Is "Backwardness" a Problematic Concept of Uneven and Combined Development?

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The revival of Leon Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development (UCD) into an international social theory has been successful. Spearheaded by Justin Rosenberg (1996), its explanatory capabilities thus far have been wide, accounting for state formations in medieval Persia (Matin 2007), Northeast Africa (Makki 2011), Korea (Miller 2016), and China (Cooper 2015), the rise of political multiplicity itself (Rosenberg 2010), the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England (Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015), the formation of the peculiar ruling class of post-Meiji Japan (Allinson and Alexander 2010), the rise of nationalism (Matin 2020; Cooper 2023), the concretisation of Occidentalism (the idea of a united Western sphere) (Leigh 2020), Brexit and the rise of Trump (Rosenberg and Boyle 2019), the resurgence of far-right ideologies (Anievas and Saull 2020), and the modern Brazilian novel (Schwarz, Brown, and Rosenberg 2021). Within the past three years, a special issue and a forum on the theory have been published in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* and *Millennium* (Rosenberg 2021a; Rosenberg et al. 2022). Collectively, these scholars not only expand the explanatory scope of the theory beyond Trotsky's specific interest in the Russian Revolution to other uneven and combined dynamics under the global capitalist epoch, but through the examples above they also show that the theory holds transhistorical explanatory power, arguing that international unevenness as a causal locus is not specific to capitalism (for the theoretical basis of this expansion of the theory, see for example Rosenberg 2021b).

Amidst this successful revival of Trotsky's theorising, however, one concept has been mostly left behind: "backwardness." Indeed, Trotsky's use of backwardness to describe Russian society in his original application of UCD has been condemned as outdated even by UCD scholars because the term seems to suggest a normative ranking of developmental stages between different societies (Felipe Antunes de Oliveira in Rosenberg et al. 2022, 321). Relatedly, the remnant of this concept in a typical contemporary application of UCD—the "privilege of historic backwardness" (see for example the case of China's supposed backwardness in Rosenberg and Boyle 2019)— is where UCD theorists receive the most criticisms.

However, I argue that backwardness, (re)understood correctly as *self-perceived* backwardness, is an important concept without which UCD's explanation of historical change is incomplete (a detailed elaboration of this argument can be found in Nguyen 2025). To that end, this article proceeds in two steps. First, I briefly sketch what UCD is exactly and the kind of contributions it is making towards international relations scholarship (IR). Second, I dwell upon the subtle but very important difference between backwardness as alluding to a normative ranking of societies and backwardness as describing self-perceived backwardness as an important part of uneven and combined historical change.

The Renaissance of Uneven and Combined Development

To understand what kind of explanations UCD offers, it is useful to look at its original application in Trotsky's seminal History of the Russian Revolution (Trotsky 2008, especially Chapter 1). Here, he observes that over the course of the nineteenth century, there emerged stark unevenness between Western advanced capitalist nations and a "backward" Czarist and semi-feudal Russia that was still maintaining a peasantry-centric production economy. Pressure emanating from the former—what he terms the "whip of external necessity"—compelled Russian society to

"catch up." Yet in this process of "modernising" the nation, Russian society would/could not retrace the course of early adopters of capitalism in Britain and France. Instead, it could, and did, make use of what Trotsky terms the "privilege of historical backwardness" to skip repeating the intermediate, *bourgeois*-centric developmental stages experienced by its predecessors and, in the end, initiated a proletariat revolution that would take over the revolutionary tasks of the *bourgeoisie*. The revolt against the oppressive Czarist state, thus, was led by the proletariat and not the politically weak/Czar-dependent *bourgeoisie*: such is the unique combined outcome that was the Russian Revolution. The original significance of this argument, as Rosenberg (2006, 309) emphasises, is that it poses a challenge to Marx's observation of a homogeneous "world after its own image" by showing that the ongoing history of capitalism was proliferating an array of unique combined developments, the Russian Revolution being the exemplar as it dramatically diverged from Marx's stagist and linear understanding of capitalist "modernisation."

Importantly, while focussing on explaining concrete events belonging to a particular historical epoch, Trotsky coins UCD at a high level of abstraction. This is most clearly seen when he observes unevenness as 'the most general law of the historic process' (Trotsky 2008, 5). And if unevenness is to be understood as a transhistorical law, then processes of combined development must be so accordingly.

Indeed, Rosenberg picks up this cue in spearheading the theory's revival. In a move faithful to Trotsky's spirit, Rosenberg argues that UCD, rather than being a toolkit just for the Russian Revolution or just for development under the capitalist epoch, is a transhistorically observable phenomenon—a fact 'intrinsic to the historical process itself' (Rosenberg 2006, 309). Taking seriously Trotsky's observation about unevenness being a historical "law," Rosenberg extends UCD from a particular analysis of Russian development into an international social theory— a theorisation of the international and the domestic as one continuous ontological texture, wherein the former is causally significant towards processes taking place in the latter (Rosenberg 2006, 336). He, as well as many other UCD writers mentioned in the introduction, shows that unevenness, the whip of external necessity, the privilege of historic backwardness, and combined development can be observed across space and time in human history.

What kind of contributions is UCD making to IR? More frankly, what has been the point of reviving the theory? Rosenberg, right from his early writings (2006), has always been clear about what UCD means for the discipline: to resolve the problems of "internalism" (or "methodological nationalism"). Internalism is defined as the tendency to conceptualise societal processes and outcomes as isolated within a society, which ignores the consequences of interactive multi-societal co-existence (or, simply, the international) (Rosenberg 2013b, 1). Indeed, Rosenberg (2006, 308–9) argues that IR has for the most part perpetuated an artificial dichotomization of the international and the domestic, citing the biggest perpetrator of such an issue—neo-realism—as well as failed attempts to overcome it. Thus, UCD contributes to overcoming this gap by showing one important way in which the international is causally significant towards societal processes, theorising the international as 'an emergent property *of* social development, rather than being an extraneous condition operating over and against it' (Rosenberg 2013a, 195, emphasis original; for a recent reiteration of the fact that this is indeed necessary in IR, see: Rosenberg et al. 2023).

Bringing Backwardness Back

In this welcomed and thus far successful revival of UCD, however, Trotsky's use of "backwardness" has been a sore thumb as it seems to allude to a normative ranking of societies. UCD writers are in fact most aware of this, often referring to the opening lines of his volume: 'The fundamental and most stable feature of Russian history is the slow tempo of her development, with the economic backwardness, primitiveness of social forms and low level of culture resulting from it' (Trotsky 2008, 3). As mentioned, Felipe Antunes de Olivera argues that UCD could only 'remain true to its disruptive, anti-capitalist, and revolutionary origins' by 'leaving behind some of Trotsky's outdated vocabulary, including heavily loaded notions such as "backwardness"' (Felipe Antunes de Oliveira in Rosenberg et al. 2022, 321). Given the progress made by contemporary postcolonial scholarship, which has rightly critiqued and deconstructed the ways Eurocentrism can infiltrate so-called objective theories, this call to abandon the notion of backwardness—often implying the supposed superiority of the capitalist West—seems justified at first glance

However, I contend that the importance of Trotsky's concept of backwardness is less about normative judgments and more about the *self-perception* of relevant Russian actors at the time. Trotsky (2008, 7–9) demonstrates that

throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various segments of Russian society—the aristocratic intelligentsia, the landlords, and the peasantry—internalised the view that Russia was backward compared to its Western neighbours. This widespread self-perception fuelled significant attempts at change, such as the progressive nobility assuming a role akin to the Third Estate, landlords supporting the state's move to replace serfdom with wage labour, and the proletariat embracing the boldest of revolutionary ideals from Europe. In other words,*self-perceived backwardness*, in reaction to international unevenness, drove the profound socio-political changes in Russia, of which the most radical outcome was, of course, the revolution in 1917.

Indeed, Baruch Knei-Paz's analysis of Trotsky underscores this very point: 'there are obviously no absolute criteria according to which a society may be described as backward and only comparison—in terms of some preconceived normative scale—makes it so' (1978, 63). Furthermore, Knei-Paz notes that while those advanced-backward comparisons are commonplace, if 'backwardness is a designation imposed from outside and unrecognized', it would be 'meaningless…from the point of view of the societies themselves' (1978, 63–64). Instead, as seen in Trotsky's understanding of Russian society above, 'where backwardness is internally recognized…backwardness itself becomes a social and political problem' (Knei-Paz 1978, 64). Thus, the analytical use of backwardness in UCD is not about normative comparisons, but about the self-perceptions that internalise those comparisons (Rosenberg alludes to this self-descriptive reading of backwardness too, albeit, I argue, relying too much still on the absolute "advancedness" of capitalism: Rosenberg 2021b, 282).

Therefore, as postcolonial scholarship has rightly pointed out, advanced-backward comparisons can indeed be criticised as Eurocentric, economic-deterministic, pro-capitalist, racist, sexist, anthropocentric, and more. However, as seen, those very kinds of problematic comparisons that led to self-perceived backwardness were the driving force behind societal changes in early-twentieth-century Russia. It thus should not be eliminated from any examination of uneven and combined development.

Whether that explanation clears Trotsky's name or not is beside the point. Knei-Paz himself, while remaining sympathetic and emphasising the importance of self-perceived backwardness in Trotsky's analysis, seems to also criticise Trotsky for overstepping into rigid normative beliefs that certain forms of societies are "better" or more "progressive" than others (1978, 63). Nonetheless, the takeaway here should be that self-perceived backwardness is at the very core of UCD, without which, I argue, its theoretical sequence and ability to explain uneven and combined historical change remain incomplete.

So let us re-sequence the general and transhistorical theory of UCD with self-perceived backwardness properly in place. Unevenness among societies is a law of human history. Pressure from such unevenness—the whip of external necessity—triggers certain strands of self-perceived backwardness in a society, whether that be economic, political, or cultural. Once those self-perceptions—however problematic the comparisons they are based on are—are internalised, the relevant agents in that society attempt to overcome such backwardness through whatever means they believe to be effective. Those attempts, nonetheless, are always combining existing features of the society with what the agents believe to be "advances" from outside, creating unique amalgamations. As a result, looking at the broader picture, human development is always multi-linear, interactive, and diverging, jumping forward yet taking on characteristics of the past.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Instead of reiterating that self-perceived backwardness is a necessary component of UCD through theoretical reasonings, I briefly show here, in lieu of a conclusion, the centrality of this concept in my own application of UCD to understand the origins of Japanese imperialism.

My research examines how the international context surrounding Japan during the late nineteenth century was consequential towards the rise of the Japanese empire. Specifically, it uses UCD to capture the undeniable effects that the whip of external necessity—Western intrusion into East Asia—had on Japanese society at the time. And indeed, in finding the link between this international context and processes behind the eventual Japanese turn to empire, there is ample evidence that beliefs about Japanese backwardness were internalised across the different

strata of society. Most importantly, self-perceptions of the backwardness of Japanese society were prevalent across the different parts of the Meiji government. Indeed, the Meiji government was highly explicit in its admission of Japan's backwardness vis-à-vis the West, so much so that it despatched the famous Iwakura mission (1871–1873) to Europe and the US to comprehensively learn all aspects of Western civilisation. These internalised understandings about what made Japan backward, in turn, shaped socio-political transformations that were consequential towards Japanese imperial policymaking and practice. For example, as Shogo Suzuki (2009) also points out, the internalisation of not only Western markers of what it meant to be "civilised" nations but also the fact that Japan was not considered one of them motivated the Meiji government to conduct imperialism to earn the status of being a "civiliser."

Just as in the case of the Russian Revolution, the language of backwardness was internalised and explicitly used by the relevant agents in Japan. Thus, no matter how much one tries to get around it, there is no better way to capture such a central mechanism of uneven and combined historical change than the concept of self-perceived backwardness. With this concept in place to further reinforce its theoretical robustness, UCD can continue its programme of enriching IR by providing a compelling way to capture the societal consequences of the international.

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