

Histories of World Capitalism, Methodologies of World Labour: Rethinking Uneven Development

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Abstract: The paper seeks to build on Marxist approaches to the question of uneven development aided by insights drawn from the subaltern studies school.

In this paper I attempt to develop an alternative approach to the question of uneven development. To do so, I critically interrogate and attempt a partial synthesis of two broad sources of influence: Marxism and the writings of a group of authors that came to prominence as part of the 'subaltern studies' collective and who are often incorporated under the genre of postcolonial studies.¹ At first sight, this may seem a problematic endeavour. Authors within the postcolonial cannon have repeatedly critiqued various strains of Marxism for uncritically reproducing the Eurocentric maxims found in liberal ontologies of development.² In turn, Marxists have responded by emphasising the indeterminate political postures of postcolonial theorists, who are characterised as celebrating 'difference' to the point of a paralysing relativism that renders them politically naive.³ In limiting their critiques to deconstruction at the level of textuality – be it historical archives or literary products – postcolonial theorists are portrayed as having little of coherence to say about material life and the processes of social reproduction connected to the key political issues of contemporary world capitalism.⁴ Given the scale of such a breach, according to Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Westbrook, the attempt to marry the two approaches would be to try and ride two horses at the same time: an endeavour certain to end in failure and, one might imagine, a great deal of pain.⁵

Notwithstanding such mistrust, there has been a recognition that synthesising insights from both perspectives may be a way to strengthen the analytical tools we use to understand a world dominated by, but not reducible to, capital.⁶ Notably, unlike some writing within the Western postcolonial genre, the subaltern studies authors developed their ideas in and through a critical yet productive engagement with various streams of Marxism.⁷ Founding author Ranajit Guha posed the purpose of the subaltern studies initiative as one of interrogating silences within the elitist historiography of India.⁸ A common feature within dominant historiography was a

portrayal of the anti-colonial movement as driven by domestic elite groups, a framework within which the subaltern classes were given no room for independent, autonomous thought or action. For the authors within the collective, the project sought to reinscribe the forms of consciousness and action of the subaltern classes into Indian historiography, a task that was methodologically challenging owing to the pervasive silence and elitist renderings of such features in archival documentation.⁹ In undertaking this project, the subaltern school authors necessarily challenged existing ways of conceptualising power and state formation. Through the study of peasant insurrection in particular, Guha discerned that the peasantry could not be adequately understood as a remnant of pre-modern social relations that remained trapped in anachronistic forms of consciousness. Rather the peasantry tended to engage adeptly with the symbolic and material changes wrought within Indian colonial society. The subaltern classes were therein not a passive reactor to historical changes that unfolded around them, but could be reconceptualised as a constituent presence in the construction of Indian modernity. Through its interactions with dominant groups, and most dramatically in form of insurrection, the subaltern actively shaped the formation of modern India.¹⁰

While the initial target of the subaltern school were the historians of Indian nationalism, a direct engagement with a prevailing Marxist orthodoxy was quickly forthcoming.¹¹ During the 1970s Indian Marxism was heavily influenced by an approach in which the dynamic forces of change within societies were determined by the 'articulation' (or interaction) of different modes of production – feudal, semi-feudal, capitalist. The key purpose of this approach was to identify the factors that retarded capitalist development in India as compared to its 'full' development in the West wherein labour had been freed from precapitalist forms of exploitation and the forces of capital drove forward the forces of production and social development.¹² While authors such as Utsa Patnaik and Ashok Rudra differed on the degree to which Indian agriculture displayed capitalist characteristics, there was nonetheless common agreement that an expected full transition to capitalism had been limited and that the vestiges of pre-capitalist production relations were seen to fetter the transformation of Indian agriculture.

One of the primary facets of this debate that conflicted with the subalternist position was the use of a fundamentally European template of agrarian change against which rural India was judged. Despite their disagreements, authors within the modes of production debate did not question whether India was moving from 'feudalism' to 'capitalism'. Rather, they diverged over what characteristics should be used to define each stage, the degree to which this transition had already occurred, and what factors were combining to stall it. This mechanical view of agrarian transformation, and the correlate attribution of peasant consciousness to specific locations within modes of production, drew a sharp critique from subaltern studies authors such as Partha Chatterjee, who denounced the subsumption of Indian social dynamics into a universal history of European provenance:

Are we to explain "retarded" capitalism simply in terms of a time-lag, or should we treat it as an expression of the historical limits of Capital's universalising mission? To choose the latter would require us to abandon a methodological procedure designed to explain the emergence of capitalism as a universal system of generalised commodity production and to substitute in its place one that enables us to identify and explain the limits to the historical actualisation of Capital as a universal economic category.

Although only partially developed at this point, this stream of critique became more pronounced in the 'second orientation' of subaltern studies, particularly through the work of Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyan Prakash.¹³ Whereas the initial subaltern project sought to demonstrate how established historiography fitted subaltern politics into a rationalist grid of elite consciousness in order to make them legible on those terms; a similar critique could be turned upon Marxist historiography. While not denying the importance of capital's universalising pretensions, these authors repeatedly sought to draw out the implications of privileging capital as the sovereign author of historical process and therein turning all particular histories into differentiated expressions of the former. In this respect, the subaltern scholars cautioned against replacing the transhistorical drive of 'markets' or 'rationality' that occupies center stage in the liberal paradigm of development with the totalising impulse of capital.¹⁴ Within such a paradigm, capital arises like a behemoth and subsumes all before it, assiduously rewriting social life according to its own categories. At best, this approach renders historical difference legible solely through the categories of capital. At worst, it conceptualises difference merely as a function of capital's internal logic.¹⁵

For authors such as Chakrabarty, a latent historicism of this nature is implicit in the Marxist notion of 'uneven development'. According to Chakrabarty, the marxist approaches to uneven development start from an conceptualisation of global capitalism as a unity subdivided into distinct spatial units that are unevenly situated upon a temporal progression within the 'development of capital'. Within this discourse these spatial units are habitually accorded with the territorial boundaries of nation states. The underlying structure of this unity is given by the category of capital with each nation-state viewed as a differentiated moment of the history of the latter.¹⁶ Difference between them is therefore read off within the dichotomies posited by capital: precapitalist versus capitalist, unfree labour versus free labour, formal subsumption versus real subsumption. In such a schematic, that which is not capital acquires meaning in terms of the historical process of development towards the universal category (hence the prevailing use of the term 'precapitalist'). Other forms of social relations are transposed by capital's presence into 'not yet' capital awaiting history to unleash them from a state of historical retardation. As a consequence, Marxist historiography struggles to separate itself from a universal template for social change founded on an schematic reading of the evolution of capitalism in Europe. As Chakrabarty comments, "there is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'".¹⁷

The subalternist critique therefore challenges us to reconsider both the strengths and limits of understanding of uneven development wherein the latter appears as a shortened form of 'the uneven development of capital'. An example may serve to clarify these tendencies and the problems that beset them. In a recent symposium in the journal *Dialectical Anthropology*, Michael Webber put forward an analysis of the restructuring of Chinese society over the past three decades set within the Marxist paradigm of 'primitive accumulation'. The latter he defined as 'the process (or set of processes) through which capitalist production emerges from pre-existing conditions of work' and which is characterised as the stage prior to (and slightly overlapping) 'the transition to capitalism'.¹⁸ Primitive accumulation is therefore charged with the task of creating an initial stock of capital alongside a freed wage labour force in order for China to transition into capitalism. Within the main article, Webber goes to some lengths to attempt to package a diverse range of market and state-driven social processes – including land dispossession, the privatisation of township and village enterprises (TVEs) and state owned enterprises (SOEs), through the capitalisation of agriculture, state 'anti-poverty programmes', the commodification of natural resources and inter-ethnic conflict – into this narrative of primitive accumulation. In response, three critics offer replies that accept and reinforce his overall interpretative paradigm but differ over the specific processes that Webber chooses.

What emerges from this debate is a clear historicism in which China – viewed as a singular unit of analysis – is presupposed to be the latest staging post for a universal process that, owing to the accidents of history, had momentarily slipped away like a prey that temporarily escapes its hunter before its inevitable capture. By writing these heterogeneous social processes into the unitary history of primitive accumulation and transition, Webber begins by evacuating any specificity or contingency in their historical emergence by assigning them a unifying purpose beyond the intentions of their agents and an outcome that is already foretold. Importantly, however, despite valiant attempts to order social change in contemporary China according to this paradigm, Webber is ultimately forced to admit that he cannot find anything close to a cohesive logic driving the process nor does there emerge any linear outcome in the form of a clear cut 'transition'. He therefore ends by claiming that primitive accumulation in contemporary China "does not have one motive, does not simply reflect class interests, is not a particular case of a global capitalist project, but is complex and localised". Webber's paradox is starkly revealed – a commitment to write 'the history of primitive accumulation' onto histories that are ultimately resistant to such subsumption. His important conclusions regarding the non-linearity of social transformation in contemporary China is reached, moreover, without questioning the appropriateness of primitive accumulation as a template of historical change in the first place.¹⁹ Primitive accumulation is apparently so central to historical narrative that it is more important to shoehorn diverse social processes, which he readily admits resist this very classification, into its transhistorical presence than to question whether it can carry the burden of historical explanation that is expected of it.²⁰

Uneven Development and ‘the Transition to Capitalism’

In grappling with the idea of uneven development, I therefore suggest that we need to go beyond the prevalent manner of approaching the problematic within much of the Marxist canon. As indicated above, uneven development is primarily engaged through the prism of the development of capital. Capital, for Marx, was ‘value in motion’: a repeating circuit of human activity through which capital accumulates via the appropriation of surplus labour. On this basis uneven development is seen in terms of the unbalanced evolution of capital’s inner tendencies – i.e. the uneven development productive forces within and across branches of production and across geographical space. Interrogating uneven development in this way is undoubtedly fundamental to conceptualising the historical dynamics of capital accumulation on a world scale. It calls attention to currents of technological change, the role of competition and crisis tendencies, the internationalisation of capital and the role of finance in distributing investment across and between circuits of capital.²¹ Without doubt this broad Marxian tradition provides essential moorings to aid our understanding of how the history of world capitalism is interwoven with the accumulation, integration, reshaping and repeated annihilation of the labouring bodies on which it depends.²²

However, following the subaltern school critique, such a perspective provides a necessary but incomplete angle from which to enter debates over uneven development. While capital may indeed seek to rewrite social life to further the cause of ‘endless accumulation’, it does not do so – to twist a famous maxim – in conditions of its own choosing. In what follows below, I seek to enter the issues surrounding uneven development from a somewhat different angle. My primary concern is less the question of the uneven development of capital per se, but rather the processes and limits to the uneven production and reproduction of labour within a world dominated by, but not reducible to, capital. I have two primary suggestions: first that that we need to reject the notion of the ‘transition to capitalism’ on both sides of the coupling – that is the inadequacy of the temporal metaphor of ‘transition’ alongside the spatial and social implications of ‘capitalism’ seen as a bounded system.²³ I prefer to talk of capital as a process that constantly inhabits, remakes, and is fundamentally remade in its interactions with institutional forms, regimes of value and alternative temporalities that have their lineage in other histories and modes of being. This framework has the advantage, I suggest, of refusing to draw clear lines between capital and non-capital, but rather to reconceptualise such boundaries as borders that are made and remade through historically contextualised struggles. It gives more room for understanding the variety and vitality of struggles within and against capital without suffocating those under the weight of capital’s dialectic logic. In short, the approach sees an essential place for the logic of capital. Yet it must be kept in its place.

In this vein, below I chart a perspective to help us understand the origins and functioning of ‘world capitalism’. I refer to world capitalism in part to break with the

uncritical association of capitalism with the nation state but also to emphasise capitalism not as a grounded and bounded system, but as an antagonistic process: the ongoing formation and reformulation of social relations in a world dominated by, but not reducible to, capital. By using 'world capitalism' I also wish to avoid the usage of 'global capitalism' which implies that capital has indeed achieved its totalising aspirations. As Frederick Cooper has emphasised in his critique of the term 'globalization', the notion of 'global capitalism' can obscure as much as is revealed: "Crucial questions don't get asked: about the limits of interconnection, about the areas where capital cannot go, and about the specificity of the structures necessary to make connections work".²⁴

For the purposes of elaboration, I initially develop this alternate framework through an engagement with Robert Brenner who has provided one of the most important Marxist perspectives on the nature and origins of capitalism.²⁵ Within development studies, Brenner became renowned for his pointed critique of the understanding of the origins of capitalism within Frank's dependency theory and Wallerstein's world systems theory. Given that any understanding of the origins of capitalism are inextricably bound up with a conceptualisation of the 'being' of capital – and therefore its uneven nature – this debate is of central importance. Brenner, and those who have expanded on his thesis such as Ellen Wood, argue with considerable analytical force that the origin of capitalism can be located spatially and temporarily in the outcome of struggles in agrarian England in the late Middle Ages. With the breakdown of feudal society the struggle between lords and peasants led to a peculiar impasse in England in which the former lords did not enjoy sufficient power to restrain the peasantry in the directly coercive relations of feudalism, yet peasants were insufficiently strong to divorce themselves fully from the lords and set up small, independent farms. This impasse led inadvertently to a class compromise unique to agrarian England that served to unleash capitalist dynamics within the countryside. On the one hand, lords used their remaining power to seize land and transform themselves into landowners. They then rented out land on competitive leases to a new tenant class rather than employ non-economic (feudal) means of coercion to directly extract surplus from the peasantry. The new tenants either farmed the land themselves, hired waged-labour to do so, or combined the two. Structured within these social property relationships – which Brenner terms 'agrarian capitalism' – each economic actor faces the competitive mediation of the market for securing their livelihood and this compels a degree of specialisation, investment and innovation not present in other modes of social reproduction. These unique forces are seen as the central dynamic of capitalism that, once established, proceeds to unfold outward spatially and temporarily.

One of the most important aspects of this approach is that it emphasises that capitalist social relations represent a qualitative break with other forms of social organisation. Capitalism did not emerge as a gradual confluence of existing trends, such as the expansion of trade and commerce, but required a fundamental rupture of social relations and the arising of a very specific class structure that could give rise to the compulsion of the market. For the followers of Brenner, this entails that

capitalism is seen as a system – therein implying a degree of fixity and closure – and one that has a very specific remit. Capitalism is present when a particular class structure comes into being in which economic units are dependent upon markets for their reproduction and where recourse to extra-economic force is untenable. Intrinsic to this relationship is the separation of the political from the economic. That is, whereas non-capitalist social relations such as feudalism are characterised by directly political means of surplus-expropriation (i.e. serfs are coercively forced to work for their lords), capitalism is the realm of free-exchange wherein the worker freely sells her labour-power in an economic relation with an employer outside of direct political compulsion. Divorced from alternative means of social reproduction, the market acts not as an opportunity but as an external compulsion on each economic actor: the landlord needs to find someone to continually lease the land, the tenant needs to outcompete other tenant farmers for market share, and the worker needs to find someone to hire them in order to survive. For Brenner, this compulsion of competition is the germ behind the relentless and systematic development of the productive forces that has been an evident feature of the modern age.

Ellen Wood, building on Brenner's thesis, continues the logical development of the narrative by arguing that the unique productivity of English agriculture under agrarian capitalism gave rise to a wider commercialisation of English society and the creation of a unified domestic market by the seventeenth century.²⁶ The new capitalist landlord strata imposed their vision of social property relations upon the state, which became harnessed to the cause of removing impediments to capitalist expansion. These factors in turn provided the basis for the escalating creation of a wage labour force and the extension of the reach of the domestic market beyond Britain's borders to create a new international system of trade and colonialism.²⁷ Such forces promulgated industrialisation and, finally, once the uniqueness of England's productive prowess was felt by the absolutist states of Europe they were compelled to radically reorganise their own socio-economic structures in a capitalistic direction in order to compete geo-politically with the rise of Britain as a world power.²⁸ What Wood's extrapolation of Brenner's argument presents, therefore, is an account in which the contingent outcome of class struggle between lords and peasants in fourteenth century England unleashes the genie of capitalism that ultimately comes to govern world history. Capitalism came into being uniquely in England until, in the 19th century, it was imported from outside to the rest of Europe and beyond which, until that point, had remained entirely non-capitalist.²⁹

It is not necessary to dismiss the importance of the transformation of English agrarian relations in order to suggest that such mono-causal and linear reading of the genesis and development of world capitalism is likely to be partial, particularly given the way in which Brenner and Wood have portrayed the directness, completeness and irrepressible nature of capitalist transformation in England and its absolute absence elsewhere.³⁰ The problem with this perspective is that it moves from the dynamic properties of capital to an immediate and idealised notion of 'capitalism' as a system in which the logic of capital – constant market-induced

compulsion that propels productivity and a strict separation of the political from the economic – is absolute. By creating such an ideal-type of capitalism and counter-posing it to a similarly coherent non-capitalism (either ‘feudalism’ or ‘absolutism’), the perspective has trouble distinguishing between the abstract categories of capital and the conditions of their historical arising. In this respect, the development of the kind of social and political structures that Brenner highlights as necessary for the establishment of capitalism in rural England – including the separation of labour from means of subsistence, the formation of markets with suitable infrastructure to impose competition, the transformation of gender relations, state formation and the installation of bourgeois property rights – was more partial and longer in development than given credit for.³¹ Moreover, it was forged through a wider set of dynamics than a one-time result of class conflict between landlords and the peasantry.³² Yet in an attempt to locate authorship of the modern world solely in the terms of the inner logic of capital, the dynamic of capital is invoked to explain the preconditions of capitalism.

As such, Brenner and Wood end up in a tautology where the arising of capitalism accounts for the productive drive of capital, and the productive drive of capital accounts for the arising of capitalism. By insisting on the purity of specific understanding of capitalism as a system, they create closures through a strategy of opposition and hierarchization that serve to marginalize all that upsets the framework’s founding values. For the arising of capitalism, they are happy to invoke the contingent outcome of class struggle. Once established, however, the self-perpetuating logic of capital determines the course of struggle and eviscerates historical contingency.³³ The purpose of such a closure is to avoid a situation in which capital is in any way dependent upon a ‘constitutive outside’ that, in Timothy Mitchell’s words, cannot be folded back to capital’s logic or internal contradictions or be contained by an underlying causal or dialectical pattern.³⁴ To do so would inevitably collapse some of the neatness of a teleological understanding of history written on capital’s own terms. In short, Brenner and followers do not want to loosen the fastenings of a strict definition of capitalism and its origins because they are worried that they may never get them closed again.³⁵

If, however, we do unfasten those moorings, we can grasp the origins of capital according to a more dispersed set of social processes and relations of power. In this respect, Joseph Inikori’s disaggregated study of English regions suggests that in the era of the incipient industrial revolution (1660s-1850s) agrarian England was no simple paragon of capitalist agriculture within a unified domestic market but rather it was marked by the uneven development of agrarian social relations and notable regional barriers to trade.³⁶ The areas that most fit Brenner’s model of agrarian capitalism were those in the south, whereas the northern counties displayed strong lineages of non-capitalist agrarian relations and existed in relative isolation from southern commerce. This is important because these ‘backward’ northern counties are those in which the industrial revolution took off and drove the development of industrial capitalism. Specifically, the three pioneering regions of Lancashire, the West Riding of Yorkshire and the West Midlands were primarily integrated not into

a unified domestic market but into regional and, most importantly, overseas trading networks connected to the broader trans-Atlantic economy. Only later during this period would a more comprehensive process of national integration occur in which the agrarian capitalist areas of England, and the capital city London, would be drawn more fully into the burgeoning industrialisation stemming from the industrial north through specific programmes of infrastructural integration. For Inikori, therefore, the progressive agrarian capitalism of the south was primarily to benefit from, rather than proliferate, the forces underpinning capitalist industrialisation.

What this interpretation of the rise of industrial capitalism tends to do is to disrupt the thesis of a unitary and linear emergence of capitalism in post-feudal agrarian England, that leads to a relatively smooth progression of deepening capitalist social property relations until, ultimately, industrialisation was the necessary result.³⁷ On the contrary, from Inikori's account, capitalist industrialisation occurred as a rupture in the more backward regions of England and was facilitated not simply by the cumulative legacy of changing agrarian class structures but a specific integration into a changing world economy in which colonialism, merchantism and slavery were defining features.³⁸ Robin Blackburn, for example, has explicitly heralded the importance of the role of slavery and the Atlantic economy within the development of industrial capitalism in England.³⁹ Not only were the markets and products offered within the Atlantic region essential for the pro-genesis of industrialisation in northern England, but the 'super-profits' provided by plantations to merchants in England in the 18th century facilitated the provision of credit to early industrialists and manufacturers.⁴⁰ Far from a linear transition from 'agrarian' to industrial capitalism on the basis of the logic of the former, as Irfain Habib suggests, "the arrival of capitalism was not a natural internal process: Subjugation of other economies was crucial to the formation of industrial capital within it. In other words, colonialism, in its harshest forms, was not a mere attendant process to the rise of capitalism, it was one of its basic, inescapable premises".⁴¹

Moreover, the importance of slavery for the arising of world capitalism was not limited to flows of goods and credit. As Timothy Mitchell notes, following Sidney Minz, the production of sugar in sixteenth and seventeenth century Caribbean a labour process necessitated "strict labor discipline, careful scheduling and time-consciousness, and the division of labor into work units by age, skill, and gender, to an extent as yet unknown in mainland Europe".⁴² As such, the forms of time-discipline seen as so central to the rise of English industrial capitalism were already written into the history of the Atlantic world prior to the era of English industrialisation.⁴³ This leads us back to an engagement with Marx, who famously declared that:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, 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 rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.

These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. Hard on their heels follows the commercial war of the European nations, which has the globe as its battlefield [and is] still going on in the shape of the Opium Wars against China.⁴⁴

While Marx provided no integrated account of 'the rise of capitalism', his comments are indicative of the importance he placed on situating the origins of capitalism in a broader set of processes than those ongoing within the English countryside. His usage of the term primitive accumulation was not to set a universal template of historical change, but rather to explain the historically specific rise of capitalism within England in terms of a fusion of shifts within domestic class structure, state policy and the interstitial changes in international production, trade, finance and migration (forced or otherwise). What this emphasises is the rise of world capitalism as the joining of several synchronous processes with disparate roots, rather than the unfolding of a single diachronic process whose lone seed had been planted in the fields of the English countryside by the indeterminate struggles of feudal lords and peasants some six hundred years ago.

Capital, Non-Capital, World Capitalism

On this basis, rather than seeing the logic of capital spreading outwards with an iron certainty and rewriting societies into a system of capitalism, it is possible to reject the clear dichotomy and externality of capital / non-capital and to view capital not as a system but as a process – one that transforms its own social foundations as it moves. This perspective allows us to see the tentative presence of capital resting on its synthesis with a series of relationships and connections to expand, consolidate and reproduce itself that are not reducible to social forms of capital. As Timothy Mitchell has emphasised across a range of historical contexts, the power of capital can exist only by drawing on both human and non-human social forces that embody other energies, methods and goals.⁴⁵ Moreover, following the subaltern school, the forms of power, domination and resistance that suffuse these connections are not readable in the terms of capital alone. While capital is driven by a systemic impulse to attempt to universalise by incorporating increasing numbers and types of social activity into its circuits of value expansion, it does so in and through combination with institutional forms that are the products of prior historical conditions and reflect different regimes of value.⁴⁶

For example, if we return a topic raised earlier, it is useful to consider the ways in which world capitalism has been most profoundly reshaped by the uneven incorporation of Chinese labour into the circuits of capital. It is worth briefly highlighting the underlying question that this poses. From the perspective put forward by Ellen Wood, for instance, could China – the supposed 'workshop of the world' for the capitalist global economy – be described as 'capitalist'? The political economy of contemporary China is characterised by its characterised by historical legacies that do not conform to any linear path of capital. There is no clear separation of the political from economic but rather pervasive macro-economic

interventions by an authoritarian party-state which still owns and manages one-third of the economy; endemic corruption and close synergies between officials and business leaders from municipal politics upwards; ambiguous property rights and uneven enforcement of the rule of law; and a coercive structure of citizenship and work relations that belies any simple notion of 'free wage labour'.⁴⁷ Are these supposedly 'non-capitalist' or 'pseudo capitalist' features a cause of failed or insufficient transition – therein leaving China parked in the 'waiting room of history' as Chakrabarty proactively puts it? This, of course, was the perspective of Webber introduced earlier in this chapter, for whom China was awaiting the completion of primitive accumulation to fully unleash the logic of capital and finish its transformative mission.

Alternatively, if we understand capital in a perpetual state of movement and reconstitution, we are on stronger grounds to provide a non-historicist reading of such transformations. Instead of a theory that sees capital unrelentingly consuming difference on a global scale, we have theory that can highlight and understand capital's unremitting condition of acute indigestion. By cohabiting with social relations and institutional forms that forge an uneasy symbiosis with capital but do not necessarily collapse before its logic, we see a mutual process of constitution and transformation. The inherently vernacular institutional forms that facilitate accumulation therefore cannot be simply read off as social forms of capital as constituted by the unfolding of the latter's internal logic. Vinay Gidwani characteristically draws out the issue in precise terms:

If a profit-centred rationality anchored to a relentless logic of accumulation (the subordination of production to the 'law of value' in classical Marxist theory) is upheld as the deus ex machina of capitalism, then it is not clear how to talk about a social formation where that motive is contaminated, consolidated, and continuously interrupted by other logics, where institutional arrangements must work overtime to ensure the circuits of capital accumulation do not come to a grinding halt.⁴⁸

The arising of world capitalism, therefore is not the movement from one bounded system to another as the notion of transition would have it, but the mutual interpellation of different forms of power and control over production and social reproduction, in which both are sublated within the abstract forces of circulating capital in the pursuit of self-expansion. This creates the potential to understand that capitalism is not necessarily antithetical to forms of production relations that appear to stand outside the paradigm of proletarianisation or the universality of 'free wage labour'. From slavery, debt-bondage, to household labour, the arising of world capitalism has seen these forms of production relations serve as intimate bearers of capital. Gyan Prakash is helpful here:

Instituted by territorial conquests and political domination, the universalization of capital entailed its displacement in the irreducibly different social relations, political structures and cultural forms it

*confronted and was forced to inhabit. Inseparably connected to historical forms within which it arose and functioned, the rule of commodities and markets took shape in and profited from structures ranging from peasant production to plantation slavery, though it represented them as its opposite. In this sense, the history of unfreedom is the history of capital in disguise.*⁴⁹

Willem van Schendel is emphatic on this point when he argues that, despite one hundred and fifty years of large-scale capitalist production, South Asia did not bear out the assumption that the emergence of agrarian capitalism would produce a clear separation of capital and labour, with the latter being proletarianised.⁵⁰ Drawing upon the labour historiography of Bengal and north-east India, the expansion of wage-labour during and following the colonial period has been enormous yet hardly replicates any simple model of capitalist transition. Vaste swathes of the population have been rendered as transitory labour – ‘wage hunters and gatherers’ in Jan Breman’s striking term⁵¹ – moving in patterns of circular migration between labouring as agrarian wage labour and temporary employment in urban informal sector; at times relying on a relationship with capital for social reproduction, at others subsisting outside of a direct relationship with capital, tenuously mobilising other means of social reproduction.⁵²

On this score, Kalyan Sanyal has put forward a provocative argument regarding the relationship between capital and non-capital. He argues that the separation of labour from the means of subsistence in contemporary India – the outcome of a range of conflicting social processes around colonialism and the arising of world capitalism – “produces a vast wasteland inhabited by people whose lives as producers have been subverted and destroyed by the thrust of the process of expansion of capital, but for whom the doors of the world of capital remain forever closed.”⁵³ Unlike the traditional rendering of Marx, Sanyal breaks with the notion that those dispossessed of the means of self-reproduction are constituted as a reserve labour army defined functionally by the self-constituting logic of capital. On the contrary, far from a reserve population that is drawn into or ejected from the capitalist labour process as required by the dynamics of capital, the dispossessed of the postcolonies are created as part of capital’s arising yet form no part of capital’s being. Unable to integrate as labour into the circuits of capital, but separated from alternate means of social reproduction, they are exiled to what Sanyal terms the ‘wasteland’, a space outside capital that challenges its universality. Subsisting through a vast and varied range of activities located at the threshold between informality and illegality, the dispossessed are constituted as non-capital: a need economy where, despite being framed within the social forms of commodities, money and exchange, their activities are isolated from the circuits of capital and their processes of value expansion.⁵⁴ For Sanyal, this marginalised mass is then constructed as the object of development leading to the proliferation of governmental technologies that simultaneously reproduce and regulate the surplus population through interventions such as basic needs provision and micro- credit programmes that reunite the dispossessed with the means of subsistence.

The key point here is that the 'wastelands' of world capitalism are not a residue of pre-capitalist social relations in a stalled but ongoing transition to capitalism. As Chakrabarty puts it, "There is nothing in the logic of the market or profit that guarantees an automatic transformation of individuals into citizens".⁵⁵ On the contrary, far from being expressions of stalled transition, these social forms are central to the organisation of social reproduction within the contours of world capitalism. In this respect, Partha Chatterjee has usefully invoked the notion of 'political society' as a marker by which to discuss the political articulations of the dispossessed.⁵⁶ For Chatterjee the rural and urban poor make their claims on government outside the framework of stable, constitutionally defined rights and laws. In fact, it would be impossible for them to do otherwise because their very existence—from informal housing built on occupied public land through to the uncertain boundaries of informal forms of employment—bends the rules of legality constitutive of civil society. Rather, they occupy 'political society', a domain of temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations frequently through figurehead leaders who mediate such linkages.⁵⁷ Political society is not the outcome of pre-capitalist social institutions articulating with a modern formal state apparatus, because political society is a decisively modern phenomenon. It articulates the structural inability of capital to universalise in the manner of a historicist reading of history through the lens of capital. This point is made succinctly by Aditya Nigam when he argues that political society is:

*the domain of not-yet citizens, those who are not modern, individuated citizens (in the specific sense this has come to acquire in western political and social theory) and whose imaginative world is governed by notions of community. These populations of the not-yet citizens are not on the way to becoming full-fledged citizens; they will most probably never be.*⁵⁸

Without doubt the boundaries between the wastelands of capital and the circuits of capital are not as rigid as the presentation of Sanyal and Chatterjee might suggest.⁵⁹ The dispossessed are – out of necessity – shrewd in the ways they seek to secure their social reproduction and assert dignity in the face of intractable burdens. Indeed, for Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, such peoples actively construct a form of cosmopolitanism through circular migrations between different physical and social spaces in which they are able to "deploy the technologies of one to some advantage in the other".⁶⁰ In this way, the boundary between capital and non-capital is not a clear bright line, but a threshold whose borders are vague, constantly made and remade, and which is traversed repeatedly by individuals and groups that are necessarily shrewd in the ways that they seek to secure their social reproduction. Tim Mitchell therefore speaks of a 'frontier' that is a battleground of contested social practice:

It is not a thin line marking the barrier between market and non-market, or formal and informal. It is a terrain of warfare spread across the entire space of the market, the entire length of what is called the history of

*capitalism. If it is an outside, then it is an outside found everywhere, a scene of battle that seems to define every point at which the formal or the capitalist can be identified.*⁶¹

What does this entail for a theory of uneven development? First and foremost, it suggests that 'a theory' of uneven development, Marxist or otherwise, is untenable. Such an analytical strategy cannot help but organise the principles of historical change according to a central, overarching category such as 'the development of capital' cannot capture the histories upon which the latter was founded and that remain inherent to its being. There is no doubt that Marx's unfolding of the logic of capital is necessarily central to our understanding of contemporary social change on a world scale. However, as David Washbrook has suggested, the shadow of teleology, while necessarily informing historical perspective, can also play tricks with the light.⁶² On the one hand, it provides capital with the security of its logical categories, rather than emphasising the inherent instability of them and the ways in which the circuits of capital constantly attempt to secure their moorings in social relations and institutions whose provenance can in no way be derived from capital. On the other, it serves to confine our understanding of historical struggles by limiting them to the binaries of a world seen through the categories of capital. The narrative can consequently serve to rationalise – rather than contextualise and contest – what Dia Da Costa terms capital's 'voracious capacity to incorporate difference and marginalised others as a force for legitimising the system'.⁶³

Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide a methodological counterpoint to historicist readings of uneven development in the Marxist tradition. To reaffirm, the intention is not to dismiss Marx's critique of capital. The latter remains central to any prescient critique of the social dynamics of the modern world. However, it is important to be cognisant that Marxism has repeatedly been troubled by a tension between the logical deduction of social forms from the inner-logic of capital, and its narrative of the historical emergence (or non-emergence) of these forms in the manner laid out by the theory. For the subaltern school, this tension manifested itself in a failure to recognise that the categories through which Marxism constructs its account of social change are often complicit in creating silences and rendering historical difference simply a function of capital's totalising logic. The subaltern critique, I have argued, is important. Writing history or theory is, of course, an emphatically political endeavour. To use Stuart Corbridge's evocative term, it makes claims on strangers that are distant, socially, temporally and spatially.⁶⁴ In this respect, a self-reflexive Marxism that can recover the struggles cast under the shadows of a teleological reading of uneven development is one that is more pertinent for understanding the lineages (and therefore informing the futures) of the contemporary world.

Notes:

¹ It should be stressed that the term ‘postcolonial studies’ is one that has been used to encompass a diverse set of writings and has often been critiqued or rejected by authors who are viewed as key protagonists within the field. It is not my purpose to present a critical survey of the field that could address such debates (see Loomba 2005) nor will I address whether the subaltern studies contribution is usefully subsumed within the overarching field of ‘postcolonial studies’ (Chatterjee 2010).

² (Prakash 1994; Chakrabarty 2000a)

³ See, for example, (Dirlik 1997; Lazarus 1999; San Juan 2002)

⁴ (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2006; Smith 1998)

⁵ (O’Hanlon and Washbrook 1992) The latter was a response to Prakash’s call for ‘Post-Orientalist’ histories (Prakash 1990).

⁶ In addition to Prakash’s reply to O’Hanlon and Washbrook, (1992) see (Castree 1996) and (Bartolovich and Lazarus 2002)

⁷ On the relationship of the project – and particularly the work of Ranajit Guha – to Marxism, see (Chakrabarty 2000b). Other commentaries on this relationship can be found in Gyan Prakash (1990; 1994; 1992), Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000a), Partha Chatterjee (1983) and Gayatri Spivak (1996a).

⁸ (Guha 1982)

⁹ (Guha 1983) was a classic attempt to fulfil this aim.

¹⁰ (Guha 1997)

¹¹ (See the Marxist critique by Alam 1983; and the response by Chatterjee 1983)

¹² See (Chakrabarty and Cullenberg 2003) for a critical overview.

¹³ Both Chatterjee (2010) and Prakash (1994) provide overviews of these shifts.

¹⁴ Mainstream approaches to uneven development, from modernisation theory to neoliberalism and neo-institutionalism, emphasise that uneven development is a contingent phenomenon caused by political or cultural blockages that frustrate the development of market rationality and the appropriate institutional forms to promote an efficient and equitable society. From this perspective, history is the process of removing such blockages to allow all regions of the world to join the path of progress, modernisation and development pioneered by Europe since the end of the middle ages. That these theoretical approaches are the mainstay of international development institutions such as the World Bank is not surprising. On the one hand, they do not interrogate the impact of power in the creation and reproduction of the modern world and its entrenched relationships that stratify processes of production and consumption in such unequal fashions. On the other hand, a theory of uneven development that emphasises its contingent character legitimates the enlightened trusteeship of international development agencies to aid the countries of the South to overcome their internal barriers to modernisation. See (Taylor 2010).

¹⁵ In this respect, even the limits to capital can be portrayed solely as its own internal, self-generated contradictions, see Gidwani’s (2004) critique of Harvey.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Holloway’s (1995) notion of nation states as the ‘unity in separation’ of global capital.

¹⁷ (Chakrabarty 2000a p. 27-8).

¹⁸ (Webber 2008 and the commentaries by Michael Perelman, Charles Post and Alvin So in the same issue)

¹⁹ Notably, at several points Webber cites other authors to substantiate his understanding of primitive accumulation as a universal historical process, even when such authors explicitly reject such interpretations. For example, Webber cites an article by Jairus Banaji to assert the applicability of primitive accumulation to agrarian transformations in colonial India despite the fact that Banaji does avoid using the term within that article and describes processes that are infinitely more complex. Elsewhere Banaji rejects outright the notion: “Primitive accumulation is no longer the best way to frame the early history of capitalism ... because that remains a *purely teleological perspective* and one that diverts attention from the real lacuna in materialist historiography”. (Banaji 2010 p. 43, emphasis in original).

²⁰ It is important to note that Marx specifically warned against these tendencies: See Marx’s 1878 letter to *Otechestvennye Zapiski* where he rails against those who would insist on “transforming my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory

of the general course fatally imposed on all people's, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves placed" (Marx 1982 [1878])

²¹ Beyond the work of Marx himself, of particular importance are the perspectives outlined in Clarke (1988; 1990), Harvey (1999; 2003), Weeks (2001; 1982), Smith (1984), Sayer and Walker (1992; 1995), Fine (2004).

²² I have written about the international division of labour from within this perspective (Taylor 2008; 2009a; 2009b)

²³ It is notable that Marx didn't use the term 'capitalism', instead utilising either the 'capitalist mode of production' or 'bourgeois society' both of which, I contend, are more specific and limited than the commonplace usage of 'capitalism': see the critique of Brenner below.

²⁴ (Cooper 2005: 91)

²⁵ (Brenner 1977; Brenner 1985a; Brenner 1985b; Wood 2002).

²⁶ (Wood 2002; Wood 2003)

²⁷ (Wood 2002 p. 136)

²⁸ (Wood 2002) also (Teschke 2003) and (Lacher 2006)

²⁹ On the non-capitalist nature of absolutist Europe see (Wood 2002; Teschke 2003; Lacher 2006). With respect to the key case of France, George Comninel (1987) argues for the absolute absence of capitalism prior to 1789 owing to the lack of 'a system entirely structured about commodity production as the self-expansion of capital through the reduction of labour to labour power'. This position has been sharply critiqued by Harry Heller (2006), as touched on below.

³⁰ While proponents of Brenner's position have argued that there was "not even a hint of capitalist development" outside of England until 1815 (Zmolek 2004), more nuanced analyses have contested this. Harry Heller's (2006) study of the French Revolution contests the notion that capitalist dynamics were entirely absent from pre-nineteenth century France. He argues that capitalist production existed unevenly across the different sectors of the economy in 18th century France, with the north characterised by capitalist agriculture, bringing with it social differentiation between proprietors and large farmers on the one hand, and day labourers and teamsters on the other. Likewise, a capitalist dynamic in various branches of manufacture – some of them based around smaller workshops and some with large factories. Of course, this is not to suggest that France was somehow 'capitalist' according to the strict criteria of Wood, but rather to complicate the dichotomous picture of capitalism versus feudalism or absolutism drawn by the Brenner tradition.

³¹ See (Duchesne 2002; Albritton 2000; Albritton 1993; Albritton 2002)

³² Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2000) provide an alternative methodology for understanding the rise and consolidation of capitalism within the broader Atlantic world. They emphasise the confluence of struggle-driven process of expropriation that combined with four processes: 1) big commercial estates for capitalist agriculture (as per Brenner), but also including the slave plantations in the New World; 2) petty production in both rural and urban areas; 3) the putting out system; 4) the labour of circulation (particularly in trans-Atlantic shipping) that combined the first three. David Rollison (1992) also highlights the role of small merchants in transforming rural England during this period. See also (Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Federici 2004)

³³ See the critique by Davidson (2005).

³⁴ (Mitchell 2000 p. 12)

³⁵ It is presumably with this in mind that Wood entitled her book 'The Origin of Capitalism'.

³⁶ (Inikori 2002)

³⁷ Notably, the adherents of Brenner's thesis have rarely attempted to join the dots from the emergence of 'agrarian capitalism' in the 1400s with that of industrial capitalism some three hundred or more years later. Wood speculates that the dispossession of peasants provided both wage labourers and consumers and that, therefore, without agrarian capitalism there would have been no industrial capitalism (Wood 2002 p. 142). There is some substance to this view, although given that the mass-dispossession movement occurred at a much later stage than the origins of agrarian capitalism and was in its most striking instances a calculated, state-led process, there is ambiguity here regarding a singular causal relation. Moreover, while these dispossessed workers indeed become consumers of cheap commodities, the industrial revolution was not simply focused

on domestic working class markets, but was intimately connected to the international trade of the wider Atlantic world.

³⁸ Notably, Brenner's work on merchants and the English revolution of 1640 places more emphasis on conflicts between factions of merchants over access to overseas trade, a struggle that is difficult to reduce to the offshoots of agrarian capitalist development. "Whereas the company merchants thus 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, first in tobacco and then in sugar planting, while pioneering the Africa – West Indies – Virginia – New England trades in slaves, provisions, and staple crops". (Brenner 1993)

³⁹ Blackburn (1997) is in part following on the earlier propositions of Eric Williams yet suggests that the evidence for the importance of slavery for English capitalism is perhaps more compelling than Williams allowed, see chapter 12.

⁴⁰ In relation to the importance of wealth extraction from India, see (Habib 1995; Alavi 2008)

⁴¹ (Habib 1995 p. 23)

⁴² (Mitchell 2000 p. 2)

⁴³ On time-discipline, see E.P.Thompson's classic article from (Thompson 1967)

⁴⁴ (Marx 1976 p. 915). See also, "Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance." –The Poverty of Philosophy (1847)

⁴⁵ (Mitchell 2002 p. 4)

⁴⁶ See, for example, Julia Elyachar's (2005) discussion of workshops in suburban Cairo and Gidwani's (2008) discussion of the politics of work in Gujarat.

⁴⁷ (Pun and Smith 2007; Lee 2007; Yeung 2004)

⁴⁸ (Gidwani 2008: xxiv).

⁴⁹ (Prakash 1997 p. 22).

⁵⁰ (van Schendel 2006). Also see (Banaji 2010)

⁵¹ (Breman 1994)

⁵² This is discussed further below, where I draw on the work of Kalyan Sanyal.

⁵³ (Sanyal 2007 p. 53)

⁵⁴ For Sanyal (2007: 209), a need economy is "an ensemble of economic activities undertaken for the purpose of meeting needs, as distinct from activities driven by an impersonal force of systemic accumulation . . . a non-capitalist economic space that is integral to the post-colonial capitalist formation".

⁵⁵ (Chakrabarty 1989pg. xi)

⁵⁶ (Chatterjee 2004; Chatterjee 2008)

⁵⁷ (Chatterjee 2008 p. 57)

⁵⁸ (Nigam 2008)

⁵⁹ Indeed, the radical separation of civil society and political society as autonomous domains reflects a failure to acknowledge one of the original critiques of the subaltern school – its reluctance to deconstruct its central category of the 'autonomous domain of the subaltern', cf. the critique by O'Hanlon in (Ludden 2002) alongside (Spivak 1996b).

⁶⁰ (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2004 pp 339–364)

⁶¹ (Mitchell 2007 p. 252)

⁶² (Washbrook 2007 p. 88)

⁶³ (Da Costa 2010)

⁶⁴ (Corbridge 1993)

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