EDITORIAL

A system of mutual dependence and antagonism: exploring the potential of uneven and combined development within Global Political Economy

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U&CD scholarship has made vital conceptual and analytical contributions to international relations and international historical sociology scholarship during recent decades. However, so far, it has mainly focused on the longue durée of capitalist transitions rather than contemporary analyses of the dynamics, crises and policy shifts within the global political economy. A small body of literature has recently begun to apply a U&CD conceptual toolkit towards just such ends. In this special issue, we showcase a range of original thought and empirical work which advances the U&CD perspective within the growing and critically oriented field of global political economy. Transcending the pitfalls of orthodox liberal and realist approaches, U&CD draws a direct link between ruptures, contradictions and crises in the global economy and its ongoing division into a multiplicity of nominally sovereign territorial political units. Focusing on a breadth of divisions and antagonisms across lines of class, race, gender and nationality, the articles contained herein point to the immense potential for creative applications of U&CD to play a role in GPE scholarship as it emerges from the grip of the stifling orthodoxies of international political economy.

Key words uneven and combined development • global political economy • liberalism • realism • historical materialism

Key messages
• U&CD scholarship has made vital contributions to international relations and scholarship.
• But its main focus has been on the longue durée of capitalist transitions.
• U&CD connects ruptures, contradictions and crises in the global economy with political multiplicity.
• We showcase a range of work which advances the U&CD perspective within global political economy.

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Introduction

The launch of a dedicated Global Political Economy (GPE) journal (Clua-Losada and Moore, 2022) presents an exciting opportunity to decisively break with some of the predominant assumptions and approaches of orthodox International Political Economy (IPE). An inter-discipline developed in opposition to the International Relations (IR) subfield of IPE, proponents of GPE have long questioned the latter’s core assumptions – from Eurocentric dichotomies of ‘the West vs. the Rest’, idealised conceptions of market capitalism and rigid geographies of core and periphery, to the separation of domestic and international levels of analyses, and the separating out of supposedly self-contained national models from their global context. Rather than simply trying to bridge pre-existing disciplines of orthodox international politics and international economics as IPE once set out to do (Strange, 1970), GPE encompasses attention to several academic fields and adopts a critical perspective on capitalism, power and exploitation – with sustained attention to the power of social categorisation and construction, culture and resistance.

Instead of limiting our disciplinary historical horizon to the relatively short history of North American IPE, we follow Ben Selwyn (2015: 526) in re-claiming the relevance of classical political economy debates for the understanding of the ‘really big questions’ of contemporary capitalism. A critical and independent journal of GPE removes any incentives towards naturalising ahistorical and apolitical economic categories, and frees authors from any reluctance to critically theorise global society sometimes observed in mainstream approaches. This has enabled the editors and authors of this special issue (SI) to advance a heterodox, radical and diverse research programme of our own making.

In this SI, we propose that one key platform a renewed inter-discipline of GPE could be built upon is the idea of Uneven and Combined Development (U&CD). Leon Trotsky’s theory of U&CD re-emerged from niche political debates and found itself at the forefront of a vigorous set of debates and novel perspectives within IR nearly three decades ago, thanks principally to the pioneering efforts of Justin Rosenberg (1994; 1996; 2006; 2016). At the heart of U&CD lies the basic idea that ‘more is different’ (Anderson, 1972; quoted in Oatley, 2019: 3). Because multiple societies interact with one another in a systematic (rather than sporadic or random) fashion under capitalism, the development of each unit and of the system as a whole changes over time in complex, open-ended and irreducible ways. Rosenberg originally turned to the long-neglected concept of U&CD as part of his devastating critique of realist IR theory but quickly found that U&CD had potential theoretical implications and research applications for both IR and the social sciences more generally.

A substantial body of literature has subsequently flourished, examining the relevance of U&CD for both international theory and international historical sociology (see, for instance, Matin, 2013; Anievas, 2014; Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2015). Debates and empirical foci have been extraordinarily diverse and widespread, from the origins of capitalism to methodology and the cultural consequences of U&CD (see Rosenberg et al, 2022). Furthermore, the recent U&CD literature has coined a suite of new concepts including the ‘whip of external necessity’, the ‘privilege of historic backwardness’, the ‘contradictions of social amalgamation’ and the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’. However, until very recently, U&CD perspectives have barely been applied to analyses of the contemporary global political economy. Notable exceptions
include Morton (2013); Dooley (2019); Germann (2018; 2021); Rosenberg and Boyle (2019); Antunes de Oliveira (2021) and Rolf (2021). Their collective diversity and novelty highlight just how promising U&CD as a theoretical orientation may be for GPE. This SI is the first systematic endeavour to redress this imbalance and start a lasting conversation about the potential of U&CD for GPE analysis.

What specifically does U&CD bring to the table? In a nutshell, it is to fundamentally rethink the global political economy through the category of ‘the international’. That is, U&CD can be understood as a historical materialist perspective that refuses to see capitalist globalisation as a universalising logic driven by a uniform process of class exploitation and contestation, or reducible to a rigid core-periphery geography. Instead, it foregrounds the complex interaction between class dynamics, structures of racial and gender oppression, and inter-societal pressures and opportunities.

A journal of GPE might seem a curious venue to insist upon the salience of ‘the international’. At best, this may appear as a banal endeavour, since no contemporary GPE author would in principle disagree that international relations indeed matter. At worst, insisting on the causal powers of the international sphere may seem to risk letting the wolf of realism – which systematically underplays domestic social causality and upholds an understanding of sovereignty which remains illusory to the majority of the world’s population – in by the back door. However, Leon Trotsky – the original architect of U&CD – would likely not have seen a contradiction here. Indeed, as well as being a committed internationalist and key figure in the sequence of events which ended the First World War, across his various writings, Trotsky demonstrates a concerted effort to analyse capitalism as a global (rather than national) system of political and economic power – but one in which national differences are both systematically significant and continuously reproduced, rather than being anachronistic and ancillary. In Trotsky’s own words:

National capitalism … cannot even be conceived of as anything but a part of world economy. The economic peculiarities of different countries [are] not of a secondary character… But the specific features of national economy, no matter how big, enter, and that in an increasing measure with their component parts into the higher reality, which is called world economy.

(Trotsky, 1930)

Indeed, Trotsky developed the theory of U&CD as part of a theoretical undergirding to support his notion of permanent revolution, which insisted – against the stagist Marxist orthodoxies of the Second International surrounding the fixity of Russian ‘backwardness’ – that revolutionary movements in ‘backward’ countries could strike out, vie for state power and kick-start a chain of events leading to the demise of capitalism and imperialism and the emergence of international socialism. Moreover, this was not to be the product of sheer voluntarism, but a direct consequence of the diffusion of highly advanced technology and factory organisation that foreign capital introduced to Russia’s major cities. In doing so, Trotsky demonstrated a remarkable ability to conceive of capitalism as an internally contradictory global system, within which heterogeneous economic development and highly path-dependent national and local processes of class formation, political development and ideological reshuffling take place. Class struggle and international dynamics are thus not contradictory sources of agency. Instead, they interact in open-ended ways, producing non-linear
forms of development – and making possible radical solutions to seemingly intractable political and theoretical impasses.

Trotsky’s political hopes were dashed. He lived to see the rise of fascism, the consolidation of Stalinism and the outbreak of a second global conflagration – far deadlier than the one in which he had played a role in ending. Railing against the revenge of nation-states and inter-imperialist rivalry, Trotsky articulated an approach to global politics which sought to intimately connect the political economy of capitalism with imperialism. In his final articles, he denounced those who interpreted the Second World War as emerging simply from the ‘abstract political principles’ of a struggle between democracy and fascism (Trotsky, 1971). Instead, he insisted, the conflict was an ongoing expression of the irreconcilability of capital’s globalised economy with national state boundaries. In his words, ‘imperialism is the very expression of this contradiction. Imperialist capitalism seeks to solve this contradiction through an extension of boundaries, seizure of new territories, and so on’ (Trotsky, 1971: 447).

In the 21st century, as the world order built at the end of the Second World War runs into multifaceted crises – from the emergence of a new systemic rival to US imperialism to the hard limits to endless economic expansion posed by a looming environmental catastrophe – we suggest it is time to revisit Trotsky’s unique internationalist strain of historical materialism. More than simply reaffirming the contradictory and deeply destructive dynamics of global capitalism, our aim with this SI is to unpack the potential of U&CD for GPE analysis, helping to forge a new set of concepts and debates that might, eventually, lead to political solutions hitherto deemed impossible.

This introductory article unfolds in three sections. In the first section, we expand on the theoretical contribution of U&CD to GPE debates. Section two outlines some open controversies within the contemporary U&CD literature. Finally, section three presents each of the articles in this SI.

**U&CD in action: the difference the international makes**

Mainstream IPE has long been dominated by a limiting dialogue between US-centred realist and liberal perspectives, with a modest opening to selected critical voices, sometimes lumped together as a ‘British school’ (Cohen, 2008). A variation of realism became the predominant approach to IPE during the Cold War, when understanding events such as oil shocks, Eurodollar crises and export control violations drove Global North IR scholars versed in high diplomacy and geopolitics to examine economic dynamics more closely. Concepts such as hegemonic stability theory (HST) and the idea that the US was ultimately a benign hegemon concerned with the provision of ‘global public goods’ emerged as part of a broader effort to rehabilitate US power in a period of international turbulence. As critical contemporary re-readings of the institutional history of IPE have shown (Antunes de Oliveira and Kvangraven, 2023), mainstream IPE could remain restricted to a narrow set of political and theoretical debates by systematically excluding and misrepresenting dissenting radical perspectives from the Global South, in particular dependency theory.

As the Cold War came to an end, liberal and poststructuralist perspectives displaced realism to the margins of IPE. Liberal and poststructuralist critiques of realist IR theory variously sought to sever the link between the global capitalist economy and geopolitical-economic competition and conflict (Herborth, 2022), painting
an optimistic (from an US standpoint, anyway) picture of ‘globalisation’ and the post-Cold War world (Fukuyama, 1989). Liberal IPE practitioners have emphasised the pacifying potential of deepening capitalist interdependence (Keohane, 2009; Slaughter, 2017). This has left IPE scholarship lacking the tools to connect current geopolitical ruptures and conflagrations with developments in the global capitalist economy, conceived as it is as an overwhelmingly pacifying force (Drezner, 2017; Rademacher, 2022).

Both realist and liberal approaches to IPE debates have also largely bracketed class struggle, exploitation, imperialism and the impact of global capitalism as a geographically expansive system, along with the interests of non-Western states. As Oatley (2021) has argued, even liberal IPE has succumbed to methodological nationalism. Indeed, its ‘underlying assumption is that the global political economy is a simple mechanical system… Simple mechanical systems can be disassembled into their distinct sub-units, each of which can be studied and understood in relative isolation from the others’ (Oatley, 2021: 322). Foreign economic policymaking is consequently studied not from a systemic perspective, but with reference to coalitions of domestic actors and institutions with incentives to increase economic openness (Moravcsik, 1998; Sturzenegger and Tommasi, 1998; Bates, 1999). For this reason, in addition to the incapacity, or unwillingness, to conceptualise social conflict as class struggle and the world economy as exploitative, ‘the international’ is principally understood as an exogenous constraint on the pursuit of interests (Narizny, 2001: 51). ‘[T]he possibility that the international setting has an impact on domestic preference formation’, raised in passing in a seminal text (Frieden, 1999: 70), remains underexplored – while the fact that the global economy is enacted in and through a multiplicity of territorial political units is an afterthought to such analysis.

An internationalist historical materialist perspective proposes instead that the dialectical relationships between the global and the national become an alternative starting point for GPE debates. Leaving behind a fundamental limitation of mainstream IPE, U&CD theorists have insisted that territorial and geopolitical fissures still matter – not as anachronisms or historical accidents, but as part and parcel of the production of capitalist geography, and with critical impacts of their own upon the trajectories of ‘national’ or ‘local’ development. As Oatley explains, ‘rather than limit the conception of the international system to the interaction between autonomous states with sovereign equality, U&CD conceives of the global political economy as a complex interdependent system that is heterogeneous and hierarchical’ (Oatley, 2021).

The framework for GPE analysis which is starting to emerge from contemporary U&CD contributions – including the original articles in this SI – goes well beyond the ideological conceptual repertoire of realism and liberalism (that is, ‘balance of power’, ‘security dilemma’, ‘hegemonic stability’, ‘coalition formation’, ‘global public goods’ and so on). U&CD scholarship has been striving to grasp the systematic consequences of social and inter-societal competition, conflict and cooperation. Germinal ideas first advanced by Trotsky but not extensively developed in his own work – such as ‘unevenness’ and the ‘whip of external necessity’ – serve as the potential seeds of a renewed GPE conceptual arsenal. Germann’s concept of ‘advanced unevenness’ (2021) and Antunes de Oliveira’s (2021) definition of the ‘economic’ whip of external necessity are cases in point. Rather than putting forward an exhaustive or fixed conceptual framework or a rigid causal theory, however, the editors of this SI are primarily concerned with throwing open a conversation about the potentialities
of creative and non-dogmatic engagement with Trotsky’s ideas geared specifically at contemporary GPE challenges.

The big promise of U&CD is that a richer conception of ‘the international’, organically connected to a historical materialist understanding of class struggle, can shed new light on processes of structural change, social re-composition and (foreign) economic policy formation. Liberal IPE cannot fully capture these dimensions not only because it shies away from seriously contemplating the central category of capitalism as an internally contradictory, conflictual and dynamic system of social and territorial relations, but also because it understands them to be overwhelmingly shaped by either nationally distinct institutions or globally homogenous trends. Realist IPE, by contrast, limits the systemic pressures that arise from and act upon multiple societies to a detrimentally narrow focus on security competition under anarchic conditions. Yet catching up economically to match the military might of capitalist pioneers was only ever one concern of ruling classes even at the high point of the age of empires in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Hobsbawm, 2010). Just as important was shoring up their political regimes and avoiding social revolution, and alternative strategies of conservation, substitution, subordinate integration with and even outright repudiation of more ‘advanced’ developmental forms have often been given precedence over competitive emulation. Particularly in the periphery of global capitalism, the ‘national bourgeoisie’ (Fanon, 2004) or the ‘dominated-dominant’ (Bambirra, 1978) ruling classes have repeatedly challenged expectations and defied pre-conceived development models.

Furthermore, mainstream IPE cannot capture the full range of pressures and opportunities presented by a globalising capitalism and fails as a guide to the emerging forms of geopolitical and geo-economic contest between the United States and China today. The discipline continues to focus overwhelmingly upon the US–European ‘core’ economies, with only limited success in expanding its geographic reach (Shibata, 2022). Within the old North Atlantic core and the security alliances overseen by the United States, moreover, power-political considerations have receded further into the background. And yet even here ‘the international’ matters, in so far as national or regional growth cycles differ in timing, magnitude and duration. This creates a shifting landscape of overlapping peaks and troughs to which policymakers have to formulate macroeconomic responses (Germann, 2018; Antunes de Oliveira, 2021).

U&CD, in our conception, is highly congruent with alternative critical theory approaches and Critical Political Economy broadly conceived (Wigger, 2022). For example, teachers of international development have been facing an uphill battle to convince students of the continued relevance of their core object of study. After the years of unbridled neoliberal optimism of the 1990s, economic crises, a pandemic, war and a looming environmental catastrophe have collectively rendered the perspective of ending world poverty in the near future – once taken seriously by international organisations and academics (World Bank, 1990; Collier, 2008) – naïve, if not disingenuous (Selwyn, 2018; Donnelly, 2019). The concept of ‘development’ itself, strongly denounced by the post-development critique (Sachs, 1997; Escobar, 2011), seems to be getting increasingly irrelevant, as the promise of a better future for all is now little more than pie in the sky. Nevertheless, self-perceived ‘developing’ countries and social movements across the Global South continue to define their priorities in terms of development.
A system of mutual dependence and antagonism

U&CD offers a radically distinctive way to conceptualise development, thereby allowing for a reconnection of development theory and the political priorities of historically oppressed social groups (Antunes de Oliveira, 2020). Instead of the idealised outcome of never-ending market reforms or state-led development programmes, development appears, quite simply, as the outcome of unevenness and combination. From a U&CD perspective, development is not a moral category, the undisputed promised land that each and every society should aspire to. Development is a real historical construction, the result of the interaction between international pressures and opportunities and class struggle in different parts of the world, at different historical junctures. Instead of leading us to ask why development has failed across the Global South – as mainstream neoliberal, neodevelopmentalist and institutionalist approaches do – U&CD invite us to critically analyse the conditionings of the development that actually happened – and continues to happen – not only in so-called ‘developing’ countries but across the ‘developed’ countries as well.

U&CD in GPE: work in progress

The seven original articles in this SI demonstrate the potential and breadth of the nascent U&CD GPE scholarship. Nevertheless, in its current form, U&CD is far from a fully developed or exhaustive GPE theory. Significant disagreements remain among those engaging with Trotsky’s ideas and its multiple contemporary re-readings. This introductory article does not aim to settle existing debates. Indeed, the editors and authors of this SI do not necessarily stand on the same side in these debates. Instead, in this section we will briefly review and contextualise three open controversies, in the hope of inviting engagement from different perspectives and encouraging dialogue within the U&CD literature and beyond.

The first debate refers to the origins and time boundaries of U&CD. In Trotsky’s original writings, U&CD appeared mostly with reference to global capitalism and geopolitical competition in the age of empires, although Trotsky at some point remarked that ‘unevenness’ is ‘the most general law of the historic process’ (Trotsky, 2008: 4). Whereas some authors focus on the specifically capitalist character of U&CD (Ashman, 2009; Löwy, 2010), Rosenberg’s (2010) reading extends U&CD beyond the modern period, and Anievas and Nişancıoğlu (2015) have shown that the origin of capitalism itself can be investigated through U&CD. This debate apparently has little relevance for contemporary political economy analysis, but it carries deep consequences for the way capitalism and U&CD are conceptualised. Extending U&CD beyond the transition to capitalism is fundamental to the endeavour of making U&CD the core of a general IR theory, but the more general our understanding of ‘unevenness’, ‘combination’ and ‘development’ is, the less useful these categories are for short-term political economy analysis, and the greater the need for intermediate, mid-range concepts capable of connecting them to specific phenomena.

A second debate relates to the very character of U&CD as a lens, a frame, a concept, a causal law, or a theory. Teschke (2014), Rioux (2015) and Salgado (2020) (among others) have criticised what they see as ahistorical, overly abstract, or deterministic character of U&CD. Meanwhile, U&CD scholars continue to creatively use U&CD in a variety of ways that eschew the rigid, quasi-positivist version implied by their critics. Rosenberg places U&CD as a ‘general abstraction’ at the core of a distinctively international social theory (Rosenberg, 2016; 2021). Germann has called U&CD
a ‘heuristic’ used to reconstruct the contingent force-field of internal and external pressures in which political actors are situated (Germann, 2022: 52). Antunes de Oliveira (2019; 2020) sees U&CD mostly as a ‘concept’ of development, which should be combined with other critical perspectives capable of offering mid-range concepts to operationalise it.

A third debate, connected to the previous point but perhaps the most directly relevant for contemporary political economy analysis, pertains to the very understanding of ‘development’ within U&CD, a theme we briefly touched upon in the last section. Building on the post-development, dependency and decolonial literatures, some U&CD authors have sought to overcome Trotsky’s outdated use of terms such as ‘advanced’, ‘backwards’ and the ‘cultural class’ of nations, as well as the very idea of stages of development (Antunes de Oliveira, 2020; Antunes de Oliveira, 2024). Alami (in this SI) also questions whether the contemporaneity of distinct temporalities is still relevant. Such debates echo calls by some for a ‘global’ rather than ‘international’ development as the clear hierarchies of the global political economy become increasingly blurred (Horner, 2020). By contrast, others maintain that it remains possible and relevant to plot individual national economies along (relatively) agreed upon measures of development (GDP per capita, sectoral make-up of economies, technological capacity, labour productivity and so on). As Oatley (2021: 322) argues, ‘societies occupy different spaces along some common underlying dimension of economic development’.

Instead of theoretical weaknesses in need of resolution, the editors of this SI see these controversies as signs of the thriving moment of U&CD scholarship. As the reader will see, the articles in this SI adopt different positions in relation to these and many other topics. This lack of a common understanding of the scope and the character of U&CD does not prevent a distinctive and evolving dialogue from emerging, however. The most important limitation which remains in the U&CD literature is therefore not the lack of diversity in ideas, but perhaps the still insufficient diversity of racial, gender and socio-economic background of the authors engaging with U&CD, which is reflected in the limited bridges that exist between U&CD and other critical theoretical perspectives. To date, most of the scholars participating in the ongoing revival of Trotsky’s ideas are white males from or based in the Global North. Productive dialogues between U&CD and feminism and U&CD and anti-racist perspectives are still nascent. The editors of this SI have consciously attempted to broaden participation and increase the diversity of contributors, but we must admit there is still a long way to go to bring real diversity to U&CD debates.

In sum, this SI is an attempt to consolidate U&CD debates, with a particular focus on GPE. Our starting point is the idea that international multiplicity calls for more than the comparative cataloguing of differences among societies and invites empirical examination and theoretical analysis along three lines. First, societies’ coexistence with others expands the horizon of pressures and possibilities beyond what isolated political economy enquiry into their specificities can reveal. Second, we investigate how interacting political economies continuously remake, and thus force us to rethink, what we take ‘the global’ to be – a static constant or a socially produced (and hence ever-evolving) scale of human activity. Not only does this challenge ‘flat earth’ conceptions of globalisation and totalising conceptions of capitalism; third and last, it also opens new research avenues for the study of numerous issues exceeding the traditional bounds of ‘states vs. markets’ – from macroeconomic management to
climate change to poverty and social inequality. The following section shows how the articles collected in this SI live up to these promising research avenues.

**This SI**

The articles contained within this SI are all – albeit in highly different ways – concerned with expanding this emerging theoretical perspective beyond its current focus on international historical sociological debates, and cementing U&CD as a core approach to research in critical Global Political Economy. We bring together early-career and established scholars with varied specialisms in probing the potential of U&CD to creatively expand and critically enrich the study of GPE.

Each of the contributors takes up a salient issue in GPE, including theoretical and methodological debates about U&CD, carceral capitalism, commodity dependence, the limits of anti-Eurocentrism, Sino-American competition, EU policy formation and Global South perspectives on U&CD and global value chains. This breadth of topics and academic disciplines addressed demonstrates the capacity for U&CD to burst beyond its confines within the relatively niche corner of Marxist international relations theory. While collectively covering the gamut of capitalist development past and present, each article also probes how U&CD can be used to rethink mainstream theories, approaches and methods of IPE.

Ilias Alami uses an engagement with U&CD to shine a light upon one of the major transformations taking place in the contemporary global political economy: the general increase of diverse sets of practices and phenomena which can fruitfully be understood, collectively, as ‘state capitalism’. Drawing on work which re-orientates analysis of state capitalism from individual cases of diversion from liberal norms, Alami argues that state capitalism is best understood instead as a tendentially global trend – and a self-reinforcing ‘spiral’, in which ruptures with neoliberal orthodoxy in one location beget further ruptures elsewhere. Alami’s analysis raises thorny issues about the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’ which is core to the theoretical orientation of U&CD. Widening the optic to capitalist accumulation as a global process, he argues that cleaving to a notion of development as temporally ‘uneven’ preserves too much of a devotion to stagism, amounting to a ‘misreading of spatial unevenness as temporal dislocation’. Instead, analysts should examine the deep, long-run transformations taking place in the accumulation of capital on a global scale – including new ‘constellations of division of labour, tendencies towards economic stagnation, the development of rentierism, the growing importance of logistics and territorial connectivity, the centralisation of capital in the hands of states, and the extension of financial activities’ into new arenas of social life. The geographical unevenness of these global trends and their mediation by a multiplicity of states, Alami argues, better explains the revenge of dirigisme than temporal dissonance and geopolitical pressure.

Steven Rolf, similarly, addresses the question of contemporary state capitalism as a more-than-national process from the empirical vantage point of contemporary China. He argues that far from being an ‘alien’ intruder into a liberal international order (as prominent US-based analysts would have it), contemporary Chinese state capitalism is a product of the geopolitical economy of US hegemony which has predominated since the Second World War. Challenging comparative political economists’ methodologically nationalist and internalist analyses of Chinese capitalism,
Rolf points out that the country’s emergence as a global export manufacturing centre since the 1970s is unintelligible without simultaneous analyses of transformations taking place at the systemic level of the global political economy.

Going beyond the now somewhat familiar political economy narrative which explains China’s rise (for example the hollowing out of manufacturing in the Global North, the defeat of organised labour and the rise of global production networks and their financing by newly liberalised capital flows), however, Rolf draws attention to how these background macroeconomic conditions activated Chinese catch-up development through the mechanism of a series of acute geopolitical crises – which collectively drove China to modernise its economy through (temporary) accommodation with the ‘paper tiger’ imperialism of the United States. Phenomena such as China’s Third Front period (an outcome of the high geopolitics prompted by the Sino-Soviet split) and the Vietnam War were not ephemeral, argues Rolf, but became embedded ‘within’ China’s domestic spatial economy, class structure and policymaking practice in ways which drove catch-up development – and continue to shape how Chinese capitalism develops to date. The relative success of Chinese state capitalism is in turn driving transformations within the global hegemon, the United States. In the process, he emphasises that capitalism is not simply an economic system, but also an intrinsically geopolitical one – arguing that U&CD is key to grasping the complex unity of these processes as they play out.

The article by Julian Germann zooms in on another critical instance in the spiral of ‘state capitalism’: the case of the German political economy, where public officials have pursued major policy change from domestic subsidies to foreign investment screens that centre on a more proactive role for the state. This development confounds much of the comparative-institutional scholarship which expected Germany to be slowly (if at all) drawn into the neoliberal orbit of the United States rather than, as it now appears, in the opposite direction. To resolve this conceptual disorientation, Germann mobilises U&CD to interrogate the systemic forces threatening the German export-led growth model and delineate the strategic options, organisational capacities and social support available to policymakers. The article argues that, caught between a globally dominant US and a leapfrogging China vying for technological leadership, the German state needs to carefully calibrate interventions in order to avoid stoking this conflict; and has been forced to proceed piecemeal because German capital has so far benefitted from deep integration with China as well as the United States.

Neil Dooley’s article offers a synthetic and innovative account of the eurozone crisis and its origins in the unevenness of European capitalism. It argues that comparative political economy (CPE) scholarship is limited by its methodological nationalism, while U&CD can overcome this limitation but lacks mid-range concepts. To fully understand how the eurozone crisis played out in Portugal and Ireland, Dooley argues, a wider conception of European multiplicity and a richer analysis of peripheral politics is needed. His article proposes a new framework that brings U&CD into dialogue with the growth models perspective (GMP), and uses the notion of a ‘dominant growth coalition’ (DGC) to interrogate the distinct paths of late industrialisation charted by state and business elites in Portugal and Ireland, and culminating in the eurocrisis.

Samantha Ashman’s article addresses the blindness of much of IPE to the colonial underpinnings of the global political economy and the forms of racialised dispossession and exploitation that characterise it to this day. Her article offers an exemplary study
A system of mutual dependence and antagonism

of the U&CD of *racial capitalism* through a conversation with Marxist black thought and feminism and the historical case of South Africa. It shows how a capitalist world economy that turned on ever larger amounts of gold as its monetary anchor led mining capital and an emergent settler-colonial state to institute a deeply racialised forced-labour system and segregated society. Its empirical account of how race, class and gender were co-articulated in unique ways in the material and social antecedents of the apartheid regime holds valuable theoretical lessons for scholars of U&CD and racial capitalism: it overcomes stagist views of capitalist development as universalising ‘free’ wage labour, and offers new insights into social reproduction in specific migrant-labour and settler-colonial contexts.

Judith Koch’s article raises difficult questions surrounding the scalar optic of U&CD approaches to global political economy. Through an interrogation of the negotiations leading to the signing of the Single European Act in 1986 – which effectively established the European Single Market – Koch claims that divisions between political elites *within* the supranational scale are beyond the analytical reach of U&CD, as currently conceived. Adopting a radical historicist variant of Political Marxism, Koch argues for an understanding of the European Commission ‘as a non-monolithic agent that acts with some autonomy from its national context’. In doing so, she demonstrates the value of granular analysis of the divisions within the supranational European elite, overlayed on multiple divergent national capitalisms which form the usual object of U&CD analyses.

Ulaş Taştekin’s article interrogates contemporary late industrialisation strategies in the Global South that carve out export enclaves tightly articulated with advanced manufacturing centres in the Global North. Focusing on the case of multilaterally negotiated ‘qualified industrial zones’ in Egypt, he counters conventional narratives that promote these zones as drivers of innovation and investment. The synthetic conceptual framework he devises brings insights from U&CD into a direct and fruitful dialogue with critical strands of the global production network literature. The three productive points of contact Taştekin identifies are conceptualising the global political economy as an integrated if unequal whole, seeing polarisation rather than catch-up development as a regular outcome of the interaction of its parts, and broadening the analysis to encompass the (power-)political relations between core and peripheral economies.

**Conclusion**

The new GPE journal is born into crisis: as the liberal international order is crumbling and the global economy ventures into uncharted territories, old paradigms and parochialisms are reasserting themselves. In view of the analytical deficiencies of liberal IPE revealed by the present ‘polycrisis’ (*Tooze, 2022*), mainstream thinking seems vulnerable to falling back onto outmoded analytical categories like great power conflict, and ideological tropes such as democracies versus autocracies. Amid growing political and scholarly disorientation, anti-colonial, anti-racist, feminist and renewed historical materialist perspectives are attempting to stake more central claims in disciplines such as International Relations, Geography, Development Studies and even Economics. With this SI, we aim to contribute to this broad renewal of critical scholarship, showcasing excellent contemporary scholarship which critically uses U&CD as a theoretical framework to engage with pressing GPE debates.
Notes
1 An extensive contemporary bibliography on U&CD can be found at https://unevenandcombineddevelopment.wordpress.com/. The Cambridge Review of International Affairs published two special issues on Uneven and Combined Development.
2 See, for instance, the consternation caused by debates around Callinicos’ (2007) proposed ‘realist moment’ (Pozo-Martin, 2007; Callinicos & Rosenberg, 2008).

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A system of mutual dependence and antagonism


