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Towards a “Unified Field Theory” of Uneven Development: Human Productive Subjectivity, Capital and the International

GREIG CHARNOCK  and GUIDO STAROSTA 

This article puts labour, and its historically changing forms of existence, at the centre of the theorisation of uneven international development. It advocates a consciously dialectical approach that goes beyond significant limitations in historical-geographical materialism, and in the work of Neil Smith in particular. It argues, first, that geopolitical modes of explanation cannot be asserted on descriptive grounds, or in logical abstraction from the determinate content of social reproduction. It then argues that the critique of uneven development must focus on the material process Marx termed the “real subsumption of labour to capital” so as to analyse the transformation of the productive subjectivity of the international working class in contemporary capitalism. This transformation has today resulted in the contemporary form of a “new” international division of labour, the worldwide dynamics of which are mediated by a variety of specific national and regional forms of the capital accumulation process.

In *Global Society*, Vol. 29, No. 4, Sébastien Rioux mounts an incisive critique of international relations literatures that take Leon Trotsky’s idea of “uneven and combined development” (U&CD) as the main conceptual prism through which to provide a critical, historical materialist explanation of “the international” and of worldwide socio-historical change.¹ Rioux’s principal criticism is that U&CD theory takes for granted that which needs to be theorised, namely the question of “why and how capitalist development is uneven and combined”—a problem inherited from Trotsky himself who, as Rioux explains, only asserts the general law-like validity of U&CD on immediate, descriptive grounds. This, he argues, ultimately leaves us bereft of “the necessary theoretical development of categories and concepts that can account for the historically specific dynamics of social change by tracing back its logical connections to the *inner structural dynamics of development itself*”.² In lacking such a substantive theorisation of uneven international

1. Sébastien Rioux, “Mind the (Theoretical) Gap: On the Poverty of International Relations Theorising of Uneven and Combined Development”, *Global Society*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2015), pp. 481–509. See also Sébastien Rioux, “The Collapse of ‘the International Imagination’: A Critique of the Transhistorical Approach to Uneven and Combined Development”, *Research in Political Economy*, Vol. 30A (2015), pp. 85–112.

2. Rioux, “Mind the (Theoretical) Gap”, *op. cit.*, p. 490, emphasis added.

development on the basis of these specific dynamics, Rioux's arraignment against the U&CD literature finds it culpable of conflating "the *fact* of U&CD as a *theory* of U&CD".³

Our aim in this article is not to intervene in any debate between Rioux and U&CD theorists. Rather, we seek to depart from Rioux's own, more reconstructive suggestion that the key to finding a "unified field theory" of uneven development might lie in a set of "historical-geographical materialist" literatures that are largely ignored in international relations scholarship.⁴ We note that while making this suggestion Rioux is keen to transcend the antinomy, or dualism, between the Marxian analysis of the "organic tendencies" of capitalist development on the one hand, and a transhistorical conception of inter-societal interaction, on the other. In this article, we therefore outline our own proposal for the development of a theory of uneven international development that might transcend the dualism between these two sociological and inter-societal "logics". Indeed, what we propose is a theory that seeks to avoid any kind of dualism, exteriority or "gap" in the theorisation of uneven development—including any dualism between theory, on the one hand, and the historical development of concrete "empirical" forms, on the other.⁵ In other words, we seek to vindicate a consciously *dialectical* approach to the question of uneven development and the international that reproduces neither the crude empiricism of approaches that depart from—but do not go beyond—the immediacy of concrete phenomena, nor the application of a speculatively arrived at "framework" of concepts and categories—or a "model"—upon concrete reality (giving rise to the violence of abstraction characteristic of structuralist Marxism, for example). Rather, our approach acknowledges the dialectical unity of the content and form of concrete social phenomena, and on the basis of the recognition of the general determination of the process of social reproduction specifically in, what Marx termed, "bourgeois society". Accordingly, we will argue, much as Rioux appears to suggest is already established by historical-geographical materialism—and in the work of the late Neil Smith, in particular—that the key to providing something like a "unified field theory" of uneven development is dialectically rooted in the intrinsic, material unity between human beings and nature, and the socially mediated character of that unity (hence between productive forces, social relations of production, and their actualisation in and through the conscious practice of individuals).⁶ In other words, we want to put *labour*, and its historically changing forms of existence, at the centre of the theorisation and analysis of uneven international development.

We therefore begin by summarising what we think is the more productive contribution to the theorisation of uneven development to be found in Smith's pioneering work, namely his insistence that uneven development is a *determined* outcome of "the production of nature", i.e. of socio-ecological metabolism under specifically capitalistic social relations.⁷ Yet our actual intent in this first section is to revisit this

3. *Ibid.*, p. 508, emphasis added.

4. See Scott Kirsch, "Historical-Geographical Materialism", in Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Vol. 5 (Oxford: Elsevier, 2009), pp. 163–168.

5. Guido Starosta and Gastón Caligaris, *Trabajo, valor y capital: de la crítica marxiana de la economía política al capitalismo contemporáneo* (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2017), pp. 11–15.

6. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 58.

7. We recognise that the term "determination", which we use throughout this article, will for some readers immediately smack of a vulgar economic functionalism in which a great many "superstructural" phenomena might be explained with recourse to a mechanistic, causal relation with the "economic

contribution in order to highlight what we think are deficiencies in historical-geographical materialism more generally, and which, ultimately, limit its ability to explain uneven development without also falling into a trap of relying on ungrounded, unexplained and indeterminate “laws” of capitalist development that derive from—and serve to reproduce—a dualism that is not so very different from that which Rioux seems to identify (in his own terms) as being so problematic in U&CD theory.

Our own contribution is therefore to build upon the “rational kernel” of Smith’s production of nature thesis so as to advance a theory of world-historical social change and uneven development that is wholly grounded in the materiality of the “web of socio-ecological life”, to borrow a term from Harvey,⁸ but which can begin to explain contemporary dynamics of uneven development and inter- (and, indeed, intra-) societal relations without relying upon indeterminate, trans-historical “laws of unevenness”. We argue in this first section that the key to arriving at a substantive, materialist theory of the international and of uneven development is to, first, recognise that one simply cannot assert the autonomy of “the political”—and therefore of geopolitical modes of explanation—on descriptive grounds or in “logical” abstraction from its determinate social content.⁹ In short, we suggest, the international as composed of different national state forms is today part and parcel of capital’s “second Nature”, and therefore should be explained on the basis of its substantive content and what is really at stake in the general process and product of uneven international development (albeit in a highly mediated form), namely the transformation of human productive subjectivity (or, more simply, *labour*), and the changing forms of the global production of relative surplus-value as the historically specific, alienated form of that general process of transformation.¹⁰

base”. For us, however, the term is central to dialectical inquiry and the recognition that reality is contradictory, the movement of contradiction. “Contradiction” here means that every real form (whether “natural” or “social”) realises its own qualitative determination by transforming itself into a more concrete form, that the process of determination is a process of becoming another, i.e. a movement of self-negation. This form of movement, or the “inner life”, of the concrete object that we want to inquire after by means of thought, needs to be observed through its specific modes of existence and development. Marx’s *Capital* does precisely this: it is the ideal reproduction of the real determinations of capital as the alienated social subject of bourgeois society, starting with its simplest mode of existence—i.e. the commodity. See Juan Iñigo Carrera, *Conocer el Capital hoy: Usar críticamente El Capital* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2007).

8. David Harvey, “Notes Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development”, in *Spaces of Neoliberalization: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005), pp. 55–92.

9. Though not picked up on by Rioux in his critique of the U&CD literature, it is noteworthy that the latter pays scant attention to debates among historical materialist scholars from the 1970s and 1980s in which heavy criticism was heaped upon the notion of the (relative) autonomy of the political. In our view, Simon Clarke and others working in the “open Marxist tradition” succeeded in articulating the most cogent, non-dualistic theorisation of the determination of the national state form. See Simon Clarke (ed.), *The State Debate* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991); Werner Bonefeld, “Global Capital, National State, and the International”, *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2008), pp. 63–72.

10. The term “human productive subjectivity” denotes the power and capacity of the human individual to partake in the social metabolic process, that is, the conscious control over the social character of her individual labour. See Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”, in *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 279–400. In the capitalist mode of production, the productive attributes of individual workers include the strictly material or technical dimension of labour-power required by

The next dimension of our argument, then, is that in order to explain uneven development, and the outwardly manifest diversity of national “capitalisms”, we must focus on the material process Marx termed the “real subsumption of labour to capital” and the transformation of the productive subjectivity of the international working class in contemporary capitalism. As we explain in section two of this article, this entails the recognition that the process of the production of relative surplus-value on a world scale leads to historically changing constellations of the international division of labour—much as Marx insisted was already a real tendency of the bourgeois mode of production and the system of large-scale industry as early as the 1840s.¹¹ More concretely, and as a contemporaneous manifestation of this more general foundation of the international, we argue in section three of the article that the global transformation of socio-ecological metabolism on the basis of the fragmentation of the productive subjectivity of the international working class has in recent years resulted in the contemporary form of a “new” international division of labour (NIDL). The inner, worldwide dynamics of this NIDL are mediated by a variety of specific national and regional forms of the capital accumulation process, such that each particular concrete national space of capital accumulation and societal reproduction bears its own empirically distinctive attributes in terms of institutional forms, labour markets, distributions of income and wealth, and, of course, competing ideologies and political cleavages.

On “the Production of Space, Scale and Nature under Capitalism” and the Limits to Smith’s Theory of Uneven Development

In this first section, we pick up from where Rioux signs off in his *Global Society* article, and offer some initial grounds for a revitalised, unified theory of the international that is precisely grounded in the recognition that the reproduction of human life necessarily entails a metabolic relation with nature. For Rioux, the failure on the part of IR theorists to engage with Smith, as well as his fellow historical-geographical materialist David Harvey, is significant because they have already identified the necessity for a “unified field theory” that might explain worldwide socio-historical change. Smith and Harvey have also already gone some way towards explaining the uneven (and combined) development of a multiplicity of social and geopolitical forms on the basis of a materialist conception of the inner dynamics of capitalist development in historical time and space. Taking Rioux’s cue, then, let us examine Smith’s project to provide “a thorough spatial reconstruction of the concepts and categories pertaining to the capitalist mode of production” so as to begin to explain the international as we encounter it as being necessary and immanent to the reproduction of capital as the most general form of social

the particularity and complexity of the productive functions to be performed, as well as its “moral” attributes (that is, the general forms of consciousness and self-understandings that make those workers suitable for the specific forms of discipline that a certain organisation of the capitalist labour process entails). See Juan Iñigo Carrera, *El capital: razón histórica, sujeto revolucionario y conciencia* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2013); and Guido Starosta, *Marx’s Capital: Method and Revolutionary Subjectivity* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

11. Karl Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital & Value, Price and Profit* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), pp. 43–48. See also Paul Cammack, “Capitalist Development in the Twenty-First Century: States and Global Competitiveness”, in Toby Carroll and Darryl S.L. Jarvis (eds.), *Asia after the Developmental State: Disembedding Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 125–129.

reproduction *today*.¹² As Rioux suggests, this necessitates a return to question of "the production of space, scale and Nature under capitalism".¹³

In our view, Smith's lasting contribution is to the theorisation of the dialectical unity of nature and society, and to how "the spatial scales of capitalism" are re-produced—with all of their geographical and geopolitical "unevenness"—as a "corollary" of the historically specific (i.e. capitalistic) form of mediated socio-ecological metabolism on a world scale.¹⁴ This has significant ramifications for how we ought to resist any lapse into conceiving of certain spatial scales in immutable terms:

the geographical scales of human activity are not neutral "givens", not fixed universals of social experience, nor are they an arbitrary methodological or conceptual choice ... Rather, scale should be seen as materially real frames of social action. As such, geographical scales are historically mutable and are the products of social activity, broadly speaking.

... At the very least, different kinds of society produce different kinds of geographical scale for containing and enabling particular forms of social interaction. The medieval city is the locus of feudal commerce and simultaneously a place to be defended from external military attack, while the modern metropolis is much more the expression of an expansive capitalism premised on large-scale production, widespread financial, service and communication networks, and mass consumption.¹⁵

This specificity, Smith argues, holds true as much for the production of the national state as for other spatial scales of social interaction:

With the internationalisation of commercial capital in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the question of coordinating competitive and cooperative relationships between capitals became increasingly vital. The nationalisation of capital, simultaneous with and as part of the internationalisation of capital, was the solution that emerged historically ... National capitals and their attendant political frameworks in the nation-state emerged as a vital geographical means for coordinating and arbitrating economic competition between capitals at the global scale. National capitals are in effect different "laws of value" in a wider global market, and they remain coherent to the extent that the nation-states devised for the purpose succeed in protecting the gamut of social, economic and cultural conditions that sustain individual national capitals. That is, the functions of the state which were in

12. Rioux, "Mind the (Theoretical) Gap", *op. cit.*, p. 499.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 498.

14. In *Uneven Development*, Smith confines his discussion of the spatial scales of capitalism to the urban, global and nation-state, although in later years he also discussed the household and the body; see Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Neil Smith, "Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Space", *Social Text*, No. 33 (1992), pp. 54–81.

15. Neil Smith, "Remaking Scale: Competition and Cooperation in Pre-National and Post-National Europe", in Neil Brenner, Bob Jessop, Martin Jones and Gordon McLeod (eds.), *State/Space: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 228.

earlier times attached to lower spatial scales of territorial control—city states, duchies, kingdoms, etc—are, *with the advent of capitalism, reconstituted at the scale of the nation*.¹⁶

On what basis does Smith make these claims? His conception of what he very much saw as a dialectical, non-dualistic theory of the production of space and scale, in general, was first expounded in his now classic book *Uneven Development*, in which he challenged a basic notion of space inherent to traditional Western epistemologies and indeed common parlance—that of “space as field, as a container, or as simple emptiness”.¹⁷ Influenced by the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre, he argued that space is itself a social product, and, moreover, has become an active moment in the production and reproduction of a historically specific (i.e. capitalist) worldwide socio-ecological landscape: “By its actions”, he insists, “this society no longer accepts space as a container, but produces it; we do not live, act and work ‘in’ space so much as by living, acting, and working we produce space”.¹⁸ As a corrective to traditional theory, then, Smith sought to advance a systematic, Marxian understanding of how capital produces and re-produces variegated socio-geographical space “in its own image”¹⁹—a result he termed “uneven development” or “uneven geographical development”.²⁰

For Smith, an essential preliminary step in the appreciation of how capital produces space at various inter-relational scales is to first examine the *production of nature* under capitalism. This, he underlines, is a reflexively critical endeavour since it must penetrate the “delusive appearance of things”,²¹ and must question a core tenet of traditional Western thought in which “nature is generally seen as precisely that which cannot be produced; it is the antithesis of human productive activity”.²² On the basis of a critical reading of the Frankfurt School theorist Alfred Schmidt, in particular, Smith emphasises the central importance of the concept of socio-ecological metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) in Marx’s own critique of political economy, the key materialist-dialectical point being that “the whole of nature is socially mediated and, inversely, society is mediated through nature as a component of the total reality”.²³ Or, to put it simply, in the historically evolving process of the social-ecological metabolism upon which human reproduction is based, seemingly prior and external nature itself increasingly becomes a *product*.²⁴ Smith here picks up on Schmidt’s heuristic and “useful distinction

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 229–230, emphasis added.

17. Smith, *Uneven Development*, p. 92.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 116. See also Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

19. As David Harvey puts it in “The Geopolitics of Capitalism”, in Derek Gregory and John Urry (eds.), *Social Relations and Spatial Structures* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 150.

20. To this end, Smith was ultimately dismissive of the theoretical utility of both Trotsky and Lefebvre: see Neil Smith, “The Geography of Uneven Development”, in Bill Dunn and Hugo Radice (eds.), *100 Years of Permanent Revolution: Results and Prospects* (London: Pluto, 2006), pp. 182–183; Neil Smith, “Antinomies of Space and Nature in Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*”, in Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (eds.), *Philosophy and Geography II: The Production of Public Space* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp. 49–70.

21. Smith, *Uneven Development*, *op. cit.*, p. 49, quoting Marx.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

23. Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: NLB, 1971), p. 79.

24. This argument would certainly seem to be consistent with Rioux’s other work on corporeality, insofar as it critiques the commonplace, abstract category of “the natural body” and foregrounds, instead, the material processes of the social reproduction of real bodies under circumstances that are

between 'first nature' and a 'second nature'", which he subsequently refashions in *Uneven Development* so as to claim that "we must now consider there to be a social priority of nature; nature is nothing but social", and that "instead of the domination of nature, therefore, we must consider the more complex process of the *production of nature*".²⁵ For Smith, the term "second nature" captures the result of the historical, worldwide generalisation of production for exchange characteristic of capitalism, and subsequently the result of the "real subsumption of nature to capital".²⁶ With the constitution of the capitalist world market, "nature is progressively produced from within and as part of the so-called second nature".²⁷ In search of profit, capital "attaches a price tag to everything it sees and from then on, it is this price tag which determines the fate of nature"; "no part of the earth's surface, the atmosphere, the oceans, the geological substratum, or the biological substratum are immune from transformation by capital".²⁸ Indeed, for Smith, such was the degree to which capital had subsumed nature in this manner that the distinction between first and second nature was, by the late twentieth century, practically obsolete.²⁹

Smith's next step in his line of argument is unequivocal: "Unless space is conceptualised as a quite separate reality from nature, the production of space is a logical corollary of the production of nature".³⁰ For Smith, the produced spaces and scales of capitalistic second nature emerge out of an incessant "dialectic of equalisation and differentiation" of the development of capital's productive forces. As capital extends its reach over the whole globe, the socio-ecological landscape is subsumed within a process that consists of capital's price tagging of everything. Yet this landscape comprises myriad particularised spaces/places—at a variety of spatial scales, including that of the national state. The *relative* past, present and future development of these spaces is conditioned by specific degrees of the concentration and centralisation of capital, the agglomeration and socialisation of labour-power, and differing degrees of resilience to the perpetual rhythms of accumulation and geographical "see-saws" in the location of investment that periodically threaten the devaluation of geographically concentrated fixed capital and of relatively immobile working classes bearing particular productive and cost attributes.³¹ As Smith explains,

the drive toward universality in capitalism brings only a limited equalisation of levels and conditions of development. Capital produces distinct spatial scales—absolute spaces—within which the drive towards

historically specific to capitalism, and which therefore engender the particular attributes of the "labouring body". See Sébastien Rioux, "Embodied Contradictions: Capitalism, Social Reproduction and Body Formation", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 48 (January–February 2015), pp. 194–202.

25. Smith, *Uneven Development*, *op. cit.*, p. 33, pp. 47–48. Here, Smith is criticising the notion of the social domination of nature in Frankfurt School Critical Theory.

26. Neil Smith, "Nature as Accumulation Strategy", in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (eds.), *Coming to Terms with Nature: Socialist Register, 2007* (London: Merlin Press, 2006), pp. 19–41.

27. Smith, *Uneven Development*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79.

29. To the degree that David Harvey affirms: "It is in practice, hard to see where 'society' begins and 'nature' ends ... [I]n a fundamental sense, there is in the final analysis nothing unnatural about New York City", in David Harvey, "The Nature of Environment: Dialectics of Social and Environmental Change", in Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch (eds.), *Real Problems, False Solutions: Socialist Register, 1993* (London: Merlin Press, 1993), pp. 28, 31.

30. Smith, *Uneven Development*, *op. cit.*, chapter 4, p. 92.

31. See also David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), chapter 12.

equalisation is concentrated. But it can do this only by an acute differentiation and continued re-differentiation of relative space both within and between scales. The scales themselves are not fixed but develop (growing pains and all) within the development of capitalism itself. They are not impervious; the urban and national scales are products of world capital and continue to be shaped by it. But the necessity of discrete scales and of their internal differentiation is fixed.³²

“Uneven development”, Smith concludes, “is the product and geographical premise of capitalist development”.

This perceptive insight, we argue, ought to have significant methodological ramifications for the theorisation of the international, for if the appearance of “socio-political multiplicity” and of uneven international development as real spatial phenomena must be *explained* on the basis of their (re-)production as a moment of the real subsumption of nature to capital—that is, as *produced* spaces—then we ought to be prepared to accept the possibility that the international is less of an autonomous, autopoietic system than might be posited by means of some transhistorical logic or apprehended by an immediate empirical focus on geopolitical rivalry and cooperation. We should, in other words, be prepared to include “the international” among those other categories—ground-rent, landed property and agriculture—that Marx accepted as being central to any scientific analysis of pre-capitalist society and economy, but which become subsumed within the production of nature and space in specific, practical ways. In short, their categorial relation should be established on the basis of their determination and reproduction under capitalism *specifically* rather than on the basis of historical precedence. To paraphrase Marx, “Capital is the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society. It must form the starting-point as well as the finishing-point, and must be dealt with before [the international]”.³³

The recognition that this insight today applies as much to the political categories of the national state and the international system as it does to economic categories is common among certain Marxist literatures—for instance, among “state derivation” theorists, and the various scholars associated with “open Marxism”—but is at odds with orthodox IR and traditional epistemologies of the international.³⁴ We should also already add at this point that it would appear to be inconsistent with Neil Smith’s own take on the remaking of state-space in “post-national Europe”, from

32. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

33. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 108. Marx goes on to say: “... It would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to historical development. The point is not the historical position of the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society ... Rather, their order within modern bourgeois society”.

34. See, for example, Claudia von Braunmühl, “On the Analysis of the Bourgeois State within the World Market Context”, in John Holloway and Sol Picciotto (eds.), *State and Capital: A Marxist Debate* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), pp. 160–177; John Holloway, “Global Capital and National State”, *Capital & Class*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1994), pp. 23–49; Werner Bonefeld, “The Spectre of Globalization: On the Form and Content of the World Market”, in Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis (eds.), *The Politics of Change: Globalization, Ideology and Critique* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 31–68; and Peter Burnham, “Marx, International Political Economy and Globalisation”, *Capital & Class*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2001), pp. 103–112.

which we quoted above, which also implicitly adheres to a methodologically nationalist epistemology and, in our view, fails to follow through the insight of his own production of space thesis into his conception of the contemporary national state form. Our contrasting methodological point here is made clear by Juan Iñigo Carrera, who explains how and why the world market historically results from the confluence of various national processes of capital accumulation, but, once this process is complete, the relationship becomes inverted and the world market becomes—both in a concrete and cognitive sense—“systematically prior” to its differentiation into national spheres in competition with one another which, through their antagonistic relationships as “hostile brothers”,³⁵ *outwardly* mediate the unfolding of the essentially global *inner* determinations of the production of relative surplus-value on a planetary scale.³⁶ Whatever the “fact” of a multiplicity of national state spaces formally constituted under pre-capitalist or mercantilist phases of international economic integration, then, these spaces are *today* reproduced organically as both product and pre-condition of the essentially *global* accumulation of capital—that is, as “really subsumed” elements of capital’s “second nature”.³⁷

As path breaking as Smith’s argument was for its time, we think that there are further limitations to his theory of uneven development. Crucially, Smith works with a methodological approach that reinforces a dualistic rift between theory and history (ironically so, given the attention he gives to the unity of nature and society). For Smith, as with historical-geographical materialist scholarship more generally, theorising amounts to offering a mental construct, or “cognitive map”,³⁸ that identifies general tendencies or “laws of motion” in abstraction (e.g. “the dialectic of equalisation and differentiation”), only to then attempt to extrinsically *apply* that construct or map to an otherwise self-subsisting concrete “reality” in order to try to come up with a framework offering a certain degree of explanatory power. The crux for us is that, in dialectical cognition, “theoretical categories” are not—in a Kantian dualistic fashion—a subjective way of ideally organising a

35. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value, Vol. II* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), p. 29.

36. Juan Iñigo Carrera, “The General Rate of Profit and Its Realisation in the Differentiation of Industrial Capitals”, in Greig Charnock and Guido Starosta (eds.), *The New International Division of Labour: Global Transformation and Uneven Development* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), p. 36.

37. Further textual evidence to demonstrate that this accords with Marx’s own thinking might be found in chapter 31 of *Capital*, where he discusses the “colonial system” as a concrete form of the original accumulation of capital: it “proclaimed the making of profit as the ultimate and sole purpose of mankind” (Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976], p. 918). That is, now profit-making becomes the content of the social process of humanity as a whole (i.e. the world market), and not just any particular national community. Space constraints do not allow us to elaborate on the precise nature of the process of transition this entails in different parts of the world, but we would broadly endorse the approach in Dale Tomich, “Rapporti sociali do produzione e mercato mondiale nel dibattito recente sulla transizione dal feudalesimo al capitalismo”, *Studi Storici*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1980), pp. 538–564.

38. David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 2. We also think Castree’s encapsulation of Harvey’s theoretical project applies as much to Smith, insofar as “he acknowledges that while [theory] is indubitably *about* the world it is not, by definition, *coterminous with it*. ... What this means is that while critique can be compelling *at the theoretical level*, it is found wanting when put to the test of conjunctural specifics”; Noel Castree, “The Detour of Critical Theory”, in Noel Castree and Derek Gregory (eds.), *David Harvey: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 260. In this respect, Derek Kerr’s critique of a theory-history dualism in Harvey’s work applies as much to Smith; see Derek Kerr, “The Theory of Rent: From Crossroads to the Magic Roundabout”, *Capital & Class*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1996), pp. 70–71.

given material content, but rather they are more abstract yet fully objective determinations of those more concrete “empirical” forms. This further explains our earlier injunction to heed Marx’s methodological point about the determinate—rather than historical or logical—sequencing of the categories of critique.³⁹ Smith, on the other hand, is himself culpable of a dualism between theory and history. To the extent that he in particular conceives of unity of the world market, it is but the *contingent* result of the *indeterminate* manner in which the tendencies of “equalisation and differentiation” unfold historically and concretely.⁴⁰ To the extent that he conceives of national states as mediating forms of worldwide capitalist development, they are but the contingent “resolution” of the *indeterminate* manner in which the tendencies of “competition and cooperation” unfold historically and concretely within and beyond their demarcated boundaries.⁴¹ In both cases, his “mapping” remains at the apparent level of the concrete forms in which the substantive immanent unity of the global movement of the total social capital—to which we return in more detail below—asserts itself outwardly through the antagonistic relationships among individual capitals (economically) and among national states (politically). That is, his work leaves significant questions unanswered regarding the development of an approach that can adequately conceive of the systematic mediations between abstract tendencies of the capital accumulation process and concrete empirical forms of the world market.⁴²

In sum, we find that Smith’s “cognitive mapping” leads him to overlook the determinate social content of uneven development. At one point in *Uneven Development*, he does discuss the “fate of human nature under capitalism”, but only as an incidental *by-product* of the technical division of labour and the historical advance of the system of large-scale machinery.⁴³ Smith does not, in other words, identify the development of the material powers of the human being as a labouring subject—that is, of human productive subjectivity—as the *content* of the production of nature, the real subsumption of nature to capital, the historical development of the social and technical division of labour, and of the development of the productive forces under capitalism. And for this reason, he too leaves us bereft of a unified theory that is able to provide a systematic explanation of uneven international development that maintains the unity of not just nature and society but also theory and history. As we now explain in further detail, the key to finding such a theory still lies precisely in the “inner dynamics of development itself”, as suggested by Rioux. But it entails the foregrounding of the recognition that the global accumulation of capital still rests upon the pursuit of relative surplus-value, and with it the transformation of the human productive subjectivity of the international working class.

39. John Bellamy Foster makes a broadly similar point in his “Marxism in the Anthropocene: Dialectical Rifts on the Left”, *International Critical Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2016), p. 414.

40. See, for instance, Smith, “The Geography of Uneven Development”, *op. cit.*, pp. 189–190.

41. See Smith, “Remaking Scale”, *op. cit.*, pp. 228–229.

42. In *Uneven Development*, Smith falls back on orthodox Marxist ideas on the sources of uneven international development and “underdevelopment” (the likes of Samir Amin, Arghiri Emmanuel and Ernest Mandel), and only re-signifies them in light of his foregrounding of a dialectic of equalisation and differentiation. For a critique of this orthodoxy, see Juan Iñigo Carrera, “End Notes to ‘The General Rate of Profit and Its Realisation in the Differentiation of Industrial Capitals’”, available: <https://www.academia.edu/24332230/End_Notes_to_The_general_rate_of_profit_and_its_realisation_in_the_differentiation_of_industrial_capitals_1> (accessed 7 October 2016).

43. Smith, *Uneven Development*, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–74.

The Global Accumulation of Capital and the “Inner Dynamics of Development Itself”

One of Marx’s most potent scientific discoveries was that capital is neither simply a thing (for example, the instruments of production), nor a productive unit or legal entity (such as a firm), nor a social grouping sharing common characteristics and interests (for instance, “business” or “the bourgeoisie”). Rather, in its general determination as self-valorising value, capital is a materialised social relation between commodity-owners differentiated into social classes, which, in its fully developed form as the (global) *total social capital*, becomes inverted into the (alienated) subject of the process of social reproduction and its unitary expansion.⁴⁴ Thus, capital is essentially the movement of the self-expansion of the objectified general social relation between private and independent human beings, which, in the course of its own process, produces and reproduces the latter as members of antagonistic social classes.⁴⁵ All moments of the human life-process become inverted into material bearers of the life-cycle of capital, or, rather, they become forms assumed by the flow of value in its self-expanding circulatory process. Subsumed under the capital-form, the alienated content of social life becomes the production of surplus-value or the formally boundless quantitative progression of the general reified form of social-ecological metabolism.⁴⁶

Although this content governs the movement of capital as a whole, as an alienated collective power the total (global) social capital is nonetheless the product of the private and independent form taken by social labour.⁴⁷ The general unity of the movement of the total social capital cannot be established immediately. It is thereby indirectly established through the exchange of commodities resulting from the apparently autonomous actions of individual capitals in competition with each other, as each of them pursues the maximisation of its profitability through the expanded reproduction of their formally independent cycles of valorisation. More specifically, the concrete form in which individual capitals assert their class unity as “aliquot parts” of the total social capital is the process of formation of the general rate of profit.⁴⁸ This is the inner or essential determination of the general social relation between capitalist firms (or individual capitals). Competition between individual capitals operating in different branches of production within the international division of labour (IDL) has the result of equalising rates of profit in and across those branches, thus averaging out to form an average world market rate of profit.⁴⁹

The antagonistic character of the class relation disrupts the fluidity of the total social capital’s valorisation. The establishment of the general unity of social labour must therefore take shape through a further objectified form of social mediation, the state, which in bourgeois society confronts commodity-owners (the personifications of money-as-capital and of the commodity labour-power), as an apparently external power with the authority and capacity to establish the

44. Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, *op. cit.*, p. 763.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 723–724; Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume II* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 185.

46. Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, *op. cit.*, pp. 251–257.

47. The term “total social capital” is the usual English translation of what Marx variously terms “*gesamte gesellschaftliche Kapital*”, “*gesellschaftlichen Gesamtkapitals*”, or simply “*gesellschaftliche Kapitals*”.

48. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume III* (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 298–300, 312.

49. Iñigo Carrera, “The General Rate of Profit”, *op. cit.*; Bonefeld, “The Spectre of Globalization”, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

overall direct regulation of their antagonistic social relations. The state thus develops as the most concrete political form that embodies the direct organisation of the unity of the conditions of social reproduction in its alienated capital-form.⁵⁰ By virtue of this content, the state becomes the general political representative of the total social capital. In brief, capitalist social relations exist as differentiated economic forms (the autonomised movement of capital-commodities on the market) and political forms (class struggle and the state). The latter, far from enjoying “autonomy” (relative or otherwise), are the necessary mode of realisation of the contradictory content of the economic mode of existence of capitalist social relations. In other words, class struggle and state policies are not to be conceived of as independent, self-subsisting factors that externally modify or influence the workings of the law of value. Instead, they need to be grasped as necessary modes of motion through which the law of value further unfolds beyond the strictly economic forms immediately springing from the indirect nature of the social relations of capitalist production.

Insofar as the law of value operates through the jurisdictional demarcation of the world market into multiple national spaces of valorisation, the unity of the global total social capital becomes self-differentiated into the circulation processes of distinct national total social capitals. In this way, the competition between individual capitals becomes politically mediated “by the direct relations that are established between distinct national states—that is, their ‘international relations’”.⁵¹ The formation of the average world market rate of profit thus takes concrete shape through diverse geopolitical forms. However, this does not change the fact that the immanent content of both international economic relations between individual capitals and international political relations between national states remains the accumulation of capital on a world scale. Geopolitical competition in the “interstate system” is thus but a further mediated form in which, through their political representation by their respective states, the “multiplicity” of national total social capitals also assert their unity as aliquot parts of the global total social capital. Through all these complex mediations, the latter thereby affirms itself as the concrete alienated subject of socio-ecological metabolism through the exploitation of the international working class.⁵²

This eminently unconscious and crisis-ridden social-ecological process gives rise to changing constellations of the international division of labour and, as a consequence, to evolving developmental potentialities for each national space that mediates the production of relative surplus-value by the total social capital across the globe. The territorial or spatial dimension of the capital accumulation process—and the changing forms of the worldwide division of labour—therefore cannot be seen as being determined by the conscious and autonomous political “strategies” of governments and state bureaucrats charged with directing the “national economy”. Instead, it needs to be grasped as an expression of the underlying formal and material unity of the essentially global contradictory dynamics of the accumulation of the total social capital through the production of relative surplus-value, which are economically mediated (as opposed to determined) by

50. Marx, *Capital: Volume I, op. cit.*, p. 719ff.

51. Gastón Caligaris, “The Global Accumulation of Capital and Ground-Rent in ‘Resource Rich’ Countries”, in Charnock and Starosta, *The New International Division of Labour, op. cit.*, p. 58.

52. For further methodological clarification of the relation between the *global* total social capital and *national* total social capital, see *ibid.*, pp. 56–59.

relations of competition among individual capitals like transnational corporations (TNCs), on the one hand, and politically mediated by the policies of a multiplicity of national states on the other.⁵³

The dynamic and changing character of international development is therefore a product of *these* “inner structural dynamics” of the accumulation of capital and the worldwide production of relative surplus-value in particular. Smith’s insistence that “uneven development represents a forced yet contested, momentarily fixed yet always fluid resolution to [the] central contradiction [of equalisation and differentiation]” ultimately stops short of foregrounding the content of such dynamics, and thus leaves “geo-historical processes as they are ‘really going on’” unexplained.⁵⁴ Where we advance beyond Smith, therefore, is in our own insistence that we need to return to the question of how the total global social capital—as the general reified form of social-ecological metabolism—looks to produce relative surplus-value *in concrete, historical forms*. The key to providing an answer to this question, and one which evades the dualism between theory and history, lies in the recognition that in its most developed form as large-scale industry, the production of relative surplus-value fundamentally entails the permanent revolution in the modes of exertion of the labour-power of individual workers and of their articulation as a directly collective productive body or organism.⁵⁵ This is the “permanent revolution” that lies at the heart of the changing historical forms of the international division of labour and its geopolitical manifestations, and which—when it forms the basis of the theorisation of “the international”—allows for the preservation in the very process of cognition itself of the unity of nature and society (i.e. the specificity of capitalism) as well as the unity of theory and history in the substantive explanation of the social totality and its changing forms.

The foundation of the uneven spatial differentiation of capitalism as a totality—whether manifest in the differentiation of conditions of development across and indeed *within* national borders—must therefore be searched for in the global, historical transformation of the material forms of the capitalist production process (and not, as Smith would leave it, in some indeterminate dynamic of equalisation and differentiation). To reiterate, the (global) total social capital’s production of relative surplus-value through the transformation of the materiality of labour process, and hence of the productive subjectivity of the labourer herself, is the general content that is realised in the form of uneven development.

The Changing Forms of the New International Division of Labour and Uneven Development Today

Uneven development is the product of the total social capital’s drive to enhance the production of relative surplus-value on a world scale through the development of

53. This crucial point about dialectical mediation is lost in dualist accounts of international politics that posit a “logical” separation between geopolitics and capitalist development – see, for instance, David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Furthermore, this points to how the crisis-ridden nature of capital accumulation intensifies geopolitical competition to the point of it taking the form of military rivalry between national total social capitals. Although this does not add anything to the *explanation* of the content of the determinations at stake, it does draw attention to its concrete forms and, in particular, to those that comprise the focus of many of the case studies chosen by the U&CD literature.

54. Smith, “The Geography of Uneven Development”, *op. cit.*, pp. 190, 193.

55. Marx, *Capital: Volume I, op. cit.*, p. 617.

the productivity of labour. Today, this drive finds its most advanced expression in the computerisation and robotisation of large-scale industry. As a result of its own immanent tendencies, the contemporary form of the IDL represents a complex constellation that is the culmination of an evolving concrete historical process, whereby capital searches worldwide for the most profitable combinations of relative cost and qualities/disciplines resulting from the variegated past histories of the different national fragments of the working class (through their impact upon their general conditions of reproduction and condensed in what Marx alludes to as the “historical component” of the value of labour-power). Each country therefore *tends* to concentrate a certain type of labour-power of distinctive “material and moral” productive attributes of a determinate complexity, which are spatially dispersed but collectively exploited by capital as a whole in the least costly possible manner.⁵⁶ Production in specific industrial branches since the 1950s, and more conspicuously since the 1970s, has thereby expanded in some countries while contracting in others where new and more advanced sectors have developed, following a rhythm determined by the evolution of technological changes and the relative cost and productive attributes of national labour forces.⁵⁷ The result of this historical process is the contemporary IDL, which is expressed of course in “socio-political multiplicity” and the immediate fact of uneven development.

Succinctly put, our argument is therefore that the essential general content that explains the unevenly developed character of the contemporary IDL, and which has been reproduced under its evolving historical configurations since the 1950s until the present time, consists in the international fragmentation of the productive subjectivity of the working class.⁵⁸ Our approach allows us not just to explain the existence of the international as comprising a multiplicity of distinct national forms of the organisation and reproduction of a material and essentially global process, but also to explain the changing forms of this IDL in world-historical terms.

An analysis of the materiality of the process through which the total social capital today organises socio-ecological metabolism in the form of large-scale industry reveals four divergent and ongoing tendencies in the development of the productive attributes of the global working class.⁵⁹ First, it expands the productive subjectivity of the part of the collective labourer responsible for the advance in the conscious control of the movement of natural forces (that is, science) and its technological applications in the directly social organisation of the immediate production process. Although not explicitly addressed by Marx in *Capital*, the benefit of historical hindsight makes it very easy for us to recognise how capital deals with its constant need for the development of the productive powers of science and for the conscious organisation of the increasingly social labour process, namely by engendering a special partial organ of the collective

56. Nicolas Grinberg and Guido Starosta, “The Limits of Studies in Comparative Development of East Asia and Latin America: The Case of Land Reform and Agrarian Policies”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2009), pp. 771–772.

57. A process whose incipient stages were identified and (problematically) theorised by Folker Fröbel, Jürgen Heinrichs and Otto Kreye, *The New International Division of Labour: Structural Unemployment in Industrialised Countries and Industrialisation in Developing Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

58. Iñigo Carrera, *El capital*, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–90.

59. *Ibid.*; Guido Starosta, “Revisiting the New International Division of Labour Thesis”, in Charnock and Starosta, *The New International Division of Labour*, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–103.

labourer.⁶⁰ Capital requires from these workers ever more complex forms of labour. As much as those discussed in *Capital*, these are also “immediate effects of machine production on the worker”.⁶¹ Needless to say, inasmuch as this expanded productive subjectivity is nothing more than a concrete form of the production of relative surplus-value, the exercise of the newly developed intellectual productive powers is inverted into a mode of existence of capital in its movement of self-valorisation as well. Moreover, sooner or later many of these intellectual dimensions of living labour can also experience automation (or knowledge “codification”) and therefore become relatively simplified. This latter aspect has been central to the more recent phases of the evolution of a “new” international division of labour (NIDL), which has therefore subsumed intellectual labour under its dynamics too.⁶²

Secondly, the process tends to degrade the subjectivity of those workers that acquire and exercise their increasingly simpler manual or experienced-based productive attributes in the direct process of production. Indeed, large-scale industry is based on the objectification of tacit knowledge, previously embodied in the manual industrial worker and largely acquired through lengthy on-the-job, learning-by-doing processes, as an attribute of the system of machinery.⁶³ In this sense, the tendency of the impact of the capitalist automation is certainly one of “deskilling” or “degradation” of direct production work through the objectification of formerly manual tasks as functions of machines. Yet the effect of increasing automation in recent decades has not only been one of deskilling. It has been mixed, also entailing a certain creation of new skills that are required by capital even from direct production workers. The key point, however, is that these newer skills have been of a different *kind* from those that have been eroded. While these latter skills tended to be based on the *particularistic* development of the productive subjectivity of wage-workers (both manual and intellectual) as a result of the practical experience of machining in the direct process of production, the newly created skills tend to revolve around the *universalistic* dimension of the productive quality of labour-power, whose development is achieved in the general process of education and socialisation that precedes its actual application in the production process. For instance, the “microelectronics revolution” that is at the basis of the contemporary international division of labour has entailed not only the degradation of the particularistic dimension of direct production work but also the emergence and generalisation of so-called “soft” or “generic skills”,⁶⁴ such as familiarity with computers and flexibility or individual initiative in problem-solving or decision-making.⁶⁵

60. Starosta, *Marx’s Capital*, *op. cit.*, pp. 233–288.

61. Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, *op. cit.*, p. 517.

62. See, for example, Tomás Friedenthal and Guido Starosta, “The New International Division of Labour in ‘High-Tech’ Production: The Genesis of Ireland’s Boom in the 1990s”, in Charnock and Starosta, *The New International Division of Labour*, *op. cit.*, pp. 127–156. Today, such dynamics fascinate commentators on so-called “Industry 4.0” or the “fourth industrial revolution” more generally.

63. Ursula Huws (ed.), *The Transformation of Work in a Global Knowledge Economy: Towards a Conceptual Framework* (Leuven: HIVA-K. U. Leuven, 2006).

64. Monique Ramioul, “Organisational Change and the Demand of Skills”, in Huws, *The Transformation of Work*, *op. cit.*, pp. 97–118.

65. Margherita Balconi, “Tacitness, Codification of Technological Knowledge and the Organisation of Industry”, *Research Policy*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2002), pp. 357–379.

In the third place, while the new technologies have not resulted in the total elimination of manual labour from automated processes of production,⁶⁶ they have recreated the conditions for the extended reproduction of what Marx called the “modern manufacturing division of labour”, that is those non-mechanised tasks and labour processes acting as an “external department” of large-scale industry proper as the dominant form.⁶⁷ This tendency was fundamental for the initial stages of what scholarly debate labelled an NIDL from the late 1960s, and it remains the focus of continuing critical research on “commodity chains” and the labour process in, for instance, the global garment industry.⁶⁸

Fourthly and lastly, the production of relative surplus-value through the system of machinery leads to the multiplication of the surplus population relative to the needs of the accumulation process, which also constitutes a transformation of productive subjectivity produced by the automation of large-scale industry.⁶⁹ More specifically, this tendency represents the most extreme case of material mutilation of the productive attributes of the working class resulting from capital accumulation, that is, not simply their degradation but the prospect of their outright non-reproduction. Yet it is from this tendency that the global pool of cheap but disciplined labour-power that has been central for the original constitution and evolution of an NIDL from the 1960s was eventually derived, and which today provides the lifeblood for “debt-farism” and the “poverty industry” in advanced as well as developing countries.⁷⁰

In sum, the upshot of all these material transformations in the capitalist labour process has been an increase in the internal polarisation of the global collective labourer according to the type of productive attributes that its different members embody. As a concrete expression of the inner nature of the process of capital accumulation, these social processes have been global in content and national only in form. More specifically, this growing differentiation of the productive attributes of the collective labourer of large-scale industry has been at the basis of the emerging patterns of differentiation of national and indeed supra- and sub-national spaces of accumulation in the last four decades. In effect, based on these productive changes and the revolution in communication and transportation methods, capital has been increasingly able globally to disperse the different parts of the labour process according to the most profitable combinations of *relative* costs and productive attributes of the different national fragments of the worldwide labour force (through their impact upon labour productivity and unit labour costs). In empirical terms, this presents itself in the immediate fact of uneven international development.⁷¹ It is also manifest in the internal regional and local differentiation of the conditions of the reproduction of labour-power *within* national spaces of accumulation,⁷² as well as the formation of wider supranational or regional

66. Ludovico Alcorta, “Flexible Automation and Location of Production in Developing Countries”, *The European Journal of Development Research*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1999), p. 164.

67. Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, *op. cit.*, p. 588ff.

68. See, for example, Alessandra Mezzadri, *The Sweatshop Regime: Labouring Bodies, Exploitation and Garments Made in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

69. Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, *op. cit.*, pp. 553–575.

70. Susanne Soederberg, *Debtfare States and the Poverty Industry: Money, Discipline and the Surplus Population* (London: Routledge, 2014).

71. As detailed in Nicolas Grinberg, “From Miracle to Crisis and Back: The Political Economy of South Korean Long-Term Development”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2014), pp. 720–721.

72. Which is to say that the divergence in the conditions of reproduction of the expanded and degraded organ of the collective labourer is now replicated *inside* advanced capitalist countries

spaces of valorisation whose constitution thereby required the mediation of the development of novel international juridical and political forms (e.g. the European Union). The economic and/or political integration of national spaces of accumulation into broader free trade areas, in competition with one another, has been yet another concrete form in which capital achieved the increased heterogeneity in the reproduction of the varied organs of the global collective labourer.

We would underline, however, that the historical emergence and expanded reproduction of this novel form of the IDL has not entirely wiped out its “old” or “classic” modality. In this, certain countries (for instance, most of the Southern Cone of Latin America and, paradigmatically, Argentina and Brazil), due to particularly favourable and non-reproducible natural conditions that enhance the productivity of labour, continue to participate in the planetary production of relative surplus-value through the provision of cheapened raw materials, staple foods or energy sources to the world market (hence directly or indirectly reducing the average value of labour-power of the international working class).⁷³ Moreover, the reproduction of this form of subsumption of these territories into the global circuits of accumulation is not simply based on the export of “natural-resource based” commodities. In effect, insofar as the latter are material bearers of ground-rent and are consumed overseas, this involves a continuous in-flow of extraordinary social wealth that constitutes a drain of the total surplus-value otherwise available for capital’s appropriation, and which, *ceteris paribus*, would end up in the pockets of domestic landowners.⁷⁴ Capital was thus historically driven to overcome this barrier to its accumulation capacity by reshaping those spaces of valorisation in order to recover part of that surplus-value, through the establishment of an “antagonistic association” with local landowners over the shared appropriation of ground-rent.⁷⁵ Thus, from originally being simply a source of cheap raw materials and means of subsistence, the qualitative specificity of those national spaces of valorisation has actually become determined as a source of ground-rent recovery for global capital.⁷⁶

The reproduction of this modality of the accumulation process needs to be politically mediated by a wide array of state policies that intervene in the circulation of ground rent-bearing commodities in order to block the “spontaneous” course of ground-rent towards landowners and divert its flow towards capital. Thus, the transfer of ground-rent must be achieved through different policy mechanisms

themselves. This process is, of course, heavily mediated by gender, ethnicity, age and other intersectionalities. See, for example, the illustrative evidence in Alex Nunn, “The Production and Reproduction of Inequality in the UK in Times of Austerity”, *British Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2016), pp. 469–487.

73. As Marx remarks in Volume I of *Capital* (*op. cit.*, pp. 579–580), the establishment of this “classic” modality of the IDL was determined by the production of relative surplus-value through the system of machinery of large-scale industry.

74. Juan Iñigo Carrera, *La renta de la tierra: Formas, fuentes y apropiación* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2017).

75. Nicolas Grinberg and Guido Starosta, “From Global Capital Accumulation to Varieties of Centre-Leftism in South America: The Cases of Brazil and Argentina”, in Susan J. Spronk and Jeffrey R. Webber (eds.), *Crisis and Contradiction: Marxist Perspectives on Latin America in the Global Political Economy* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 236–272.

76. For an explanation of the specific modality through which subsidiaries of TNCs operate within such countries, and how they valorise on the basis of the recovery of in-flows of surplus-value, see Alejandro Luis Fitzsimons and Guido Starosta, “Global Capital, Uneven Development and National Difference: Critical Reflections on the Specificity of Accumulation in Latin America”, *Capital & Class*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2018), pp. 109–131.

(overvalued exchange rates, export and import taxes, direct state regulation of staple food and raw material prices, etc.), which result in the establishment of specific domestic conditions for the circulation of capital within those national territories.⁷⁷ Consequently, its appropriation can only be done by capitals operating within those countries and whose circuit realises its final phase (i.e. the sale of commodities) almost exclusively on protected domestic markets of a very limited size vis-à-vis world market norms.⁷⁸ Although this means that individual capitals cannot reach the scale needed for profitably utilising advanced technological conditions, they have compensated the resulting higher production costs with the appropriation of a portion of ground-rent. In this way, they have valorised at the average rate of profit despite their restricted magnitude and backward technologies.⁷⁹ This abundant extraordinary mass of social wealth has thus systematically complemented the surplus-value extracted from the domestic working class to the point of determining the very specificity, *with its inherently limited potentialities*, of the developmental trajectory in those national spaces. This, in other words, explains “underdevelopment” in Latin America, and on a basis that is entirely consistent with the “unified theory” of uneven development we outline above.

The emergence and development of the “new” IDL did not, therefore, entail the overcoming of the “classic” IDL. Both modalities actually coexist in the contemporary configuration of the world market, resulting in a more complex form through which the formal/material unity of the global accumulation process is achieved. This insight can explain the content that underlies the different types of regionalism that prevail in Latin America for instance (e.g. the Mercosur), and in a way that does not simply rely on a catch-all tendency to subsume the explanation of the existence of such regions within some abstract logic of geopolitical rivalry and cooperation. It is, in other words, another reason not to theorise “the international” as if political forms were autonomous from their economic content.

Conclusion

In a recent essay, Olaf Corry makes the case that the longstanding preoccupation with geopolitics among IR scholars of various theoretical bents has resulted in a commonplace tendency to assert an ontological distinction between nature (or the environment), on the one hand, and questions of “sovereignty, anarchy and balance of power” on the other—a separation he finds palpably untenable in an “Anthropocene age” in which we are all fast becoming aware of the mutually transformative (and destructive) dynamics of human behaviour and the Earth’s ecology.⁸⁰ Corry suggests that “old materialism” might have something to offer IR scholars today insofar as “Marx put nature, and human interaction with it, right at the centre of historical social theory”.⁸¹ We agree, and have sought in

77. A detailed account of these policies and their role in transferring ground-rent to industrial capital can be found in Juan Iñigo Carrera, *La formación económica de la sociedad argentina. Volumen I, Renta agraria, ganancia industrial y deuda externa. 1882–2004* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2007); and in Caligaris, “The Global Accumulation of Capital”, *op. cit.*, pp. 66–70.

78. Grinberg and Starosta, “The Limits of Studies”, *op. cit.*, p. 769ff.

79. Fitzsimons and Starosta, “Global Capital”, *op. cit.*

80. Olaf Corry, “The Nature of International Relations: From Geopolitics to the Anthropocene”, in Clara Eroukhanoff and Matt Harker (eds.), *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2017), pp. 102–118.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

this article to outline the basis for a unified—that is *dialectical*—theory of uneven development that resists any tendency to posit a dualist logic between humans and nature, or indeed between the “laws of motion” of capital and the international system. The key to this endeavour, we suggest, is to put the question of the transformation of human productive subjectivity—or, more simply, labour—at the heart of any cogent theory of the international and its uneven development. Unfortunately, while Rioux is right to suggest that Neil Smith has gone some way to uncovering the “inner dynamics of development itself”, we have argued that Smith’s explanation of uneven development on the basis of his theory of the production of nature, space and scale in capitalism falls short of foregrounding the underlying content of uneven development: the worldwide production of relative surplus-value and, with it, the transformation and fragmentation of the productive subjectivity of the international working class.

To persist in the pursuit of a theory of uneven development and the international that upholds the relative autonomy of geopolitical and sociological modes of explanation on the basis of an axiomatic “logical rule” is to foreclose the possibility of arriving at a socio-naturally-grounded theory that explains why and how the inner dynamics of (specifically) capitalist development are *necessarily* uneven, and why and how they are expressed through the reproduction in time and space of an international state system characterised by cooperation and conflict between geopolitical forms that mediate the global accumulation of capital. Our intervention goes some way, we hope, towards the elaboration of such a theory—one that foregrounds the analytical and political question of the transformation of human productive subjectivity. As a basis for future research and debate into the dynamics of uneven development, and their mediation by different national states, our intervention points towards further empirical investigation of the concrete forms in which the expansion and degradation of the productive subjectivity of the different organs of the collective labourer, as it springs from the global production of relative surplus-value, unfolds.

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