, or one which, detached from its origins, still represents a resource for critical artists today? And the contradictions do not stop there. ‘Lukács asserts that realistic literature has been produced by both bourgeois and socialist writers’, notes George Parkinson:

That he should assert this of socialist writers is not surprising, but may seem strange that he should grant the existence of bourgeois realists. We have seen that realism implies a grasp of reality; but in *History and Class Consciousness*... Lukács argues that the bourgeoisie, by virtue of its very nature as a class, is incapable of grasping a totality, which is something that only the proletariat can achieve.

Does Lukács, as this would suggest, therefore expect realist literature to be produced, if not by proletarians, then by writers who adopt ‘the perspective of the proletariat’, those whose sense of totality is informed by Marxist theory? No. ‘Lukács’ explanation of the existence of bourgeois realism is that some bourgeois writers were capable of grasping a totality after a fashion, though their knowledge of this totality was class-limited and their dialectics were only instinctive.’<sup>102</sup> In fact, the later Lukács goes out of his way to argue that realism can be produced by writers who are neither Marxists nor even socialists. These contradictions flow from the Stalinist political tradition within which Lukács stood during the period when his major works of criticism were written and they shatter the coherence of his historical argument, with which there are nevertheless two serious difficulties.

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, pp. 134-137.

<sup>100</sup> Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, p. 309.

<sup>101</sup> György Lukács [1938], ‘Realism in the Balance’, in *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp. 56-57.

<sup>102</sup> George Parkinson, *Georg Lukács* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 89.

One is that the definition of realism which Lukács gives is quite specific to literature and this raises the question of the extent to which it can be generalised across the entire spectrum of artistic production. Some ill-considered comments on Schönberg apart, Lukács usually restricted himself to the discussion of writers, yet despite this refusal to engage with disciplines outside his professional specialism, he nevertheless made sweeping general statements about realism and modernism on the basis of literary developments alone. Now, while it is at least possible to compare Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* with James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* on a formal level; it is not possible to compare *The Magic Mountain* with Jackson Pollock's painting *Autumn Rhythm*. Considerations on the realist novel cannot be the basis of a discussion of modernist art – which includes not only literature, but painting, sculpture, architecture and cinema. A modernist painting can scarcely be expected to fulfil the same function as a realist novel; indeed, a realist painting cannot be expected to fulfil the same function as a realist novel – and in some key modernist disciplines—architecture, for example—there are styles which precede it, but no 'realist' school with which comparisons can be made. Music is perhaps the most obvious example. As Adorno wrote:

If we listen to Beethoven and do not hear anything of the revolutionary bourgeoisie – not the echo of its slogans, the need to realise them, the cry for that totality in which reason and freedom are to have their warrant – we understand Beethoven no better than does the listener who cannot follow his pieces' purely musical content, the inner history that happens to their themes.<sup>103</sup>

Beethoven's work is surely as expressive of bourgeois ascendancy as Scott or Balzac, but in what sense can it be described as 'realist'? In other words, even if we accept for the moment that Lukács makes a coherent case (which is not the same as a convincing case) for the decline of literature after the bourgeois revolution, the very way in which his categories are drawn from literature make that case difficult to extend to other mediums other than by assertion.

The other difficulty with Lukács's position is summarised in a statement from late in his life: 'The author of these essays subscribes to Goethe's observation: "Literature deteriorates only as mankind deteriorates."<sup>104</sup> As Anderson writes: "The basic error of Lukács's optic here is its *evolutionism*: time, that is, differs from one epoch to another, but *within* each epoch all sectors of social reality move in synchrony with each other, such that decline at one level must be reflected in descent at every other."<sup>105</sup> Anderson rightly rejects this, arguing that transformations in culture do not simply occur in lockstep with those of the economic or the political; to imagine that they do is to ignore the distinction between the 'immediate and mediated effects of the "economic structure" upon the various social institutions' under capitalism to which Lukács himself had earlier drawn attention.<sup>106</sup> At one point in his later work Lukács still appeared to recognise this, quoting a passage from the *Grundrisse* in which Marx argues that uneven development means developments in art do not necessarily coincide with those of the economy: 'In art it is recognised that specific flourishing periods hardly conform to the general development of society, that is, of the material base, the skeleton, so to speak, which produces them.'<sup>107</sup> The point endorsed here by Lukács is perfectly correct, but he ignores what Marx then goes on to say, which is not at all compatible with his general position:

<sup>103</sup> Theodor W. Adorno [1962], *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury, 1976), p. 62.

<sup>104</sup> György Lukács [1965/1970], 'Preface', in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, edited by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), p. 9.

<sup>105</sup> Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', p. 103.

<sup>106</sup> György Lukács [1923], 'The Changing Function of Historical Materialism', in *History and Class Consciousness: Essays in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 235.

<sup>107</sup> György Lukács, 'Marx and Engels on Aesthetics', in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, p. 67.

Is the view of nature and of social relations on which Greek imagination and hence Greek [mythology] is based possible with self – acting mule spindles and railways and locomotives and electrical telegraphs? What chance has Vulcan against Roberts and Co., Jupiter against the lightning rod and Hermes against the Credit Mobilier? ... From another side: is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the Illiad with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary conditions for epic poetry disappear? <sup>108</sup>

There are two aspects to what Marx is saying here, one concerned with form and the other with technology; it is the former which is most relevant to Lukács' arguments. Marx does indeed reject the idea that art must change in lockstep with socio-economic development, but the disjunction between the two is not *infinitely* extendable to the point of complete autonomy: some forms of artistic practice are so specific to a particular time that they cannot be practised outside it to any serious effect. As Jameson writes: 'We cannot...return to aesthetic practices elaborated on the basis of historical situations and dilemmas which are no longer ours.'<sup>109</sup> James Wood points out that one of the functions of the novelist is to explore consciousness, yet there are greater difficulties in doing so today than at the height of the historical novel:

For consciousness and the construction of consciousness has changed, and is changing, rapidly. In fact, the rapidity of that change is one of the new challenges for writers. The reason that historical novels are nowadays almost always failures or of no artistic merit has to do with the speed of change. Tolstoy was able to reach back 60 years to the Napoleonic Wars because he had a confidence that those 60 years had made hardly any difference to the kind of humans he was writing about...<sup>110</sup>

But this is not now the case, and has not been since decades before Tolstoy died. As Henry James wrote to one practitioner of the historical novel over a hundred years ago:

The 'historical novel' is, for me, condemned...to a fatal cheapness...You may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints, as much as you like – the real thing is almost impossible to do, and in its essence the whole effect is as nought: I mean the invention, the representation of the old CONSCIOUSNESS, the soil, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make our, that make the modern world were non-existent. You have to think with your modern apparatus a man, a woman – or rather fifty – whose own thinking was intensely otherwise conditioned, you have to simplify back by an amazing tour de force – and even then it's all humbug.<sup>111</sup>

In other words, Lukács is right that the realist novel (as he conceived it, at least) could not survive indefinitely, but not for the reasons he gives.

For Greenberg, unlike Lukács, modernism is not an unmediated *expression* of bourgeois cowardice and vulgarity, but rather a hostile *reaction* to these characteristics: 'It was no accident...that the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically – and geographically too –

---

<sup>108</sup> Karl Marx [1857-8], *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books/New Left Review, 1973), pp. 110-111. The passage quoted by Lukács above comes from an earlier and inferior translation.

<sup>109</sup> Fredric Jameson [1984], 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 50.

<sup>110</sup> James Wood, 'Life Just Isn't Like That', *The Guardian* (8 January 2000).

<sup>111</sup> Henry James [1905], James to Sarah Orne Hewlett, October 5, 1905, in *Henry James Letters*, vol. 4, 1895-1916 edited by Leon Edel (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 208.



with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe'. Greenberg argues that the revolutionary movements of the time allowed the avant-garde both to 'isolate their concept of the "bourgeois" in order to define what they were not' and gave them 'the courage to assert themselves as aggressively as they did against the prevailing standards of society'. However, although avant-garde artists shared with Marxists a revulsion at the bourgeoisie, this was mainly on aesthetic rather than socio-economic grounds; and they were as much removed from the working class movement as they were from the philistinism of the Moneybags. However, while they could remain aloof from the former, they could not entirely escape the latter; having abandoned aristocratic patronage, 'the avant-garde remained attached to bourgeois society precisely because it needed its money': 'No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of the society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold.'<sup>112</sup> This contradictory relationship with the bourgeoisie was unprecedented for an artistic movement, although it was to become the norm as the 19<sup>th</sup> century went on:

Romanticism was the last great tendency following directly from bourgeois society that was able to inspire and stimulate the profoundly responsible artist – the artist conscious of certain inflexible obligations to the standards of his craft. By 1848, Romanticism had exhausted. After that the impulse, although indeed it had to originate in bourgeois society, could only come in the guise of a denial of that society, as a turning away from it. It was not to be an about – face towards a new society, but an emigration to Bohemia which was to be art's sanctuary from capitalism. It was to be the task of the avant-garde to perform in opposition to bourgeois society the function of finding new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of that same society, without at the same time succumbing to its ideological divisions and its refusal to permit the arts to be their justification.<sup>113</sup>

Greenberg pointed out that where there is an 'advance-guard' there is usually also a 'rear-guard'. Industrial capitalism sucked the rural masses into the new urban centres of production, obliterating or making irrelevant the folk culture they had known in the countryside. What would replace it? 'To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.' Kitsch, as Greenberg describes it is 'mechanical', formulaic, relies on 'vicarious experience' and 'faked sensations': 'Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time.' But there was nevertheless a connection between kitsch and the avant-garde: 'The precondition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends.' But there is a central difference: 'If the avant-garde imitates the processes of art, kitsch...imitates its effects.'<sup>114</sup> Greenberg insists that only by crossing the divide between aesthetic and political rejection of capitalism – by the mutual embrace of avant-garde and vanguard, if you like – was there any possibility of defending what was of value in culture against the remorseless advance of kitsch.<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>112</sup> Clement Greenberg [1939], 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgements, 1939-1944*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 7, 10-11.

<sup>113</sup> Clement Greenberg [1940], 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, p. 28.

<sup>114</sup> Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', pp. 12, 17.

<sup>115</sup> For anticipations of this position, see Walter Benjamin [1938], 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, *1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 64-66. A similar account of

Timothy Clark has described Greenberg as being an advocate of ‘Eliotic Trotskyism’ in which the defence of the artistic values of the bourgeoisie in the period of its ascendancy are necessary for the continuation of culture as such:

They are the repository, as it were, of affect and intelligence that once inhered in a complex form of life but do so no longer, they are the concrete form of intensity and self-consciousness, the only one left, and therefore the form to be preserved at all costs and somehow kept apart from the surrounding desolation.<sup>116</sup>

Greenberg’s attachment to Trotskyism was however considerably weaker than Lukács’ adherence to Stalinism, and by the late 1940s at the latest the former had abandoned his earlier revolutionary commitments, a shift which did not leave his theory of modernism untouched. From being a defence against appropriation by the bourgeoisie, modernism becomes an internally-generated process of disciplinary self-purification.

The differences from his earlier positions can be seen most clearly in the essay ‘Modernist Painting’ (1960). Greenberg argues that before the Enlightenment, art functioned in a similar way to religion; indeed, it usually functioned as an extension of religion. With the triumph of rationalist consciousness much of religion’s explanatory role was removed and it was reduced to the level of entertainment and, as Greenberg has it, therapy. ‘The arts could save themselves from this levelling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained by any other kind of activity.’ But the Enlightenment not only posed this problem, it also offered a solution. Beginning with the work of Kant, modernism declared itself as a self-critical tendency in Western culture:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. ... Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art. ... Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before one sees the picture itself, one sees a Modernist picture as a picture first. ... Modernist painting in its latest phase has not abandoned the representation of recognisable objects in principle. What it has abandoned in principle is the representation of the kind of space that recognisable objects can inhabit. ... To achieve autonomy, painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture, and it is in its efforts to do this, and not so much – I repeat – to exclude the representational or literary, that painting has made itself abstract.<sup>117</sup>

Unlike Lukács, Greenberg does not use a single style within a single discipline as a model for all contemporary artistic production, although, as an art critic, he is obviously most concerned with painting. In 1960 he began ‘Modernist Painting’ with a declaration of the universal significance of modernism: ‘Modernism includes more than art and literature. By now it covers almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture.’<sup>118</sup> If Greenberg’s conception of modernism avoids confining it to a particular discipline, he does reduce it to a particular style or approach, and in this, at least, the later Greenberg was consistent with the earlier. In 1944 he had declared that:

---

the origins of the modern artist outlined by Greenberg was given, nearly 50 years later, by Raymond Williams, without reference of the earlier thinker. Given the academic specialisation which means that literary critics are unlikely to be acquainted with the work of art critics, this was probably not plagiarism on the part of the latter, but it is indicative of how little Greenberg’s work has been absorbed into the intellectual culture of the Left. See Raymond Williams [1987], ‘When was Modernism?’ In *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, edited by Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>116</sup> Timothy J. Clark [1982], ‘Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art’, in *Pollock and After: the Critical Debate*, edited by Francis Frascina (London: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 54. See also p. 50.

<sup>117</sup> Clement Greenberg [1960], ‘Modernist Painting’, in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, pp. 85-88.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Poetry is lyric and ‘pure’; the serious novel has become either confessional or highly abstract, as with Joyce or Stein; architecture subordinates itself to function and the construction engineer; music has abandoned the programme. Let painting confine itself to the disposition pure and simple of colour and line, and not intrigue us by association with things we can experience more authentically elsewhere.<sup>119</sup>

This was the basis of his rejection of Surrealism – it was figurative, and no matter how bizarre the juxtapositions involved in Surrealist painting, it was consequently a literary form.<sup>120</sup>

Is this the sum total of modernism though? Eugene Lunn argues that there were four features of modernism common to all art forms: ‘aesthetic self-consciousness or self-reflexiveness; ‘simultaneity, juxtaposition, or “montage”’; ‘paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty’; and “dehumanisation” and the demise of the integrated individual personality.’<sup>121</sup> Yet only the first features in the Greenberg’s conception of modernism, here expressed in relation to Joyce: ‘*Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* seem to be, above all...the reduction of experience to expression for the sake of expression, the expression mattering more than what is being expressed.’<sup>122</sup> But as George Orwell noted of the first of these novels:

*Ulysses* could not have been written by someone who was merely dabbling in word-patterns; it is the product of a special vision of life, the vision of a Catholic who has lost his faith. What Joyce is saying is “Here is life without God. Just look at it!” and his technical innovations, important though they are, are primarily to serve this purpose.<sup>123</sup>

More recent commentators like Colin McCabe have suggested that the content of certain chapters in the novel is specifically related to Irish politics: ‘The resonances and allusions of [the Aeolus section] indicate that the paralysis of Irish politics is a result of the illusions about class antagonisms that were fostered by nationalist ideology.’<sup>124</sup>

But even if we accept that one tendency within modernism has indeed been towards what we can refer to in shorthand as ‘abstraction’, there is more than one reason why this should be the case. One might be that artists were attempting to transcend their own historical moment. Boris Groys argues that the avant-garde had set themselves the following questions:

How could art continue under the permanent destruction of cultural tradition and the familiar world that is a characteristic condition of the modern age, with its technological, political and social revolutions? Or, to put it in different terms: How can art resist the destructiveness of progress? How does one make art that will escape permanent change – art that is atemporal, transhistorical?

<sup>119</sup> Clement Greenberg [1944], ‘Abstract Art’, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, p. 203.

<sup>120</sup> Clement Greenberg [1944], ‘Surrealist Painting’, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1.

<sup>121</sup> Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (London: Verso, 1982), p. 39 and pp. 34-42 more generally. As Alex Callinicos points out, the characteristics identified by Lunn as constitutive of modernism have subsequently been ascribed to postmodernism by figures like Charles Jenks, which one of many reasons why the existence of the latter as a distinct set of artistic practices should be in doubt. See Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), pp. 12-14. On the specific question of how the modernist device of Collage has been wrongly claimed for postmodernism, see Brandon Taylor, *Modernism, Post-Modernism, Realism: A Critical Perspective for Art* (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press, 1987), pp. 53-65

<sup>122</sup> Greenberg, ‘Avant Garde and Kitsch’, p. 10.

<sup>123</sup> George Orwell [1940], ‘Inside the Whale’, in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 1, *An Age Like This, 1920-1940*, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1970), p. 557.

<sup>124</sup> Colin McCabe *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (Houndmills: Macmillan 1978), p. 140.

This was written in relation to the Russian pre-revolutionary Constructivism, but the point is of general application: one way of producing an ‘art for all time’ might be to remove from it any of the recognisable markers of history or contemporaneity.<sup>125</sup> Another reason might be the one that Greenberg himself had given earlier in his career. He was not alone in doing so. In 1931 Walter Benjamin wrote a letter in which he commented on the attitude a committed writer should take to his work, faced with the prospect that it might be used in unintended ways by the class enemy: ‘Should he not...denature them, like ethyl alcohol, and make them definitively and reliably unusable for the counter-revolution at the risk that no one will be able to use them?’<sup>126</sup> Although none of the Abstract Expressionists would have known Benjamin’s name, let alone his work, during the late 1940s, the strategy he outlined was the one which some of them, at least, pursued as the Cold War intensified. Serge Guilbaut writes that:

Rothko tried to purge his art of any sign that could convey a precise image, for fear of being assimilated by society. Still went so far as to refuse at various times to exhibit his paintings publicly because he was afraid critics would deform or obliterate the content embedded in his abstract forms.<sup>127</sup>

In fact, the danger would not come from critics misrepresenting the content of his work but from critics – of whom Greenberg was in the, as it were, advance-guard – misrepresenting his work as having no content. There are two issues here.

The first is the distinction between ‘subject’ and ‘content’. The early Greenberg was aware of the difference: ‘Subject matter as distinguished from content: in the sense that every work of art must have content, but that the subject matter is something the artist does or does not have in mind when he is actually at work.’<sup>128</sup> The later, not so much:

I, who am considered an arch-‘formalist’, used to indulge in...talk about ‘content’ myself. If I do not do so any longer it is because it came to me, dismayingly, some years ago that I could always assert the opposite of whatever it was I did say about ‘content’ and not get found out; that I could say almost anything I pleased about “content” and sound plausible.’<sup>129</sup> Now, at one level this is a necessary caution against ‘reading-in.’<sup>130</sup>

Because one cannot say just ‘anything’ about content does not mean that there is *nothing* to say. David Caute once noted the confusion which exists in the minds of some critics (he was thinking particularly of Susan Sontag) with regard to these terms ‘subject’ and ‘content’:

The Anzin miner’s strike of 1884 is the subject of Zola’s novel *Germinal*; the content of the novel is what emerges through Zola’s literary treatment of the subject. It is not, therefore...a matter of choosing between form and content because every work of art, however ‘abstract’, however formalistic, has a content. Content always refers to the world (material, mental, associative or

<sup>125</sup> Boris Groys, ‘Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich’, in *In the Flow*, p. 65.

<sup>126</sup> Benjamin to Scholem, April 17, 1931, in Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 232-233.

<sup>127</sup> Serge Guilbaut 1980], ‘The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the ‘Vital Centre’’, in *Pollock and After*, p. 160.

<sup>128</sup> Greenberg, ‘Towards a Newer Laocoon’, p. 28.

<sup>129</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Complaints of an Art Critic’, in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 270.

<sup>130</sup> Orwell too noted the same tendency among literary critics to use words which were ‘almost completely lacking in meaning’: ‘When one critic writes, “The outstanding features of Mr X’s work is its living quality”, while another writes, “The immediately striking thing about Mr X’s work is its peculiar deadness”, the reader accepts this as a simple difference of opinion. If words like black and white were involved, instead of the jargon words *dead* and *living*, he would see at once that language was being used in an improper way.’ See Orwell, ‘Politics and the English Language’, pp. 161-162.

whatever) outside the work of art mediated and reshaped by artistic form. The fact is grasped once we cease to identify content with the mimetic representation of a subject or theme.<sup>131</sup>

Jameson too has criticised precisely the fallacy 'that works of art...are conceivable that have no content, and are therefore to be denounced for failing to grapple with the "serious" issues of the day, indeed distracting from them...' If this is understood, then the supposedly 'abstract' aspects of modernism take on a new meaning: 'Modernism would then not so much be a way of avoiding social content...as rather of managing and containing it, secluding it out of sight in the very form itself, by means of specific techniques of framing and displacement which can be identified with some precision.'<sup>132</sup> Pollock, the doyen of abstract impressionism whose reputation was at least partly constructed by Greenberg, was himself unambiguous on the question. In an interview in 1950 he said:

It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express his age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Every age finds its own technique...method is, it seems to me, a natural growth out of a need, and from the need the modern artist has of expressing the world about him.<sup>133</sup>

This brings us to the second distinction, between 'representation' and 'resemblance'. In everyday usage 'represents' is taken to mean 'something which stands in for something else'. In Greenberg's hands, it appears to mean 'something which resembles something else'. But representation can take place without resemblance. The Art and Language group (i.e. as far as this text is concerned, Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison and Mel Ramsden) draw precisely this distinction: 'Those features of a picture according to which we are able... to see it as resembling a person or etc. compromise... the descriptive content of the picture, although these features are in general neither necessary nor sufficient for descriptive or representational content.' They conclude: 'We cannot infer realism from resemblance.'<sup>134</sup>

Both aspects of this question were discussed in a brilliant article by Meyer Schapiro, one of Greenberg's contemporaries and a fellow Trotskyist, in 1937:

The logical opposition of realistic and abstract art...rests on two assumptions about the nature of painting, common in writing on abstract art: that representation is a passive mirroring of things and therefore essentially non-artistic, and that abstract art, on the other hand, is a purely aesthetic activity, unconditioned by objects and based on its own eternal laws...These views are thoroughly one-sided and rest on a mistaken idea of what representation is. There is no passive, 'photographic' representation in the sense described. ... All renderings of objects, no matter how exact they seem, even photographs, proceed from values, methods and viewpoints which somehow shape the image and often determine its contents. On the other hand there is no 'pure art', uncontaminated by experience; all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of a hand, are shaped by experience and non-aesthetic concerns.<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> David Caute, *The Illusion: An Essay on Politics, Theatre and the Novel* (London: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 151.

<sup>132</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Reflections in Conclusion', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 201-202.

<sup>133</sup> Jackson Pollock 1950], 'Interview with William Wright', in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, edited by Paul Wood and Charles Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 575-576.

<sup>134</sup> Art and Language [1980], 'Portrait of V. I. Lenin', in *Modernism, Criticism, Realism*, edited by Charles Harrison and Fred Orton (London: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 148, 167. The title of this essay is reference to the series of paintings by Art and Language called 'Portraits of V. I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock'.

<sup>135</sup> Meyer Schapiro [1937], 'Abstract Art I: The Nature of Abstract Art', in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), pp. 195-196.

The final conception of modernism is that of Jameson. In his foundational essay on postmodernism, Jameson follows Ernest Mandel in arguing that there have been three stages ('fundamental moments') in capitalism: 'These are market capitalism, the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and our own, wrongly called postindustrial, but what might better be termed multinational, capital.' As he goes on, 'my own cultural periodization of the stages of realism, modernism, and postmodernism is both inspired and confirmed by Mandel's tripartite scheme'.<sup>136</sup> There are in fact differences in the chronologies deployed by Mandel and Jameson; for the purposes of this discussion, however, they are secondary.<sup>137</sup> The key point is that Jameson sees particular periods in the history of capitalism as possessing distinct 'cultural logics' and that of modernism is associated with the period which begins after 1848. He therefore retains the element of periodization characteristic of Lukács, but identifies realism and modernism as 'cultural logics' corresponding respectively to the market and imperialist stages in the development of capitalism, rather than indices of totality or fragmentation in the bourgeois world-view. This is free from both the moralism with which Lukács judged modernism and the narrowness with which Greenberg defined it, but is misleading in a different way. Jameson is right, in my view, to associate modernism with a period in capitalist development, but wrong about the nature of that period.

It is remarkable that Jameson and Anderson, his most persistent interlocutor, both recognise that modernism does not emerge from monopoly capitalism as such, but rather from the fusion of the 'contemporary' and the 'archaic', which it initiates. Yet neither man ever invokes the concept specifically intended to illuminate these juxtapositions. Indeed, Anderson has rarely discussed uneven and combined development at all, except for a very brief reference to Germany, post-Unification, although he has discussed uneven development, but not in the context of modernism.<sup>138</sup> Jameson, as we shall see, tends to refer to uneven development, even when he is discussing uneven and combined development. The latter concept therefore forms a ghostly unacknowledged presence in the background of their more concrete discussions, to which we now turn.

In his early work, *Marxism and Form* (1971), Jameson noted of Surrealism that the juxtaposed objects which it depicted are 'places of objective chance or preternatural revelation...immediately identifiable as the products of a not yet fully industrialised and systematized economy'.<sup>139</sup> Although written of one specific school of Modernism, the essential point – that it involved the representation of a world in which old and new co-existed and inter-penetrated each other – was capable of generalisation to the entire field. Over a decade later, in his assessment of Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Anderson took this step, quoting Jameson on Surrealism but in order to illustrate a much more general argument.<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>136</sup> Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', pp. 35-36.

<sup>137</sup> Jameson misrepresents Mandel in two respects. First, the latter identifies four periods in the history of capitalism, down to the early 1970s, not three, each characterised by different forms of technology, in which the stage of 'market capitalism' is preceded by an earlier one extending from 'the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to the crisis of 1847'. See Ernest Mandel [1972], *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1975), pp. 120-121. Second, where Jameson sees the period of multinational capital and postmodernism continuing from the post-war period until the present, Mandel regarded that period as definitively ending with the crisis which opened in 1973-4, a point with which I am in agreement. This difference in periodization is highlighted in Mike Davis, 'Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism', *New Left Review* I/151 (May/June 1985), pp. 107-108.

<sup>138</sup> Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books, 1974), pp.236, 276; Perry Anderson, 'Brief Remarks on the Notion of "Uneven Development"', in *Criteria and Indicators of Backwardness: Essays on Uneven Development in European History*, edited by Miroslav Hroch and Lud'a Klusáková (Prague: Variant Editors for Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 1996).

<sup>139</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 103.

<sup>140</sup> Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', pp. 106-107.

In my view, ‘modernism’ can best be understood as a cultural field of force triangulated by three decisive coordinates. The first...was the codification of a highly formalized academicism in the visual and other arts, which itself was institutionalized within official regimes of states and society still massively pervaded, often dominated, by aristocratic or landowning classes: classes in one sense economically ‘superseded’, no doubt, but in others still setting the political and cultural tone in country after country of pre-First World War Europe. ... The second coordinate is then a logical complement of the first: that is, the still incipient, hence essentially novel, emergence within these societies of the key technologies or inventions of the second industrial revolution: telephone, radio, automobile, aircraft and so on. Mass consumption industries based on the new technologies had not yet been implanted anywhere in Europe, where clothing, food and furniture remained overwhelmingly the largest final-goods sectors in employment and turnover down to 1914. The third coordinate of the modernist conjuncture, I would argue, was the imaginative proximity of social revolution.<sup>141</sup>

In summary, Anderson argues that, in Europe at least, modernism ‘arose at the intersection between a semi-aristocratic ruling order, a semi-industrialised capitalist economy, and a semi-emergent or insurgent labour movement.’<sup>142</sup> This was the situation, not only in Russia, but across most of Europe, down to 1945.

In the conclusion to his first collection of essays on postmodernism, Jameson, deployed what he called ‘uneven development’ to reach very similar conclusions to those of Anderson:

...in an age of monopolies (and trade unions), of institutionalized collectivization, there is always a lag. Some parts of the economy are still archaic, handicraft enclaves; some are more modern and futuristic than the future itself. Modern art, in this respect, drew its power and possibilities from being a backwater and an archaic holdover within a modernizing economy: it glorified, celebrated, and dramatized older forms of individual production which the new mode of production was elsewhere on the point of displacing and blotting out.

Jameson then refers to Joyce creating his version of Dublin alone in his rooms in Paris, but the point is clearly intended to be of wider application than literature, or any specific form of artistic production, almost an explanation for modernism itself. ‘Modernism must thus be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development’ – but here Jameson refers specifically to Bloch and ‘non-synchronicity’ rather than Trotsky and uneven and combined development, before going on to describe ‘the coexistence of realities from radically different moments in history – handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance’.<sup>143</sup> It was left to one of Jameson’s admirers, Julian Stallabrass, to draw out the connection with Trotsky’s concept:

Jameson has convincingly argued that the most systematic works are produced in circumstances where, due to combined and uneven development, thinkers are faced with extreme contrasts of scene, as if they lived in an environment where it is easy to step from one historical period to another. Peasants in paddy fields may raise their eyes from their work to glimpse a new neighbour, a high rise postmodern office complex. Such variegated environments, argues Jameson, foster systematic and totalising thinking about historical change.<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

<sup>143</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Secondary Elaboration’, in *Postmodernism*, p. 307.

<sup>144</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 71.

Modernism must be seen then, not as a conjunctural moment in the history of capitalism, but as a form of artistic production generated by the triumph of capitalism as the globally dominant socio-economic system. The significance of 1848, in this perspective, is not the failure of the revolutions of that year, but as a marker indicating the when that system became definitively established. If the argument here is correct, however, then the form taken by that triumph was precisely the sudden onrush of capitalist modernity into long-established pre-capitalist societies: modernism is not the cultural logic of monopoly capitalism, but of uneven and combined development, which is one of the reasons why countries as politically distinct as Italy and Russia could both manifest such similar versions. Modernism is the way in which the experience of that transformation has been transmitted and understood through culture. In this, modernism would appear not as a set of artistic practices related to the historic decline of the bourgeoisie – or indeed to the fortunes of *any* particular class – but to the contemporary reality of class society itself; the rhythms of capitalist industrialisation, the stimuli associated with urban life and the patterns of social conflict during the epoch of Classical Imperialism – an epoch which, like modernism itself, apparently climaxed with the Second World War.

Modernism is obviously not an unmediated expression of experience. Lukács argues that the key distinction between realist authors (such as Mann) and their modernist contemporaries (such as Joyce) is the ability of the former to convey the totality of the social world and the inability of the latter to convey anything but the fragmented experience of that world.<sup>145</sup> As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, however, the view that modernist work simply embodies subjective ‘experience’ is untenable: ‘Expressionist and surrealist art, need it be said, are every bit as much constructed as Balzac; we are judging (if we need to) between two different products of ideological labour, not between “experience” and the “real”’.<sup>146</sup>

I began this section by quoting Trotsky’s views on Futurism. Here, Day shows three different ways in which that branch of modernism was able to translate the experience of capitalist modernity into the forms of art:

First, it can refer to a range of modern motifs (cars, aeroplanes, telephones) or their associated qualities (speed). Second, it can refer to the experiential ‘sensations’ of life in modern cities (experiences of speed and of ‘simultaneity’ across time and space, as new methods of transport and communication make the world seem smaller, or the feeling of exhilaration produced by competing sensations in the city). Third, it might refer to the technical and formal devices used by artists to ‘represent’ any of the above (the fragmentation and fracturing of picture space, the juxtaposition or collaging of different materials/elements as a way of ‘expressing’ sensations of speed or simultaneity).<sup>147</sup>

One final issue remains in this connection: the attitude of modernists to capitalist modernity. ‘Generally it is right to stress that modernism was no simple rejection of modernity; it was rather a reaction, a critical response to it,’ writes Krishan Kumar. As we have already seen, it was possible to critically embrace modernity from diametrically opposed political positions. According to Kumar, for the Futurists and Constructivists, ‘modern society was not modern *enough*’: ‘It was ‘inauthentically’ modern. It was too cautious, too cowardly, to accept all the implications of modernity. It preferred to harbour past relics, so preventing the realization of modernity’s full potential.’<sup>148</sup> These attitudes extended beyond the Italian and Russian representatives of modernism: they could be found in Weimar Germany, for example: ‘What Gropius taught, and what most Germans did not

---

<sup>145</sup> See, for example, Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, pp. 33-36.

<sup>146</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 88.

<sup>147</sup> Day, ‘The Futurists’, p. 206.

<sup>148</sup> Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society*, p. 98.



want to learn, was the lesson of Bacon and Descartes and the Enlightenment: that one must confront the world and dominate it and that the cure for the ills of modernity is more, and the right kind of modernity.’<sup>149</sup>

Not every modernism embraced modernity and wished to extend it. Modernists in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland – in every sense the most ‘Western’ society in the colonial world – took a quite different perspective. Eagleton describes it as ‘stratified...made up of disparate time scales. Its history was differentiated rather than homogenous, as the anglicised and atavistic existed side by side, and a commercialised agriculture still bore a few quasi-feudal traces.’ This is a by-now-familiar exercise in identifying an example of uneven and combined development without using the actual concept; for, as Eagleton makes clear, the two temporalities of Irish life did not simply co-exist in separate life worlds: ‘...what is afoot in nineteenth-century Ireland, with the cataclysm of the Famine, the agricultural revolution, the sharp decline of the language and the sea changes in popular culture, is the transformation *within living memory* of a social order in some ways quite traditional, and so a peculiarly shocking collision of the customary and the contemporary.’ The intrusion of capitalist modernity was associated with British colonial power and its local agents, and as a consequence: ‘The modernist sensibility [in Ireland] is not of course synonymous with modernity. On the contrary, it is its sworn enemy, hostile to that stately march of secular reason which was precisely, for many a nineteenth-century Irish nationalist, where a soulless Britain had washed up.’ Modernism in this context was ‘a last ditch resistance to mass commodity culture’.<sup>150</sup> Or to put it in Greenberg’s terms, the struggle between avant-garde and kitsch expressed in terms of nationalist resistance to imperialism.

What this example suggests is that the attitude of modernists to modernity is less to do with left-right oppositions within nation-states, but where these nation-states (actual or aspirant) are situated within the structured inequality of the capitalist system in its imperialist stage. And that, in turn, inevitably leads us to the question of the state.

### 2.3. Capitalist States and Bourgeois Hegemony

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? According to David Armstrong, uneven and combined development:

...has no real explanatory power when it comes to understanding why some societies experience revolution while others, apparently very similar societies do not; why some quite different societies experience fairly similar revolutions and why some similar societies had rather different revolutionary experiences.<sup>151</sup>

I think the concept can be defended against these challenges. 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 or 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

<sup>149</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 101.

<sup>150</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 278-280.

<sup>151</sup> David Armstrong, ‘On Revolutionary Chickens and International Eggs’, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4 (October 2001), p. 671.

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, as he explained in this speech from early in the 1920s:

We Russians find ourselves – in terms both of sociology and geography – on the border-line between those countries which possess colonies and those which are themselves colonies. We are a colony in the sense that our largest factories in Petrograd, in Moscow and in the South were obtained by us ready-made from the hands of European and American finance capital which formerly drew off the profits. That a Russian industrial capitalist was merely a third-rate agent of world finance capitalism – this fact tended immediately to invest the struggle of the Russian worker with an international revolutionary character. Russian workers had before their eyes: on the one hand, the combined money-bags of Russia, France, Belgium, etc.; and on the other – the backward peasant masses, entangled in semi-feudal agricultural relations. At one and the same time we thus had in our country both London and India. This, despite all our backwardness, brought us flush up against European and world tasks in their most developed historical forms.<sup>152</sup>

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.<sup>153</sup> 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'.<sup>154</sup>

---

<sup>152</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1920], 'On the Policy of the KAPD: Speech Delivered at the Session of the ECCI, November 24, 1920', in *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, vol. 1 (London: New Park Publications, 1973), p. 176.

<sup>153</sup> Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, pp. 242-247, 284-308.

<sup>154</sup> Trotsky, 'For the Internationalist Perspective', p. 199.

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. Karl Radek, for example, wrote in *The Development of the World Revolution and the Tactics of the Communist Parties in the Struggle for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (1919): ‘The illusion of a quick victory arose from the incorrect interpretation of the lessons of the Russian Revolution, the conditions of which, although within an identical historical framework, were by no means the same as those of the European revolution.’<sup>155</sup> 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):

The whole difficulty of the Russian revolution is that it was much easier for the Russian revolutionary working class to start than it was for the West-European classes, but it is much more difficult for us to continue. It is more difficult to start a revolution in West-European countries because there the revolutionary proletariat is opposed by the higher thinking that comes with culture, and the working class is in a state of cultural slavery.<sup>156</sup>

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.<sup>157</sup> 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.<sup>158</sup> Here, for example, is Pannekoek:

---

<sup>155</sup> Pierre Broué [1971], *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*, edited by Ian Birchall and Brian Pearce (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005, pp. 308-309 and pp. 307-313 more generally.

<sup>156</sup> Vladimir I. Lenin [1918], ‘Fourth Conference of Trade Unions and Factory Committees of Moscow: Report on the Current Situation, June 27, 1918’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 27, *February-July 1918* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 464.

<sup>157</sup> Neil Harding [1977/1981], *Lenin’s Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic and Socialist Revolutions*, vol. 2 (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 235-243.

<sup>158</sup> From 1920 Bolshevik leaders often responded to ultra-left arguments by making fundamentally dishonest debating points that refused to accept even those aspects of their opponent’s case which were accurate, such as the implications of a non-revolutionary peasantry – a point which, as we have seen, Radek had acknowledged only a short time before. Trotsky himself responded to Gorter by arguing that the British revolution *would* involve a peasant uprising – not in Britain itself, but in India. To say the least, this is not one of Trotsky’s finest polemical interventions: the point is correct, but irrelevant, since it was the social role of the peasantry within the imperialist countries which was at stake, not that of the oppressed peasantry in their overseas territories. See Hermann Gorter [1920], ‘Open Letter to Comrade Lenin: an Answer to Lenin’s Pamphlet, ‘Left-wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder’,’ in *International Communism in the Era of Lenin: a Documentary History*,

The German experience brings us face to face with the major problem of the revolution in Western Europe. In these countries, the old bourgeois mode of production and the centuries-old civilisation which has developed with it have completely impressed themselves upon the thoughts and feelings of the popular masses. Hence, the mentality and inner character of the masses here is quite different from that in the countries of the East, who have not experienced the rule of bourgeois culture; and this is what distinguishes the different courses that the revolution has taken in the East and the West.<sup>159</sup>

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 attempts 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 aware of the similarities between Italy and Russia, as he wrote the year of his arrest: ‘The proletariat has even greater importance in Italy than in other European countries, even of a more advanced capitalist nature: it is comparable only to that which existed in Russia before the Revolution.’<sup>160</sup> Gramsci 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.<sup>161</sup>

---

edited by Helmut Gruber (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 223 and Trotsky, ‘On the Policy of the KAPD’, p. 176.

<sup>159</sup> Anton Pannekoek [1920], ‘World Revolution and Communist Tactics’, in *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*, edited by D. A. Smart (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 103.

<sup>160</sup> Antonio Gramsci and Palmiro Togliatti [1926], ‘The Italian Situation and the Tasks of the PCI (“Lyons Theses”)', in *Selections from Political Writings*, edited by Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), p. 345.

<sup>161</sup> Antonio Gramsci [1929-35], *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 238, Q7§16.

In his critique of this passage, 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. According to Anderson, it was Gramsci's comrade Bordiga – another of the 'ultra-lefts' – who more accurately understood 'the essential twin character of the capitalist state':

...it was stronger than the Tsarist State, because it rested not only on the consent of the masses, but also on a superior repressive apparatus. In other words, it is not the mere 'extent' of the State that defines its location in the structure of power (what Gramsci elsewhere called 'Statolatry'), but also its efficacy. The repressive apparatus of any modern capitalist State is inherently superior to that of Tsarism, for two reasons. Firstly, because the Western social formations are much more industrially advanced, and this technology is reflected in the apparatus of violence itself. Secondly, because the masses typically consent to this State in the belief that they exercise government over it. It therefore possesses a popular legitimacy of a far more reliable character for the exercise of this repression than did Tsarism in its decline, reflected in the greater discipline and loyalty of its troops and police – juridically the servants, not of an irresponsible autocrat, but of an elected assembly.<sup>162</sup>

As we shall see, Anderson was right to draw attention to the *extent* of the differences between capitalist and pre-capitalist states (and 'Tsarism' can act 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.<sup>163</sup>

First, capitalist states do indeed have greater repressive powers than their pre-capitalist forerunners or contemporaries. One of Gramsci's more accurate recent admirers, Ranajit Guha, has pointed to 'the absurdity of an uncoercive state'.<sup>164</sup> 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. Jeff Goodwin's 'state-centred' approach identifies a number of 'practices' or 'characteristics' which can make the emergence of revolutionary movements or situations less likely. The most relevant to our discussion is 'political inclusion', which:

...discourages the sense that the state is unreformable or an instrument of a narrow class or clique and, accordingly, needs to be fundamentally overhauled. ... Accordingly, neither liberal

---

<sup>162</sup> Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review* II/100 (November-January 1976-7), p. 55.

<sup>163</sup> Peter Thomas has in any case argued that Gramsci's position was more complex than Anderson suggests, in that his emphasis on the dominance of the state in the East was not intended to suggest *strength* but rather *vulnerability*, in the absence of a fully functioning civil society. More importantly, in his actual concrete analysis of Western societies, Gramsci was perfectly aware that they were by not uniform in the extent to which civil society had developed and – a more unusual point to make at the time – that the more advanced constituted a 'hegemonic centre' which produced 'the peripheral zones': 'West and East are comparable, just as variations in the West itself, because both participate in the dynamic of an expansive political and economic order that is fundamentally and essentially internationalist in character.' See Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, pp. 200-203.

<sup>164</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 23.

populist polities nor authoritarian yet inclusionary (for example) ‘populist’ regimes have generally been challenged by powerful revolutionary movements.<sup>165</sup>

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. Here, for example, is Paul Levi responding to the idiocies of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), one of which was to assume a false identity between German and Russian conditions:

Here the proletariat faces a fully developed bourgeoisie, and confronts the political consequences of the development of the bourgeoisie, i.e. democracy, and under democracy, or what is understood as democracy under the rule of the bourgeoisie, the organisational form of the workers takes different forms from the state-form of agricultural feudalism, which is absolutism.<sup>166</sup>

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.<sup>167</sup> 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.’<sup>168</sup> 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. The authors of an important study of the relationship between capitalism and democracy are therefore right to reject any automatic correspondence between the two:

It was not the capitalist market nor capitalists as the new dominant force, but the contradictions of capitalism that advanced the cause of democracy. ... The relationship between working-class strength and democracy may be summarised in the following way: a diachronic analysis within each of the Western European countries reveals that the growth of working-class organizational strength led to increased pressure for the introduction of democracy; a synchronic analysis reveals that these pressures led to the development of stable democratic regimes where the working class found allies in other social groups.<sup>169</sup>

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

---

<sup>165</sup> Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 44, 46-47.

<sup>166</sup> Paul Levi [1921], ‘What is the Crime: the March Action or Criticising it? Speech at the Session of the Central Committee of the German Communist Party on 4 May 1921’, in *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Writings of Paul Levi*, edited by David Fernbach (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2011), p. 182.

<sup>167</sup> Goran Therborn ‘The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy’, *New Left Review* I/103 (May-June 1977), pp. 4, 17.

<sup>168</sup> Anderson, ‘Modernity and Revolution’, p. 105.

<sup>169</sup> Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 7, 142-143.

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, as Peter Thomas explains:

A class's hegemonic apparatus is the 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. This concept traverses the boundaries of the so-called public (pertaining to the state) and the private (civil society), to include all initiatives by which a class concretizes its hegemonic project in an integral sense.<sup>170</sup>

These are some of the mechanisms through which hegemony is maintained; its content need not be wholehearted endorsement of capitalism. As Jeremy Lister notes:

Capitalism is not maintained by a mass popular affirmation or affection for what the system objectively produces for society as a whole; it is maintained by the way it has hitherto marginalised alternatives against it, a “better the devil you know” kind of common sense attitude, which in turn promotes a notion of apathy and disinterestedness in the very possibility of change.

In this context all that capitalism requires to do is maintain a majority of the working class in circumstances which are bearable compared to the imaginable alternatives, and as Lister points out, those for whom it is not bearable, ‘often lack the conceptual and linguistic tools to understand their position in this system, let alone do anything about it.’<sup>171</sup> One reason why an irreplaceable component of capitalist hegemony is nationalism, both as a source of psychic compensation and means of political mobilisation, is to prevent the most oppressed and exploited from acquiring the tools of which Lister writes.<sup>172</sup>

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. Guha once described colonial India as a situation involving ‘dominance without hegemony’, but this could be found throughout the East.<sup>173</sup> In a sense, it is where uneven and combined development is present but hegemony is absent that the conditions for permanent revolution arose. This in turn suggests that 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.

\*\*\*

---

<sup>170</sup> Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, p. 226. Although Thomas writes ‘a class’ throughout this passage, what he describes here is only comprehensible as the *modus operandi* of a single class: the bourgeoisie.

<sup>171</sup> Jeremy Lester, *Dialogue of Negation: Debates on Hegemony in Russia and the West*. (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 72; see also Kate Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and its Narratives* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 60.

<sup>172</sup> Neil Davidson [2000], ‘From National Consciousness to Nation-States’, in *Nation-States*, pp. 67-76 and [2009/2010/2012], ‘The Necessity of Nation-States for Capital’, in *ibid*, pp. 235-243, 250-257.

<sup>173</sup> Guha *Dominance without Hegemony*; see also Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 150-151, 175-210.

These discussions of modernity, modernism and hegemony may seem to have taken us some distance from uneven and combined development, but in fact they constitute a necessary basis for understanding the full implications for those societies – the vast majority – which have been subject to it. In concrete terms, the concept of uneven and combined development should help us explain why – to pick two wildly different examples – former peasants from the Staritski *uezd* in Tver’ province could become the driving force behind the factory committee of the Baltic shipyard in Petrograd, *and* why former black sharecroppers from Clarksdale in the Mississippi Delta could create the electric blues in the South Side of Chicago. In this part I will sketch the impact of uneven and combined development in the West which began some decades earlier than in Russia, but for the most part, and in most cases, occurs contemporaneously. There is, of course, one major exception, to which I will turn first: England

### 3. CARTOGRAPHIES AND CHRONOLOGIES

#### 3.1. 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.<sup>174</sup>

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.<sup>175</sup> 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. As Marx noted in the chapter from *Capital* on ‘The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist’:

The different moments of primitive accumulation can be ascertained in particular to Spain, Portugal, Holland, France and England, in more or less chronological order. These different moments are systematically combined together at the end of the seventeenth century in England; the combination embraces the colonies, the national debt, the modern tax system, and the system of protection.<sup>176</sup>

---

<sup>174</sup> Godwin Smith, *Reminiscences*, edited by Arnold Haultain (London: Macmillan, 1911), pp. 1, 4.

<sup>175</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Nineteenth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 36-47.

<sup>176</sup> Marx, *Capital*, pp. 915-916.



This is not ‘combination’ in Trotsky’s sense, however, as *all* the forms referred to by Marx are ‘contemporary’.

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. ‘Englishmen and women did not know that they had crossed a barrier that divided them from their own past and from every other contemporary society’, writes Joyce Appleby.<sup>177</sup> 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. Edward Thompson famously discussed plebeian resistance ‘in the name of custom’ to ‘innovation in the capitalist process’ which is ‘most often experienced by the plebs in the form of exploitation, or the expropriation of customary use-rights, or the violent disruption of valued patterns of work and leisure’: ‘Hence the plebeian culture is rebellious, but rebellious in defence of custom.’<sup>178</sup> By the latter half of the eighteenth-century this rebelliousness was therefore 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, as Charles Post has detailed, with industry servicing the farming sector in what was effectively an ‘agro-industrial complex’.<sup>179</sup> 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.<sup>180</sup>

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. Sydney Pollard has written of the process by which the English were transformed into industrial wage labourers:

The worker who left the background of his domestic workshop or peasant holding for the factory entered a new culture as well as a new sense of direction. It was not only that ‘the new economic order needed...part humans: soulless. Depersonalized, disembodied, who could become members, or little wheels rather, of a complex mechanism’. It was also that men who were non-accumulative, non-acquisitive, accustomed to work for subsistence, not for maximization of income, had to be made obedient to the cash stimulus, and obedient in such a way as to react precisely to the stimuli provided.<sup>181</sup>

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

<sup>177</sup> Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 83.

<sup>178</sup> Edward P. Thompson, ‘Introduction: Culture and Custom’, in *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), p. 9.

<sup>179</sup> Charles Post [1995], ‘The Agrarian Origins of US Capitalism: The Transformation of the Northern Countryside before the Civil War’, in *The Agrarian Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620-1877* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2011), pp. 98-99.

<sup>180</sup> Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), pp. 88-144

<sup>181</sup> Sydney Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management: A Study of the Industrial Revolution in Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 190; the quotes within this passage are from Werner Sombart’s *Modern Capitalism*.

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'.<sup>182</sup> 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.'<sup>183</sup>

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'.<sup>184</sup> 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, as Craig Calhoun has pointed out, when we consider the experience of 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: 'Where are the mass shootings, for physical violence, and the prison camps and utter defeats, for psychic violence?'<sup>185</sup> 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.<sup>186</sup> 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.

Nor did English conditions produce a local modernist movement, as can be seen in we take one of the few painters working in the period of English industrialisation which might plausibly be categorised in this way: J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851). During the last 15 years of his life in particular, Turner made his subject, not industrialisation as such, but rather the fossil-fuel powered transport which made it possible, above all steamboats and trains. A sense of how unusual this was in his national context can be gathered from the assessment by Nikolaus Pevsner – Hungarian-born but in most respects a naturalised Englishman – who described Turner's world as 'a fantasmagoria' and his work as 'irrational': 'Turner's position in English art is indeed baffling from whatever point of view one considers it – also from that of his Englishness.'<sup>187</sup> During the same year (1955) as Pevsner was expressing his bafflement, Greenberg was equally dismissive, albeit for different reasons: 'Turner was actually the first painter to break with the European tradition of value painting', he wrote of Turner's later paintings. Despite describing them as 'atmospheric', however, ultimately he regards them as merely 'picturesque', a verdict endorsed by their popularity with a public which would not have expected his intangible subject matter – clouds, rain, mist, sea – to be

---

<sup>182</sup> Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, p. 308.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>184</sup> Edward P. Thompson [1963], *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 486.

<sup>185</sup> Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 52.

<sup>186</sup> Edward P. Thompson 'The Peculiarities of the English', in *The Socialist Register 1965*, edited by Ralph Miliband and John Saville (London: Merlin Press, 1965), pp. 312-313.

<sup>187</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London: The Architectural Press, 1956), pp. 18, 152.

rendered with ‘definite shape or form’: ‘what we today take for a daring abstractness on Turner’s part was accepted then as another feat of naturalism’.<sup>188</sup> Here Greenberg is judging Turner against his own assumptions about the necessity for modernism in the visual arts to necessarily involve an increasing shift from resemblance (‘representation’) towards abstraction. Turner’s later work is however neither a regression towards naturalism nor a prototype of abstraction, but an attempt to express his response to mechanisation in a way similar to the Italian Futurists, with boats and trains as his subject rather than automobiles. *Rain, Steam and Rail – the Great Western Railway* (1844) is not primarily about H<sub>2</sub>O in its various forms, but about the intrusion of modernity into nature in the shape of the train, the rail bridge which it necessitates and the city of London, looming indistinctly in the background of the picture, from which it has emerged. In Turner’s most famous and popular painting, *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up* (1838), the symbolism could not be more obvious: the steam-powered tug (representing the mundane but functioning modernity) pulls a ghostly ship from the age of sail (representing the heroic but outmoded past) towards its final dismemberment.

Turner’s intimations of modernism are all the more startling for their almost complete isolation. Paul Wood notes the influence Turner had on the French Impressionists:

But in a British context, such artistic radicalism was isolated, even idiosyncratic. Turner’s *Rain, Steam and Speed*...a dynamic image of the modern if there ever was one, was painted in the 1840s, 30 years before comparable studies of *Gare St Lazare* by Claude Monet...in Paris. But in Britain Turner’s example gave rise to no school.

Wood concludes that ‘something seems to have restrained British artists from the innovations embarked on in France’.<sup>189</sup> Steve Edwards similarly writes of British painters in the latter half of the nineteenth century, that ‘something about English society prevented them from finding a way to make ambivalence and incoherence suggestive of modern experience; from making a moral dilemma from uncertainty’:

Modernity is depicted in the British art of the period, but modernist form doesn’t really break the surface. In France, the ongoing clash between traditional ways of life and the rapid transformations of Paris and other urban centres made these changes available for representation.

As Edwards stresses, the point is not that Britain (or more precisely, England) was free from conflict – we have already seen that this was not the case – but rather that the capitalist modernity was so embedded as to produce a sense of familiarity, it ‘had come to seem natural’ and ‘this made it more difficult to depict modern society as bewildering or awkward, simultaneously exhilarating and horrifying’.<sup>190</sup> The determining nature of context is nicely illustrated by a conversation from the beginning of the twentieth century reported in the biography of Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957). It is important to remember here that Lewis was

---

<sup>188</sup> Clement Greenberg [1955], ‘“American-Style” Painting’, in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, *Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, edited by John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 229.

<sup>189</sup> Paul Wood, ‘The Avant-Garde from the July Monarchy to the Second Empire’, in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>190</sup> Steve Edwards, ‘Victorian Britain: From Images of Modernity to the Modernity of Images’, in *Art and Visual Culture, 1850-2012: Modernity to Globalisation*, edited by Steve Edwards and Paul Wood (Milton Keynes: Tate Publishing in association with The Open University, 2012), p. 60. Edwards specifically refers to uneven and combined development in his introduction to this multi-authored collection. See ‘Introduction: Stories of Modern Art’, in *Art and Visual Culture*, p. 9.

one of the very few native English modernists. When Filippo Marinetti (1876-1944) tried to claim him for Futurism, Lewis replied:

‘Not too bad,’ I said. ‘It has its points. But you Wops insist too much on the Machine. You’re always on about these driving-belts, you are always exploding about internal combustion. We’ve has machines here in England for a donkey’s years. They’re no novelty to *us*.

To which Marinetti responded:

‘You have never understood your machines! You have never known the *ivresse* of travelling at a kilometre a minute. Have you ever travelled a kilometre a minute?’

Lewis had not, nor had he any wish to.<sup>191</sup>

The dominant theme in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English art and literature – including that produced by socialists – is a rejection of both modernity *and* modernism. Alasdair MacIntyre once commented:

There have been since the industrial revolution in Britain two main critiques of our form of life. One was the romantic protest against capitalist ugliness whose culmination is in Lawrence and Leavis. The other was the socialist protest. William Morris held them together in his own day: it is a prime victory of bourgeois ideology to have kept them apart ever since.<sup>192</sup>

But if we look at the socialist future envisaged by Morris, it is described in the subtitle of his most famous novel as ‘an epoch of rest’:

‘You see, guest, this is not an age of inventions. The last epoch did all that for us, and we are now content to use as much of its inventions as we find handy, and leaving alone those which we don’t want.’ ... ‘In the half-century that followed the Great Change...it began to be noteworthy: machine after machine was quietly dropped under the excuse that machines could not produce works of art, and that works of art were more and more called for.’<sup>193</sup>

This constitutes the main exception to the socialist and indeed Marxist conception of socialism representing a new form of modernity. Raymond Williams wrote of Morris that,

...what the representation of discontinuity typically produces is a notion of social simplicity which is untenable. The extent to which the idea of socialism is attached to simplicity is counter-productive. It seems to me that the break towards socialism can only be towards an unimaginably greater complexity.<sup>194</sup>

England, or more precisely, London was a *subject* of modernist writing – think of Eliot’s ‘Unreal City’ in *The Waste Land* (1922) – and a provided a *destination* for modernist writers from outside Britain, like James, Pound and Eliot himself from the USA, Conrad from Poland or Yeats from Ireland. What Malcolm Bradbury calls, ‘a distinguishable English brand of

---

<sup>191</sup> Wyndham Lewis [1932], *Blasting and Bombardiering: An Autobiography* (London: John Calder, 1982), p. 34.

<sup>192</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre [1961], ‘Culture and Revolution’, in *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings, 1953-1974*, edited by Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2008), p. 178.

<sup>193</sup> William Morris [1890]. *News from Nowhere: Or an Epoch of Rest, Being some Chapters from a Utopian Romance* (London: Longman, Green, 1920), p. 198.

<sup>194</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: Verso, 1979), pp. 128-129.

Modernism’, was much more a literal sense of writing expressive of a new ‘Modern’ era after ‘the era of Victorianism was ending, [and] a new phase in society, art and thought beginning’, than expressive of the tension between the archaic and the modern.<sup>195</sup> The reason why capitalist modernity in England produced neither 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.<sup>196</sup> It was, as Anderson points out, ‘a hybrid between a city-state and a nation-state’.<sup>197</sup> 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. As Norman Stone notes of the English – later British – bourgeoisie, in whose interests the state acted:

In Great Britain, that class existed so strongly, even in the eighteenth century, that liberal reforms were introduced piecemeal there, and often without formal involvement of parliament. Existing *ancien-régime* institutions, such as the old guilds or corporations, would be gradually adapted to suit a changing era. Thus, in form, England (more than Scotland) is the last of the *ancien régimes*; she did not even have a formal law to abolish serfdom.<sup>198</sup>

In other words, while Britain, or perhaps England, appeared to represent an *ancien regime* (‘in form’) this concealed what was actually a supremely adaptive modernity, which is only now reaching its limits.<sup>199</sup> 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

---

<sup>195</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, ‘London: 1890-1920’, in *Modernism*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 178-179 and pp. 172-179 more generally.

<sup>196</sup> Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, pp. 563-64, 580-82.

<sup>197</sup> Perry Anderson, ‘Heirs of Gramsci’, *New Left Review* II/100 (July/August 2016), p. 92.

<sup>198</sup> Norman Stone, *Europe Transformed, 1873-1999* (London: Fontana Books, 1983), pp. 18-19.

<sup>199</sup> Non-Marxists have also highlighted the significance of state forms for capital. Despite the business management terminology deployed by Darren Acemoglu and James Robinson (‘virtuous circles’, ‘positive feedback loops’), at the core of their discussion is a defensible argument about the adaptability of the British capitalist state. See *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Random House, 2012), pp. 308-18.

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. As Pollard writes: ‘Unlike the experience of the following countries which were faced with a fairly comprehensive package of mutually reinforcing changes, the British [sic] evolution was slow, piecemeal and unconscious, in the sense of being unperceived as a whole.’<sup>200</sup> 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 as Jonathan Crary explains:

Modernity, contrary to its popular connotations, is not the world in a sweepingly transformed state. Rather... it is the hybrid and dissonant experience of living intermittently within modernized spaces and needs, and yet simultaneously inhabiting the remnants of pre-capitalist life-worlds, whether social or natural. ... Factory manufacturing, for example, did not abruptly extinguish the long-standing diurnal rhythms and social ties of agrarian milieus. Instead there was an extended period of coexistence during which rural life was incrementally dismantled or subsumed into new processes.<sup>201</sup>

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.<sup>202</sup> 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. In the case of Russia itself,

...the proletariat did not arise gradually through the ages, carrying with itself the burden of the past, as in England, but in leaps involving sharp changes of environment, ties, relations, and a sharp break with the past. It was just this – combined with the concentrated oppressions of czarism – that made Russian workers hospitable to the boldest conclusions of revolutionary thought – just as the backward industries were hospitable to the last word in capitalist organization.<sup>203</sup>

Describing the situation prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917, Gareth Stedman Jones has contrasted ‘the revolutionary maturity of the Petrograd proletariat, uniquely concentrated in the most advanced factories of the capitalist world’ with Britain, ‘the most advanced capitalist country’, where ‘the structure of the metropolitan working class still looked back to

---

<sup>200</sup> Sydney Pollard, ‘The Industrial Revolution – an Overview’, in *The Industrial Revolution in National Context: Europe and the USA*, edited by Mikuláš Teich and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 377.

<sup>201</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 65-66.

<sup>202</sup> Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle*, pp.60-84, pp. 149-82; Michael Andrew Zmolek, *Rethinking the Industrial Revolution: Five Centuries of Transition from Agrarian to Industrial Capitalism in England* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2013), pp. 509-792.

<sup>203</sup> Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 33.

pre-industrial divisions of skill and status': 'A few large plants were lost in an ocean of small workshops'.<sup>204</sup> These conditions were productive of neither Bolsheviks nor Constructivists. Elsewhere in the West the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation would fall between the English and Russian extremes.

### 3.2. 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, as Robert Looker and David Coates put it, ‘virtually contemporaneous’ with industrialisation and urbanisation, rather than preceding them, as had been the case in England.<sup>205</sup> 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. Harry Harootunian writes of Marx’s comments on German uneven development (in the ‘Preface to the First Edition’ of *Capital* Volume 1) that he ‘was proposing that capitalist modernization is inevitably destined to produce the co-presence of colliding temporalities, contemporary non-contemporaneities forcing people constantly to navigate their way through different temporal regimes as a condition of becoming modern’.<sup>206</sup> The point is capable of being generalised beyond Germany: 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 and

---

<sup>204</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones [1971], *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationships between Classes in Victorian Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 346

<sup>205</sup> Robert Looker and David Coates, ‘The State and the Working Class in Nineteenth-century Europe’, in *The Rise of the Modern State*, edited by James Anderson (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), pp. 98-101, 112-13.

<sup>206</sup> Harry Harootunian, ‘Piercing the Present with the Past: Reflections on Massimiliano Tomba’s *Marx’s Temporalities*’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2015), p. 62; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 91.

Jameson has correctly noted some of the implications, although as usual without identifying them as the results of uneven and combined development:

Enlightenment Scotland is above all the space of a coexistence of radically distinct zones of production and culture: the archaic economy of the Highlanders and their clan system, the new agricultural exploitation of the Lowlands, the commercial vigour of the English ‘partner’ over the border, on the eve of its industrial ‘take-off’. The brilliance of Edinburgh is therefore not a matter of Gaelic genetic material, but rather owing to the strategic yet eccentric position of the Scottish metropolis and intellectuals with respect to this virtually synchronic coexistence of distinct modes of production, which it now uniquely fell to the Scottish Enlightenment to ‘think’ or to conceptualize. Nor is this merely an economic matter: Scott, like Faulkner later on, inherits a social and historical raw material, a popular memory, in which the fiercest revolutions and civil and religious wars now inscribe the coexistence of modes of production in vivid narrative form.<sup>207</sup>

One aspect of what Jameson calls ‘the co-existence of radically distinct zones of production and culture’ is 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. ‘Since most Europeans were rural, so were most migrants’, notes Hobsbawm of the latter half of the nineteenth century, and, while pointing out that some migrants exchanged ‘a poor agricultural milieu for a better one’, for the majority the most important fact was ‘their exodus from agriculture’: ‘Migration and urbanization went together, and in the second half of the nineteenth century the countries chiefly associated with it (the United States, Australia, Argentina) had a rate of urban concentration unsurpassed anywhere except in Britain and the industrial parts of Germany.’<sup>208</sup> 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’.<sup>209</sup> 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

---

<sup>207</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Secondary Elaborations’, in *Postmodernism*, p. 405; [1989], ‘Marxism and Postmodernism’, in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 44; see also Neil Davidson, ‘The Scottish Path to Capitalist Agriculture 3: The Enlightenment as the Theory and Practice of Improvement’, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 2005), pp. 29-36.

<sup>208</sup> Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, p. 196.

<sup>209</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1925], ‘Where Is Britain Going?’, in *Collected Writings and Speeches on Britain*, vol. 2, edited by R. Chappell and Alan Clinton (London: New Park, 1974), p. 37.



working class at the time – and two attempts at armed insurrection.<sup>210</sup> 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. As Ernest Mandel notes: ‘They functioned as a reservoir of agricultural raw materials and as an “internal colony” in the sense that they formed a steady market for the industrial products of the North and did not develop any large-scale industry within their own territory (this was to change only with the Second World War)’.<sup>211</sup> 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. One such area was around the Alabama coalfields. According to Brian Kelly:

The region presents an almost classical example of what Marxists have described as ‘combined and uneven development’: the turn-of-the-century South included a number of exceptional areas where large concentrations of industrial workers laboured in mills, foundries, and manufacturing plants on a par with the most advanced in the North, but these stood like frontier outposts of a new age in a region overwhelmingly steeped in primitive agriculture, in some places little-changed from the way it had been conducted in the antebellum period.<sup>212</sup>

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. 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.’<sup>213</sup> 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”.’<sup>214</sup> Indeed – but we should note the similarities between the British and Japanese states after 1868, to which Christopher Bayly has drawn attention.

---

<sup>210</sup> Neil Davidson, *The Origins of Scottish Nationhood* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 167-186; ‘Class Consciousness and National Consciousness in the Scottish General Strike of 1820’, in *New Approaches to Socialist History*, edited by Keith Flett and David Renton (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2003).

<sup>211</sup> Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, p. 87.

<sup>212</sup> Brian Kelly, ‘Materialism and the Persistence of Race in the Jim Crow South’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2004), p. 11

<sup>213</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1938], ‘Revolution and War in China’, in *Leon Trotsky on China*, edited by Les Evans and Russell Block (New York: Monad Press, 1976), p. 66.

<sup>214</sup> Mark Elvin, ‘A Working Definition of Modernity’, *Past and Present* 113 (November 1986), p. 212.

Between 1870 and 1914, both consciously emphasised the role of their monarch-emperors, the preexisting symbolism of the crown being used to represent national unity against two main challenges: external imperial rivalry and internal class divisions.<sup>215</sup> 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: ‘Russia represented the opposite pole to Japan within the spectrum of authoritarian monarchy – no corporate regime strategy, much depending on the monarch himself.’<sup>216</sup> The state structure was crucial, as in many respects Japanese development was far more rapid than Russia’s, as Trotsky himself noted:

Even late-developing Russia, which traversed the same historic course as the West in a much shorter length of time, needed three centuries to get from the liquidation of feudal isolation under Ivan the Terrible, through the Westernizing of Peter the Great, to the first liberal reforms of Alexander II. The so-called Meiji Restoration incorporated in a matter of a few decades the basic features of those three major eras in Russia’s development. At such a forced pace, there could be no question of a smooth and even cultural development in all fields. Racing to achieve practical results with modern technology – especially military technology – Japan remained ideologically in the depths of the Middle Ages. The hasty mixture of Edison and Confucius has left its mark in all Japanese culture.<sup>217</sup>

The differences were sharply demonstrated by the Japanese victory over Russia in the war of 1904-5. Lenin welcomed the result, arguing that it clearly demonstrated the different class nature of the two states:

Here again, as so often in history, the war between an advanced and a backward country has played a great revolutionary role. And the class-conscious proletariat, an implacable enemy of war – this inevitable and inseparable concomitant of all class rule in general – cannot shut its eyes to the revolutionary task which the Japanese bourgeoisie, by its crushing defeat of the Russian autocracy, is carrying out.<sup>218</sup>

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:

The war signalled the transformation of the industrial base from light to concentrated heavy industries and the ceaseless migration of rural populations to the urban sites of factory production. ... Critics, along the way, noted the sharp lines of unevenness between the newer, modern capitalist industries and the so-called traditional sectors, which, in the Meiji period, had grown concurrently and even complementarily rather than competitively. But by 1920 and the succeeding years, the sharply silhouetted contrast was widely observed in the uneven relationship between the large metropolitan sites like Tokyo/Yokohama and Osaka/Kobe, which had literally been transformed overnight, and a countryside that supplied the cities with a labour force and capital but...received nothing in return. ... Moreover, it brought new classes and an awareness of new identities and subject positions, and it expanded the possibilities for women in the labour market.<sup>219</sup>

---

<sup>215</sup> Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, p. 104.

<sup>216</sup> Michael Mann, ‘Ruling Class Strategies and Citizenship’, in *States, Wars and Capitalism: Studies in Political Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 200.

<sup>217</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1933], ‘Japan Heads for Disaster’, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932–33]*, edited by George Breitman and Sarah Lovell (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1972), p. 291.

<sup>218</sup> Vladimir I. Lenin [1905], ‘The Fall of Port Arthur’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 8, *January–July 1905* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 52.

<sup>219</sup> Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 3-4.

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). Tom Nairn, for example, writes of Germany:

In both situations, hastily created state-nations had dissolved a host of older countries – city and princely states, early-modern or even mediaeval kingdoms – in a way intended to be final, and which indeed still appeared to be so in the circumstances of the 1920s. ... And yet the liberal-progressive unit, the grandly proclaimed wider identity, had clearly foundered. What way out was there but a drastic reformulation of that identity along illiberal-populist lines, emphasizing the things either denied or side-lined by the former unity regimes?

Later we are reminded that ‘ethno-nationalism has normally had a powerfully rural or small-town foundation’ and ‘how rural the Germany of Hitler and Heidegger was’.<sup>220</sup> From the opposite perspective entirely, Zygmunt Bauman argues 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: ‘*The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of civilization and the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture.*’<sup>221</sup>

Neither position captures what ‘combination’ actually meant in Germany – or indeed any of the other countries which underwent comparable trajectories. As Richard Evans has pointed out, despite all that has been written about its ‘supposed backwardness’ on the eve of the First World War, including ‘its alleged deficit of civic values, its arguably antiquated social structure, its seemingly craven middle class and its apparently neo-feudal aristocracy’, it was not regarded in this way by contemporary observers, not least because ‘Germany was the Continent’s wealthiest, most powerful and most advanced economy’. This did not mean that no tensions had been produced by the onset of capitalist modernity:

...beneath its prosperous and self-confident surface, the sheer pace of economic and social change was frightening and bewildering. Old values seemed to be disappearing in a welter of materialism and unbridled ambition. Modernist culture, from abstract painting to atonal music, added to the sense of disorientation... The old established hegemony of the Prussian landed aristocracy, which Bismarck had tried so hard to preserve, was undermined by the headlong rush of German society into the modern age. Bourgeois values, habits and modes of behaviour had triumphed in the upper and middle reaches of society by 1914; yet simultaneously they were being challenged by the growing self-assertion of the industrial working class, organized in the massive Social Democratic labour movement. Germany, unlike any other European country, had become a nation-state not before the industrial revolution, but at its height; and on the basis, not of a single state but of a federation of many different states whose German citizens were bound together principally by a common language, culture and ethnicity. Stresses and strains created by rapid industrialization interlocked with conflicting ideas about the nature

---

<sup>220</sup> Tom Nairn, ‘Reflections on Nationalist Disasters’, *New Left Review* 1/230 (July/August 1998), p. 149, 151. I think Nairn is on firmer ground when describes Germany, not as irredeemably backward, but as undergoing ‘a moment of rural-urban transition—“moment” here meaning not “instant” but a world-historical phase, possibly multi-generational in duration and yet with a determinable beginning and end’. See *Ibid.*, pp. 151-152

<sup>221</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. x. Bauman’s argument is however convincing in so far as it directed against claims that fascism is unconnected to capitalism. See Neil Davidson [2013-14], ‘Right-Wing Social Movements as a Problem for Capital’, in *Nation-States*, pp. 259-269.

of the German state and nation and their place in the larger context of Europe and the world. German society did not enter nationhood in 1871 in a wholly stable condition. It was riven with rapidly deepening internal conflicts which were increasingly exported into the unresolved tensions of the political system that Bismarck had created.<sup>222</sup>

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.’<sup>223</sup> 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. We can see this in microcosm in the attitudes of the Japanese sociologist and film theorist, Yasunosuke Gonda, during the inter-war period, here discussed by Harootunian:

With Gonda and others, it was possible to understand how capitalism had led to the present, but what he feared most, and what his own vision of a mixed culture circulating elements from past and present, Japan and the West, revealed, was that continuous march of capitalism that would eventually eliminate unevenness – the culture of difference – for one of evenness, levelling, and the homogenizing of the cultural ground. It was this fear of ‘modern life’, as he and others were calling it in the 1930s, together with the representations of cultural form that led Gonda, and others, to embrace fascism. Gonda’s agenda aimed at halting the very process of deterritorialization that had led to the present conjuncture by transmuted that national consumer into the national community.<sup>224</sup>

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

---

<sup>222</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), pp. 19-21. See also, Anievas, *Capital, the State and War*, pp. 71-84, for a version of this argument which explicitly situates the German experience with the context of uneven and combined development.

<sup>223</sup> Ernst Bloch [1932], ‘Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics’, *New German Critique* 11 (Spring 1977), p. 29, p. 32. See also Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity*, p. 216 and Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China*, p. 18.

<sup>224</sup> Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity*, pp. 165-66.

are broadcast by radio, which means that the radio is serving as a means of spreading prejudices.<sup>225</sup>

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.’<sup>226</sup> 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!<sup>227</sup>

These are not merely historical observations. As John Gray has written of the contemporary USA:

It has by far the most powerful fundamentalist movement of any advanced country. In no otherwise comparable land do politicians regularly invoke the name of Jesus. Nowhere else are there movements to expel Darwinism from public schools. In truth, the US is a less secular regime than Turkey.<sup>228</sup>

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. In Bloch’s words this is not only ‘not dangerous to capitalism’, but positively beneficial for it. Daniel Lazare is exaggerating only slightly to describe the USA as ‘an eighteenth-century republic that has come to resemble a democracy in certain respects, but which at its core remains stubbornly anti-democratic’: ‘While the United States might look like a democracy and sometimes even act like one, it was fundamentally a holdover from the days when not even the most radical politicians believed that the people should be free to run the government as a whole.’<sup>229</sup> This continuing element of archaism at the heart of the most-self-consciously ‘modern’ of societies should caution

<sup>225</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1926], ‘Radio, Science, Technology and Society’, in *Problems of Everyday Life: Creating the Foundations for a New Society in Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1973), p. 257.

<sup>226</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1933], ‘Uneven and Combined Development and the Role of American Imperialism: Minutes of a Discussion,’ *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932–33]*, edited by George Breitman and Sarah Lovell (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1972), p. 117.

<sup>227</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1933], ‘What Is National Socialism?’, in *The Struggle against Fascism in Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 413.

<sup>228</sup> John Gray, *Al Qaeda and What It Means to be Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>229</sup> Daniel Lazare, *The Velvet Coup: The Constitution, the Supreme Court and the Decline of American Democracy* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 9.

against claims 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 in Part 4 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.

### 3.3. Uneven and Combined Development in Russia after 1917: from Revolution to Counter-revolution

Russia continued to be marked by uneven and combined development immediately after the October revolution. In a letter to the first issue of the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism* in 1922, Trotsky wrote:

The Soviet state is a living contradiction of the old world, of its social order, of its personal relations, of its outlooks and beliefs. But at the same time the Soviet state itself is still full of contradictions, gaps, lack of coordination, vague fermentation – in a word, of phenomena in which the inheritance of the past is interwoven with the shoots of the future.<sup>230</sup>

These contradictions continued throughout the 1920s. On a slightly less exalted note than Trotsky, Walter Benjamin observed similar ‘interweaving’ during his visit to Moscow in 1926:

Here the newcomer learns perhaps most quickly of all to adapt himself to the curious tempo of this city and to the rhythm of its peasant population. And the complete interpenetration of technological and primitive modes life, this world-historical experiment in the new Russia, is illustrated in miniature by a streetcar ride.<sup>231</sup>

The Stalinist counter-revolution which began in 1928 transformed the Russian society described in these passages from one undergoing, with great difficulty, the transition to socialism, into something quite different: the first example of the integrated state capitalism that was after World War II to become the typical developmental form in the Global South.<sup>232</sup> This transformation heightened the fusion of archaic and contemporary forms to an unprecedented degree, above all by propelling millions of former peasants into the factories and cities. In England, it took three hundred and fifty years from the emergence of agrarian capitalism to the consolidation of industrialisation, years characterised by enclosure, clearance, repressive legislation and social degradation at home, and slavery, genocide and imperial conquest abroad. In Russia the process was even more greatly compressed than in Scotland, Germany or Japan, taking less than a tenth of the time it did in England, with the same processes magnified in intensity for every reduction in duration.

Despite the atrocities of Stalinism, (state-) capitalist modernity produced new forms of consciousness and perception among formerly agrarian peoples, in ways similar to the process in Western Europe, North America and Japan. During the early 1930s the Russian psychologist Alexander Luria undertook a number of studies of behaviour in Uzbekistan and

---

<sup>230</sup> Trotsky, ‘Radio, Science, Technology and Society’, p. 271.

<sup>231</sup> Walter Benjamin [1927]. ‘Moscow’, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 1, 1927–1930, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 32.

<sup>232</sup> Neil Davidson, ‘Is Social Revolution Still Possible in the Twenty-first Century?’, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, vol. 23, nos 2-3, Special Issue: 25 Years of Revolution: Comparing Revolt and Transition from Europe 1989 to the Arab World 2014 (2015), pp. 119-128.

Kirghizia, both areas of what was then Soviet Central Asia. These were areas where the economy was largely pre-capitalist and the majority of the population were illiterate. The first five-year plan provided for more intensive industrialisation of regions like Central Asia than in the USSR more generally. Accordingly: 'Industrial production, and numbers of workers employed in industry, expanded more rapidly in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, and in the Urals and West Siberia, than in the rest of the USSR.' Furthermore, this was from a lower level: 'While 9.4 per cent of the Soviet population lived in these republics, they contained only 1.5 per cent of those employed in large-scale industry; and most industrial workers were Russians.' By 1934 this had completely changed, with the number employed in large-scale industry nearly trebling from 53,000 to 158,000: 'The increase in the working class in these areas took place against the background of the forcible transfer of a large part of Central Asian agriculture to the production of cotton, and the forcible settlement of the nomadic Kazakhs, many of whom died from starvation in the subsequent famine, or emigrated from Kazakhstan.'<sup>233</sup> Both regions were therefore experiencing what Luria later called 'a radical restructuring of their socioeconomic system and culture' as a result of Stalinist collectivisation and the industrialisation process. The economy was based on cotton, with some transhumant cattle-rearers who spent part of the year in the mountains. The population were dominated by Islam, in respect of whose tenets women were confined to their own quarters, from which they could only emerge if draped in the veil. 'The radical changes in class structure were accompanied by new cultural shifts.' These included the universalisation of literacy and numeracy, but also of agronomy. 'As a result, people became acquainted not only with new fields of knowledge but also with *new motives for action*.' These developments produced new forms of consciousness, in which 'abstract' rather than 'situational' thinking came to predominate, on the basis of new state capitalist social relations rather than those associated with those of petty commodity production. As Luria notes:

...sociohistorical shifts not only introduce new content into the mental world of human beings; they also create new forms of activity and new structures of cognitive functioning. They advance human consciousness to new levels. We now see the inaccuracy of the centuries-old notions in accordance with which the basic structures of perception, representation, reasoning, deduction, imagination, and self-awareness are fixed forms of spiritual life and remain unchanged under differing social conditions. The basic categories of human mental life can be understood as products of social history – they are subject to change when the basic forms of social practice are altered and are thus social in nature.<sup>234</sup>

Why then did these transformations not produce a revolutionary response similar to those which had erupted in 1905 and 1917? As we by now come to expect, a crucial aspect was the specific character of the emerging state – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, a crucial aspect was the specific character of the personnel whose relationships constituted the state. Alex Callinicos has noted that the counter-revolution in Russia had four main components: forced collectivisation, rapid industrialisation, systematic coercion and – most important in the context of this discussion – the fact that 'a minority of the population benefited from the changes it brought': 'the social meaning of the changes involved was upward mobility for a minority at a time when the mass of the population was experiencing an appalling decline in its material conditions'.<sup>235</sup> We tend to think of Stalinist Russia

<sup>233</sup> R. W. Davies, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia*, vol. 4, *Crisis and Progress in the Soviet Economy, 1931-1933* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 485-488.

<sup>234</sup> Alexander R. Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, edited by Michael Cole (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 12-4, 163-4.

<sup>235</sup> Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 34-35 and 29-37 more generally.

primarily as a totalitarian monolith but, near the top, social relations were also flexible enough to allow entry into the new ruling class and for its members to make sharp tactical shifts within what was in many respects a chaotic (and certainly not ‘planned’) accumulation process. As Mike Haynes points out:

The drive to industrialise Russia opened up new possibilities for people to find ‘room at the top’. New enterprises needed managers. So did hospitals, schools universities and research institutes. The expanding party state needed new layers of senior administrators. Beneath them, intermediate layers of white collar workers, professionals, doctors, teachers and architects had to be filled out. ... The fact that capitalism is always in movement creates some capacity for people to move up to the top. But the leap forward begun in Russia in the 1930s vastly expanded these opportunities.

Haynes argues against regarding the ruling class as wholly new, rather: ‘The rapid changes opened up possibilities for mobility alongside those who had already established themselves before 1928.’<sup>236</sup> At least some talented and potentially rebellious people were elevated into a new ruling class which regarded itself – for the most part quite sincerely at this stage – as a revolutionary force in Russian society; but precisely because ‘Marxism’ was the official doctrine of the state, it was unavailable to the overwhelming majority of the new, urbanised working class as a doctrine of resistance, let alone of revolution, in the way it had for an earlier generation of workers facing the Tsarist state.

The obstacles to revolutionary consciousness were not purely ideological. Moshe Lewin explains some of the reasons why the ‘social cleavages did not turn into political ones’:

Repression and terror alone could not explain the phenomenon. Factors like the cultural level, the relatively short industrial experience of the bulk of the employees (and the upward social mobility for many in the system), the existence inside the working class of large unintegrated segments of newcomers, women, youth, a kind of worker’s aristocracy, too, as well as a large differentiation span, all those explain social tensions, crude language, vodka and hooliganism, *tekuchka* [i.e. ‘spontaneous mobility of manpower’] and dirt, but may also serve as an explanation for the lack of any direct political challenge to the regime. Such a mass was probably difficult to rule – but easy to control...<sup>237</sup>

Control was partly exercised by the ways in which the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation were instituted, which was quite different to the pre-1917 period. In relation to urbanisation, the parallels are not so much with the recent growth of mega-cities in the contemporary Global South (which will be discussed in Part 4 of this article) but somewhere rather more unexpected.

At the conclusion of her comparison of industrial cities in the USA and USSR, Kate Brown points out that both states were centrally concerned to suppress the resistance of workers to the dictates of capitalist industrialisation, ‘to fix social relations in place’:

...despite the fact that both the United States and Soviet Union were founded on revolution and grew through rapid urbanization, leaders in both countries distrusted the revolutionary and spontaneous quality of urban space and worked to destroy it. With straight lines and the force of the grid, Soviet and American leaders planned new ‘garden cities’ cut through with wide, rebellion-proof avenues, which negated the unpredictability and anarchy of nineteenth-century

<sup>236</sup> Michael Haynes, *Russia: Class and Power, 1917–2000* (London: Bookmarks, 2002), pp. 143-144.

<sup>237</sup> Moshe Lewin [1982], ‘Social Relations inside Industry during the Prewar Five-Year Plans, 1928-1941’, in *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 257



cities. As a result, both expanding American corporate power and expanding Soviet party-state power etched an anti-revolutionary conservatism onto twentieth-century urban scapes.<sup>238</sup>

Nor were workplaces themselves conducive to the type of organisation which had been characteristic, above all in engineering, before 1917. Here too there were ironic parallels with Russia's Cold War rival:

Before 1917...there was a high concentration of labour in Russian plants and this helped forge solidarity. But workers then, even under Tsarist repression, had more chance of independent organisations. After 1928 the larger plants operated more like company towns, fiefdoms of the plant managers, which gave them a degree of authority not only over workers in the workplace but outside it as well.<sup>239</sup>

It is in this context that Stalinist Russia's own versions of 'debased adaptation' and 'non-synchronicity' emerged. As Smith writes, 'once the project of achieving Communist modernity got underway, it quickly became apparent that a side-effect of massive social and economic transformation was to revitalize many "neo-traditional" practices and representations', including 'the emergence of a charismatic leader, the revival of clientism as a principle of social organization, and reconstitution of social hierarchies more akin to status groups than to modern social classes'.<sup>240</sup> The retreat to pre-existing ideologies was inscribed into the Stalinist experience from the Russian point of origin during the late 1920s, as a form of consolation for a population being subjected to otherwise unendurable social convulsions, both terrorized into submission and mobilized into production for a process of breakneck industrialization. Lewin points out: 'Institutions and methods which seemed to be entirely new, after deeper insight show the often quite astonishing reemergence of many old traits and forms.' Not least of these was the reproduction, the recreation in secular form, of the iconography and values of Russian Orthodoxy:

One telling example of extolling some of the more primitive trends of rural society when state interests seemed to have warranted it, and offering it as a value for the whole nation, is the policy in regard to the family undertaken in the 1930s. ...it was clearly the large, archaic rural family, with its high demands on the reproductive faculties of women, authoritarian structure, and apparently solid moral stability, that was presented as a model. ... The 'crusaders' themselves got trapped in some of the least modern, most orthodox, and most nationalist elements in their tradition, now put to use as ingredients of a renewed worship of the state and its interests.<sup>241</sup>

In cultural terms these regressions are far from the defiant modernism which had characterised the revolutionary years and, not unexpectedly, the consolidation of the Stalinist regime within the USSR saw the institutionalisation of anti-modernism as state policy. John Berger traces the implications for the artists involved:

For a few years after 1921 the condition of Russian art was the very antithesis of that which had preceded it for nearly two centuries. 'We have taken the Bastille of the Academy', claimed the students. For a few years artists served the State on their own initiative in a context of maximum freedom. Soon a very similar academicism was to be re-imposed. ... They had to

---

<sup>238</sup> Kate Brown, 'Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana Are Nearly the Same Place', *American Historical Review*, vol. 106, no. 1 (2001), pp. 46-47.

<sup>239</sup> Haynes, *Russia*, p. 174.

<sup>240</sup> Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China*, p. 206.

<sup>241</sup> Moshe Lewin [1977], 'The Social Background to Stalinism', in *The Making of the Soviet System*, pp. 274, 275; and see pp. 274-276 more generally.

abandon their total prophetic claims and resign themselves to becoming good workers in a single productive sector.<sup>242</sup>

This was new form of ‘academic naturalism’ which had, as MacIntyre points out, ‘appeared in other times and places and notably in Victorian England, another society dominated by a technically oriented, sexually conservative bourgeoisie’.<sup>243</sup> This is of course an aspect of a wider conservatism shared by British and Soviet societies.<sup>244</sup> It is worth noting, in this connection, that it was not only in Stalinist Russia, but in Fascist Germany that ‘a restoration of former bourgeois cultural forms and relations is instituted’ during the 1930s.<sup>245</sup>

Needless to say the levels of mobilisation associated with break-neck industrialisation could not be sustained for decades on end – but then, they did not need to be. Even before Stalin’s death in 1953 the processes of industrialisation and, to a large extent, urbanisation were essentially complete, and the regime stabilised. Looking back from the nineteen sixties, MacIntyre imagined what Trotsky’s response would have been: ‘The liberalization of Khrushchev would have appeared to him as parallel to the liberalisation which has developed in other capitalisms once primitive accumulation has been accomplished.’<sup>246</sup> We cannot know what Trotsky would have thought, but this assessment shift involved is accurate enough. The relaxation of state repression went hand-in-hand with modest but real improvements in levels of consumption and standards of living more generally, although these were still shadowed by developments in the West, they were by now clearly moving in the same direction.<sup>247</sup> The most familiar image we have of the USSR is as it was at the very end – decaying, hollowed-out and in full disintegration. It is therefore easy to forget that, even as late as the 1970s, serious figures in the West expected it to match or overtake living standards in the USA by early in the twenty-first century.<sup>248</sup> By the time these predictions were being made, however, the era of uneven and combined development in Russian history was long over: it had become at least as much an exemplar of capitalist modernity as its Cold War rival.

## 4. CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

### 4.1. The Persistence of Uneven and Combined Development

Can we still discern the process of uneven and combined development in contemporary capitalism? A common theme on the left since the late 1980s in particular, more or less coincident with the consolidation of neoliberalism, has been the elimination of the non-synchronous or, in terms of this chapter, the evening-out of unevenness and the stabilisation of combination. Guy Debord, reflecting on his 1967 critique of the Spectacular Society twenty years later, argued that it now had reached a point of total integration in which where all forms predating capitalist modernity had been absorbed and rendered affectless:

---

<sup>242</sup> John Berger, *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the U.S.S.R.* (London: Writers and Readers, 1969), pp. 47-48.

<sup>243</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marcuse* (London: Fontana Books, 1970), p. 57.

<sup>244</sup> Nigel Harris [1968], *Beliefs in Society: the Problem of Ideology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 130-166.

<sup>245</sup> Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 101.

<sup>246</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre [1963], ‘Trotsky in Exile’, in *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, p. 273.

<sup>247</sup> Haynes, *Russia*, pp. 179-182; Goran Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945-2000* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 133-146, 150-160.

<sup>248</sup> See, for example, Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, pp. 127-128.

Beyond a legacy of old books and old buildings, still of some significance but destined to continual reduction and, moreover, increasingly highlighted and classified to suit the spectacle's requirements, there remains nothing, in culture or nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry.<sup>249</sup>

More recently, although rather less comprehensibly, Hartmut Rosa, one of the main proponents of 'accelerationism' has argued:

The ubiquitous simultaneity of late modernity...is thus, strictly speaking, no longer a simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous, since that presupposes the idea of a temporalized, directed, and moving (though asynchronous) history. Instead, it is, as it were, a static, situational, 'timeless', and orderless *simultaneity of historical fragments*.<sup>250</sup>

It is the theorists of postmodernism, however, who have been most insistent in claiming that the contradictions of capitalist modernity have been overcome. Jameson, perhaps the most influential of these figures, claims that everything associated with 'pre-modernity' had 'finally been swept away without a trace':

Everything is now organized and planned; nature has been triumphantly blotted out, along with peasants, petit-bourgeois commerce, handicraft, feudal aristocracies and imperial bureaucracies. Ours is a more homogeneously modernized condition: we no longer are encumbered with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization (at least from the perspective of 'the West').<sup>251</sup>

As is quite often the case with Jameson, it is unclear whether the quoted passage expresses his own view or is simply intended to reflect a widely-held belief, which it certainly does: but in either case, does the belief correspond to reality?

#### **4.1.1. *The End of Pre-capitalist Survivals?***

One response to such claims might be to argue that uneven and combined development still persists, but that the mechanisms by which it produces its effects is no longer the same as in Trotsky's lifetime, precisely because there are no longer any pre-capitalist survivals with which capitalist modernity can combine. 'Today', writes Joseph Choonara, 'uneven and combined development is best conceived as a drawing together of successive phases – including, crucially, capitalist phases – in novel forms within countries of the Global South.'<sup>252</sup> Choonara stands in the Trotskyist tradition, but similar positions have been taken by writers outside it. Jan Nedervee Pieterse, for example, writes in relation to post-Fordist production that:

the actual options available and directions taken are more likely to be influenced by the interactions among different modes of capitalism than is indicated by merely examining

---

<sup>249</sup> Guy Debord [1988], *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso,) 1998, p. 10.

<sup>250</sup> Hartmut Rosa [2005], *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 292-293.

<sup>251</sup> Jameson, 'Secondary Elaborations', pp. 309-310.

<sup>252</sup> Joseph Choonara, 'The Relevance of Permanent Revolution: A Reply to Neil Davidson', *International Socialism*, second series, 131 (Summer 2011), p. 182.

varieties in the North, as if these represent the front end of capitalism (which is not tenable in view of the rise of Pacific Asia) and as if the front end would not be affected by the rear.<sup>253</sup>

In fact, although uneven and combined development can involve what used to be called ‘the articulation of modes of production’ – and actually did so in, for example, pre-revolutionary Russia and pre-Independence India, it need not.<sup>254</sup> Jairus Banaji has argued – possibly deploying a rather over-capacious definition of ‘capitalism’ – that ‘what the world-economy of the nineteenth century threw up was an articulation of *forms of capitalism* more than a combination of modes of production’.<sup>255</sup> Trotsky himself certainly thought that uneven and combined development was possible in societies where capitalist laws of motion were already dominant, as he thought they were in China by the late 1920s.<sup>256</sup> Regardless of intellectual pedigree, however, it is true that the combination of different phases of capitalist development can produce entirely new social consequences. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discover such a process in Latin America, in passages which echo Trotsky’s remarks about the effect of English or French capital being transplanted onto the steppes of the Donets Basin.<sup>257</sup>

From the perspective of stages of development’ one might think that through the contemporary export of industrial production, an auto factory built by Ford in Brazil in the 1990s might be comparable to a Ford factory in Detroit in the 1930s because both instances of production belong to the same industrial stage.

According to these authors such a thought would however be mistaken:

...the two factories are radically different in terms of technology and productive passages. When fixed capital is exported, it is exported generally at its highest level of productivity. The Ford factory in 1990s Brazil, then, would not be built with the technology of the Ford factory of 1930s Detroit, but would be based on the most advanced productive computer and information technologies available. The technological infrastructure of the factory would locate it squarely within the information economy.<sup>258</sup>

But does uneven and combined development today *only* involve the transplantation of the newest technologies into those areas which had never experienced the older versions, or does

---

<sup>253</sup> Jan Nedervee Pieterse, ‘Globalization North and South: Representations of Uneven Development and the Interaction of Modernities’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 17, no. 1 (February 2000), p. 135.

<sup>254</sup> The concept of articulation in this sense originates not, as is commonly thought in the work of Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, but in that of Pierre-Phillipe Rey, most of whose major works have still not been translated into English. See Aidan Foster-Carter, ‘The Modes of Production Controversy’, *New Left Review* 1/107 (January-February 1978), pp. 55-77. For one of the earliest attempts outside of France to use the concept, see John G. Taylor, *From Modernization to Modes of Production: A Critique of the Sociologies of Development and Underdevelopment* (London: Macmillan, 1979), chapter 13, especially pp. 226-234.

<sup>255</sup> Jairus Banaji, ‘Modes of Production: A Synthesis’, in *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010), pp. 259-260.

<sup>256</sup> Leon D. Trotsky [1928], ‘The Draft Programme of the Third International – a Critique of Fundamentals’, in *The Third International After Lenin* (London: New Park, 1974), p. 162.

<sup>257</sup> Their failure to recognise the parallels between their own work and Trotsky’s may be simple ignorance of his positions rather than unwillingness to be associated with them. Hardt was once asked whether his failure to consider uneven and combined development in *Empire* reflected ‘a more general disagreement or critique of [Trotsky’s] view’. He replied: ‘No, I think it’s just a missed opportunity. But I think Toni [Negri] and I are less familiar with Trotsky’s work than we are with Lenin’s work, but, sometimes, those kinds of familiarities are just coincidences of background.’ See Michael Hardt, ‘An Interview with Michael Hardt’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2003), p. 135.

<sup>258</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 287.

it still involve the impact of capitalist modernisation on peasants and rural dwellers? The latter scenario does rather depend on the continued existence of a peasant class to be impacted upon, which several leading Marxist thinkers have suggested is no longer the case. In the final volume of his history of the ‘short’ twentieth century, for example, Hobsbawm identified the most significant social change to have taken place in its second half, the one which broke decisively with the entire previous history of humanity, as ‘the death of the peasantry’:

The peasantry, which had formed the majority of the human race throughout recorded history, had been made redundant by agricultural revolution, but the millions no longer needed on the land had in the past been readily absorbed by labour-hungry occupations elsewhere, which required only a willingness to work, the adaptation of country skills, like digging and building walls, or the capacity to learn on the job. What would happen to the workers in those occupations when they in turn became unnecessary? Even if some could be retrained for the high-grade jobs of the information age which continued to expand (most of which increasingly demanded a higher education), there were not enough of these to compensate. What, for that matter, would happen to the peasants of the Third World who still flooded out of the villages?<sup>259</sup>

If peasants are still ‘flooding’ out of villages then this implies that reports of their death as a class have been greatly exaggerated. As we shall see, however, Hobsbawm was right to point to the consequences for the newly urbanized populations and the cities in which they live. As might be expected from his previously quoted comments, Jameson sees the supposedly disappearing peasantry as an important aspect of how everything which pre-existed capitalist modernity is being obliterated, and is particularly concerned with the effect on our sensibilities:

...people who lived in two distinct worlds simultaneously; born in those agricultural villages we still characterise as medieval or premodern, they developed their vocations in the new urban agglomerates, with their radically distinct and ‘modern’ spaces and temporalities. The sensitivity to deep time in the moderns then registers this comparatist perception of the two socioeconomic temporalities, which the first modernists had to negotiate in their own lived experience. By the same token, when the premodern vanishes, when the peasantry shrinks to a picturesque remnant, when suburbs replace the villages and modernity reigns triumphant and homogenous over all space, then the very sense of an alternative temporality disappears as well, and postmodern generations are dispossessed (without ever knowing it) of any differential sense of that deep time the first moderns sought to inscribe in their writing.<sup>260</sup>

There is a degree of telescoping involved in both accounts. The decline of the peasantry as a proportion of the global population is undeniable, though it has been slower and more varied than expected – indeed, it is possible that peasants still constitute the largest global class.<sup>261</sup> The majority of the world industrial working class – 79% in 2010 – are now based in the Global South, but this does not mean that the majority of people there are industrial workers;

---

<sup>259</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Allen Lane, 1994), pp. 289, 415; see also David Reiff, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p.179

<sup>260</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘The End of Temporality’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Summer 2003), p. 699.

<sup>261</sup> Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (London: Bookmarks, 2009), p. 47.

by 2010 only 23.1% were.<sup>262</sup> In this respect, proletarianization in the Global South presents a paradoxical picture and one which does not simply repeat earlier patterns:

The historical pattern of capitalist industrialisation in the West and Japan was accompanied by the kind of industrialisation and employment generation there that led to the decline of the rural population to the point that it constitutes, at most between 2 and 8 per cent of the overall population in the advanced countries. For countries like Brazil, India, China and Mexico the rural population is currently a majority. In due course it may well become a minority, but well above the proportions now prevailing in the earlier industrialising countries.<sup>263</sup>

Furthermore, while proletarianization is an ongoing process it is not always simply a case of abandoning the farm and entering the factory in a once-and-for-all break. The move from peasant to worker involves people retaining links, moving back and forth between rural and urban areas, with a correspondingly complex development of class consciousness. The process is also spatially uneven: in some regions the ‘new enclosures’ and other processes associated with the emergence of the neoliberal trade and food regimes push small and middling peasants and their offspring off the land and into the cities (though not necessarily into factory work), while in others a degree of ‘re-peasantisation’ in the form of partial reliance on small-holdings for subsistence/income by urban workers still continues in the formal and informal sectors.<sup>264</sup> In the early 1980s Neil Smith wrote of how:

Pre-capitalist modes of production had been integrated into the world capitalist system as ‘internalized externals’. As such they have not made the complete transition from formal to real integration, and the real integration of the global space-economy is necessarily incomplete.<sup>265</sup>

To say the least, this understates the extent to which real subsumption (or integration) has taken place, even in the countryside.<sup>266</sup> From his studies in rural India, Raju Das argues that one of the ways in which rurality is maintained is where:

a) the use of technology aimed at increasing labour productivity (meaning that the transition to real subsumption has occurred); b) the use of various forms of tied or unfree labour as well as free labour made to work long hours for very low wages, thus reinforcing the system of formal subsumption; or c) landowners resorting to hybrid subsumption.

By the latter Das means the ‘mercantile/usury-based exploitation as well as exploitation based on rental payment’ in situations where:

...landowners, who were earlier formally subsuming labourers on annual contracts as well as daily labourers, resorted to large-scale casualization: permanent workers became casuals. This situation gradually changed to one where many landowners started renting out their land, often to those who

<sup>262</sup> John Smith, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalisation, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016), pp 101-104.

<sup>263</sup> Achin Vanaik, ‘Emerging Powers: Rise of the South or a Reconfiguration of Elites?’, in *Shifting Power: Critical Perspectives on Emerging Economies*, edited by Nick Buxton and Nicola Bullard (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2014), p. 8.

<sup>264</sup> Henry Bernstein, “‘The Peasantry’ in Global Capitalism: Who, Where and Why?”, in *The Socialist Register: Working Classes: Global Realities*, edited by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (London: Merlin Press, 2001), pp. 38-40.

<sup>265</sup> Neil Smith [1984], *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Third Edition, London: Verso, 2010), pp. 188-189.

<sup>266</sup> Surprisingly perhaps, given his background in the unorthodox Trotskyism of the International Socialist tradition, Smith's path-breaking book is at its weakest precisely in dealing with combined, as opposed to uneven development. See, for example, *Uneven Development*, pp. 5-6.

were earlier working as casuals or on permanent contracts, contributing to their partial peasantisation.<sup>267</sup>

These types of complexities in the capital/labour relation, rather than smooth transitions from formal to real subsumption, or straight binary oppositions between capital and labour are of course exactly what uneven and combined development would lead us to expect.

#### 4.1.2. 'Dual economy', 'Hybridity', 'Syncretism'

Even if we reject the excessive claims for the untrammelled dominance of capitalist modernity, there are still alternative concepts to uneven and combined development which tend to be deployed rather more frequently in contemporary discussions of the relationship between multiple socio-economic forms. In one of what was – until recently – the very few attempts to marry theoretical consideration of with empirical study of the process, Carole McAllister assessed two of these. Her discussion is a useful starting point for attempting to establish the continued existence of uneven and combined development as a tendency.

One of these concepts is 'dual economy', which, as McAllister says

...assumes the existence of two separate economic and social domains in colonial and semi-colonial societies – one organised according to the principles of Western corporate capitalism and the other representing a relatively stagnant subsistence or peasant economy. The society, and especially its economy, is conceptualized as divided into a 'traditional' and a 'modern' way of life.

The problem in this case, 'is the lack of attention to the interactions between the two sectors, and the assumption that they are self-contained' – an assumption that McAllister challenges on the basis of her regional fieldwork in Malaya:

...in fact, the theoretical division of any society into two such distinct and self-contained units is clearly a distortion. In Negeri Sembilan, as well as in other contemporary Third World societies, it is clear that the so-called traditional sector – organized around subsistence agriculture and the principles of matrilinear kinship – is essential to the functioning of international capitalism and that the latter in turn continues to reshape 'tradition'.<sup>268</sup>

As I wrote Part 1 about China during the 1920s, even in areas subject to uneven and combined development, these absolute separations *do* exist. Highlighting them is quite a common approach among non-Marxist radicals. Arundhati Roy, for example, writes that:

As Indian citizens, we subsist on a regular diet of caste massacres and nuclear tests, mosque breaking and fashion shows, church burning and expanding cell phone networks, bonded labour and the digital revolution, female infanticide and the Nasdaq crash, husbands who continue to burn their wives for dowry, and our delectable stockpile of Miss Worlds.<sup>269</sup>

---

<sup>267</sup> Raju J. Das, 'Reconceptualizing Capitalism: Forms of Subsumption of Labour, Class Struggle, and Uneven Development', *Review of Radical Economics*, vol. 44, no. 2 (June 2012), pp. 195-196. For Marx's original discussions of 'hybrid' or 'intermediate' subsumption, see Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 645 and [1861-3], 'Intermediate Forms', in *Collected Works*, vol. 34 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), pp. 118-20

<sup>268</sup> Carole McAllister, 'The Uneven and Combined Character of Third World Development: Lessons from Women's Everyday Forms of Resistance in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia', Working Paper No. 9 (Amsterdam: International Institute for Research and Education, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>269</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (London: Flamingo, 2002), pp. 167-68.

McAllister rightly regards uneven and combined development as an alternative to the mere juxtaposition of extreme differences; unfortunately, some of Trotsky's other modern adherents have tended to see it as *constituted* by them, as in this passage by Tom Kemp:

India thus remained an example of combined development. Bullock carts and sacred cows existed side by side with advanced capitalist industry and a modern industrial proletariat. Religious fanaticism and superstition abounded; there was an anarchic and distorted land system, stagnation, mass poverty, sloth and filth. On the other hand there were railways, factories, banks, modern city centres and a sophisticated intelligentsia in touch with the most advanced ideas. These contradictions and paradoxes were essential parts of India's historical legacy of colonial independence.<sup>270</sup>

An example of dualism being invoked to describe a specific situation can be found in the October 2003 announcement by HSBC that it was moving 4,000 call centre and back office jobs from Britain to the Indian state of Hyderabad. The story gave the media an opportunity to recycle the most banal clichés in the repertoire of travel journalism, including the classic, 'India: Land of Contrasts'. The contrasts are scarcely picturesque: 'The biggest difference between HSBC's smart Babukhan Chambers and the British centres it is usurping is the grinding poverty that surrounds Babukhan – limbless beggars and families in tents', wrote one *Guardian* journalist.<sup>271</sup>

These disparities pre-existed the decisions by British financial institutions like HSBC, Prudential and TSB/Lloyds to transfer part of their telecommunications operations offshore. Indeed, the only reason why these companies were prepared to do so is because India already had a relatively highly-skilled and – by British standards – lowly-paid workforce either already accustomed to the modern office environment or in the process of being trained to enter it. Behind these developments lies the software export industry, which has been the fastest growing sector in the Indian economy since 1991 – not coincidentally the year in which a deeply indebted Indian state sought loans from, the conditions of which were the opening up of the economy to both native and foreign private capital. The education systems of several states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are now adapted to serve the requirements of this sector, which has generated its own contrasts, as Anthony D'Costa explains:

...rural India is characterised by debt bondage, social servitude, extensive poverty, illiteracy, and limited opportunities for social and economic mobility. Culturally there is a massive divide from the highly integrated, glamorous, and globalised software industry.<sup>272</sup>

D'Costa does refer to uneven and combined development in this context, but only to dismiss it as indicative of the problem

By framing the rise of the Indian software industry as integral to uneven and combined development I have demonstrated that there are serious contradictions with such a development process. ... Paradoxically, in attempting to overcome technological barriers through greater international economic integration, the Indian software industry is forging ahead but it is also exacerbating uneven and combined development at the national level.<sup>273</sup>

---

<sup>270</sup> Tom Kemp, *Historical Patterns of Industrialisation* (Harlow: Longman, 1978), p. 143.

<sup>271</sup> Julie Finch, 'In India, Its Service with a Compulsory Smile', *The Guardian* (17 November 2003).

<sup>272</sup> Anthony D'Costa, 'Uneven and Combined Development: Understanding India's Software Exports', *World Development*, vol. 31, no. 1 (January 2003), p. 221.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 221-222.



We have already seen how uneven and combined development has been assimilated to quite different theories, from positions of both support and opposition; a similar misidentification can be seen here with respect to dual systems theory. The divisions to which D'Costa draws attention are of course never absolute and the situations where it breaks down are exactly where the concept of uneven and combined development might be more usefully applied. Many commentators recognise that there are not unsurmountable barriers between the different temporalities of Indian social life, but regard this too as a problem. Jeremy Seabrook is typical here: 'The loss of jobs to rich countries is small compared to the cultural hybridisation of hundreds of thousands of young Indians'.<sup>274</sup> D'Costa similarly sees the divisions between 'hybridised' Indians and their compatriots as 'inherently destabilising' of Indian society.<sup>275</sup> There are a number of issues here.

As I noted earlier, hybridity is an ongoing process which predates not only Western colonialism, but even the earlier division of Europe, then the rest of the world into 'West' and 'East'. The notion that there once existed a pure, unsullied, non-hybrid Indian people – or indeed any other – has been rightly criticised by Said:

If you know in advance that the African or Iranian or Chinese or Jewish or German experience is fundamentally integral, coherent, separate, and therefore comprehensible only to Africans, Iranians, Chinese, Jews or Germans, you first of all posit an essential something which, I believe, is both historically created and the result of interpretation – namely the existence of Africanness, Jewishness or Germanness, or for that matter Orientalism and Occidentalism. And second, you are likely as a consequence to defend the essence or experience itself rather than promote full knowledge of it and its entanglements and dependencies on other knowledges.<sup>276</sup>

As George Lipsitz notes, the world has always been characterised by 'transformation and change':

Instead of looking to the past for compensatory stories about cultural uniformity, we need to build the future by learning lessons from individuals and groups whose histories have prepared them to make productive use of contradictions, to embrace the dynamism of difference and diversity.

Music is one of the best examples: 'Music that originally emerged from concrete historical experiences in places with clearly identifiable geographical boundaries now circulates as an interchangeable commodity market to consumers across the globe.' The most obvious example of this is the virtual universality of Hip-Hop but, as Lipsitz goes on to say, this is not simply a process through which the original sense of musical 'place' is lost or appropriated:

Through the conduits of commercial culture, music made by aggrieved inner-city populations in Canberra, Kingston, or Compton becomes part of everyday life and culture for affluent consumers in the suburbs of Cleveland, Coventry or Cologne. At the same time, electro-techno-art music made in Germany serves as a staple for sampling within African American hip hop; Spanish flamenco and paso doble music provide crucial subtexts for Algerian Rai; and pedal steel guitars first developed by country and western musicians in the USA play a prominent role in Nigerian juju.<sup>277</sup>

---

<sup>274</sup> Jeremy Seabrook, 'Progress on Hold', *The Guardian* (24 October 2003).

<sup>275</sup> D'Costa, 'Uneven and Combined Development', pp. 215-216

<sup>276</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), pp. 35-36.

<sup>277</sup> George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 4.

The guitar itself is a good example. First developed in Spain, it attained modern form in the music of black Americans who combined the five-tone scale of their West African origins with European harmonies to produce the chord progressions characteristic of the blues.<sup>278</sup> Or take Brazil, where no-one could claim that class politics has been adversely affected by the supposedly debilitating effects of ‘Western’ culture. During the 1990s Brazil became the sixth biggest market for recorded music in the world after the USA, Japan, Germany, the UK and France (and the second biggest market for pirate recordings, after the USA). One of the genres is the *mangue* beat movement which first developed in the city of Recife.

Hybridity is not new in Brazilian music. Here, as in other nations, what is usually called ‘traditional’ national genres like the *samba* and the *choro* mixed modes of the Portuguese colonial settlers, the transplanted African slaves and the indigenous population since the nineteenth century. *Mangue* is no different in this respect except that it has not existed long enough to receive the respectable aura of tradition conferred by time and familiarity. Worse, it employs rhythms and instruments derived from rock – which is itself of course a hybrid. ‘In fact, *Mangue* is a metaphor for cultural diversity based on an environment full of diversity.’ Far from submerging what I will call ‘older’, rather than ‘traditional’ musical forms, it has brought them to the surface: ‘One of the most interesting effects of the *mangue* movement and its offshoots is that instead of suffocating traditional culture, *mangue* beat is helping local culture to rejuvenate itself.’<sup>279</sup>

Part of the problem here is the very notion of ‘the West’.<sup>280</sup> As Gordon Matthews has written of the equation of global capitalism with Westernisation: ‘One problem with this view is that “Western” is hardly a monolithic category, but encompasses many different societies, ideas, values: are there really any such things as “Western values”, “Western ways of life”?’<sup>281</sup> National cultures are never homogenous; above all, as Lenin insisted, they are divided on class lines.

The elements of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in every national culture, since in every nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism. But every nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of ‘elements’, but of the dominant culture.<sup>282</sup>

The point which Lenin is making here is that while there may be no such thing as a proletarian culture, the proletariat does *have* a culture, which is not identical to that of the bourgeoisie, even though it exists in the context of capitalist society and the dominant bourgeois ideology. Consequently: ‘we take *from each* national culture *only* its democratic and socialist elements; we take them *only* and *absolutely* in opposition to the bourgeois

---

<sup>278</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

<sup>279</sup> Luciana F. M. Mendonca, ‘The Local and Global in Popular Music: the Brazilian Music Industry, Local Culture and Public Policies’, in *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy and Globalization*, edited by Diane Crane, Nobuko Kawashima and Ken’ichi Kawasaki (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 107-9, 110-111. There are even more extreme examples of cultural adoption by Brazilian musicians, notably in the way some embraced British post-punk approaches in the early 1980s. In part this was a reaction to the types of music which were supposed to exemplify Brazilian culture – not only bossa nova and samba, but also such counter-cultural forms such as Tropicalismo. See Eliete Mejorado and Bruno Verner in conversation with Gavin Butt, ‘40 Degrees in Black’, in *Post-Punk: Then and Now*, edited by Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Fisher (London: Repeater Books, 2016).

<sup>280</sup> I am also guilty of using ‘the West’ in shorthand ways, not least elsewhere in Part 4 of this article.

<sup>281</sup> Gordon Matthews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 182.

<sup>282</sup> Vladimir I. Lenin [1913], ‘Critical Remarks on the National Question’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 20, *December 1913-August 1914* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 21.

culture and bourgeois nationalism of *each* nation.’ What Lenin is thinking of by ‘proletarian culture’ is not the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian equivalent of *Eastenders*, but something more like internal trade union democracy, or the libraries established by the German Social Democratic party and by the miners of the Rhondda Valley in south Wales for the self-education of working class people. The object of the socialist movement is not to preserve the ‘proletarian’ aspects of that culture but to create an international culture drawn from all these cases: ‘The slogan of working-class democracy is not “national culture” but the international culture of democracy and the world-wide working class movement.’<sup>283</sup>

Black workers in South Africa before the fall of apartheid, for example, were heavily influenced by the best aspects of British working class organisation. In 1983 the Federation of South African Trade Unions produced a 72-page pamphlet called *The Shop Steward*: ‘Half of it is an historical account of the British shop steward movement with upbeat accounts of the strength of shop stewards during the First World War or at Ford plants in Britain in the 1960s.’<sup>284</sup> Working class movements do not only learn from the experience of the working class, but from those aspects of the dominant culture which the bourgeoisie has subsequently betrayed. South Africa also gives us an example of this. Early in 2001 a teacher's committee in Johannesburg advised the provincial education department that several of Shakespeare's plays should be removed from school reading lists. In the ensuing controversy it became apparent the extent to which these works had been part of the cultural formation of leading activists in the anti-apartheid struggle, particularly *Julius Caesar*, in which they identified with the conspirators against tyranny. In 1944 the first manifesto of the Youth League of the ANC, in which Nelson Mandela played his first political role, concluded with the passage from the play that begins: ‘The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars.’ Later, when many of the same activists were imprisoned on Robben Island, they would recite passages from the same text and others which were open to radical interpretation. When Sonny Verkatrathnam secretly circulated his copy of the *Complete Works* asking his fellow-prisoners to autograph their favourite passages, Mandela chose the speech which begins: ‘Cowards die many times before their deaths.’<sup>285</sup> And in this respect they were resuming a tradition which had started nearly 200 years before in Britain. As Robert Hughes points out:

When thousands of voteless, propertyless workers the length and breadth of England met in their reading-groups in the 1820s to discuss republican ideas and discover the significance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, they were seeking to unite themselves by taking back the meaning of the dominant culture from custodians who didn't live up to them.<sup>286</sup>

In this context concerns over the supposed cultural homogenisation resultant on ‘Westernisation’ – which Naomi Klein summarised in 2000 as ‘the idea of everyone eating at Burger King, wearing Nike shoes and watching Backstreet Boys videos’ – is to fixate on the superficial.<sup>287</sup> As Klein herself recounts of the workers she met in the Special Enterprise Zones of Global South:

---

<sup>283</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>284</sup> Denis MacShane, Martin Plaut and David Ward, *Power! Black Workers, Their Unions and the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1984), p. 65.

<sup>285</sup> Anthony Samson ‘O What Men Dare Do’, *The Observer* (22 April 2001). The history of Robben Island prisoners and how they found resources for their struggle in the English literary tradition has been told in compelling detail in Ashwin Desai [2012], *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

<sup>286</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (Revised and Augmented Edition, London: The Harvill Press, 1995), p. 128.

<sup>287</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 357

They are young men and women in Hong Kong and Jakarta who wear Nikes and eat at McDonald's, and tell me they are too busy organising factory workers to bother with Western lifestyle politics. And while Westerners sweat over what kind of shoes and shirts are the most ethical to buy, the people sweating in the factories line their dorm rooms with McDonald's advertisements, paint 'NBA Homeboy' murals on their doors and love anything with 'Meekey' [i.e. Mickey Mouse]. The organisers in the Cavite zone often dress for work in ersatz Disney or Tommy T-shirted – cheap knockoffs from the local market. How do they reconcile the contradiction between their clothes and their anger at the multinationals? They told me they had never really thought about it like that: politics in Cavite is about fighting for concrete improvements in worker's lives – not about what name happens to be on a t-shirt you happen to have on your back.<sup>288</sup>

The arrival of the new is any case not necessarily experienced as an alien intrusion by people who in most respects adhere to longer-established forms of social and economic life. Electronic media and communications technologies are perhaps the contemporary bearers of capitalist modernity in the way that the railway and the telegram were in the mid-nineteenth century, and like their predecessors, they can also play a role in social organisation. In what – for Seabrook – is a relatively balanced passage, he notes their contradictory impact:

People are not tabula rasa on which the global media inscribes its messages at will. But neither is it an adequate explanation to claim that people interpret the messages after their own fashion and integrate them into their own world-view. It is more complicated. People do assimilate images and information according to their own experience, but, particularly in cultures where until recently people have remained closed to the assault of efficient technologies of cultural dissemination, this is scarcely an encounter of equals.<sup>289</sup>

Seabrook here elides media content and technological form: the former will indeed contain an ideological charge – although it is not clear to me why unfamiliarity should necessarily lead to greater susceptibility – but the latter can be put to multiple uses, with quite different political implications. An illustration of the simplest type of impact is given by the novelist William Dalrymple, who here evokes a mixture of archaic and contemporary forms in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh:

Within a day, I had walked beyond the last metalled road. Along with the tarmac, I left both the telephones and the electricity grid far behind me. Soon I was heading into an apparently premodern world: up in the hill villages, the harvest was being cut by hand with sickles and bound in sheaves, stacked one by one into stooks. Oxen ploughed the narrow terraces with wooden ploughs. In the villages, stone houses with wooden fretwork balconies like those in Mughal miniatures tumbled down steep mountainsides, slate roofs alternating with roof terraces where the women were drying apricots and stacking kindling for the winter. You could almost taste the woody resin-scent of the deodars and the warm peach-brandy aroma of the drying fruit. One of the goatherds who wandered past our camp the second evening said he was on his way to consult the local oracle, a shaman who channeled a Pahari deity and was celebrated for the accuracy of his prophecies. It was trekking as time travel: I seemed to have walked up into a Jack-and-the-Beanstalk world about as far as I could imagine from the noise and pollution of New Delhi. ... Later that morning, at the top of the pass, I stopped in at the village [of] Shakti Dehra, and fell into conversation with the headman. Within minutes, Joginder Rajput had whipped out a cellphone and begun talking to his younger brother who needed him to send

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, p. 429. Or as the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah put in a related context, 'what can you tell about someone's soul from the fact that she drinks Coca-Cola?' See *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 103.

<sup>289</sup> Jeremy Seabrook, *Consuming Cultures: Globalization and Local Lives* (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications, 2004), p. 189.

down some bullocks for the ploughing. The government telephone network had failed to get landlines up to the village yet, he explained, but there was a good signal from one of the private cellphone companies and about half the households in the village now had mobiles.<sup>290</sup>

Rajput's reliance on a private provider certainly indicates the extent to which late uneven and combined development occurs under the sign of neoliberalism, but it is clear that the possession of a mobile phone has made easier aspects of his working life and that of his family.

Technology does not, however, only impact on individuals, but can also be incorporated into forms of social interaction. In Sipsongpanna, the southwestern border region of Yunnan in China, the 'hills have been levelled to make way for new roads, power lines have replaced the canopy of the rain forest, and new migrants from the coast are building cities in place of villages'. The Buddhist religion practised by the Tai population has been repressed since 1953, but has recently experienced a revival as monks operating across the national borders of Thailand, Laos, Burma and China have attempted to revive the classical Tai 'though today they carry it not on palm leaves but on floppy disks, videos and CDs'. As Sara Davis says: 'Thus we should attend not just to the video itself but to the person who carries the video, who puts it in the machine and presses "play", who explains the images that appear in terms a village teenager can understand. In the right hands, modernity is made to feel, not foreign or alienating, but as familiar, remembered, and natural as old legend.'<sup>291</sup>

Both these examples display what I earlier called 'adaptation' in the face of capitalist modernity. I will discuss the modernity of political Islamism below, but it has to be seen as a similar response. The familiarity of adherents with the latest means of destruction allows Roger Scruton to contemplate the irony whereby, 'the techniques and institutions on which Al-Qa'eda depends are the gifts of the new global institutions': 'It is Western enterprise with its multinational outreach that produced the technology that bin Laden has exploited so effectively against us.'<sup>292</sup> Gray extends the argument in a way that points to a more significant aspect of Al Qaeda's implantation in contemporary capitalism – its reliance on communications media:

It is modern not only in the fact that it uses satellite phones, laptop computers and encrypted websites. The attack on the Twin Towers demonstrates that Al Qaeda understands that twenty-first century wars are spectacular encounters in which the dissemination of media images is a core strategy. Its use of satellite television to mobilise support in Muslim countries is part of his strategy.<sup>293</sup>

Finally, and more positively, communications technologies have also played an important role in facilitating working-class movements. Geoffrey Crothall, editor of *China Labour Bulletin*, recently pointed out that the spread of strikes was not only due to the increasing volatility of Chinese workers:

One of the key reasons is simply that strikes are much more visible. Just about every factory worker, especially in Guangdong, has a cheap smartphone and can post news about their strike and the response of management and the local government to it on social media and have that information circulate within a matter of minutes. This enhanced visibility has also encouraged

---

<sup>290</sup> William Dalrymple, 'After the Blackout', *New Statesman* (12-18 October 2012), pp. 23-24.

<sup>291</sup> Sara Davis, 'Premodern Flows in Postmodern China: Globalization and the Sipsongpanna Tais', *Modern China*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 2003), pp. 177, 199.

<sup>292</sup> Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalisation and the Terrorist Threat* (London: Continuum Books, 2003), p. 128.

<sup>293</sup> Gray, *Al Qaeda and What It Means to be Modern*, p. 76.

more workers to take strike action. They see workers from other factories or workplaces that are in exactly the same position as them taking strike action and they think ‘we can do this too’.<sup>294</sup>

The other dominant alternative to uneven and combined development is syncretism. In one sense this is the more important of the two, since the postmodern argument for the end of the non-synchronous is effectively a ‘super-syncretism’ on a global scale. As McAllister notes, syncretism registers ‘the thorough mingling and mixing of historically separate social and cultural traits’, but: ‘In such a perspective, historically discrete elements merge into a syncretic mixture whose different strands eventually become so tightly woven that they are quite difficult to separate out.’ The difficulty here is that adherents of syncretism fail to recognise the tensions which these mergers produce:

...under the impact of the current process of rapid economic and social change, some of the strands that appeared to be bound together in one ‘rope’ are being dramatically ripped apart and then reinterpreted and rewoven into new patterns. In sum the model presents reality as more static and seamless than it proves to be and as composed of discrete cultural elements that easily combine and recombine rather than fundamental social relations that often wrench as they shift.<sup>295</sup>

Some syncretist positions converge with positions which are nominally informed by the concept of uneven and combined development. Mike Davis, for example, argues that Dubai and China have this in common: ‘Starting from feudalism and peasant Maoism, respectively, both have arrived at the stage of hypercapitalism through what Trotsky called “the dialectic of uneven and combined development”.’ What this suggests, however, is that uneven and combined development is a process with an end point at which the specific tensions associated with it are overcome – although obviously not those characteristic of capitalism in general:

In the cases of Dubai and China, all the arduous intermediate stages of commercial evolution have been telescoped or short circuited to embrace the “perfected” synthesis of shopping, entertainment, and architectural spectacle on the most pharaonic scale.<sup>296</sup>

A different case for syncretism has been put by leading former-neoliberal-turned-dissident-conservative, Gray, for whom non-Western societies are free to adapt aspects of Western capitalism to create entirely new formations:

The growth of the world economy does not inaugurate a universal civilisation, as both Smith and Marx thought it must. Instead it allows the growth of indigenous kinds of capitalism, diverging from the ideal free market and from each other. ... Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill believed that modern societies throughout the world would become replicas of western societies. The West would necessarily be a *model*, its imitators secular, Enlightenment cultures. ... History has falsified this Enlightenment faith. Modern societies come in many varieties. Like nineteenth-century Japan, China and Russia, Singapore, Taiwan and Malaysia are developing as modern countries today by borrowing selectively from western societies while rejecting western models.<sup>297</sup>

---

<sup>294</sup> Patrick Boehler, ‘Q&A: Strikes Peak in China with New Generation of Interconnected Blue-Collar Workers’, *South China Morning Post* (13 August 2014).

<sup>295</sup> McAllister, ‘The Uneven and Combined Character of Third World Development’, p. 7.

<sup>296</sup> Mike Davis, ‘Sand, Fear and Money in Dubai’, in *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*, edited by Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 53-54.

<sup>297</sup> John Gray, *False Dawn: the Delusions of Global Capitalism* (London: Granta, 1998), pp. 195-96.

What Gray calls ‘selective borrowing’ is close to what in Part 1 I called ‘debased adaptation’, and carries the same risks for the ruling-classes involved. These have been pointed out by a very different conservative thinker, although one who is similarly sceptical about the prospects for neoliberalism, Edward Luttwak, who has highlighted ‘the perils of incomplete imitation’, whereby developing world ruling classes ‘have been importing a dangerously unstable version of American turbo-capitalism, because the formula is incomplete’. What is missing? On the one hand, the legal regulation to control what he calls ‘the overpowering strength of big business’ and on the other the internal humility by the winners and acceptance of the essential justice of their personal situation by the losers from the system:

So far, however, in too many countries undergoing turbo-capitalist change, the winners enjoy their wealth all too visibly, are enormously eager to enrich their children, and they give away very little, except to the Church. As for the losers, what they feel is not guilt, but bitter resentment. And neither group is filled with the moral certainty required to punish losers who break the rules.<sup>298</sup>

It is possible to consider ‘incomplete adaptation’ in more concrete and explicitly Marxist terms, in relation to growth in specific sectors of the economy, where expansion may be at quite a different level from the rest. Beverley Silver has focussed on the impact of working-class organisation in such situations of sectional growth:

Strong new working class movements had been created as a combined result of the spatial fixes pursued by multinational capital and the import substitution industrialisation efforts of modernising states. In some cases, like Brazil's automobile workers; labour militancy was rooted in the newly expanding mass production consumer durable industries. In other cases, like the rise of *Solidarnosc* in Poland's shipyards, militancy was centred in gigantic establishments providing capital goods. In still others, like Iran's oil workers, labour militancy was centred on critical natural resource export industries.<sup>299</sup>

As we have already seen, Silver is not the only Marxist effectively to recapitulate elements of uneven and combined development without being aware of the concept, or its relevance. Presenting her particular perspective on the impossibility of complete ‘catch-up’, Silver notes that ‘while spatial fixes tend to erode the North-South divide, technological fixes, product fixes and protectionism tended to reconstitute the divide continually’:

Spatial fixes relocated the social contradictions of mass production (including strong working classes), but they have not relocated the wealth through which high-wage countries historically accommodated these same contradictions. As a result, strong grievances and strong bargaining power go hand in hand, creating the conditions for permanent social crises in much of the post-colonial world.<sup>300</sup>

#### **4.1.3. *Uneven and Combined Development in the West – An Incomplete Process***

---

<sup>298</sup> Edward Luttwak, *Turbo Capitalism: Winners and Losers in the Global Economy* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1998), pp. 25-26.

<sup>299</sup> Beverley Silver, *Forces of Labour: Workers' Movements and Globalisation since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 164.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

If uneven and combined development still occurs in the Global South, can we at least declare it to be completed process in the West? Clearly, it is less significant there, particularly since the Second World War, but two aspects still remain. One is the continued drawing together of different phases of capitalist development, a process of which we saw examples earlier in the Global South. Hardt and Negri highlight similar combinations in Italy during the 1970s and 1980s:

The transformation of the Italian economy since the 1950s demonstrates clearly that relatively backward economies do not simply follow the same stages the dominant regions experience, but evolve through alternative and mixed patterns. After World War II, Italy was still a predominantly peasant-based society, but in the 1950s and 1960s it went through furious but incomplete modernisation and industrialisation, the first economic miracle. Then, however, in the 1970s and 1980s, when the processes of industrialisation were still not complete, the Italian economy embarked on another transformation, a process of postmodernisation, and achieved a second economic miracle. These Italian miracles were not really leaps forward that allowed it to catch up with the dominant economies; rather, they represented mixtures of different incomplete economic forms. What is most significant here, and what might usefully pose the Italian case as the general model for all other backward economies, is that *the Italian economy did not complete one stage (industrialisation) before moving on to another (informatisation)*. Various regions will evolve to have peasant elements mixed with partial industrialisation and partial informatisation. The economic stages are thus all present at once, merged into a hybrid, composite economy that varies not in kind but in degree across the globe.<sup>301</sup>

Although the concept is not named, the argument here suggests one of the ways in which uneven and combined development ('hybrid, composite economy') retains its relevance in the contemporary West.

The other aspect is migration. Again using post-war Italy as our example, we can see the process unfolding as in-migrants from the Mezzogiorno revolted against their living conditions and low pay during the 'industrial miracle' of the late fifties and early sixties.<sup>302</sup> We have already noted in the case of Hardt and Negri how many Italian commentators invoke 'leaping over stages' without any reference to Trotsky. Here, for example, is former Communist militant Lucio Magri discussing the way in which post-war Italy was the site of both the most highly advanced technologies and forms of labour organisation:

Technological leap did not only mean the application of better equipment and better work organisation to a productive apparatus partly out of use (as in Germany and France). It meant revolutionizing both the one and the other and involving large areas previously excluded from modernity: that is moving quickly from a narrow and sometimes craft based, industrial base to a Fordist industry that was already (at its most advanced) on the threshold of automation, and then extending it to new sectors and new types of production and consumption. It meant leaping over the intermediate stages that other countries had previously crossed with difficulty.

Magri then refers to 'the social and cultural upheavals induced or anticipated by the Italian economic miracle' and highlights its 'novel interlinking of modernity and backwardness, how it fuelled imbalances and regional or class conflict between North and South, capital and labour, and old and new middle layers'.<sup>303</sup>

<sup>301</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 288-89.

<sup>302</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 223-229, 247-253; Lucio Magri [2009], *The Tailor of Ulm: Communism in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 141-55.

<sup>303</sup> Magri, *The Tailor of Ulm*, pp. 142, 148.



The preceding section indicates some of the enduring characteristics of uneven and combined development; but given that it necessarily involves the unexpected outcomes of drawing together different forms, within a system as dynamic as capitalism, it would be unusual if new combinations did not arise. Two of these are particularly significant.

## 4.2. New Developments in Urbanism and Ideology

### 4.2.1. *Mega-Cities*

I have stressed throughout this chapter how urbanisation – whether in Lahore or Los Angeles – has played an equivalent role to industrialisation and, in some cases, has been even more significant in generating uneven and combined development. This remains the case but, in the Global South at least, it has taken on new forms. The number of cities with populations of over one million rose from 86 in 1950 to 400 in 2004 and these are expected to account for all future population growth from 2020, until the anticipated peak is reached with a global population of 10 billion in 2050, of which 95 per cent will live in urban areas in the developing world.<sup>304</sup> What kind of urban areas are these?

At one extreme they simply involve adding new streets and buildings of modern design and composed of modern materials onto an older base, as in Thailand: ‘Bangkok is a First World City imposed on the decaying fabric of the original’, writes Seabrook.<sup>305</sup> At the other extreme, it involves constructing entirely new cities in previously uninhabited rural or even desert conditions, as in China. What is perhaps even more startling than the appearance of these monuments to Chinese expansion is their tendency to expand to the point of convergence: the Pearl River Delta was still a rural agricultural area as late as 1973; it now consists of 9 cities, the total population of which is 42 million people. These are already merging, as it were, organically, but the Chinese state plans to consolidate them into one gigantic megacity by 2030, by which point the population should have risen to 80 million.<sup>306</sup>

Between these two extremes lie two other, perhaps more typical developments. One is where the boundaries between the cities and their surrounding hinterlands begin to dissolve, along with their distinction from each other. Gregory Guldin has written of areas in China which are ‘neither rural nor urban but a blending of the two wherein a dense web of transaction ties large urban cores to their surrounding regions’.<sup>307</sup> The other is where cities expand in ways which are genuinely urban, creating peripheral slums quite unlike those which arose during the original process of industrialisation in the West. Davis describes this as a consequence of ‘urbanization-without-growth’ which has become ‘radically decoupled from industrialisation, even from development *per se*’:

The global forces “pushing” people from the countryside – mechanization in Java and India, food imports in Mexico, Haiti and Kenya, civil war and drought throughout Africa, and everywhere the consolidation of small into large holdings and the competition of industrial-

<sup>304</sup> Mike Davis, ‘Planet of Slums’, *New Left Review* II/26 (March/April 2004) pp. 5-6; *A Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 13-14.

<sup>305</sup> Jeremy Seabrook, *In the Cities of the South: Scenes from a Developing World* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 251. He then adds, with typical distaste for anything which might pollute the supposed purity of the non-Western: ‘it exhibits the limits of development, and the unsuitability of Western urban transplants in the South’.

<sup>306</sup> Chris Weller, ‘The world’s largest megacity already has more people than Canada, Argentina, or Australia’, *Business Insider UK* (8 July 2015).

<http://uk.businessinsider.com/chinese-mega-city-has-more-people-than-canada-argentina-or-australia-2015-7>

<sup>307</sup> Gregory Guldin, *What’s a Peasant to Do? Village Becoming Town in Southern China* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 2000), p. 17.

scale agribusiness – seem to sustain urbanization even when the “pull” of the city is drastically weakened by debt and depression.<sup>308</sup>

Seabrook describes this process in the capital of Indonesia:

Urbanization in Dhaka is quite unlike any traditional idea of the city. Whole areas remain semi-rural, and there is little high-rise building. Whole tracts of open land become covered with dense grass in the monsoon, lush grazing ground for cattle. ... Even so, an invasive industrialization is the reason for their existence. The tension between village and city is made visible in Dhaka, and in the end it is not the village that prevails. The cooking fires may be in traditional clay *chulhas*, or stoves, in front of the huts, but the cooking fuel proves to be a mixture of waste material from plastics and garment factories, which melts into a foul-smelling liquid.<sup>309</sup>

Quite often, the cities of the global south display elements from all four of the ‘ideal types’ outlined here, which are rarely incarnated in completely pristine form. What they all have in common is that many inhabitants of the new slums can increasingly be characterised as ‘informal workers’, now over a one billion strong and two-fifths of the population of the developing world. Davis reasonably asks:

The labour-power of a million people has been expelled from the world system, and who can imagine any plausible scenario, under liberal auspices, that would reintegrate them as productive workers or mass consumers?<sup>310</sup>

Seabrook imagines the sense of frustration and loss experienced by former peasant transplanted into a city that endlessly denies them what it promises:

Whenever you look at the goods in the shop window – especially in the air-conditioned mall, where you sometimes take few minutes refuge from the heat or the rain – it strikes you afresh how poor you remain in spite of the striving. In the village you knew what you needed for survival; and although you might have wished for some small luxuries, you never allowed your imagination to wander in the realms of the impossible. In the city, you are taunted with the absences in your life every time you pass through the central shopping area, with its glass and marble enclosures, and windows full of thin papier-mâché models wearing fashionable clothes for a foreign autumn, the array of dazzling white refrigerators and washing machines, the rows of flickering TV screens all showing different channels – ospreys in flight, speedway racing from Minneapolis, Alpine peaks in Switzerland. At night, the street-lamps and advertisements shimmer in the wet road, so that even beneath your feet a chasm of magical colour reflects your own diffuse feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction.<sup>311</sup>

This is powerfully evocative, but – typically – has no sense of how experiences of this sort might lead city-dwellers to organise, rather than simply bemoan their fate. In fact, it would be wrong to imagine that the mass of the population live lives of quiescent desperation in the absence of an immediate catalyst. In the Egyptian context, for example, Eric Denis has gone so far as to write of ‘urbanization from below’:

In 1996, the rate of urbanization in Egypt (defined as the part of the population living in the 800 agglomerations greater than 10,000 inhabitants) was calculated at 70 per cent. Today, that

<sup>308</sup> Davis, ‘Planet of Slums’, p. 10.

<sup>309</sup> Seabrook, *In the Cities of the South*, pp. 176-77.

<sup>310</sup> Davis, ‘Planet of Slums’, p. 27.

<sup>311</sup> Seabrook, *Consuming Cultures*, pp. 251-252.

figure is around 80 percent. Most of these neo-urbanites, no longer engaged in agriculture, have to earn their living and make settlements habitable by themselves – without services from the state and, indeed, without its recognition.<sup>312</sup>

The middle-class hatred and fear of these populations is palpable. During the 1990s: ‘Commentators warned that the inhabitants of the *‘ashwa’iyat* [i.e. ‘random’ or ‘haphazard’] were not urban and *hadari* (‘civilized’) but rather rural *fellaheen* – something that didn’t belong in the city and was poisoning its lifeblood.’ As Jack Shenker notes, two decades later, on the eve of the revolution of 2011, the inhabitants of the informal settlements were not simply occupying the wrong space, *but living in the wrong time*:

These people, went the narrative, are not our flesh and blood; they are not even of our time. ... One investigation into the *‘ashwa’iyat* uncovered ‘carts dating from the time of Methuselah’.<sup>313</sup>

These smug moderns were right to be fearful. Co-existence with Methuselian modes of transportation would indeed represent an extreme form of uneven and combined development, far beyond even the polarities fused prior to Russia in 1917: but the impacts are quite similar. Shenker rightly points out that, despite the media focus on Tahir Square, the roots of the revolution of 2011 lay elsewhere:

The start of the revolution was...not truly in the city, but in the non-city – those ever-expanding pools of state abandonment which, for so many decades, had been seeping through the metropolis even as those at the top gazed stubbornly out at sand.<sup>314</sup>

Although defeated, the Egyptian revolution has been the most important of the contemporary social explosions. It was not, however, alone in having its roots in the new urban peripheries. As Colin Mooers points out about Latin America: ‘Urban neighbourhoods under popular control in Caracas, Santiago, Lima, Buenos Aires and La Paz mobilized around issues of housing, water rights and food distribution; and the recuperation of closed factories was pivotal in bringing down traditional governments committed to neoliberalism and paving the way for the ascendancy of Left governments.’<sup>315</sup> In at least one important case, that of El Alto in Bolivia, an entire city has been the site of new forms of social organisation. In one sense El Alto is an overspill of La Paz, for which it provides much of the workforce and, crucially, through which three of the four supply-routes pass. El Alto is both relatively new – as a city it has only really existed since the Second World War – and also growing exponentially, with inhabitants mostly consisting of those driven from their former occupations or locations. In a way, the population of El Alto is a classic ‘combined’ group, consisting of former peasants forced off their land, former tin miners made redundant following the ‘rationalization’ of the industry, and former inhabitants of La Paz who can no longer afford to stay there. It has also the largest indigenous population of any city in Bolivia.

---

<sup>312</sup> Eric Denis, ‘Demographic Surprises Foreshadow Change in Neoliberal Egypt’, in *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest and Social Change in Egypt*, edited by Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing (London: Verso, 2012), p. 241.

<sup>313</sup> Jack Shenker, *The Egyptians: A Radical Story* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), pp. 89-90. The notion of populations belonging to a different period in history from the present is not, of course, confined to elites in the Global South. As the late Doreen Massey wrote of the Western hostility to migrants from the Global South, ‘it was not merely the arrival of what have frequently been called “the margins” (a spatial concept) but the arrival of people from *the past*. Distance was suddenly eradicated spatially and temporally’. See *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 70

<sup>314</sup> Shenker, *The Egyptians*, p. 99.

<sup>315</sup> Colin Mooers, *Imperial Subjects: Citizenship in an Age of Crisis and Empire* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 127.

Sian Lazar has made an important study of the city, conducted around 2003, the year in which the explosion of struggle in El Alto ultimately compelled President Sanchez de Lozada to resign. In her work, Lazar notes that, for both peasants in the surrounding area and urban workers in the informal sector: ‘Their household model of production allows for fluidity of associational life, but has also allowed them to form alliances and organisations based on territorial location; the street where they sell, the village or region where they live and farm, and, with the addition of the *vecino* organisational structures in the cities, their zone.’ This does not mean that more traditional forms of association have been completely overtaken: ‘Trade unions are flourishing in the informal economy of El Alto and form a crucial part of the structure of civic organisation that is parallel to the state and shapes multi-tiered citizenship in the city.’ The emergence of these complex interactions between forms of organisation based on both place of residence and place of work leads Lazar to conclude that ‘the working class in Bolivia is reconstituting itself as a political subject, albeit not in its traditional forms’.<sup>316</sup> These forms may not resemble those which emerged in Petrograd in 1905 or 1917, but why should this be surprising?<sup>317</sup> In the fusions of the archaic and the contemporary the latter component at least is always subject to change, although as El Alto demonstrates this has not lessened the resulting potential for social explosiveness.

However, as I have emphasised throughout this chapter, it would be wrong to imagine the consequences of contemporary uneven and combined development always tend towards revolutionary or at least left-wing conclusions. The rapid transformation of cities has a dark side exemplified, perhaps, by the rise of urban gendered violence in India, as Manali Desai reports:

For the new, urban, middle-class India, hedonism, voyeurism and sexual prowess are eternally emblazoned on the cities’ and highways’ larger-than-life billboards, in films and, not least, in a vast amount of pornography. India is the world’s fifth largest consumer of online porn – not such a surprise, given the size of its population, yet the relatively poor e-connectivity of rural India compared with China, for example, also needs to be taken into account. All this points to a release of libidinal energy after decades of prudery, leavened only by the occasional glimpse of Bollywood flesh. But this sexual ‘freedom’ is not only circumscribed by sharp gender inequalities, reinforced by caste and ethnic domination; it has also produced a fierce reaction, which is directly threatening to women. The aspirational, gym-toned male body, with distinctly Western consumer tastes – whisky, cigarettes, fast cars – looms large on city billboards, enjoining men to participate in the image, if only vicariously. For India’s surplus men, fantasies fuelled by bootleg liquor are compounded by frustrated mobility and other forms of class desire.

In the Indian case, the recent explosion of sexual violence against women is partly produced by a tension between the contradictory demands of Hindu nationalism for male libidinal restraint and the new temptations and frustrations attendant on new forms of city life. In other areas, however, it is religion itself which has been reshaped by uneven and combined development. Religion represents a consolation or defence against the intrusion of capitalist modernity, but religion is also communicated and celebrated using the techniques and technologies that capitalist modernity has provided. Elsewhere it has formed an alternative to a left politics. Davis has gone as far as to say that in the mega-cities:

---

<sup>316</sup> Sian Lazar, *El Alto, Rebel City: Self and Citizenship in Andean Bolivia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 178.

<sup>317</sup> Although we should remember that in Russia too there were peasant soviets – inevitably based in communities – and in the armed services, in addition to those in workplaces.

Marx has yielded the historical stage to Mohammed and the Holy Ghost. If God died in the cities of the industrial revolution, he has risen again in the post-industrial cities of the developing world. ...populist Islam and Pentecostal Christianity (and, in Bombay, the cult of Shiva) occupy a social space analogous to that of early twentieth century socialism and anarchism.<sup>318</sup>

As a general argument this is too pessimistic. What is involved is not simply an unchallenged revival of religious belief, but a *contest* between radical left and populist religious responses to capitalist modernity. As we have seen, in Latin America it is the former which has tended to dominate, in Central Africa, it is the latter. As Alexander Colas has written, Marxists needs to use the notion of ‘populism’ as it is represented by Islamism,

...not as descriptors of accidental, residual forms of mass political mobilisation, but, rather, as structural features of societies – like those in Africa – far more powerfully subject to the vagaries of combined and uneven capitalist development.<sup>319</sup>

The situation in the Middle East is more mixed, although – as the unfolding catastrophe in Syria reminds us – it has to date had no happier an outcome.

#### 4.2.2. *Political Islam*

I noted in Part 1 that uneven and combined development tended to produce three possible responses in the Muslim world: (1) in which Islam incorporated sufficient elements of capitalist modernity to maintain organisational structures and modes of social interaction, even if this meant inventing novel traditions which allowed it to function in a changed social context (‘renewal’); (2) in which former adherents simply abandoned their beliefs in order to embrace new revolutionary doctrines associated with capitalist modernity (‘adoption’); and (3) which in a sense faces in both directions, where new forms of collective organisation such as trade unions were deployed to defend both material conditions *and* forms of religious observance (‘adaptation’). This position is, in a sense, the most important, as it represents an unstable situation which ultimately leads to the alternatives represented by either (1) or (2). It is the main terrain of the contest to which I have referred. It is however important to understand that outcome (2) today has *two* possible variants: revolutionary socialism or radical Islam. These alternatives were brought into opposition for the first time in the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9.

As we saw in Part 1, Tim McDaniel has drawn parallels between the Russian and Iranian Revolutions. He compares the Russian and Iranian working classes *before* the overthrow of their respective autocracies, but contrasts the roles which they played *during* these revolutions:

Both were numerically small. ... In addition, both industrial labour forces were highly heterogeneous, characterized by large influxes of peasant migrants unacquainted with socialist ideas or traditions of worker struggle. In both too, because of the rapid pace of industrialization, ‘industry’ was very heterogeneous, ranging from traditional craft-type establishments to modern plants with advanced technology. Obviously, these traits shared by the two industrial labour forces were not decisive in shaping labour protest, for they cannot explain the very great differences in militancy and class consciousness.<sup>320</sup>

<sup>318</sup> Davis, ‘Planet of Slums’, pp. 29, 30.

<sup>319</sup> Alejandro Cola, ‘The Re-Invention of Populism: Islamist Responses to Capitalist Development in the Contemporary Maghreb’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2004), p. 257.

<sup>320</sup> McDaniel, *Autocracy, Modernization, and Revolution in Russia and Iran*, p. 138.

There are two points to be made here. First, it is not clear that the role of the Iranian working class was less than that of the Russian in the revolutionary process, given that the former – although even smaller as a proportion of the population – was decisive in breaking the regime and even, in the Shoras, threw up forms of organisation which are clearly of the same type as the soviets or factory councils.<sup>321</sup> Second, without reducing the entire difference in outcome to the ‘absence of revolutionary leadership’ beloved of Leninist cliché, it is simply unhistorical to ignore the role of the Bolsheviks and particularly, the distinct political programme which they were able to offer workers, which was at least partly responsible for consolidating class consciousness and providing strategic leadership, the absence of which was telling in Iran.

There is, however, one aspect of McDaniel’s argument which points towards a central issue of state forms. McDaniel rightly affords ‘key significance’ to ‘the contrast between a basically capitalist model of industrialization with pre-twentieth-century styles of political despotism’, as in Russia, and ‘a neopatrimonial model with the most modern technology of repression’, as in Iran.<sup>322</sup> Behind this slightly over-elaborate terminology lies the fundamental distinction between the state in pre-capitalist Russia and the state in capitalist Iran, whatever formal similarities there may have been between the respective titles held by Nicholas Romanov and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.<sup>323</sup> This distinction was carried over into the outcomes. Theda Skocpol writes that, ‘the central phalanx of the clergy fused its authority and activities with the state itself’ and claims that this was not

‘a return to tradition’ in Iran, but rather a strikingly innovative contemporary departure, in which Khomeini and his associates took upon themselves a vanguard, state-building and state-controlling role analogous to that of the Jacobins in revolutionary France and the Communists in revolutionary Russia and China.<sup>324</sup>

Whatever the other differences between the latter three revolutions, in each case the state was overthrown; in the case of Iran, it was only the regime. Consequently, and despite the Western fixation on the supposed singularity of Islamist ideology, the regime of the mullahs inherited the pre-existing state rather than creating its own. Skocpol indicates as much herself later in the same discussion:

Pre-revolutionary Iran was...a rentier state, where revenues from exports of oil and natural gas were channelled into the state, not so much into truly productive investments, but instead into lavish purchases of modern armaments and into luxury consumption. An Iranian Islamic

---

<sup>321</sup> For the classic discussion, see Assef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1987), pp. 100-66; see also Miriam Poya ‘Long Live Revolution!...Long Live Islam?’, in *Revolutionary Rehearsals*, edited by Colin Barker (London: Bookmarks, 1987), pp. 143-49.

<sup>322</sup> McDaniel, *Autocracy, Modernization, and Revolution in Russia and Iran*, p. 138.

<sup>323</sup> There was a period in which revolutionary events in Iran could be directly compared to those in Russia because of the commonality of pre-capitalist state forms, but this was much closer in time to 1917: the ‘constitutional revolution’ between 1906 and 1911. During this period the working class was however too insignificant to play a role of any significance. For a discussion, which situates this revolution with the context of uneven and combined development, see Kamran Matin, ‘Uneven and Combined Development and the “Revolution of Backwardness”’: The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911’, in *100 Years of Permanent Revolution: Results and Prospects*, edited by Bill Dunn and Hugo Radice (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

<sup>324</sup> Theda Skocpol [1982], ‘Rentier State and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution’, in *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 253. Fred Halliday concurs: ‘The paradox of the Iranian revolution was that it was *both* the most traditional *and* the most modern of social revolutions.’ See *Two Hours That Shook the World: September 11, 2001, Causes and Consequences* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), p. 62.

Republic could remain, for quite some time, another sort of rentier state: a populist, welfare-orientated rentier state, with ulama passing out alms in return for moral conformity on a grander scale than ever before.<sup>325</sup>

If the Islamic Republic resembles the state of the Pahlavi dynasty in its rentier essence, it also has a wider set of affinities with other capitalist states, as Fred Halliday points out:

If one looks at the subsequent history of the Iranian revolution, not as a scriptural but as pragmatic, political one, with ideology used to justify the mundane and universal goal of keeping state power, then much becomes clear. The mullahs have seized and kept control through the mechanisms found elsewhere – mobilization for war, discretionary use of welfare, repression of political opponents, demagoguery about foreign threats and conspiracies abroad.<sup>326</sup>

Halliday is right to emphasise the constraining effects on ideology of attempting to successfully manage a capitalist nation-state of any size, but in his understandable desire to resist Islamophobic hysteria, he perhaps underplays the impact the Iranian and other Islamic regimes on social and personal behaviour. Ankie Hoogvelt highlights the real dividing line in relation to state intervention: ‘The Islamisation of officially secular and moderate regimes targets personal law and penal law, leaving intact the existing economic formation and political model inherited from previous regimes.’<sup>327</sup>

The constraints mentioned above apply to regimes, but not to Islamists who have no prospect of achieving state power. Political Islam as a form of adaptation is quite different from the defence of tradition involved in renewal. This dissimilarity has been obscured by the fact that any group of Muslims who happen to be opposed to Western interests tend to be described as ‘Islamic radicals’, no matter how conservative they may be. The Taliban may have allowed Al Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a base, but that did not mean the two organisations were similar in any way other than their shared religious designation: the former was deeply traditional in its desire to return established forms of village organisation; the latter profoundly radical in its ambition to create a regime which had not previously existed on earth. In neither case is ‘religion’ an autonomous force. On the contrary, the motivations of radicals in particular are formed by their material circumstances:

Just because a lack of graduate employment, decent housing, social mobility, food, etc., is explained by an individual through reference to religion does not make it a religious grievance. It remains a political grievance articulated with reference to a particular religious worldview.<sup>328</sup>

Indeed, Olivier Roy has argued that in the French context, Islamism:

...is not the revolt of Islam or that of Muslims, but a specific problem concerning two categories of teenagers – mostly immigrants, but also native French citizens. The question is not the radicalization of Islam, but the Islamization of radicalism.<sup>329</sup>

Roy’s question – why does radicalization take this particular form among certain groups – is one that needs to be asked, not only of France or the West more generally, but of the heartlands of the Muslim world itself. Part of the answer lies with the modernizing secular

<sup>325</sup> Skocpol, ‘Rentier State and Shi’a Islam in the Iranian Revolution’, p. 254.

<sup>326</sup> Halliday, *Two Hours That Shook the World*, p. 63.

<sup>327</sup> Hoogvelt, *Globalisation and the Postcolonial World*, p. 200.

<sup>328</sup> Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: the True Story of Radical Islam* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 25.

<sup>329</sup> Olivier Roy, ‘The Islamization of Radicalism’, *Mada Masr* (11 January 2016).  
<http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/islamization-radicalism2016>.

nationalist regimes, which not only failed materially to provide for the majority of their populations, but usually took the form of murderous dictatorships which were – as in the case of Syria – prepared to kill countless people and destroy unquantifiable amounts of property in order to preserve themselves in power. Those lucky enough to escape the attentions of the Assad regime might of course then find themselves victim of the latest incarnations of capitalist modernity in the form of US drone missiles. It is not entirely surprising that those on the receiving end of either or both might be driven to identify their own, quite different, version of what it means to be modern.

The starting point for understanding Islamism in the mirror of uneven and combined development has therefore to be that it is not a traditional rejection of modernity. By this I do not simply mean that Islamists inhabit contemporary culture, although this is how a certain school of conservative thought tends to conceive their relation to modernity, offering, at its most superficial, scenarios such as the one imagined here by Samuel Huntington: ‘Somewhere in the Middle East a half-dozen young men could well be dressed in jeans, drinking Coke, listening to rap, and, between their bows to Mecca, putting together a bomb to blow up an American airliner.’<sup>330</sup>

If, as we have already seen, the techniques and technologies of Islamic radicalism are quintessentially modern; the ideology, and the forms of consciousness to which it corresponds are, as we should by now come to expect, far more ‘combined’. ISIS, which has of course long surpassed Al Qaeda as the incarnation of the Islamist threat, illustrates the ways in which the archaic and the contemporary can fuse under present conditions. After the Charlie Hebdo massacre, Hari Kunzu rightly scorned those who regarded the killers as exponents of a ‘medieval’ ideology:

The jihadi movement is a thoroughly modern beast, which ironically owes much to the French revolutionary legacy of 1789. Though they are religious millenarians, looking to bring about global submission to the will of God, they are also utopian revolutionaries, and have adopted tactical thinking from the various movements that trace their legacy to Paris, and that inaugural moment of modernity.<sup>331</sup>

Gray has argued that, consciously or not, ISIS stands in an even longer revolutionary heritage, in that it has parallels with both millenarian experiments like that of the Anabaptist commune at Munster and modern revolutionary movements, by which he means the entire range from the Jacobins to the Khmer Rouge; but also adduces another aspect, that of transnational crime syndicates:

So what is Isis essentially – violent millenarian cult, totalitarian state terrorist network or criminal cartel? The answer is that it is none of these and all of them. Far from being a reversion to anything in the past, Isis is something new – a modern version of barbarism that has emerged in states that have been shattered by western intervention.<sup>332</sup>

Ultimately, combination of the archaic and contemporary is embedded in the consciousness of individuals who are subject to the process.

The men who planned and carried out the Islamist attacks on America – all but four of them Saudi citizens – have often been depicted in the press as being “medieval fanatics”. In fact, it

---

<sup>330</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1998), p. 58.

<sup>331</sup> Hari Kunzu, ‘Charlie Hebdo: Understanding is the Least we Owe the Dead’, *The Guardian* (9 February 2015).

<sup>332</sup> John Gray, ‘An Apocalyptic Cult Carving a Place in the Modern World’, *The Guardian* (26 August 2014).



would be more accurate to describe them as confused but highly educated middle class professionals... Such figures represent a clash of civilisations occurring not so much between civilisations, as the author Samuel Huntington would maintain, but rather within individuals, products of the same cultural dislocation and disorientation that accompanies accelerating economic change and globalisation.<sup>333</sup>

The journalist Jamie Doward wrote of his encounter with the British jihadi, Mohammed Ezzouek, whom we can take as one example:

The first thing I noticed about him was his size: tiny, birdlike. ... The second thing was his beard. Long, black and wispy, it had clearly taken months to grow and was central to his identity. The third was his trainers, Nike, almost box-fresh. This man is a walking contradiction, I thought. He spoke street slang while praising the prophet. He went to Somalia to live under a caliphate and here he was, talking to me in London, complaining about the difficulties getting a mobile phone contract. ... The group's members appear to have existed in a liminal world where east met west and modernity clashed with medieval. Many played five-a-side football together, shared an interest in designer clothes and were at the same schools. But they were also captivated by a London-based Islamist cleric, Hani al-Sibai, who refers to himself as a sheikh and has been named by the US Treasury as a supporter of al-Qaida. Their world is exemplified in the Twitter feeds of Isis fighters who link to speeches by extremist clerics interspersed with rap videos and pictures of themselves posing with fearsome-looking automatic weapons.<sup>334</sup>

To conclude this part of my discussion, it might be useful to stand back from ISIS, the horrors associated with it and the controversies to which it has given rise, and turn to an earlier example of the emergence of modern Islamism. This was centred in the Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan, and was not dominated by young men with 'fearsome-looking automatic weapons' of the sort mentioned by Doward. We are fortunate to have McAllister's case study of this process, to which I have already referred, as she explicitly treats it as an example of uneven and combined development. McAllister argues that the Islamic revival or *dakwah* in Malaysia, 'is primarily a reaction against both the economic stress and dislocation and cultural deracination brought by capitalist development; it is in large part an attempt to define a personal and a political alternative'. As in many other, more famous cases, it is essentially modern rather than a retreat to tradition: 'Although such resistance might in one sense be interpreted as a return to the past or a strengthening of tradition, it is eminently clear that this wave of Islamic militancy – and the *reassertion* but also *reinterpretation* of traditional Malay Islam it promotes – is a contemporary phenomenon, arising from people's current problems and needs.' But McAllister also draws attention to the contradictions which this reinterpretation involves, not least for the women who were so central to the *dakwah* movement:

At the same time, immersion in the revival serves to divert attention away from social to primarily religious matters and essentially blunts their critical awareness of economic and political realities; this occurs in spite of the collective choice of so many young women to embrace fundamentalist Islam represents at least an unconsciousness [sic] resistance to the hegemony of capitalist culture. For a minority of Negeri Sembilan devotees, the *dakwah* movement, however, has a radically different effect. It actually helps them focus and articulate their growing criticism of their country's course of dependent capitalist development and its impact on their own lives. For these female adherents, conscious resistance and protest are part

<sup>333</sup> William Dalrymple 'Inside Islam's "Terror Schools"', *New Statesman* (28 March 2005), p. 16.

<sup>334</sup> Jamie Doward, 'My Encounter with Jihadi John's Friend as they Sought a Radical Path', *The Observer* (1 March 2015).

of their commitment to Islamic revival, even though such commitment is often characterised by a denial of their matrilinear traditions and thus their pre-existing rights and freedoms as women.<sup>335</sup>

The fact that adherents of radical Islam desire a complete transformation of society does not mean that even the successful achievement of state power would necessarily lead to that outcome. Those who do not consciously seek to overthrow capitalism, those who do not even recognize it as the real force shaping the conditions to which they are opposed, will always end up accepting capitalist imperatives, if only because these seem to be natural, God-given processes beyond human intervention. Unlike ISIS, the dakwah movement was not shaped by the catastrophic impact of Western military intervention, but by the type of industrial and urban intrusions which we have now traced for over the two hundred years or so; but it raises the same issue as the emergence of ISIS: the need for an alternative and socialist form of modernity.

## 5. CHINA: WHERE ALL ROADS MEET<sup>336</sup>

### 5.1 China in the Neoliberal World Order

My argument in the preceding parts of this article has been that uneven and combined development is not only a universal phenomenon under conditions of capitalist modernity, but an ongoing one which will only cease when the last peasant has been pushed or pulled off their land into wage labour and city life. Nuclear holocaust, environmental collapse or even the socialist revolution are likely to have occurred long before humanity ever reaches that point: it is a process which will never conclude while capitalism subsists. In this final part, I conclude my discussion by returning to a country which has appeared at several points in the discussion so far, notably in Parts 1 and 4, and which is currently experiencing uneven and combined development in its most intense form.

China was the first country outside of Russia for which Trotsky argued that a strategy of permanent revolution was possible. As in the Russian case, this was because the process of uneven and combined development had produced – among other things – a working class which was small relative to the overall population, but possessed of an exceptional degree of revolutionary militancy. Even the dramatic changes which occurred in China during the first three decades of the Twentieth century have, however, been overshadowed by the contemporary impact of uneven and combined development, which resumed late in 1978, when the party-state began to reinsert China into the world economy.

The subsequent transformation of China has been interpreted in several different ways. For some bourgeois commentators, such as Ian Bremmer, it represents perhaps the most advanced form of a transition *to* what he calls state capitalism, which he defines as ‘not the reemergence of socialist central planning in a twentieth-century package’ but rather ‘a form of bureaucratically engineered capitalism particular to each government that practices it’ and

---

<sup>335</sup> McAllister, ‘The Uneven and Combined Character of Third World Development’, pp. 12-13.

<sup>336</sup> Many thanks to Charlie Hore for letting me draw on his extensive knowledge of contemporary China, which not only helped me avoid a number of errors but, I hope, has strengthened the overall argument. Readers familiar with the history of Trotskyist factionalism will recognise that the phrase which forms my title, ‘where all roads meet’, is taken from the Johnson-Forest Tendency, which originally used it in relation to Poland. See C. L. R. James, F. Forest and Ria Stone [1947], *The Invading Socialist Society* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1972), pp. 33-40.

one ‘in which the state dominates markets primarily for political gain’.<sup>337</sup> Most commentators, however, have taken quite the opposite view. For Christian Caryl, the date at which the Chinese ‘reform era’ began means that it must be regarded as one of five founding moments of a new historical era:

The forces unleashed in 1979 marked the beginning of the end of the great socialist utopias that had dominated so much of the twentieth century. These five stories – the Iranian Revolution, the start of the Afghan jihad, Thatcher’s election victory, the pope’s first Polish pilgrimage, and the launch of China’s economic reforms – deflected the course of history in a radically new direction. It was in 1979 that the twin forces of markets and religion, discounted for so long, came back with a vengeance.<sup>338</sup>

For David Harvey, the ‘force of markets’ is the more significant, to the point where he sees the Chinese reforms as a key component of the global neoliberal turn.<sup>339</sup> I agree that China is currently part of the neoliberal world order, but this was scarcely the intention of the Party leadership when it initiated the reform programme, which preceded not only the consolidation of neoliberalism, but the elections of Thatcher and Reagan which signalled, in their respective ‘isms’, its initial forms. The individual components of the neoliberal order were first assembled into a coherent package in the UK and USA, in both vanguard neoliberal form during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher and social neoliberal form during that of Tony Blair.<sup>340</sup> These forms were the most advanced, but precisely for that reason were not necessarily the most typical of the phenomenon, nor did they necessarily reveal the future pattern of development elsewhere in the world, since neoliberalism has reinforced rather than undermined the inherent unevenness of capitalism. But the era of neoliberalism, like the era of state capitalism (in the Marxist rather than Bremmerian sense) which preceded it, contains a spectrum of different positions, some more extreme than others.

In fact, as Bob Jessop has pointed out, neoliberalism has always been characterised by spatial differentiation in which several varieties operated simultaneously. His typology involves four geographically demarcated moments, each reflecting the structured inequality of the global capitalist system. Two of these forms can be found in the developed capitalisms of the West. The first involved *neoliberal regime shifts*, above all in the English-speaking world, where the institutional characteristics of the Great Boom – Social or Liberal Democracy in politics, Keynesianism in economic management, and Fordism in industrial organisation – were replaced during the dominance of parties belonging to the New Right. The second involved *neoliberal policy adjustments*, for example in the Scandinavian and Rhenish countries, where partial adaptations to neoliberalism were made while retaining some elements from the former period. The third involve *neoliberal system transformation* in the former Stalinist states of Russia and Eastern Europe, and to a lesser extent in South-East Asia, where the existing state capitalist economies (although Jessop prefers the terms ‘state socialist’) were transformed with varying degrees of abruptness into particularly extreme versions of the Western multinational capitalist model. The fourth involves *neoliberal structural adjustment programmes* in the Global South, which are essentially an aspect of

---

<sup>337</sup> Ian Bremmer, *The End of the Free Market: Who Wins the War Between States and Corporations?* (New York: Portfolio Books, 2010), p. 23; for his substantive discussion of China, see *ibid.*, pp. 128-145.

<sup>338</sup> Christian Caryl, *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), p. xiii.

<sup>339</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 120-135.

<sup>340</sup> Which is why Perry Anderson’s decision to omit Britain (‘whose history since the fall of Thatcher has been of little moment’) from his study of the European Union is mistaken. Blair’s ‘social’ variant on the neoliberal regime has been far more insidiously influential than that of Thatcher. See ‘Foreword’, *The New Old World* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. xii-xiii.

contemporary imperialism as exercised by Western-dominated transnational institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.<sup>341</sup> In a sense, the Chinese experience is closest to the second type, even though as a state and a society it had more in common with it those which experienced the third.

As this suggests, the initial adoption of market solutions was slower and more cautious than appears in retrospect. As Claudio Katz points out:

From 1978 to 1992, this path [i.e. ‘its transition to capitalism’ – ND] was limited by the preeminence of a model of commercial reforms which were subordinated to central planning. Under this scheme, rural communes were converted into agro-industrial units guided by the profit principle, but without opening to widespread privatisations. Managers appeared with the power to reorganize industrial plants, but they did not have the power to enforce mass layoffs or to sell enterprises... The turn to capitalism was consummated at the beginning of the 1990s, starting with the privatisations carried out by the old directors of the state enterprises with the intention of forging a capitalist class. The members of this group were transformed into the main investors in the new companies. Private accumulation was also accelerated through exploitation of the agricultural producers.<sup>342</sup>

Now, it is important not to ‘bend the stick’ too far in response to an exaggerated accounts of the extent of the immediate post-1978 transformation. Nigel Harris identified as early as 1986 the direction of travel: ‘The changes in the People’s Republic of China – selling public companies to private shareholders, privatizing housing and medicine, opening sectors to competitive joint ventures with foreign companies – were not only remarkable in the speed with which the changes were introduced and the contrast with past Chinese history; the Chinese were part of an apparently universal move back to a private capitalist world’<sup>343</sup> What one can say is that while neoliberalism led to deindustrialisation in large parts of the West, it led in China to previously unimaginable levels of industrialisation, to which we now turn.

## 5.2 Three Aspects of Uneven and Combined Development in Contemporary China

As I noted in a previous survey, originally published in the mid-2000s, almost anything one says about China is out of date before it appears in print, but it is possible to discern continuities with earlier manifestations of uneven and combined development.<sup>344</sup> Here, I want to briefly discuss three: the instabilities caused by migrant flows into the cities; the actuality of working-class resistance and self-organisation; and the capacities of the state to ‘contain’ these instabilities.

### 5.1.1 Internal Migration

As in the aftermath of the First World War, there is currently a massive influx of workers into the cities, but now on a much greater scale. Many of these cities did not pre-exist the

---

<sup>341</sup> Bob Jessop, ‘From Hegemony to Crisis? The Continuing Ecological Dominance of Neoliberalism’, in *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberalism: the Collapse of an Economic Order?*, edited by Kean Birch and Vlad Mykhnenko (London: Zed Books, 2010), pp. 172-174.

<sup>342</sup> Claudio Katz, ‘Capitalist Mutations in Emerging, Intermediate and Peripheral Neoliberalism’, in *BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique*, edited by Patrick Bond and Ana Garcia (London: Pluto Press, 2015), p. 72.

<sup>343</sup> Nigel Harris, *The End of the Third World: Newly Industrializing Countries and the End of an Ideology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 167.

<sup>344</sup> Neil Davidson [2006], ‘China: Unevenness, Combination, Revolution?’, in *We Cannot Escape History: States and Revolutions* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), p. 175.

migration but, as we saw in Part 4, are being constructed solely for the purposes of containing new factories and distributions hubs. Previously, the household registration or *hukou* system was designed to ‘to limit rural-to-urban migration’ as part of the process by which ‘the growth of cities was curtailed’: ‘Within the Maoist city, the economic and social landscape was carved into repetitive, cellular units made up of *danwei* compounds.’<sup>345</sup> Is it too much to assume that at some unconscious level Mao understood that the growth of the cities would threaten precisely the kind of social upheaval that might endanger the Party’s rule?<sup>346</sup>

There have, however, been changes since 1991 in particular in both the composition of the migrant population and the relationship new migrants have to their point of origin. The three great areas of neoliberal industrialisation are the Pearl River delta, the Yangtze River delta and what might be called the Beijing-Tianjin corridor. Richard Walker and Daniel Buck note: ‘There are three major routes to proletarianization in China: from the farming countryside, out of collapsing state companies in the cities, and through the dissolution of former village enterprises.’<sup>347</sup> The new workforce has certainly been formed from these three groups, but these had different relationships to the working class. The second group listed by Walker and Buck, employees in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), were surely already ‘proletarians’ in their former jobs, unless one subscribes to the curious view that wage labourers employed by the state do not count as ‘workers’. In fact, their fate resembles that of workers in the privatised industries in the West, although workers in SOEs had better social protections and employment guarantees until they were dismantled in the 1980s and 1990s. The third group, workers in the rural township and village enterprises (TVES) which both supported the rural infrastructure and subcontracted to the SOEs, occupied a more ambivalent position. These were of course located in ‘the farming countryside’ but, as Walker and Buck suggest, their employees occupied a transitional position, being former peasants ‘nominally protected by the obligations of local government’. However, as many SOEs were dismantled and the survivors looked for cheaper subcontractors, the TVES themselves went into crisis, shedding the majority of workers who were now reduced ‘to proletarians subject to the full force of the market’, an experience which the authors rightly describe as ‘Marx’s shift from “formal” to “real” subsumption of labour’. Finally, the first group, the peasantry proper, have undergone the classic process of proletarianization: ‘rural displacement to the cities is vast, numbering [by 2007] roughly 120 billion since 1980 – the largest migration in world history’.<sup>348</sup>

In the 1920s, migrants intended to move on a permanent basis, but this was not necessarily so in the 1980s and 1990s, as Kevin Lin explains:

The first generation [of migrant workers] were rural peasants who, pushed by rural poverty and pulled by the burgeoning urban economy, migrated to China’s urban centres in the 1980s. Their city wages were meagre but still higher than their rural incomes. For young women, factory work and urban life also brought a new sense of freedom. But the household registration system and their own rural roots meant that the first-generation migrant workers have been predisposed to eventually returning to their villages.<sup>349</sup>

This ‘dual’ identity was possible because the state maintains a landholding system that allows members of a family to work in urban industry while retaining links to the small holding. One factor which helped slacken the tensions which would otherwise have built up uncontrollably

<sup>345</sup> Richard Walker and Daniel Buck, ‘The Chinese Road’, *New Left Review* II/46 (July/August 2007), pp. 42, 59.

<sup>346</sup> Davidson, ‘China’, p. 178.

<sup>347</sup> Walker and Buck, ‘The Chinese Road’, p. 42.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-44.

<sup>349</sup> Kevin Lin, ‘Recomposing Chinese Migrant and State-Sector Workers’, in *Chinese Workers in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Anna Chan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 71.

in the cities was therefore the link many workers continued to have with the countryside, both as a place of refuge in periods of unemployment or non-payment of wages, and as a source of subsistence through farming:

It is the family farm that lends the migrant worker away from home a substitute for the benefits he or she is not getting from urban work, as well as security in the event of dis-employment or unemployment or in old age, while this same worker helps supplement the otherwise unsustainably low incomes of the auxiliary family members engaged in underemployed farming of small plots for low returns. So long as substantial surplus labour remains in the countryside, the key structural conditions for this new half-worker half-cultivator family economic unit will prevail.<sup>350</sup>

By contrast, the second generation of migrant workers, who were mainly born in the 1980s and 1990s, and who might amount to as many as 58% of the total, have weaker links to the countryside: ‘Most of them, like the first-generation, have come directly from farms and small cities, but a small percentage were born or raised by their first-generation migrant parents. In general this group’s link to the countryside is weaker, and they are more accustomed to urban living.’ This does not mean, however, that they have completely ceased to identify themselves as peasants or inhabitants of their rural hometowns: ‘These migrant workers are living in a societal limbo seeing themselves as neither urban or rural; their urban residency and youthful aspirations clash with social and institutional barriers to permanent settlement.’<sup>351</sup>

There is of course a gendered aspect to the situation in which migrants find themselves. Julia Chuang’s fieldwork among women migrants working in the export-processing zones suggests that they are far more likely than men to return to their villages of origin, in part because of pressure from female family members: ‘Some older women in Fa-Ming expect young migrant women to adhere to traditional values and practices even as they are exposed to modern, urban values in destinations.’<sup>352</sup> The pressures are not simply about upholding traditions, but are a means of dealing with a practical issue: the effective absence – after nearly 70 years of ‘communism’ – of a welfare state in the countryside and the consequent reliance on women to provide or at least pay for support: ‘In the sending community, women face a double bind: they are expected to support husbands who engage in precarious and high-risk migrations; and they are expected to negotiate with those husbands to channel a portion of remittance income to their aging parents, who lack access to welfare or social support.’<sup>353</sup> One of Chuang’s interviewees (‘Golden Flower’) from Fa-Ming village in Sichuan province had been a temporary migrant to the city before her marriage:

But Golden Flower chafed at the uneven bargain that marriage represented. She saw domestic work as a form of bondage, intolerable specifically in comparison to the life she had known during migration. She envisaged her near future: ‘In the end I’ll be alone raising pigs in the village while he is out in the city working. At least he can go out and work, have some space for a real life out in the city’.<sup>354</sup>

---

<sup>350</sup> Phillip C. C. Huang, Gao Yuan and Yusheng Peng, ‘Capitalization without Proletarianization in China’s Agricultural Development’, *Modern China*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2012), p. 164; see also, Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labour Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), chapter 6.

<sup>351</sup> Lin, ‘Recomposing Chinese Migrant and State-Sector Workers’, pp. 71-72.

<sup>352</sup> Julie Chuang, ‘Factory Girls after the Factory: Female Return Migrations in Rural China’, *Gender and Society*, vol. 30, no. 3 (June 2016), p. 479.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid*, 2016, p. 484.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid*, p. 481. This is of course not unique to China or indeed the Global South. J. D. Vance writes of the Appalachian grandparents, relocated to Ohio: ‘The sense that they had abandoned their families was acute, and

What kind of situation do the migrants face in the workplaces that await them in the cities? Ching Kwan Lee argues that what prevails across the board are forms of ‘disorganised despotism’ involving ‘workers’ institutional dependence on management for livelihood, managerial power to impose coercive modes of labour control, and workers’ collective apprehension of such control as violations of their interests and rights’, and that ‘varying degrees’ of such despotism can be found ‘across industrial firms of different ownership types’ on a contingent basis: ‘For example, the generally long working hours and more intensive labour processes in private firms than in state firms are due more to the volume and nature of orders they respectively receive, not due to any difference in management’s institutional power and its imperative to impose discipline in these two types of firm.’<sup>355</sup> Additionally, migrant workers, who are referred to as ‘peasant workers’ (*nongmingong*) in Chinese, tend to be looked down on as uneducated and generally lacking in culture by urban resident workers, and naturally are resentful of this condescension: clearly, this is a barrier to class unity. The official union federation, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), only proclaimed that it had a responsibility to ‘represent’ migrant workers in 2003. Given that the ACFTU is primarily an instrument of state and management control, this is something of a mixed blessing, but is at least partly a response to the reality of migrant worker militancy.<sup>356</sup>

### 5.2.2. *Worker Resistance*

The fact that migrant workers tend to be employed in the private sector and are consequently subjected to the harsher conditions prevailing there, together with the declining availability of the countryside as a means of escape, however temporary, may have contributed to their being more militant than workers in the older state-owned sector, where closures and lay-offs have tended to be the central problems. The relative difference in degrees of militancy is not necessarily reflected in the explanatory framework within which Chinese workers seek to understand their own situation. If anything, Lee’s research found that those still employed by the state indict their oppressors within ‘a cognitive framework of “class” and he refers to one worker’s ‘spirited critique of the degeneration of the official union into a “yellow union” and the transformation of enterprise cadres into a capitalist class’, while others ‘deploy Marxist concepts to understand and evaluate market socialism’, reporting one who ‘condemns as unfair the unequal distribution of income by appealing to Marx’s labour theory of value’. Migrant workers, however, tend to express their opposition in different terms: ‘Migrant peasant workers’ encounter with market and capitalist forces bring about a critique alluding to “alienation”, grounded more in terms of denial of human dignity, loss of personal autonomy, and dishonesty, not in terms of exploitation.’<sup>357</sup> This is not as surprising as it might seem. Marxism was available to newly radicalized workers in the 1920s as a new and unsullied doctrine, filtered through the Bolshevik experience, which helped them make sense of their own exploitation and oppression; but, as in Stalinist Russia itself, where the ideology of the bureaucratic ruling class has supposedly been ‘Marxism-Leninism’ for nearly 70 years,

---

it was expected that, whatever their responsibilities, they would return home regularly.’ See *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), p. 30.

<sup>355</sup> Ching Kwan Lee, ‘From the Spectre of Mao to the Spirit of the Law: Labour Insurgency in China’, *Theory and Society*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2002), pp. 197-198 and pp. 197-206 more generally.

<sup>356</sup> David S. G. Goodman, *Class in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 183; Eli Friedman, *Insurgency Trap: Labour Politics in Postsocialist China* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 51.

<sup>357</sup> Lee, ‘From the Spectre of Mao to the Spirit of the Law’, p. 204. See also Lin Chun, ‘The Language of Class in China’, in *Socialist Register 2015: Transforming Classes*, edited by Leo Panitch and Greg Albo (London: Merlin Press, 2014), pp. 41-42

it cannot play the same role. At best, workers in the state sector can draw attention to the inconsistencies of neoliberal ‘socialism’, while those in the private sector, for whom Maoist rhetoric has been less significant, express their opposition through a form of moral economy. ‘The two groups of workers, traditional and new, are merging in a common search for class subjectivity.’<sup>358</sup>

Much therefore depends on whether a genuine Marxism capable of explaining the trajectory of ‘Marxist’ China becomes available to large numbers of Chinese workers. If it ever does, it should find as ready an audience as in the 1920s. In their introduction to Hao Ren’s important collection of interviews with migrant workers involved in industrial struggle across the Pearl River Delta, Zhongjin Li and Eli Friedman note that ‘nominally “socialist” China presents in hyperbolic form many of the problems that those of us in the capitalist world experience: low wages, no benefits, lawlessness in the workplace, anti-union employers and governments, a broken system of political representation’.<sup>359</sup> Fortunately, the response of Chinese workers has also been ‘hyperbolic’, at least episodically. The absence of what might be termed formal or institutionalised class struggle through worker’s parties, free trade unions, or legal social movements has not precluded the existence of class struggle, as has been so clearly demonstrated by rapidly growing industrial struggle and what Lee calls ‘the staggering increase’ in Chinese workers turning to existing legal mechanisms to seek redress.<sup>360</sup>

The level of ‘mass incidents’ increased after 2003 and particularly after 2008, as Chinese workers and peasants responded to the downturn and the introduction of the new Labour Contract Law and Labour Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law with an acceleration of struggle. Contrary to the impression that the lack of formal freedoms precludes any changes from above precipitated by struggle from below, Chinese workers, through their quasi-legal and illegal actions, usually without formal organisation, had forced a nervous ruling class to concede major legal changes which have had a real impact and, at a local state level, forced a turn from a sole reliance on repression to a more mixed approach involving both repression and conciliation. The implementation of new labour laws led to a huge increase in disputes submitted to official labour dispute mechanisms and to the courts. At the same time far from damping down militant labour struggle these concessions seem to have encouraged them as instanced by the rise in labour protests. Ironically it seems that information on the new legislation has acted as catalyst for struggle especially as employers have tried to circumvent the new laws. One observer described the situation in the Longgang division of Shenzhen:

‘At the end of 2007, strikes broke out almost every day. And the participants came from all kinds of industries and jobs. They did not go to work, gathering around the gate or wandering in the square. The strikes were all in large factories with at least two hundred or three hundred workers. Such factories as Yunchang, Dahua, and Jingchang employed thousands of workers. At that time, the new Labour Contract law had just been implemented. Workers lost their seniority after the bosses terminated their existing labour contracts, so workers went on strike.’<sup>361</sup>

The actions taken involve more than strikes (whose status is currently in a legal limbo in China), but also blockades of streets, demos and sit-ins. The pressure from below has had an impact just as it did during rapid periods of industrialisation and urbanisation in other states. The level of struggle is all the more extraordinary given that it is expressed outside of official

<sup>358</sup> Chun, ‘The Language of Class in China’, p. 42.

<sup>359</sup> Zhongjin Li and Eli Friedman, ‘Introduction to the English Edition’, in *China on Strike: Narratives of Worker’s Resistance*, edited by Hao Ren (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), p. xiv.

<sup>360</sup> Lee, *Against the Law*, p. 43

<sup>361</sup> Quoted in Li and Friedman, ‘Introduction to the English Edition’, p. 16.



trade union structures, although the ACFTU may now be becoming more responsive to workers' demands at a local level.<sup>362</sup> The most spectacular recent example has been the March-April 2014 strike at footwear manufacturer Yue Yuen in Dongguan over non-payment of social security contributions, perhaps the biggest to date in the Chinese private sector. It climaxed in production being completely shut down across three factories for 11 days, with around 30,000 workers or about 80% of the workforce on strike and 10,000 of them taking part in street protests and demonstrations. In the end, the strike was only ended by the intervention of Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security ordering the company to pay up.<sup>363</sup>

### 5.2.3. *State Transformations*

In the face of facts like these, Mike Davis is surely correct to say: 'Two hundred million Chinese factory workers, miners and construction labourers are the most dangerous class in the planet.'<sup>364</sup> What the outcome also suggests, however, is that the state has developed the adaptability to absorb or 'contain' the effects of uneven and combined development, just as earlier capitalist states had done. Ironically – given the persistence of Western leftist fantasies about the socialist nature of the regime – one reason for this ability is that it continues to perform what has historically been one of the main functions of the capitalist state, but one which has been weakened in the West by both decades of neoliberalism and more recently by experiments in right-wing populism: representing and managing the interests of national capital as a whole.<sup>365</sup> Why the CCP? Slavoj Žižek writes that, 'arguably the reason why (ex-) Communists are re-emerging as the most efficient managers of capitalism: their historical enmity towards the bourgeoisie as a class fits perfectly with the progress of contemporary capitalism towards a managerial system without the bourgeoisie'.<sup>366</sup> There is an element of truth in this, but even so, the adaptability of the state involved what Charlie Hore refers to 'a fundamental shift in power *inside* the ruling class' following the neoliberal turn:

The government deliberately decentralised economic power, allowing lower levels of the state to keep a greater proportion of profits and taxes. The expectation was that this would lead to greater efficiency, but what local officials actually did was follow their own interests. This is why Chinese economic development has been both so dynamic and so unstable: economic growth has been state-led, but by the lower levels of the state, leading to enormous duplication of investment and assets. ... Although China remains a repressive police state, it is far less so than 25 years ago. The government deliberately scrapped many of the controls on everyday life to make economic reforms work. Freedom of movement had to be allowed if markets were to flourish; some freedom of speech was necessary if officials were to tell the truth about the economy and debate policy options...<sup>367</sup>

Walker and Buck note how neoliberal developments since 1978 (or 'the transition' as they describe it) 'has reconfigured the *form* of the state in a way that has unleashed the powers of capitalism'. One aspect of this has been the devolution of power to the metropolitan and

<sup>362</sup> China Labour Bulletin, *Going it Alone: the Workers' Movement in China (2007-2008)* (Hong Kong: China Labour Bulletin, 2009), pp. 5-7, 14, 21-22, 23-24, 36.

<sup>363</sup> Immanuel Ness, *Southern Insurgency: The Making of the Global Working Class* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), pp. 135-144.

<sup>364</sup> Mike Davis, 'Spring Confronts Winter', *New Left Review* II/72 (November/December 2011), p. 15.

<sup>365</sup> Neil Davidson, 'Crisis Neoliberalism and Regimes of Permanent Exception', *Critical Sociology*, published on-line 4 August 2016 at:

<http://crs.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/08/03/0896920516655386.full.pdf+html>

<sup>366</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), 11.

<sup>367</sup> Charlie Hore, 'China's Century?', *International Socialism*, second series, 103 (Summer 2003, pp. 8, 25.

prefectural levels, giving local governments the ability to annex territory and existing urban areas, and to raise revenue through local taxes and rents. The authors draw an audacious parallel:

Altogether, the Chinese situation reminds one of the American federal system and its urban growth politics, from which an array of public and private players profit handsomely. Backroom payoffs are far from unknown in the US, but the exchange of favours and rewards is done to the mutual advantage of many. What the Chinese call *guanxi* is very like what Americans call horse-trading. Regional government competition in China is also reminiscent of American federalism. It is pointless to complain, in this context, about the duplication and inefficiency of local boosterism. The evidence in both the US and China is that this kind of wide-open alliance between state and capital for regional development works very well indeed. ... One would not expect the State Council to play midwife to the birth of capitalism in the same way as local governments. China's 'developmental dictatorship' is more in line with continental European experience in this regard.

The entirely correct view that China 'has followed a path not so distant from those of Europe and North America' leaves Walker and Buck with 'a final question' which is why China's polity has not liberalised in line with the neoliberalisation of its economy.<sup>368</sup> The obvious answer is that there is no necessary connection between capitalism – certainly not the neoliberal variant – and democracy. In China what David Goodman calls the 'intermediate middle classes' are not yet demanding reform, let alone overthrow of the state: 'On the contrary...[they] are fundamental supporters of the contemporary Party-state, even if at times some are also the most articulate critics of specific actions and policy settings of the Party-state, particularly wanting it to be more efficient and just'.<sup>369</sup>

If an insurgent working class is one central problem facing the Chinese party-state then the other is precisely whether the devolution of power to individual capitalists and bureaucrats has begun to undermine its ability to perform its role as central authority for the system as a whole. In one sense President Xi Jinping's current campaign against corruption is an attempt to force actors to perform their roles with an eye to the overall interests of national capital rather than their particular section of it, and behave accordingly:

One of Xi's most pressing concerns since becoming president of the largest one-party state in the world has been re-establishing the CCP's authority over its nearly 90 million members. The central government can issue laws and formulate policy, but given factionalism and competition for power among officials at all levels, it has struggled to get the rank and file to implement those policies or uphold those laws. The central government can issue laws and formulate policy, but given factionalism and competition for power among officials at all levels, it has struggled to get the rank and file to implement those policies or uphold those laws. Local governments, for example, often collude with businesses to enrich themselves at the expense of the people, soliciting backlash in the form of mass protest and social unrest, and threatening the party's power.

And, as these author's note: 'These problems are made more urgent by a slowing economy.'<sup>370</sup>

---

<sup>368</sup> Walker and Buck, 'The Chinese Road', p. 65.

<sup>369</sup> Goodman, *Class in Contemporary China*, 155.

<sup>370</sup> Macabe Keliher and Hsinchao Wu, 'What China's Anti-Corruption Campaign is Really About', *The Atlantic* (7 April 2015):

[HTTPS://WWW.THEATLANTIC.COM/INTERNATIONAL/ARCHIVE/2015/04/XI-JINPING-CHINA-CORRUPTION-POLITICAL-CULTURE/389787/](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/xi-jinping-china-corruption-political-culture/389787/)

## IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

In a sense this brings us back to our starting point, for the situation does resemble that of Russia with which I began this series of articles – not because a bourgeois revolution is still to be accomplished, but because fundamental social change can only come at the hands of the working class. Our end, however, is not entirely in our beginning. Paul Mason has written that: ‘Shenzhen’s workers are to global capitalism what Manchester’s workers were 200 years ago.’<sup>371</sup> Mason’s desire to establish the continuities within the global history of the working class is commendable, but there are limits to the parallels which can be drawn. The Marxist science-fiction author, Kim Stanley Robinson, has one of his characters say that ‘historical analogy is the last refuge of people who can’t grasp the current situation’.<sup>372</sup> That seems to be appropriate here. The Mancunian workers who marched to Saint Peter’s Fields in 1819 and the Glaswegian workers who struck for the vote the following year had available to them neither socialism as a goal nor Marxism as a theory. It is a great, if bleak historical irony that, after the material and ideological devastation wrought by Stalinism, the same is true for most workers today, and not only in China. There are therefore no analogies entirely adequate to describe our current situation and we should therefore not expect to find strategic or organisational models ready-made for use. What we *can* predict from our experience until now is that uneven and combined development will continue to play a role in throwing up revolutionary conjunctures, the outcomes of which, as always, cannot be predicted in advance.

---

<sup>371</sup> Paul Mason, *Live Working or Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global* (London: Harvil Secker, 2007), p. 7 and chapter 1 more generally.

<sup>372</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson [1993], *Red Mars* (London: Harper Voyager, 2009), p. 543. But for those who need to have the point established by Authority, see this warning, in Trotsky’s first iteration of the strategy of permanent revolution: ‘Historical analogies, by which liberalism lives and is nurtured, cannot take the place of social analysis.’ Leon D. Trotsky [1906], *Results and Prospects*, in *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects* (Third edition, New York: Pathfinder Books, 1969), p. 36; see also [1908–1909/1922], *1905* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 6.