Theorising ‘the international’: the potential of Critical Realism and the Law of Uneven and Combined Development

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Abstract

Can general mechanisms governing social life (necessity) and the possibility of multiple outcomes in socio-historical processes (contingency) be incorporated into a single theoretical framework? The intellectual challenge of this perennial question of social science and philosophy has been keenly felt within IR. For although IR theory has traditionally been relatively amenable to the idea of the ‘lawfulness’ of international relations, there is arguably a fundamentally ‘contingent’ and uncertain dimension to the international milieu that seems to subvert this theoretical amenability. Two emerging intellectual strands within IR, namely, ‘critical realist philosophy’ and ‘uneven and combined development’, can arguably offer a solution to the problem of theorising contingency in social life. Critical realist philosophers of science have reintroduced the concept of the ‘necessary mechanism’ into both the social and natural sciences without losing sight of how they intersect with contingent outcomes. Meanwhile, the advocates of the idea of ‘uneven and combined development’ have propounded it as the intellectual basis for a general conceptualisation of differentiated outcomes (contingency) of the historical constitution of international systems and polities. This paper critically draws on these two intellectual strands to develop a theoretical ‘internalisation’ of contingency as a necessary property of human social development, which has significant implications for contemporary international theory.

Keywords

Critical realism, uneven and combined development, necessity, contingency, explanatory theory, Marxism, International Relations

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'Those who deny the existence of contingency should be tormented until they admit that it is possible for them not to be tortured' Duns Scotus (cited in Young-ah Gottlieb 2003: 174)

Debates on social law within IR

The turn to historical sociology to solve problems in IR theory (Hobden and Hobson 2002; Hobson and Lawson 2008; Hobson 2004; Hobson et al 2010; Lawson 2006; 2007) is now well established. Noting the resurgence of interest in the paradigm has become almost as familiar as tracing the contours of the disciplinary tradition and its various theoretical dead ends and false dawns. For historical sociologists the twin pillars of substantive historical enquiry and the schemas of classical social theory are the means through which we can develop rich explanatory accounts of the concrete development of international systems (Buzan and Little 2000; Rosenberg 2006; 2010)**.** But somewhat surprisingly this turn to historical sociology has actually elicited very little discussion on the more ontological and epistemological arguments which occupied many of the so-called Great Debates in IR. This may reflect the critique that historical sociologists in IR have often made about the impoverishing intellectual resources of the discipline's tradition (see Lawson and Shilliam 2010) – perhaps even going so far as to share Chris Brown's sharply expressed view that the four debates were 'singularly pointless affairs' (Brown 2007: 409). Brown exhibits a justified concern, which will no doubt resonate with historically-minded enquirers, to encourage a focus on substantive matters of analysis rather than a new round of metatheoretical enquiry. The problem with this outlook is that the assumptions we make about ontology repeatedly impact on the conclusions we come to. They define the most basic dimensions of the reality we seek to comprehend, inevitably informing the tools we use to capture its workings, and consequently the findings too. Ontological assumptions are often critical in determining the attitude we take to the question of whether social forms, such as 'the international', have 'lawful' properties. This question of 'lawfulness' is my principle concern in what follows. I argue that general mechanisms governing social life (necessity) and the possibility of multiple outcomes in socio-historical processes (contingency) can be incorporated into a single theoretical framework. The intellectual challenge of this perennial question of social science and philosophy – whether the social world 'obeys laws' – has been keenly felt within IR. For although IR theory has traditionally been relatively amenable to the idea of the 'lawfulness' of international relations, there is arguably a fundamentally 'contingent' and uncertain dimension to the international milieu that seems to subvert this amenability.

Before proceeding to elaborate the substantive theoretical content of this set of claims it is necessary to look at the extent to which these assumptions already operate within IR theory. Whether human interaction exhibits elements of lawful necessity is a highly contested claim in the wider social sciences. Having shied away somewhat from the 'Great Debates' on ontology, historical sociologists, at least in their majority, have also tended to be sceptical about a 'lawful' international realm. At one level this is hardly surprising for a method aiming to challenge abstract universal thinking and reinstate history – with all its complexities and uncertainties – back into theory, at a time when approaches that identify law-like behaviour in social systems have fallen out of fashion in the modern social sciences. Indeed, IR theorists have traditionally imported concepts and principles long ago pioneered in other fields for its own explanatory purposes. Consequently, it has taken time for IR to latch on to the wider social science *zeitgeist* that tends to see the complexity of the social sphere as a reality which makes it impossible to theorise necessary laws of social development. The more recent turn to historical sociology, for example, has seen the emergence of neo-Weberian approaches (Hobden and Hobson 2002; Hobson 2004; Lawson 2006) and it is Weber who is most closely associated with the rejection of universal laws in the social world, and the advocacy of an intentional, culturally conditioned conception of historical change (Weber 1978).

If one looks further back, however, claims to law-likeness in international systems have not only been subject to very little scepticism in IR, but actually formed a key intellectual foundation for many of its mainstream theories.[1] Hans Morgenthau once described his own endeavour as an attempt to uncover the 'objective laws that have their roots in human nature' to form the basis for an international theory (Morgenthau 1985: 4). Similarly, the idea that lawful relations could be inferred from repeatedly observed recurrences of events was a cornerstone of Waltz's structural theory of international politics (Waltz 1979: 1). The rejection of these realist approaches has been a key point of attack for critical scholars. Realism in IR has been roundly criticised, in its 'reductionist' (Morgenthau 1985) and 'systemic' (Waltz 1979) forms alike for three reasons: (1) de-historicising and de-contextualising the social process; (2) committing the 'reification fallacy' that ascribes causal power to abstract, general categories; and, (3) for mistaking historically specific social forms

[1] There was however never universal agreement, even 'internally' amongst traditional realist scholars. A sceptical hostility to laws of history was always a feature of the work of E.H Carr, who proposed instead a pragmatic form of historicism in which interpretation gave new meanings and significance to what we take to be fact. Carr largely eschewed the kind of high theory explanation that were common to both systemic or 'reductionist' theories of the international system (Carr 1987). His claim that 'today this terminology' of laws 'sounds as old-fashioned as it is presumptuous' (Carr 1987: 58), reflected wider attitude in the social sciences per se, even if, as he said it, positivism was giving new life to discourse on lawfulness.

for ‘natural’ properties which are intrinsic to all human development (Hobden and Hobson 2002: 3–62; Rosenberg 1994; Teschke 2003: 14–26; Wendt 1999: 1–21). The critical wing of IR has thus lambasted the suspect theoretical foundations for the ‘laws’ of international systems identified by the realist mainstream. But does this write off all claims about social laws? There is no consensus on how to answer, but nonetheless a clear tendency exists. Even if historical sociologists have answered ambiguously, (post)positivists have given a more categorical “yes”. Consequently, as Morgenthau’s position (laws of human nature) was sidelined by the rise of positivism, and with alternative positions on social law notable by their absence, there opened up a principle schism in the discipline between positivism (laws as empirical regularities) and (post)positivism (‘there are no such laws’).

While there were certainly two poles in this debate, it was positivism, helped by being at the epicentre of mainstream American social science *per se*, which tended to have the upper hand. John Ruggie may have been exaggerating when he said that Carl Gustav Hempel’s (1965) deductive-nomological model[2] has ‘embraced most types of international relations theorising’ (Ruggie 1998: 93), but he was not entirely mistaken. From large-*n* quantitative analysis to the more theoretically-orientated neo-realist models, the idea that explanation involved anticipating probabilistic outcomes when certain conditions were met, has been a cornerstone of mainstream IR theory. Most neo-realist conceptual schemas, such as the idea of balancing against an existing hegemonic power, assume that rational forms of behaviour will occur when a given set of conditions exists, with empirical regularities (probabilistic ‘laws’) expected to verify this. The (post)positivist challenge to this way of thinking undoubtedly has tremendous power. Focusing on the heuristic construction of meaning, identities and patterns of events and processes (Wendt 1999; Ruggie 1998), it consciously rejects universal laws and the problematic assumption that the behaviour of states could be anticipated, once we assume they will respond ‘rationally’ to their circumstances. Alexander Wendt argued that ‘as if’ thinking lay at the heart of this problem: i.e., the idea that if something can be modelled to happen this way, it would probably do so (Wendt 1999:61). This was plainly incorrect, he argued: just because a process can be modelled ‘as if’ it ‘works

[2] The deductive-nomological model is a social research method where conclusions are logically derived from abstract, simplifying initial conditions in order to explain empirically-observed correlations. Although the method involves close empirical observation and often quantification of events to uncover regularities, it is deductive in that theories which explain the regularities are logically deduced from a set of assumed initial conditions. It was captured with typical clarity by Waltz when he defined the deductive-nomological notion of law his method utilised: ‘Laws establish relations between variables, variables between concepts that can take different values. If a, then b, where a stands for one or more independent variables and b stands for the dependent variable’ (Waltz 1979: 1).

a certain way does not mean that it in fact works that way’ (ibid). Historical sociologists are likely to loudly concur with such remarks. After all, only by studying the terrain of history can we test whether our theories actually explain the process with which we are concerned. We must ‘conceive things thus’, as Marx and Engels once put it, ‘as they really are and happen’ (Marx and Engels 1969: 28).

Where historical sociologists may well depart from (post)positivist scholars, however, is over the question of whether we need a universal social theory in our explanatory work. Much more could be said on the knotty problem of how to combine these universal pretensions with ‘the particular’. For our purposes here it is worth noting the resulting difference as to how our theories should account for the ‘contingent form’. Ruggie identifies exactly this issue in his rejection of law-like generalisation *a la* positivism. He argues that narrative telling about history, and all the contingencies that process involves, must ‘take the facts of social life seriously’. Therefore:

> ‘Law-like generalizations can help account for aspects of... a transformation. But none, I now believe, seems feasible of its totality, the explanation of which will continue to rely on narrative protocols. The contingencies are too great, the role of unanticipated consequences too pervasive. And if constructivism means anything at all it means taking those facts of social life seriously’ (Ruggie 1998: 135).

Ruggie’s criticism undoubtedly holds against the positivist notion of law (as generalisations about events), because the diversity of concrete forms we uncover in IR undermines attempts to create ‘general variables’ that have genuine analytical utility. Ruggie notes, for example, the way that studies of historical world orders in particular confront profound small-*n* problems: ‘How many cases of hegemony are there “like” Britain in the nineteenth century or “like” the United States in the postwar era?’ (Ruggie 1998: 86). It is this tremendous historical particularity which defies attempts to draw simple comparisons, let alone inductively abstract from these cases ‘general conditions’ that might then anticipate future behaviour. In all these senses Ruggie is right – the ‘contingencies are too great’, the ‘role of unanticipated consequences’ *is* ‘too pervasive’ (ibid). Yet Ruggie also pinpoints a problem; the contours of which go beyond IR. This is the issue of how to integrate this contingency into our explanation in a manner which recognises that the lives of people, and all the institutions such as states we create through historical time, are structured in ways outside of our control by multiple networks of social relations.

One need not adopt the positivist position of 'grouping' instances of diverse phenomena into 'variables', but we do still need to account conceptually for the necessities that form part of any social process. Otherwise we are left with a view of a world in which contingency is so all pervasive that social scientists have no other option but to simply tell stories about how particular forms intersected with one another. If we want to avoid this, then we have to find a means of integrating necessity into our social theory too. Indeed, conceptualising these imperatives is where theory can make its strongest claims. Treating lawfulness in social systems as necessities, however, is largely at odds with dominant assumptions about social law within IR. Amongst both its proponents and critics alike the prevalent definition of lawfulness is a positivist one: 'law-like generalisations' (Ruggie 1998: 135). But there is no reason for believing that empirical correlations of events ('generalisations') indicate the existence of lawful properties: what we actually need to do is theorise the social *necessities* at work in any given process. Such an emphasis on 'necessities', as opposed to the 'probabilities' which are normally associated with positivism, does however leave us with a problem. We need to conceptualise laws in social systems without succumbing to determinism and this means that we need to incorporate contingency as an irreducible moment in any historical process.

I want to argue below for the possibility of a dialectical resolution of the necessity/contingency problem through three theoretical moves. Firstly, I establish a critical realist ontology which assumes the existence of 'necessary mechanisms' in the social process. This is an ontology Marx certainly held to, although it was largely implicit in much of his work. It has been drawn out much more explicitly as the basis for scientific methodology in the second half of the 20th century by Roy Bhaskar and his co-thinkers (Bhaskar 1975; 1993; 1998a; 1998b; Collier 1998; Sayer 1992; 1998). It has also recently inspired some discussion of its core ideas within IR (Brown 2007; Chernoff 2007; Joseph 2007; Kurki 2007; Patomäki 2002; Patomäki and Wight 2000; Wight 2006; 2007). Secondly, I shall demonstrate how this ontology can be used to develop a method and corresponding concepts that register contingency as an integral dimension to all processes of social and historical change. Finally, I highlight a key problem in the existing critical realist literature, which, though it rightly emphasises the concrete contingencies of the event, tends to assume contingency is an un-theorisable 'externality' in any explanation. Through these three intellectual movements, I shall demonstrate how we can 'internalise' contingent dimensions into social theory through a

critical appropriation of Leon Trotsky's idea of 'uneven and combined development' (Trotsky 1962, 1967; Rosenberg 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010; Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008).

The problem of necessity and contingency – the partial solution of critical realism

The stakes are high in attempting a dialectical resolution of the problem of necessity and contingency which incorporates both of these dimensions into the bounds of social theory. Throughout the history of ideas philosopher after philosopher has championed the necessary over the contingent and vice versa – expressing a repeated, collective failure to truly transcend this dichotomy. Spinoza insisted that 'in nature there is nothing contingent' and thus the uncertainty of the event is merely expressive of an epistemological problem, 'a defect of our knowledge' as he put it (cited in Bennet 1984: 121). These arguments were also played out in classical Greek philosophy. Democritus shared Spinoza's position, but Epicurus attempted an interesting 'totalisation' of the contingent, arguing that 'necessity, introduced by some as the absolute ruler does not exist, but some things are accidental, others depend on our arbitrary will' (cited in Marx 1975:42). Aristotle was much more circumspect with his notion of 'conditional necessity' – a view of logical outcomes within certain conditions that foreshadowed 20th century positivism (Aristotle 2001: 1-8). But there was still no real incorporation of the contingent – with the indeterminate, multiple possibilities that this involves – into his approach. As with so many 'problems' of classical philosophy such as the famous question of thought and matter, a dialectical synthesis of formal oppositions was needed, which recognised them as expressive of contradictions in material reality.

Overcoming this dichotomy occupied the attention of the young Marx in his doctoral thesis, where he engaged with the work of Epicurus and Democritus. He lamented that 'Democritus makes use of necessity, Epicurus of chance. And each of them rejects the opposite view with polemical irritation' (Marx 1975:43). A different ontology was at the centre of Marx's challenge, because, despite their materialism, both these thinkers shared 'anti-realist' (in philosophical terms) assumptions about science. In the Epicurean system there were no causal-necessities, only chance-like contingencies. The Democritean was in contrast 'dogmatic', but also anti-realist, as its concept of necessity did not go beyond the surface appearances of things and was therefore only concerned with identifying proximate forms of causation (Marx 1975: 43–45). Each of these ontologies fed into different conceptions of social change: the Epicurean was dynamic but apparently random; while the Democritean was causal but static. Marx developed the notion of 'real possibility' as an alternative

ontological presupposition. This concept was in sharp contrast to the 'abstract possibility' of the Epicurean 'imagination', and sought 'to explain the necessity and reality of its object', the restrictions and 'sharp boundaries' (Marx 1975:43-44) that condition human actions. Epicurus had indeed identified a real dimension of the historical process: how any situation can have a number of possible concrete outcomes. But the truth contained in this observation was negated by its transmutation of contingency into an absolute ontological position, when in fact possibilities are never limitless but constrained by social and material conditions.

We would today refer to the position Marx intimated in his doctoral thesis as a *critical realist* ontology, because it takes the objective world as given, but seeks to (critically) uncover mechanisms existing beyond the surface, ephemeral forms of appearance of things. Once agents' actions are conceived as intrinsically social, within definite social and historical relations, then 'real possibilities' emerge which involve necessity and contingency. Exactly the same assumptions underpin modern critical realism. Its theorists also argue that the world exists independently of our comprehension of it; that necessity and contingency exist in a dynamic inter-relation in any natural and social process; and that our conceptual apparatus should go beyond the surface forms of phenomena, critically interrogating these appearances and uncovering underlying mechanisms. The latter point displaces the subject and object of the investigation, for it does not stop at studying events. Instead it uses theoretical concepts to identify mechanisms and processes, which are not immediately observable but are nonetheless operating at a deeper level. Thus, Roy Bhaskar argues that 'the full working out of the principle [of objectivity] involves a radical account of the nature of external laws as tendencies of things not conjunctures of events' (Bhaskar 1975: 9-10). Critical realists argue that mechanisms or laws are *logically independent* of the events to which they give rise. This means a common mechanism can give rise to a diverse range of concrete outcomes. The law of gravity, for example, finds its expression in an infinite number of concrete instances.

As a consequence, necessities are not absolute, but, relative: different combinations of law-governed phenomena produce unique, concrete outcomes. In concrete space and time there is therefore what Marx once called a 'unity of many determinations and forces' (Marx 1973a: 101) – where actions, mechanisms and processes combine in unique ways. In any one conjuncture certain forces and necessities will preponderate over others. When aircraft fly, for instance, they overcome the gravitational pull of the earth. In such circumstances gravity is of course still 'there', but other forces utilise energy produced through human interaction with

nature in order to overcome its downward pull. In a natural process the ‘mechanism’ or lawful aspect may appear obvious, or at least uncontroversial. But in the social world, too, similar necessities exist. They are, however, particularly tendential because they must always intersect with other necessities through the mediation of human action. Indeed the consciousness present in all human activity adds a very ‘special’ contingency.

Marxism is famous for its ‘laws’, but social necessities are not limited to those that were the subject of Marx’s theory of capital. Consider, for instance, the necessities involved in the production of personal identity. Real people, born in real places, are ascribed a certain identity (a name, ethnicity, etc) merely as a result of the spatial location and their kinship relations. Although we are conscious, although we have intentionality, we cannot ‘escape’ the historical reality of our own birth, nor the way the world may treat us as a result. The necessity involved in the reproduction of identity is of course essential to the notion of ‘otherness’ we discuss in IR, normally using the concept of inside/outside relations. Yet, curiously IR theory, particularly its critical wing, does not tend to view this notion as a historical necessity. Treating it as an *historical* necessity along the lines of critical realism has important implications. It captures the constrained, ‘lawfulness’ involved in the reproduction of personal identity which, surely, accords with our everyday experience. Predicating it as ‘historical’ indicates the relativity involved too. Specific, historical circumstances produce particular notions of inside/outside relations and these will in any case only be ‘necessary’ for so long as the conditions that make it so continue to exist.

Methodologically, the principle which this involves also has theoretical implications for causality in social theory. Events do not occur ‘spontaneously’ – definite conditions, actions and mechanisms intersect together in real space and time to produce a given outcome (Bhaskar 1975: 146). Every process, from market competition to military conflict between states, involves a co-penetration of social forces. Nothing, in this sense, happens ‘randomly’ and the task of social theory is to trace these causal relations. This perspective also effects how we treat the specificity that critical scholars in IR tend to emphasise. It is helpful to recall Ruggie’s point that there is only *one instance* of *American* hegemony in the world order, which sets enormous limits on the conclusions we might draw for its future on the basis, for example, of the British experience. A critical realist framework is actually quite compatible with perspectives that emphasise the radical specificity of the event or process in international systems. It simply argues that understanding this specificity must involve

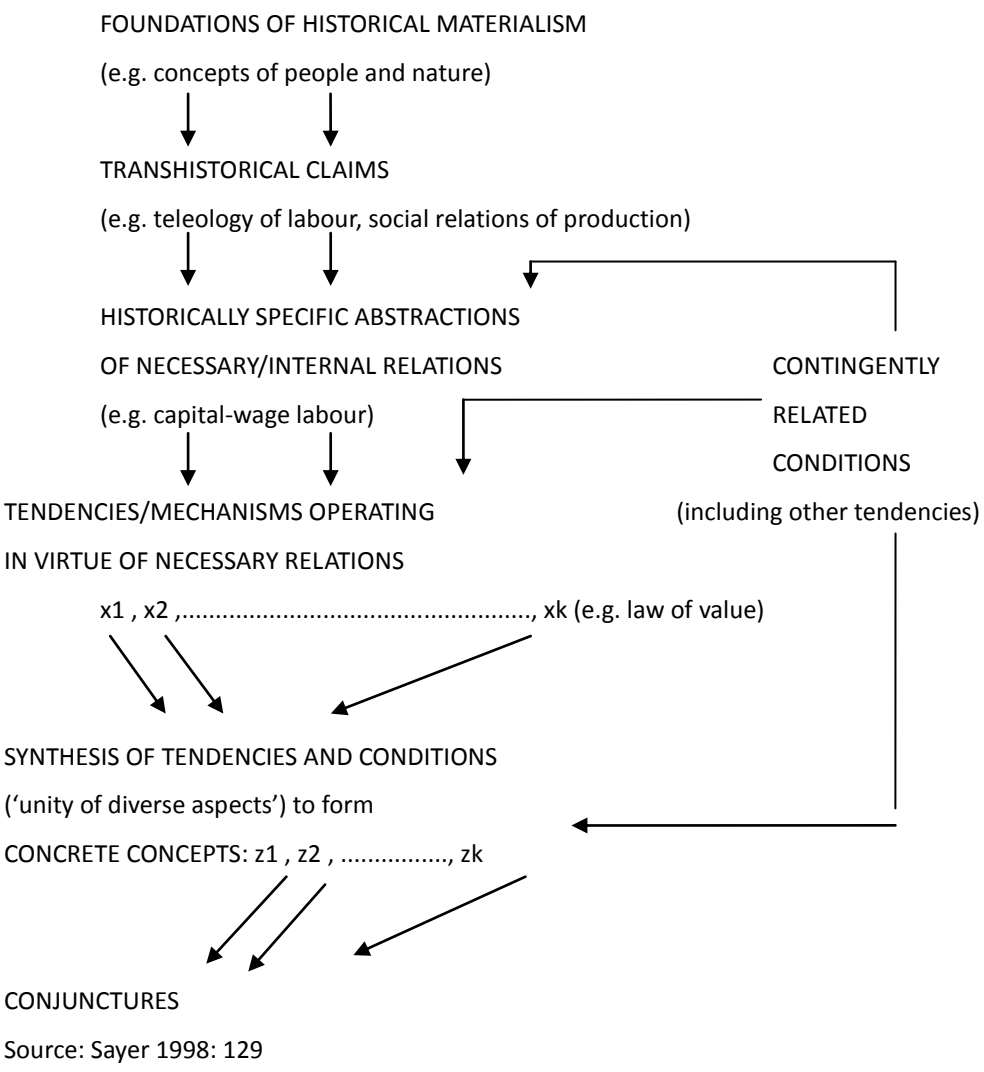
excavating the co-existence of forces and mechanisms that make the phenomenon in question different to others. Events thus arise out of the complex mediation of social forces and necessities in any given conjuncture. To illustrate this one may reflect for a moment on the response of the US government to the Arab Spring. There is a juxtaposition of tremendous power and relative powerlessness in its actions, for the administration is responding to an 'external' set of processes which are uncertain and outside the confines of its immediate control. Meanwhile, the actions of agents, both the US executive and other actors, are conditioned by social and material necessities, themselves the product of historical experience and the cultural legacies of the past; and political responses to developments express, in a concrete, irreducible form, this matrix of determinations and forces. Social research founded on a critical realist ontology would thus seek to theorise the mechanisms involved, then, subsequently, rebuild the concrete totality, in order to deliver a richer explanatory account of why the US government responded in the manner that it did.

Recognising the contingency at work in such concrete-historical developments is crucial for at least three reasons. Firstly, different necessities are contingently-related in real space and time and their intersection has to be studied concretely. Secondly, despite the focus on mechanisms, a critical realist perspective is deeply hostile to determinism; i.e. those forms of thinking that treat change as inevitable once it has happened. In the social realm,[3] the unpredictability of human behaviour gives a powerful element of contingency, as forms of conflict and co-operation amongst social groups result in outcomes that cannot be predicted in advance. In the international milieu this is particularly important to keep in mind, because a multiplicity of agencies and social forms, from states to TNCs, are engaged in multiple inter-penetrating forms of interaction that co-determine one another's collective experience. Thirdly, interacting networks of social relations between different forces both *enable* and *constrain* individual agents or collective social units within a system. Our agency thus represents the ability to activate the 'causal powers of things' put at our disposal within these relational systems (Sayer 1992: 116). Working out the mediation between the powers of things and the contingent process that leads to their activation – knowing at what point contingency 'enters in' – therefore becomes essential (ibid). Mechanisms when activated in

[3] Even in the relations between natural phenomena the intersection between the generative mechanisms is a contingent one. Consider for example the kind of 'chain reactions' that develop in the course of natural disasters, where a series of mechanisms combine contingently to aggravate and deepen the crisis.

this way produce effects in conjunctures which may be unique; and so the task of theory is to 'analyse objects in terms of their constitutive structures' and 'causal powers' (ibid).

Figure one – the relation of abstract and concrete



Source: Sayer 1998: 129

We can also use a combination of critical realist ontology and Marx's method to develop a distinctive means with which to develop the concepts we use to capture the necessities. It should be obvious by this stage that the concepts we employ should identify mechanisms at work in the real world; this is the key criterion critical realism lays down for social theory. Because the world exhibits contingency, our concepts cannot be deterministic, but must recognise multiple possible outcomes inherent in any process. Again the ontological assumptions we make about our existence can inform how we approach this theoretical process. Critical realists argue that reality is necessarily stratified, with different 'levels' of existence. In forming concepts we have to recognise this stratification, because the necessities

we theorise will operate at a distinct level of analysis (Bhaskar 1975: 169; Collier 1998: 260). Each mechanism while operating at its own level can be explained by derivative mechanisms at a deeper level of extension. There is a danger of reductionism latent in this approach, whereby the method of scientific explanation involves an ever-greater diminution of the whole to its parts. To avoid this, critical realists use the notion of 'emergent properties', which recognises that each 'level' will have properties which cannot be reduced to these deeper levels. There is arguably a further implication to this argument too, regarding how we understand the relationship between the part and the whole. If wholes have 'emergent properties' beyond the qualities of their constituent components then they cannot simply be reduced to parts.[4] As we will come onto below, this has implications for how we conceptualise the relations between objects and the role of systems in the identity of parts.

Once social theory is conceived as a search for 'real relations' then it simultaneously becomes a matter of historical enquiry too. The concepts cannot be logically deduced from a set of abstract assumptions; their utility needs to be tested against historical development. Moreover, they have an intrinsic 'historicity' because they are specific to a given phase of human development. As historical concepts they only hold true for as long as the relations to which they refer exist (Ollman 2003: 69). Marx did not reject transhistorical categories, but, he only afforded them substantive analytical utility when they were historically concretised in relational social systems (Sayer 1987: 21). Derek Sayer notes how the theoretical and historical relativity of Marx's concepts meant that he rejected the kind of 'exclusive, unambiguous, closed and universal' definitions of positivism (ibid). His general concepts were much more elastic, admitting the possibility of multiple usages in differing contexts with concretisations thus modifying the general properties (ibid).

In figure one we see how Andrew Sayer depicts this understanding of the relationship between the abstract and concrete levels of the analysis in Marx's method. His pictoral presentation illustrates how concepts in Marxism range from the most abstract which refer to transhistorical necessities, through historically-specific abstract concepts, to tendencies or mechanisms (Sayer 1998: 128). Determining which concepts should be used thus depends upon the relations that exist at any point in time (ibid). And this is why Marxism 'cannot take its most basic concepts for granted in the way that the natural sciences can', they 'must

[4] For example, the power of water to extinguish fire cannot be derived from its elements because they are both highly flammable (Sayer 1992: 119).

change with the reality they seek to depict' (ibid). Sayer's illustration captures the primacy of history for social theory. It demonstrates the role contingency plays at several stages in the determination of historical conjunctures, with concrete outcomes representing a fusion of contingently-related necessary mechanisms and forces. The discursive and multi-faceted dimensions of human life produce this multiplicity of contingent, unique and irreducible outcomes. Figure one thus illustrates not only how the categories are 'temporally' defined, but also the role contingency plays in the reproduction and transformation of more fundamental dimensions of human life, even entire systems of social reproduction. Bringing a dialectical account of the relationship between contingency and necessity to bear on social theory is therefore, arguably, essential to developing dynamic theorisations of social change.

Many totalities? The limitations of contemporary critical realism

Out of this methodology, then, there emerges the first part of a solution to the dilemma of necessity and contingency in social theory: the treatment of necessity and contingency as ever-present dimensions in historical change. The question still remaining is whether this assumption in itself is sufficient to finally resolve the recurring problem first expressed in the arguments amongst the classical Greek materialists. In what follows I want to argue that critical realism only takes us part of the way to finally overcoming this age old problem, because it does not treat contingency as an 'internal relation'. Critical realists correctly argue that the contingent aspect is an ever-present dimension to social change, but they have also argued that it is an 'external' relation (Sayer 1992; 1998**).** Like arguments over contingency and necessity, the debate over whether internal or external relations predominate in the social world has been a recurring one. It hinges on whether we see objects in the world as independent (externally related) or relationally co-constituted (internally related).

Theorists who promote the idea that relations are external argue that all objects or processes will be independent of one another, and thus could continue to exist if one or other of them ceased to exist. In contrast, if a relation is internal then the identity and existence of each object is dependent upon other objects. Critical realists critique both 'internal relations' perspectives, which impart 'relationality' to *all* objects and processes (Ollman 2003; Sayer 1987), and the dominant, external relations approach that 'is implicit in the Humean theory of causality... but has been accepted by the whole orthodox (empiricist and neo-Kantian) tradition in the philosophy of science' (Bhaskar 1998: 42). Instead they argue that the world is made up of both internal and external relations, which exist within 'open systems' (Bhaskar

1998; Sayer 1992; 1998). Contingent relations are therefore considered ‘external’, because ‘it is neither necessary nor impossible that they stand in any particular relation’ (Sayer 1992: 89; see also Sayer 1998). In the second half of this article, I will question whether ‘externality’ is a useful way of thinking about contingency, before considering how the law of ‘uneven and combined development’ might offer an ‘internalisation’ of the contingent form.

Treating contingency as an external relation hinges upon the claim that relations between a given object (or, for that matter, a process or mechanism) may not be essential for the existence of other objects. Common sense certainly dictates that this is correct. We can envisage any number of objects that were they to cease to exist would not undermine the existence of other objects. Andrew Sayer outlines this position with typical clarity:

> ‘The relation between a person and a lump of earth is external and contingent in the sense that each object can exist without the other. On the other hand, the relations between landlord and tenant, master and slave are internal and necessary in that each part of the relation depends upon its relation to the other (Sayer 1998: 127; see also Sayer 1992: 140-144).

The straightforward nature of Sayer’s argument makes it difficult to fault. There does appear to be a difference between master-slave relations where identity is derived through explicit mutual constitution and the relations between a ‘lump of earth’ and people – who but mad men amongst us could challenge this? But while this chimes with many common sense assumptions about the nature of existence, the difference is not quite as absolute and clear cut as Sayer suggests. If we replace, for instance, ‘earth’ with ‘inanimate nature’ and ‘person’ with ‘animate nature’, then the change of vocabulary brings out, surely, the co-constitutive nature of these identities.

Furthermore, if we pursue this thought a little we can start to identify some of the problems with the notion of external relations *per se.* Animate and inanimate nature both form part of the material reality that all forms of human science seek to comprehend. Distinguishing between these elements is therefore a conceptual, indeed ‘definitional’, task that ascribes distinctive identities to each side, but these categories must also capture the real existing material phenomena to which they refer. Conceptually, we cannot properly understand animate nature without simultaneously holding in our mind a notion of the inanimate. Moreover, in the course of actual material development, people and ‘lumps of earth’ have

been powerfully co-determined. Marx once wrote, indeed, that ‘the original sources of all wealth’ are ‘the soil and the labourer’ (Marx 1974: 475). For Marx this historical inter-relation was a great productive power that acted as the foundation for the construction of entire civilisations; not to mention their contestation, crises, and even their ultimate collapse. So ‘internally related’ were nature and humanity in Marx’s analysis capitalist social relations were ‘sapping’ the life, energy and productive potential of these two ‘original sources’ (ibid). For these reasons, Sayer is arguably wrong to treat the relationship as external. ‘Lumps of earth’ are a necessary condition for life and human development can undermine the health of the soil through over-exploitation. Treating these as internal dimensions of a singular reality captures the co-constitutive nature of the relation.

When Bhaskar invokes the idea of an ‘internal relations’ perspective, he actually gives convincing justifications for generalising it as a basic methodological presupposition. He writes, for example, that ‘emergent social things are existentially constituted by or contain their relations, connections or interdependencies with other social (and natural) things’ (Bhaskar 1993: 54). In other words, all ‘emergent’, i.e. historically constituted, social forms are what they are due to their ‘relations, connections, and interdependencies’ with other social and natural forms. Here Bhaskar appears to be speaking very generally, and, consequently the logical implication of his argument is that an ‘internal relations’ perspective is a universal methodological presupposition. Indeed, all objects in the world ‘fit’ Bhaskar’s criteria – we can conceive of no object that is not constituted by the relations it inhabits. Notions of difference, otherness, and specificity, all key concepts in IR, for example, arguably only make sense if we see the particularities they emphasise as being an expression of the multiple networks of relations constituting any specific social form. Yet Bhaskar, despite giving strong reasons for the ‘generalisation’ of an ‘internal relations’ method, conversely argues that ‘in the social world we are almost always concerned with partial totalities’ and these may ‘contain external, contingent or no connection between the elements’ (Bhaskar 1998a: 631).
The difficulty arising from this ontological assumption is how to capture theoretically the relationship between the ‘partial totalities’ Bhaskar invokes (Ollman 2003: 177). The ‘open system’ concept that is employed by critical realists makes this a broadly empirical question, i.e., we can make no a priori theoretical assumptions about the nature of the external relations between the totalities, beyond that they are external / contingent.

Bhaskar’s theorisation of this point invokes the notion of ‘epistemic contingency’, i.e., our knowledge of the contingent as a fundamental ontological condition. He thus writes that for any given relation between entities, the ‘epistemic contingency of their relational character, the extent to which their explanation requires reference to a totality of aspects... to one another, remains open’ (Bhaskar 1998b: 43). At this level of critical realist discourse, there is arguably only a partial theorisation of the contingent form. It is theorised in the sense of its conceptualisation as an ontological presupposition, which underpins an empirical focus on the concrete nature of contingent and internal relations. But it is not fully theorised in the sense it leaves open the question of why social and natural processes are inherently unpredictable. In other words, it fails to explain what necessary mechanisms result in outcomes that cannot be determined in advance and are therefore contingent.

It is noteworthy that in the extract cited above, where Bhaskar implies that the principle of ‘internal relations’ has a certain universality, is taken from his engagement with the principles of dialectical thought (Bhaskar 1993). This was a logical turn in his writings, because critical realist assumptions about ontology imply a conceptualisation of the social process in a way that embraces its contradictions. ‘The world being what it is – the very qualities of order, difference, structure and change that Bhaskar attributes to reality’, writes Ollman, should ‘exercise... the greatest influence on our abstractions’ (Ollman 2003:175). A dialectical explanation of the emergent of contingent forms thus requires a conceptualisation, at a suitably high level of abstraction, of the processes that result in contingent outcomes. Marx’s most basic premise, of course, was the ‘double relationship’ – the ontological claim that human relations to nature must simultaneously involve collective and interactive social relations with one another (Marx and Engels 1969: 31). There is no reason not to make a similar theoretical claim about contingency: that there must be something about the way the social process works which results in indeterminate outcomes. If we capture this conceptually then we will have properly ‘internalised’ contingency theoretically.

In IR the use of totality, or ‘internal relations’, as a theoretical presupposition is hardly common. Yet at the same time many of its concepts, such as hegemony and uni-or-multi-polarity pre-suppose the existence of an integrated international order and only make sense conceptually when they are relationally defined by their opposites. In more contemporary IR scholarship the concern for specificity and the backlash against ‘grand theorising’, might explain the hostility to attempts at establishing a general theoretical framework accounting

for the mechanisms resulting in differentiation. Despite an insignificant presence within IR, an 'internal relations' perspective is arguably complimentary with many assumptions of its theories. The idea 'how things cohere become essential attributes of what they are' (Ollman 2003: 72) opens up a way of thinking about specificity at, for example, the 'unit level', which sees a state's relations to the international system as 'part and parcel' of its peculiarity. Yet, due to the predominance of 'external relations' perspectives, the opposite assumption is often latent within social theory: that the world is made up of logically independent things, which then interact with one another. In IR, Eurocentric visions of modernity, for example, establish reifying conceptualisations of the East and West that fail to see how these specific notions of 'otherness' were formed through interactive, 'internally related' processes (see Hobson 2004).

Internal relations scholars (Ollman 2003; Sayer 1987) do not advocate unilinear visions of social development. The rejection of the existence of external relations *per se* also has an impact on how we think about contingency because it posits the need to 'internalise' it theoretically. No doubt many IR theorists fear that such an internalisation would undermine the complexity which is inherent in the concept of contingency itself. Colin Wight, who has been at the forefront of introducing a critical realist ontology into IR, for example, said that his book, *Agents, Structures and International Relations; politics as ontology,* did not advance a 'general theory of International Relations' because 'no such theory is possible' (Wight 2006: 294). 'The international political system is a complex, chaotic and essentially open system that is causally overdetermined', he argued, consequently, 'this means that the patterns we observe are not reducible to, or explainable by, any one theory' (ibid). Indeed, it is true, that a 'general theory of International Relations' would represent thin gruel indeed; though my fear in this regard is that it would result in 'de-socialising' the international realm in the reifying manner of neo-realism (see Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008: 86). But there remains a place for a general conceptualisation of the multilinear and interactive processes that result ineluctably in an international realm characterised by 'chaos and complexity'. Here, I believe, lies the potential of the 'law of uneven and combined development' both as an explanatory tool for explaining the chaos and complexity of the international system, but also to capture the necessities that result in indeterminate outcomes. It is to this potential that we should now turn.

Theorising contingency: implications of the law of uneven and combined development

The idea of uneven and combined development was first articulated by Leon Trotsky to conceptualise the contradictory impact of capitalist modernisation on underdeveloped states in the periphery of the global system (Trotsky 1962; 1967). He was particularly concerned with the peculiarities of early twentieth century Russia, as its archaic, absolutist state form and semi-feudal backwardness became juxtaposed with rapid industrial modernisation (Trotsky 1967: 21–32). Trotsky’s innovative treatment of this apparent paradox sought to incorporate these contradictory elements into the remit of social theory, by arguing that they arose *necessarily* from the multilinear dimensions of historical development. ‘The development of historically backward nations leads necessarily’, he argued, ‘to a peculiar combination of different stages in the historic process’ and thus their evolution ‘acquires a planless, complex, combined character’ (Trotsky 1967: 23). Unevenness referred to the asynchronous form taken by global social development – the great diversity that existed in the human form with geographically dispersed polities and regions developing in different ways, eliciting variation in the pace of technical and social progress. Combination denoted the interactive process that set in when these forms combined – giving rise to outcomes such as the one Trotsky studied in Russia, where a single social formation fused together diverse developmental forms. Meanwhile, the lawfulness referred to the necessity of this process, for it could be no other way than diverse social forms entering into interaction with one another.

To understand Russia’s late development Trotsky sought to weave its diverse lineages together by situating the life of the domestic polity in the contradictions of world history. The subtle processes of cultural and intellectual diffusion from outside combined with the harder imperatives of geopolitical and economic competition (the ‘whip of external necessity’ as he called it). These influences and pressures intersected with the nation’s domestic culture, along with its class and state structure. The uneven and combined development ‘from afar’ helped to reproduce and accelerate it ‘within’ the sovereign bounds of the territorial state. Spatially concentrated industrial urbanisation took place against a backdrop of appalling misery and backwardness in the country, where ‘peasant land cultivation as a whole remained... at the level of the seventeenth century’ (Trotsky 1967: 27). Trotsky thus excavated Russia’s unique path dependence within the contours of global history, which crucially included the recognition that different social property forms could become juxtaposed within a single state formation. In this way, he challenged the ‘pedantic schematism’ (Trotsky 1967: 23) of those forms of Marxism with *stadial* conceptions of historical development.

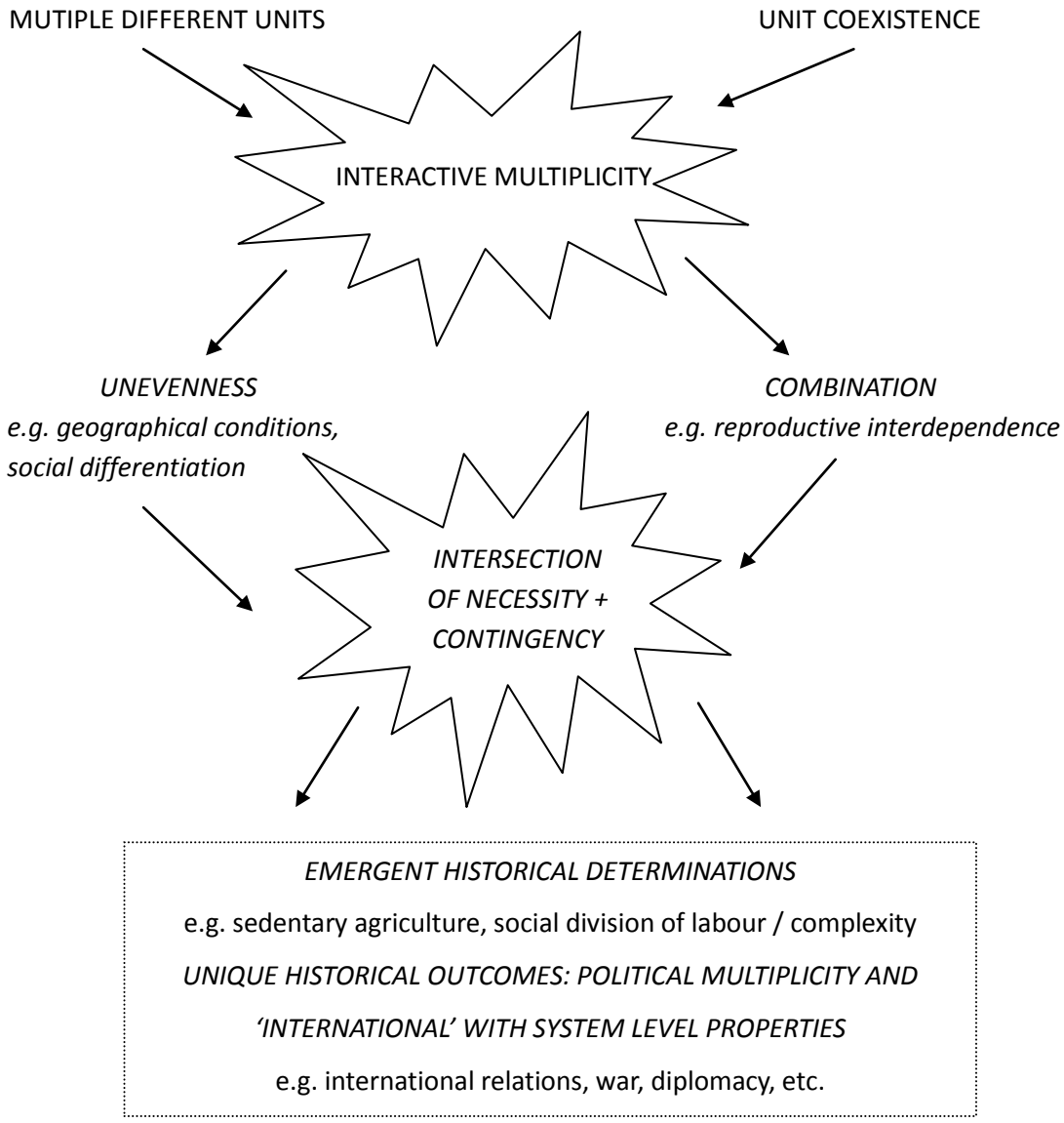
The implications were not localised to the Russian polity. Trotsky himself extrapolated the concept outwards, embracing the entire periphery of late capitalist development (Trotsky 1974: 15–16). In Trotsky’s application of the concept, however, the ‘combination’ tended to denote, specifically, the impact and outcomes produced by capitalist internationalisation (ibid). This thus allowed him to conceptualise the contradictory dynamics of capitalist globalisation and, indeed, he was surely right to do so, for very few would downplay, let alone deny, the enormous impact of the emergence of these social relations on the pace and form of development in every corner of the globe. But ‘uneven and combined development’ also had conceptual potential beyond this concrete application. Trotsky’s idea not only challenged unilinear interpretations of Marx, but also added a new premise to historical materialism, whereby human development is seen as *necessarily* multilinear. This has recently been taken up in the work of Justin Rosenberg (2005; 2006; 2007; 2010), who has used the idea of multilinear patterns as a lawful phenomenon to extend the concept of uneven and combined development backwards temporally through time – thereby also raising it to a higher level of abstraction conceptually. For international theory this makes it possible to use uneven and combined development as the *explanans* for an historical account of the emergence of ‘the international’ (Rosenberg 2010). Many have argued this departs too far from its original meaning (Ashman 2006; 2009; Davidson 2006; 2009; Smith 2006), even though it largely follows the logic of Trotsky’s own claim that ‘unevenness is the most general law of the historic process’ out of which combination arises (Trotsky 1967: 23).

If we recall our earlier discussion of the method of abstraction in which we noted how transhistorical concepts acted as pre-suppositions or ‘premises’ of a more concrete and historical analysis, there is no reason why we cannot work with Trotsky’s notion at different levels of abstraction and concretisation. Reification of the social process will only set in should we forget Sayer’s point that categories will acquire substantive analytical unity solely in their historically specific form (Sayer 1987: 21). In other words, we should only expect to end up with a non-historical analysis, if we used a transhistorical notion of uneven and combined development in a non-historical and reifying way. Moving to a more ‘abstract’ level of analysis is also the only option if we want to bring the revolutionary implications of the concept to bear on the ontological assumptions that ground all our social research. The theorisation of indeterminacy which is offered by Trotsky’s concept arguably resolves the problem of necessity and contingency for social theory. This point has been intimated,

tentatively suggested indeed, but not fully drawn out, in the texts where Rosenberg excavated the conceptual core of this idea and accounted for the origins of ‘the international’.

In Rosenberg’s (2006) original criticism of classical social theory the problematic of contingency exists as a recurring theme in his argument. Rosenberg’s claim is that faced with the objective problem of unevenness in history, classical scholars invoked ‘contingent’, intruding externalities as concrete addenda to the idea of development, rather than reconstructing it along the lines that Trotsky did by adding the predicates uneven and combined (Rosenberg 2006: 332-333). Using Robert Nisbet (1969) as an example of this common fallacy, Rosenberg points to his argument which held that it was impossible to take humanity as the subject and object of the notion of development, for it is too ‘diverse, multiple and particular’ (cited in Rosenberg 2006: 333). But this position only stands if we already hold in our minds the assumption that development is unilinear and not uneven. By adding the properties of unevenness and combination *in abstracto*, then the ‘diverse, multiple and particular’ – the variety of cultural and social forms in world history – cease to be externalities. On the contrary they are now understood as arising through the multiple, dispersed but interactive properties of a re-conceived notion of social development (ibid).

Figure two – Emergence: from interactive to political multiplicity



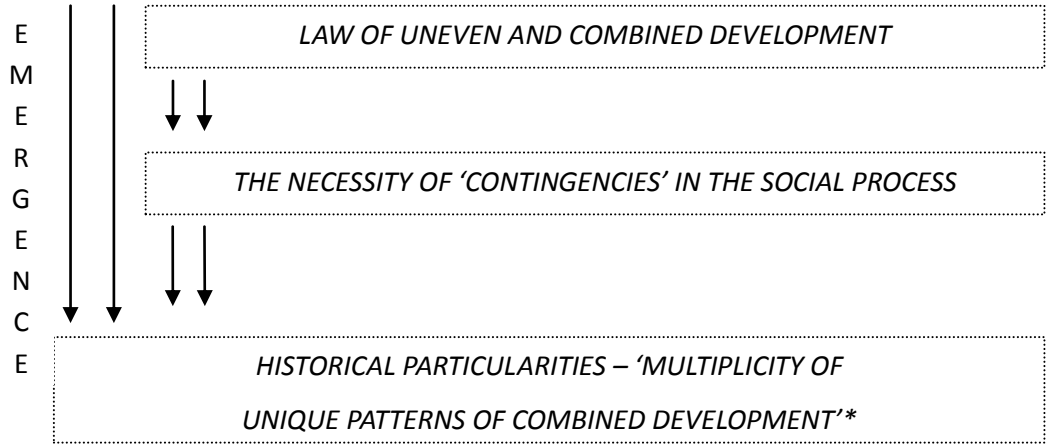
The dialectical character of the analysis (unevenness > interaction > particularity > unevenness) suggests that social-historical necessities lead to emergent, particular social forms. But to elicit particularity – the diverse historical examples of developmental and cultural forms – there must be a powerful element of contingency. Wars, revolutions, state formation, to take the classical subject matter of historical sociology by way of example, all involve struggles between social groups, the outcome of which cannot be pre-determined. Rosenberg does not go so far as to start to theorise the dialectic of necessity and contingency in the idea of U&CD. He does however make a particularly suggestive comment which illustrates the need to reflect upon the intersection of these dimensions within the modalities of the concept. Defending the lawful character of unevenness, Rosenberg writes, '...The

concrete pattern of socio-cultural diversity is contingent’, but, ‘the fact of the diversity is not’ (Rosenberg 2006: 317). It derives, he suggests, from the social necessity of unevenness in historical development. Rosenberg does not appear to mean merely that the pattern of social cultural diversity is conditional on wider social forces – one possible interpretation of the term ‘contingency’. Rather, he appears to be putting forward the more interesting idea that the contingent arrangement of social forces arises out of the necessarily uneven and combined nature of development, resulting in social-historical particularity. The suggestion then is that contingencies within the historical process arise necessarily. To put it another way, it must be the case that when diverse social forms interact, the forms of co-operation, conflict and intellectual exchange this interaction involves, result in particular outcomes that cannot be anticipated in advance and are therefore ‘contingent’.

The point can be illustrated through a discussion of Rosenberg’s (2010) most innovative piece: his application of uneven and combined development to early human society. Drawing on world history studies and the work of Buzan and Little in IR (Buzan and Little 2000), he seeks to locate the origins of the first ‘international system’ by tracing the interaction between ‘hunter-gatherer-bands’. This early stage of development, where humans lived in nomadic communities dispersed across vast regions, still exhibited, Rosenberg argues, the same properties of uneven and combined development. The enormous unevenness intrinsic to the diverse resources the natural world offered early human societies, and the different tempos at which societies adapted to these conditions, inevitably resulted in an uneven pace of technical development, as communities learnt social techniques adapted to their environments in temporally and spatially differentiated moments (Rosenberg 2010: 179–182). Yet hunter-gather-bands were also dependent on one another for their reproduction and this was the most basic element in the process of interaction that led to overlapping development pathways (ibid). This included the passing of productive techniques across generations and communities, a form of interaction essential to the emergence of the first sedentary communities (ibid). This process, taking place across a temporal plane of thousands of years, eventually led to the formation of the first international systems. The distinctive qualities of such a system as understood in IR is the existence of causal properties such as war, diplomacy, and so on, which cannot be reduced to the interaction between domestic polities (Rosenberg 2010: 172–173). Rosenberg thus concurs with Buzan and Little’s observation that the kind of interaction occurring between hunter-gather-bands does not have the qualities we

would associate with 'the international', but it does exhibit the more anterior and basic qualities of unevenness and combination amongst these social units (ibid).

Figure three – Contingency as an emergent property of U&CD



* Rosenberg 2006: 309

The process Rosenberg describes is plainly 'law-governed'. There are necessities at work at every level, not only in the uneven and combined form taken by interaction within the early human species, but also, for example, in the brutish form taken by social reproduction itself (the imperative of survival) when the human species has such an under-developed labour process. However, the narrative also illustrates how the contingent form itself is a necessary one. There is an indeterminacy of outcome inherent in the process, but one simultaneously conditioned by necessities. This would probably have been even more apparent had he reflected on the forms of cultural reproduction in these early communities too. Commonalities and difference in the cultural form must also arise from the same interactive process Rosenberg analyses. Their outcomes are particularly contingent because there are multiple narratives that even the most historically nascent communities can construct to give meanings to their lives. But it is perhaps in the struggle for survival between communities that contingency manifests itself most clearly. The development of a surplus in agricultural production in the first settled communities requires storage, which in turn made these surpluses attractive to competitors (Rosenberg 2010: 173–174). The result is 'nucleation' – the formation of larger and more concentrated groups better able to carry out defensive actions (ibid). Contingency is at the apex of the process – for the extent of individual groups' success in achieving either nucleation or other forms of defence cannot be pre-determined in advanced. The way this denouement intersects with others in the interactive process of mutual constitution also presupposes an indeterminacy of outcome (contingency). We can see

how, thus, uneven and combined development conditions the whole expanse of human development. Whether a given set of cultural meanings, social forms and processes are passed generationally across time, or socially across space, is dependent on a whole web of ‘necessary but contingent’ interactions. Indeterminacy of outcome arises therefore quite lawfully from the process that uneven and combined development invokes.

If contingency is so deeply interwoven in this process why does it not feature more substantively in Rosenberg’s argument? For instance, Rosenberg offers no discussion of a concrete and specific social form as it underwent the interactive process he describes. The explanation is at one level entirely straightforward. It is a simple empirical problem, because the object he takes as the subject of his investigation is so far back in human history that empirical information is limited, undermining our ability to tell the story in a way that incorporates the concrete intricacies. The sheer breadth of time spanned by his analysis also inevitably has the effect of shifting the focus to more general trends of social development.

There is however more to this than research pragmatism. Rosenberg’s argument also shows the need to place important qualifications on the theorisation of indeterminacy that uneven and combined development offers. This comes across very clearly in the historical materialist conception of development he incorporates as key to the story: successive transformations in the human relation to nature lead to evolving forms of social hierarchy, necessarily existing in a state of mutual constitution and interaction with the wider world (Rosenberg 2010: 178–182). Consequently, drawing on *The German Ideology* he writes:

> ‘Human history, on this view, reappears as a millennial succession of generations, each of which inherits a given total constellation of social and natural relations which it passes on (in a form modified by the outcomes of its own (re)productive activity) to the next’ (Rosenberg 2010: 179).

Captured in this observation is in fact the greatest of all possible necessities: namely, history itself, because once it has happened it cannot be changed. The cumulative experience of the past conditions heavily the form and nature of the present moment. ‘Men make their own history’, wrote Marx famously and appositely on this very point, ‘but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx 1973b: 146). The ‘real contradiction’, as Marx would have probably put it, in this living and breathing process is that

the indeterminate outcomes of the past transmogrify into the historically inherited realities of the present. But it is then necessarily the case that the conjuncture bears witness to contingent struggles, co-operation and interaction which in turn modify the historical conditions shaping the future. It is therefore in the ‘conjuncture’ that the necessity of contingency most sharply manifests itself. For precisely this reason reflecting on history shows that at any one of its infinite historical moments indeterminate natural and social processes shape the form of human development in sometimes subtle, but other times dramatic, ways.

Treating contingency as a necessity written into the DNA of the law of uneven and combined development could also be interpreted as undermining our notion of social progress. And it certainly does take us away from the type of pre-determination and ineluctable understanding of progress present in Hegel’s teleology. Yet Marx’s concept of development introduces important qualifications here too. Human social development itself is treated as a necessity; it is a cumulative process as we build on our inherited conditions to develop new productive techniques, social and cultural forms to continually transform our environment. Progress may well be, at certain points, thrown backwards across any number of epochs by, for example, a natural or social disaster. But it remains an intrinsic quality of the human species that we continue to exist in social forms which are capable of rediscovering forgotten productive techniques and social relations, and are also able to develop these further in new and unique ways into the future. Marx of course argued that progress is usually contradictory because of the prevalence of conflicts as well as all the co-operative interaction our social relations involve. Consider the wide-ranging and multiple struggles over wealth and power that are fundamental to all social hierarchies. If one derives the conception of progress from the assumptions Marx and Engels develop in *The German Ideology* our development can be judged by the extent to which the form of the ‘double relationship’ (Marx and Engels 1969: 31) allows for a sustainable relationship with nature and an equitable and free development of the human social condition. There is a real sense therefore that development *does* have a directionality and purposefulness, if we consider the entire breadth of human history and its successive attempts to develop more sophisticated and equitable social forms.

Conclusion

Trotsky’s conception of uneven and combined development was of course extrapolated from an attempt to find an answer to a very specific problem: how to account for the peculiarities of Russian development without losing sight of a general conception of social development.

Rather than define the Russian experience comparatively against a supposed 'norm' he internalised its contradictions into a re-defined notion of social development itself. From the outset Trotsky's point was explicitly ontological, invoking a necessity of development itself, unevenness as 'the most general law of history' (Trotsky 1974: 15). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore to find that wrapped in the physiognomy of this idea was a further anterior dimension: once multilinear patterns of social development are considered necessary, then contingency and indeterminacy must be equally lawful. The key to understanding why this is so lies in the notion of 'combination' and here too we find the relevance for IR. The idea of uneven and combined development is predicated on an anterior notion of multiple social forms. The concept can only make sense if this presupposition is already in place: unevenness and combination must refer *too something.* And this 'something' is the multiple social forms which interact to produce differentiated forms of development. Contingency operates when these social forms 'combine' to elicit indeterminate outcomes. How original was Trotsky's claim? Does the notion of differential totality not get us this far? If so is not uneven and combined development simply 'excessive theorising' – a redundant idea that breaks the famous *Occam Razor*[5] principle? Not quite. Uneven and combined development is indeed predicated on the idea of internal relations. Treating a totality as differentiated tells us the identity of a specific social form cannot be properly understood without conceptualising the world in which it exists. But it does not tell us anything about the necessary properties of social development. Crucially it does not involve the idea that *multiple social forms* must *necessarily* interact with one another to produce a multiplicity of indeterminate outcomes.

This 'necessity of indeterminacy' holds the key to the uncertainty of the international milieu. Consider again the problem Ruggie invoked. His claim was simply that lawfulness cannot account for the 'totality' of a transformation, for the 'contingencies' are 'too great, the role of unintended consequences too pervasive' (Ruggie 1998: 135). Ruggie's target was of course a distinctive notion of social law as generalisations about events, from which probabilities might be inferred. And in a very important sense he *was actually right.* Contingencies are indeed pervasive, and this is particularly so in the international realm. The travails of floundering neo-realist prediction in IR indicate the inherent problem in trying to anticipate agent behaviours on the basis of the twin-pillars of rational deduction and empirical generalisation. There is simply too much differentiation, or rather, too much uneven and

[5] The principle that states concepts should have a meaning and utility which is not already captured by other concepts. This principle was used to challenge the use of scholastic metaphysical systems in medieval philosophy.

combined development, too many multiple unique social forms and indeterminate outcomes, that negate attempts for logical induction to successfully account for real social causality. The task instead is to highlight contradictions and the social forces they lock in interaction and conflict. Decisions of state managers, mechanisms of global trade, transnational social struggles of the subaltern classes – these multiple actions and mechanisms can all 'combine' to produce transformational results which cannot be precisely known in advance. But the indeterminacy inherent in these interactions is entirely lawful. Uneven and combined development internalises the contingent dimension into the bounds of theory by no longer treating it as an independent externality to the analysis.[6] But it does so without embracing radical historicism, because once clearly grounded in an historical materialist method then the actions and processes found in the international milieu are reconceived as a penumbra of social necessities that find their expression and mediation through the course of collective human activity. This is thus the dialectic of necessity and contingency in historical change.

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[6] This conclusion is not without precedent in wider intellectual discourses beyond IR. Theorising indeterminacy in this way also chimes with developments in the physical sciences too. Summarised by Daniel Bensaïd as a turn to understanding 'stochastic behaviour occurring in a determinate system', new ways of thinking about science associated with chaos theory are increasingly arguing that 'lawless behaviour [is] wholly governed by law' (Bensaid 2002: 296).

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