

What's at Stake in the Transition Debate? Rethinking the Origins of Capitalism and the 'Rise of the West'

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a veritable historiographical revolution in the study of the early modern epoch. This has come from a disparate group of scholars¹ challenging what they see as the fundamentally 'Eurocentric' nature of extant theoretical and historical approaches. Debates over the origins of capitalism have subsequently taken on new dimensions as scholars have forcefully problematized notions of an inextricable and self-propelling 'rise of the West' whilst relativizing the uniqueness of a singular Western modernity. Once side-lined to the margins of historical and sociological investigation, the non-Western sources, dynamics and experiences of capitalist modernity have thus been at the forefront of these literatures acting as a much needed corrective to the essentializing, self-aggrandizing narratives of an internally-generated 'European miracle'.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this literature has been the resolute focus on the relations of interconnection and co-constitution between the West and 'the rest' in their joint making of the modern world. This attention to 'the international' as a thick space of social interaction and mutual constitution should put International Relations (IR) scholars in a unique position to make important contributions to these debates. Yet, thus far, postcolonial critiques² have made little impact on the mainstream of the discipline, even after the historical sociological

¹ The body of anti-Eurocentric literature is now vast. For a sampling of some of the most important contributions see James Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1993); A.G. Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley:University of California Press, 1998); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 2000); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 2000); John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² But see the significant contributions by John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins*; Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (London:Routledge, 2004); Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies', *Review of International Studies* 32 (2006):329–352; Robbie Shilliam (ed), *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity* (London:Routledge, 2010); Gurminder K. Bhambra, 'Historical sociology, international relations and connected histories', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23, no. 1 (2010):127–143; Sanjay Seth, 'Postcolonial Theory and the Critique of International Relations', *Millennium*, 40, no. 4 (2011):167-183.

'turn'.³ Instead, historical sociological approaches to IR have been criticized with reproducing Eurocentric assumptions, as they predominately conduct their analysis on the basis of European history.⁴

More recently, attempts to reconstruct Leon Trotsky's concept of uneven and combined development (U&CD) into a theory of 'the international'⁵ have also been subject to the charge of Eurocentrism. For Gurinder Bhambra, despite attention to the implications of societal difference, U&CD remains tied to a stadial mode of production-based theory that still identifies the central dynamic of capitalism as European in origin. This essentially excludes the non-West, relegating it to an empirically significant yet theoretically secondary role. U&CD thus fails to 'address issues of domination and subordination...integral to the emergence...of unevenness'.⁶ Similarly, for John Hobson: 'invoking *inter-societal* processes as causal factors of social change is ...insufficient ...either because the 'international' turns out to be "intra-European", or because when the international reaches global proportions, it is understood in terms of Western agency and Eastern passivity'.⁷ A further point of contention in these debates revolves around the spatio-temporal applicability of U&CD: whether or not the concept can be usefully extended in time and pace beyond the capitalist epoch. 'For failure to generalise U&CD', Hobson writes, 'leads to fetishising Europe with the unintended consequence of naturalising, if not eternalising, Western capitalist domination, while simultaneously denying agency to the East'.⁸

This article seeks to take up these challenges, engaging with anti-Eurocentric critiques in developing a more 'international' approach to the origins of capitalism that, as Bhambra puts it, 'brings the non-West more thoroughly into understandings of the construction of the modern world'.⁹ It does so by building upon U&CD in developing a distinctly non-Eurocentric account of the genesis of capitalism thus generalizing the concept beyond its original capitalist

³ Stephen Hobden and John Hobson (eds.) *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴ Cf. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins*; Bhambra, 'Historical sociology'.

⁵ Justin Rosenberg, 'Why is There no International Historical Sociology?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12 no. 3 (2006):307-340; Kamran Matin, 'Uneven and Combined Development in World History: The International Relations of State-formation in Premodern Iran', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2007):419-447; see also Neil Davidson, 'Putting the Nation Back into the International', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22, no. 1 (2009):9-28; Jamie Allinson and Alexander Anievas, 'Approaching the "international": beyond Political Marxism', in ed. Anievas *Marxism and World Politics* (London:Routledge, 2010):197-214.

⁶ Gurinder K. Bhambra, 'Talking Among Themselves? Weberian and Marxist Historical Sociologies as Dialogues without Others', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39, no. 3 (2011):673,676.

⁷ John Hobson, 'What's at Stake in the Neo-Trotskyist Debate? Towards a Non-Eurocentric Historical Sociology of Uneven and Combined Development' *Millennium*, 40, no. 1 (2011):153.

⁸ *Ibid*,165.

⁹ Bhambra, 'Talking Among Themselves?',669.

temporality. U&CD is uniquely suited in offering a genuinely 'internationalist historiography'¹⁰ of the origins of capitalism by theoretically incorporating the interactive and multiform character of all social development.

The debate on the transition to capitalism is a particularly apposite body of literature for assessing U&CD's efficacy in theorizing social change because positions within it well demonstrate the very methodological problems U&CD seeks to overcome: specifically, the hardened division between 'internalist' and 'externalist' modes of explanation. In particular, the debates within (neo-)Marxist approaches have largely split between these two 'internalist' and 'externalist' poles. On one side, scholars such as Maurice Dobb,¹¹ Robert Brenner¹² and Ellen Wood¹³ locate the generative sources of capitalist social relations in the internal contradictions of feudal European societies. On the other side, Paul Sweezy¹⁴ and Immanuel Wallerstein¹⁵ view capitalism as having developed from the growth of markets and trade in Europe¹⁶ over the Long Sixteenth Century (1450-1650). The main issue between these different positions thus revolves around whether the intensification of exchange relations (trade) or class conflicts were the 'prime movers' in the transition to capitalism. Anti-Eurocentric scholars have broadened the debate in considering the emergence of antecedent forms of capitalism (or 'protocapitalism') in the non-West while further emphasizing the overwhelmingly 'contingent' or accidental factors explaining the rise of a globally dominant Western European capitalism.¹⁷ Yet, for the most part, the anti-Eurocentric move within the main methodological parameters set out by the original debate, accepting an essentially 'externalist' explanation of the origins of capitalism by highlighting the spread of commerce and markets as the 'prime movers'.¹⁸ Nonetheless, what they have done, in creative and interesting ways, is to spatially *decenter* the causes of capitalism by moving away from the Eurocentric frameworks characterizing both sides of the earlier debates.

¹⁰ Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2010), 253.

¹¹ Maurice Dobb *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1963).

¹² Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe,' in *The Brenner Debate*, eds. Aston, T. H. et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹³ Ellen Meiksins Wood *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002).

¹⁴ Paul Sweezy, 'A Critique' in Rodney Hilton (ed) *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978), 33-56.

¹⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System, Volume I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Academic Press, 1974).

¹⁶ Here and throughout the paper the term 'Europe' and 'European' is deployed with the problematic implications of anachronism and intra-European divisions firmly in mind. As such it is used, unless specified, in a basic geographical sense, predominantly (but not exclusively) denoting England, France, Low Countries, Portugal, Hapsburg Spain and Austria, Germanic principalities, Hungary, and Italian city-states.

¹⁷ See, for example, Jack Gladstone, 'The Rise of the West or Not? A Revision to Socio-economic History', *Sociological Theory* 18, no. 2 (2000): 173-94; Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*; Hobson, *Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, 313-316.

¹⁸ Cf. Frank, *ReOrient*; Hobson, *Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*.

So what exactly is Eurocentrism? At its core, Eurocentrism represents a distinctive mode of inquiry constituted by four interrelated assumptions about the form and nature of modern development.¹⁹ First, it conceives the origins and sources of capitalist modernity as a product of developments primarily *internal* to Europe. Dominant accounts of the rise of capitalism either as an economic form²⁰ or as a social system²¹ place its origins squarely in Western Europe, while non-Europe is relegated to an exploited and passive periphery.²² This posits a strong 'inside-out' model of social causality (or *methodological internalism*) whereby European development is conceptualized as endogenous and self-propelling.²³ Europe is thereby conceived as the permanent 'core' and prime mover of history which, in its worst forms, can lend itself to an interpretation of European society/culture as somehow superior to the rest. This second, normative assumption of Eurocentrism can be termed *historical priority*.

From these two assumptions emerges a third predictive proposition that the European experience of modernity is a universal stage of development through which all societies must pass. European modernity is a kind of public good to be given to other societies through some form of diffusion. This entails a fourth *stadial* assumption, *linear developmentalism*, whereby endogenous processes of social change are conceived as universal stages of a linear development which encompass all societies of the world at different times and different places. These four assumptions (*methodological internalism*, *historical priority*, *universal stagism*, and *linear developmentalism*) make up the core of Eurocentricism.²⁴

The following article challenges these assumptions by examining the extra-European *geopolitical conditions* conducive to capitalism's emergence as a distinctive mode of production.²⁵ We do so by tracing the subaltern processes of societal transformation through an analysis of three spatio-temporal vectors of U&CD emerging over the late Medieval and early Modern epochs. This is not intended to be a 'total' account of the origins of capitalism. Rather, the article aims to specify particular geopolitical factors that were fundamental and necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for the advent of capitalism in Western Europe.

¹⁹ This follows the summary by Matin, Kamran, 'Redeeming the Universal: Postcolonialism and the Inner Life of Eurocentrism', *European Journal of International Relations*, iFirst (2012): 2.

²⁰ David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Are Some So Rich and Some So Poor?* (London:W. W. Norton & Co., 1998).

²¹ Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure'.

²² Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System, Volume I*.

²³ Here, the partial exception is Wallerstein's account which incorporates the American discoveries as a factor in the rise of a capitalist world system. But see John Hobson's critique of World System Theory as Eurocentric in *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics* (Cambridge:University of Cambridge, 2012),236-8.

²⁴ However, this is not to argue that every Eurocentric account shares all four assumptions.

²⁵ We define capitalism as a distinctive mode of production characterized by the systemization of competitive accumulation primarily based on the exploitation of wage-labor.

This article is developed in five movements. It begins by offering a critique of arguably the most influential (if controversial) interpretation of capitalism's origins: the 'Brenner thesis'. Demonstrating the problematically confining temporal and spatial limits of Robert Brenner's 'capitalism in one country' approach, we argue for a more robust conception of 'primitive accumulation' allowing one to visualize the intersocietal contexts of capitalism's emergence. The second section lays out our alternative theoretical framework drawing on the concept of U&CD, explicating its core tenets of the 'whip of external necessity' and 'privileges of backwardness'. The third section, then, examines the emergence of the Pax Mongolia as providing propitious geopolitical conditions for the increase in trade and commerce linking the West and East together as interactive components of a unified geopolitical system. Further, it elucidates how the Black Death, spread from East to West through the intersocietal interactions facilitated by the Pax Mongolia, led to decisive shifts in the balance of class forces eventually giving rise to capitalist social relations in Northwestern Europe, particularly in the English countryside.

Section four analyses how Ottoman attempts at Empire building curtailed the imperial threat of the Habsburgs, giving Northwestern European states the geopolitical space in which modern developments could take place. In the process, the Ottomans unwittingly facilitated the development of English agrarian capitalism and brought about a structural shift to Atlantic trade and Northwest European dominance. Section five details the effects of the New World discoveries in the rise of capitalist social relations in Northwestern Europe, demonstrating in particular the development of specific social forces in England, tied to colonial trade and plantation production, that would play a decisive role in the making of the English 'bourgeois revolution'.

The Spatio-Temporal Limits of Brennerism

In what has become one of the most influential theorisations of capitalism's origins (Marxist or otherwise), Robert Brenner mobilised Marx's emphasis on changing social property relations in order to construct an account of the origins of capitalism in terms of class struggles specific to feudalism.²⁶ These struggles were bound in the specificity of social property relations based on the appropriation of surplus from the peasantry by lords through extra-economic means, where lords would habitually 'squeeze' agricultural productivity by imposing fines, extending work and extracting higher proportions of surplus. In the fifteenth century this sparked class conflicts in

²⁶ Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', and 'The Agrarian Roots of Capitalism,' in (eds) *The Brenner Debate*. Aston, T. H. et al (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1987),213-328.

the English countryside, where serfs rebelled against their worsening conditions and won formal enfranchisement. The liberation of serfs from ties and obligations to the lords' demesne initiated a rise in tenant farming and led to increased market dependence as peasants were turned away from their land and forced into wage-labour as an alternative means of subsistence. Although peasant expulsions were met with significant revolt, the unity of the English state and nobility ensured victory for the landed ruling-class.²⁷ This concentrated land in the private possession of landlords, who leased them to free peasants, unintentionally giving rise to 'the classical landlord-capitalist tenant-wage labour structure'.²⁸

Hence, for Brenner, the specificity of the feudal 'system of surplus extraction' determined the 'uniquely successful development of capitalism in Western Europe'.²⁹ Yet in spite of the extensive and informative historical explanation conducted by Brenner, the above formulation is conceptually too narrow and too simple; Brenner ultimately tries to explain too much with too little. In Brenner's schema, Marx's master concept, the 'mode of production'—conceived as the composite totality of relations encapsulating economic, legal, ideological, cultural and political spheres—is reduced to the much thinner 'social properly relations' concept itself reduced to a form of exploitation. Brenner's error is to take the singular relation of exploitation between lord and peasant as the most fundamental and axiomatic component of the mode of production, which in turn constitutes the foundational ontology and analytical 'building block' upon which ensuing theoretical and historical investigation is constructed. Consequently, as S.H. Rigby notes, Brenner is one of those 'Marxist theorists' who 'constantly slip toward an implicit pluralism by which Marxism dies the death of a thousand qualifications'.³⁰

The result of this ontological singularity is a dual tunnelling – both temporal and spatial – of our empirical field of vision and enquiry. *Temporally*, the history of capitalism's origins is reduced to the historical manifestation of one conceptual moment – the freeing of labour – and in turn explained by it. Such tunnelling cannot account for why the extensive presence of formally free wage-labour prior to the sixteenth century (both inside and outside England) did not give rise to capitalism elsewhere.³¹ Nor can it explain subsequent social developments; by obliterating the histories of colonialism, slavery and imperialism, Brenner 'freezes' capitalism's

²⁷ Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots', 252.

²⁸ Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', 47.

²⁹ Robert Brenner, 'The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism' *New Left Review*, 104 (1977):94-103, 68.

³⁰ S.H. Rigby, *Marxism and History: A Critical Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2nd Ed, 1999), xi.

³¹ Subhi Y. Labib, 'Capitalism in Medieval Islam', *The Journal of Economic History*, 29, No. 1 (1969):79-96; Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).

history.³² This substantially narrows Marx's more robust conception of the process of so-called 'primitive accumulation' that Brenner and his students give so much analytical weight in explaining capitalism's origins. In a famous passage, Marx wrote:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the expiration, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation....The different moments of primitive accumulation can be assigned in particular to Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, and England, in more or less chronological order. These 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.³³

Here, we see the much more temporally and spatially expansive conception of capitalism's emergence that Marx provides. The story of capitalism's genesis was not then a national phenomenon, but, rather, an *intersocietal* one.

In contrast, Brenner *spatially* reduces capitalism's origins to processes that occurred solely in the English countryside; towns and cities are omitted, Europe-wide dynamics are analytically active only as comparative cases, and the world outside of Europe does not figure at all. Similarly excluded are the numerous technological, cultural, institutional and social relational discoveries and developments originating outside of Europe that were appropriated and adopted by Europe in the course of its capitalist development.³⁴ In short, Brenner neglects the determinations and conditions that arose from the social interactions *between* societies: "political community" is subordinated to "class" while classes are themselves largely conceptualised and studied within the empirical spatial limits of the political community in question.³⁵ Accordingly, within this spatio-temporal tunnelling we find the various moments of Eurocentrism outlined in the introduction. Temporal tunnelling gives rise to the notion of historical priority; spatial tunnelling gives rise to methodologically internalist analysis. For Brenner's followers, these problems are only compounded as the possibility of early capitalist developments outside of the English countryside that Brenner allows for are rejected.³⁶ The notion of the origins of 'capitalism in one country' is thus taken literally.

³² James, M. Blaut, 'Robert Brenner in the Tunnel of Time', *Antipode*, 26, no. 4 (1991):351-374.

³³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (London:Penguin, 1990),915.

³⁴ Cho-yun Hsu 'Asian Influences on the West' in Carol Gluck and Ainslie T. Embree (eds.) *Asia in Western and World history: A Guide for Teaching* (New York:M. E. Sharp, 1997), 22-31,27fn2; Hobson, *The Eastern Origins*,190-219; Hobson, 'What's at Stake'.

³⁵ Kamran Matin, 'Democracy Without Capitalism: Rethorizing Iran's Constitutional Revolution,' *Middle East Critique*, 21 no. 1 (2012):37-56. 45

³⁶ Brenner views capitalist property relations as emerging in such regions as Catalonia and the United Provinces in the late 15th and 16th centuries, respectively, though he has not reflected on how these developments might

Unevenness and Combination

To better account for the biography of capitalism's development, we need to have an approach that captures the geopolitically interconnected and sociologically co-constitutive nature of its emergence. The theory of uneven and combined development provides one such approach. The below offers a schematic exposition of the theory's two main concepts – unevenness and combination – from which the 'whip of external necessity' and 'privilege of backwardness' necessarily follow.

Unevenness posits developmental variations both within and between societies, along with the attendant spatial differentiations between them. The 'force of uneven development', Trotsky wrote, 'operates not only in the relations of countries to each other, but also in the mutual relationships of the various processes within one and the same country'.³⁷ Emphasizing the specificities of any given society's development, Trotsky showed how they were irreducible to any single unilinear path of development. 'Russia stood not only geographically, but also socially and historically, between Europe and Asia'.³⁸ As both cause and effect of this international differentiation, unevenness also denoted the peculiar local sociological forms of internal differentiation in institutional, cultural and class relations.³⁹ For example, Trotsky noted both the imbalances between Russian town and countryside⁴⁰ and between state and society⁴¹ in contrast to European forms. Crucially, such relations of unevenness created competitive structural conditions between societies themselves – 'the whip of external necessity' which in Trotsky's case referred to the competitive pressures of European capitalism on the less-developed Russian social formation.⁴² Hence, developmentally differentiated societies constantly impact upon one another's social reproduction and development, which in turn instigate various forms of

problematize his theoretical account of the origins of capitalism which exclusively focuses on the English countryside. Other scholars within the Brenner School have, by contrast, viewed the origins of capitalism as an exclusively English affair, rejecting the possibility of the antecedent development of capitalism in the Low Countries. See Robert Brenner, 'The Low Countries in the Transition to Capitalism', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1:2 (2001):169-241; Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'The Question of Market Dependence', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 2:1 (2002):50-87; Charles Post, 'Comments on the Brenner-Wood Exchange on the Low Countries', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 2:1 (2002):88-95.

³⁷Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution*,131.

³⁸ Trotsky, *History*,26.

³⁹ Luke Cooper, 'Uneven and combined development in modern world history: Chinese economic reform in the longue durée of capitalist modernity.' Paper presented at *International Studies Association Annual Convention*, San Diego, 1 – 4 April 2012,6.

⁴⁰ Trotsky, *History*,474.

⁴¹ *ibid.*,476.

⁴² *ibid.*,28,477.

combined development. Social development is thus ineluctably multilinear, polycentric and co-constitutive by virtue of its very interconnectedness.

Combination at the most abstract level refers to the way in which internal relations of any given society are determined by their relations with other developmentally differentiated societies. For example, in Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, we find numerous processes through which the more 'backward' Russia attempted to developmentally 'catch up' with a more advanced Europe by making use of their pre-existing developmental achievements. The 'privilege' of Russia's backwardness entailed a 'skipping over intermediate steps'⁴³ of development, ensuring attempts at catch up did not follow the same paths of antecedent developments.⁴⁴ Accordingly combined development also referred to processes in which societies drew 'together different stages of the journey', combining the spatio-temporally variegated experiences of societies into potentially explosive amalgams of 'contemporary and more archaic',⁴⁵ thus creating multilinear trajectories of development. Hence, *contra* Bhambra's criticism that U&CD theoretically reproduces the strong stagism of Enlightenment thinking, it rather presupposes stagism in order to *scramble* and *subvert* it. The notion of 'stages' is deployed precisely to counter stagist thinking as Trotsky continually emphasized in his many diatribes against the Menshevik position that the socialist revolution had to wait for the bourgeois stage to complete itself.

Though usually rooted in the interlacing and fusion of differentiated modes of production, the effects of a combined development suffuse every aspect of society. It is much more than a simple economic phenomenon, but, rather, captures the totality of relations constitutive of a social order. By deploying combined development in this way, Trotsky was able to uncover the contradictory and complex 'concentration of many determinations' that ultimately led to a trajectory of development in which proletarian revolution took place in Russia – economically the most backward and ideologically the most reactionary European state. Historical processes are, then, always the outcome of a *multiplicity of spatially diverse nonlinear causal chains* that combine in any given conjuncture. What this compels historians and sociologists to do methodologically is to analyse history from a multiplicity of spatio-temporal vantage points – what we have termed elsewhere the overlapping 'spatio-temporal vectors of uneven and combined development'⁴⁶ – in order to uncover these causal chains. In this schema, Brenner's

⁴³ Ibid.,27,476.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*,27.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Alexander Anievas, '1914 in World Historical Perspective: The "Uneven" and "Combined" Origins of the First World War', *European Journal of International Relations*, (forthcoming, 2012).

emphasis on the origins of capitalism would constitute one of many spatio-temporal vectors of U&CD; one that must be complimented and combined with other determinations analysed from alternative vantage points. In short, U&CD stresses, indeed necessitates, an 'internationalist historiography'⁴⁷ of the origins of capitalism.

Structural Crisis, Conjunctural Catastrophe: Pax Mongolia as a Vector of Uneven and Combined Development

It is worth recalling that in the early modern epoch, Europe was in no sense predetermined to rise to global prominence. Up until at least the mid-13th century, the social formations making up 'Europe' were the least developed region of a 'world system' of increasing economic integration and cultural contacts between 'East' and 'West'.⁴⁸ Arising late on the periphery of this world system, European development had the most to gain from the new intersocietal links being forged, particularly through the diffusion of new technologies and 'resource portfolios' spreading from East to West.⁴⁹ The principles of mathematics, navigational inventions, arts of war, and significant military technologies all originated in the more advanced East eventually passing to the backward West.⁵⁰ In these ways, Europe benefitted from a certain 'privilege of backwardness'⁵¹ which was a key precondition for the eventual emergence of capitalism within it. Crucial to this process of worldwide interconnection was the 'globalizing' dynamic of the robustly expansionist Mongol empire which, over the course of the 13th and 14th centuries, unified much of the Eurasian landmass putting 'the termini of Europe and China in direct contact with one another for the first time in a thousand years'.⁵²

The impact of the Mongol conquests in the subsequent trajectory of world history was profound. Once relatively isolated entities, the different sedentary and nomadic societies making up the whole of the Eurasian landmass were now 'interactive components of a unified system'⁵³ of geopolitical relations. What we then find in the 13th century world is a plurality of differentiated societies, based on different modes of production (tributary in the East, nomadic

⁴⁷ Banaji, *Theory as History*, 253.

⁴⁸ Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*.

⁴⁹ On this general process of East to West diffusion see the indispensable works of Jack Goody and John Hobson.

⁵⁰ J.R. McNeil and William H. McNeil, *The Human Web* (London:W.W. Norton, 2003), 117–118; Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 112.

⁵¹ Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World*, (London:Bookmarks, 1999), 141; Hobson, *Eastern Origins*, 192.

⁵² Abu-Lughod *Before European Hegemony*, 170.

⁵³ Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium* (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 2007), 108.

in the steppes, feudal in Europe), constituting a single interactive geopolitical whole. Within this ontological whole, each society's conditions of existence necessarily impinged on and entered into their logics of reproduction thereby creating an 'interdependence...of the structures of social, material and cultural life'.⁵⁴ Nomadic expansionism thus represented a kind of 'simple' or archaic form of 'uneven and combined development'.⁵⁵

The effects of the Mongol conquests on West and East were, however, gravely different. For China, the Mongol invasions profoundly arrested economic development. E.L. Jones claims that the human destruction wrought by the Mongol conquest of Sung China 'was so large that it must have obliterated economic life over wide areas'.⁵⁶ Similarly, according to Alan Smith, 'after the overthrow of the Sung dynasty by the invading Mongols in 1276, China never regained the dynamism of its past'.⁵⁷ For this reason, Eric Mielants cites the Mongol conquest as an 'important variable' in explaining why China failed to make the transition to capitalism.⁵⁸ Although by 1350 the Mongol empire disintegrated into a number of rivalling khanates, the continuing nomadic threat to China's inner Asian land frontier persisted. The strategic dilemma posed by the nomads is often cited as a reason for the Ming dynasty's retreat from the sea represented by their famous decision not to follow up Admiral Zheng He's naval expeditions in the Indian Ocean. The inward turn of the Ming Empire, though often exaggerated, nonetheless did signal the abandonment of seaborne expansion and, as an indirect result, the eventual weakening of the empire vis-à-vis its soon to be Western competitors.⁵⁹ Had it not been for China's central strategic problem, the nomadic threat, it may well have reached the New World first.

By contrast, for Western Europe, which only narrowly escaped Mongol decimation, the effects of the Mongol invasions were primarily beneficial for economic development. 'Western merchants benefited tremendously, both directly and indirectly, from the Pax Mongolia "which had created a favorable political circumstances [for] the economic expansion of the West"'.⁶⁰ In addition to lowering commercial protection and transaction costs of overland trade, the Mongol

⁵⁴ Rosenberg, 'Why Is There No International Historical Sociology', 324.

⁵⁵ On the 'simple form' of U&CD see Jamie Allinson and Alexander Anievas, 'The Uses and Misuses of Uneven and Combined Development: An Anatomy of a Concept', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22, no. 1:47-67.

⁵⁶ E.J. Jones, *Growth Reoccurring: Economic Change in World History* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1988), 110.

⁵⁷ Allan K. Smith *Creating a World Economy: Merchant Capital, Colonialism, and World Trade, 1400-1825* (Oxford:Westview Press, 1991), 27.

⁵⁸ Eric H. Mielants *The Origins of Capitalism and the 'Rise of the West'* (Philadelphia:Temple University Press, 2007), 56.

⁵⁹ Kees van der Pijl, *Nomads, Empires, States: Modes of Foreign Relations and Political Economy, Vol. I* (London:Pluto, 2007), 104-109. On the many strategic dilemmas presented by the nomadic threat see Arthur Waldron, 'Chinese Strategy from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries' in Williamson Murray et al. (eds) *The Makers of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1994), 85-114.

⁶⁰ Mielants, *The Origins*, 56.

Empire also facilitated the diffusion of such key technologies as navigational techniques and gunpowder⁶¹ from East Asia to Europe—all of which were crucial to the West's subsequent rise to global prominence.

Of particular significance for our discussion here was the ways in which the establishment of the Pax Mongolia was a major boon for overland trade connecting East to West, again notably benefitting Western Europe. As Janet Abu-Lughod has shown, the great contribution of the Mongols to the 'world economy' of the time was 'to create an environment that facilitated land transit with less risk and lower protective rent. By reducing these costs they opened a route for trade over their territories that, at least for a brief time, broke the monopoly of the more southerly routes'.⁶² For a time, then, the creation of the Mongol Empire actually contributed to the processes of urbanization and spread of market relations already taking place throughout Europe. The decreased transaction and protection costs resulted, as Meilants puts it, 'in an unprecedented expansion of the market for Western European cities, which in turn increased the division of labor in most of the European urban industries'. 'Thus', as he continues,

it is Eurocentric to claim that 'medieval development' in Europe was nothing but 'auto-development'. The opening up of the East Asian market due to the Pax Mongolia was of an unprecedented scale and provided enormous opportunities for the Western city states. The expansion of the textile industry in the Low Countries, for example, was intrinsically linked with 'the increased demand for woollen cloth in interregional and international commerce'.⁶³

As Europe economically expanded, China lay in ruins: another reason for the divergent paths of socio-economic development between the two regions. Further, the integration of the Mongolian Empire had the unintended consequence of leading to 'the unification of the globe by disease'⁶⁴ as represented by the spread of the Black Death in the middle of the 14th century.

The Black Death is often cited as a major conjunctural factor in both explaining the terminal crisis of the feudal mode of production in Europe and the crucial shifts in the balance of class forces leading to the eventual rise of capitalist social relations. Some scholars have gone so far as to cite the Black Death as *the* main reason for the development of capitalism in Western

⁶¹ Meilants, *The Origins*, 57.

⁶² Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 154; cf. Finlay and O'Rourke *Power and Plenty*, 106-8.

⁶³ Meilants, *The Origins*, 81.

⁶⁴ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, 'A Concept: The Unification of the Globe by Disease (Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries)' in *The Mind and Method of the Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 28-83.

Europe.⁶⁵ Yet rarely, if ever, does this contingent factor enter into the theorization of the process of systemic dissolution and reconstruction itself. And, one might ask, why should it? How could any historical sociology *theorize* such a phenomenon? The reason is that in both origin and effect the Black Death was a *social* phenomenon. It is 'indicative', Neil Davidson writes, 'of a rather oversocialized notion of human existence if our struggle with...non-human aspects of nature is treated as an exogenous factor'. Davidson goes on to give the example of the Black Death which, he correctly notes, plays a crucial role in Brenner's explanation of the changing balance of class forces at the end of the 14th century. Against conceptions of the Black Death as a pure contingency, however, Davidson notes how 'the extent of its [the Black Death's] impact was a function of the weakened resistance to disease of a population who were already suffering from reduced caloric intake as a result of the feudal economic crisis'.⁶⁶ What is more, it was only through the Mongolian unification of the Eurasian landmass, and the increasing intersocietal interactions that this facilitated, that allowed the Plague to spread to Europe in the first place.⁶⁷ The integration of the Mongolian Empire thus had the unintended consequence of creating what Le Roy Ladurie called 'the unification of the globe by disease'.⁶⁸ This is then a case of intersocietal interaction ('combined development') having massive, long-term social and economic impacts in the trajectory of European development feeding into the causal conditions for capitalism's eventual emergence. For the demographic collapse resulting from the plague temporarily tipped the balance of class forces in favour of the peasantry throughout much of Western Europe, but notably within the English countryside.⁶⁹

In the face of labor shortages caused by the plague and the consequent upward pressures on wages levels, the ruling classes *throughout* Europe sought to reimpose strictures on the peasants that had been hitherto gradually diminishing, thus attempting to strengthen serfdom. This was a near uniform response of the ruling classes to a universal problem: a 'seigniorial reaction' to the structural crisis within feudalism (exhibited by the tendency towards a declining rate of seigniorial levy⁷⁰) and the conjunctural catastrophe represented by the Black Plague. 'In a system where the social reproduction of the ruling class hinged upon a growing population in order to sustain seigniorial revenues', Jason Moore writes, 'the Black Death quickly transformed

⁶⁵ See, for example, B.F. Harvey 'Introduction: The "Crisis" of the Early Fourteenth Century', in B.M.S. Campbell (ed.) *Before the Black Death: Studies in the "Crisis" of the Early Fourteenth Century* (Manchester:Manchester University Press, 1991),1-24.

⁶⁶ Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago:Haymarket, 2012),409.

⁶⁷ McNeil and McNeil, *The Human Web*,120.

⁶⁸ Findlay and O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty*,111.

⁶⁹ Brenner, 'The Agrarian Class Structure',35.

⁷⁰ Guy Bois, 'Against the Neo-Malthusian Orthodoxy' in T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin (eds.) *The Brenner Debate* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1985),107-118.

the agrarian depression of the early fourteenth century into a terminal crisis of the feudal system'.⁷¹ Where seigniorial reaction was successful, however, depended on the balance of class forces and antecedent processes of internal differentiation. As Findlay and O'Rourke note,

In each region the impact effect of the plague was to raise wages, lower land rents, and hence increase the demand on the part of landowners for serfdom. The different experiences of Eastern and Western Europe must therefore be due to differences in the 'supply' of serfdom, with rulers in the former region more willing to accede to landowners' demands more than their counterparts in the latter. Trade and population recovery favoured urban interests in the west and rural interests in the east.⁷²

The central reason for these different outcomes lay in the variegated relations between land and labour in Eastern and Western Europe. Although the demographic collapse in Eastern Europe was actually less in absolute terms than that in the west, the strain was greater given the already endemic shortages of labor characterizing the region. 'Given the vast underpopulated spaces of Eastern Europe', Anderson remarks, 'peasant flight was an acute danger to lords everywhere, while land remained potentially very abundant...The land/labour ratio thus in itself solicited the noble class towards forcible restriction of peasant mobility and the constitution of larger manorial estates'.⁷³

According to Brenner, the key factors in explaining the different effects of the demographic collapse lay in the dynamics of the class struggle explicable by: (a) the differential levels of peasant organization, class consciousness and internal solidarity within each society, and; (b) the differential levels of ruling class unity and their relationship to the state.⁷⁴ In other words, the key variables explaining the variegated effects of the demographic shifts caused by the Black Death (a result of intersocietal interactions) was the *unevenness* in the social forms of internal differentiation – particularly between the peasant and lordly classes in agrarian production on the one hand, and that between the lords and the state, on the other. It seems then, that 'unevenness' and 'combination' played a central role in the ending of serfdom in Western Europe thus paving the way for the subsequent emergence of capitalist production relations.

⁷¹ Jason W. Moore, "The Modern World-System" as Environmental History? Ecology and the Rise of Capitalism', *Theory and Society*, 32, no. 3 (June 2003):307-377,314.

⁷² Findlay and O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty*,123.

⁷³ Anderson, *Passages*,252-3.

⁷⁴ Brenner, 'The Agrarian Class Structure',36.

Crucially, for Brenner these variables explain the divergent developmental paths taken by England (towards agrarian capitalism) and France (strengthening of feudalism) in the aftermath of the Black Death. In France, the monarchical state developed a 'class-like' character, thus emerging as a competitor to the lords for the peasants' surplus. This meant that when peasant revolts occurred the state would habitually support them against landlords, by protecting their freehold and fixing dues. The consolidation of peasant freedom precluded market forces of compulsion emerging in agrarian relations leaving France a fundamentally feudal state. In contrast, England developed significant unity among the landed class vis-à-vis each other and with the state, so that when peasant revolts took place the state fell on the side of landed interests. This allowed English landlords to maintain landholdings by 'engrossing consolidating and enclosing' peasant freeholds, leading to the development of market forces in production and emergence of symbiotic relations with tenant capitalists; in short, presaging the sustained economic development of agrarian capitalism.

Remarkably, Brenner cites a distinctly international determination – the Norman Conquests of the eleventh century – as the causal factor behind England's intra-lordly cohesion.⁷⁵ But nowhere does Brenner's treatment of this external determination enter into his theorisation of the development of agrarian capitalism, appearing instead as an *ad hoc* addendum.⁷⁶ Without theorizing the international, Brenner finds no trouble tracing English nobility-state relations in *sixteenth* century to an *eleventh* century cause. Spatial tunnelling in theory thus leads to temporal tunnelling of history, where historical conjunctures are explained by phenomena half a millennia apart. This leaves questions over how far this picture of intra-lordly unity stands up when tested against the history of the intervening years. What, for example, explains the fits of English intra-lordly struggle during the Hundred Years War or the War of the Roses? The next section seeks to address this deficiency by looking at how England's internal ruling class unity was in fact predicated on its relative seclusion from the geopolitical tumult that gripped Europe in the aftermath of the Black Death. Although such insulation from geopolitical factors would, at first sight, lend itself to the internalist method practiced by Brenner, on closer inspection we find that England's isolation had distinctly international roots.

The Ottoman-Habsburg Rivalry over the Long Sixteenth Century

⁷⁵ Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots of Capitalism', 255-6.

⁷⁶ Matin, 'Democracy Without Capitalism', 45

As the Mongolian horde ebbed back into Inner Asia, a geopolitical vacuum in Anatolia was filled by the Ottoman Empire. Starting as a small 'tribe of 400 tents'⁷⁷ on the border of Byzantium in the thirteenth century, it grew through perpetual conquest into an Empire that by the sixteenth century stretched from Basra to Belgrade, Cairo to the Crimea. Linking the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and Anatolia to Europe, this paved the way for a Pax Ottomana that greatly contributed to the revival of European commerce and connections with the East following the Mongolian retreat,⁷⁸ feeding into the cultural flowering of the Renaissance in the process.⁷⁹ Geographically and economically, 'the Ottoman Empire was the hinge that connected the rapidly growing economies of Europe with those of the East.'⁸⁰

Despite the regenerative effects of Pax Ottomana, for most of Europe the Ottoman incursions seemed like a semi-apocalyptic event.⁸¹ With a standing army the size of which no alliance of European princes could match, the Ottomans constituted a formidable military danger that threatened the very existence of Christendom. This Euro-Ottoman confrontation was rooted in a relation of unevenness: the Ottoman tributary system allowed for the raising of armies on a stable and unified basis, while in comparison, the feudal system in Europe required extraordinary financing for armies which weakened intra-ruling class unity and rural stability.⁸² The very efficacy of the Ottoman military meant that from the mid-fifteenth century and '[u]p to 1596 there was no question of international politics which did not somehow involve the Ottomans'.⁸³

This involvement was permanent and regularly hostile. In 1453 the Ottomans conquered Constantinople, subsequently using it as a base to conduct further excursions into Greece, Bosnia and Albania. By 1519, concern for the 'Terrible Turk' loomed so large that the election of Charles V as the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire was in part based on his ability to unite Christendom in wars against the Ottomans.⁸⁴ Europe's Eastern preoccupation was soon justified

⁷⁷ Gibbons, *Foundation of the Ottoman Empire: a history of the Osmanlis up to the death of Bayezid I (1300-1403)* (Clarendon Press:Oxford, 1916).

⁷⁸ R. J. Barendse, 'Trade and State in the Arabian Seas: A Survey from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century' *Journal of World History*, 11, no. 2 (2000) pp. 173-225: 192

⁷⁹ Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art Between East and West* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁸⁰ Thomas, W. Gallant, 'Europe and the Mediterranean: a Reassessment' in Gerard Delanty (ed.) *Europe and Asia Beyond East and West*, (London:Routledge 2006),126.

⁸¹ Indeed, Martin Luther famously suggested that the Ottomans were a punishment from God for the degeneration of Christianity. See Mustafa Soykut, 'Introduction', in Mustafa Soykut (ed.) *Historical Image of the Turk in Europe*, (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2003),26.

⁸² Kerem Nisancioglu 'The Ottoman Origins of Capitalism: Uneven and Combined Development and Eurocentrism', Unpublished Manuscript (2013).

⁸³ Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600*, (London:Phoenix, 2000),35.

⁸⁴ Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire*,35.

as Ottoman armies surged onward to Budapest and Vienna in the 1520s, putting them in direct conflict with the Habsburgs. The ensuing wars between these two 'superpowers' were conducted primarily on the South Eastern terrain of Europe, with an especially long drawn out war over Hungary and Mediterranean possessions. Teeming with Ottoman sponsored corsairs, access to this crucial artery of seaborne trade became increasingly conditional on outcomes of Ottoman-Habsburg rivalry.

Aside from these 'direct' instances of geopolitical pressure, the Ottomans made extensive use of alliances and connections with dissident groups in Europe as a means of undermining Habsburg hegemony.⁸⁵ Francis I, King of Valois France, recognised the significance of the Ottoman Empire as a 'power-balancer', candidly admitting:

I keenly desire the Turk powerful and ready for war, not for himself, because he is an infidel and we are Christians, but to undermine the emperor's power to force heavy expenses upon him and to reassure all other governments against so powerful an enemy.⁸⁶

Around the same time, Sultan Suleyman I established links with the Schmalkalden League of German Protestant princes, urging them to co-operate with France against the Habsburgs, and going as far to offer them amnesty should Ottoman armies conquer Europe.⁸⁷ The Ottoman threat in South East Europe eventually forced Charles V to grant German Protestants concessions in return for military and financial support in the Hungarian wars, contributing to the development of the Reformation.⁸⁸ The Ottoman-Protestant axis would reach as far as the French Calvinist party, who implored the use of an Ottoman alliance against Spain in the second half of the sixteenth century. With less success, the Ottomans also attempted to develop links with the Moriscoes in Spain⁸⁹ and Protestants in the Low Countries⁹⁰ in order to internally destabilize Habsburg Spain. In these ways, Halil Inalcik notes, 'the Ottoman Empire played an

⁸⁵ Gabor Agoston (2007) 'Information, ideology and the limits of imperial policy: Ottoman grand strategy in the context of Ottoman-Habsburg rivalry' in Virginia Askan and Daniel Goffman (eds.) *The early modern Ottomans: remapping the empire*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁸⁶ Francis I, quoted in John Elliot, 'Ottoman-Habsburg Rivalry: The European Perspective' in eds. *Suleyman the Second (ie the First) and His Time*, Halil Inalcik and Cemal Kafadar (Istanbul:Isis Press, 1993), 153-162,155.

⁸⁷ Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire*,37.

⁸⁸ Stephen A. Fischer-Galati, *Ottoman Imperialism and German Protestantism 1521-1555* (Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1959); Daniel H. Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe*, (Oxford:Princeton University Press, 2009),169.

⁸⁹ Andrew C Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier: A History of the Sixteenth Century Ibero-African Frontier*, (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1978),94.

⁹⁰ Mehmet Bulut *Ottoman Dutch Economic Relations in the Early Modern Period 1571-1699* (Veloren:Hilversum, 2001).

important role in the balance of power in Europe in the sixteenth century and consequently in the rise of the nation-states in the West'.⁹¹

Both Charles V's and Phillip II's prioritisation of the Ottoman front came at an extremely high cost. The former could not maintain either religious or Austro-Castilian unity, and the latter oversaw the eventual breakaway of the Dutch Provinces that would mark the beginning of the end for the Spanish Habsburg epoch. Indeed, it was only after the Ottoman threat was dispelled from the Mediterranean that Phillip II could concentrate Spanish efforts in consolidating rule in the Netherlands and invading England in the late sixteenth century, by which time it was arguably all too late.⁹² Various authors have noted that it was an accumulation of such 'cross-pressures generated by the heterogeneity and scale'⁹³ of the Habsburg domain that prevented the establishment of a unified imperial hegemony in Europe.⁹⁴ In numerous ways it was the Ottoman threat that so persistently redirected Habsburg resources away from the internal divisions that were stretching the Empire to the North West, contributing in turn to the perpetuation of 'multiple polities within the cultural unity of Christian Europe' that 'time and again frustrated universal imperial ambitions'.⁹⁵ It could be said then, that the uneven and combined development of relations between the Ottomans and Europe created further developmental unevenness throughout Europe.

In preventing the unification of Europe, the Ottomans thus created the geopolitical breathing space for the political and economic development of England and the Netherlands. The Dutch made use of the divisions in Christendom to take its long desired opportunity to break away from Habsburg domination.⁹⁶ The English were perpetually buffered from European geopolitical pressure precisely at a time when the continent was experiencing a demographic and commercial revival. The Habsburg-Ottoman rivalry formed a geopolitical centre of gravity that consumed every corner of Europe, redirecting any imperial concerns away from England and the Low Countries. And typical of Ottoman manoeuvres, both states were offered diplomatic agreements – capitulations⁹⁷ – that weaved political alliance with commercial privileges in

⁹¹ Inalcik, Halil, *Turkey and Europe in History* (Eren, 1997),120.

⁹² Nexon, *The Struggle for Power*,189.

⁹³ Nexon, *The Struggle for Power*,137; Fischer-Galati, *Ottoman Imperialism*.

⁹⁴ See also Wallerstein *The Modern World-System, Vol I*,167; Daniel Chirot, 'The Rise of the West', *American Sociological Review*, 50 no. 2 (1985):181-195, 183; and Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London:Unwin Hyman, 1989),31-70.

⁹⁵ Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648* (London:Verso, 2003),104.

⁹⁶ Nexon, *The Struggle for Power*,188.

⁹⁷ For an exploration of capitulations see Eldem, 'Capitulations and Western Trade', in Suriaya Faroqhi (ed.) *Cambridge History of Turkey Vol. III: The Later Ottoman Empire, 1603-1839* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2006),283-355.

Ottoman territories. This was a major contributing factor to the integration of Levant and Atlantic trade in the seventeenth century and the ensuing rise of these Atlantic commercial powers. The Dutch became dependent on the Ottomans for supplies of their most heavily demanded raw materials – mohair yarn and wool – and equally dependent on the Ottoman market for one its principle exports, woollen cloths. England became similarly attached to both the import of wool from and export of woollen manufactures to the Ottoman Empire. In both cases, the attempts of merchants and financiers to monopolise and control such trade led to the establishment of strong trading companies.⁹⁸

Aside from these new commercial privileges, the effects of the Ottoman geopolitical buffer were especially pronounced in English intra-lord class relations and the peculiar development of the English state. A variety of authors have stressed the significance of England's lack of involvement in continental geopolitical conflicts from 1450 onwards as a fundamental factor in its peculiar development of capitalism.⁹⁹ Skocpol suggests that 'England could remain somewhat aloof from the continental military system' which made it 'uniquely responsive to commercial-capitalist interests'.¹⁰⁰ For Braudel this isolation abetted a highly beneficial protectionism helping England 'remain independent and to fend off interference from foreign capitalists... more successfully than any other European country'.¹⁰¹ For Sayer, England's privilege of isolation meant it was not 'squandering productive resources on Continental empire building, nor obliged, to the same degree or in the same ways as Continental powers, to defend itself against others' expansionist predilections' during the precise period when agrarian capitalism was set to take hold.¹⁰²

Isolation was significant to the development of capitalism for two reasons. Firstly, in the absence of the socially disturbing effects of invasion, English society was peculiarly homogenous. Such a feature precipitated an unprecedented internal social coherence in language, customs, law, and ultimately, a market that would become so central to capitalist development.¹⁰³ Secondly, the

⁹⁸ For Ottoman commercial relations with the Dutch see Bulut, *Ottoman Dutch Economic Relations*; for the English see James Mather, *Pashas: Traders and Travellers in the Islamic World*, (London:Yale University Press, 2009).

⁹⁹ Interestingly each of the authors subsequently cited place a high degree of explanatory emphasis on England's island geography. Without seeking to discount this geographical factor, the prevalence of naval warfare by the sixteenth century suggest that England was eminently open to invasion should the will or compulsion have arisen. See Susan Rose, *Medieval Naval Warfare, 1000-1500*, (London:Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰⁰ Theda Skocpol, 'Wallerstein's World Capitalist System: A Theoretical and Historical Critique,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, no. 5 (1977):1075-1090,1086.

¹⁰¹ Fernand Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism*. (London:John Hopkins University Press, 1977),101-2.

¹⁰² Derek Sayer, 'A Notable Administration: English State Formation and the Rise of Capitalism,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 97, no. 5 (1992):1382-1415,1391.

¹⁰³ Ellen Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 47; G. E. Aylmer, 'The Peculiarities of the English State,' *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 3, no. 2:91-108.

absence of warfare begot one of the more peculiar features of Tudor 'absolutism' – its relative lack of military resources. In contrast to the Habsburgs, Spain, France, or indeed the Ottomans, who were engaged in near permanent warfare, England had little requirement for a large army.¹⁰⁴ Concomitantly, there was no parallel development of the strong, tax appropriating bureaucracies that distinguished French and Spanish absolutism.¹⁰⁵

This had significant consequence for the relationship between the landed class and the state. Unthreatened by forces abroad and reluctant to engender monarchical centralization, the English aristocracy was significantly demilitarized: 'In 1500, every English peer bore arms; by Elizabeth's time, it has been calculated, only half the aristocracy had any fighting experience'.¹⁰⁶ This in turn gave the English ruling class significant 'freedom' to pursue commercial activities, well in advance of any other European state.¹⁰⁷ To begin with, the English state did not have the resources to protect the lower classes from attempts by the landed class to 'engross, consolidate and enclose' peasant land.¹⁰⁸ But, moreover, demilitarization meant that the English landed class did not possess the sort of extra-economic power required to coercively 'squeeze' peasants, becoming instead dependent on their productivity.¹⁰⁹ Under these conditions the English aristocracy became disassociated from 'patented peerage'. Influence and office became a more important source of power for this 'untitled gentry' that would come to dominate English political and economic life.¹¹⁰ The English landowning class was thus 'unusually civilian in background, commercial in occupation and commoner in rank'.¹¹¹ The lack of social stratification engendered an intersection of landed classes, would be capitalists, and state officers that became a central plank of the landlord – capitalist tenant – wage labourer triad.

These factors help to explain two 'central elements' of the Brenner thesis: firstly, why English society was so conducive to the landed class–capitalist tenant symbiosis that underpinned agrarian capitalism; secondly, why the nobility and state developed such mutual interdependence in England. As we have seen, these were products of England's isolation from continental conflicts, itself explained by the Habsburg preoccupation with Ottoman incursions in Europe. When considered in this specifically international context, the two central elements of

¹⁰⁴ Anderson, *Lineages*, 123.

¹⁰⁵ Skocpol, 'Wallerstein's World Capitalist System', 1086.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Kennedy shows that in 1470s the Spanish and English military manpower numbered 20,000 and 25,000 men respectively. By the 1550s, Spain's manpower had risen to 150,000 while England's manpower had fallen actually by five thousand to 20,000. Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, 56. See also, Anderson, *Lineages*, 125.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁰⁸ Skocpol, 'Wallerstein's World Capitalist System', 1086; cf. Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure', 49.

¹⁰⁹ Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 53.

¹¹⁰ Anderson, *Lineages*, 127.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*; cf. Sayer, 'A Notable Administration', 1394.

the Brenner thesis can be best understood as forms of 'combined development' – the peculiar developmental outcomes of an inter-societal condition rooted in the differentiated – that is uneven – relation of England to the European geopolitical milieu.

Another major consequence of Ottoman pressure would eventually feed into these English developments. Imperial expansion had brought under Ottoman control the main trade route that connected Europe to Asia. In accordance with the exigencies of their military aims, the Ottomans sought to break down the dominance of Genoese, Venetian, Spanish and Portuguese traders in Levantine markets, while simultaneously granting privileged access to occasional allies, the French, English and Dutch. Subsequently, merchants and financiers from blockaded states sought alternative routes to the East, with Genoese merchant-financiers redirecting capital away from the Mediterranean into commercial activity in the Atlantic. According to Mielants, 'it was precisely the inter-city-state competition for access to Eastern markets and the threat of the expanding Ottoman Empire that led to the discovery of the Americas'.¹¹² The uneven and combined development of Euro-Ottoman relations thus played a central role in bringing about a *structural shift* away from the geopolitical centrality of the Mediterranean towards the Atlantic.

The Atlantic Sources of Western Capitalism

...the veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal.¹¹³

There is a long tradition in Marxist thinking emphasizing the profound impact the 1492 'discoveries' had on the development and consolidation of capitalism as a world system. Yet, today, the hegemonic Brennerite approach to the origins of capitalism, emphasizing as it does the internal, agrarian sources of its genesis, explicitly sidelines the contribution of the 'periphery'. Noting some Marxists' emphasis on the importance of the wealth amassed from the New World, Ellen Wood writes, 'we cannot go very far in explaining the rise of capitalism by invoking the contribution of imperialism to "primitive accumulation" or, indeed, by attributing to it any

¹¹² Mielants, *The Origins*, 85.

¹¹³ Marx, *Capital*, 925.

decisive role in the *origin* of capitalism'.¹¹⁴ As reasons, she cites the relatively late start of British colonization and Spain's failure to develop in a capitalist direction.

Regarding the latter, the immediate effects of colonialism on the Spanish Habsburg Empire were indeed to further entrench the feudal monarchy whilst arresting economic development in the region. Yet there were also significant knock-on effects that actually worked to hasten the rise of Dutch capitalism. While colonial surpluses were able to (partly) finance the Habsburgs military expeditions across Europe, 'the influx of bullion from the New World also produced a paratism that increasingly sapped and halted domestic manufacturers'.¹¹⁵ This led to a virtual 'de-industrialization' of the Castilian economy as the home market collapsed with American silver raising production costs and an ascendant Dutch manufacturing sector penetrating the Castilian textile market. This further meant that Phillip II's imperial projects could only be sustained through 'reckless borrowing'.¹¹⁶ Thus, despite (or *because* of) the vast imports of New World silver, fiscal-military pressures bankrupted the monarchy eight times by the end of the 17th century.¹¹⁷ And, as Genoese bankers held Spain's public debt, they came to 'reorient their "surplus capital" from the American trade towards the bond market, thereby opening the door for Dutch capital. The rise of the United Provinces and the decline of Spain were therefore intimately connected'.¹¹⁸ What is more, the inflow of silver may have actually accelerated the decline of Spanish military power. For, as William McNeil notes, 'it was the swelling flow of New World silver after the 1550s that made Philip [II] think he could conduct war both in the Mediterranean against the Turks and in the north against the Dutch'.¹¹⁹ New World silver thereby further aided the structural geopolitical space opened to Northwestern Europe (and particularly the Dutch) in advancing towards capitalism.

The relationship of America's colonization to the development of capitalism in Western Europe is, then, not as a straight-forward as Wood would have us believe. For one thing seems clear; without New World colonialism and slavery, capitalism wouldn't have been able to survive nor catapult itself into the global industrial system that it subsequently became. As Robin Blackburn writes, '[t]he oxygen required by the European furnace of capitalist accumulation, if it was not succumb to auto-asphyxiation, was supplied by the slave traffic and the plantation-

¹¹⁴ Wood, *Origin of Capitalism*, 148.

¹¹⁵ Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974b), 73.

¹¹⁶ James W. Moore, "'Amsterdam is Standing on Norway'", Part I: The Alchemy of Capital, Empire and Nature in the Diaspora of Silver, 1545-1648', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 10, no. 1 (January 2010):33-68, 43-46, 45.

¹¹⁷ The Spanish monarchy declared bankruptcy in 1557, 1575, 1596, 1607, 1627, 1647, 1653, and 1680.

¹¹⁸ Moore, "'Amsterdam is Standing on Norway'", 45-46.

¹¹⁹ William H. McNeil, *The Pursuit of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109.

related trades'.¹²⁰ The point Blackburn makes is particularly important if one views the origins of capitalism not as a single moment of inception, as does Wood, but as a value-added process of increasing systemic consolidation and complexification; a cascading and multilayered transformation of states and societies. So how did the colonization of the Americas contribute to this process of capitalist consolidation?

In the first instance, the bullion confiscated in the Americas lubricated the circuits of capital accumulation within Europe as a whole, providing the liquid specie for Europe's vibrant trade with the East. By 1650, the flow of precious metals from the Americas reaching Europe is estimated to have amounted to at least 180 tons of gold and 17,000 tons of silver. Between 1561 and 1580, about 85% of the entire world's production of silver came from the Americas. This provided the capital for European merchants' profitable trade with Asia and East Africa in textiles and particularly spices.¹²¹ It also assisted European states in obtaining more raw materials and primary products from areas (particularly in China and India) which would have otherwise had little incentive to trade with the Europeans on such a scale.¹²² Moreover, as S.M.H. Bozorgnia notes,

In due time, the influx of silver, coupled with the high value placed on this specie in the East, enabled Europeans to monopolize the trade of Asiatic countries and subordinate their economies, thereby laying the foundations of European domination and colonialism in the region. This domination ultimately enabled the Europeans to [channel] wealth and resources from every corner of that continent back to Europe.¹²³

The plundering of the Americas thus functioned as a central means of so-called primitive accumulation on a European wide basis. For throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, Spain and Portugal acted as *conduits* for the transfer of much of the American bullion into the coffers of financiers in London, Amsterdam, Paris and Genoa. It is perhaps no coincidence that almost half of the gold and silver acquired by Spain ended up in Holland,¹²⁴ the first state to experience a bourgeois revolution, ending up Marx's 'model capitalist nation of the seventeenth century'.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London:Verso, 1997),374.

¹²¹ Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model*, 189, 192; See also Magda Von Der Heydt-Coca, 'Andean Silver and the Rise of the Western World', *Critical Sociology*, 31, no. 4 (2005):481-513.

¹²² Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*,270-271.

¹²³ S.M.H. Bozorgnia, *The Role of Precious Metals in European Economic Development: From Roman Times to the Eve of the Industrial Revolution* (Westport:Greenwood Press),180.

¹²⁴ Michel Beaud, *A History of Capitalism, 1500-1980* (London:MacMillan Press, 1984),26.

¹²⁵ Marx, *Capital*,916.

Moreover, as Blackburn's study shows, the slave system generated both the markets and needed surpluses that assisted in jumpstarting the engine of industrial accumulation while supplying key inputs into the industrial process.¹²⁶ Though the slave system did not invent capitalism it did assure 'the further development of an already existing agrarian and mercantile-manufacturing capitalist complex' as '[t]he colonial and Atlantic regime of extended accumulation allowed metropolitan accumulation to break out of its agrarian and national limits and discover an industrial and global destiny'.¹²⁷ Indeed, the Atlantic trade and colonial demand in particular were major stimulants to the industrializing British economy.¹²⁸

Another significant contribution to the development of capitalism that the American colonies provided was their use as sites of capitalistic experimentations in agro-industrial techniques as witnessed in the emergence of plantation slave complexes. The plantations are perhaps best characterized as 'transitional forms' of production relations combining complex hybrids of capitalist and pre-capitalist relations that, through their enmeshment within the world market, facilitated the rise of capitalism in the metropole in important ways. Blackburn describes them as 'dependent and hybrid socioeconomic enterprises, not animated by a pure capitalist logic but closer to it than European serfdom and slavery would have been, or were'.¹²⁹

The slave plantations represented 'combined' social formations amalgamating different modes of production in particularly time-compressed ways. Sidney Mintz characterized the sugar plantations as 'precocious cases of industrialization' noting how these 'agro-industrial enterprises nourished certain capitalist classes at home *as they were becoming more capitalistic*'.¹³⁰ Indeed, we can trace the ways by which the colonial plantations of the 'periphery' were *generative* of precisely those *social forces* in the 'core' that would end up making a decisive contribution to consolidating England's capitalist transition. Here we reconnect to Robert Brenner's work detailing the role of the merchant community in the making of the English Revolution of 1640-60 which presents 'the metropolitan face of the hybrid economic forms whose development the other side of the Atlantic is traced by Blackburn'.¹³¹

Brenner delineates two distinct factions of mercantile capital: one dominant faction centred around the City and increasingly tied to the East India Company and merchants

¹²⁶ See Blackburn, *New World Slavery*, 510-580.

¹²⁷ Blackburn, *New World Slavery*, 515.

¹²⁸ P.K. O'Brien and Stanley Engerman, 'Exports and the Growth of the British Economy from the Glorious Revolution to the Peace of Amiens', in Barbara Solow (ed) *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1991), 177-209, 182.

¹²⁹ Blackburn, *New World Slavery*, 376.

¹³⁰ Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (London:Penguin, 1985), 59, 61.

¹³¹ Alex Callinicos, *Imperialism and Global Political Economy* (Cambridge:Polity, 2009), 114, and 113-114 for which the following discussion draws.

importing from the Levant, and; a second faction of 'new merchants' predominately coming from outside the City and connected to the rising colonial trades in the Americas. While the former faction relied heavily on the Crown for politically protected trade routes and monopolies, the latter was much less dependent on the state since, given the merchants' socio-economic backgrounds, they were excluded from government-sanctioned charter companies. 'Whereas the company merchants', Brenner writes, 'continued to maintain themselves on the basis of property that remained to a significant degree politically constituted, and systematically to avoid involvement in production, the new merchants not only initially traded without state-backed commercial privileges but were obliged to become profoundly involved as capitalist entrepreneurs in colonial production...'.¹³² It was this second faction of colonial mercantile capitalists, whom had begun the process of subsuming labour to capital, that would come to play a leading role in supporting Oliver Cromwell and the Independents during the Revolution. The balance of class forces in England was, then, directly connected to and constituted by socio-economic developments in the New World thereby paving the way for England's bourgeois revolution.

Conclusion

By extending U&CD beyond capitalism, we have sought to show its more general applicability as a theory of 'the international' whilst remaining sensitive to the massive qualitative differences between its capitalist and pre-capitalist iterations. U&CD represents a truly *transhistorical* phenomenon, yet its distinct causal determinations, articulated and expressed through intersocietal relations, are in every instance historically specific to, and variable across, any given mode of production. Under the generalized commodity production of the capitalist epoch U&CD tends to take on a more intensive and dynamic character.¹³³ Wider developmental differences between societies generate more exaggerated causal determinations – the 'whip of external necessity' – that creates intersocietal 'coercive comparisons'.¹³⁴ This breeds a form of combined development in which adoption, substitutionism and hence amalgams of the 'contemporary and more archaic' social forms are systemic features of the capitalist mode of

¹³² Robert Brenner *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (London:Verso, 1993),685.

¹³³ See Allinson and Anievas, 'The Uses and Misuses',56-58.

¹³⁴ Colin Barker, 'Extending combined and uneven development' in Bill Dunn and Hugo Radice (eds) *100 years of permanent revolution: results and prospects* (London:Pluto Press),72–87,78.

production. In the case of pre-capitalist societies, U&CD's characteristics are qualitatively different. Due to the limited productive capabilities of pre-capitalist societies and the narrower developmental differences between them, the 'whip of external necessity' is less severe. Consequently there is no *systemic* tendency towards coercive comparison. To be clear, this is not to say that 'combined social formations' never existed in pre-capitalist times, but rather that their occurrences were qualitatively different: irregular and episodic. As our historical argument has demonstrated, even in the pre-capitalist context, the intersocietal conditions of unevenness still generated causal determinations that decisively impacted upon – that is combined with – the development of social formations.

From the Mongol invasions to the New World Discoveries, we have traced how geopolitical developments led to the geographical linking of hitherto disparate communities, creating a truly global history. These general conditions contributed to the development of capitalism in a particular time and place, through the shifts in class forces brought about by the Black Death, the geopolitical milieu of Europe under Ottoman pressure, and the development of Atlantic colonial trade and slavery. These determinations provided an expanded non-Eurocentric geographical vantage point from which we outlined the development of capitalism, but one that was still nonetheless partial. A fuller exposition would have to account for determinations that arose from the histories of Africa, the subcontinent, and the 'Far East', among other places. Rather than closing off these empirical 'gaps,' we hope to have offered a theoretical framework that opens up such avenues for further research.

We have also argued that these general conditions provided the appropriate historical context to telescope into – and in turn explain – the specificities of English development that led to the origins of capitalism. This has demonstrated how U&CD offers a theoretically sophisticated analysis of the particularities of development within a universal context thus adding empirical content to Karman Matin's call for a theoretical 'redeeming of the universal'.¹³⁵ U&CD's usefulness is rooted in its ability to not only capture but also theorize the multiple mediations between the general and the particular. We suggest that this further furnishes and in many ways goes beyond the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism. For in order to truly 'provincialize Europe' we need an alternative non-Eurocentric lens afforded by a universal perspective such as U&CD that articulates rather than homogenizes particularity. In this lies the great challenge.

¹³⁵ Matin, 'Redeeming the Universal'.