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The Hieroglyph of the 'Party': Contextualising the Agent–Structure Debate through the Works of Trotsky, C. L. R. James and Althusser

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Abstract

Questions about the agency of the Communist Party – especially its failure to effect and support radical social transformations – formed one crucial aspect of the socio-political context in which the agent–structure debate was rejoined by social scientists in the 1960s and 70s. Moreover, the Party had long existed as a hieroglyph for Marxist thought. And deciphering the historical importance of the Party in processes of world development required the theorisation of an *inter-societal dimension to the agent–structure problem*. I contend that using an Ideas in Context approach to the agent–structure debate in order to consider this pre-existing Marxist literature on the agency of the Party illuminates issues obscured in the progress of the debate in IR. To this effect I examine the seminal writings of Trotsky, C. L. R. James and Althusser in order to reveal how the debate, imported into IR in the late 1980s, was *already* framed by the problem of analytically and ethically coming to terms with the *inter-societal dimension* of socio-political transformation, especially when this dimension pushed to the fore the generative nature of inter-societal alterity manifested in the condition of – and ‘advantage’ of – comparative backwardness. Crucially, the attempts made to decipher the hieroglyph of the Party are instructive in that they reveal foundational challenges for the intellectual production of knowledge of inter-societal alterity and its centrality to issues of continuity and change, the identification of structural constraints and sources of transformative agency.

Keywords: *agent–structure debate, Louis Althusser, backwardness, communism, Communist Party, international relations, C. L. R. James, Leon Trotsky*

Introduction¹

It might seem somewhat anachronistic to rethink the agent–structure problem by reference to that old instrument of communist politics, the ‘Party’. After all, even before the end of the Cold War the agent–structure debate had been introduced into international relations (IR) by focusing on the agency of the state within the international system. Most of the debate that followed Alexander Wendt’s seminal article in 1987² has concentrated upon state agency, and critics of state-centrism in IPE have usually used Kenneth Waltz’s neo-Realism as a foil with which to direct the debate towards issues of globalisation. In any case, in the post-Cold War world, who talks of the Communist Party anymore, except those referring to an increasingly capitalistic China?

Nevertheless, if not the only impetus for a renewal of the agent–structure debate, questioning by Marxists (and also non-Marxists) about the agency of the Party – especially its failure to effect and support radical social transformations – formed one crucial layer of the global socio-political context of the 1960s/70s within which the agent–structure problem was rejoined by social scientists. In fact, the Party had long existed as a hieroglyph for Marxist thought. What I mean by this is that the Party had long held a crucial symbolic value in Marxist narratives of modern world development, and yet the socially transformative agency of the Party could not be deciphered by reference to the grammar of Marx’s classic narrative. In fact, deciphering the historical importance of the Party in processes of modern world development required the theorisation of what I will term an *inter-societal dimension to the agent–structure problem*. I contend that using an Ideas in Context approach to the agent–structure debate in order to consider this pre-existing Marxist literature on the hieroglyph of the Party illuminates issues obscured by the way in which the debate has proceeded in IR.

The ‘inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem’ is a term I use to refer to a particular problem posed in the debate by Marxist intellectuals regarding the potential of the Party to radically influence the trajectory of modern world development. At a general level, the historical phenomenon that perplexed many Marxist intellectuals was how inter-societal relations composed of comparatively ‘backward’ versus ‘advanced’ socio-political formations led to their amalgamation in the ‘backward’ society, in turn generating novel forms of political organisations that possessed radical transformative potential. The most important instance of this process for twentieth-century Marxism was the amalgamation of the existing Tsarist state apparatus with the Bolshevik Party to form the Party-State, a political organisation that effectively conjoined both the CPSU and the USSR. In fine, the historical meaning of the Party was ambiguous in Marxist debates because the Party’s entrance into – and effect upon – world history could not easily be made sense of through a narrative that presumed *universal* ‘stages’ to human development. Instead, this grand narrative was challenged by the possibility that the condition of *inter-societal alterity* was fundamentally complicit in generating new structures of social and political organisation to be found in modern world development. This condition is what I consider to be the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem, a problem manifested specifically in the condition of comparative backwardness and engaged with most directly by Marxists in their attempt to decipher the hieroglyph of the Party.

In this article I revisit the agent–structure problem by way of examining some seminal Marxist writings on the Party that reveal how the agent–structure debate, imported into IR in the late 1980s, was *already* framed to a significant extent by the problem of analytically and ethically coming to terms with a fundamentally ‘IR’ issue, namely the condition of inter-societal alterity. The Marxist attempts made to decipher the hieroglyph of the Party are instructive for the debate in IR in that they reveal how the challenge of producing knowledge of inter-societal alterity was intimately linked to the agent–structure problem in terms of understanding a

structurally differentiated whole, as well as identifying sources of transformative agency. However, the most important failure in these attempts was – and I would say remains – the tendency to ‘flatten’ the agent–structure problem by ultimately downplaying the abiding efficacy of inter-societal alterity within processes of modern world development.

The inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem has been neglected in IR in large part because of the way in which the debate has tended to proceed through either a philosophy of social science or international political economy approach. Although the goal for many who take the former approach is to allow for social-scientific inquiry that might more adequately inform projects of social transformation, the literature nevertheless proceeds primarily in the abstract meta-theoretical realm.³ What is important for the purposes of the present argument is that the philosophy of social science approach avoids any serious consideration that the inherited socio-political context through which intellectuals joined the agent–structure debate might be a constitutive element in the production of knowledge of the agent–structure problem itself. This avoidance, as I shall ultimately suggest, has helped to create the paradoxical condition whereby the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem has been discarded along with the prior global context of the debate.

Alternatively, IPE approaches to the agent–structure problem have overwhelmingly focused on the bounds of inter-state action and cooperation in a system populated by an array of *like* units.⁴ What has been lacking is any direct engagement with the phenomenon of inter-societal alterity in investigations of the continuity of and changes in the system of states. It is telling, in this respect, that Wendt never pursued his original suggestive comments that the Althusserian-inspired literature on the interaction of differentially developed modes of production led the debate beyond analysis of *the* homonymous state as the privileged ontological unit.⁵ Additionally, those in IPE who have attempted to move the agent–structure debate out of its ‘territorial trap’ have tended to posit another universal structure – global capitalism instead of anarchy – as that which frames the unevenness and differentiation of transnational agency between a variety of units.⁶ I shall suggest in the following interrogations of Marxist authors that relegating ‘difference’ to an organisational condition within one coherent global structure runs the risk of effectively ‘flattening’ the analytical and ethical challenge of appreciating the abiding nature of inter-societal alterity as a generative condition of modern world development.

The agent–structure debate in IR has yet to be directly joined by those working on Ideas in Context. Placing ideas, concepts and, most importantly, the debates over their contested meanings into historical context is a broad and multifaceted (and often itself contested) approach. Strategies range from analysing the ‘speech acts’ of texts,⁷ to the changing meanings of concepts, ‘political language’ and systems of discourse,⁸ the social relations of production that create the conditions of possibility of political language and discourse,⁹ and the relatively autonomous socio-political context of the academy itself.¹⁰ I spell out the particulars of my own strategy of contextualisation elsewhere.¹¹ In general terms I consider the aim of contextualisation to be the

recounting of a socio-political history of the contested development of concepts, the purpose of this activity being to make the critical intellectual more self-aware of the conditions of possibility of her/his own knowledge production.

By taking an Ideas in Context approach I am *not* claiming that we can bypass meta-theoretical interrogation of the agent–structure problem; to claim this would be trite. In fact, to illuminate the socio-political context that frames the conditions of possibility of social-scientific inquiry ultimately requires an engagement with meta-theoretical questions relating to ontology, the relationship of agents to structures, and the sources of agency. Neither is the purpose of this article to shift the object of enquiry from state as actor to the Party – or radical social movements in general – as actor. The point is that an Ideas in Context approach can help to draw out the importance of the intellectual's self-appreciation of the socio-political context through which s/he is positioned in relation to mass politics and radical projects of change. In short, the conditions of possibility that inform knowledge production of the agent–structure problem is *part* of that problem; it might even be, as I shall conclude, a first-order problem.

However, in this article I only make suggestions about the meta-theoretical contours of the agent–structure problem. The specific purpose of the article is to show how the self-understanding of the socio-political positionality of the critical intellectual can constitute the intimate optic through which s/he engages – or fails to engage – with the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem. Therefore, in arguing that the production of knowledge *of* the agent–structure problem needs to be factored into the agent–structure debate, I aim to specifically expose how the problem of inter-societal alterity has historically featured centrally in critical intellectual understandings of a structurally differentiated whole as well as the sources of transformative agency, and how the absence of this problem in the IR debate requires urgent attention.

To help draw out these issues for further investigation I explore, after first contextualising the 1960s/70s' agent–structure debate within the wider crisis of Western Marxism, the work of three seminal Marxist thinkers, Leon Trotsky, C. L. R. James and Louis Althusser. Trotsky was perhaps the original theorist of (Slavic) backwardness in the Marxist tradition; James approached backwardness from the (post)colonial standpoint of the 'periphery'; and Althusser struggled with the philosophical importance of backwardness for the production of critical theory that could contribute to a 'mass line' of action. I detail how each author explored the condition of comparative backwardness between differentially developed societies, and particularly how each explored the potential and culpability of the Party in processes of 'catching up to', or even 'surpassing', the most advanced. Crucially, I also reveal how in each author this investigation brought up intimate challenges regarding the relationship of the intellectual to the masses in moments of radical social transformation, challenges that ultimately led them to flatten the generative condition of inter-societal alterity in their analyses of modern world development. I conclude by outlining how these attempts to decipher the hieroglyph of the Party hold contemporary importance for the progression of the agent–structure debate in IR.

Contextualising the agent–structure debate within the crisis of Western Marxism and the hieroglyph of the 'Party'

The following sections interrogate Trotsky, James and Althusser by reference to their specific socio-political contexts. Here, however, we must entertain a more global context within which intellectual debate proceeded. To this effect, it is appropriate to begin with a proposition so basic that it can easily be forgotten or dismissed: the problematisation of the agency of the Party in the 1960s and 70s, in both Marxist thought and politics, acted as one foundational impetus for the global renewal of the debate of the agent–structure problem in the social sciences. A stream of events during this period challenged the leftist intelligentsia in the West to recognise the imperial rather than progressive agency of the Communist Party: Khrushchev's 'revelations' of Stalin's deviations, interventions by the Red Army in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the rise of Maoism and of alternative forms of radical social organisation in the Third World in general, and the inaction of the French Communist Party in Paris in 1968 are but some of the events that led to a crisis in Western Marxism.

It is necessary to acknowledge differentiated intellectual currents within this global context. For example, in sociology the problem of 'structure' had different intellectual genealogies on each side of the Atlantic, in the European world deriving from Marxist theories, yet in the United States far more from Parson's structural-functionalism.¹² Nevertheless, as the turbulent 1960s once again made the problem of radical social change a compelling theoretical problem, many critical social scientists took part in the renewed agent–structure debate by reference (sympathetic or critical) to the Marxist tradition and the possibilities of escaping the deterministic – now understood as politically conservative – binds of *diamat* (dialectical materialism), the official ideology of the Party.¹³ For example, Pierre Bourdieu's celebrated investigations of the agent–structure problem through the concepts of habitus and cultural capital can be seen as part of this wider context. In the 1950s Bourdieu joined the Committee for the Defence of Freedom, an organisation designed to counter Stalinist influence in French academia. His critical observations of the arrogance of Party intellectuals led Bourdieu to explain their relation of domination over the less-educated workers in terms of cultural capital.¹⁴

It must also be recognised that the agent–structure debate of this period was fed just as much by pre-existing debates peculiar to the philosophy of social science tradition.¹⁵ Additionally, it is important to respect the fact that debates among intellectuals in the academy are not simple reflections of debates in the wider political arena; the academy has at least a relative institutional autonomy from politics proper. Nevertheless, the impact of new challenges in the political sphere can be registered in the academy, not only directly through shifts in the popularity of various *objects* of inquiry, but at a more subterranean level through shifts in the popularity of *approaches* to social-scientific inquiry. As Perry Anderson lucidly expressed some time ago, it was the gradual organisational separation of the worker and the leftist intellectual in the post-revolutionary era that prompted leftist thought in the Western academy to turn towards a more abstracted 'discourse on method'.¹⁶ For example,

Roy Bhaskar's route into the agent–structure problem can be contextualised in terms of this historical subterranean shift. Bhaskar has recounted how his concerns with world poverty, combined with the inability of the language of economics to address poverty, led him to mount a sustained leftist – directly Marxist-inspired – critique of the philosophy of science.¹⁷

Therefore, while it is too simplistic to define the global context of the agent–structure debate solely in terms of the crisis in Western Marxism, this crisis incontestably formed a crucial and influential layer of this context. And, as I shall now discuss, it is extremely instructive for the debate in IR to explore the roots of this crisis within a particular Marxist literature that attempted to explain the emergence and agency of the Party. The contemporaneous work of Anthony Giddens provides an influential and insightful bridge between the agent–structure debate of the 1960s/70s and this pre-existing Marxist literature. Crucially, Giddens' work examples how investigation of a structurally differentiated whole and the sources of transformative agency drew upon long-held questions regarding what I have here termed the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem.

Giddens' 'structuration' approach, as a sympathetic critique of the Marxist tradition, sought to reintroduce agency into social theory.¹⁸ To this end, Giddens highlighted the importance of the specificities of time–space relations in social interaction, especially the way in which the world economy had historically developed *unevenly*. The unevenness of this development, Giddens noted, had caused even Marx to proffer *two* theories of revolutionary change. The first, a revolutionary potentiality produced by the advanced economic techniques of capitalist industrialist organisation, had not occurred in recent history. The second, however, spoke of the importation of advanced industrial techniques into a backward agrarian society. For Giddens, it was this second time–space relation that had produced radical transformations in modern history, ones that had diverged from the trajectories of the advanced societies, resulting, not least of all, in the phenomenon of state socialism.¹⁹

In focusing on this second time–space relation Giddens was participating in a long-standing debate that had puzzled Marxist (but also non-Marxist) historical sociologists: why had radical social transformations in modernity paradoxically occurred in conditions of backwardness, what was the nature of such transformations, and how should the novel results of these transformations be reconciled into a grand narrative of modern world development?²⁰ This, at its deepest level, was a question regarding the unexpected transformations arising from the amalgamation of differentially developed socio-political formations – comparatively 'backward' and 'advanced' – within a backward society. And *the* historical phenomenon around which this problem had crystallised post-1917 in revolutionary thought and practice (perhaps only displaced somewhat with the Iranian Revolution in 1979) was the conquering of the Tsarist state apparatus by the Bolshevik Party and the conjoining of both into a novel form of political organisation, the Party-State.

There is nothing exceptional about the formation of parties in political life. But what did give the Communist Party its novelty – at least in the eyes of Marxists – was

its mandate of effecting *revolutionary* change facilitated by its particular organisational structure. The Party existed, in Marxist–Leninist understandings, to facilitate the taking over of state power from the bourgeoisie and refashion the state apparatus to support a ‘mass proletarian democracy’. Unlike regular political parties, the Communist Party would effectively dissolve itself once it had assured the dictatorship of the proletariat so that a post-class society could be created.²¹ Moreover, this peculiar mandate required the organising of the Party around the concept of ‘democratic centralism’. Rather than being totalitarian by default, democratic centralism sought to organise political life through a ‘dialectical unity of two countervailing elements’ that amalgamated a Western-style horizontal democracy of electioneering and free expression of opinion *and* a vertical command line necessary to radically contest the very foundation of state power. By explicitly taking on the mantle of a ‘vanguard’, the representational form of the Bolshevik Party distinguished itself in its organisational constitution from other parties or political organs. After all, the very purpose of the Party was to forge a contradictory unity of leadership, activists and masses through which radical social transformation might be made possible. Even if, from 1920 onwards, vertical command was enforced to the detriment of horizontal democracy, the many succeeding experiments of democratic centralism always developed by reference to these essentially contested issues of agency and representation.²²

So far I have attempted to draw out a particular influential layer of the global context of the 1960s/70s in which the agent–structure debate reignited, namely, the crisis in Western Marxism. I have placed this crisis within a particular and influential pre-existing Marxist literature on the historical emergence and status of the Party that directly addressed the generative nature of inter-societal alterity, namely, the amalgamation of backward and advanced socio-political formations and the generation of novel forms of political agency globally transformative in their potential and effect. As I shall now document, within this literature the Party existed as a hieroglyph for Marxist understandings of modern world development, and to decipher its historical meaning within this development required an engagement not just with issues of continuity and change, the constitution of a structurally differentiated whole, and the identification of sources of transformative agency, but specifically with the inter-societal dimension of these issues. In turn, this task of deciphering required interrogation of the relationship between the mass of social forces, the intellectual and her/his prescriptions for radical change, and the subsequent political organisation of these forces to effect such change. And, in particular, this relationship was forged by direct reference to the generative condition of inter-societal alterity manifest in the condition of comparative backwardness.

Trotsky and the overcoming of Slavic backwardness

The core political debate amongst the Russian intelligentsia during the last decades of Tsardom pitted universally applicable laws of progress against theories of

contingency and path dependency.²³ From the time of Alexander II onwards, this debate hinged on the question of whether Russia's developmental destiny lay in a replication of Western Europe or down a separate geographical path. The 'separate path' idea was a derivative of Slavophilia that, since the 1830s, had claimed the uniqueness and superiority of the Slavic values of communal spirit and natural harmony over the political order of the West.²⁴ Narodnik political philosophy was an offshoot of Slavophilia, which proposed that the later a country industrialised, the harder it was to do so by capitalist means.²⁵ This simultaneous attraction and repulsion of the West felt by the Russian intelligentsia indicated a potent 'consciousness of backwardness', articulated by Petr Struve thus:

Confronted with Western culture the Russian intellectual feels like a schoolboy or an uneducated person. Although he hates this culture and considers it to be something alien to him, he cannot escape respecting it and feels ashamed by its superiority.²⁶

Russian Marxism developed within and by reference to this debate. Indeed, it was over the question of an expected world convergence of social conditions that both the Bolshevik and Menshevik programmes were constructed. The Mensheviks acquired the tag 'European' due to their incremental socialism; alternatively the Bolsheviks, in evoking the revolutionary potential of the Russian peasantry, were labelled 'Slavophile Marxists'.²⁷

In attempting to make sense of the results and prospects of the 1905 revolution Trotsky sought to overcome the dichotomy of West–East. Because the substantive developments of class society associated with European culture had not yet occurred in Russia, for Trotsky the Russian intelligentsia could not represent any class directly but only the *idea* of class.²⁸ Therefore, despite importing the most advanced European thought, the Russian intelligentsia still remained for Trotsky as backward as the objective conditions that they lived in. This led Trotsky to, on the one hand, condemn outright the Slavophilic position and the romance of a primitive and barbaric past,²⁹ yet, on the other hand, to claim that the wholesale importation of modern European philosophy into the Russian milieu was *also* a problem.

Likewise, Trotsky proclaimed that the revolutions of 1905 and then 1917 had destroyed the myth of Russia's 'uniqueness'; revolution was, after all, the quintessential signature of the modern polity. But having said this, Trotsky also admitted that the 1917 revolution bore a 'character wholly peculiar to itself', and one that 'opened entirely new historical perspectives before us'.³⁰ Indeed, he would later assert that the October Revolution finally allowed Russian society to overcome 'the consciousness of inferiority'.³¹ Trotsky theorised this escape from backwardness through the notion of 'uneven and combined development'.³² His resultant historical narrative of Russian history proceeded as follows.

A 'Tartar'-inspired backward mode of production coupled with a geographical proximity to Europe forced the Tsarist state to be constantly under the pressure of its 'external social-historical milieu'.³³ Faced with a growing qualitative disparity

in military forces between industrialising Europe and its own largely peasant army, the Tsarist ruling strata had to act to secure their own survival. However, it was only by borrowing European techniques, with borrowed capital from European banks, that the Tsarist state could hope to maintain its power. Because Russian industrialisation was predicated upon an influx of foreign capital, not upon an 'organic' development of social forces, the industrialisation process therefore 'skipped' a number of stages that had been necessary to the industrialisation process in England.³⁴ In fine, Tsardom had grafted onto quasi-feudal social relations the most advanced capitalist productive forces, but in order to sustain a most backward political system rather than transform it.³⁵ It was due to the contradictory nature of this policy that Trotsky characterised Russian development as a 'peculiar combination of different stages in the historic process',³⁶ a process that culminated in 1917.³⁷

Essentially, Trotsky's appraisal of Russian development rested upon two core propositions. Firstly, the universalising exigencies of the capital relation had to work through the prism of already existing inter-societal 'unevenness', a prism constructed through the worldwide differentiation of socio-political forms in which unevenness was not a structural condition *internal* to the totality of capitalist relations, but a condition that defined the relation of non-capitalist to capitalist polities. Secondly, this unevenness had not worked simply as a barrier to capital's productive forces. Rather, the importing of such productive forces onto existing 'backward' social forms had the tendency to produce *novel* political organisations, and, what is more, social forms that existed coeval with the advanced, thus undermining the assumption that human development proceeded through a set of universally shared stages.³⁸

It was through these propositions that Trotsky proceeded to sketch out the potentiality for revolutionary action among the masses downtrodden by Tsardom. The Russian worker was no doubt culturally backward and ignorant in comparison to the West European proletariat; yet at the same time, and because of this backwardness, the Russian worker was mobile, active and receptive to the most extreme ideas inherent in his/her class position.³⁹ Indeed, 'revolutionary freshness' was sealed in at that moment when the worker had been 'thrown into the factory cauldron snatched directly from the plough'.⁴⁰

However, in the midst of *analytically* refuting Marx's 'stages of development' schema, Trotsky nevertheless *prescriptively* endorsed it. He maintained, despite acknowledging historical 'leapfrogging', that bourgeois culture – especially the freeing of the individual psyche from the fetters of relations of personal dependency – was socialism's prerequisite. Of course, socialism would not fetter individual freedom through the blind elements of economic relations, but neither would true socialism subsume this freedom under a monolithic general will.⁴¹ Rather, it would be through the 'super-personal element' – through the reasoned, collective mediation of individual passion – that the potentialities of human spirit trapped in the atomistic individual would be released by socialism.⁴² Therefore it was imperative that the Russian worker digest the bourgeois habitus to become truly revolutionary. (Trotsky even led the way in this respect with his personal presentation and demeanour.⁴³) In other words, as much as he had analytically dissipated the binary of modern West–pre-modern East, a

Russian consciousness of backwardness continued to shape Trotsky's ethical outlook. And it is for this reason, as much as for any logistical considerations, that Trotsky desperately clung to the forecast of revolutionary winds from the West.

What position did the Bolshevik Party play in this process of 'catch up'? Trotsky accepted that the evolving Party-State of the USSR posed a core challenge for Marxist praxis: contra Engel's and Lenin's expectations, the state had not withered away with the dictatorship of the proletariat, but had remained by taking on a dual character. On the one hand, the state was still socialistic in defending the socialisation of property, yet, on the other hand, the state apparatus distributed goods and needs in a bourgeois fashion based on capitalist measures of value.⁴⁴ As part of this dual character a bureaucratic stratum, through the network of the Party, had risen to power.

Trotsky was unsure as to the historical novelty one should attribute to this dualistic political authority created in the 'Soviet thermidor'. He was adamant that the Party-State no longer governed through the principle of democratic centralism that had been originally deployed in the Bolshevik Party to mediate and intellectually appraise the necessarily contradictory currents of mass opinion: Stalin's coercive state apparatus could no longer entertain any contradiction in thought.⁴⁵ However, neither could the Soviet Union be understood as a form of 'state capitalism': for the bureaucracy, if privileged, was nevertheless a stratum that had achieved a remarkable degree of independence from previous dominating classes.⁴⁶

Yet if Trotsky admitted that the Party-State was a novel result of the first proletarian revolution, he could not countenance the sustained *reproduction* of this political organisation. Either the present regime would 'backslide' into capitalism, or, more importantly, its future would lie in its immanent subsumption under a socialist regime.⁴⁷ Moreover, convinced that socialism required first of all the importation of Western bourgeois mores, norms and techniques, Trotsky was adamant that the *progressive* period of the Soviet Union could produce no *new* world of technology, science or art, all of which would have to be imported according to a ready-made Western pattern. Therefore the only time when the Russian experiment would produce novel advancements in human life would be when the existing Party-State had withered away.

In all aspects, then, Stalin's Party-State for Trotsky was a 'degenerative' form of political organisation:⁴⁸ its novelty resided only in the nature of a *transitory* moment between regimes, not in its particular restructuring of social life.⁴⁹ Trotsky could consider no other possibility, because to claim that the Bolshevik project could not be encapsulated in the term 'workers' state' – to claim that combined development *continued* after 1917 – to claim that the Party-State was neither capitalist, nor socialist in the classic sense – would reveal a stark fact: that Western bourgeois individualism could *not* be pristinely imported into 'backward' Russian culture and that the Party-State itself was the radical result of a novel amalgam of socio-political formations. Faced with a Russian alterity that could not be engaged with by his ethical orientation to a universal (but European-led) developmental trajectory, Trotsky shut down a full investigation into the unexpected and novel form of political organisation

produced in the revolution of backwardness. In this way, the inter-societal dimension of agent–structure was effaced from the praxis that underlay the construction of a Fourth International.

Two legacies arose out of Trotsky's own political forays. Firstly, during his battles with Stalin, Trotsky increasingly attempted to legitimate his Bolshevik credentials by passing off his theory of uneven and combined development as a version of Lenin's 'weakest link' in the chain of imperialism.⁵⁰ By doing this Trotsky allowed a conceptual slippage to enter into his theory, namely, that world order could be defined as already capitalist in its totality. But Lenin's understanding of unevenness as the 'weakest link' was the opposite to Trotsky's. The latter understood unevenness not as a condition internal to a capitalist totality but instead as a condition formed at the interface of the relation of non-capitalist to capitalist socio-political formations: a condition, moreover, that produced unexpected amalgams (combined development) deriving from this qualitative difference itself. Many subsequent Trotskyists (including, as we shall see, C. L. R. James) inherited this conceptual conflation. Secondly, by enacting a novel 'primitive accumulation' of the agricultural milieu and forcefully collectivising the peasantry, Stalin secured for his Party-State a structural reproductive efficacy to be legitimised through the thesis of 'socialism in one country' as an ideological counterweight to Trotsky's 'permanent' world revolution. Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development was thereafter buried beneath Stalinism, and generations of Marxist intellectuals (including, as we shall see, Althusser) were denied engagement with a promising route into explaining the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem.

C. L. R. James and the redemption of the periphery

James became a Marxist after having read Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, and he subsequently joined various Trotskyite organisations in 1930s' Britain.⁵¹ Invited by the Socialist Workers Party to tour the United States in late 1938, James extended his stay (illegally) until the early 1950s. Whilst in the United States, he formed the Johnson–Forest Tendency, a small intellectual group that set for itself the task of rethinking Trotsky's critique of the USSR as merely a 'degenerated' workers' state. Crucial to this endeavour was the translation and reading by the Tendency of Marx's early economic and philosophical manuscripts. Persuaded by the Hegelian-humanist tenor of these works, James then wrote *Notes on Dialectics*, a work that as late as 1980 he considered to be the most important of his oeuvre.⁵²

From these readings James took the idea that human freedom was integral to the 'economic' question of labour because the essence of private property was that it alienated the labour of man from his own creative activity. Only the replacement of exchange value with use value would allow for the full development of labour power, and with it the ethical promise of freedom immanent within bourgeois individualism.⁵³ Indeed, because James considered that class society was defined by the reproduction of the conditions for alienating labour power, Stalinist society

appeared as the ultimate expression of such a society. The five-year plan, by the same logic inherent in monopoly capitalism, was actually a highly defined form of class exploitation supported by 'state capitalism'.⁵⁴

To understand the contemporary stage of what might be called his 'dialectic of freedom', James sketched a historical narrative composed of the struggle between three social forces – the masses, the bourgeoisie and the radical petty bourgeoisie. A crucial moment in this narrative is the French Revolution.⁵⁵ The petty bourgeoisie appeared here in the guise of the intelligentsia, and, as Jacobins, mobilised the revolutionary masses against the conservatism of both the *ancien régime* and the bourgeoisie in order to establish, paradoxically, bourgeois society. Here could be found the historical essence of Stalinism as a political project, namely, the control, rather than arrest, of revolutionary mass action in order to create a national compromise between classes. In their new twentieth-century role as an intellectual caste of administrative and bureaucratic economic planners, the petty bourgeoisie lived on in the United States as the corporate labour organisations of the New Deal, and in the USSR as the apparatchiks of the Party. Against this, James narrated a counter-history of the masses wherein the proletariat developed a self-awareness of their agency above and beyond the constraining leadership of the petty bourgeoisie.

The purpose of this grand narrative for James was to draw attention to the arrival of a new universal stage in the dialectic of freedom. No longer was the task a Leninist one – to create a dictatorship of the proletariat in order to 'wither away' the state. What required withering now was the *Party*. James defined the new stage of the dialectic of freedom as organised planning versus the activity of the masses. And soon after writing *Notes on Dialectics*, he sketched out the contours of a popular book on *American Civilization*.⁵⁶ For it was in American history, James claimed, that one could see the dialectic of freedom playing out most intensely. The peculiarity of American society lay in the fact that it had developed free from the European shackles of feudalism and landed aristocracy and had thus realised what Europe had not: the *ideal* conditions of bourgeois freedom in both individual and associative life.⁵⁷ However, once the industrialisation of the economy had culminated in the New Deal, such individualism became subsumed under a mechanised socialisation of life.⁵⁸ Promised the ideal of individual and associational freedom, yet systematically robbed of the creative expression of this freedom, the American worker felt alienation most acutely.

By virtue of such intensities, the American masses, for James, held the most radical and progressive potential in pushing forward the dialectic of freedom. Crucially, he attributed the enabling condition of this potentiality to, paradoxically, America's cultural 'backwardness' as a colonial outgrowth of the European heartland. America had produced little in high culture because its own cultural origin, 'pristine' due to the absence of the European *ancien régime*, was necessarily *popular* in essence.⁵⁹ From these origins sprang the tradition of mass culture in America wherein intellectuals – whom it will be remembered were of petty bourgeois origin in James's grand narrative – had not only to talk to, but also pay attention to, the masses.⁶⁰ For these reasons, American civilisation expressed the most progressive impulse of

the modern dialectic of freedom: the refusal by the working masses to accept the institutionalisation of an elite to represent their interests.⁶¹

From this it is clear that James placed great emphasis on the personal role of the intellectual – as a species of the petty bourgeoisie – in the playing out of the struggle between bureaucratic rule and the activity of the masses. It is also clear that for James the relationship of the intellectual to the masses was refracted through the geo-cultural condition of backwardness based upon a core–periphery distinction. However, it is of just as great importance to note that James understood the nature of the core–periphery relation not through Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development but through Lenin's theory of the 'weakest link' of imperialism.⁶²

the dialectic of history is such that small independent nations, small nationalities, which are powerless ... in the struggle against imperialism, *nevertheless* can act as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which can bring on to the scene the real power against imperialism – the socialist proletariat.⁶³

Moreover, James believed that the transformative nature of this link applied not only to struggles with a geo-political aspect – for example, between the Parisian masses and the St Domingue slaves during the French Revolution⁶⁴ – but also to minority struggles *within* a society. Here the key reference point was the American abolitionist movement.⁶⁵ Through the 'underground railroad', the intelligentsia embraced the creative force of the masses and shut down the distance between the intellectual elite and the popular masses.⁶⁶

To excavate further the reasons why the special transformative potential of peripheral societies in James's grand narrative depended upon the relationship between its intellectuals and masses we need to briefly consider his own personal history as a 'native' intellectual in colonial Trinidad. As James himself noted, for fear of losing his precarious distinction from the colonial masses the native intellectual consistently strived to associate himself with the puritanical/bourgeois sensibilities and mores of the British colonisers, and in doing so characterised the mass culture of the colonised as base and primitive by European standards.⁶⁷ Predictably, however, the intelligentsia were not rewarded with a meaningful share of legislative or executive command by the colonial office. And for fear of losing their relatively superior but effectively unimportant status as clerks or teachers, colonial intellectuals rarely pursued the cause of self-determination in either the cultural or political sphere.⁶⁸

This isolation of the native intellectual from his own society at large – compounded with the political morass of this isolation – haunts James's autobiographical notes,⁶⁹ all the more so, perhaps, because James never repudiated his colonial education of classical history and literature. In fact, so strong was this education that James interrogated the *ethical* nature of world development and its dialectic of freedom by reference to *Western civilisation* rather than to *class struggle*.⁷⁰ He was especially fond of comparing the potentially liberating mass cultures of modern times to the 'democratic' tragedies written at the start of Western civilisation in ancient Greece.⁷¹

Nevertheless this self-confessed 'Victorian', who had internalised the coloniser's civilised 'code' of fair play in his private school years, was confronted with the hypocrisy of the code in all other aspects of West Indian life.⁷² Here, cricket was crucial for the cultivation of James's political thought because it was the only social sphere in which the colonised and colonisers could engage each other as equals.⁷³ Concurrently, James gleaned in the yearning by the masses for 'fair play' in cricket a vicarious expression of their yearning for national independence. This reflects a perennial but steadily increasing appreciation by James of the way in which apparently 'absurd' forms of popular culture contained nobler sentiments. The Rastafari, for example, through promoting a mystical relationship to Africa, were nevertheless expressing a popular cultural yearning for West Indian independence, as had Marcus Garvey before them.⁷⁴

Therefore James's dialectic of freedom was intimately informed by his own struggles over the institutional standing of the colonial intellectual: specifically, his attempt to break from a self-imposed isolation from the masses by embracing the cause of national independence. This desire was expressed, as Robert Hill has insightfully noted, in his judgement of the radical potentialities of American society, i.e. as a *vindication* of the colonial/peripheral world.⁷⁵ Obverse to Trotsky's treatment of the periphery as necessarily backward and ultimately in need of a European revolution, James claimed that the sources of progressive politics could be found *within* and *due to* the peculiar make-up of peripheral societies.⁷⁶

And yet the 'double consciousness'⁷⁷ that was cultivated in James by identifying with Western civilisation in the midst of being categorised as an outsider to this civilisation posed (although in a far more acute manner) a similar problem regarding the standing of the intellectual in a transforming society, as had Trotsky's consciousness of Slavic backwardness. To explore this tension, and its implications for James's deciphering of the Party through the historical narrative of a 'dialectic of freedom', it is best to turn to his argument in the *Black Jacobins*, one restated in stronger terms in an appendix written in the 1960s.

For James, the amalgamation, in French colonial St Domingue, of the most modern industrialistic forces of production in the form of the sugar factories with the most despotic relations of production in the form of the masters' whip produced the first and most intense modern expressions of the dialectic of individual freedom in the new world.⁷⁸ Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Francophile leader, and in James's schema the radical petty bourgeois intellectual, recognised the necessity for an independent Haiti to treat France as a mentor in the modern ways of technology and culture; yet the pursuit of this relationship with the enemy ultimately undermined Toussaint's own relationship with the black masses. Dessalines – the anti-intellectual and man of the people – could only treat the French as mortal enemies to Haitian independence, although, in James's view, the price of this strategy was long-term underdevelopment.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, by struggling against the colonial West in order, paradoxically, to save the immanent promise of Western civilisation, Toussaint, 'the first and greatest' of West Indians, had laid the ground for a *Black Humanism*.

This higher expression of Western humanism represented the unique contribution of national culture that West Indians brought to the meeting of the global comity of progressive movements at the 'rendezvous of victory'.⁸⁰

But, at the same time, James was well aware that the most important mass movements in West Indian history had invariably taken the position of Dessalines rather than that of Toussaint. These sentiments especially coalesced, as James himself noted, around the use of Africa in Garveyism, Negritude and Rastafarianism as a symbol of resistance.⁸¹ Yet the expression of national independence in the embrace of Africa – as the mother of civilisation – rather than Europe – as the despotic foster-parent – was a sentiment that James could not share with the masses. And unable to wholly immerse himself in a popular 'national culture' that looked *away* from Europe and its classical heritage, James the Victorian was led to contradict his placement of the Party in his dialectic of freedom.

This contradiction is best exposed by turning to James's last directly interventionist political writings in the 1960s that returned to the 'source' – to Africa and, specifically, the question of African socialism as it had been pursued in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana. James believed that Africa's progressive future had to emerge from the contestation of its own peculiar cultural forces. Yet, at the same time, James was adamant that there could be no progress without the aid of Western technology and science, as well as an education that dwelt upon the historical lessons – good and bad – that the development of Western civilisation offered Africa.⁸² Moreover, this aid could be sequestered only by proving to Western civilisation that within Africa lay the possibility of its own redemption.⁸³ Again, James stated his support for Black Humanism, noting that African culture had retained, in its tribal mode of life, the mores of socialistic association that had been all but destroyed with the mechanisation of Western life.⁸⁴ And again, a great deal depended for James upon the actions of the peripheral intellectual because only this small privileged stratum in Africa held the education needed to drive forward the modernisation project required to realise the promise of Black Humanism.⁸⁵

The problem was, however, that the more the intellectual encouraged modernisation/Westernisation, the more he distanced himself from the African masses in order to legitimise his standing within the Western elite: this was especially evident in the degeneration of Nkrumah's Ghana.⁸⁶ Therefore, and at odds with his vindication of the New World periphery, James acknowledged the condition of comparative backwardness to be a *systemic problem* for peripheral development in Africa.⁸⁷ African 'catch up' required a political organisation that could 'police' and maintain the relationship between the intellectual – in general terms the colonial petty bourgeoisie – and the masses. This organisation was none other than the Party, the purpose of which was *not* to regiment the working masses, but rather to *enable* these masses to pursue their self-directed entry into the modern world. According to Lenin, James claimed, this required the performance of two basic but under-appreciated tasks: honest administration, and, more importantly, education of the peasantry at the same time as the political education of the intelligentsia.⁸⁸ A 'new type of government

official' was needed that would return the colonial intellectual to direct contact with the colonial masses, and in doing so cultivate a Black Humanism, thus securing for Africa a place at the 'rendezvous of victory'.⁸⁹

We are left, then, with two conflicting interpretations of the Party in James's writings. On the one hand, the Party is presented as integral to the dialectic of freedom in its capacity as a structural constrainer of transformative agency. In this presentation, the periphery is vindicated as a special region in world development that, due to the less restrained creative energies of its masses and the underdevelopment of its intelligentsia, has the potential to drive forward radical transformations in world order. On the other hand, the Party is presented as a possible answer to the structural problem of the comparative backwardness of the periphery, a progressive organisation that might sequester the intelligentsia to pursue 'catch up' and thus secure the social conditions adequate for radical transformation.

This dualism is ultimately explained by James's double consciousness. For, in the former presentation, the core-periphery division was part of the uneven development of one totality, capitalist imperialism, but just as much for James, Western civilisation itself. In this totality James could disappear into the colonial masses to struggle against the petty bourgeois organisation of politics, including, of course, the Party. In the latter, James had to use the Party as an organisation that might help engineer the relationship between the peripheral intellectual and masses so as to reorient the independent nation towards a rendezvous with the dialectic of freedom within Western civilisation. Here, James had to stand apart as a petty bourgeois intellectual from the masses in order to police the direction of their cultural development, so as to ensure that there would be no 'vicarious' turn towards Africa and away from the 'truth' of Europe.

In sum, James's double consciousness deciphered the hieroglyph of the Party schizophrenically, so to speak: the presence of the Party in modern world development had one meaning for struggles that could progress the dialectic of freedom within Western civilisation, and another for those struggles that, through the dialectic of freedom, attempted to found a counter-civilisation. Redolent of Trotsky's inability as a critical intellectual situated within a peripheral context to both analytically and ethically acknowledge the unexpected and novel forms of political authority produced in amalgamations of 'backward' and 'advanced' socio-political forms, James's dialectic of freedom also flattened the inter-societal dimension of the agent-structure problem. Uncomfortably for James, the progress of civilisation could not abide the historical reproduction of a peripheral, postcolonial alterity.

Althusser's defence of the 'mass line'

Althusser's notoriety rests upon his critique of Marxist humanists (as James had been), a critique that has to be contextualised within the history of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). The intellectual life of the PCF, from 1924 to the early 1950s, was defined by conformity to Stalinism.⁹⁰ However, having proactively modelled itself in the Jacobin image, the PCF found it difficult to take any meaningful critical position

vis-à-vis Gaullism and the Algerian problem during the 1950s. From this inaction began a slow haemorrhaging of radicals from the Party who were now less attracted by the revolutionary potential of the French working class and more so by Third World independence movements.⁹¹ On top of this, Khrushchev's geo-politics of 'peaceful coexistence', compounded with his infamous critique at the Twentieth Congress of Stalin's cult of personality, inaugurated a new strategy in the CPSU of 'socialist humanism' wherein class relations were declared eliminated. Having lost votes with the fallout from the Algerian war, the PCF leadership seized on the opportunity to re-present communism as a form of humanism and thus part of a wider restoration of French democratic life.⁹²

Althusser was concerned that this change in Party strategy would encourage the petty bourgeois character of the French intellectual to come to the fore and thus militate against the forging of strong links between intellectuals and the working classes. This conservatism would disallow precisely a focus upon the crucial political question of the time: the structure of class society and the necessity of political *organisation*. The first order of business was to battle the Hegelian, and for Althusser ultimately bourgeois, reading of Marx. For this task, Althusser deployed the concept of a 'problematique'. The set of co-determining issues and concepts that an intellectual worked within did not reveal its own general form to that intellectual; rather, the 'problematique' acted as an ideology.⁹³ And the only way that this veil of pre-given ideology might be pierced was non-theoretical, through a ruptural experience in society at large that revealed the contingent nature of the political context in which the intellectual existed.⁹⁴

Althusser claimed that between the early (humanist) Marx and the late (scientific) Marx existed just such a rupture that had produced an 'epistemological break'. Specifically, Althusser argued that Marx's context was defined by the comparative backwardness of Germany in relation to the French revolutionary tradition. This had also resulted in the overdevelopment of German idealism and an underdevelopment of a 'science' of politics. In fact, Althusser claimed that it was this forced inter-societal comparison that led Marx to dispel the illusion of idealist philosophy with the reality of French socialism, and subsequently to reinterpret Germany's own history in this new light of class struggle.⁹⁵ Thus for Althusser the contingent 'origins' of any innovation in political thought referred to the uneven nature of that society's developmental interactions with other differentially developed societies. Furthermore, Althusser believed that uneven development also formed the contingent 'origins' upon which Lenin developed the theory and practice of Bolshevism. In fact, the Russian conjuncture had itself forced a rupture within the Marxist 'problematique' because revolution in a capitalist world had not occurred in the most capitalistic society but rather in 'backward' Russia.

To theorise this problem of the generative nature of the condition of backwardness, Althusser borrowed from Mao and made a distinction between a 'Hegelian' simple contradiction and a 'Marxist' complex contradiction.⁹⁶ Instead of the Hegelian understanding of the subject of history as man overcoming his alienation, complex contradiction forced the theorist to recognise that in the modern epoch the subject of history was 'expressed' through a 'highly differentiated social structure'.⁹⁷ However,

by complexity Althusser did not mean a democratic plurality of factors: complex contradiction was structured through the *domination* of, ultimately, the economic 'base'.⁹⁸ Thus unevenness was a structure, specifically, of capitalist imperialism. This international 'structure of structures' constituted the 'secondary' contradiction through which the principle contradiction of capital–labour was mediated. This meant that class struggle took place in and through a complex-structural-unevenly-determined milieu, or was, in short, 'overdetermined'.⁹⁹ Through this overdetermination, the principle contradiction would 'condense' in a 'strategic locus', such as Russia, and play out through what seemed empirically to be phenomena displaced from the capital–labour struggle, such as Party politics.¹⁰⁰

Therefore Althusser's notion that the base contradiction was constantly – and forever¹⁰¹ – overdetermined by the unevenness of the superstructure was a critique of both humanism and economism. It was, claimed Althusser, the genius of Lenin to theoretically glean overdetermination and its importance for practice through his notion of the 'weakest link' in the imperial chain.¹⁰² Lenin's core revelation in this respect was that Marxist politics had to hit at the 'nodal strategic point of overdetermination'. Standing upon the weakest link, one could not rely upon the spontaneous actions of workers or the inexorable evolution of forces of production. Only through pressure exerted strategically by a political organisation, the Party, could the link in the chain of world order be broken.¹⁰³ As Althusser bluntly put it: "Workers of the world unite!" effectively means "Organise!"¹⁰⁴

The task for the intellectual in this radical project was to present philosophy as 'class struggle in the field of theory'.¹⁰⁵ Against Stalinism, Althusser argued that the Party was not simply the superstructural expression of the movement of the base (as it would have to be in a simple contradiction). Instead, there was a tension between the Party elite (including its intellectuals) and the masses.¹⁰⁶ For the masses were always ahead of intellectuals in their appreciation of the political conjuncture; however, unversed in the notion of overdetermination, they still had to be *organised* along the lines of *class* politics.¹⁰⁷ This was the tension which the production of a 'mass line' sought to engage with by: (a) paying attention to what the masses thought of their conditions; (b) relating this subjective content to a scientific class analysis; and (c) offering the masses a political line and explaining this to them in a way that they could recognise their own will in the strategy proposed.¹⁰⁸

But at the crucial moment in May 1968, the PCF leadership vacillated. And then, having subsequently entered into a common front with Mitterrand's Socialist Party, the leadership abruptly broke off this alliance before the 1974 elections. This, Althusser claimed, was an indication that the leadership had no intention of cultivating a 'mass line' but had sought to run the PCF on the lines of a *bourgeois* party rather than through the organisational principle of 'democratic centralism'.¹⁰⁹ After all, democratic centralism was designed to dispel the bourgeois ideology that interpolated subjects as 'free individuals'. Instead, democratic centralism sought to interpolate the political subject as a bearer of *class* relations and thus responsible in the intellectual sense for the formulation of a collectively held class position. Yet, at the same time, *democratic* centralism was not an oligarchic organising principle

(as was the case in bourgeois political parties), because its leadership were compelled to 'make the masses who make history speak for themselves' and to be 'attentive to the powers of imagination and invention of the masses'.¹¹⁰ Without the organisational principle of democratic centralism the Party would merely become another component of the (bourgeois) ideological state apparatus.¹¹¹ Althusser's defence of democratic centralism, then, was a defence of the Party as possessing a unique agency capable of transforming the structure of world order by the cultivation of a 'mass line'.

At this point it is instructive to recapitulate the above argument. While it is usually underemphasised in surveys of his oeuvre, Althusser's whole enterprise rested upon the observation that comparative backwardness was a crucial condition within the 'structure of structures' that made up world order. Backwardness shaped the contingency of the political context that forced intellectuals such as Marx and Lenin to step outside their inherited *national* interpolation as subjects and, by effecting an epistemological break, lay the philosophical grounds for pursuing class struggle within a capitalist imperialist world order. In this way, Althusser deciphered the hieroglyph of the Party as a unique form of political organisation required to break the 'weakest link' of imperialism.

The question is, did Althusser deploy the weakest link thesis in a way that – as had been the case with Trotsky and James – obscured the transformative potential of inter-societal *alterity* manifested in the condition of backwardness? In short, did Althusser, as had Trotsky and James, effectively flatten the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem?

To answer, we must revisit Althusser's usage of the concept of the 'mode of production'. Althusser's notion of overdetermination depended upon approaching the concept of a 'mode of production' as a wilful abstraction rather than a historical or economic reality.¹¹² Crucially, the purpose of this abstraction for Althusser was to better understand capitalist social reproduction in its *synchrony*, and on its own finished terms, rather than through illumination of the *diachronic* specificities of its prior historical development, a strategy that tended to lead to Hegelianism.¹¹³ Moreover, Althusser had taken care to show that contradiction was still determined in the last instance by the economic base. He was therefore adamant that the *source* of unevenness had to be found in the *internal* reproduction process of capitalist social relations. From this source unevenness would expand to inform the reproduction of inter-societal relations.¹¹⁴ Crucially, this conceptualisation effectively allowed Althusser to avoid any discussion of the inter-societal dimension through which the *expanded* reproduction of capital might be refracted in the drive towards a capitalist world economy.¹¹⁵

This meant that in his escape from humanism and economism, Althusser normalised that which was supposed to be ruptural and contingent. For each 'unexpected' context of class struggle was explained as a ruptural moment *within* an already existing 'chain' of structures that coalesced as the overdetermined structure of a singular capitalist totality. Althusser ultimately faced a familiar problem: was unevenness a quantitative condition determined by various measures of comparative

backwardness, *or* did it also have to be understood as a qualitative condition, wherein a conjuncture formed by the relationship between differentially developed societies produced a novel set of political challenges leading to a novel form of politically organising social forces? Althusser's genius lay in framing the context in which the critical intellectual undertook knowledge production by reference to the structural condition of inter-societal alterity. Yet the Leninist tools that he inherited, especially the 'weakest link in the chain', worked to conceptually flatten the foundational importance of this condition for understanding the structural constraints and sources of transformative agency within modern world development.

This failure to fully explicate the importance of inter-societal alterity is demonstrated by Althusser's final pessimistic judgement of the radical nature of the PCF. Returning to Machiavelli, a political thinker that he had broached at the start of his career, Althusser re-posed the problem that he had begun his philosophical interventions in the PCF with – the contingency of origins in the development of political thought. For Althusser, Machiavelli's Prince was a hieroglyph that could only be deciphered by recognising its purpose to facilitate the creation of novel forms of political organisation. The lesson from this translation for the present day 'modern Prince' – the Party – was that Machiavelli had not factored in the masses as active subjects within this creation: he had not produced a 'mass line'. What is really striking here is Althusser's treatment of the forging of political unity – and the way in which this unity depended upon a contradictory yet intimate relationship between the intellectual and the masses – as a *national* problematic. The silence of the inter-societal dimension of the structure of 'contingency' (or 'aleatory' conditions) compared with its centrality in Althusser's first critiques speaks volumes.¹¹⁶

It would be difficult to claim, despite his castigations of the backwardness of French political thought in comparison to German traditions, that Althusser possessed a French consciousness of backwardness akin to Trotsky or James.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, Althusser's inability to decipher the hieroglyph of the Party by reference to the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem owes a good deal to the continuing legacies of the Russian revolution of backwardness in Marxist thought and practice. As Gregory Elliot has noted, there was a Marxist thinker that might have provided for Althusser an alternative anti-Stalinist critical understanding of the 'contingency of origins' of the Party to that of Lenin's 'weakest link', and one that did *not* rest upon the simple contradiction of the Hegelian dialectic. But the writings of the 'renegade' Trotsky were effectively denied to Althusser, a faithful member of the Stalinian PCF.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

For Trotsky, James and Althusser, deciphering the hieroglyph of the Party required an engagement with the condition of comparative backwardness and, more generally, with the abiding efficacy of inter-societal alterity upon processes of modern world development. Each author intimately interrogated the ethical relationship of himself as

a critical intellectual to popular forces by reference to the strictures and potentialities of radical social and political transformation afforded by the condition of inter-societal alterity. And in this way the problem of inter-societal alterity profoundly informed the authors' investigations of a structurally differentiated whole as well as the sources of transformative agency. This fundamental problem challenged both humanist (James) and structuralist (Althusser) praxes, it presented itself even in different socio-political contexts, for example, in the periphery (James), semi-periphery (Trotsky) and metropolis (Althusser), and it demanded prescriptions for political action from the insider (Althusser), outsider (James) and renegade (Trotsky) of leftist politics.

The above investigations are important in and of themselves to the extent that they demonstrate how the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem variously informed a range of intellectual positions and enquiries, all of which contributed towards a crucial layer of the global context in which the agent–structure debate in the social sciences was relaunched during the 1960s/70s. But to conclude I want to suggest how the above investigation might also directly speak to the stakes at play in the contemporary agent–structure debate in IR.

The first point to make is that neither the transformation of the world economy in the 1970s nor the post-Cold War transformation of the geo-political landscape rescinded the challenge for IR of analytically accounting for the condition of inter-societal alterity. Indeed, the hieroglyph of the Party has now effectively become associated with other objects arising in conditions of comparative backwardness, be they as diverse as the World Social Forum, the Zapatistas, Chavismo, slum gangs, indigenous movements or Al Qaeda. And what is more, the new global context furnished by the 'war on terror' urgently demands of critical intellectuals a direct ethical engagement with the condition of inter-societal alterity. For example, how does one situate oneself with regards to Western conservative political forces, non-Western conservative forces, non-Western popular forces, anti-Western popular forces, and Eurocentric leftist forces?

The second point to make is that the agent–structure debate in IR is presently ill-equipped to deal with such challenges. Colin Wight's recent book, perhaps the most lucid and coherent assessment of the agent–structure problem in IR so far, exposes the depth of these difficulties. Of particular interest is Wight's insistence that the agent–structure problem can only be solved by developing a meta-theory of the relationality of the planes of human existence that enable and constrain social action, namely, the material, the intersubjective, social roles and personal subjectivity. For Wight, the relationality of these planes – and the way in which their relative importance is structurally differentiated both temporally and spatially – is what can be said to constitute 'global social relations'.¹¹⁹ However, in order to proceed further and to specifically analyse this differentiated structural whole in order to prescribe solutions to global social problems, one cannot remain at the level of meta-theory. And this task, of course, is not one that can or should be demanded from Wight's philosophy of social science. The challenge, nevertheless, remains how to make a meta-theoretical resolution of the agent–structure problem speak both analytically

and ethically to the substance of world politics, a substance that is just as much characterised by the abiding and generative nature of inter-societal relations today as it was in Trotsky's, James's and Althusser's lifetimes.

I shall make these points speak to each other by way of an observation: Althusser can be said to mark (but not in chronological terms) an important shift in the thinking through of the problem of inter-societal alterity amongst critical intellectuals. Whereas Trotsky and James inhabited a socio-political context defined by backwardness or peripherality, Althusser inhabited an advanced/core context.¹²⁰ The former authors represent an 'embodied' concern of the critical intellectual with his political standing in relation to the purpose of effecting radical social transformation: in fine, a concern punctuated and politicised by the backward/peripheral positionality of the intellectual himself. The latter represents a 'disembodied' concern by the intellectual of the core/advanced society with the same problem of inter-societal alterity. And yet Althusser inherited a historically produced conceptual framework for engaging with inter-societal alterity (e.g. imperialism's 'weakest link') that downplayed the abiding and generative nature of inter-societal alterity in modern world development. Even with no consciousness of backwardness to emotively skew his perspective, Althusser still flattened the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem as effectively as Trotsky and James had.

Therefore engagements with the problem of inter-societal alterity from intellectuals who inhabit core/advanced societies might not be so 'disembodied' as they first appear, and this is where an Ideas in Context approach can be revealing for the agent–structure debate in IR. We cannot assume that concepts, first meta-theoretically investigated and resolved, can subsequently be mobilised to provide a more adequate perspective upon substantive social and political phenomena. For example, although difference/alterity is a concept that we necessarily debate at the level of meta-theory, it is at the same time an abstraction that arrives at our desk with the contestation over its analytical and ethical meaning having *already* been framed within a previous socio-political context. In general, this consideration raises the intriguing but very challenging possibility that the production of meta-theory can never be undertaken separately from investigations into the historical contexts that produced the concepts contemporarily utilised in meta-theory. But, in particular, this consideration makes the works of Trotsky, James and Althusser very instructive (in their insights and oversights) for the contemporary debate in IR. This is because these authors directly engaged with the inter-societal dimension of the agent–structure problem, a dimension that was by and large discarded when the debate was imported into IR with little sensitivity towards its historical contextualisation.

Thus I submit that, despite the many gains made in the debate, the agent–structure problem remains 'flattened' in IR. And as the debate moves on to directly engage with issues of ethics and responsibility¹²¹ in the current global context of the 'war on terror' it is more important than ever that critical intellectuals examine the way in which previous socio-political contexts might have historically conditioned their appreciation of – and ignorance of – the various dimensions of the agent–structure problem, foremost amongst these being the inter-societal dimension. In this respect,

revisiting the Marxist authors who attempted to decipher the hieroglyph of the Party is profoundly instructive and intimately revealing to the critical intellectual.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to Justin Rosenberg, Kamran Matin, the editors, and especially Ken Booth, for helping to direct the revision of this article.
- 2 Alexander Wendt, 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, 41(3), 1987, pp. 335-70.
- 3 David Dessler, 'What's at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?', *International Organization*, 43(3), 1989, p. 443. Examples include the debate on the primacy of ontology or epistemology: Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 41-2, 441-73; Vivienne Jabri and Stephen Chan, 'The Ontologist Always Rings Twice: Two More Stories About Structure and Agency in Reply to Hollis and Smith', *Review of International Studies*, 22(1), 1996, pp. 107-10; and Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, 'A Response: Why Epistemology Matters in International Theory', *Review of International Studies*, 22(1), 1996, pp. 111-16. See also the debate on modernist essentialism, Roxanne L. Doty, 'A Critical Exploration of the Agent-Structure Problematique in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3(3), 1997, pp. 365-92, and Colin Wight 'They Shoot Dead Horses Don't They? Locating Agency in the Agent-Structure Problematique', in *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(1), 1999, pp. 109-12. See also the emphases in Walter Carlsnaes, 'The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 36(3), 1992, pp. 245-70; and Heidi Suganami, 'Agents, Structures, Narratives', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5(3), 1999, 70-91.
- 4 See, for example, K. O'Neill, J. Balsiger and S. D. VanDeveer, 'Actors, Norms, and Impact: Recent International Cooperation Theory and the Influence of the Agent-Structure Debate', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 7, 2004, pp. 149-75.
- 5 See Wendt, 'The Agent-Structure Problem', p. 367. Wendt's 'three cultures of anarchy' in *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) might be considered, in this respect, a weak resolution to this challenge.
- 6 For example Andreas Bieler and Adam D. Morton, 'The Gordian Knot of Agency-Structure in International Relations: a Neo-Gramscian Perspective', *European Journal of International Relations*, 7(1), 2001, pp. 5-35. In investigating globalisation some authors combine both philosophy of science and IPE approaches: for example, John Maclean, 'Towards a Political Economy of Agency in Contemporary International Relations', in Martin Shaw (ed.), *In Politics and Globalisation: Knowledge, Ethics, and Agency* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 202-25; and Heikki Patomäki, *After International Relations: Critical Realism and the (Re-)Construction of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002).
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- 9 For example, David McNally, 'Language, History, and Class-Struggle', *Monthly Review*, 47(3), 1995, pp. 13-30.
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- 12 See Allen Swingewood, *A Short History of Sociological Thought*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 202; and Tom Bottomore, *Sociology and Socialism* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984), p. 13.
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- and H. J. Helle (eds), *Macro-Sociological Theory – Perspectives on Sociological Theory*, vol. 1 (London: Sage, 1985), pp. 58–9; and Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
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 - 16 Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), pp. 49–55, 68–9.
 - 17 Christopher Norris, 'Interview with Roy Bhaskar', *The Philosopher's Magazine*, 8, 1999, pp. 34–50. On the Althusserian influence on Bhaskar see Gregory Elliot, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 307 n. 5.
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 - 41 See, for example, Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1954), p. 180.
 - 42 See especially Leon Trotsky, 'Literature and Revolution', in *The Age of Permanent Revolution*, pp. 319, 322–3; Trotsky, 'Concerning the Intelligentsia', pp. 587–8; Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*,

- pp. 157–76; and Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), pp. 28–9. Hence Trotsky's valorisation of Freud over Pavlov.
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- 80 See especially James, *Black Jacobins*, pp. 305–26; and C. L. R. James, 'Introduction', in *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), pp. 23–4.
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- 104 Louis Althusser, 'Marxism Today', in Gregory Elliot (ed.), *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 276.
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 119 Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 174–6, 296–9.
 120 This being said, further investigation into Althusser's Algerian roots could possibly reveal a reason for his curious sensitivity to the problem of 'backwardness'.
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