



The ‘Law’ of Uneven and Combined Development: Some Underdeveloped Thoughts

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical reconstruction of the main Marxist debates about the idea of ‘leaps forward’ in historical development. There have been two important approaches: the so-called ‘law of uneven and combined development’, as developed by Leon Trotsky, George Novack and Ernest Mandel, and Jan Romein’s ‘handicap of a head start’. Although Romein’s approach is Stalinist in origin, elements of it are compatible with Trotsky’s interpretation. But, even an expanded version of the ‘law’ of uneven and combined development lacks predictive value, although one can say with certainty in hindsight whether a combined development has taken place. It is argued that the ‘law’ is, in fact, an underspecified social mechanism and that its explanatory power can be increased by identifying a number of recurrent patterns.

Keywords

uneven development, combined development, diffusion, Trotsky, Novack, Romein

One feels a little foolish in proclaiming a scientific law inasmuch as it is done so frequently as a form of humor.
Elman Service¹

The ‘law of uneven and combined development’ occupied a special place in Ernest Mandel’s thought. He used this ‘law’ again and again to refer to developments in world capitalism as well as in the so-called transitional societies. In this paper, I seek to situate Mandel’s interpretation critically in the context of the twentieth-century debate on the connection between ‘backwardness’ and

1. Service 1960, p. 102. I am grateful to Mike Hanagan, Joost Kircz, Knut Kjeldstadli, two anonymous referees, and members of the Editorial Board for their critical reading of earlier drafts of this article.

‘leaps forward in development’, and show that the ‘law’ might be of greater analytical value if certain elements of it were more accurately specified.

1. The Trotsky-Novack-Mandel approach

Within the Marxist tradition, the idea of ‘leaps forward’ acquired its first advocates in the early twentieth century.² Rudolf Hilferding wrote in his *Finance Capital* (1910):

Capitalist development did not take place independently in each individual country, but instead capitalist relations of production and exploitation were imported along with capital from abroad, and indeed imported at the level already attained in the most advanced country. Just as a newly established industry today does not develop from handicraft beginnings and techniques into a modern giant concern, but is established from the outset as an advanced capitalist enterprise, so capitalism is now imported into a new country in its most advanced form and exerts its revolutionary effects far more strongly and in a much shorter time than was the case, for instance, in the capitalist development of Holland and England.³

Anton Pannekoek also observed in 1920, referring to the October Revolution:

This is not the first time in history that a transition to a new mode of production – or a new form or phase of a mode of production – displaces the centre of the world to new countries or different regions. In Antiquity the centre shifted from the Near East to Southern Europe, in the Middle Ages from Southern to Northern Europe; the rise of colonial and merchant capital made first Spain and then the Northern Netherlands the leading country, while the rise of industry did the same for England. The reason is easily grasped. In a region where the earlier form attained its highest development, the material and intellectual forces and institutions that ensured its existence became so fixed and sturdy that they became almost insurmountable obstacles to the development of new forms. Think for example of the guild ordinances of the medieval cities, which ensured that later capitalist manufacturing could only flourish where they were not in force; or think of the Dutch merchants’ policies in the seventeenth century, which stifled industry. There is even a corresponding law in organic nature, which, to paraphrase Darwin’s ‘survival of the fittest’, could be called ‘survival of the unfitted’.⁴

2. We can also find embryonic elements of it in Marx’s own writings. See e.g. Mehringer 1978, pp. 20–64.

3. Hilferding 1981, pp. 322–3.

4. Horner 1920, p. 267.

But it was chiefly Trotsky who made the idea of societal leaps acceptable among Marxists. As is known, beginning in 1904–5 he worked on a theory of uninterrupted revolution [*nepreryvnaja revoljucija*], which stated that the rapid development of world capitalism in Russia left only the working class capable of completing a social revolution. ‘The proletariat will carry out the fundamental tasks of democracy – and the logic of its immediate struggle to safeguard its political rule will at a certain point pose purely socialist tasks for it.’⁵ Over the years, Trotsky generalised this theory into a much broader theory of social change. His theoretical labours reached their apex in this respect in 1932–3 in his book on the *History of the Russian Revolution*. Here, he presented his ‘law of combined development’:

Although compelled to follow after the advanced countries, a backward country does not take things in the same order. The privilege of historic backwardness – and such a privilege exists – permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages. Savages throw away their bows and arrows for rifles all at once, without travelling the road which lay between those two weapons in the past. The European colonists in America did not begin history all over again from the beginning. The fact that Germany and the United States have now economically outstripped England was made possible by the very backwardness of their capitalist development. On the other hand, the conservative anarchy in the British coal industry... is a paying-up for the past when England played too long the role of capitalist pathfinder. The development of historically backward nations leads necessarily to a peculiar combination of different stages in the historic process. Their development as a whole acquires a planless, complex, combined character.⁶

Trotsky emphasised that the ‘possibility of skipping over intermediate steps’ is ‘by no means absolute’. He voiced two major reservations. Firstly, the extent to which such a possibility exists depends on ‘the economic and cultural capacities of the country’.⁷ Secondly, a ‘leap’ does not always have a progressive result:

The backward country... not infrequently debases the achievements borrowed from outside in the process of adapting them to its own more primitive culture. In this the very process of assimilation acquires a self-contradictory character. Thus the introduction of certain elements of Western technique and training, above all

5. Lev Trockij, ‘Socialdemokratija i revoljucija’, *Načalo*, 10 (25 November–8 December 1905), as cited in Mehlinger 1978, p. 232. On Trotsky’s collaboration with Parvus (Alexander Helphand) in this early period, see Scharlau 1962.

6. Trotsky 1977, pp. 26–7.

7. Trotsky 1977, p. 27.

military and industrial, under Peter I, led to a strengthening of serfdom as the fundamental form of labour organization. European armament and European loans – both indubitable products of a higher culture – led to a strengthening of czarism, which delayed in its turn the development of the country.⁸

In sum, Trotsky distinguished *two* regularities: first the ‘law of unevenness’, and linked to it the ‘law of combined development’, that is, ‘a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms.’⁹ Let me try to deconstruct Trotsky’s theory to some extent. What is, in fact, the *unit of analysis* here? Jon Elster observes:

World history may be studied from two points of view: as the rise and decline of nations or as the rise and decline of institutions. The former approach is that of Thorstein Veblen and, more recently, of Mancur Olson.... The latter perspective is that of Marx and, more recently, of Douglass North.... Trotsky’s theory of combined and uneven development says that these questions are interrelated.¹⁰

Progress. There is progress; and this progress is linear, and can thus be used as a standard with which to measure to what extent a nation/institution is more or less ‘backward’.¹¹

Unevenness. The development of nations/institutions is uneven, so that more or less backward or advanced nations/institutions exist alongside one another – incidentally, a thought that could already be found in Lenin as the ‘law of uneven development’.

Combination 1. Backward and advanced nations/institutions are interwoven with each other.

Privilege of backwardness. A ‘backward’ nation/institution can, under certain conditions (‘economic and cultural capacities of the country’), appropriate technical and other gains from an ‘advanced’ situation without going through the intermediate stages that the advanced nation/institution did have to go through.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid. See also the very useful study of Trotsky’s views in Thatcher 1991.

10. Elster 1986, p. 54.

11. An outstanding analysis of the concept ‘backwardness’ in Knei Paz 1977, pp. 70–3.

Combination 2. The new situation that thus arises in the previously ‘backward’ country *can* lead to an advantage over the previously ‘advanced’ nation/institution; but ‘not infrequently’ the result is only a form of modified backwardness.

After Trotsky’s death, it was chiefly the US philosopher George Novack (1905–92) who tried to develop the theoretical framework in this area further. In 1957, he published a two-part essay in the British *Labour Review* in which he generalised Trotsky’s analysis, declaring it ‘one of the fundamental laws of human history’, and introduced the concept of ‘the law of uneven and combined development’, which, in later decades, would come to lead a life of its own. Novack considered the pattern that he had described ‘a scientific law of the widest application to the historic process.’¹² He asserted that Trotsky’s theory was an ‘application’ of a more general regularity to ‘the key problems of the international class struggles in our own time.’¹³ The law of uneven and combined development, Novack said, held true not only for human history but also for all evolutionary biological processes. Novack thus used a different unit of analysis from Trotsky, namely all living organisms and their forms of social life.

He distinguished the law of uneven development on the one hand, which provides that ‘the constituent elements of a thing, all the aspects of an event, all the factors in a process of development’ develop at different rhythms, and the law of combined development on the other hand, which provides that ‘features belonging to different stages’ can converge to form something new.¹⁴

In the joining of such different, and even opposing, elements, the dialectical nature of history asserts itself most forcefully. Here, contradiction, flat, obvious, flagrant contradiction, holds sway. History plays pranks with all rigid forms and fixed routines. All kinds of paradoxical developments ensue which perplex those with narrow, formalized minds.¹⁵

The combination of slavery and capitalism could lead, for example, to a situation in which there were commercial slaveholders among the Creek Indians of the Southern US. ‘Could anything be more anomalous and self-contradictory than

12. Novack 1972a, p. 82.

13. Novack 1972a, p. 85. He said even more clearly a few years later: ‘The law of uneven and combined development is a general law of the historical process of which the theory of permanent revolution is a particular expression limited to the period of transition from the capitalist system to socialism’. Novack 1972b, p. 147.

14. Novack 1972a, pp. 85, 99.

15. Novack 1972a, p. 101.

communistic Indians, now slaveholders, selling their products in a bourgeois market?’¹⁶

Combined social formations are characterised, Novack says, by a struggle of opposites. He distinguishes two main types.

Combination Type 1: The backward form ‘absorbs’ the product of the advanced culture. ‘For example, the Indians could replace the stone axe with the iron axe without fundamental dislocations of their social order because this change involved only slight dependence upon the white civilization from which the iron axe was taken.’¹⁷ Sometimes, elements from an advanced culture can even prolong the life of a backward culture. ‘The entrance of the great capitalist oil concerns into the Middle East has temporarily strengthened the sheikdoms by showering wealth upon them.’¹⁸

Combination Type 2: Elements of the backward culture are ‘incorporated’ into the advanced culture. When, for example, Native Americans became involved in the fur trade, money pushed its way into their societies, with revolutionary consequences, ‘setting up private interests against communal customs, pitting one tribe against another and subordinating the new Indian traders and trappers to the world market.’¹⁹

In the long term, Type 2 always prevails, because ‘the superior structure... thrives at the expense of the inferior features, eventually dislodging them.’²⁰

Ernest Mandel – who placed considerable value on Novack’s opinions²¹ – took over the core ideas of this theoretical construct in later years. He focused, however, on the construct’s usefulness for analysing capitalist and transitional societies²² – though he sometimes failed to make a sharp distinction between Novack’s ‘law’ and Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution and almost never mentioned Novack by name.

Mandel rarely made any pronouncements about the ‘law’ in the abstract.²³ One of the rare occasions on which he did was in the late 1970s, when he

16. Ibid.

17. Novack 1972a, p. 106.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Novack 1972a, 107.

21. It was Novack, for instance, who prevailed on Mandel to begin writing his *Marxist Economic Theory* – see Jan Willem Stutje’s forthcoming biography of Ernest Mandel.

22. For example see Mandel 1970b. Mandel borrowed the concept of the ‘transitional society’ from Novack as well; see Novack 1968.

23. See, however, his summary of Trotsky’s view in Mandel 1995, pp. 1–8.

defended the thesis that the law of uneven and combined development could only have been discovered in a particular stage of world capitalism. In Marx's time, it had still seemed as if every country were developing independently along the same lines: 'The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.'²⁴ This idea reflected the actual nineteenth-century situation, Mandel says: 'France and Belgium did generally follow the pattern of English development; Germany and Italy by and large repeated French development, although without a radical bourgeois revolution.'²⁵ This pattern – which economic historians like Alexander Gerschenkron have also recognised, by the way²⁶ – ceased to be valid toward the end of the nineteenth century. Japan, Austria, and Tsarist Russia started on that road, but were unable to traverse it completely.²⁷ With the rise of imperialism, 'it became impossible for less developed countries to repeat *completely* the process of industrialization and modernization undergone by the imperialist countries.'²⁸ Since then, imperialism had unified the world economy into a 'single world market', even though world *society* had emphatically not become a 'homogeneous capitalist milieu'. On the contrary:

although [imperialism] submits all classes and all nations (except those which have broken out of its realm) to various forms of *common* exploitation, it maintains and strengthens to the utmost the *differences* between these societies. Although the United States and India are more closely interwoven today than at any time in the past, the distance which separates their technology, their life-expectancy, their

24. Marx 1976, p. 91.

25. Mandel 1979, p. 69.

26. Commenting on Marx's assertion that an industrialised country shows a less industrialised country 'the image of its own future', Gerschenkron writes that this generalisation is 'in some broad' sense valid. 'It is meaningful to say that Germany, between the middle and the end of the last century, followed the road which England began to tread at an earlier time.' Gerschenkron 1962, pp. 6–7.

27. Mandel 1979, p. 69.

28. *Ibid.* Mandel gave three reasons for this reversal. 'First, the weight of imperialist capital on the world market (and therefore in every country, including the backward ones) was such that any organic process of industrialization in competition with imperialist capital was ruled out so long as imperialism dominated.... Second, the native bourgeoisie in these countries was trapped between its desire to industrialize and modernize on the one hand and its close relations with agrarian property on the other hand. Because of its close relationship, the bourgeoisie had no interest in effecting a radical agrarian revolution, for to do so would have been to destroy a significant part of its own capital. Such an agrarian revolution, however, is the precondition for the creation of the extensive internal market required for a thorough, organic process of industrialization.... Third, the peasantry – which would have provided most of the potential participants in the bourgeois revolutionary process... – was unable to offer central political leadership for that process.' Mandel 1979, pp. 69–70.

average culture, the way of living and of working of their inhabitants, is much wider today than it was a century ago, when there were hardly any relations at all between these two countries.²⁹

But such expatiations were, in general, exceptional, as previously mentioned. Mandel tried much more often to show concretely that particular developments had been the result of uneven and combined development. Here, one example will suffice: inter-imperialist competition. Mandel became aware of this problem in the course of the 1960s. He did not mention the subject in his *Marxist Economic Theory*; but he did pay attention to it in his reply to Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber's *Le Défi américain* (Paris, 1967), and was, in fact, the first person on the European Left to do so.³⁰ From the late 1960s on, Mandel analysed US hegemony on several occasions in his works. In *Die EWG und die Konkurrenz Europa-Amerika* (1968), he claimed that the United States had 'benefited from the law of unequal development for a century' and was 'now becoming its victim'.³¹ After the end of the Civil War, the US had succeeded in a strikingly short time in catching up with Britain as an industrial power, thanks in part to the lack of surviving feudal or semi-feudal elements in its society, the availability of advanced technology,³² and the presence of major raw materials. The two World Wars further weakened the US's rivals, so that, in 1945, 'Germany, Japan, Great Britain, France and Italy had lost practically all their autonomous military and economic power'.³³ A steadily increasing surplus productive capacity and a growing surplus of capital, concentrated in the hands of the big corporations, accompanied the US economic growth that ensued.³⁴ The surplus capital could not be exported to underdeveloped countries, because their markets were too small and the investment climate too insecure. It therefore *had* to be placed in other developed capitalist countries, such as Western Europe and Japan. The resultant 'gigantic transfusion of American capital' led to the reconstruction of European and Japanese industries that had suffered greatly from the Second World War or otherwise become obsolete.³⁵ An exceptionally rapid accumulation

29. Mandel 1970b, p. 22.

30. Neusüss 1972, p. 6.

31. Mandel 1970a, p. 9.

32. The advanced technology resulted from the relatively high wages in the US, which in turn resulted from the limited labour supply, which in *its* turn resulted from the large quantity of 'freely' available land, which for many years gave US workers opportunities to become independent farmers.

33. Mandel 1970a, p. 10.

34. Mandel 1968.

35. There was also a political and strategic consideration that played a role in this respect. US hegemony was contested almost from the start, by the Soviet Union and colonial revolutions. In

process thus began in these countries,³⁶ leading to a shift in the relationship of forces. In the 1960s, the US lost its absolute superiority for good – though this loss did result in a consolidation of its *relative* superiority.³⁷

2. A second approach: Romein's 'handicap of a head start'

The idea that history makes 'leaps' has been accepted by all sorts of authors for a very long time. Over a century ago Lewis H. Morgan (1818–81) suggested that societies can skip over stages. Nikolai Chernyshevski (1828–89) concluded: 'History is like a grandmother; it loves the younger grandchildren.'³⁸ Thorstein Veblen too described in his book *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* (1915) how 'several generations' had developed machine technologies during the Industrial Revolution in Britain at the cost of 'large and long experience and argumentation', which the Germans had subsequently taken over 'in definite and unequivocal shape' – a transfer involving 'no laborious or uncertain matter'.³⁹

It should in any event occasion no great surprise that the Dutch Communist historian Jan Romein (1893–1962) developed a second theory of social 'leaps', independently of Trotsky – although I cannot rule out the possibility that Romein implicitly intended his theory as a Stalinist answer to Trotsky. While

order to maintain its hegemony against these challenges the US was compelled to restore Western Europe's and Japan's economic power. Mandel 1970a, pp. 10–11.

36. Mandel 1964. In later publications, Mandel also pointed out that an extensive industrial reserve army existed in Western Europe and Japan in the first ten to fifteen years after the Second World War that could be mobilised for the accumulation process. See Mandel 1976, pp. 169–71; Mandel 1974.

37. Mandel 1970a, p. 17. Christel Neusüss argues that this last argument of Mandel's turns logic upside down. Mandel shows that uneven development has determined the concrete historical relationship between the US and EEC, and then he *calls* this an expression of the law. 'But this is exactly what he means to demonstrate: that the historical fact of uneven development can be explained on the basis of the relationship between the historically and naturally divergent preconditions of capitalist production in particular countries, on the one hand, and the effect of the law of value on the world market, on the other.' Neusüss 1972, p. 80n.

38. As cited in Gerschenkron 1962, p. 179.

39. Veblen 1964, pp. 190–1. The same theme has subsequently been put forward countless times. Ronald Dore, for example, spoke of a 'late development effect': 'It is generally recognised that late-starters have some advantages – Germany leapfrogging over Britain in steel technology in the nineteenth century, for instance, or Japan in shipbuilding after the Second World War, starting, with her yards completely destroyed, unencumbered with all the nineteenth-century machinery which clutters the Clydebank. What is not so generally recognized is that there is a late development effect also in (a) social technology – educational systems, methods of personnel management, committee procedures, and (b) ideologies which – in the case of the egalitarian democratic ideologies germane to the present argument – although originally consequences of an advanced

Trotsky had reasoned chiefly from the viewpoint of the ‘backward’ country, Jan Romein reasoned from the other direction. Once more starting where Pannekoek had in 1920, Romein spoke of a ‘law of the handicap of a head start’ and used it ‘as a political standpoint, not only to the advantage of the new Soviet state but also to the advantage of its new leader, Joseph Stalin.’⁴⁰ In 1935, Romein published an essay on ‘The Dialectic of Progress’. Citing many examples from military, cultural and economic history, he defended the central thesis that ‘the most backward competitor has the best chance of success in the struggle for supremacy.’⁴¹ Developments in the Soviet Union, he argued, confirmed this:

Totally contrary to the ‘theory’, which taught that the so-called Russian experiment had to fail because it had skipped over the bourgeois-capitalist phase, it seemed instead that that (relative) skipping over created the conditions for success. The slogan of *dogmat’ i perignat’*, catching up with and surpassing Western capitalism, proved no idle phrase but a conscious application of what we have just tried to show: namely, that each time the highest system is not the direct continuation of the previous one, but rather develops on a lower foundation *in contradiction* to the previous one, albeit while drawing on the results of that previous one.⁴²

Romein – who was familiar with Trotsky’s work⁴³ – thus altered an element of it. We could call this altered element *Combination 2A*: while Trotsky left the question open of what the outcome would be of introducing ‘advanced’ elements into a ‘backward’ situation, Romein claimed that an initial lag in development leads not only to a leap forward but even to an advantage over the previously advanced nation/institution. In this way, Romein gave an apologetic twist to the law, using it to justify ‘socialism in one country’. Contrary to ‘ordinary’ Stalinists, however, he considered that the Soviet experiment was possible, not because capitalism was already well developed in Russia, but rather because it was *not yet* well developed.

At the same time, Romein added some elements to the argumentation that *were* compatible with Trotsky.

stage of industrialization in the societies in which those ideologies *first appeared*, can have independent life and force of their own when diffused to societies just beginning industrialization. I suggest that by these processes of diffusion late-developing societies can “get ahead” – can show in a “more developed” form, patterns of social organization which, in the countries which industrialized earlier are still emerging, still struggling to get out from the chrysalis of nineteenth-century institutions’. Dore 1973a, p. 12.

40. Otto 1998, p. 129.

41. Romein 1937, p. 29.

42. Romein 1937, pp. 48–9.

43. See his reference to the German edition of Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* on p. 49.

Handicap of a head start, the mirror image of the ‘privilege of backwardness’: just as an initial lag in development may lead to a leap forward, a head start may lead to stagnation.

Competition between advanced and backward nations. Only competition among nations always reveals which is backward and which is advanced. However petrified old forms may be, they still rule supreme as long as new forms do not threaten them. Therefore one cannot speak of the ‘decline’ of old forms. Neither does capitalism ‘decline’, although it changes in times of crisis. ‘I would prefer to drop that whole “idea of inherent decline” as a historical concept. It is unusable, because it is too vague. It amounts to a more or less instinctive, and therefore more or less superficial, biological view of historical processes.’⁴⁴

Intensity. The tempestuous development of world capitalism has a contradictory effect on development by leaps. On the one hand, a steady acceleration takes place. ‘Increased trade, development of credit institutions and a greater quantity of available capital have made it possible to appropriate technical and organisation improvements so much more quickly and easily!’ As a result, ‘the period during which a given system has and profits from a head start is becoming shorter and shorter, because improvements are easier to appropriate and apply.’⁴⁵ On the other hand, ‘the greater scale of capital investment leads at the same time to reluctance to make improvements, since they often require installing totally new factories.’⁴⁶ Taken together, the outcome of these two effects is that, while the duration of a head start is becoming shorter, it is being ‘more intensively used’, ‘so that the only differences with the earlier situation are ones of tempo and intensity’.⁴⁷

US anthropologist Elman Service (1915–96)⁴⁸ would, incidentally, discover the handicap of a head start entirely on his own twenty-five years after Romein. In a 1960 publication, Service made a distinction from an evolutionary perspective

44. Romein 1937, p. 35.

45. Romein 1937, p. 47.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. Elman R. Service had fought in the Spanish Civil War and belonged in the first post-Second-World-War years to the Mundiana Upheaval Society, a group of anthropology students in New York City that Stanley Diamond, Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf also belonged to. Wolf characterised the group as follows: ‘Well, all of us were some variant of red. Some of us had actively been members of “the Party” at some point. Others were Fourth Internationalist, or Three and Three-quarterth Internationalist. I think that was one of the strong bonds among us... a Marxian stew but not necessarily with any commitment to a particular party line.’ Friedman 1987, p. 109.

between two contradictory influences: on the one hand, *specific evolution*, through which every given system ‘improves its chances for survival, progresses in the efficiency of energy capture, by increasing its adaptive specialization’, with ‘nonprogressive’ stabilisation or complete stagnation as its final result; and, on the other hand, *general evolution*, through which forms that are ‘not highly specialized’ and have the potential to adapt to new circumstances continually originate alongside the stagnating forms.⁴⁹ Combining these two factors resulted in the ‘Law of Evolutionary Potential’, which Service summarised as follows: ‘The more specialized and adapted a form in a given evolutionary stage, the smaller is its potential for passing to the next stage’, or: ‘Specific evolutionary progress is inversely related to general evolutionary potential.’⁵⁰ The direct consequence of this regularity is that ‘over-all progress’ is discontinuous and irregular. Referring to the 1917 Russian Revolution, Service also pointed out a spatial aspect of his ‘Law’, an element that neither Trotsky nor Romein had explicitly mentioned – *local discontinuity*. Service meant by this that ‘if successive stages of progress are not likely to go from one species to its next descendant, then they are not likely to occur in the same locality.’⁵¹ Leaps forward also lead to geographical displacements.

3. Debates

The theory of the handicap of a head start was the occasion of some debate. Trotsky had stated that a backward country must have sufficient ‘economic and cultural capacities’ in order to appropriate advanced technology successfully. Romein had taken this aspect much less seriously; and the Dutch-German technician Frits Kief (1908–76) argued that this had led Romein to overestimate the scope of the ‘dialectic of progress’ to a considerable degree.

In the classical Marxist approach, a form of social development must mature completely in order for a new form to originate. Given how closely the struggle for socialism is to the working class, the *existence* of the working class is a *precondition* for socialism – also and above all because the existence of this class is an expression of the existence of the economic and technical relations that make socialism *necessary*. Marx therefore linked concentration of capital to socialisation of labor. *Both* of these factors determine a society’s degree of ripeness for socialism. ‘The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument.’

49. Service 1960, pp. 94–5.

50. Service 1960, p. 97.

51. Service 1960, p. 99.

Reasoning in Marxist terms, a phase of development can thus in principle not be skipped over. This of course does not mean that every capitalist development must retrace the route from the most primitive to the most highly developed stage. It only means that the *capitalist* stage is an *unavoidable* stage, which *must* be traversed in order to go from absolutism to socialism. With one ‘unless’: unless socialism has been achieved in the most highly developed capitalist countries. But this is obviously not what Romein means.⁵²

Kief cited Trotsky’s statement approvingly:

The possibility of skipping over intermediate steps is of course by no means absolute. Its degree is determined in the long run by the economic and cultural capacities of the country. The backward nation, moreover, not infrequently debases the achievements borrowed from outside in the process of adapting them to its own more primitive culture.⁵³

He added ‘Trotsky thus touched here on precisely the key missing element of Romein’s theory: a country’s economic and culture capacities as the determinant of the possibility of skipping over stages of development.’⁵⁴ Romein had fallen victim to a very common phenomenon among non-technically schooled intellectuals, Kief said: overestimating a people’s capacity to adapt to technology – an overestimation that had led Lenin to make a ‘tragic mistake’:

His tragic mistake was namely to think that a country could industrialize in successive technical stages, rather than through organically building up its *whole* productive apparatus. Make sure that you first build up heavy industry – basic industry – and [Lenin thought] you have the basis for consumer goods industry and thus for prosperity.

This is a tragic error, because it only deals with the *technical* side of the question and *neglects* the human side; or in other words, neglects the *cultural* side...

No doubt one can attempt to make up for technical backwardness by importing factory installations and technical equipment. But the attempt will not succeed unless the living conditions of *people* are not *simultaneously* improved, because *people* will have to use the equipment. It turns out that human adaptation to modern technology requires time, *a lot* of time.

In order to staff and run a factory, more is needed than just picking up some knacks. The more delicate the mechanisms become, the more accurate the measuring instruments and measurements must be. But that demands awareness. We can see that Romein has taken no account in his theory of many factors that are *essential*, particularly in the modern production process: factors that are also and

52. Kief 1955, pp. 356–7. The citation within the citation is from Marx 1976, p. 929.

53. Trotsky 1977, p. 27.

54. Kief 1955, p. 358.

primarily psychological in nature, such as respect for the material, the product, the tools and the measuring instruments. These psychological factors are *culturally* determined.⁵⁵

Dutch sociologist Jacques van Doorn wondered how universally valid the theory of the handicap of a head start is. He argued in the 1950s that it would be better not to use the term ‘handicap of a head start’ because it was only a ‘dialectical artifice’, and that it was more useful to begin from an ‘empirically demonstrable and explicable fact’: so-called ‘rigidification’. Drawing on the work of Robert Merton and Philip Selznick,⁵⁶ van Doorn argued that every social system eventually rigidifies:

At all levels, technical, psychological and sociological, the systems in question are characterized by a certain degree of *structuration*. This structuration results either from a conscious allocation of functions or from functioning in a particular way over a long period of time. The consolidation that thus arises acquires a certain autonomy in the course of time, however, which comes to impede changes in the systems’ functioning. In technical systems this consolidation takes the form of an apparatus out of balance; in psychology one speaks of a functional autonomy of motivation; in sociology this consolidation is called institutionalization.⁵⁷

The handicap of a head start manifests itself only when rigidification becomes predominant. But, contrary to what Romein seems to suggest, this kind of fatal inflexibility ‘far from always’ occurs. ‘A limited degree of institutionalization still leaves room for integrating new elements, that is, *room for social change*’. The example of constantly dynamic large-scale industry shows that structures that retain a degree of openness can both be institutionalised *and* undergo rapid change.⁵⁸

Dutch sociologist Cornelis Lammers also concluded that Romein’s theory was not sufficiently worked out ‘with an eye to concrete, systematic research.’⁵⁹ He therefore tried to apply Romein’s idea to organisational development, and distinguished for purposes of operationalisation four different kinds of leaps forward:

55. Kief 1955, p. 360.

56. Philip O. Selznick (1919–), born Philip Schachter, was a Trotskyist from 1935 to about 1941. Assertions that Robert K. Merton (1910–2003), born Robert Schkolonik, sympathised with Trotskyism in his early years as well, have neither been confirmed nor refuted (communications by Melvyn Dubofsky and Alan Wald).

57. van Doorn 1958, p. 911.

58. van Doorn 1958, pp. 912–13.

59. Lammers 1984, p. 95.

i) Deliberate leaps forward, by means of which organisations consciously skip over a stage. This involves ‘a sober calculation by dominant organizational elites’ that by introducing very advanced technology, etc., ‘they can equal or surpass their competitors, rivals or adversaries.’⁶⁰

ii) Non-arbitrary leaps forward, by means of which organisations ‘that are not engaged in a zero-sum game’ (for instance government agencies or voluntary associations) and that therefore have no ‘need of constant change’ orient toward new developments and subsequently decide “of their own accord” as it were’ to introduce advanced technology or something comparable.⁶¹

iii) Leaps forward through acquisition, that is, ‘founding new [organizations] on the ruins of old ones, or at least by using elements acquired from the “wreck” of older organizations.’⁶²

iv) Leaps forward based on affinity, that is, ‘abrupt changes as the result of a certain correspondence or convergence between the original organizational form or methods on the one hand and on the other hand the form or methods that ultimately arise through renewal, adaptation or transformation.’⁶³

Lammers argued, in addition, that the ‘dialectic of progress’ is not a universal law but, at most, ‘a connection that sometimes occurs under quite specific circumstances,’⁶⁴ for two reasons. First, far from every form of backwardness or lag in development is the result of the ‘handicap of a head start’. Most organisations have, after all, never been at the head of the pack and thus never experience any ‘handicap of a head start’. They *can* benefit from the ‘privilege of backwardness’ (Trotsky) by ‘carrying out one or more of the four forms of leaps in development previously mentioned.’⁶⁵ Second, not every ‘handicap of a head start’ leads to a leap forward in development.

Rather, the ‘normal’ consequence of the ‘handicap of a head start’ is an organization’s remaining fixed in its original form ‘until death ensues’. If an organization whose potential for renewal is ‘retarded’ should find itself in a drastically altered environment, the chance that it will agonize and ultimately perish will be proportional to the strength of the ‘brake’ constituted by its head start.⁶⁶

60. Lammers 1984, p. 106.

61. Lammers 1984, p. 107.

62. Lammers 1984, p. 108.

63. Lammers 1984, pp. 108–9.

64. Lammers 1984, p. 112.

65. Lammers 1984, p. 113.

66. *Ibid.*

4. Provisional conclusion

Despite the Stalinist influences in the Romein debate, elements of it can definitely be integrated into the Trotsky-Novack-Mandel approach. Nevertheless, the ‘law’ seems so far to be an analytical tool with a very restricted usefulness.

Reacting to Novack’s articles, Cliff Slaughter asked at the time to what extent one could really speak here of a law:

A scientific law should outline the particular sets of conditions which give rise to a typical result in the given sphere of investigation.... Can the law of uneven and combined development be seen in the same way? It states that factors developed to an uneven extent, either between societies or within one society, combine to form single formations of a contradictory character. If this generalization is to be accorded the status of a law it should give clear guiding lines to the following problem, among others. Will the processes at work give rise to a dialectical leap forward in history, as in the October Revolution in Russia, or will they give rise to degenerative processes, as in the bureaucratic distortions of Stalin’s regime, or the destruction of the Tasmanian aborigines?⁶⁷

The Maoist-inclined sociologist Wim Wertheim (1907–97), who had shown his agreement with Romein’s interpretation on several occasions since the late 1950s,⁶⁸ also expressed doubts in his book *Evolution and Revolution* (1974) about whether leaps forward can really be described as resulting from a law. While leaps forward constitute a recognisable pattern in history, Wertheim preferred to use the term ‘trend,’ ‘the strength and the evolutionary validity of which has still to be thoroughly investigated’.⁶⁹ Neither Romein nor Service had really specified the ‘specific characteristics of a society earmarked for the next evolutionary step,’ and, in addition, ‘it is never the most backward society which makes the leap forward’.⁷⁰ Instead of playing with ‘quasi-scientific laws,’ Wertheim found it more sensible ‘to elaborate and test a series of more or less concrete hypotheses, in order to find out under *what* conditions the trend of the retarding lead and the privilege of backwardness [are] operative’.⁷¹

What should we make of this? Novack had answered Slaughter that the law cannot predict the outcome of combining factors at different levels of development,

67. C.S., letter to the editor in *Labour Review*, as cited in Novack 1972c, p. 120.

68. See e.g. Wertheim 1958; Wertheim 1964, pp. 16–18, 180–1, 259–60; Wertheim 1966.

69. Wertheim 1974, p. 76.

70. Wertheim 1974, p. 77.

71. *Ibid.*

because its action and results do not depend upon itself alone, but more upon the total situation in which it functions.... Under certain conditions, the introduction of higher elements and their amalgamation with lower ones accelerates social progress; under other conditions, the synthesis can retard progress and even cause a retrogression. Whether progress or reaction will be favored depends upon the specific weight of all the factors in the given situation.⁷²

This defence leads us, at the very least, to the conclusion that the ‘law’ is insufficiently specific. We generally understand a ‘law’ to be a statement of the type: ‘If preconditions $C_1 \dots C_n$ hold true, then it follows that if P, then Q’. For example: ‘If the atmospheric pressure is 1 bar, then water will reach the boiling point at 100 degrees Celsius’. In the case of the ‘law’ of uneven and combined development, we know what P and Q are, but we do not know what all the preconditions $C_1 \dots C_n$ are that are necessary in order for P to lead to Q. To predict this result, we must not only observe *that* there is unevenness, but also exactly what kind of unevenness it is and what the possibilities and limits of transmission are. We cannot thus strictly speaking describe this as a law.⁷³

Statements about uneven and combined development thus also lack any predictive value, although one can say with certainty in hindsight, *ex post facto*, whether a combined development has taken place. It may be more correct to call the ‘law’ of uneven and combined development a *mechanism* in Jon Elster’s sense, that is a frequently occurring and easily recognisable causal pattern that is triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences. Unlike a covering law, a mechanism does not say ‘if A, then always B’; but ‘if A, then sometimes B’.⁷⁴

72. ‘Reply by George Novack’, in Novack 1972c, pp. 122–3.

73. E.P. Thompson (1978, p. 86) already suggested that ‘the argument will be advanced if we discard the concept of “law” and replace it with that of “the logic of process”’. Leo Kofler has argued that, in a Marxist perspective, ‘sociological’ laws can exist that are only applicable to one case. In my opinion, this approach undermines the whole concept of a scientific law. I prefer Helmut Fleischer’s position that the ‘domain of the concept of law in its significant sense is that of the isolatable and elementary, the typical and schematic’. See Warynski 1944, p. 161; Fleischer 1973, p. 117; and compare Alfred Cobban’s remark: ‘In practice, general social laws turn out to be one of three things. If they are not dogmatic assertions about the course of history, they are either platitudes, or else, to be made to fit the facts, they have to be subjected to more and more qualifications until in the end they are applicable only to a single case.’ Cobban 1964, pp. 13–14. One might see the concept of ‘probabilistic law’ as a way out here, but I am not convinced that this would be more than an act of intellectual camouflage.

74. Elster 1999. There is here, of course, a close link with the Marxian concept of the ‘tendency’ (see e.g., Marx 1981, p. 339). Mandel (1995, p. 1) has also characterised the law of uneven and combined development as a ‘historical mechanism’, but without further specification of the concept. See also Stinchcombe 1991 and Bunge 1997.

The explanatory power of the mechanism of uneven and combined development can be increased by identifying a number of recurrent sub-mechanisms. Some insights can probably be gained from non-Marxist diffusion theorists,⁷⁵ sociologists⁷⁶ and economists,⁷⁷ and from world-system analysts.⁷⁸ But, ultimately, we need historical studies that carefully explore historical attempts to transfer particular innovations (ideas, technologies, organisations or institutions) from one social context (A) to another (B). Such studies should at least reveal: (i) context A's relevant (political, social, cultural, natural) features; (ii) the actors attempting the transfer from A to B and their interests; (iii) the characteristics of the 'channels' through which the transfer from A to B was attempted; (iv) the social and material factors determining the innovation's assimilation, non-assimilation or adaptation in context B; and (v) the transfer's later implications for the relationship between A and B.⁷⁹ The results of such studies could probably teach us a lot more about the nature of historical leaps.

Translated by Peter Drucker

75. Rogers 1995 is still a useful standard work. Studies that examine unsuccessful diffusion seem particularly important.

76. See for example Dore 1973b, Meyer and Hannan 1979, Strang 1990, and Meyer, Ramirez and Soysal 1992.

77. There is, for example, much to be learned from the work of Alexander Gerschenkron (1904–78) and the ensuing discussions about late industrialisation in Europe from 1870 to 1914. See, above all, Gerschenkron's collected essays (Gerschenkron 1968). While Gerschenkron never referred openly to his political sympathies during his later life in the US, his work cannot be understood without reference to his past in the 1920s and '30s as an Austro-Marxist and 'critical supporter' of the Soviet Union. It is also at the least highly likely that Gerschenkron familiarised himself during his years as a leftist in Vienna with Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* when it was published in German in 1932–3. Other interesting contributions include Jervis 1947, Ames and Rosenberg 1963.

78. For example, Bunker and Ciccantell 2003.

79. Serious attention should be paid to political and cultural dimensions. Following Trotsky, Ernst Bloch and other thinkers Mandel (1995, p. 107) has argued that historical processes may express 'the partial non-synchronism of socio-economic and ideological forms'. Thus, the transfer of advanced ideological elements may be non-synchronous with the less advanced socio-economic context where these elements are introduced, or the transfer of advanced socio-economic elements may be non-synchronous with the ideological context where these elements are introduced. Non-synchronism may explain why cultural forms and institutions of advanced capitalism have sometimes not 'really' been transferred to peripheral contexts, but as simulacra. In these cases, a discrepancy may arise between the formal façade and actual behaviour, leading to systematic 'regulatory inconsistency'. Waldmann 1998 has a brilliant discussion of this phenomenon.

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