**UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT:**

**NEO-TROTSKYISM IN PERSPECTIVE**



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**INTRODUCTION**

In this paper I am going to introduce two of the main authors of the Neo-Trotskyist scholarship, Justin Rosenberg and Neil Davidson. I will begin by pointing out the main characteristics of the concept of Uneven and Combined Development, as well as a summary of Justin Rosenberg´s and Neil Davidson´s articles. These authors agree on the general conceptualizations of Uneven and Combined development (U&CD from now on) that Leon Trotsky defined in his work *The History of the Russian Revolution.* However, these two authors have strong disagreements on the historical application of such a concept as it will be shown below. Besides showing the existing disagreements between both authors, I will provide historical data that justifies Justin Rosenberg´s stance on the historical application of Neo-Trotskyism.

**UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT: THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION**

As I said in the introduction, Leon Trotsky conceptualized the theory of U&CD in the book *The History of the Russian Revolution.* This theory was conceptualized in scattered points throughout that book (Davidson, 31), but despite this fragmentation in the content, the theory is still a coherent body of thought. The theory was still established as a tool to understand why the proletarian revolution succeeded in Russia, when the Communist Manifesto written by Karl Marx and Frederic Engels stated that countries where the industrial production process was very advanced, like Germany or United Kingdom, would be the first ones to experience a transition towards a communist society (Rosenberg, 21). Therefore, Trotsky introduced an international dimension to a sociological theory (Skocpol, 94). The main claims about the international system of this theory are as it follows:

* The world is **Uneven**, in the sense that it contains many societies of many different kinds.
* These societies coexist, they interact with each other. The existence of these societies is therefore **combined.**
* The interaction between societies is essential for historical **development**. (Rosenberg, 17).

These assumptions bring to the table two important forces in world history according to Trotsky: **The whip of external necessity** and **the privilege of historical backwardness** (Rosenberg, 23). The first one describes a force by which the elites of certain societies feel compelled at given points of history, through the co-existence with other societies, to follow the path of development of more developed societies (Ibid). The privilege of historical backwardness refers to an effect of the unevenness by which certain societies import directly the achievements of other societies without going through the burden of having to invent these innovations. In this manner, certain societies, due to this backwardness can leap through all the previous stages that other societies had to go through to achieve certain innovations (Ibid, 23).

With these theoretical conceptualizations, Trotsky constructed his theory of the permanent revolution. The society of Czarist Russia was experiencing a case of combined development, because the elites felt compelled to apply the industrialization processes of United Kingdom, and so they did industrialize at a faster rate than their British counterparts, while still maintaining an absolutist form of state. The transition to capitalism was being uneven and combined, and so would be, in Trotsky´s opinion, the further transition to a classless society (Rosenberg, 25).

**U&CD IN JUSTIN ROSENBERG AND NEIL DAVIDSON**

Having settled Trotsky´s original conceptualization I will describe here the theories of Rosenberg and Davidson. The supporting theory that I am commenting in this paper is established in Justin Rosenberg´s article *Uneven and Combined Development: ‘The international’ in Theory and History.* Much of the first part of this article describes in detail the Trotskyist theory of U&CD and how this theory added something new to classical sociology; the international integration of societies. After addressing this, Rosenberg sustains his main point: that U&CD is not only applicable to the modern period of capitalistic expansion, but to the whole extent of human history (Rosenberg, 25). Rosenberg argues that if U&CD was not applicable to every historical period, then it would not be a general solution for incorporating international relations into a social theory (Ibid). Since the beginning of civilization different societies with a very different range of social and technological structures have interacted. Not only there were interactions between societies but between civilizations, which enabled the exchange of technologies between them. For Rosenberg, U&CD is a universal law of human history, while the whip of external necessity and the privilege of historical backwardness are forces repeated throughout history.

The universality of U&CD brings an important conclusion as well. The world dominion by the different European Empires was also a consequence of the historical backwardness and external necessity of Europe compared to other civilizations. That same historical process is bringing an end to western dominance now in the XXI century, as China is leaping forward several stages of development. Rosenberg concludes that Trotskyist theory can serve as well to explain different levels of integration and development to more fields of sociology and history, like the cultural or technological differences .

On the other hand, Neil Davidson, in his article *The Conditions for the Emergence of Uneven and Combined Development* portrays a different historical application of the concept of U&CD. Davidson shares the same conceptualization of the ‘law of U&CD’ that Rosenberg has. He establishes as well, that the theory was a conceptualization of the tool to interpret how the permanent revolution would take place (Davidson, 32). Davidson seems to be more interested in the particular historical period that brought this theory. To him, Trotsky was mostly focused on building a revolutionary movement in the age of Stalinism. Davidson points out that most of the theory was a sketch and that after the death of Trotsky, his colleagues focused more on the concept of permanent revolution (Ibid). In recent years, the concept has begun to spark academic attention again and so has its criticisms. Davidson’s responds to these criticisms by arguing that the concept of ‘backwardness’ is reductionist and that the claim of his critics are transhistorical and inaccurate.

Davidson’s main argument is that U&CD is only applicable and was meant to explain the period after capitalism was expanded as a form of exploitation. This is because the industrial revolution and the accumulation of capital made societies deeply *differentiated* from each other. Societies, Davidson argues, did interact and influence each other before capitalism was established, however, the rules of U&CD are only applicable in the context of sudden deep social, economic and cultural change, which only industrialization and capitalism could bring (Davidson, 37).

**THEORIES**

Is uneven and combined development applicable to the whole extent of human history? Rosenberg and Davidson seem to have very different responses for this question. Rosenberg argues that the dynamics of U&CD, especially the whip of external necessity and the privilege of historical backwardness, are repeated throughout history and explain changes occurred in societies. Therefore, Rosenberg responds to this question affirmatively, sustaining that the rise of different civilizations throughout history can be explained through Trotsky´s interpretation. Rosenberg addresses this matter in a very explicit way: “Uneven and combined development really is a universal in human history […] the whip of external necessity and the privilege of historic backwardness are repeatedly generated across history as routine effects of the multiplicity of societies” (Rosenberg, 26).

Davidson on the other hand, responds negatively to this question, stating that the conditions for the historical application of the concept of U&CD only rose after the advent of capitalism as a productive system globally. As Davidson puts it: “Until the advent of capitalism, societies could borrow from each other, influence one another, but were not sufficiently differentiated from each other for elements to `combine´ to any effect. […] The detonation of the process of uneven and combined development certainly required sudden, intensive industrialization and urbanization” (Davidson, 36).

Two very interesting accounts of pre-capitalist combined development are given by Kamram Matin and Owen Miller. Starting with Kamram Matin, in his essay *Uneven and Combined Development: The International Relations of State-formation in Premodern Iran*, he exposes how the interaction between nomadic Turkish tribes and sedentary agrarian societies in pre-modern Iran, formed a unique juxtaposition of different economic, political and militaristic systems that culminated with the appearance of the Uymaq (a political and military institution):

 “The geopolitical dimension of the state-formation in the case of precapitalist Iran was primarily expressed in the almost unbroken geopolitical pressure of Turkish tribal nomadism on the Iranian sedentary society throughout its premodern history. […] the nomadic–agrarian interaction entailed a rather complex process of state-formation. It produced a specific, synergetic relationship between tribal nomadism and Iran’s primarily agrarian society, mediated by and crystallized in the military-administrative institution of the uymaq” (Matin, 430).

As Rosenberg himself notes as an example in another part of his text;

“Imagine, a map of the world in 1540, which used different colours to indicate the different kinds of society co-existing at the time. […] One colour might denote the great state-based power centres of the day (European, Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, Ming, etc), each one of them rooted in a different regional civilisation, […] a second colour would mark vast areas of Asia, Arabia and North Africa that were occupied by nomadic pastoralists. […] A third would indicate those parts of the world still covered by communities of settled farmers organised in family and tribal groupings. […] A fourth one would be needed for huge areas that were still composed of hunter-gatherer groups” (Rosenberg, 25).

The main point of this historical account provided by Matin, that relates itself to the quote by Rosenberg, is that before the appearance of capitalism, different groups of humans pressured each other to adapt political and economic systems. In the case of pre-modern Iran, this combination between nomadic and sedentary was key in the formation of the state of Iran.

According to Matin, the nomadic tribes imposed a form of external whip in the sedentary settlements, and this generated that these settlements would eventually take military-administrative figures of the nomad tribes:

“The high mobility, predatory and war-attuned nature of nomadism were of the utmost importance in shaping the outcome and forms of the interrelation between the nomadic ‘extensive economy’ and the sedentary society’s ‘intensive economy’.[…] The mobility of the whole population and its property enabled the nomads to evade the imperial expeditions into the steppe, while the remarkable agility and maneuvering power of the nomadic cavalry made it a formidable force in raiding, and under certain conditions, conquering the settled populations. […]The nomadic organizational units of the period of ‘armed peace’ were directly superimposed on the sedentary polity and entered a direct relation with the socioeconomic structure of the agrarian polity. The central mediator and backbone of the new combined polity in Iran was uymaq: the distinct nomadic institution at the heart of the nomadic–sedentary synthesis which [...]underpinned the specific premodern state-form in Iran” (Matin, 432-433).

Matin seems to have successfully applied the concept of the whip of external necessity to a particular period of premodern Iran. The more successful military techniques of the nomadic tribes forced the sedentary settlements to adapt some of their political-military structures, while still maintaining an agrarian economy. These societies, where therefore uneven, because they had different structures, they were combined because they coexisted and influenced each other, and most importantly, that interaction provided a certain form of change in their structures.

Owen Miller analyses the different political structures of the Korean Peninsula through a period of 1600 years (300-1900) in his text *The Uneven, Combined and Intersocietal Dimensions of Korean State Formation and Consolidation over the Longue Durée*: *300-1900 CE*. Miller exposes how Korea was influenced by its closest neighbors and how this interaction occurred at different levels of development, mostly with the Chinese society:

“State formation on and around the Korean Peninsula was intersocietal from the beginning. […] Korean state formation took place in the periphery of the Chinese civilization. This intersocietal interaction took the form of both hierarchical influences from China and peer polity interaction with neighboring polities to the north and on the Japanese Islands. By the late first millennium BCE, at the latest, there existed on the Korean peninsula and the region to the north, agricultural societies based on the farming of rice and other grains, with differentiation and simple polities centered around chieftains” (Miller, 60).

Miller supports here that there was a combined coexistence between the societies of China and the Korean Peninsula by the end of the first millennium BCE. This coexistence made the Koreans combine a more hierarchical political system like that of the Chinese society, with a more traditional economic system based on chieftains. The whip of external necessity was accentuated in this part of history because Korea was under the continuous pressure of China. Throughout the article, there are more instances of this uneven combination of societies:

“The Silla Dynasty also introduced a system of bureaucratic ranks based on the Chinese model that ran in parallel to kolp´um system (A Korean social system institution based on birth), creating a complex enmeshing of ascriptive and bureaucratic status within the aristocracy” (Miller, 62).

Not only the combination in Korea took place with a differentiated political and economic system but within the political system. The Silla Dynasty, which ruled over Korea between the 6th and 10th Century, borrowed some bureaucratic features from the Chinese and combined them with their own system of social ranking. In this manner, the history of the Korean society, like the previous example portrayed in premodern Iran by Matin, was subject to the whip of external necessity and the privilege of historical backwardness. The geopolitical pressures of China towards Korea forced Korea to adopt some of their political and bureaucratic figures, but the Silla dynasty was able to do it in a shorter time than what it took the Chinese to develop their own organizational techniques. Because they were able to borrow these innovations from the Chinese, the Silla Dynasty combined those with their own social ranking systems.

Another question that we might ask ourselves is if the interactions of the West with other civilizations were determinant for the rise of the west and global capitalism? For Rosenberg, every civilization and society has been subject, at a given point or another in history, to the whip of external necessity and the privilege of historical backwardness. The medieval Christian Kingdoms of Europe are no exception to this, and so were the first global empires of this continent. Due to a certain historical backwardness, Europe was able to borrow and apply in a short amount of time innovations and inventions from the Far and Middle Eastern civilizations that took centuries to develop. Due to this and a series of external pressures (mostly from the Ottoman Empire), the different European kingdoms were forced to expand themselves. As Rosenberg puts it: “Multiplicity and interaction played a major role in the rise of the west. And Trotsky´s idea therefore provides an antidote to Eurocentric versions of modern world history” (Rosenberg, 26).

The interaction of the different European societies with the eastern societies provided a combined interaction that allowed Europe to adopt some of the breakthroughs of the east without adopting the same political system as them. Hence, development did not go in a linear fashion. Many of these inventions eventually allowed the advent of capitalism and the industrial revolution. In a different text by Rosenberg called *The 'Philosophical Premises' of Uneven and Combined Development,* the author sustains a similar point: ``All development – even capitalism– includes this interactive dimension arising from unevenness which explains the phenomenology of modern combined development here apparently derived by Trotsky from capitalism alone´´ (Rosenberg, 587). Capitalism, therefore, is the product of the multiplicity and interaction of societies.

Davidson doesn´t agree in this point with Rosenberg. Davidson establishes that societies interacted between each other in the past; however, combination is something that occurred only after the appearance of capitalism. This economic system is historically not preceded and only through it the conditions for U&CD can appear. “Marx and Engels noted that `history becomes world history´ only as a result of the spread of capitalism […] Some theorist have argued that to argue in this way is Eurocentric, since it allegedly ignores both the timing and extent of the Eastern Influence on Western development. Some European States, notably Spain and Portugal, certainly plundered South America and parts of Asia […], but they were not the original sites of capitalist development´´ (Davidson, 43). The rise of capitalism in England, under this vision, was due to the 1688 revolution. Davidson says that it was a product of the ‘pioneers’ of the Dutch and English revolution. Davidson goes on to argue as well that although these revolutions changed the production method, the real game-changer was the second wave of capitalist industrialization, due to the fact that after this period, states started competing over the accumulation of capital (Ibid, 46). In essence, Davidson´s response to this question is that the advent of capitalism was an event that occurred by the interaction of different societies, but the establishment of the capitalist system, is what made combination between societies possible. This capitalistic combination is what brought Uneven and Combined Development between societies, something that was never preceded in pre-industrial societies (Ibid, 47).

With regard to the question of uneven and combined development and the rise of Europe, it is been shown that much of Europe took advantage of many of the technologies and inventions conceived in India and China centuries before. The application of many of these technologies enabled some of these European empires to launch the industrial revolution and boost empires overseas. Historical data suggests that China had already experienced a previous production revolution centuries before the industrial revolution. During the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 CE), Agricultural and manufacture production boomed. Because of this, the population doubled between 960 and 1020. A big selection of technological achievements was made, including, among many others, blast furnace, water powered textile machinery or the magnetic compass (Davies, fee.org). Many of these technological breakthroughs were later adopted by the British (and other European powers) during the colonization period, which allowed the development of the industrial revolution:

“Agriculture, trades, and manufacture all grew dramatically. […] A whole range of technological breakthroughs and improvements were made. These included movable type printing (1000), the blast furnace (1050), mechanical water clocks (1090), paddlewheel ships (1130), the magnetic compass (1150), water-powered textile machinery (1200), and most dramatically, huge oceangoing junks with watertight bulkheads, a carrying capacity of 200 to 600 tons, and a crew of about 1,000” (Davies, fee.org).

The European Empires (mainly the British Empire) benefited from the privileges of historical backwardness. By borrowing many of the inventions from the east and applying them very quickly, these empires were able to combine them with their unique political systems.

Another example of external necessity that pushed Europe to find alternative methods of commerce and military domination was the fall of Constantinople in the hands of the Ottomans. Among other things, it revived crusading activities in Europe and pushed different European Empires to look for alternative commerce routes:

“The fall of Constantinople in 1453 revived crusading activities in Europe. Prince Henry saw this in terms of circumnavigating Africa and reaching the elusive Christian rulers of the East. He saw this also in terms of trade-monopoly, and exemption from payment of the customary tithe to the Pope. All this was confirmed by a Papal bull of 8 January 1455. […]The Portuguese and the Spanish carried over the medieval crusading spirit of the Reconquista in their discoveries of the new route to India and the New World respectively” (Hamdani, 323).

The perception of the Islamic threat motivated by the invasion of Constantinople is one of the biggest moments of external pressure in history. This was essential in the establishment of the concept of Europe, not just as a geographical denomination but also a cultural and political one, to denominate what until then was denominated as Christendom.

An important factor to consider in responding to the question at hand is the fact that none of the European Empires combined surpassed the manufacturing and production level of India and China until the mid-19th Century. The period when the European powerhouses started to ``catch up´´ is coincidental with the period of the fall of Constantinople. The rise of west could be explained then by a combination of the whip of external necessity by the Ottoman Empire and the privilege of historical backwardness of Europe. The graph bellow shows the evolution of GDP of different civilizations throughout the last two thousand years:



Graph 1: Share of GDP (1-2017 CE). Graph from Angus Madison, *Contours of the British Industrial Revolution,* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 70.

Another account of beneficial historic backwardness can be found in the article by Luke Cooper called *Asian Sources of British Imperial Power: The Role of the Mysorean Rocket in the Opium War*. In this article he mentions how the British copied the Mysorean rocket technology and applied it to develop the Congreve rocket. This technology was essential for British victory in China:

“While the *Nemesis* entered into Chinese popular memory as the `devil ship´, this was in no small part due to the vessel being armed with the Congreve rocket. […] It was, of course, no coincidence that the Mysorean and Congreve rockets had a comparable impact on the enemy, as a direct lineage can be trace from the latter to the former”. (Cooper, 122)

Moreover, this is just another account were the economic or military success of Europe was due to the interaction and combined development with other civilizations.

If we have settled that uneven and combined development had an impact in the rise of global capitalism, can we apply this concept to other relevant fields of social science? Justin Rosenberg defends that the concept of U&CD is not only applicable to economic or political systems, it can encompass different forms of culture, technique, legislative systems across different civilizations and societies. The concept can be applied to societies that apply, for example, a similar cultural system to other society, while having a unique political establishment. There is still unevenness and a combined coexistence here, because some cultural systems have been adopted while maintaining the differences in other areas. Therefore for Rosenberg, the concept of U&CD is not only universal throughout time, it is universal in content too: “The multiplicity of societies entails interactions not only of politics and economics and technologies, but of every other dimension of social existence too. It includes ideas, religions, literature, music, etc… and all the other ways that humans construct their worlds” (Rosenberg, 30).

Davidson seems to disagree with this. To him extrapolating the concept beyond the period of modernity and the economic field is excessive. “A concept intended to encapsulate a particular international historical process becomes transformed into a term applicable to virtually any situation in which societies interact with and mutually influence each other” (Davidson, 38). Again, combined development for Davidson is observable only if a certain amount of socio-historical circumstances appear. When these circumstances do not appear and we, as observers, interpret those processes under U&CD, we are falling into the mistake of conceptual overstretch (Ibid).

Several historical accounts show, that in many cases, the forces of external necessity and historical backwardness have affected fields different to economic or political dominion. In a series of conferences at USC, Ron Harris argued how many legal figures like the *commenda* (also known as commercial partnership) and corporation law were Arab and Islamic innovations that were later adapted by the different Italian cities:

“Udovitch argues that the prophetic and legal texts reflected pre-Islamic and early Islamic practices that originated in caravan and long-distance trade in and around the Arabian Peninsula. The commenda was an indigenously developed Arab-Islamic institution […]he concludes that the commercial links between the Christian West and the Muslim Middle East in the 8-10th centuries provided Italian merchants with ample opportunities to import this institution from their more advanced counterparts” (Harris, 14).

This is an excellent example of how the interactions among societies enabled the application of different types of legislation. The Italians were able to apply these legal concepts without having to develop a commercial class that would move around the Silk Road. The Italians were able to apply these concepts in a different political and economic context than that of the Arab world.

Another interesting account of U&CD can be found in the article by Chase-Dunn and Marilyn Grell-Brisk *Uneven and Combined Development in the Sociocultural Evolution of World-Systems*, where different historical accounts of different societies coexisting and borrowing techniques from one and other is shown. One of the cases these authors mention is the existence of an integrated social system in Prehistoric Northern California:

“In *The Wintu and their neighbours*,the authors presented a study of late prehistoric Northern California as a system of interaction networks that linked small-scale polities (tribelets) across major linguistic divides. […] Northern California systemic interaction networks were formed by warfare, trade and intermarriage around the Sacramento River Valley and that linked Northern and Central California into a single prestige goods network based on the exchange of clam-shell disk beads. […] Local Headmen were the ones who carried out inter-village exchange. This interpolity exchange was mainly organized as gift-giving. […] The Pomo were the main manufacturers of clam disk shell beads. They obtained the Coast miwok that lived at Bodega Bay and they devoted a large amount of family labour time to producing round beads with a hole in them for stringing into the `protomoney´. […] As the population increased on the Northern Channel Islands the islanders increasingly specialized in the production of olivella shell beads that came to function as protomoney. […] Neither the Pomo nor the island Chumash lived in a core/periphery hierarchy in which some polities were exploiting and/ or dominating other polities. But they did live in a situation of core/periphery differentiation—in which systemic interaction was occurring among polities with different degrees of population density” (Chase-Dunn and Grell-Brisk, 210).

In this context, the Chumash and the Pomo may have borrowed techniques of exchange from one and other. The differentiation (or unevenness in more Trotskyite terms) was due to a difference in the population density between the coastal and island settlements. Nevertheless, this allowed different social systems but similar methods of exchange between the tribes. U&CD seems to work here not just for large global empires and cities, but also for small tribes and groups of humans. This is yet another example of U&CD in something not related entirely to economic or political domination.

Another great example of U&CD at work that Chase Dunn and Grell-Brisk show is in Ancient Mesopotamia. In this case coexistence between the rural settlements and the first cities enabled a combined structure, not just in the economy but with militaristic techniques and methods of extraction of the minerals:

“The Akkadian empire is one of the oldest empires produced by a conquest of states. Prior to its unification by Sargon of Akkad, the Sumerian city-states had existed for well over seven centuries. These city-states interacted through a complex economic network with a definitive core-periphery hierarchy. The core had a written language, theocratic government and irrigated agriculture. The periphery consisted of pastoralists, horticulturalists and specialized quarrying and manufacturing villages. […] Metalworking throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages has been attributed to mountain societies. […] Both co-evolution and `the development of underdevelopment´ were occurring in the Mesopotamian system before the rise of the Akkadian Empire. […] The Akkadians were successful in their war effort at unification of the city states because they combined Sumerian core-type military strategy (the use of heavy infantry) with a pastoralist military technology (composite bows)” (Chase-Dunn and Grell-Brisk, 213).

This example provides another account of different societies coexisting in a combined way and adopting techniques from one and the other. The Akkadin Empire managed to unify all the cities of Ancient Mesopotamia because Sargon the Great combined militaristic techniques from the cities and the rural settlements. The existence of these two types of societies enabled them to borrow techniques from one another while maintaining uneven structures. It is not mere simple interaction between societies what is observed here. There is an actual combined interrelation, what Trotsky would have identified as an early form of ‘the social structure of humanity’ (Rosenberg, 27).

**CONCLUSION**

The most recent literature on the application of U&CD and Neo-Trotskyism seems divided between those scholars who think that the application of this theory of international relations is applicable to the whole extent of human history and those who think that the concept was conceived to address historical events conceived only after the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism. Rosenberg and other scholars of the Neo-Trotskyite literature (most notably John M. Hobson) think that applying this concept only to processes made after the rise of the West portrays a Eurocentric narrative of international reality and history. On the other hand, those defending a non-transhistorical application of U&CD, contend that Trotsky himself conceptualized this idea to apply it to a very particular period of human history. These scholars try to be more loyal to the original conceptualization of the concept by Trotsky. In a sense, the current debate within Neo-Trotskyism is contentionbetween a Eurocentric or non-Eurocentric application of the concept.

Despite these controversies within the existing literature, it is undeniable that societies of all types and times interacted. From small settlements to global empires and from the times of Mesopotamia to globalization, all the societies that existed interacted in a combined way. These interactions provided a different degree of change between the societies, the change could occur in the economic or political structure, but also in the technology and the culture. The world, therefore, seems to have been combined and uneven from the beginning and continues to be so. The current rise and rapid industrialization of China and other parts of Asia can be interpreted and understood through the lenses of U&CD as a process subject to the forces of the whip of external necessity and the privilege of historical backwardness, and so are many other processes in the international arena.

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