

# Gramscian and Trotskyist alternatives to Waltz's International Relations

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**ABSTRACT:** The theoretical debate of International Relations at the end of the Cold War was influenced by Waltz's realist theory. This paper aims to explore theoretical alternatives, based on the Marxist body of thought, particularly the Gramscian perspective of Adam Morton and Justin Rosenberg's Trotskyist perspective, in the period following the Cold War. The selection of these authors is due to the fruitfulness of their debate in the contemporary Marxist field.



**KEYWORDS:** Marxism. Gramsci. Trotsky. Realism. Waltz.

## Alternativas gramsciana e trotskista para as RI de Waltz

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**RESUMO:** O debate teórico das Relações Internacionais ao fim da Guerra Fria foi marcado pela elaboração teórica de Waltz e seu realismo. O objetivo desse texto é abordar, no período posterior à Guerra Fria, alternativas teóricas que se baseiam no corpo de pensamento marxista, sobretudo a abordagem gramsciana de Adam Morton e a trotskista de Justin Rosenberg, dada a saliência do debate entre esses dois autores no campo marxista contemporâneo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Marxismo. Gramsci. Trotsky. Realismo. Waltz.

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## 1 Introduction – Cold War, Problem-solving theories and critical theory

In the discipline of International Relations, it has been convened to refer to three or four great theoretical debates since the institutionalization of the Chair of International Relations in Aberystwyth in 1919. The first debate was between realist and idealist authors (for a critical appreciation, see Schmidt, 2012). The second debate involved realist authors: on one side, traditionalists, and on the other, those with purported “scientific” positions based on the behavioralist wave. Two versions inform what the third debate was about. The first refers to the publication of Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* in 1979. This book is considered the canon of structural realism, or neo-realism, as well as the set of all subsequent criticisms and debates that followed it. Another version refers to the attempt to synthesize Waltz’s neo-realism and Keohane and Nye’s liberal institutionalism, the so-called “neo-neo synthesis” (Wæver, 1992). Last, the version of the “fourth debate” referred to the criticisms inside the “neo-neo synthesis” (Bittencourt, 2025).

The dominant and anachronical narrative of theoretical debates excluded Marxism to a great degree, even when it apparently participated in them (Halliday, 1994). This seems to be the case of Robert W. Cox’s critical theory, labelled as a Marxist contribution even though the author self-identified as simply a Marxist confluent. Plus, Cox admits his use of Gramsci’s thought as directed by the specific way he elaborates his analyses on historical facts (Cox, 2003, p. 29). It is likely that this direction affected the liberal way that Cox many times interpreted Gramsci, approximating the Italian author to Tocqueville, for instance (Cox, 1999, p. 10). There is little doubt, however, that Cox assimilated the bipolar feature of the Cold War, and, although distant, it impacts his critical debate on Waltz’s contribution (Bittencourt; Passos, 2021). According to Cox, critical theory as defined by him adapts better to a more unstable period, more prone to historical transformations. Such changes would be the most significant characteristic of critical theory, along with several other variables. For its turn, problem-solving theories such as Waltz’s are better equipped for periods where there is a higher stability and predictability, such

as the Cold War, since it is guided by the maintenance of the status quo, having a limited number of variables and an a-historical approach, dealing with history repetitively. Cox's proposed dualism does not imply the exclusion of either theoretical set: "the strength of the one is the weakness of the other," Cox (2013, p. 277) declares. Considering himself an eclectic author, Cox used many problem-solving authors in his analyses (Cox, 1992, p. 179; 2013, p. 364-366).

The peculiar assimilation of specific aspects of Gramscian Marxism by Cox's theoretical endeavor is a remarkable topic in the dominant narrative of International Relations debates during the Cold War. It served the purpose of assessing Cox's theoretical construct as "Marxist". Nevertheless, Coxian critical theory was important also in stimulating other readings of the Italian author, including those that searched for developing and reflecting on Gramsci's writings while criticizing Waltz, even though left aside in the dominant debate of the discipline.

Focusing on specifically Marxist approached, this paper aims at presenting, however panoramically, some of the most relevant Marxist elaborations inspired both in Gramsci and Trotsky in order to, as Cox did, elaborate a critique of the Waltzian theoretical apparatus, given its fundamental importance for the contemporary understanding of International Relations (Dunne; Hansen; Wight, 2013). Our research question is: how to evaluate the Marxist literature inspired in Gramsci and Trotsky that emerged in IR after the Cold War in terms of alternatives to Waltz's thinking? Our hypothesis is that the criticism to Waltz swings from a pole of substitution of Waltz's theory in a critical way, and a pole of critical evaluation and complementarity with some aspects of the American political scientist. The following arguments support our hypothesis. First, attempts to expand IR's theoretical alternatives derive from an effort to apply and extend Gramsci's non-systematic formulations to international relations. Second, the attempt to provide an explanatory framework to IR is based on Trotsky's notion of Uneven and Combined Development in terms of multiplicity as explored by Justin Rosenberg. This is an attempt to provide the discipline with another key concept, as was the one of Anarchy for Waltz.

The standard for selecting the texts used was choosing the ones with specific criticisms to Waltzian theory of international politics, in order to contemplate a greater array of authors that use Gramsci's and Trotsky's ideas to theorize on IR. Furthermore, among the texts of each of the selected authors, we chose to focus on the most representative ones, providing a broader view of how the debate evolved and which issues were problematic for the Marxist critique under the lenses of Gramsci and Trotsky. We selected authors with the most substantive alternatives to the problems they addressed.

Following this introduction, the paper has sections. The next one provides a grounding glimpse on Waltz's theory in order to emphasize the topics addressed by the Marxist authors we deal with. The third section focuses on Mark Rupert's criticism of Waltz's concept of politics as alienation, arguing in favor of removing the artificial boundaries between politics and economics. The fourth section brings along Adam Morton's idea of state which is more dynamic and can afford a concept of hegemony and passive revolution (as inspired by Gramsci) in opposition to Waltz's balance of power. The fifth section highlights Justin Rosenberg's fundamental framework of Uneven and Combined Development as the most robust contemporary alternative to Waltz's anarchical system, along with its theoretical implications. The sixth section discusses the debate between Morton and Rosenberg to illustrate the fruitfulness of Rosenberg's theoretical endeavor. Lastly, we conclude the paper with reflections on the discussions presented throughout this paper.

## **2 Waltz as the mainstream canon of IR**

Waltz's definition of International Relations in the 1970s and 1980s had a profound impact on the discipline. Perhaps the most consequential of all of them was the deliberate limitation of IR to international politics (Bittencourt, 2025). No wonder his most influential book is named after politics rather than International Relations in a broad sense. Following Bittencourt (2025), we agree that there is a remarkable degree of cohesion and continuity in the

substance of Waltz's concepts and theoretical notions, making it possible to go back and forth between his theoretical work since *Man, the State, and War* (Waltz, 2001) until his latest writings. Bearing in mind the purposes of this paper, we focus on specific elements of Waltzian thought that are fundamental for his theoretical proposition. These are also the elements that will be criticized by the authors we will deal with below.

In 1972, Waltz asserted that International Relations was a moribund field of inquiry (Waltz, 1975). It was so because of the lack of a general theory that organized the field around the most consequential actors and elements that provided unity and meaning to the empirical investigations developed. Researchers could not agree on what the main actors of IR were, and neither could they effectively know something about a field no one knew what it was about. Such discontentment was solved in his seminal Theory of International Politics.

Waltz's solution was to dive deeply into the theory of science in order to understand if there could be an effective "theory" of international relations. Waltz's stand on this topic is clear: a theory is a mental picture of a bounded realm or domain of activity (Waltz, 1979). It should be about something particular, and it would help to organize the aspects of reality because no one could grasp reality directly, unaided by any theory (Waltz, 2001, 1979, 1997; Bittencourt, 2025; Halliday; Rosenberg, 1998; Wæver, 2009). Since theory should be about something, a theory of IR should be about politics, and, being about politics, it should be made taking as reference the most consequential actors that existed in the international political system. Such actors were the states (Waltz, 1979). Therefore, bearing in mind that theory was about a bounded realm, Waltz was concerned with the international political realm, and other issues were only of interest to the extent that they mattered for states and their relations, not because states were the only actors in International Relations, but rather because they were the most consequential actors (Waltz, 1979).

The states were the interacting units of the international system. But they were not the only elements of this system. The system also comprised a structure that is not equal to the sum of different

units. The structure is a more complex and abstract concept that allows us to think of the system as a whole (Waltz, 1979).

The structure allows us to think of "the international." It is more than the mere relationship of the units, and cannot be reduced to such interactions. This is an important step made by Waltz so that we could grasp the international with an existence of its own.<sup>1</sup>

The structure is a threefold element. The first component is the ordering principle. For Waltz, echoing his 1959 book, such ordering principle could be anarchy or hierarchy. Anarchy is the most important concept here, because systems change if there is a change in this principle. While domestic systems are based on hierarchy, allowing units to specialize, in anarchy units were expected to develop the same tasks, and their capacities would necessarily duplicate (Waltz, 1970; Duarte; Campos, 2013). It takes us to the second element of the structure: units are undifferentiated. States are to face the same tasks, deciding for themselves how to deal with their own domestic and foreign issues. Last, structures are defined by the distribution of capacities between units. The ones ranked higher in their capabilities are the poles of the system, and the polarity of the system generates a great deal of expectations on the stability and peacefulness of it (Waltz, 1979; Græger et al., 2022). These capabilities are the size of the territory, military capacity, resource endowment, size of the population, economic capacity, and political competence and stability (Waltz, 1979, 1988). All these elements should be ranked together and not separately.

Waltz's international system brings along a given concept of the state as political unit wishing to survive. Furthermore, it isolates the political aspects in order to deal with them theoretically. Other issues enter his equation of politics only to the extent that they are submitted to politics. Therefore, the equilibrium possible for Waltz's model is the balance of power. States constrain and incentivize certain actions based on the expectations of damage that their capabilities can inflict on others.

Bearing this theoretical model in mind, one point should be noted. It is often argued that Waltz's theory is not concerned with

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenberg will develop heavily on this topic. See below.

changes in the international system. This is half true – at least in theory. It should be stated more accurately that his model allows for a limited understanding of change. Structural change can happen in two forms. The first of them is a change in the ordering principle of the system. If anarchy gives way to hierarchy (as in the case of a world government, for instance), then a change occurs. Another possibility of change is a change in the distribution of capabilities among the units. The distribution of capabilities, even though directly connected to the units, is not under their control. Therefore, it is an attribute of the system, and it is this distribution that defines whether the system is bipolar, tripolar, multipolar, or unipolar (Waltz, 2000). It is, indeed, a very limited account of change, but it cannot be denied its existence in Waltz's thought.

### 3 Mark Rupert and the alienation of theory

Mark Rupert's criticism brings capitalism more to the forefront of his writings. He points to the absence of boundaries between theory and practice, as well as between politics and economics. For Rupert, "it is possible to understand both the system of sovereign states and the capitalist world economy in non-reductionist ways if the theory of IR/IPE is reconstructed on the basis of a Marxian/Gramscian social ontology" (Rupert, 1993, p. 67). Such a social ontology that Rupert based his thoughts is precisely the practical potential offered by theory since such distinction does not exist: "for Marx and for Gramsci, the construction of a social ontology was integral to the project of uncovering and actualising latent revolutionary possibilities" (Rupert, 1993, p. 68).

One cannot isolate aspects and social relations from reality, reduce them to objects or things, and deal with them separately. This is a process of alienation<sup>2</sup>, i.e., it removes the real sense of

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<sup>2</sup> Even though the focus of this paper is concerned with the concepts as developed by Gramsci, the main idea of alienation dates back to Marx, and Rupert explains it in the following fashion: "alienation and fetishism are rooted in the material practices of capitalist social life. Under the *specific historical conditions* of capitalism, the ontologically central process of objectification takes the form of alienation" (Rupert, 1993, p. 70).

what these aspects and social relations actually mean and represent. The author understands that it is in such a process of alienation that the relations among states are based on. Such situations are intrinsically contradictory, which opens up the possibility of overcoming them. Overcoming such contradictory situations is one of the main goals of the philosophy of praxis for Gramsci, or, as he put it, Gramsci's "his main political objective is to bring about a transformative process, a unification of theory and practice, which will transcend the division of capitalist society into rulers and ruled" (Rupert, 1993, p. 79).

Rupert suggests that the state – or the "integral state" – is compounded by the political society summed up with civil society (and it is noteworthy that such formulation derives from Gramsci), and this is where the power of the bourgeoisie lies in Western societies (Rupert, 1993, p. 79). Rupert argues that Gramsci caught a glimpse of the concretization of overshadowed social alternatives by contesting the hegemonic practices of dominant classes. Such alternatives had been objectified and separated by artificial oppositions historically produced by social processes (Rupert, 1993, p. 80).

Hence it is possible to transcend relations of alienation established by capitalism understanding that both a) the system of sovereign states (the object scrutiny of the IR discipline), and that, b) the international division of labor (the object of inquiry of International Political Economy), are both historically specific aspects of the social organization of the capitalist productive activity (Rupert, 1993, p. 83).

The state, which has a paramount importance for structural realist theory, becomes no longer an "ontologically primitive" unit of analysis but instead a simple organization of productive forces under capitalism. This organization is a product of the intrinsic fragmentation of such system:

it will be necessary to abandon the characteristic neo-realist premise that the fundamental reality of world politics - everywhere and always - is power struggle among autonomous states in a context of anarchy. (...) [Neo-realism] is an historically real and effective but none the less self-limiting form of theory/practice. Neo-realism, like any ideology,

is grounded in practical experience. (...) a Marxian/Gramscian critique would take as its point of departure the proposition that international politics as we know it is historically embedded in, and internally related to, capitalist social relations (Rupert, 1993, p. 83-84).

Following this, international political relations are a product of a double alienation, or a "second-order alienation". These relations involve one state interacting with other states. Building on the previous finding, these relations are between the object produced by a process of capitalist alienation (the state) and the relationships between this alienated object and its peers, all of which are also the result of historical processes developed under capitalism, in processes of alienation as well. Transporting the domestic relations to the international realm, Rupert also transports the domestic rationale typical of capitalist societies to a global level:

it appears that the second-order alienation of the inter-state system has reproduced at a global level aspects of the more fundamental, first-order alienation. In particular, the system of political states has reproduced institutions and practices which abstract politics from productive life, and hence preclude explicit communal self-determination directly within productive activity. Instead, productive activity is organised in a world 'economy', a global division of labour governed by world market forces and seemingly beyond the reach of any form of communal control (Rupert, 1993, p. 85).

Rupert's conclusions on Neo-realism are but a consequence of his starting points and the presuppositions of his explanation. Neo-realism presents abstract causes for the international political relations without dealing with the core of the relations developed by states. These are relations of alienation, assuming an existing separation between politics and economics. One needs to understand such relations as alienation processes and also recognize that "politics" and "economics" are part of the same social whole in order to establish effective political strategies for overcoming reality. In other words, understanding alienation and the indivisible unity of politics and economics is essential for *praxis*.

#### **4 Adam Morton, hegemony and world order**

Adam Morton (2007) contends that the mainstream debate in IR established a very static discussion around political theory, and Waltz's theory (1979) is an example of it. Cox's (1981) pioneer critique is an attempt to break such static stance (Morton, 2007, p. 111; Bittencourt; Passos, 2021).

The idea of hegemony, dealt with in its original Gramscian sense, is paramount to make sense of topics that the mainstream theories of IR cannot reach. Instead of solely focusing on the notion of military or economic domination, Gramsci's category of hegemony "filters through structures of society, economy, culture, gender, ethnicity, class, and ideology. These are dimensions that escape conventional IR routes to hegemony, which simply equate the notion with state dominance" (Morton, 2007, p. 114). Following such a blueprint, the relations of production are central because they will generate new social interactions and bring about new forces that will sustain power both within the state as well as in world order (Morton, 2007, p. 117). Relations of production and hegemony are intimately connected because hegemony is the way a class uses to exercise its power (Morton, 2007, p. 117).

Hegemony is necessary for the development of a historical bloc (*blocco storico*), i.e., the conjunction of not only economic or political interest but also moral and intellectual convergences:

a historical bloc refers to the way in which leading social-class forces within a specific 'national' context establish a relationship over contending social forces. It is more than simply a political alliance between social forces represented by classes or fractions of classes. It indicates the integration of a variety of different class interests that are propagated throughout society (Morton, 2007, p. 118).

Politics in this context is much more dynamic (and it seems to be even more dynamic as is in the often-quoted explanation of Robert Cox), and the focus of Morton is grasping the forces of different social classes and the processes they are enmeshed in, and how the development of the state is produced starting from these forces and processes. In the end, the states are seen as a reflection of certain historical blocs, and this is paramount for leaving behind

the state-centric view in IR theories (Morton, 2007, p. 119). The state-centric vision relates to what Gramsci called statolatry, i.e., emphasizing but specific features of the state. Morton claims that the tendency to concentrate on state "capabilities" is a symptom of statolatry, which is defining for neo-realism. Hence the state must be considered "not just as the apparatus of government operating within the 'public' sphere (government, political parties, military) but also as part of the 'private' sphere of civil society (church, media, education) through which hegemony functions" (Morton, 2007, p. 120).

Bearing it all in mind, it is possible to reach a different idea of hegemony, whose expression shows itself through the expansion of a certain mode of production on global scale:

it is within a particular historical bloc and form of state that hegemony is initially constructed. Yet, beyond this initial consolidation, as hegemony begins to be asserted internationally, it is also within other different countries and particular forms of state that struggles may develop as a result of the introduction of new modes of production (Morton, 2007, p. 122).

It is fundamental noting that the use of the notion of hegemony, which is produced in a certain historical bloc, is more subtle in Morton's thought. In this fashion, hegemony is internationally *projected* through a certain mode of production which, for its turn, grounds certain social relations and establishes a state-civil society complex. Such a complex compounds the state (or, more clarifying, the "integral state"). The social classes struggle to establish their hegemony consensually when it comes to more complete forms of hegemony. On the other hand, dominating forms of hegemony, with the predominance of coercion, are characteristic of incomplete forms of hegemony, including the form that Gramsci named passive revolution.

## 5 Bringing Trotsky to IR: Justin Rosenberg

There is little doubt that Waltz's work had a strong impact on Justin Rosenberg's thinking. While Waltz sought to approach what

he considered to be more relevant for a theory of international politics in a systemic perspective committed to constraints on and from the most salient political units in terms of their power capabilities, Rosenberg sought to provide substance to what would be more appropriate to explain the international system *per se* in Marxist terms. Rosenberg's theoretical development is remarkably a discussion, both direct and indirect, with Waltz's work.

Unlike many of his peers, Rosenberg is an author who has sought to deepen his understanding of the Waltzian work. His criticism of realism as International Relations theory dedicates particular attention to Waltz's *Man, the state and war* (Waltz, 2001) in one of the sections of his book (Rosenberg, 2024).

The focus of Rosenberg's critique emphasizes two issues. The first one is the isolation of the "permissive causes of war" (in complementation to efficient causes) in the form of anarchy, the absence of a government above that of states, which is more like a contradiction to the notion of perpetual peace rather than a proper theory of international politics (Rosenberg, 2024). Rosenberg notes Waltz's resource to Rousseau's metaphor of the stag hunt, claiming that Waltz transposes the individual level to a higher scale of political units in order to explain why states and starving hunters are base themselves more on self-interest rather than in a rational cooperative behavior beneficial to all parties (Rosenberg, 2024). The second issue is a criticism to the structure of the system, that constrains individual units, resulting in a balance of power in a context of competition and survival. Rosenberg asserts that such a notion of structure is a mechanic one in Waltz's elaboration (Rosenberg, 2024). Two key concepts become very problematic in this context: power and change. Change is a forgotten issue for Waltz's elaboration as it involves no convulsive interaction between domestic revolution and international politics. The premise that justifies such point is the fallacy of the Hobbesian state of nature, a grounding rationale for waltz that limits individual freedom within the states to restrain the routinely resource to violence, typical of the human nature. Being there no party that exercises such restraint on states, each political unit will be internationally on their own and up to their own resources, unfolding

a mechanical structure of conduct that applies to the society of states (Rosenberg, 2024).

Rosenberg reevaluates Waltz's work later on. According to this assessment, Rosenberg argues that the Marxist notion of Uneven and Combined Development could provide explanations at the international level. Quoting an interview with Waltz himself (Halliday; Rosenberg, 1998), Rosenberg (2022) let the reader know that Waltz had tried to develop, unsuccessfully, a theoretical construct that brought about both the domestic and the international together in a distinct fashion of his systemic theory of international politics. According to Waltz, such a theoretical endeavor would be better than a theory that isolated only the systemic level, but he could not see the possibility of such a realization.

The most important aspect of Rosenberg's later evaluation, however, is his contention that uneven and combined development could serve as an alternative ontology for the IR discipline, combining both the national and the international in the same explanatory framework. It is worth noting that such a framework critically incorporates elements of Waltz's work. The theoretical proposal of Rosenberg is locating uneven and combined development in terms of multiplicity, with the goal of not incurring methodological nationalism or internationalism. This proposal aimed to break the epistemological and ontological constraints that International Relations (IR) had been bound by.

There was a common trait in IR theory since the theoretical apparatus that Edward Hallett Carr (2001) outlined in his seminal work: IR had been locked in the prison of Political Science (Rosenberg, 2016). Carr had a remarkable role in this definition since he was the one to affirm that international politics was in its infancy, and as such, it was appropriate to locate it under the tutoring of Political Science. From the perspective of ontology, agency, and being the states the main actors in international politics, it was a fair confinement for international politics to be under the guidance of Political Science.

The confinement was replicated by other theories and got marked in the thematic and institutional profile of the discipline. IR became a one-way road of sorts, profiting from contributions of

other areas of knowledge and turning them into solely epiphenomena of Political Science. As with any one-way road, IR enjoyed the contributions of different areas but could not offer a contribution of its own. For instance, Geopolitics was an appropriation of Geography by IR, as International Political Economy was an appropriation of Economics. IR also absorbed the category of gender from Anthropology, as well as postcolonial studies from literature; the movement from IR to other disciplines was nonexistent.

Waltz's theory takes central role in this dynamic, as does his category of anarchy, the "permissive cause" of wars. In other words, the absence of an international government upon states was the socializing component of the most consequential units in terms of power capabilities. The political relations of these units was one of competition, survival and tending to power balance in the medium and long run.

The alternative to such diagnosis derived from multiplicity as an unfolding of Leon Trotsky's notion of uneven and combined development. Put very briefly, uneven and combined development starts from a general law that can be identified in every historical process: the unevenness of rhythm (Trotsky, 1977). Such premise is applied originally to the context of the historical process of Russia by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which there is a mixture of the archaic and the modern, the extensive rural countryside and the few but heavily and fast industrialized and urbanized cities. Such Russian context "skipped" the traditional stages of classical development, having a strong stimulus from the outside (foreign) capitalist competition, to which Trotsky called the "whip of external necessity." The combination of the "archaic" rural and the advanced, industrialized, and urbanized "modern" accelerated by external factors was highly relevant to the historical pre-revolutionary process in Russia.

There is an important caveat to be made. Trotsky's grasp of uneven and combined development was not systematic and ended up in an incomplete notion. Furthermore, Trotsky himself did not thoroughly examine the connection between it and themes of international political interest, instead dealing with these topics only sporadically, such as in the case of the foreign policies of

European states in the historical moment relevant to the Russian historical process between the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – i.e., in the eve of the Russian 1917 revolution.

Recognizing and exploring this gap, Rosenberg (2016) sought to systematize the theoretical implications and methodological consequences of this notion. As an alternative to the “prison of political science,” Rosenberg suggested that multiplicity is the most profound code of the international as a feature of human existence. Neither Political science nor any other discipline could provide insights on this aspect. The search for its adequate place as “the international” would bring about consequences for the whole of social sciences, some of them already known in terms of the possibility of use.

The first of them was *coexistence*. Since there is no single authority, the possibility of coexistence among multiple societies emerges. It represents a new layer beyond the internal structures of any society, unfolding a whole set of new social phenomena that add to the traditional perspective of political relations and phenomena (Rosenberg, 2016). The second is *difference*. The quantitative multiplicity of societies also has its qualitative features, as these societies differ along a range of dimensions, including size, culture, power, history, and spatial singularity, among others. Put differently, this diversity unfolds into a multi-linear nature of global social development (Rosenberg, 2016). What comes next is *interaction*. There are infinite possibilities as a common condition to all individual societies that face each other quantitatively and qualitatively. From these interactions, numerous risks and opportunities become apparent. Another consequence of multiplicity is *combination*. No society develops in isolation and along a strictly linear historical trajectory. Countless dimensions of historical and social processes combine in distinct ways, allowing societies to reconfigure themselves (Rosenberg, 2016). Last, there is the *dialectical change* (Rosenberg, 2016). Bearing in mind all the elements already discussed, it does not suffice to refer to unilinearity or multilinearity analytically. The processes are dialectical in the sense that the same dialogical transfers occur between societies, sometimes

extremely far away from one another, and they bring along many historical possibilities and dimensions for life. Therefore, what emerges is a unique result that transcends any Eurocentric perspective present in many International Relations elaborations.

## **6 Gramsci Against or beyond Trotsky? The Morton-Rosenberg debate**

The way Rosenberg appropriated the notion of Uneven and Combined Development generated many criticisms to his perspective (Blaney; Tickner, 2017; Thaddeus Jackson, 2017; Rosenberg Et Al., 2024). One of them was that interests us more centrally is Adam Morton's, for two reasons. The first one is that he is an author we have dealt with in this paper. The other one is that he is one author that also uses Trotsky's ideas in his analyses (beyond the aforementioned Gramsci's).

Morton (Bieler; Morton, 2018) reports that Rosenberg's perspective is a trans-historical appropriation, oblivious to the original Marxist formulation of the notion of Uneven and Combined Development in terms of historicity. This was so because of Rosenberg's pretense to substitute the category of anarchy and Waltz's theoretical construct (Rosenberg, 2013). Indeed, for Morton, such an attempt, following a Waltzian fashion, was an exercise on general abstraction, with an inadequate move of history, very far away from historical specificities. Morton also suggested that Rosenberg was envious of Waltz's "positivist" way of aggregating a scientific program under a generalizing concept (anarchy) (Bieler; Morton, 2018). Furthermore, Rosenberg's approach to the concept differs from Trotsky's non-systematic formulation of uneven and combined development (Trotsky, 1957). According to another moment in Trotsky's theorization, capitalism would be more resourceful in its uneven feature for its own means and methods, and unevenness would be its starting point.

According to Morton's interpretation, uneven and combined development should be considered a valid category only for capitalist societies. According to another critic who adds to Morton's argument here, a law that explains everything and every

historical process explains nothing specific about capitalism, imperialism, and the present moment of capitalist restructuration. In practice, it explains nothing. It would reduce such a law to a mere triviality (Smith, 2006).

It is necessary to highlight Rosenberg's response to his critics. According to him, the general abstraction of the category under scrutiny is coherent with the Marxian possibility of general abstraction of the formulations about the capital (Rosenberg, 2022). Uneven and combined development cannot predict actual correlations within the realm of an abstract approach, but it allows us to integrate its concrete effects into a historical explanation that extends beyond the individual Russian case originally analyzed by Leon Trotsky. For him, uneven and combined development cannot predict the actual features of relations and their transformations, but it can provide a means to integrate its effects into historical explanation.

## **7 Conclusions: Gramscy, Trotsky and Marxism in the IR landscape after the Cold War**

The brief sample of the debate between Waltz and his contemporary Marxist critics reveals interesting aspects of the debates in International Relations. Resuming Rosenberg's metaphor of the "prison of Political Science," the debate presents exactly such a configuration: different ideas from distinct fields of inquiry helping to create an IR thought, but with little, if any, impact on exporting IR ideas outside the discipline itself. The Marxist inspiration that motivates the criticisms presented here entails an important attempt to escape the confines of Political Science, bearing in mind Gramsci's conception of an organic unity between state and civil society, between politics and economics, between politics and culture, between politics, history, and philosophy, among others.

We point to two topics that adequately sum up the criticisms derived from Gramsci's and Trotsky's thought as elaborated by Rupert, Morton, and Rosenberg. These topics are 1) scope as the nature of theory, and 2) the way to deal with history.

As for the first, the starting point of the argument is the idea of totality in the Marxist formulation. Gramsci and Marc did not approach these themes in a similar manner. For the Italian author, such an idea is pursued in terms of unity between philosophy, history, and politics (Gramsci, 1977, p. 1363-1509). The fragmentation of reality and of scopes cannot be accepted in Marxist approaches. It could be only a separation for methodological or didactical ends. If the Waltzian theory is guided mainly by its systemic characterization in terms of the most relevant elements of the relationships established and the components of international politics through Gramscian and Trotskyist lenses, such a separation can be, at most, a mediating bias that approximates the holist perspective (Coutinho, 2012). Politics, economics, culture, structure, superstructure, state, civil society, national, international... all these have organically linked and cannot be separated. They interact with one another in various historical and social contexts, without any discernible pattern, unlike Waltz's focus, which emphasizes historical repetition and patterns. Such difference affects the way Rupert approached the fragmentation of historical analyses as alienation, as well as the way Morton emphasizes the dynamic and holist character of hegemony in an assessment that brings along national and international in historical terms. Evidently, Rupert's stand includes the state, but it cannot be reduced to the state since his approach focuses also class conflicts and their fragmentations. A similar rationale is found in Trotsky's formulation and its derivation as multiplicity according to Rosenberg. The combined, multiple whole is an element that removes any possibility of fragmentation between the national and the international, as well as all dimensions of social life. At the same time, there is no room for standardization in the realm of theory since the unevenness of historical transformation and of all dimensions of life is the most important assumption. As a partial conclusion, overcoming the fragmented approach to life, theory, and praxis gains front-stage importance in the horizon of Marxism and justifies the arguments made throughout this paper.

History, viewed in patterned terms, and the resulting balance of power, are vital aspects of Waltz's theory. The opposite point

guides the formulations of Rupert, Morton, and Rosenberg. The historical dynamism in their approaches derives, to some extent, from the particularity that Gramsci and Trotsky lent to the themes of non-repetitive and non-patterned history. Gramsci, in his particular formulation, guided by an absolute historicism (Gramsci, 1977, p. 1226), does not allow for any analogy or historical repetition as an assessment parameter. For his turn, Trotsky (Trotsky, 1977, p. 24-26) renounces any linearity or evolutionist (or tautologist) possibility in this topic. Historical possibilities, in terms of multiplicity, will follow such characterization.

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