Is the ‘development’ in ‘uneven and combined development’ the ‘Development’ in ‘Millennium Development Goals’?\(^1\)

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Abstract

As the coherence and legitimacy of the ‘development’ project seems to be increasingly under threat, it has been reaching out for alternative theoretical foundations upon which to base its practices. The reach towards historical sociology is understandable but ultimately politically and practically problematic in a post-colonial age. This is because the assumptions, structure, logic and grammar of historical sociology build in a norm of capitalist development as theorised by Marx and Weber, despite recent efforts to counter its provincial origins. Debates of course do not take place in a political vacuum and reproduce the developmental presumption that what matters – analytically and politically – for Africa is the achievement of ‘modernity’ by ‘development’. I suggest the contestable assumptions of time, history and the notion of modernity itself in historical sociology must lead us to re-evaluate the limitations of it as a way framing the world, as well as the notions of development that have flowed from it. Various studies by Africa specialists both utilise and critique these tools. These are already under question in critical development studies, which

\(^1\) Although this is work at a very early stage of development, thanks go to Marta Iñíguez-de-Heredia for some very helpful comments and pointers. All other comments most welcome.
argues for the de-politicising effects of the epistemic superiority and political authority affected in the name of ‘development’ in contemporary international and African politics. The common tendency in these literatures is a push towards understanding the basic limitations of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ as guiding lenses for analysing the social world.

Keywords: Africa. Historical sociology, development, modernity, time, post-colonialism
Introduction

It is hardly novel to note that although the signifiers may be different, the deeper, hierarchical political relational logic of world politics remains untransformed in public discourse. Whereas it may not be politically acceptable to describe Africa as ‘barbaric’, in relation to a ‘civilised’ Europe, or even ‘backward’ in relation to an ‘advanced’ Europe, it is nonetheless ubiquitously politically acceptable – nay, politically responsible – to think of Africa as ‘developing’, and by implication Europe as ‘developed’. ‘Development’ is the basic lens applied to each and the relationship between the two.

What I want to argue explicitly in this paper is that this is a limiting relational world-political frame that cannot be overcome whilst we continue to structure our social thought around the central problematic of capitalist modernity, which is the founding question for historical sociology as a project. Such a problematic tends, by its logic, to lens Africa and its polities as a deviant or incomplete articulation of a normalised capitalist modernity. The immediate question might arise of why anyone would want to overcome this structure of thought. The answer may be relatively obvious to many, and not at all obvious to others. Indeed, as historical sociology becomes a much broader church, there is an emerging critical line of thought on these questions, such as that pursued by Gurminder Bhambra, that starts to unpack the core problematic of the discipline. Despite this, the premises, logic and conclusions of the main interpretive frames of HS in their neo-Marxian and neo-Weberian forms continue to constitute a barrier to the imagining of a less racially hierarchical and depoliticised form of world politics. The challenge for critical social thought is to dissect and rethink our framings of social reality to render possible different outcomes and actions: using historical sociology in its current mainstream state to think about Africa

\(^2\) Although even this, depressingly, remains a common designation, and of course the concept is particularly central to the notion of ‘uneven and combined development’.


\(^4\) See Bhambra, G. K. (2007). Rethinking modernity: postcolonialism and the sociological imagination, Palgrave Macmillan; Bhambra, G. K. (2010) “Historical sociology, international relations and connected histories.” Cambridge Review of International Affairs 23(1). Note to workshop: In this drafting process, I came to Bhambra’s writings quite late, and as such have not had time to adjust the argument in the light of this.
is unlikely to be able to achieve this without some reflection on its limitations and purposes.

Incidentally, this critical reframing of the social world is precisely what Marx, Weber and their various descendants undertaking the project of historical sociology also saw themselves as doing – questioning dominant narratives of social reality such as to provide a guide for political action and ultimately improvement. This is of course what unites the tradition of humanist inquiry in its diverse and plural forms. What divides the tradition more consistently is the conceptualisation of what the right social and political values are that should underpin inquiry, and these are of course embedded somewhat in the particular historical and political junctures out of which they arise. Hence, social and political thought changes and may be cast aside once its principal assumptions are subverted or no longer tenable, or once its logic has been drastically undermined. The relative marginalisation of ‘God’ as the basis referent for Western political thought has been one such huge displacement.

Yet despite the tumults and changes, various categories also survive and seemingly become, in Chakrabarty’s words, ‘indispensable’ as a means of generating understanding of social reality, despite their ‘inadequate’ status, and yet the act of deliberately provincialising them can open a space for imagining alternatives. The question that comes to mind when consistently encouraged to read ‘Africa’ as ‘developing’ must however be ‘how indispensable are the concepts of modernity and development in understanding world politics?’, and ‘can we possibly imagine anything else?’ I will not, by the end of the paper, have provided many answers to this, but I will suggest tensions between the horizons of ‘development’ and the ‘life-worlds’ of the postcolony.

The argument and structure of the paper is as follows: firstly, I will set up, briefly, what I mean by ‘historical sociology’ (HS). I will then look at the question of ‘generative grammar’ in two of its major traditions – Weber(plus) and Marx(plus) - and argue that they are grounded in conceptions of ‘modernity’, ‘history’ and ‘development’ that depend on particular readings of early 20th century Europe and its

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historical development. This means, for reasons that I will make clear, that historical sociology as a language or lens for apprehending social reality is constrained in terms of its modernist ontology, even as it tries valiantly to displace it and innovate around this generative grammar. Much of the most prominent Africanist literature shares this basic structure, although their attempt to be faithful to the potential for meaningful historical agency generates a number of tensions in their analysis. I will then go on to argue that the notion of ‘development’ that informs the contemporary ‘development community’ is an outgrowth but not abandonment of this mode of thinking that has modified some of the filling and signifiers but not the basic structure of thinking around ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ as being those things which matter most in world politics. Indeed, the (re-)adoption of a more overtly ‘Weberian’ sociological approach to ‘development’ through the concepts of statebuilding and good governance has significantly expanded the ambit of development actors in their sites of intervention in the South. I will conclude by considering the possibilities and implications of ‘provincialising modernity’ as a way of conducting inquiry into the world politics and the international relations of Africa.

To a very large extent I am re-iterating a critique that is being made in many, many places by post-colonial thinkers about the nature of the ways ‘we’ apprehend reality. In particular this argument owes much to Sanjay Seth’s recent IPS piece that draws out the differences between HS and Postcolonial Theory as strategies for challenging Eurocentrism and Pal Ahluwalia’s work on politics and post-colonial theory. Furthermore, there is an extensive ‘post-development’ literature on the problematic nature of ‘development’ and its dependence on a model of Western economy and modernity. That it has not yet been absorbed within the disciplinary boundaries International Relations is not necessarily a surprise.

What I want to do in this paper is to try to address the issue of disciplinary ambivalence about whether we can separate the situated origins of HS from its outputs as a mode of social theory, and in doing so, whether it can hold onto its

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central legitimising and motivating claims to be simply ‘telling superior stories’ about the international without wider reflections on the politics and exclusions of its analysis. This is all the more pressing given that modes of analysing Africa are very closely implicated with the dominant practices of international politics. This is not to argue that academic inquiry must instrumentalise itself to contemporary political agendas, but it is to acknowledge that it does significantly and necessarily interact with them. This is particularly the case for work which is self-consciously concerned with the framing of the international politics of Africa in such a way as to re-think the limited set of political options for engagement. If the paper has one central aim, then, particularly so in the context of the workshop in which it is presented, it is to provoke a response and discussion from historical sociologists and Africanists alike on the question of the adequacy – analytic and political – of a HS frame as a means of understanding critically the constitution of social realities in the service of reframing the international politics of Africa and elsewhere.

**Unpacking the Generative Grammar of Historical Sociology**

“Generative Grammar: a device, as a body of rules, whose output is all of the sentences that are permissible in a given language, while excluding all those that are not permissible.”

These next sections will argue that the generative grammar of the HS research programme commits it to analysing the social world in such a way as to normalise and centralise conceptions of capitalist modernity and development. It will unpack the elements of this generative grammar for Weber, Marx, Hobson and Rosenberg as originators and exemplars respectively of the HS tradition.

Historical sociology is defined by its “concern with the formation and transformation of modernity”.

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about the problem of seeing Africa through a HS lens is that HS is by \textit{definition} about something understood as ‘modernity’ and how it is to be explained. It is crucial to ask, then, what modernity is, and how different schools of historical sociology depict its constituent features. There is what we can label for now a basic \textit{concern for modernity} in each approach to HS.

Another defining feature of HS is a concern to tell \textit{causal} historical stories about the emergence or non-emergence of modernity. This requires a theorisation of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, and some means of distinguishing a ‘good’ causal story from a ‘bad’ causal story. Thus, as in the structure of any causal argument, there are \textit{explanans} – things doing the explaining, and \textit{explananda} – things to be explained. In the case of HS, it is the existence and interaction of a limited number of key social ‘forces’ – e.g. relations of production, state-society relations, military power – that explain historical development and processes and constitute particular \textit{causal logics}. This is the ‘sociological’ aspect of HS.\footnote{Bhambra has a particular critique of causality in HS, which I have not had time to deal with in the piece. See Bhambra, ibid., 2007.}

The ‘historical’ aspect of HS is furnished by what Popper and Chakrabarty identify as ‘historicism’, and what Lawson calls ‘the \textit{underlying} reality that provides the environment for everyday action, events and processes’... which are seen as ‘structures and tendencies’.
\footnote{Lawson, ibid., 357.} This is, in essence, the premise that history is meaningfully understood as ‘historical development’ or ‘historical process’ – not a teleological history, as Chakrabarty points out,\footnote{Chakrabarty, ibid., 23.} but a conception of the intrinsically \textit{connected} but non-homogeneous nature of historical outcomes. This is fundamental to understanding the contributions of HS as a project, particularly in IR whereby it seeks to displace neorealist, ahistorical and static conceptions of the international system.\footnote{Hobden, S. and J. M. Hobson (2002). \textit{Historical sociology of international relations}, Cambridge Univ Pr. ‘Introduction’.} What HS must exclude are versions of history that are either ‘radically historicist’ or ‘history without historicism’\footnote{Hobson, J. M. and G. Lawson (2008). "What is History in International Relations?" \textit{Millennium: Journal of International Studies} \textbf{37}(2): 415-435.} – the claims that either history can only be read in the frame of contemporaneous meaning, or that history is simply ‘one damned thing after
another’. As such, the ‘task of historical sociology became the task of establishing…
the movement of social forms, relations and trends across time and place.’16 As such,
if HS is to be coherent as a project, it must be based on the premise some sort of
‘development’ or ‘movement’. As Rosenberg notes,

“‘development’ connotes processes of directional change over time which can be
theorized by analysing the causal properties of particular structures of social
relationships. Abandon the idea of development in this sense, and the discourse
of historical sociology goes with it, for this is the methodological linchpin of any
notion that sociology can play a role in historical explanation.”17

These core premises – the concern for modernity, causal logics and real historical
development – constitute the ‘generative grammar’ of HS. However, in order to
discuss its constraints as a critical approach, I will discuss the more specific
generative grammars of Marx and Weber – conceptually central to the discipline –
with Rosenberg and Hobson, who are key representatives of where HS in IR currently
stands along these tendencies. Despite the conscious efforts to address the problem of
‘Eurocentrism’ within the latter two accounts, I argue that they are constrained by the
generative grammar of their own models to be only able to view contemporary Africa
primarily as fundamentally ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘backward’, these ultimate
conclusions of the inquiry being already presupposed in the set-up. Again, whilst
critical voices are beginning to unpick this problematic, the central writers within HS
have sought to absorb them within HS without modifying the central structures of the
analysis.18

What is Modernity in Historical Sociology?

A conception of ‘modernity’ is the basic ontology for both Weber’s and Marx’s social
theory, i.e. modernity and its emergence are the basic concerns of their inquiry. For
Marx, the core ontological preoccupation is the nature of relationships in society as

16 Lawson, ibid., 358.
17 Rosenberg, J. (2006). "Why is there no international historical sociology?” European Journal of
18 Bhambra, (2010), ibid.
relating to the means of production. In modern capitalist societies, as differentiated from agrarian and feudal societies, this is the relationship between capitalists and the proletariat. It is along the relationship to the means of production that society is fundamentally organised, and it is changes in the relationships of antagonistic classes that is historically significant.

For Weber, ‘modernity’ is perhaps best considered an ‘ideal-type’, which consists of a series of rationalisations: “the rationalised economy, bureaucracy as the rationalised organisation, the modern state as based on the formal procedures and rules of rational-legal authority”. Whilst Weber shares Marx’s basic concern with the origins and development of capitalism, his approach to what is historically significant is more multidimensional. For example, he allows for a more autonomous role for ideas – e.g. Protestantism – as underpinning the development of society and envisages at least three relevantly different kinds of social group actors – classes, status groups and parties.

Hobson argues that both Weber’s and Marx’s conceptions of modernity are foundationally Orientalist in their meaning. For Weber, ‘modernity’ was about the rationalisation and de-personalisation of the apparatus of the state and the emergence of modern capitalism; features which he contrasted with the patrimonial, superstitious, undifferentiated nature of Eastern state-society relations. Marx, too saw modernity – i.e. advanced capitalism – as existing only in the West and not in the East, which was constrained through oriental despotism to the ‘Asiatic mode of production’, and as such pre-historical. As such, the only possibility for advancement and development was through the Western bourgeoisie prising open these economies through European imperialism. As Hobson demonstrates and Zimmerman further argues for Weber, their conceptions of modernity were intertwined with their view of non-European peoples as being un-modern.

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20 Ibid.,
22 Ibid., 12.
What is interesting is that subsequent HS theorists have attempted to save the basic understandings of modernity present in Marx and Weber – a particular conception of the state, relationship between state and society, relations of production between capital and labour under conditions of industrialism – whilst attempting to ignore or actively divest such understandings of their ‘Eurocentric’ character. This is very clearly Hobson’s move in response to what he describes as Eurocentrism in Marx and Weber – what he shows, using but inverting the Marxian concept of late development and the Weberian account of modernity – is simply that the East and not the West was the prime historical mover of this development.24 Whilst dissolving the relationship between ‘modernity’ and ‘the West’, Hobson nonetheless retains the ‘development’ of ‘modernity’ as the basic object of his research framework, and class relations, technological development and dispositional religious identities as doing the explanatory work. In this sense, he uses a number of classically ‘Weberian’ strategies. This targets and successfully displaces the crassest examples of ‘Eurocentricism’, which apparently rest on the claim that European development was temporally prior and morally superior to non-European development, and thus expanded out in one direction. However, it does not displace or interrogate the possibly parochial nature of the analytic framing in and of itself.

Rosenberg very clearly sees and attempts to confront the problem of ‘teleological fallacy and ethnocentric prejudice’ that might arise from the category of ‘development’, and spells out a case for it remaining a category derived logically from human history rather than a murky prejudice embedded into the methodology of historical sociological thought.25 It is worth going into his argument in detail here, since it illuminates acutely and precisely the issues that HS faces as a purported universal social theory.

Rosenberg argues that:

“one need make no teleological assumptions in order to register the fact that over this period the general social conditions have indeed undergone a number of

24 Ibid., 20.
large changes… Hunter-gather, agrarian and industrializing societies have in fact predominated in the course of human existence in chronologically successive periods…Here at any rate the world historians agree.”26 [my emphases]

Even if world historians agree, it seems at first that they must agree on the following key assumption: human history is best defined, understood and periodised according to the dominant modes of economic production undertaken at any one time, and these can be meaningfully understood at an aggregated level. Built into this are (at least) three other assumptions: firstly, that human history is transparent and sequential. As Hutchings argues, this is a relatively modern assumption made by world historians which is only enabled by a conception of time as chronotic.27 Secondly, it must be assumed that what constitutes any relevant historical moment, for the purposes of causal analysis, is the economic basis of social organisation. As I will discuss shortly, this at very least needs to be argued rather than assumed since it strongly limits the significance of other potential ways of grounding readings of history. Thirdly, it must assume the possibility of a ‘view from nowhere’ imagination of an aggregated world history, not lensed through the contemporaneous concerns of the day but able to discern ‘real’ patterns. Yet, if one takes seriously the epistemological critique of history, as Suganami does, such a position also needs to be at least justified rather than unproblematically assumed.28

Rosenberg also carefully notes that the concept of development depends on a ‘cumulative movement’ and builds this into the next step of the argument:

‘No one disputes that these three types of society are distinguished – each from its predecessor – by ‘step-level’ augmentations in the productive transformation of nature, the orchestration of social power and the cultural rationalization of knowledge forms. Empirically therefore, there is a sequence in historical time in which types of human society which have arisen in succession would also have

26 Ibid.,
to be placed each on a ‘higher’ level than the last in terms of an *ascending linear scale* drawn within each of these three abstract, comparative dimensions. There exists, in other words, an *on a very broad level*, a real historical referent to the term ‘development’.\(^{29}\) [original emphases in bold, mine in italics]

It is in this section that Rosenberg’s argument becomes basically endogenous to itself. If one has already accepted that 1) societies can only be typified in this specific way, and 2) what defines this typification is positioning along Rosenberg’s identified axes, and 3) that these axes represent primarily *rankable* rather than non-rankable facets of social existence, then yes, ‘development’ is a real historical phenomenon, presupposed by this set of premises. This is, however, to accept an awful lot, notwithstanding Rosenberg’s claim that ‘no one disputes’ their content.

Much seems to hinge on the claim that this takes place ‘on a very broad level’. On the level of the particular of course, it seems chronological reversals on these axes are eminently possible. For example, in Mozambique since independence, there were clear periods of decline in the productive transformation of nature and active reversals to subsistence farming in many of the post-colonial rural areas that had previously been industrialised.\(^{30}\) In Britain, it could be argued that after the fall of the Roman Empire, there were decreases both in the orchestration of social power and the cultural rationalisation of knowledge forms. Thus if we are to posit a ‘real’ historical referent for development, as Rosenberg would like, it can only be a widescale one. Rosenberg goes on to argue, *contra* Nisbet, that the problems in terms of conceiving development thus can be solved through conceiving it as ‘uneven and combined’.\(^{31}\) However, this line of argument is premised on the idea that Nisbet’s challenge of the multilinearity and interactivity of history is confined to the “defective historical sociological method” [my emphasis].\(^{32}\)

The bigger challenge to Rosenberg’s position is the problem mounted to the question of such a type of historicism itself. According to Chakrabarty:

\(^{29}\) Rosenberg, ibid., 329-330.


\(^{31}\) Rosenberg., ibid., 334.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 333.
“…we may say that ‘historicism’ is a mode of thinking with the following characteristics. It tells us that in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as an historically developing entity, that is, first, as an individual and unique whole – as some kind of unity at least in potential – and, second, as something that develops over time. Historicism typically can allow for complexities and zigzags in this development; it seeks to find the general in the particular, and it does not entail any necessary assumptions of teleology. But the idea of development and the assumption that a certain amount of time elapses in the very process of development are critical to this understanding. Needless to say, this passage of time that is constitutive of both the narrative and the concept of development is, in the famous words of Walter Benjamin, the secular, empty, and homogenous time of history.”33

This description would entirely fit the claims that Rosenberg wishes to make about the notion of historical development. However, as Chakrabarty notes, in his reading of Marx, this account of development could only make sense through a conscious effort to distinguish what did contribute to the ‘histories posited by capital’ from that did not belong to its ‘life process’.34 On my reading of Rosenberg’s assumptions, this distinction is made by assuming that ‘history’ itself is necessarily and obviously constituted of broad changes in modes of production. For Marx, this assumption is achieved through the explicit hiving off and abstraction of the ‘real’ motions of capital that Rosenberg relies on as basic historical fact. Marx can only achieve this through the progressive ranking of advanced capitalism against the backward nature of other economies, with which he is entirely comfortable because he is explicitly arguing for an underpinning historical teleology in his approach. That is to say, that Marx does not have a problem with seeing History moving in a single direction, and it is this logic that underpins Marxist historiography, upon which Rosenberg must rely.

What Hobson and Rosenberg do not do, ultimately, is acknowledge that the particular socio-historical origins of the generative grammar of Marx and Weber pervade the rest of their work. At that point, it is less useful to describe it as ‘Eurocentric’, given the now imprecise meanings of the term, as something like ‘moderno-normative’. This is a much bigger problem, analytically and politically, than the temporal errors

33 Chakrabarty, ibid., 22-23.
34 Ibid., 50.
about the development of the East committed in Weber et al or the unsophisticated and degrading analysis of the East by Marx. It is about how they constructed *what counted as being historically significant* or meaningful, and their assumptions about what could constitute a ‘cause’, that necessarily provincialise the analysis as being of its time, place and purpose.

This would not be a problem were it not for the claims within historical sociology to be dealing with what is ‘real’ or ‘causal’ in social science: the evaluation of the quality of the claims is done against a framework that already presupposes the preference for a modernist explanation over others. As Chakrabarty points out, there is no room for gods or deities as agents to explain any events in Marx’s understanding of ‘History 1’ i.e. his historical materialism.\(^{35}\) Logically, since Marx is concerned with historical changes in the relations of production, and their generation through antagonistic class relations, there is no way in which things outside this logic could be causally generative. There is, embedded in the logic of the system, no historically significant role attributed to other organising principles such as relations of gender, nor of race – they can neither be explanans nor explanandum in any meaningful sense.\(^{36}\) The processes of the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of women are not of any historical significance, because they are simply expressions or products of particular outcomes of the struggle over control of the means of production – they cannot help us periodise or discern causal mechanisms of development. Twentieth century decolonisation, on this logic, is not a *historically significant* event on a Marxian account of world history – in fact the key claim of dependency theory in HS is that *decolonisation in the twentieth century was not a significant historical event in and of itself.*\(^{37}\) This conclusion also follows from the logic of Weberian and neo-Weberian analysis, which is preoccupied with the development of capitalist modernity through e.g. the rationalisation of bureaucratic structures, the formal depersonalisation of rule and the emergence of a rationalised economy.

\(^{35}\) Chakrabarty, ibid.


‘Development Studies’ and the varying influence of HS

Although the development industry as a whole has seen a wide range of shifts in thinking, and particularly shifts in the different social and economic theories underpinning its practices, it has nonetheless remained (obviously) resolutely tied to the notion of ‘development’ in some form, whilst often denuding it of much of the complex analytic claims entailed by such a position. Much more obviously than HS, its directions are tied to the contemporaneous political struggles of the day and the emergence of different actors within the ‘development industry’. I argue that it has tended to fall back on HS in times of intellectual and political crisis as a form of re-establishing its scientific and objective credentials. This happened with the rise of dependency theory in the 1970s, and is happening again with current development discourses of statebuilding, capacity building and good governance. Whilst from the perspective of HS it is possible to critique many aspects of the development industry and its supportive framework of development studies, including implementation, assumptions, the generally ahistorical nature of its claims and its general optimism about the compatibility of different fronts of development, as I have previously established, it also reinforces the general presupposition that ‘development’ is a historically real phenomenon and that the emergence of ‘modernity’ can be distilled to a number of core significant causes.

Colin Leys’ account of the rise and fall of Development Theory argues that different historical forces at different times influenced the nature of development theory, but that the underpinnings of the idea of ‘development’ are in some ways direct inheritors of Marxian and Hegelian traditions in Western thought and the concept of ‘modernity’. Its emergence was a direct consequence of trying to conceptualise and mediate the appropriate relationship between Europe and its former colonies in the wake of decolonisation. However, due a number of factors, including the ardour of its proponents and the anti-Marxian nature of the Cold War academy, its early theorists were unable to confront the conceptual legacies of Marx that had delivered the main theoretical framing of capitalist development in the first place. Instead, the early proponents re-conceived ‘development’ as ‘modernisation’: innocuous in terms of

political connotations, seemingly charitable, western and progressive in terms of social orientation, and all based around the Keynesian conception of the state as main architect of development.\textsuperscript{39}

However, the arguments and principles of HS re-emerged within development studies as critiques, from both the left and the right, of mainstream development principles, which were seen to be failing in India and other parts of the ‘developing world’. Most obviously, this came in the form of dependency and world systems theory through the work of Andre Gunder Frank based on the Latin American experiences of underdevelopment, and of Immanuel Wallerstein, both of which re-animated the discussion on the structures of capitalism in the world.\textsuperscript{40} However, it also came in the form of the ‘political development’ theories of Samuel Huntington in the late 1960s, which effectively called for a more Weberian approach to development, in the recognition of the role of political institutions in order to avoid ‘decay’ in the developing world.\textsuperscript{41} This line of argument legitimated a more penetrative engagement inside Southern governmental institutions by American and European development agencies. The deep connections between the centrality of ‘development’ underpinning Western thought and contemporary practices of ‘development’ might be best lensed through the work of Francis Fukuyama, who moves from a neo-Hegelian account of \textit{The End of History} to a clear and prescriptive monograph about \textit{Statebuilding and World Order}.\textsuperscript{42}

Both of these lines of argument, of course, derived their authority from the necessary presuppositions that ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ were both historical norms and historical \textit{desiderata}. Quite obviously, the argument was about how to achieve it more quickly and securely than might otherwise be expected, not what it meant to do so. To this extent, there was a symbiotic interplay of the ‘objective’ analyses and critiques of HS and the policies and practices of ‘development’. It is because of this that HS could

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 10-11.
remain a cogent and engaged critic of development theories and practices – because there were many shared ontologies between the post-independence practice of international development and the twentieth-century intellectual project of exercising the sociological imagination, even under situations where their utopias were divergent.

The argument here is not that HS as an approach to social theory was somehow directly responsible for the myriad complex, contradictory and sometimes strange turns in development theory and practices over the period. Clearly, these answered to many other masters and reflected a much more diverse set of concerns from different places. The emergence of the Human Development Index in the 1990s within the UN is one such phenomenon which took up activist concerns about the overly economic tenor of development assistance and forced an explicit expansion of it into multiple other realms, including health, democratic representation and the environment.43 The argument is that both policies of development and HS labour under common suppositions about the generally objective developmental nature of capitalist modernity, whether or not it is welcomed – to put it in the terms of the earlier argument, both are ‘moderno-normative’. It does not seem far-fetched, however, in the contemporary world to note that the discourse of ‘development’ understood as a fight against poverty and social ills in the global South has at least in the Western public media taken on a very moralised and crusading tone, with the virtual erasure of consciousness of it as a highly political activity.44

The study of Africa and the selective use of Historical Sociology: analysis, agency, angst

The seeming disconnection between specialists in the study of Africa and Historical Sociologists is, I suggest, not simply a function of their being interested in micro- and macro-level phenomena respectively. Rather, it seems to reflect a troubling tension

between the various notions of ‘development’ and ‘modernity’ and competing scholastic and political interests in narrating the life-worlds of African political space as being meaningful and understandable. As suggested earlier, if there is a basic presumption that history is about the development of societies along sequential paths of rationalisation or capital-intensification, other historical events become necessarily epiphenomenal, or requiring of explanation for their deviation. However, much of the major literature on ‘Africa’ written by area specialists critiques the general applicability of concepts of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ as developed in the HS literature.

A primary example of such a text is Chabal and Daloz’s *Africa Works: Disorder as a Political Instrument*.45 Chabal and Daloz say that must argue their case for the ‘rational’ nature of African political order in terms that are “universal analytical tools,”46 with which to comprehend the “crisis of modernity” evident in African polities.47 The analysis proceeds by outlining the ways in which the apparent disorder and irrationality of African societies is in fact the production of a particular type of modernity – a “modernity without development” or formalisation.48 Through engagement with the political, the ‘cultural’ and the economic domains, the authors argue for the durability of this patterning of African social (in its broadest sense) organisation.

Although they seem to be using a number of ‘moderno-normative’ sociological categories and modes of reasoning in their research, ultimately the analysis seems to lead towards a critique of HS as it has been described earlier in the paper, insofar as it pushes hard for an understanding of *really-existing and significant historical heterogeneity of modernity* in the case of contemporary Africa’s experiences. In leaning on the interpretive interpretation of Weber, they argue, amongst other reasons for apparent ‘disorder’ that African political society must be seen as fundamentally

46 Ibid., xvii.
47 Ibid., xviii.
48 Ibid.
reluctant to accept Western political and socio-economic versions of political order, in part because they do not accord with a core number of cultural and political values, which realms of meaning restrict what is politically possible at any one time.\footnote{Ibid., 132.} In their description of these values, the question of identity and the notions of rationality, Chabal and Daloz are attempting to deliver the sense of a distinctive African ‘life-world’ – a horizon of meaning within which behaviour is intelligible and intelligent. Thus, throughout the work there is a tension between the historicist and interpretive strands of sociological explanation. This can be understood insofar as Chabal and Daloz principally seek to tell a convincing and general story about the contemporary state of Africa. Indeed, they expressly disavow engagement with the question of development’s political desirability, other than to point out that it may not have happened on the continent as expected. By the end of the work it is clear that the term ‘modernity’ is no longer being used as a sociological category in the sense used by HS, but rather to convey a sense of contemporaneity and interconnectedness to Africa’s contemporary social realities.

Thus the critique that this type of study presents to HS as understood is the critique of the ontological realism of the HS framework argued for by Lawson, and the conception of history-as-development deployed by Rosenberg. On Chabal and Daloz’s reading, the organisation of social reality depends on basically different mechanisms, which do not point to an eventual modernising of Africa in the terms anticipated by HS, which in turn undermines the claims to the underlying ontological ‘realism’ upon which its core claims rest. Rather, it supports a reading of the world as being organised around significantly different logics that are meaningfully explained at the level of the life-world rather than the underlying historical forces.

The politics of knowledge production about Africa: can we provincialise ‘modernity’ and ‘development’?

Above I argued that, on the definitional terms of Marxian and Weberian HS, decolonisation was not a historically significant event, given that it did not express
particular changes in the relations of production, nor in the rationalisation of the state. And yet, this claim seems deeply counter-intuitive, particularly when exploring the current political discourses and symbols used in the politics of Sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, decolonisation can be viewed as historically an enormously significant event, but only so if you organise history around something else, such as changes in the status and agency of the apparently subordinated political subject, rather than changes in class relations or underlying movements towards an image of modernity and development. What reasons might we have for preferring one form over the other?

The answer for post-independence and anti-colonial politicians was of course a self-consciously political one, generated out of the perceived need to reverse or at least counteract the narratives of African incapacity or political immaturity that had characterised the justifications for ongoing colonialism. The historical significance of decolonisation is then intrinsically tied to the political objectives of telling the story thus, which were necessarily plural, connected to both sustaining elite power, and trying to sediment a new sense of political subjectivity amongst citizens.

A return to an understanding of history-as-development at very least has major political implications; the de-centring of politicised and political subjectivity in the postcolony and the re-focusing of political attention upon ways in which African countries can or cannot emulate trajectories tracked by particular generations of European social theorists. In this sense it does not matter so much whether this is through the consideration of ‘uneven and combined development’ or the ‘Millennium Development Goals’: both depend on a particular concern with an understanding of what it means to be ‘modern’ or ‘developed’, although of course the former framework is rather more pessimistic about the eventual effects of capitalism, and the latter far more prescriptive at the level of the person of what it means to be ‘developed’. Both exclude the possibility of historically significant other futures or subjectivities through allowing for the contestability of their authoritative readings.

The move made in the post-colonial literature has been to attempt to pluralise the intellectual space through either the telling of subaltern histories, the development of an awareness of ‘connected histories’, or a grappling with the question of
intersectionality of different modes of being.\textsuperscript{50} This work suggests collectively that the importance of having different histories is precisely to reflect these different modes of being that the postcolony finds itself in, both engaged in the attempt to understand the structure of different modes of domination, for which it instrumentalises a number of HS frameworks, but also to maintain the ‘difference’ of political and personal subjectivities which create their own meaningful history. However, even work such as Chakrabarty’s, through setting up a bifurcated reality seems to concede the indispensability of the ‘modern’, whilst simultaneously provincialising the experiences of Europe.

Is it ultimately possible to provincialise the concepts of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ when they are so deeply embedded into the way that we understand the world and particularly the world of international politics? Is it even desirable to do so, given that this seems to be the terrain on which the political plays out – without some sort of goal-directed politics there is often the suggestion, as was made repeatedly towards the post-modern theorists, that the political itself is under threat? I would argue that it is at least worth finding out, such that the political can be a sphere of self-conscious reflection, rather than automatic ‘baptism’ into a particular developmental mindset.\textsuperscript{51} Historical sociology, as the mechanism for ‘discovering’ historical development, requires that history, and perhaps by implication ‘being’, are structured around these concepts of development and modernity, or at least that these concepts are of primary usefulness. They may be of primary usefulness, although I would argue that that has to do with the existing political status of modernist history and the centrality of the concept of ‘development’ than the ability to discern the ‘real’ amongst the complex life-worlds of the universe.

I do not think that it is a stretch to see the ongoing pathologies of the development industry in Africa as being in party the product of an inability to fundamentally challenge the embedded historical assumption of ‘development’ in the dominant systems of thought. In the context of countries receiving ‘development assistance’, it

\textsuperscript{50} These can be read through the Subaltern Studies project, Bhambra’s Rethinking Modernity (ibid.), Chakrabarty’s Provincialising Europe, Mohanty’s work on Third World Feminism.

is absolutely imperative on a number of levels to consistently re-politicise the notion of ‘development’ and maintain a consciousnessness of the intellectual baggage that it brings with it, which is very rarely open to intellectual or democratic scrutiny. In this sense, the task of ‘provincialising’ ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ becomes a political as well as simply intellectual or aesthetic endeavour, and most particularly so in regions where much political authority is wielded by the ‘knowers’ of ‘development’ and ‘modernity’.52

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that HS is a way of understanding the world that is tied to the structuring concepts of ‘development’ and ‘modernity’, which produce a particular understanding of history and social reality that is necessarily restricted and parochial, despite attempts to overcome or avoid this. It has fed in at various junctures to ‘development theory’ and the reconceptualisation of the problems of modernity, particularly in Africa, that have heavily structured the discourses of politics both about and within the continent, which has led to the diminuition of its political horizons and choices. I have suggested that Africanist literature has found itself unable to fully absorb the theoretical stipulates of HS and has instead tended to use but ultimately subvert its moderno-normative orientation. I have concluded by reflecting on the possibilities for what might be involved in ‘de-centring’ or ‘provinicalising’ the concepts of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’.

As noted at the start of the paper, its principal aim in the context of the workshop is to provoke discussion and thought about this central issue: how far is it politically and intellectually fruitful to use HS in its main forms as a way to understand or explain ‘Africa’, without reproducing parochial norms of modernity and development that seem to restrict rather than open up political choices? Whilst I do not claim to have made much headway in the imagination of alternatives, at very least I hope to have established the validity of the question.

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