

# Uneven and Combined Development: Convergence Realism in Communist Regalia?

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**This is an open-access draft of an article accepted for publication in the  
*Cambridge Review of International Affairs*:**

It represents the version that the journal accepted for publication, but has not undergone copyediting, production, or post-acceptance updates

**Accepted:** 22 June 2020

## **Abstract**

Leon Trotsky's notion of 'uneven and combined development' (U&CD) has been gaining traction as an explanatory theory of international relations over the past decade, notably in work by Justin Rosenberg and Alexander Anievas. The idea that the uneven sequencing of economic development between countries affects both their relative power relationships and domestic political stability, in particular, carries *prima-facie* intuitive plausibility. The potential consequences for international stability of such relative power shifts and domestic upheavals, furthermore, suggest that there may be significant explanatory payoffs from this line of investigation. At the same time, however, the U&CD intuition raises other questions about causal foundations and theoretical affiliations. What accounts for the sequencing of uneven development, for example? And how exactly do both relative power shifts and domestic political instability elevate war risks? This paper will address these lacunae, by demonstrating that – at the level of its underlying micro-foundations – U&CD can be understood as a compound of catch-up convergence growth theory and security-dilemma realism. Such a recognition paves the way, in turn, for a fruitful application of U&CD to contemporary questions in international politics.

Deploying Leon Trotsky's notion of 'uneven and combined development' (U&CD) as a means of explaining international outcomes has become a vibrant – albeit still-niche – cottage industry within international relations (IR) scholarship over the past decade,<sup>1</sup> as evidenced by this Special Issue.<sup>2</sup> The idea that the uneven sequencing of socio-economic development between countries affects both their relative power relationships *and* their domestic political stability, in particular, carries considerable intuitive appeal. In terms of explanatory payoff, moreover, the potential benefits of such an approach are clear. Insofar as both 'external' balance-of-power shifts and 'internal' domestic political upheaval may affect states' war-proneness, a theoretical approach that can account for both third- and second-image sources of instability simultaneously – perhaps even first-image sources, too, if international and domestic political turmoil throw-up particularly bellicose leaders – may offer a level of explanatory power beyond the reach of arguments that focus on a single level of political interaction.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, the U&CD intuition begs further questions as a causal theory of international politics. What accounts for the precise sequencing of uneven development, for example? And how exactly do both relative power shifts and domestic political instability elevate war risks?

The purpose of this article is therefore both critical and complementary. It is complementary, because it recognises that U&CD is both intuitively plausible and – in its promise to combine external and internal mechanisms into a compound account of political conflict – rich in explanatory potential. But it is also critical, providing a realist's 'outside baseball' take on U&CD's existing micro-foundational limitations. More specifically, then, the article critiques the application of U&CD as an approach to IR scholarship thus far, while simultaneously bolstering the notion that uneven and combined development do indeed explain much about both systemic balance-of-power dynamics and domestic bellicosity. U&CD's promise of a 'theory of everything' – that is, a 'macro cause' of *both* external *and* domestic aggression incentives – is seductive. But to become analytically persuasive as a causally-specified theory rather than merely an appealing intuition, it requires micro-foundational elaboration. Specifically, it requires a strengthened economic account for the uneven

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<sup>1</sup> A note on the title: U&CD is not a 'communist' theory, of course; the former simply provides historical-materialist *explanation* while the latter advances a totalitarian-normative *prescription*. Nonetheless, its progenitor – Leon Trotsky – was a prominent, influential communist, and that association has undoubtedly coloured the intellectual exchange between U&CD and other IR theories, realist and liberal alike, many of which were formulated during the struggle *against* Soviet communism. Plus, the juxtaposition of 'convergence realism' against 'communist regalia' was more syntactically satisfying than the considered alternatives!

<sup>2</sup> Intended as the further-developed successor to its predecessor – also published in *CRIA* – just over a decade ago (see issue 22:1 (2009)).

<sup>3</sup> On these 'images' – often known as IR's 'levels of analysis' – see: Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

sequencing of development, and a reinforced political account of how uneven development produces both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ conflict pressures.

The article finds the former in catch-up convergence growth theory, which explains how expanding cross-border economic flows enable less developed economies to catch-up with the development levels of the industrial leaders, becoming larger economies and thus greater powers in the process – albeit also with domestic distributional outcomes that produce internal upheaval. It finds the latter, meanwhile, in variants of realism that explain how power shifts in the ‘external’ environment (altering the balance of potential offensive *capabilities*) coupled with political contestation and associated belligerence in the ‘internal’ environment (generating some probability of offensive *intentions*) can generate mutual fear and subsequent hostility: the basis of the security dilemma. U&CD thus holds promise as an approach to explaining international conflict. But it is up for debate whether that is as a ‘free-standing’ IR theory in its own right, or rather as a theoretical ‘umbrella’ that draws together convergence-based explanations of differential growth with realist accounts of the conflict-inducing effects of such differentials. Indeed, following the latter approach, ‘uneven and combined development’ might even be seen more as a useful *collective* label for a bundle of subsidiary explanations, rather than as an *alternative* explanation to those drawn from other paradigms (realism foremost among them).<sup>4</sup>

The article proceeds as follows. First, it explains what U&CD actually argues. Second, it explains U&CD’s need for economic micro-foundations to account for developmental sequencing, and proposes a catch-up convergence-based fulfilment of this theoretical need. Third, it explains U&CD’s need for political micro-foundations to account for developmentally-induced international hostility, arguing that a neoclassical variant of security-dilemma realism serves this purpose. Fourth, it positions U&CD vis-à-vis the theoretical positions on which this paper contends that its micro-foundations rest, suggesting that it could be thought of as a useful compound approach to IR scholarship that draws together subsidiary theories, rather than as a ‘separate’ IR theory in its own right. Finally, it concludes with a summary assessment of U&CD’s promise and limitations, including identification of some potential contemporary applications in an age of rising powers, domestic division/bellicosity, and military-technological proliferation.

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<sup>4</sup> Contending that U&CD represents both a theory of international politics *and* a theory of foreign policy in its own right, see: Alexander Anievas, ‘1914 in World Historical Perspective: The ‘Uneven’ and ‘Combined’ Origins of World War I’, *European Journal of International Relations* 19:4 (2013), 743.

## What is U&CD?

New students of IR encounter the three ‘levels of analysis’ (or ‘images’) early in their training. Kenneth Waltz hardly ‘discovered’ the insight that the causes of major international outcomes, such as wars, could be traced to some combination of the systemic, national, or sub-national levels – any practitioner of statecraft since time immemorial could have told us that – but he takes credit for its systematisation.<sup>5</sup> Even more basically than the Waltzian tripartite, however, every student of IR encounters – and never truly stops grappling with – the interaction between two simple categories that subsume the three levels: ‘internal’ and ‘external’ causes of international behaviour (i.e. *innenpolitik* versus *aussenpolitik* approaches, as they are known in the German-language study of strategic history). Indeed, even the archetypal ‘structural’ theorists – those who privilege the distribution of relative capabilities within an anarchic system over the ‘contents’ of individual states in their explanations of international politics<sup>6</sup> – still cannot avoid recognising that, in moving from the composition of the system to the behaviour of individual units, those contents have substantial causal effects.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, even devoted analysts of individual states’ policy particularities cannot escape the reality that their objects of study, however idiosyncratic,<sup>8</sup> are ultimately responding to the stimuli of an external system. If we are all grappling with this external-internal interaction in our explanations of international politics, in short, would it not be useful to have a theoretical approach that brings them together?

U&CD seeks to provide such an approach, combining explanations for both the interstate (‘external’) power shifts and domestic (‘internal’) political demands that – between them – do so much to explain the principal ill of international relations, violent conflict.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 16-41, 80-123, 159-186.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experiences* (New York: Little, Brown, 1967); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Ralph N. Clough, *Embattled Korea: The Rivalry for International Support* (New York: Routledge, 2018 [1987]).

<sup>9</sup> Noting U&CD’s potential to provide ‘a general theory of socio-economic dynamics’, see: Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London: Verso, 1981), 87. Attempting the incorporation of U&CD as an explanatory theory of IR are (among others): Justin Rosenberg, ‘Why is there no International Historical Sociology?’, *European Journal of International Relations* 12:3 (2006), 307-40; Justin Rosenberg, ‘Basic Problems in the Theory of Uneven and Combined Development, Part II: Unevenness and Political Multiplicity’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23:1 (2010), 165-89. Identifying U&CD as a superior explanation for why deepening post-Cold War interconnectedness has led not the progressive ascent of ‘global governance’ and associated collapse of national boundaries, inequalities, and rivalries that utopian globalization theories had forecast, but rather a lack thereof (and often the opposite), see: Justin Rosenberg, ‘Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem’, *International Politics* 42:1 (2005), 2-74. For pre-existing identifications of a relationship between U&CD and structurally-based realisms, see (among others):

argument in its core, explanatory IR-theoretical form is as follows.<sup>10</sup> Economic development – at least of any capitalism-resembling practiced form – necessarily takes hold in, and is mediated through, a socio-political context. Development is thus socio-economic (‘combined’) in character. However, it also necessarily starts from different bases and advances at different extents across different socio-economic contexts; development is thus also ‘uneven’. To grow and survive in the face of military, economic, and geopolitical competitive pressures from the most advanced developmental centres, industrial late-comers face what Trotsky dubbed the ‘whip of external necessity’ – the imperative to match the most advanced centres’ productive modes, lest such leading powers coerce or destroy the developmental laggards. Moreover, such unevenness exists along vectors; axes of international relations along which there is interdependent and co-constitutive development, bringing political contestation as well as economic emulation.<sup>11</sup>

Enjoying the so-called ‘advantages of backwardness’ – jumping straight from A to an emulated C, rather than moving through the slow and costly development of B – such developmental late(r) entrants can make rapid productivity strides.<sup>12</sup> Those strides account for the interstate relative power shifts. In the course of such rapid transformation, however, domestic social, economic, and political orders experience the turmoil born of fundamental and accelerated upheaval. Such turmoil manifests itself as domestic contestation with the potential to generate revisionist demands and external bellicosity. ‘Uneven’ and ‘combined’ development produces not only differential change in states’ *external* capabilities, in short, but also variation in their *internal* propensity for conflict. Indeed, U&CD carries the promise of collapsing unnecessarily stark analytical distinctions between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ explanation altogether.

As an approach to explanation, U&CD thus stands in fundamental juxtaposition to social-constructivist contingency. For Richard Ned Lebow, for example, the outbreak of the

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John Glenn, ‘Uneven and Combined Development: A Fusion of Marxism and Structural Realism’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25:1 (2012), 75-95; Justin Rosenberg, ‘Kenneth Waltz and Leon Trotsky: Anarchy in the Mirror of Uneven and Combined Development’, *International Politics* 50:2 (2013), 183-230.

<sup>10</sup> Anievas, ‘1914 in World Historical Perspective’, 724-26.

<sup>11</sup> Such vectors exist in historically specific contexts, of course: Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, ‘What’s at Stake in the Transition Debate? Rethinking the Origins of Capitalism and the ‘Rise of the West’’, *Millennium* 42:1 (2013), 78-102; Robbie Shilliam, ‘The Atlantic as a Vector of Uneven and Combined Development’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22:1 (2009), 69-88. Nonetheless, there are also causal generalisations that can be drawn, as this article goes on to argue (and as one of the preceding co-authors similarly argues elsewhere): Jamie C. Allinson and Alexander Anievas, ‘The Uses and Misuses of Uneven and Combined Development: An Anatomy of a Concept’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22:1 (2009), 47-67.

<sup>12</sup> Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* [trans. M. Eastman] (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008 [1932]), 4.

First World War required the contingent – and, as it happened, unfortunate – non-linear confluence of multiple separate chains of causation, leading to a shift in the *ideas* held by European policymakers.<sup>13</sup> For U&CD, by contrast, the *material* base strings these seemingly distinct threads of causation together. On such a telling, UK relative decline, risen Germany’s domestic-political belligerence, Russia’s developmental weaknesses and associated domestic-political fragility, and the Balkan crises augured by Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian decay – four key contributors to World War I, taken together – can *all* be traced back to the same *underlying* cause: ‘uneven’ and ‘combined’ development, and the politico-economic tensions born thereof.<sup>14</sup>

As a social-scientific argument, meanwhile, Trotsky’s account was ahead of its time. His effort to synthesise internal and external pressures into a compound theory of the interaction between internal and external variables in the making of international behaviour represents the continuing ambition of contemporary neoclassical realism, for instance.<sup>15</sup> The ‘advantages of backwardness’ thesis – further developed by Alexander Gerschenkron<sup>16</sup> – also became central to realist thought on the sources of power shifts in the international system, an approach often dubbed ‘power transitions’ theory (or latterly ‘dynamic differentials’ theory) in contrast to the static characterisation of systemic balance provided by Waltzian polarity theory.<sup>17</sup> This is hardly a new observation, of course, but it is a salient one here. Robert Gilpin, in particular, observed in 1981 that:

...a world market economy fosters the spread of economic growth throughout the international system. Through trade, foreign investment, and the transfer of technology, wealth and economic activities tend to diffuse from the old centers to new centers of economic growth. Enjoying the “advantages of backwardness”...these new centers frequently overtake and surpass the original center.

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, ‘Contingency, Catalysts, and International System Change’, *Political Science Quarterly* 115:4 (2000-1), 591-616.

<sup>14</sup> Anievas, ‘1914 in World Historical Perspective’, 726; see also: Jeremy Green, ‘Uneven and Combined Development and the Anglo-German Prelude to World War I’, *European Journal of International Relations* 18:2 (2010), 345-68. For an application of U&CD to international competition throughout the whole period of the world wars, see: Alexander Anievas, *Capital, the State, and War: Class Conflict and Geopolitics in the Thirty Years’ Crisis, 1914-1945* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy’, *World Politics* 51:1 (1998), 144-72.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 5-30.

<sup>17</sup> The quintessential work of ‘power transitions’ realism is: Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). On ‘dynamic differentials’ as an alternative and more precise framing of such power-shifting accounts, see: Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

He then went on to note – echoing U&CD’s arguments on the relationship between developmental leaps and political competition – that,

...they [‘backward societies’] can adopt the most advanced and thoroughly proven techniques, whereas prior research-and-development costs and vested interests deter the more advanced economy from substituting the very latest techniques for obsolescent techniques. Thus, with lower costs, untapped resources, and equivalent technology, backward societies frequently can outcompete the more affluent society economically or militarily.<sup>18</sup>

Such dynamic approaches – back in vogue in contemporary realism thanks to their superior explanatory power beyond the confines of Cold War bipolarity<sup>19</sup> – thus owe much to elements of the U&CD thesis. Yet as Daniel McCarthy notes, while ‘unevenness’ is central to Gilpinian realism, the role of ‘combination’ remains to be elucidated.<sup>20</sup> The next two sections of this article address this lacuna by unpacking not only the economic foundations of uneven development – and vectors for the convergence thereof – but also the relationship between domestic politico-economic change and the international conflict born of security dilemmas.

### **Accounting for Sequencing: From Factor Diffusion to Productivity Convergence**

As noted previously, part of U&CD’s allure lies in its rejection of international contingency, coincidence, and the ‘stochastic’ element of IR. Whereas Lebow points to the numerous

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<sup>18</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 178-9. This process of ‘polarization and spread’ is described in more detail in: Robert Gilpin, *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of Foreign Direct Investment* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 47-59. Note too that Gilpin himself recognised the common ground between his dynamic realism and Marxist international thought, given that both ‘explain the dynamics of IR in terms of the differential growth of power among states’ (albeit with different accounts of underlying motives): *War and Change in World Politics*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> For an argument that IR’s focus on (static) Waltzian polarity theory over (dynamic) Gilpinian approaches has hampered our ability to explain change in the international system, see: William C. Wohlforth, ‘Gilpinian Realism and International Relations’, *International Relations* 25:4 (2011), 499-511. Recently attempting to explain various international outcomes, such as interstate conflict – or the absence thereof – with reference to dynamic power shifts are (among others): Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, “Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War,” *International Organization* 68:1 (2014), 1-31; Evan Braden Montgomery, *In the Hegemon’s Shadow: Leading States and the Rise of Regional Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Joshua R. I. Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018). This is not solely realist terrain, moreover; constructivists are also concerned with theorising power shifts (specifically the legitimising rhetorical steps that rising powers take in a bid to stave-off the counter-balancing expected by realism): Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Daniel R. McCarthy, ‘Technology and ‘the International’ or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Determinism’, *Millennium* 41:3 (2013), 485.

unconnected variables at different levels of the international system that had to align for the First World War to come about, for example – and thus concludes that the tragic outcomes of 1914 were highly contingent, contra the neorealist determinism that he seeks to critique – U&CD advocates move in the opposite direction. Instead, they connect developments at both the international-systemic level (e.g. the relative rise of German power and subsequent encircling alliance behaviour by the Triple Entente) *and* the domestic-political level (e.g. febrile European class relations and the insecure primacy of militarist-aristocratic decision-makers, particularly within Germany) in the run-up to the First World War – a confluence that Lebow takes as contingent – back to the same underlying cause: uneven socio-economic development. That is, the fact that industrial development surges came to different European countries at different times – first Britain (followed on a lesser scale by France), then Germany, and later Russia – accounts for both competition-inducing relative power dynamics at the *interstate* level and instability-fomenting distributional conflict at the *intrastate* level. The approach is thus even less contingent than neorealism: not only are relative power shifts taken as playing a deterministic role, the presence of militaristic domestic politics interacting with such international-systemic factors are also traced back to the same root cause. Development is thus ‘uneven’ – occurring at different paces, at different times, and via different steps and stages in different countries – but also ‘combined’ – simultaneously happening socially, economically, and politically, and at the domestic and international levels, albeit not necessarily to equal extents.

The sequencing of industrial development between states, i.e. differential economic growth, thus plays the pivotal causal role in U&CD’s explanation of the source of both relative power shifts and domestic upheaval. The principal problem that this creates, however, is that U&CD – at least as it has been applied thus far – does not have a fully specified causal account for *variation* in the timing and size economic catch-up. Of course, a theory with more modest aspirations than U&CD need not necessarily have such an account. But if U&CD is to fulfil its ambitious promise of removing contingency and chance from its explanations of international outcomes, then accounting for such development sequencing becomes of fundamental importance to the whole enterprise. Development sequencing – U&CD’s independent variable – is clearly not simply ‘random’, but neither is it explained by the basic U&CD intuition alone.

In short, to fulfil its promise, U&CD requires reinforced economic micro-foundations: that is, a causal account for differential economic growth rates. To be sure, Trotsky’s original formulation had the beginnings of such an account, as noted above, with his contention that: ‘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.’<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, such an insight still falls short of a full explanation for variation in sequencing; specifically, it does not account for why particular states may reap the ‘advantages of backwardness’ at particular times or to greater/lesser extents.

This ‘sequencing gap’ can be filled via the incorporation of contemporary convergence growth theory. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed exposition of such theory, but its core insight is that an expansion of cross-border economic flows – trade, financial flows, and labour/technology diffusion – enable states that are not currently at the world development frontier to catch-up with the most developed state(s).<sup>22</sup> The power-converging effects of cross-border economic flows are hardly novel imports to IR theory, of course – even before Trotsky and Gilpin’s incorporation of such insights into their respective international thought already noted, eighteenth-century liberals could be found arguing something very similar<sup>23</sup> – but these prominent prior users have stopped short of fully explicating *how* such flows redistribute relative productive capacity.

To be more specific, then, such flows enable less developed ‘follower’ states to absorb capital (financial, human, and physical) and technology (human and physical) – where those factors of production are comparatively scarce and thus reap higher marginal returns – from the most developed ‘leading’ states. Trade, investment, labour movement, and technology transfer are thus the salient vectors by which productive factors are redistributed across concentration gradients. Leading states can only grow by pushing the world productivity frontier out through their own innovation – which is usually costly and slow – whereas follower economies can simply copy, which is cheaper and quicker (all else held equal). In the absence of such cross-border economic flows, by contrast, the diffusion mechanisms necessary for this capital and technology transfer – and thus the conditions for catch-up convergence – are absent. Expansions of economic openness therefore constitute the variable that produces differential economic growth between leading economies and follower economies, and – insofar as

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<sup>21</sup> Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example: Robert J. Barro and Xavier Sala-i-Martin, ‘Technological Diffusion, Convergence, and Growth’, *Journal of Economic Growth* 2:1 (1997), 1-27. For expanded discussion, see: Robert J. Barro and Xavier Sala-i-Martin, *Economic Growth*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 349-82.

<sup>23</sup> Adam Smith, for example, argued that: ‘...nothing seems more likely to establish...equality of force than the mutual communication of knowledge and of all sorts of improvements which an extensive commerce from all countries to all countries naturally, or rather necessarily, carries along with it’: *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976 [1775]), 141.

economic wherewithal is the fungible resource that underpins states' ability to both generate military power ('guns') and provide goods to their population ('butter') – associated shifts in the balance of power between states.

Of course, convergence cannot account for why industrial leaders initially achieve their position; there will always be confluences of particular factors unique to a particular state and era, and a recognition of such 'start-of-period' contingency does not diminish the value of attempting to explain why subsequent uneven development was determined by non-contingent factors.<sup>24</sup> More important is convergence theory's ability to account for the why some periods – the relatively open ones, in terms of international economic exchange – are characterised by differential economic growth rates and the associated relative power shifts, while others are not, and to link that variance back to a generalizable feature of the prevailing international economic environment. Furthermore, insofar as states' 'absorption capacity' – their ability to accumulate capital and technology through cross-border economic flows – varies in line with such variables as macroeconomic stability, legal regime, prior educational and scientific base, potential size of domestic market, geographical conditions, expertise clustering/networks, competitive impetus toward domestic innovation, natural resource endowment, and so forth, it is possible to derive more state-specific explanations for development sequencing (both timing and scale) even within periods of convergence.<sup>25</sup>

Returning to the First World War vignette that many U&CD arguments on war-causation are developed with reference to, the diffusion of British and French capital and technology to Germany and the United States, then from France – and, indeed, Germany itself – to Russia, can be accounted for with reference to the flows associated with the globalization boom of 1871-1914.<sup>26</sup> The differential growth that was produced in turn explains much of both the relative power shifts that drove interstate competition in the period *and* the rise of domestic

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<sup>24</sup> Even then, moreover, cross-border diffusion from previous leaders and/or current peers – particularly where a state may be the international leader in one economic sector, even as another state has achieved leadership in others – can combine with domestic factors to contribute to an eventual leader's initial rise, so the entire process need not be dismissed as contingent. Pertinent cases include the movement of Protestant engineers from the still-Spanish Southern Netherlands to the Dutch Republic, the Dutch financing of early British industrialisation, and the British financing of early American industrialisation.

<sup>25</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the roles of social networks, favourable institutions/policies, and 'creative insecurity' pressures in determining states' achievement, sustainment, or relinquishment of technological leadership, see: Mark Zachary Taylor, *The Politics of Innovation: Why Some Countries are Better than Others at Science and Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). On 'clustering' as a particular basis for localised expertise sustainment, which can account for the continuation of productivity leadership even in the face of diffusion flows, see (for example): Michael E. Porter, 'Location, Competition, and Economic Development: Local Clusters in a Global Economy', *Economic Development Quarterly* 14:1 (2000), 15-34.

<sup>26</sup> David Blagden, 'Economic Flows, Power Shifts, and the European Balance, 1871-1914,' in the *Oxford Handbook of the First World War*, eds. Pierre Purseigle and Adam Seipp (Oxford University Press, under contract).

(especially German and Russian) class conflict with its attendant militarism. U&CD thus has the potential to *incorporate* specific causal micro-foundations that explain the scale and timing of differential development within its overall framework, even if it remains an under-specified account of such outcomes by itself. The next section progresses to consider what these development differentials might mean for international conflict.

### **Accounting for Hostility: Domestic Upheaval, Power Shifts, and Security Dilemmas**

As noted above, U&CD contends that the uneven sequencing of socio-economic development results in both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ conflict pressures. At the international-systemic level, uneven economic growth produces shifts in the balance of power, which in turn cause strategic competition. And at the domestic level, the distributional consequences of socio-economic development produce political instability. Yet, as with explaining the uneven sequencing of development itself, explaining how uneven development actually produces conflict is a task requiring further elaboration: U&CD captures the intuition that relative power shifts and domestic distributional contestation may both contribute to international instability, but needs to further specify the causal connection between uneven development and aggression incentives. Again, if U&CD had meaner ambitions, this need not be regarded as a criticism; many scientific theories neither purport nor need to explain every micro component of their overall operation. However, since U&CD seeks to act as *both* a theory of international politics that links international and domestic political instability back to a single underlying source, *and* as a theory of foreign policy accounting for individual states’ strategic choices, it must account for the causes of international aggression and conflict if it is to meet its own criteria.

The ‘external’ – that is, international-systemic – means by which uneven socio-economic development leads to conflict is via the mutual insecurities produced by relative power shifts (which are themselves a direct corollary of differential economic growth). Under conditions of uncertainty over future intentions and the absence of a sovereign law-enforcer endemic to international anarchy, both rising and declining states have good reason to fear others’ capabilities (both military forces, and the as-yet-unprocured military forces that a large and developed economy make it possible to buy). Declining powers face incentives to contain, weaken, and even destroy rising states, knowing that their rivals’ ability to harm them grows and that their own ability to defeat their rivals declines with the passage of time.<sup>27</sup> Rising powers, for their part, face incentives to weaken and supplant declining states as soon as

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<sup>27</sup> Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, 15.

possible to better serve their own interests<sup>28</sup> – not least because of declining powers’ own incentive structure.

In less abstract terms, again making reference to the run-up to the First World War, the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) represented an external balancing attempt, directed at containing the previous and ongoing growth of German power. Germany’s desire to break the Entente, for its part, was motivated by the Entente’s very encirclement coupled to its own knowledge that nascent Russian industrialisation made its own relative pre-eminence on the continent unlikely to endure. Taken together, this interaction of alliance politics and increasing armament – staples of realist IR theory – produced a cycle of mutual threat that contributed to the outbreak of war in 1914.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, this is already the logic being applied in contemporary U&CD scholarship; the significance of realist thinking is acknowledged in such works,<sup>30</sup> but the role of realist explanations for relative power shift-induced security competition as a micro-foundational component of the overall U&CD intuition merits further recognition.

Moving to the ‘internal’ – that is, domestic-political – means by which uneven socio-economic development can produce international conflict, this is the causal sub-component of the overall argument on which U&CD is clearest, thanks to its origins in Marxist thought. The acceleration of economic development and the associated social upheaval experienced by states reaping ‘the advantages of backwardness’ is such that there is inevitable distributional conflict over the proceeds of growth. On the one hand, capital accumulation tends to consolidate wealth into the hands of elites – yet industrialisation also changes the skill and associated productivity profile of workers, making them a more critical component of the production process, and thus leading them to demand enfranchisement and a greater share of their economic output. Elites seeking to accommodate these demands are thus simultaneously more powerful (thanks to their newfound material means) and more vulnerable (thanks to the demands of collective labour), leading them to seek to deflect public demands by leveraging the national(ist) unity produced by conflict with external foes. This results in turn – the argument goes – in an elite culture that prizes ‘martial virtues’ and a militaristic, belligerent foreign policy. The socio-economic

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<sup>28</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 187.

<sup>29</sup> As Hew Strachan notes in his history of the origins of the war, the central problem for the stability of European great power relations after German unification was that, ‘Germany’s position in Europe after 1871 was at once threatening and vulnerable – threatening because central Europe was now dominated by a major power, casting shadows over Russia to the east and France to the west, and vulnerable because the new state had long, exposed land frontiers in the same directions’: *The First World War: Volume 1: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8. This is security dilemma logic in action.

<sup>30</sup> See (for examples): Anievas, ‘1914 in World Historical Perspective’, 722; Green, ‘Uneven and Combined Development and the Anglo-German Prelude to World War I’, 363.

upheaval born of uneven, combined development can be understood, in short, as an underlying source base of the ‘myths of empire’ that contribute to war-causation.<sup>31</sup>

Again, however, there is scope for additional specificity. In particular, since development sequencing requires a micro-foundational explanation – as discussed above – so too *variance* in levels of distributional conflict associated with capital accumulation must be traced back to some other *variable*. This can be done in a way that remains sympathetic to U&CD’s overall intuition via reference to the distributional consequences of international economic exchange, and variation therein: the means by which convergence growth, and thus sequential development, comes about. Specifically, under conditions of open international trade, the owners of the factor in which a country is relatively abundant will benefit more relative to owners of the relatively scarce factor than they would under conditions of autarky (since their factor of production is more scarce – and therefore more profitable – at the world level than at the national level).<sup>32</sup> This insight can be used to understand the domestic distributional conflict produced by expanded international trade (and other forms of cross-border economic exchange): a move to greater openness alters the relative rewards received by the holders of various factors of production (capital, labour, land), producing intra-state winners and losers, even as aggregate national output grows.<sup>33</sup> Since more open international trade and other forms of international economic exchange are also the drivers of accelerated growth posited by catch-up convergence theory, the domestic conflict-inducing distributional alteration associated with increased nationalistic militarism in rapidly developing states can be similarly traced back to globalization-enabled catch-up convergence.

Taken together, therefore, U&CD’s ‘external’ and ‘internal’ accounts for the sources of international conflict – the ‘intuition in its entirety’, as it were – sum to encapsulate several dimensions of realist thought. The account is structural, insofar as there is no ‘external’ mechanism without relative power shifts in an anarchic international system. But it is also neoclassical, insofar as such systemic pressures are transmitted and operationalised via domestic politics<sup>34</sup> – even as those ‘internal’ policy choices themselves shape the ‘external’

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<sup>31</sup> Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> Paul R. Krugman and Maurice Obstfeld, *International Economics: Theory and Policy* (London: Pearson, 2006 (7<sup>th</sup> ed.)), 54-87.

<sup>33</sup> Michael J. Hiscox, *International Trade and Political Conflict: Commerce, Coalitions, and Mobility* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). On the broader psychological effects of such labour precarity, with associated implications for social stability, see: David Neilson, ‘Class, Precarity, and Anxiety under Neoliberal Global Capitalism: From Denial to Resistance’, *Theory and Psychology* 25:2 (2015), 184-201.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Kitchen, ‘Systemic Pressures and Domestic Ideas: A Neoclassical Realist Model of Grand Strategy Formation’, *Review of International Studies* 36:1 (2010), 117-43.

structure in which states operate and to which they respond.<sup>35</sup> It is ‘power shifts’ (or ‘dynamic differentials’) realism,<sup>36</sup> insofar as *variation* requires a *variable* (rather than merely the continuous fact of an anarchic system), i.e. changing mutual insecurity comes not from static power balances but from changes therein. Crucially, moreover, the ‘external’ account *needs* the ‘internal’ mechanism for there to even *be* mutual insecurity. For changes in relative power would not be concerning if each side *knew* that the other would not use their offensive potential aggressively in future. Rather, for there to be mutual fear and thus hostility, there must be the *possibility* of aggression for reasons *beyond* mere survival (i.e. aggressive *motives* that spawn future aggressive *intentions*).<sup>37</sup> As such, U&CD’s twin tracks lead ultimately to the security dilemma: the external mechanism (differential growth) creates the power shifts, while the internal mechanism (domestic upheaval and the bellicosity that it can spawn) gives reason to *fear* such shifts and act against them...which in turn creates reasons to fear others and act against them, thus completing the security-dilemma circle. Such externally power-shifting and internal bellicosity-producing mechanisms require some underlying causal account, of course, which the previous section suggested can be provided by the productivity convergence enabled by cross-border economic flows – hence this article’s choice of ‘convergence realism’ as a shorthand. But as this paragraph has illustrated, an array of related labels in any number of combinations could be equally appropriate.

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<sup>35</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> These are more usefully holistic terms than ‘power transitions’ realism, since the latter implies a defined ‘transition’ of hegemonic dominance from one to another that is by no means necessitated by the conflict-inducing logic of differential power growth.

<sup>37</sup> Randall L. Schweller, ‘Neorealism’s Status-quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?’, *Security Studies* 5:3 (1996), 90-121; Andrew Kydd, ‘Sheep in Sheep’s Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other’, *Security Studies* 7:1 (1997), 114-55. Indeed, for this reason, structural realism *requires* the possibility of domestically-sourced policy variation to explain the behaviours (such as conflict-initiation) endemic in anarchic international systems – but equally, such anarchic structure *still* then accounts for the prevalence of conflict: Brian Rathbun, ‘A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism’, *Security Studies* 17:2 (2008), 294-321. For exploration of the distinction between ‘greedy’ versus ‘security-seeking’ *motives* vis-à-vis ‘revisionist’ versus ‘status-quo’ *intentions*, see: Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). On why domestic ideas are necessarily central to international outcomes but without that recognition mitigating security dilemmas or overturning realist assumptions/arguments, see: David Blagden, ‘Realism, Uncertainty, and the Security Dilemma: Identity and the Tantalizing Promise of Transformed International Relations’, in *Constructivism Reconsidered: Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Mariano E. Bertucci, Jarrod Hayes, and Patrick James (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 197-226.

### **U&CD as Convergence Realism: A Rose(nberg) by Another Name?<sup>38</sup>**

U&CD's proponents have made expansive claims for the bar that an effective IR theory should have to clear.<sup>39</sup> Rather than merely seeking to explain a particular, bounded international behaviour or process – à la Waltz's professed focus on explaining a small number of important things<sup>40</sup> – contemporary U&CD users aspire to theory that can explain developments at the domestic and international levels, in the political, social, and economic domains, and across different countries simultaneously (as per many of their neoclassical realist brethren).

Clearing the high bar that U&CD sets for itself is a tall order. As Waltz notes, an IR theory that attempts to account for all aspects of the world that it seeks to explain ceases to be a theory, which should have sufficient parsimony to have at least some predictive power in a case beyond the idiosyncratic one at hand, and instead becomes simply a description of a unique state of the world.<sup>41</sup> Of course, this does not mean that U&CD *cannot* clear said bar, and indeed, its proponents argue that it meets even Waltz's rarefied criteria.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, if it is to *reject* Lebowian contingency in explaining both domestic and international conflict – to fulfil its own theoretical ambitions, in short – by tracing both back to the sequencing of socio-economic development, then it must also avoid *recourse* to such contingency in its own account. And that in turn necessitates adequately specified causal explanations of developmental sequencing *itself* (i.e. timing, pace, and scale of growth), *as well as* the hostilities that might arise *from* such sequencing. More generally, in claiming to explain and tie together both domestic and international politics, and social and economic development, it is not clear what – if anything – could falsify U&CD. If its coverage is so expansive that *no* data – however deviant – could meaningfully fall outside its purported coverage, then its explanatory utility would have to be questioned.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, adequately specified theoretical sub-components to the

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<sup>38</sup> This is, of course, a hat-tip to both the Rathbun article cited above – itself an application of the famous Shakespearean quip to Gideon Rose's seminal early articulation of neoclassical realism – and contemporary IR's most prominent U&CD theorist.

<sup>39</sup> Anievas, '1914 in World Historical Perspective', 725.

<sup>40</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1-13.

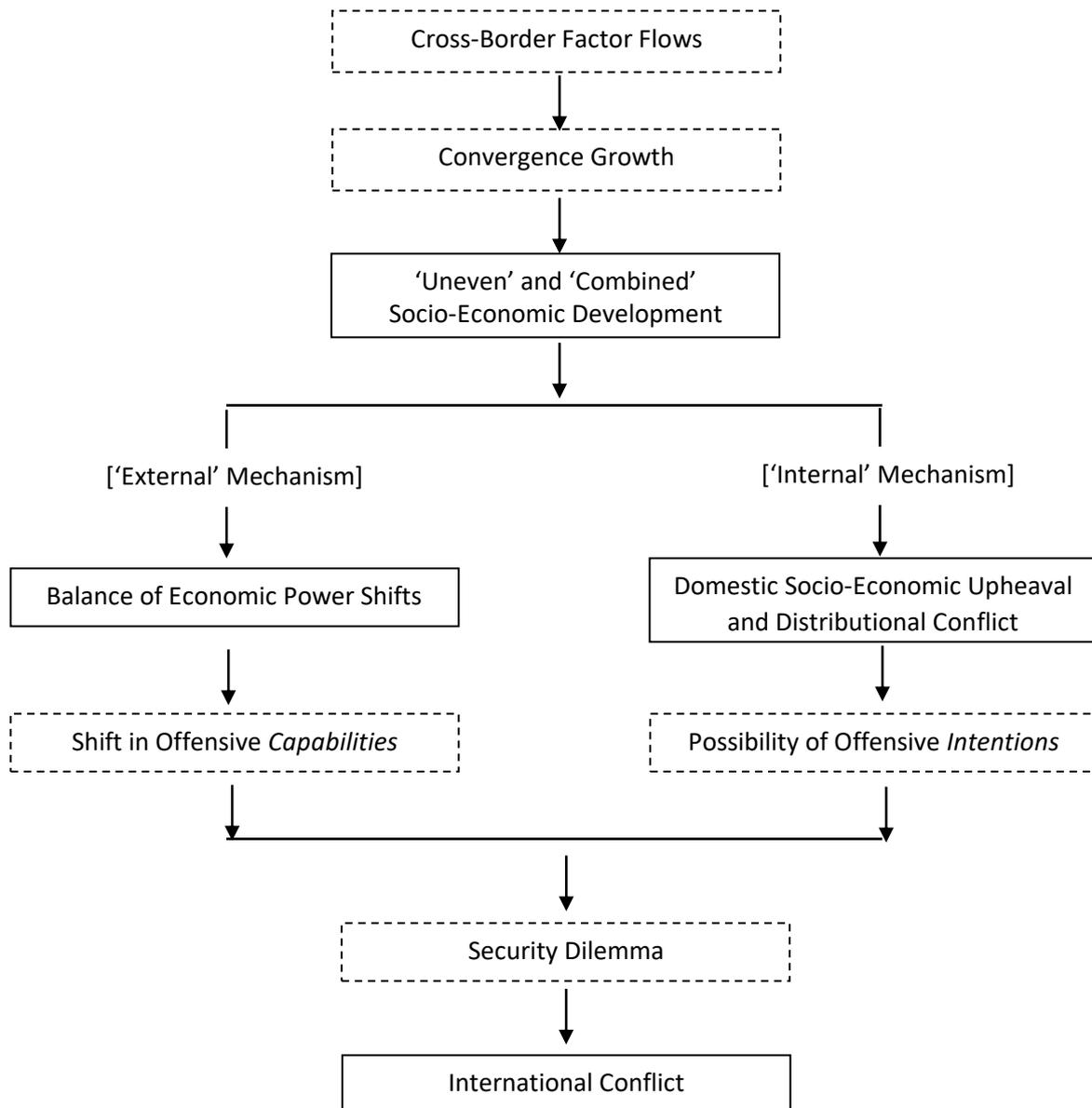
<sup>41</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 5-7.

<sup>42</sup> Rosenberg, 'Kenneth Waltz and Leon Trotsky', 183-230; Anievas, '1914 in World Historical Perspective', 725-26. Moreover, Waltz's criteria are themselves by no means as straightforward, defined, and consistent as he professes: David Blagden, 'Induction and Deduction in International Relations: Squaring the Circle between Theory and Evidence', *International Studies Review* 18:2 (2016), 195-213.

<sup>43</sup> For exploration of varieties of falsification, their merits/limitations, and what each does or does not compel in terms of the acceptance/rejection of theory, see: Imre Lakatos, 'Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes', in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge: Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, London, 1965*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014 [1970]), 91-196.

overarching U&CD intuition are valuable, because they resurrect the possibility of falsifiability.

Figure 1: 'U&CD' as a Convergence Realist Theory of Conflict



The preceding two sections offer ways to fill these lacunae. The timing, space, and scale of differential socio-economic development can be explained via the productivity catch-up convergence enabled by an expansion of cross-border vectors – trade, investment, knowledge/labour diffusion – for capital and technology movement (along with various attendant qualifications relating to the optimality of domestic institutions, policies, and networks). This, in turn, accounts for power shifts *between* states as well as (re-)distributional

effects – and attendant political contestation – *within* states. Such ‘external’ and ‘internal’ effects, meanwhile, sum between them to produce both a shift in potential offensive *capabilities* and some probability of offensive future *intentions* (all within an anarchic system that lacks reliable peace-enforcement): the three pillars of the security dilemma, and the international conflict that it generates.

U&CD, then, is undoubtedly an appealing intuition for explaining international conflict. However, it is underpinned by – and therefore arguably akin to – some neoclassical variant of convergence-activated security-dilemma realism (here dubbed ‘convergence realism’ for simplicity’s sake). Whether U&CD is best thought of as a ‘free-standing’ IR theory or as a useful ‘umbrella’ for an array of operative mechanisms is therefore up for debate. Indeed, ‘uneven and combined development’ might even be seen more as an effective collective label for a *package* of related explanations – convergence plus realism – rather than as an *alternative* explanation in its own right. Figure 1 attempts to summarise and combine these related causal steps; solid black lines denote accepted pre-existing components of the U&CD intuition, while dashed lines represent micro-foundational additions proposed by this article.

## Conclusion

U&CD is an avenue of enquiry worth pursuing in IR scholarship. As noted throughout, it represents a persuasive intuition supported by a valuable body of empirical evidence: that ‘internal’ and ‘external’ sources of conflict can be seen as coming from the same underlying causal feature, the international ‘sequencing’ – timing, pace, and scale – of socio-economic development. Indeed, its promise of such holistic explanatory coverage is seductive – yet it consequently also sets an aspiration for theory that can only be met via the incorporation of causal micro-foundations beyond the central premises of the intuition itself. As such, there may indeed be significant explanatory payoffs to using U&CD as an approach to IR, especially in an age of dramatic convergence-induced relative power shifts,<sup>44</sup> mounting domestic division/bellicosity,<sup>45</sup> and advanced coercive technology proliferation<sup>46</sup> – all fertile terrain for an approach that combines internal and external sources of political conflict and then links

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<sup>44</sup> E.g. Michael Spence, *The Next Convergence: The Future of Economic Growth in a Multispeed World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> E.g. Christopher Hobson, ‘Democratic Peace: Progress and Crisis’, *Perspectives on Politics* 15:3 (2017), 697-710.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. Campbell Craig, ‘When the Whip Comes Down: Marxism, the Soviet Experience, and the Nuclear Revolution’, *European Journal of International Security* 2:2 (2017), 223-39.

them back to a currently-operative underlying variable (‘uneven’ and ‘combined’ development). But recognition of its underlying causal foundations – a combination of convergence and realism as they are – is needed first.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank Olaf Corry, Paul van Hooft, Daniel McCarthy, Víctor Mijares, Pedro Salgado, Richard Saull, Benno Teschke, participants in the 2015 Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, the anonymous reviewers, and especially Alex Anievas and Justin Rosenberg for invaluable comments on – and encouragement with – versions of this paper. Of course, all errors and omissions remain my own.