

Uneven and combined desires: A psychological rethinking of societal multiplicity in world politics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cac**Marco Vieira** 

Abstract

This article contributes to the growing body of scholarship which claims the notion of societal multiplicity offers both a foundational ontology and novel theoretical approach to the discipline of International Relations (IR). By focusing on its unheeded psychological dimension, I offer a critique of societal multiplicity with the aim of contributing to theory development. The central contention of this article is that, despite several compelling articulations of societal multiplicity in IR since its original formulation, the notion has not yet satisfactorily accounted for the hierarchical nature of societal co-existence in world politics, in particular with regards to its psychological dimension. I explore the analytical purchase of combining the theory of Uneven and Combined Development (U&CD), understood as the core mechanism of societal multiplicity, driving interaction between and across multiple societies, with an added focus on the psychological effects of the overarching presence of Western modernity as the main civilisational referent of progress and development in world politics. I empirically illustrate the article's theoretical argument through the historical analysis of Brazil under the administration of Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), as a compelling example of the uneven and combined desire to emulate the Western other.

Keywords

International Relations, Lacanian psychoanalysis, societal multiplicity, uneven and combined development

Introduction

In his 2015 EH Carr memorial lecture at the University of Aberystwyth, Professor Justin Rosenberg boldly claimed that societal multiplicity represents the distinctive common ground of International Relations (IR) as an autonomous field of knowledge in the Social Sciences. Rosenberg's assertion, rooted on Leon Trotsky's theory of Uneven and

Corresponding author:

Marco Vieira, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.

Email: m.a.vieira@bham.ac.uk

Combined Development (U&CD), sparked a new and dynamic research programme in IR. Over the following years, academic forums, roundtables, workshops, and panels in international conferences, as well as a robust body of scholarship emerged, all centred around Rosenberg's innovative formulation of societal multiplicity.

The central contention of this article is that, notwithstanding several compelling articulations of societal multiplicity in IR since its original formulation, the notion has not yet satisfactorily accounted for the hierarchical nature of societal co-existence in world politics, in particular with regards to its psychological dimension. Considering the central role of U&CD in conceptualising and operationalising societal multiplicity, I critically examine the analytical purchase of merging Rosenberg's original rendition of U&CD, as the transhistorical mechanism driving interaction between and across multiple societies, with an additional emphasis on the psychological effects of Western modernity's pervasive influence as the main civilizational referent of progress and development in world politics.

This article does not reject Rosenberg's claim that societal multiplicity can uniquely serve as the ontological foundation to the discipline of IR (Rosenberg, 2017). The argument probes instead what I argue are the essentialising and transhistorical assumptions that underlie the claim. The argument is anchored in the premise that Rosenberg's transhistorical ontology is incommensurate with how the discipline of IR is situated and has emerged as a product of a particular historical context where Western modernity/capitalism uniquely emerged as an all-encompassing hierarchical order.¹

While processes of uneven and combined co-existence can be easily traced back to the origins of humankind, I conceive and historically situate U&CD, and by extension IR, as an approach to 'capitalist modernity' in the sense that it is interested in, and is the result of, the emergence, development and consolidation of capitalism and Western global hegemony. This means that societal multiplicity's distinctive contribution to IR is that it could offer an ontological common ground to the study of the only time in human history, from the late 15th century to the present day, when the whole world has been gradually tied into one single all-encompassing system (Buzan and Lawson, 2015: 172). The exceptional feature of Western modernity, in comparison with other historical examples of civilizational expansion, is the unrivalled global reach of its penetration and transformation of non-Western forms of socio-political organisation (Buzan and Lawson, 2015: 172). In this sense, the successful diffusion of Western modernity/coloniality has been closely related to the European colonial powers' unique capacity to elevate, spread and maintain Western particularism into a widely accepted universalism (Vasilaki, 2012).

I argue that, in the uneven and combined system of Western modernity, hierarchical co-existence is underpinned by an ever-present psychological desire to emulate what is perceived as superior Western/modern standards of social and economic development. This point relates to the Lacanian element of the proposed theoretical account of societal multiplicity which is grounded on the claim that individual and collective subjects are

¹I adopt Zarakol's (2017) definition of hierarchical order as 'any system through which actors are organised into vertical relations of super – and subordination' (p. 1). For a comprehensive compilation of analytical and theoretical approaches to hierarchy in IR, see, for example, Zarakol (2017).

fundamentally attached to the image of a desirable, albeit always unattainable, external other. In the current historical epoch, the highest civilizational standard is set by Western modernity which has created a particular global hierarchy of power whereby non-Western states are assigned an inferior status vis-à-vis a reified image of a superior Western civilisation (i.e. Hobson, 2014).

The socio-psychological notion of emulation, tied to a sense of inferiority in former colonised societies, is powerfully articulated by Fanon in 'Black Skin, White Masks'. Fanon draws on Lacan's concept of the *mirror stage* to argue that the black man's attempt to achieve psychological stability by identifying with the image of the white man is inherently doomed to fail (Fanon, 2008[1952]: 140/41). Also influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, Bhabha's concept of *colonial mimicry* explains how the colonised subject imperfectly imitates the image of an idealised Other embodied by the coloniser (Bhabha, 1995). In a previous work, I built on the postcolonial psychology literature to conceptualise postcolonial subjectivity as attempts to fill existential gaps through emulation of an ideal other. In this article, I return to Lacan's original formulation to unpack the relationship between inferiority and emulation in the construction of subjectivity.

The article's contribution is 3-fold. First, it recasts societal multiplicity as a compelling history-grounded theory of Western modernity, rather than an ontology for IR as an academic discipline. Second, and closely related to the previous contribution, it critiques the absence in Rosenberg's current adaptation of U&CD to IR of an appropriate historical contextualisation, specifically in relation to the omission of the Western-centric hierarchical logics underpinning Trotsky's original theory. Finally, and more importantly, it addresses the crucial yet often overlooked psychological dimension in processes of hierarchical co-existence within multiplicity. This is important because, according to Rosenberg's position, uneven and combined development is the core mechanism of societal multiplicity, driving interaction between and across multiple societies. This latter contribution, rooted in Lacanian psychoanalysis, illuminates how the unconscious drive to emulate idealised conceptions of Western 'development' – beyond an understanding that only focuses on the material dimension of development/underdevelopment – is intricately tied to the dynamics of uneven and combined development which still shapes North/South relations.

The article's argument is ontologically grounded on the premise that states' psychological responses are the result of historical processes of co-constitution between international, transnational and national groups and individuals whereby narratives crafted by domestic elites – political, intellectual, social – become gradually embedded into states' institutional apparatuses and decision-making processes. I argue that the sense of inferiority produced by global processes of uneven and combined development generates ontological insecurity, which elites attempt to mitigate through discourses that become routinised within state institutions.

As I later demonstrate, Brazil's political elites echoed far-right conservative and neo-liberal ideas from international and transnational networks of state and non-state actors. This form of uneven combination, shaped by the 'whip of external necessity', gave Jair Bolsonaro's regime (2019–2022) political leverage, legitimacy, and – most importantly

for this argument – an illusory sense of ontological security.² This example illustrates how Brazilian elites, through the psychological mechanism of emulation, cope with a sense of inferiority resulting from uneven co-existence under Western modernity.

It is important to clarify that the theorisation of U&CD presented here, along with the empirical processes discussed, which arise from the psychological implications of Western modernity, should not be seen as endorsing a totalising view of emulation as the only possible outcome of uneven combination under Western modernity. It indeed reflects a common and overarching pattern identified by scholars in relation to postcolonial subjectivity (i.e. Fanon, 2008[1952]; Bhabha 1995; Nandy, 1983), and I argue here that this dynamic requires further problematisation within U&CD. However, how subjects absorb and respond to this condition can vary widely, ranging from not only demanding inclusion within Western modernity but also rejecting it entirely and constructing alternative, more radical positions (i.e. Hobson and Sajed, 2017). In this regard, current shifts in the global hierarchy, marked by the rise of China and the waning influence of the West, have the potential to fundamentally reshape the dynamics of emulation described in this article.³

The article is structured in three parts. First, I outline and critically engage with the theory of U&CD as the constitutive mechanism of societal multiplicity. I demonstrate that, despite efforts to dissociate societal multiplicity from Trotsky's original framework, the concept's analytical coherence remains intrinsically linked to his contributions, particularly through what Rosenberg identifies as the five consequences of multiplicity. The central function of this section is to demonstrate, by rescuing Trotsky's original iteration of U&CD, the crucial yet often undertheorised hierarchical dimension of societal multiplicity. Second, through a Lacanian re-interpretation of Trotsky's 'whip of external necessity', I address what I define as the 'sixth consequence of multiplicity', referring to the psychological impact of hierarchical co-existence within multiplicity. I finally engage, in an analytical perspective, with the case of Brazil, under the administration of the far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro, as an interesting example of how structural changes in the 'whip of external necessity' shaped domestic processes of emulation of Western development models by Brazilian political elites.

UC&D: societal or hierarchical multiplicity?

In a 2010 article, Justin Rosenberg (2010) addressed the questions of 'where does the international come from?' and 'what accounts for its existence as a dimension of the human world? His answer to both questions was 'societal multiplicity'. For him, the place of IR among other disciplines concerns its focus on the highest level of organised

²In this article, ontological security refers to the ability of individuals, societies, and states to sustain stable understandings of their identity. The scholarship on ontological security in IR is extensive, encompassing a growing diversity of approaches and ongoing debates on various issues. For a comprehensive overview of the field, see Kinnvall and Mitzen (2017).

³I owe this important clarification to one of the peer reviewers of this article.

human co-existence (Rosenberg, 2016: 136). He draws on Leon Trotsky's theory of U&CD to explore the consequences of societal multiplicity in IR.

Trotsky's original formulation of U&CD is anchored on two enduring features of the co-existence between social groups: unevenness and combination. According to Trotsky (2008[1932]), unevenness refers to a 'general law' of historical development in the sense that societies always develop at varying paces and in different ways. The notion of combination highlights that every social, cultural, political formation is interconnected with others in a complex network of relationships, leading not only to uneven but also to combined development. The notions of uneven and combined development thus imply a unified understanding of global/international capitalist relations whereby multiple societies coexist and unevenly shape each other's path to development (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015: 45). Simply put, U&CD relates to the claim that processes of interaction and amalgamation between disparate, yet closely interconnected human groups, drive historical transformation. Anievas and Nisancioglu argue that U&CD offers the possibility of a unified theory of the 'international' through its focus on how societies 'interact, of how they change, and the relationship between these historically dynamic processes' (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015: 44).

The focus on U&CD enables an interesting and rather persuasive theoretical account of how co-existence, differentiation, interaction, combination and dialectical causality generate the possibility of multiple, albeit united, social formations. Rosenberg's operationalisation of societal multiplicity, as encapsulating the 'international' through these five consequences, clearly owes much to Trotsky's (2008[1932]) original interpretation of the Russian revolution as a product of uneven and combined development. However, contemporary applications of U&CD, particularly regarding the notion of multiplicity in IR theory, find themselves in a paradox. While they adopt definitions rooted in Trotsky's theory, they often sidestep explicit engagement with his original insights. Recent interpretations of societal multiplicity, which advocate it as the distinct ontology of IR, have attempted to distance themselves from their original ties to Trotsky's U&CD.

For example, the recent special issue of *Cooperation & Conflict* on this topic, Rosenberg and Tallis (2022) outline the five key consequences of multiplicity in the introduction, concepts that are directly rooted in Trotsky's U&CD. However, Trotsky's influence is notably unacknowledged by the editors. Similarly, the individual contributions uncritically adopt the editors' framework, neither engaging with nor acknowledging Trotsky's significance to the special issue's articulation of societal multiplicity. Koddenbrock notes that,

Rosenberg's reinterpretation can be seen as an attempt to sanitize Trotsky's Eurocentric and modernist understanding of history and to retain the one crucial and normatively uncontroversial element that has not been taken seriously enough – there are many societies on this planet and their interaction matters. (Koddenbrock, 2020: 519)

However, in downplaying Trotsky's Eurocentrism and stagist (modernist) view of history, Rosenberg inadvertently sacrifices a crucial aspect of Trotsky's original account: the implicit yet pivotal role of hierarchy. This omission in the multiplicity's conceptual project fundamentally undermines its capacity to fully grasp the mechanics of uneven

and combined development within capitalist modernity, where hierarchical co-existence is integral to its operation. Trotsky observed uneven and combined development in the context of capitalist modernity, where some countries advanced into more developed capitalist societies, serving, as I argue here, as primary models for ‘emulation’ by those considered ‘backward’ in terms of economic and technological progress.

Considering this, I propose in this article a significant refinement to Rosenberg’s framework, which reinstates and critically engages with Trotsky’s contributions. This involves a twofold adaptation: (1) the (re-)introduction of the ‘hierarchical’ element of co-existence; and (2) the integration of what could be described as the *sixth consequence of multiplicity*, the psychological impact of hierarchical co-existence within multiplicity. In the remainder of this section, I further elaborate on the element of hierarchical co-existence, followed by an exploration of its psychological consequences in the next section, using a Lacanian reinterpretation of Trotsky’s core notion of the ‘whip of external necessity’.

According to this article’s argument, hierarchical co-existence is not an atemporal ‘general abstraction’ but is firmly anchored in the historical context of capitalism’s emergence. Rosenberg’s transhistorical claim, that the uneven dynamics of societal interactions, described in his theorisation of U&CD, and further developed in his later work on multiplicity, are a constant feature of human existence, problematically relies on detaching his framework from the historically specific conditions of hierarchical co-existence under capitalist modernity.⁴ In the *longue durée*, it is a compelling proposition to ground the specificity of IR in the ontological claim that multiple encounters between civilizations, tribes, city-states, and other forms of human organisations generate complex sets of uneven and combined developments. However, notwithstanding the potential of U&CD as a central theoretical tool to understand the implications of societal multiplicity, Rosenberg’s and others overlook the crucial empirical fact that since the mid-15th century most forms of global co-existence among human communities have gradually become permeated and measured by what was believed to be the superior standards of capitalist modernity, which shaped the development aspirations of colonised and post-colonial societies which were considered pre-modern/backward.

In this sense, although not explicitly developed within the theory’s conceptual framework, hierarchy remains a fundamental condition in Trotsky’s theorisation of U&CD, shaped by specific historical circumstances. For him, the idea of modern and pre-modern societies demarcates unequal positionalities whereby international recognition and stature derive from the capacity to improve according to pre-given measures of success. Trotsky’s view that societies attempt to ‘catch-up’ and ‘reproduce’ the development of more advanced societies adds an important element of determinism to his theorisation in

⁴For an overview of the neo-Trotskyist debate in Historical Sociology on whether U&CD should be transhistorical or only applicable to the modern capitalist period, see Hobson (2011). Equally pertinent to this discussion is the debate between Alex Callinicos and Rosenberg (2008) regarding the use of U&CD as a general abstraction. For a summary of the debate see also, Allinson and Anievas (2009).

the sense that, according to U&CD, ‘development’ means a universal and shared understanding of what the desired standards of Western capitalist modernity should be.⁵

Some postcolonial scholars critiqued U&CD for presenting human development ‘as a subordinate articulation of a normalised capitalist modernity that finds its full expression in the contemporary West’ (Sabaratnam, 2011: 13; see also Gámez: 2021). Bhambra (2011; see also Tansel, 2014) argued that, while some U&CD perspectives recognise the historical importance of non-Western societies, they still position Europe at the core of capitalist development. Similarly highlighting Western (racial) dominance, Shilliam (2009) underscores the uneven formation of racial hierarchies in the ‘Atlantic vector’ of the European slave trade as a means of ‘directing the U&CD approach to investigate deeper currents in the making of the modern world’ (p. 73).

Rosenberg and other prominent U&CD scholars developed an alternative view, asserting that U&CD provides a framework for a non-Eurocentric perspective. For example, Anievas and Nisancioglu (2015) claim that Trotsky’s original theory overcomes Eurocentrism by focusing on the diverse, non-linear histories of both European and non-European societies. Matin (2012) similarly defends U&CD as non-Eurocentric, arguing that Trotsky’s concept of development is radically open and multilinear, rejecting any fixed endpoint or teleological progression. Antunes de Oliveira (2019, 2020) suggests that U&CD breaks from Western capitalist frameworks, advocating for a broader understanding of uneven and combined interactions across societies.

In my view, although generally compelling, these authors’ arguments do not sufficiently unpack and persuasively provide an alternative to the theoretical and normative implications of Trotsky’s original commitment to the notion of Western-centred capitalist development as the object or aim of humanity’s shared progress. Trotsky’s original account of U&CD does not significantly differ from other (neo-)Marxist theorists who assert that world history follows various stages of capitalist development and, even though uneven and combined, all national societies are indeed influenced by shared universal principles. From Trotsky’s original articulations of U&CD to contemporary instantiations of development theory and policy, the notion of development has become unequivocally grounded on the assumption that governments of ‘backward societies’ aim at catching-up with the developmental path of what is perceived as superior Western models (Rioux, 2014).

Although recent articulations of U&CD have greatly contributed to de-centring IR by claiming that capitalism did not originate solely from European processes, in my view, they have not adequately addressed how dominant capitalist development paradigms from the West shape the desires and aspirations of political elites in the Global South. The response has often been to overlook these realities (Rosenberg and Tallis, 2022) or to transform the concept of development into an empty signifier (Antunes de Oliveira, 2019), devoid of its constitutive meaning. According to Antunes de Oliveira (2021), any form of what is perceived as positive material or social enhancement can be linked to

⁵Molyneux (1981), for instance, contends that ‘Trotsky’s philosophical position [. . .] remained deterministic, with traces of a teleological view of history’ (p. 196). For a critique of Molyneux’s perspective, see Callinicos (1984).

what the author proposes as an overly broad definition of development in the context of U&CD. In my view, it is inconsistent to use ‘development’ as Trotsky intended without acknowledging its original focus on linear progress from ‘backward’ to ‘advanced’ societies. Ignoring this leads to a superficial appropriation of the concept, failing to fully engage with its implications for the impact of ‘capitalist development’ on so-called peripheral societies.

As argued below, the association of development with a desired image of a Western superior other remains a fundamental, yet analytically neglected, aspect of uneven and combined development processes among political elites in the so-called Global South. This empirical reality challenges attempts to remove the Western hierarchical origins of the notion. Therefore, it is my contention that a revised notion of societal multiplicity, that accounts for capitalist modernity under uneven and combined development, would benefit from the inclusion of the psychological dimension of emulation as a fundamental, albeit omitted, component of the theory.

As articulated in the next section, my Lacanian reinterpretation suggests that the psychological element of emulation is a significant force that propels the dynamic processes Trotsky explicates in terms of a ‘whip of external necessity’. In this sense, the analytical focus of the present work is less so on processes of combined and uneven development between and across European and non-European societies, and more on the psychological implications of the former’s elevation to the stature of universal superiority.

A Lacanian interpretation of ‘the whip of external necessity’ as the source and template for social progress

In this section, I argue that there is a fundamental psychological component underpinning relations between multiple societal connections. I deploy Lacanian insight to theorise Trotsky’s ‘whip of external necessity’ in terms of its psycho-affective impact beyond the original focus on its military, technological and socio-economic implications. I argue that historical variations in the ‘whip of external necessity’ functions along the lines of what Lacan argues are symbolic enunciations which individuals and societies embrace and reproduce as shared fantasies of congruency (Mandelbaum, 2016: 196).

Trotsky’s notion of the ‘whip of external necessity’, as groups’ unavoidable need to respond to external material, military and technological pressures, seems to productively interact with Lacan’s notion of the symbolic order. For Lacan, social relations are codified through language generating psychological burdens upon individuals by compelling them to conform with pre-given codes of conduct. Emulation in this sense is not simply the either imposition or strategic/rational borrowing of external economic ideas and technologies by backward nations, as purported by Trotsky’s notion of the ‘whip’. It also means a deeply ingrained psychological desire for recognition as a member of what is assumed to be a superior civilisation. In this account, the ‘whip’ provides the symbolic meanings that appeal to the uncertainty caused by the subject’s existential ‘lack’. The psychological need to emulate developmental prescriptions resonates with idealised notions of Western modernity as the highest markers of human civilisation.

In the introductory chapter, *Peculiarities of Russia's Development*, in *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky (2008[1932]: 5) underscores Russia's cultural, social, and economic inferiority compared to 'richer Europe'. Trotsky's entire theorisation rests on this uneven relationship, where the 'whip' of advanced economies drives the 'privilege of backwardness' in less developed societies, shaping their unique paths to revolutionary transformation. This theme is especially clear in the central passage where he explains the core concepts of U&CD, asserting that,

Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of combined development – by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of the separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms. Without this law, to be taken of course, in its whole material content, it is impossible to understand the history of Russia, and indeed of any country of the second, third or tenth cultural class (Trotsky, 2008[1932]: 5)

The element of combination, or 'amalgam', between 'archaic' and 'more contemporary forms' in my Lacanian reinterpretation is understood as a form of emulation, where societies adopt what they perceive as a superior model of capitalist development. Lacan contends that the subject's self-identification with the 'appearance' of an attractive other enables it to fill an existential 'lack'. The 'lack' is, in fact, the subject's true ontological 'essence' given its incessant, even if unsuccessful, quest for an exterior and coherent identity to fill it (Solomon 2015: 40–41). Lacanian theory is interesting because of its understanding of 'subjects' as existential 'voids' that permanently generate fantasied objects of desire to placate an always present sense of ontological insecurity (Eberle, 2019).

In this passage, while discussing the notion of the 'privilege of backwardness', Trotsky notes that

Although compelled to follow after the advanced countries, a backward country does not take things in the same order. The privilege of historic backwardness – and such a privilege exists – permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages. Savages throw away their bows and arrows for rifles all at once, without travelling the road which lay between those two weapons in the past. (Trotsky, 2008[1932]: 5)

For Trotsky, backward societies are compelled to adopt the advances of more developed nations, often bypassing intermediate stages. However, what I argue is missing from this analysis is not just the material adoption of these advances, but the unconscious drive behind it. Countries don't just adopt innovations; they feel an emotional imperative to do so, driven by a desire to mitigate the sense of inferiority that comes with perceived 'backwardness'.

This article's proposition that emulation of Western developmental models is a significant element of U&CD under capitalist modernity is possible through Lacan's

characterisation of the interconnection between what he calls the imaginary and symbolic orders of the human psyche (Lacan, 1981). At the imaginary level, individuals create fantasies of who they are (or wish to become) through identifications with idealised objects of desire located at the symbolic order. Lacan's assertion that the 'unconscious is structured like language' means that the sense of 'existential lack' at the imaginary order is translated into language through individuals' permanently failed attempts to find their place in the symbolic order of human culture/society (Chiesa, 2007: 35).

In Lacan's theory, there is a straightforward link between the psychic properties of individuals at the imaginary level and how these are embedded in (and dependent upon) the symbolic level of social relations. The latter provides the desired, albeit illusory, 'symbols' codified through a 'matrix of language' that enables the former's always frustrated pursuit of self-understanding (Lacan, 1981). Lacan conceives the 'Real' as the dimension which constantly (and traumatically) challenges and disrupts the fantasies created to ameliorate individuals' existential lack (Kapoor, 2020). In Lacanian terms, therefore, 'the whip of external necessity' constitutes the symbolic order of postcolonial states and works as an imagined source of desire ingrained in the collective unconsciousness of the so-called 'developing or underdeveloped' countries; that produces a sense of meaningful direction and self-cohesion (De Vries, 2007: 29). The label of 'developing', 'underdeveloped' or 'least developed', which is attached at the symbolic order to a particular group of states inculcates feelings of inferiority and drives agency among political elites who self-perceive as belonging to 'backward' peripheral regions.

The 'whip of external necessity', in that context, becomes not only a structural material necessity, but mainly a promise and aspiration for those 'incomplete' ('underdeveloped') former colonised societies. Lacan offers a powerful interpretation of the 'underdeveloped' as a necessary signifier that denotes a situation of 'lack' which gives rise to and sustains the fantasy of development. The continuous pursuit of illusory Western standards mitigates feelings of existential anxiety deriving from a sense of permanently 'lacking' (or 'lagging' behind) when these states are confronted with the 'Real' dimension of inequality and exploitation. Following from that, it could be argued that not only individual subjects but organised social groups are driven by the desire for a stable sense of 'being in the world' which is pursued through discursively reproducing the qualities of an idealised symbolic order.

The dynamic of 'permanent underachievement' (Antunes de Oliveira, 2018: 46) in the politics of development relates to Lacan's lack and the sense of inferiority that sets in as a result. Although the uneven and combined outcome of development varies, governments in underdeveloped regions aspire the ultimate goal of Western modernity. Ilan Kapoor (2020), for example, engages with Lacanian theory to assert that development is an ideological fantasy that, 'function at the level not simply of dreams or ideas but of institutional practices: desires and fantasies are externalized and materialized in the form of actions and institutional policy-making' (p. XV).

As exemplified later, in the case of Brazil, the *symbolic order* of development models, as producers of 'desire signifiers', co-exists with the *imaginary order* of national communities, whose members' dreams and aspirations are fundamentally shaped by elites' interpretations of these signifiers. These interpretations are embedded in institutional practices and long-standing national narratives of what development is and what the

appropriate policies should be to achieve it. The feeling of inferiority relates to the unresolved 'trauma' deriving from the fantasy of development been constantly disrupted by the structural configuration of permanent underachievement inherent to capitalism's *whip of external necessity*. As conceptualised here, Trotsky's 'whip of external necessity' combines two Lacanian elements:

1. The necessity to conform to (or emulate) hegemonic standards of economic behaviour represented in the (symbolic) capitalist order.
2. The actual power and material configuration of global capitalism which perpetuates unevenness which in Lacanian theory is associated with the dimension of the 'real'.

According to this interpretation, the combination of these two elements is generative of psychological effects, such as anxiety and inferiority complexes, because of states' elites elusive desire for development. Rosenberg (2013), for example, argues that, according to Trotsky, 'inequalities of wealth and power among societies give rise to a 'whip of external necessity' which compels weaker societies to adapt in order to survive' (p. 585). According to Trotsky, national communities' particular features mediate the operation of the 'whip of external necessity'. He defines the 'privilege of backwardness' as the process by which undeveloped nations directly emulate development ideas, policies and technologies from the most advanced capitalist economies without the need to follow through earlier stages (Antunes de Oliveira, 2019: 1157).

However, Trotsky's theory, and later developments of U&CD/societal multiplicity, do not consider the psycho-affective effects of perceptions of inferiority, and affective attachments to ideas of superiority building across coexisting social groups under the 'whip of external necessity' and 'the privilege of backwardness'. In *After Defeat*, Ayse Zarakol (2011) remarks that 'people who have grown up in countries whose modernity has never been in question may not fully understand how all-consuming the stigma of comparative backwardness may become for a society' (p. 6). As conceived in U&CD, development designates a master signifier of what is supposed to count as a telos in social relations even though its common pursuit by various discrete groups leads to uneven, albeit combined, social configurations. In the context of decolonisation, the still fragile identity of newly independent postcolonial states was imbricated with an imaginary 'ideal-ego' represented by the modern state in which 'development' is an essential constitutive element.

As shown earlier, this mode of *uneven and combined affective relationality*, based on emulation, has been organised in the current historical period in terms of a global hierarchy defined by Western civilizational standards. This position is corroborated by some postcolonial scholars who conceive the history of development thought and practice as part of a much broader colonial ontology (Grovoqui 2001: 435). They explore the psychological implications of associating what is claimed inferior categories, such as blackness, backwardness, exoticism and barbarism, to *non-Western under-development*; and superior ones, such as whiteness, civilisation, progress and modernisation to *Western development*. Emulation, in this regard, plays a central function in organising societal co-existence through uniting self-perceived peripheral states around the common goal of

catching-up with ‘development’. In this view, the global institutional and normative frameworks that have emerged to realise the common goal of development work as a ‘desiring machine’, which maintains Third World’s commitment in spite of all its (failed) promises (Ferguson, 1990: 23).

Desire and emulation in Brazil’s imagined ‘development’

In the previous section, I have argued that the ‘the whip of external necessity’ produces, in relation to the notion of ‘development’, objects of desire for ‘underdeveloped/developing/postcolonial’ states. I examine now one example of uneven and combined representation of these desires in the socio-political space known as Latin America. I focus on the case of Brazil as an interesting instantiation of a local interpretation of Western symbolic markers associated to the ‘whip of external necessity’. The case of Brazil interestingly elucidates this article’s primary claim that the theory of U&CD, and its later adaptation to IR through the notion of societal multiplicity, unheeded the psychological implications of the uneven and combined material production of capitalist development.

As argued next, the combination between dominant global capitalist and development ideas, which in this paper I associated with the notion of the ‘whip of external necessity’, with local socio-economic structures and local ruling elites, generated psychosocial interpretations of Brazil’s self-identification as an aspiring advanced nation. I suggest in this section that the element of unevenness in particular has triggered among Brazilian capitalist and political elites sentiments of misplacement and ontological insecurity resulting in attempts to emulate cultural, political and ideological assemblages associated with the advanced capitalist societies of the West.

(Schwarz, Brown, and Rosenberg, 2021) have creatively engaged with U&CD to explain the dynamics of absorption of Western literary standards to Brazil’s socio-cultural context. Schwarz is representative of a coterie of influential Brazilian intellectuals who engaged with the phenomenon of ‘cultural mimicry’ and Brazil’s sense of misplacement and inferiority vis-à-vis the West (Schwarz, 1992). Along similar lines, I argue here that Brazilian elites have traditionally absorbed Brazil’s peripheral, hence uneven, condition in terms of a *deficiency* or *lack* that required permanent psychological healing through narrative constructions that justified and provided solutions to the country’s ‘deficiencies’ vis-à-vis the superior development and civilizational patterns of a desired Western other (Steele, 2008). This psychological element of Brazil’s collective subjectivity has been famously identified by the Brazilian journalist and playwright, Nelson Rodrigues (1993), as a ‘mongrel complex’. According to him, this means,

the inferiority that Brazilians put themselves in relation to the rest of the world. The Brazilian is the reverse of a narcissist, who spits on its own image. The truth is: we do not find personal nor historical pretexts for self-esteem (p. 62).⁶

⁶Author’s translation from the original in Portuguese.

I further explore these claims next through the examination of Jair Bolsonaro's administration (2019–2022) and its *idiosyncratic amalgamation of moral conservatism, a nationalist critique of 'globalism' and the restoration of neoliberal development*, as the latest instalment of Brazil's desired Western image.

In October 2018, Jair Bolsonaro, a divisive far-right political figure, was elected Brazil's president. Bolsonaro's breed of right-wing nationalism is an interesting new phenomenon in the Brazilian political context. It exhibits two opposing facets. In one hand, it associates Western modernity to neoliberal precepts, such as openness to foreign capital and free markets, in an even more radical vein than the neoliberal modernisation model introduced in Brazil in the early 1990s, following the end of the Cold War. During this period, the inevitability of surrendering to market forces modelled on the experience of the United States' *laissez-faire* capitalism was fully embraced as a core dimension of the 'whip of external necessity'. Paulo Guedes, Bolsonaro's Finance Minister, is a Chicago-trained neoliberal economist whose proposed policies for Brazil's return to sustainable economic growth were large-scale privatisation of state firms and assets, pension reform and labour deregulation. This dimension of Bolsonaro's emulation of Western models was a more radical version of Brazil's early attempts in the early 90s to catch-up with market-oriented templates of Western social progress.

The second strand of Bolsonaro's worldview however is grounded on an anti-globalist ideology with no parallel in Brazil's history as an independent state. It opposes core principles and institutions of the post-WWII liberal order. Bolsonaro's former foreign minister, and key ideologue, Ernesto Araujo, disdained 'globalism' and the liberal international values and institutions it represents, which, according to this worldview, have fundamentally destabilised 'true' Western values. This latter element is linked to a radically conservative Christian evangelical undercurrent with strong tropes against socialism, feminism, abortion and exposing virulent homophobic views. Bolsonaro's ideology claims to provide remedies to recover the Brazilian society from ills associated to imagined 'others' such as gays, environmentalists, Marxists and feminists who have allegedly corrupted not only traditional Brazilian values but also societies across the Western world (Casarões and Farias, 2021).

The structural dimension of the 'whip of external necessity' is, in this historical period, related to the global decline of liberal democratic values and institutions associated to processes of economic globalisation, with the resulting rise of illiberal national conservatism in several states across the world, most prominently, the United States. Global processes of ideological and psycho-affective combination are also exemplified by extensive transnational linkages among like-minded groups. These connections are facilitated by international gatherings of ultraconservative politicians, intellectuals and activists such as the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), far-right social media activism, and the direct role of powerful individuals such as Elon Musk, the owner of the social media platform X. Recently, Musk has aligned with Brazil's far-right, now in opposition following the election of Lula da Silva in 2022, to criticise the role of Brazil's Supreme Court in curbing online misinformation. Luis Roberto Barroso, the President of Brazil's Supreme Court, linked Elon Musk to what he described as a 'destructive international far-right movement.' (cited in Financial Times, 2024).

The main international source of Brazil's Western emulation in this context was Donald Trump's United States. Bolsonaro's government closely followed Trump's foreign policy positions even when they seemed completely at odds with the country's economic and political interests. This was the case, for example, in the recurring use of hostile diplomatic language against China, Brazil's main commercial partner, crucial provider of lifesaving COVID-19 vaccines, during the pandemic, and core ally in the BRICS grouping. Bolsonaro called China 'a predator that wants to dominate crucial sectors of our economy' (cited in De Sá Guimarães and De Oliveira E Silva, 2021: 359). According to Araujo's conceptions of Brazil's Western identity, the United States and Brazil are inexorably engaged in an anti-globalist war against leftist-globalist forces, which China is one of the most powerful manifestations. De Sá Guimarães and De Oliveira E Silva, for example, argue that

the logic behind Brazil's new stance [. . .] is to fight against an 'ideological arc' supported by 'globalists and their left-wing sympathizers'. The construction of a moral enemy to be fought against, alongside Trump, went beyond any political alignment seen in past administrations, in which economic considerations took precedence over moral arguments. (De Sá Guimarães and De Oliveira E Silva, 2021: 358)

Bolsonaro has proudly embraced the label of 'Trump of the Tropics', a title that captures the psychological element of emulation discussed in this article. This vicarious identification with a perceived 'superior other' resonates with Lacan's idea of subjects attempting to mirror an idealised image, here symbolised by Donald Trump as an aspirational figure.

In this sense, Bolsonaro's government illustrates Brazil's 'national fantasy of imagined borders' (Comaroff and Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005: 127), framed around a unique interpretation of Western modernity. This is reflected in the Brazilian administration's adoption of Western-originated neoliberal ideas, as a template for economic development, which are uniquely (and unstably) tied to attempts to reproduce in Brazil conservative elements of the populist agenda of some Western leaders, particularly regarding the brand of right-wing populism professed by Donald Trump but also embraced by right-wing leaders in countries such as Hungary and Poland. Domestically, however, in spite of their strong emotional resonance with Bolsonaro's core supporters, these ideas are combined/accommodated to (and at times resisted by) socio-economic configurations of actors who upheld different interpretations and forms of emulation of the Western 'other'.

Building from the previous theoretical discussion, these myriad narratives conjure up fantasised interpretations (and conceivable solutions) to Brazil's existential lack as a 'developing' state. However, under Bolsonaro, traditional processes of Western emulation were cast in a new light between contemporary international symbolic representations of the Western other and their accommodation to particular and long-standing domestic imaginaries of Brazil's always-frustrated desire for an ontologically stable Western identity.

This interpretation of Brazil's incorporation into global processes of uneven and combined development provides a crucial and underexplored perspective on actors' behaviour, which is largely absent in current scholarship on U&CD/societal multiplicity. For

instance, Bolsonaro's scepticism towards China's role in Brazil's economic development is better explained not through purely materially unequal conditions of production and/or rational utility lenses, but by understanding the psycho-affective and ideological attachments of sectors in society and within his government, and their attempts to emulate Western models. I argue that these powerful attachments are linked to changing structural conditions in the 'whip of external necessity' related to the renewed prominence of global conservatism following Donald Trump's election in 2016.

Conclusions

With his notion of societal multiplicity, Justin Rosenberg radically challenges conventional state-focused understandings of what the 'fundamental idea' behind the discipline of IR is. In this article, I have attempted to critically examine the psychological implications of what Rosenberg describes as manifold interactions between human societies. By developing a conceptual framework, drawing on Lacan's theory of the subject and rescuing the element of hierarchical co-existence in Trotsky's U&CD, I have argued that the bonding psychological element underpinning societal multiplicity relates to attempts to emulate a desired standard embedded on a global status hierarchy. In this respect, Western modernity has been over the current historical period the highest standard that defines such hierarchical affective relations.

The research programme on U&CD/societal multiplicity has produced substantial and wide ranging theoretical, conceptual, and empirical scholarship. They focused on issues such as, for example, the global environmental crisis (Corry, 2020), the critical political economy of development/underdevelopment (Antunes de Oliveira, 2021), the international politics of architecture (Tallis, 2020), Brexit and Donald Trump (Rosenberg and Boyle, 2019), science fiction and historical change (Cooper, 2013), liberal theory and the rise of China (A'Zami and Liu, 2022), among several others. Although this growing scholarship has compellingly explored diverse logics and modes of theorising societal multiplicity and their empirical implications, an important gap remains: namely, foregrounding the claim that these uneven encounters are inescapably shaped by the practices and legacies of Western modernity and coloniality. More importantly for the present argument, U&CD and societal multiplicity approaches to global politics have often overlooked the significant psychological aspect of status-seeking behaviour, which has been largely – though not exclusively – expressed in modernity through the emulation of an idealised Western telos by 'developing' states.

In this sense, I have claimed that societal multiplicity/U&CD provides a compelling albeit insufficient theory in terms of capturing the manifold psychological configurations emanating from postcolonial societies' existential desire to emulate what is perceived as superior Western civilizational standards. I have suggested that the idea of emulation, as a key element of societal multiplicity, explains processes whereby social hierarchies are constituted in Western capitalist modernity, shaping/ordering global relations.

I focused on the idea of development as a core signifier of Western modernity, defining the desired standards of civilisation for the underdeveloped other. I have also argued that the 'whip of external necessity' is not simply imposed upon postcolonial states by the forces of global capitalism/imperialism or consciously chosen and adapted to local

conditions. Rather, emulation of external civilizational standards is also the result of psychological drives linked to a perceived sense of inferiority. This relates to the historically unique experience of Western imperialism/colonialism, which was based not just on economic exploitation and political oppression but also on the belief of the absolute superiority of the West over the subjected societies. I empirically engaged with the Brazilian case, as an example of how the uneven assimilation of Western ideas, understood in the context of Trotsky's notion of the 'whip of external necessity', combined with particular domestic conditions led to unique fantasised representations of Brazil's desire for Western modernity.

Ultimately, this article has shown that, if societal multiplicity is to be taken seriously as a theorisation of the 'international', it will need to account for global hierarchical relations under Western modernity and the non-Western collective subjectivities formed by them.

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ORCID iD

Marco Vieira  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6289-3826>

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Author biography

Marco Vieira is an Associate Professor in International Relations at the University of Birmingham, UK. Dr. Vieira has researched and written about the growing impact and influence of postcolonial Southern powers on global order, with a particular interest in the case of Brazil. He has also contributed to theoretical debates on ontological security in International Relations theory.