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Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature
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Review of *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*

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The Warwick Research Collective (WReC) has issued a compelling provocation to the field of literary studies. As the title suggests, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (CUD) places the combined and uneven development of capitalism at the center of a theory and practice of reading, and mapping, the forms and patterns of global literary production. Readers of *Mediations* are likely familiar with the centrality of combined and uneven development to Marxist geography, economic analysis, political economy, and models of revolutionary practice. For those less familiar with the concept, *Combined and Uneven Development* offers a concise and thorough introduction. WReC traces the development of the concept from its origins in Marx to its elaboration by Leon Trotsky in his account of capitalist development in the periphery and in his anti-stagist theory of permanent revolution; Trotsky describes the co-presence of developing capitalist forces and pre-existing modes of production and culture as “an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” (11). From contemporary critical theory, WReC draws most frequently throughout *Combined and Uneven Development* on Fredric Jameson, whose work magnetizes unevenness into fields of variegated totalities. Informing Jameson’s work are rich adaptations of Ernst Bloch’s conception of the “simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous,” a conceptual translation into temporal terms of the spatial patchwork of combined and uneven developments. For all of these thinkers, and WReC, too, combined unevenness is a permanent and constituent feature of the capitalist system, rather than errors in its progress. The capitalist world system will develop, de-develop, and re-develop geographical economic sectors in response to shifts in labor regimes and resulting

migrancy, the promise of surplus value extraction, technological transformation, the threat and fact of the falling rate of profit, the destruction of the natural environment, and the production and destruction of markets, especially as processes underwritten by colonialism and imperialism.

The project of *Combined and Uneven Development* is interdisciplinary in that ways that the best work in Marxism always is. The book forwards a theory of literary form and textual production rooted in the political economies of a world system undergoing tumultuous and ceaseless rearrangement, especially in response to crises within the system. WReC therefore understands world literature within the compass of the capitalist world system. Where contemporary literary study has emphasized locational difference (either Derridian or liberal-multicultural) and the relative autonomy of national literatures, WReC suggests more fruitful investigations take as their point of departure both the “singularity of modernity as a social form and its simultaneity.” Jameson, again, is the touchstone here, and modernity is understood as “the time-space sensorium corresponding to capitalist *modernisation*.” Leavening this singularity, in which WReC “hear(s) the echo of a hundred years of dialectical materialist discussion of totality, system and universality,” is “simultaneity” (12). “Multiple forms of appearance of unevenness” co-exist simultaneously within the larger capitalist singularity.

The introduction to *Combined and Uneven Development* offers, in addition to this useful redaction, the history of the concept of combined and uneven development, a series of pointed critiques of the state of contemporary literary studies, specifically its postcolonial, comparative and world literature iterations. WReC finds common cause with these disciplines’ anti-Eurocentrism (especially work by Edward Said and Pascal Casanova); however, they protest against the idea that modernity is a Western phenomenon, and posit that modernity must be “situated within the capitalist world-system.” Citing the work of Harry Harootunian, they argue that modernity is “the way in which capitalism is ‘lived’ - wherever in the world-system is it is lived - [and] ‘however society develops,’ its modernity is coeval with other modernities...” (14-15). In addition to this project of renewing the temporal, geographic, economic and political contours they feel the concept the “West” subtracts, they also want to insist, against certain somewhat ecstatic tendencies that emphasize an interactive globality of translation, of which Emily Apter’s work is for them exemplary, that translation (like comparative literature as a discipline more broadly) is structured by asymmetries of power between nations in a capitalist world-system contoured by imperialist subjugation, colonial apparatuses, and semi-peripheral abutment zones.

In partnership with world-systems theorists, WReC finds the geographical articulations of “core” and “periphery” crucial, as these terms mark the convergence of spatiality and positionality within the capitalist world-system. The semi-periphery plays particular importance in their mapping of modernism, a phenomenon whose techniques they describe as “the determinate formal registers of (semi-)peripherality

in the world literary system, discernable whenever literary works are composed that mediate the lived experience of capitalism's bewildering creative destruction (or destructive creation)" (51). Corollary to the critiques of homogenizing "the West" and arguments against analogizing Europe and modernity, WReC pays special attention to peripheries and semi-peripheries *within* Europe, and at times, *intranationally* as well. The possible co-presence within the nation of all three spatial categories, core, periphery, and semi-periphery, tempts the reader to ponder the contours of a combined and uneven development heuristic within the field of American Studies, or any other field whose site of inquiry explores the interior of national borders. Still, WReC wagers that it is in the places most underdeveloped by regimes of capitalist modernization that the "pressures of combined and uneven development find their most pronounced or profound registration" (62).

This world-combinatory nature of unevenness troubles mechanical literary chronologies wherein realism gives way inexorably to, or is sublated by, modernism. Taking up Adorno's claim that modernism is a form of realism insofar as it encodes "the systemic crisis of European modernity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," WReC calls upon us to likewise identify the modernisms in the realisms, and the realisms in the modernisms, of the periphery and semi-periphery (66). This allows WReC the flexibility to explore literary forms which are themselves combined and uneven. The taxonomy of "irrealism" appears frequently throughout *Combined and Uneven Development*, reflecting a critical desire to find a place beyond models of realism and modernism exhausted by attachments to a thoroughly ideological system of aesthetic value. In analyzing these hybrid forms as mediations of combined and uneven development, WReC aims to supercede models of world literary production that would put a bit too much distance between literary production and political economy. (This point in particular is a brief but significant critique of Pascal Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, which otherwise WReC cites approvingly, especially as it offers a corrective to models wherein literature "radiates" inexorably from the core into the periphery.) We can understand WReC's intervention as, in many ways, an extension of the kinds of conversations hosted within *Modern Language Quarterly's* 2012 special issue on peripheral realisms, edited by Joe Cleary, Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, with a contribution from WReC's own Sharae Deckard, as well as Jameson. The issue addresses, among other things, the relationship between realism, modernism, and the fate of third worldism, both in the "third world" itself and as a source of political imagination for academics in the core. Like *Combined and Uneven Development*, the *Modern Language Quarterly* issue seeks to challenge the accuracy, assumptions, and disciplinary value of longstanding binaries between modernism and realism, and to do this on the stage of world systems theory. What readers will find unique

about *Combined and Uneven Development* is its project of deploying combined and uneven development both as a determinate negation of the binary opposition between modernism and realism, and also its use of the concept as the basis for mapping historical transition onto form.

The last four chapters of *Combined and Uneven Development* offer case studies. These investigations provide exemplary, pedagogical models of how combined and uneven development is not only a fact of global capitalist development, but a foundational basis of the way to read that development. The objects of inquiry are all novels: Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Victor Pelevin's *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, and works by Ivan Vladislavic are given thorough treatment. The geographic and historical conjunctures are aptly chosen. WReC pays special attention to transitional contact points where developmental asymmetries are readily registered (Vladislavic's 1990s South Africa; Peter Pist'aneč's 1989 Bratislava in *Rivers of Babylon*; and post-war Reykjavik in Halidór Laxness's *The Atom Station*). There are of course important geopolitical reasons why the novel is a privileged object of inquiry, insofar as it has been a key formal mediation of literary exchange, cultural imperialism, as well postcolonial adaptation and resistance. For WReC, as for many critics working in the post-Lukáčan tradition, the novel functions as a way to read the relationship between consciousness and the totality of history. In *Combined and Uneven Development*, the lived structures of combined and uneven development, such as they operate as deictics of that totality, provide key entry points to understanding how literature functions an index of consciousness of the world-system. Consciousness is a somewhat undervisited category in the recencies of literary/cultural study and Marxist political and economic theory, its use in decline from earlier periods when its detection and diagnosis was central to Marxism's political project. WReC's focus on the novel excites questions about the relationship of consciousness to structure, and resurrects the Jamesonian legacy of embracing both in a dialectic: two unexpected dividends of their project. (In the close of this review, however, I wonder hopefully about the expansion of WReC's analytic beyond the novel form.)

Provocatively, *Combined and Uneven Development* poses, but does not offer a final answer, to the following question regarding the qualities of consciousness their texts reveal. They ask "whether we are reading for the *political unconscious*, the way in which form is unconsciously warped and fissured, or whether we are reading for a 'critical irrealist' politics of form: the self-conscious transformation by authors of those very fissures into sources of innovation which transform the genre of realism" (97). In a partial answer to this question, they point approvingly to the work of Roberto Shchwarz, in which Brazilian literature registers developmental asymmetries unconsciously at first, and later authors transform symptoms into "conscious aesthetic experimentation." WReC's (and Shchwarz's) linking of periodization to questions of symptom and agency is compelling; their example of the how Latin American magical realism became commodified and is now largely consumed by "metropolitan

elites” verifies Jameson’s claim, which they cite approvingly: “what is progressive may very well harden into its opposite as the situation evolves, and the balance may shift the other way” (80). The claim that the word literature is the literature of the capitalist world-system sutures form to shifting, combinatory political, economic, and cultural developments, and allows us to free that form from static alignment with place (e.g. Modernism equals the West) or value (e.g. Modernism equals progressive). The question of whether literary form is symptomatic or the result of conscious experimentation then depends less on the critic’s diagnostic powers than it does on the positioning of the text in the crosshairs of combined and uneven developments.

Since the bulk of *Combined and Uneven Development* is comprised of site specific studies, it might be useful here to follow the arc of one of the book’s investigations. In the chapter entitled “*Oboroten Spectres: Lycanthropy, Neoliberalism and New Russia in Victor Pelevin*,” WReC explores how Pelevin’s novel reflects “Russia’s rapid conversion into an authoritarian petro-state [and] might be read as a semi-peripheral resource fiction registering oil shock, the violent impact of petroleum extraction and reorganization of socio-ecological relations, not only in its content, but in its aesthetics, particularly its use of phantasmagoria and lycanthropy” (98).

The chapter is a fine example of what WReC understands as the rise of “critical irrealism” in the semi-peripheries, and in societies where combined and uneven developments testify to transition- especially transition into neoliberal regimes. Drawing from the work of Micheal Löwy, WReC argues that Pelevin’s critical irrealist novel “willfully [expresses] the contradictions of a social order and [critiques] it, while reactivating the tradition of oneiric, surreal and critical irrealist fictions from Gogol, Doestoevsky, Kafka and Bulgakov onwards” (101). In a fascinating micro-history of lycanthropy legends, WReC reveals how “werewolf folklore frequently originates in traumatic transformations of local ecologies by imperialism or modernization” as was the case in Ireland, where deforestation and the turn to “plantation mono-agriculture” finds wolves cast out of their state of nature and into human communities. This occurs at the same time as “imperialist rhetoric used werewolves as an ethnic discourse to vilify the native Irish and naturalise them as ‘sub-human’” (102). This is not dissimilar to the ambient history of the post-Soviet gothic, where we find registered “the stage of primitive accumulation which marks the transition to neoliberal capitalism.” Here WReC draws on Trotsky, who observes that “artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms,” in order to explain why residual and archaic forms and contents populate the imaginary of a society under transition into neoliberal capitalism: “the reactivation of residual forms is not arbitrary, but seems to draw on texts and tales congruent at similar points in long waves of boom-bust cycles and eco-revolutions, even if these points occur in different temporalities.” (104-5) For WReC, A Hu Lui, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf’s* sex worker and ancient fox spirit narrator, functions as a kind of formal impress of the intensification of women’s sexual exploitation in the post-Communist landscape. But her character simultaneously

transcodes an enlightened Buddhist principle of nature, a “2,000-year-old residual,” that points up the tyranny of universal commodification and protests against an immiseration so brutal that it appears premodern, which accompanies the uneven transformation of state capitalism into petro free market capitalism.

The reading of the novel is an extraordinarily lucid example of WReC’s method. Particularly interesting is how the method operates both synchronically and diachronically: combined and uneven developments structure transitional geographies and the literatures of the semi-periphery offers a particularly observable intaglio of this. Supplementing this synchronic articulation is WReC’s argument that certain residuals are “reactivated” because each new crisis, or “boom and bust cycle,” while historically unique, energizes “congruent texts and tales” from previous crises. WReC is proposing that combined and uneven developments move and shift in the mantle of the present; but they are also offering an argument about which residuals become activated and when. This is a critical move that ratifies combined and uneven development not only as a descriptive hermeneutic, but one that, when combined with crisis theory, can offer a determinate account of the appearance, and re-appearance, of particular residuals.

Combined and Uneven Development poses a number of challenges: encouraging the reader to see world literature as the literature of the world-system; to forego the values, periodizations and geographies that have calcified around modernism and realism and embrace hybrid forms; and to grasp that any critique or account of these forms cannot be uncoupled from a Marxian account of historical transition and transformation. There is much promise and difficulty in this last challenge, especially as contemporary critique only infrequently takes as its project developing an account of the how of transition and the must of transformation. *Combined and Uneven Development* is a call to engage in what Jameson has called the “dialectic of the break and the period” by hovering in uneven tectonics of the break and forestalling periodizations that too quickly become homologous with a non-contradictory versions of “Europe” or “modernity.”

As with all totalizing accounts of world capitalist development and literary form (of which we need more), questions of what is excluded, but cannot be excluded, arise. These are not deficits, but provocations for the dilation and extension of arguments. For instance, whither poetry in the system of world literature? Why is the novel still the privileged mediation of transition and unevenness, when twentieth and twenty-first century poetry offers both a rich map of translations to and from core and periphery, and forms whose curious adjacencies of dissonant particulars fit into vaster systems of figuration? Can other textual forms testify to and be illuminated by combination and unevenness?¹ For these reasons and more it is difficult to claim that the novel offers the chief site of world-literary contestation in late capitalism, as it once did in the period before our own. The important method of *Combined and Uneven Development* should be extended to and tested upon other texts of the world-system: cinema, poetics, performance.

Notes

1. See Sarah Brouillette's "UNESCO and the World-Literary System in Crisis" (Amodern.net, <http://amodern.net/article/unesco-brouillette/>, accessed March 1, 2017) for more pressure points on the novel, or even the literary text, as a reliable index of our contemporary moment.

