

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

Warwick Research Collective

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In recent years, the field of world literature has become quite a crowded place. With an ever-expanding number of guides, anthologies, companions, monographs, special issues, and conferences devoted to this field, it often feels like there is little left to be said about the “new” world literature. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the new world literature is that its “newness” seems to be paired with a sense of exhaustion, as if its primary theoretical interventions have already become a sort of orthodoxy. Each year sees dozens of new books on the subject being rolled out, but most of these give one the sense that they are more interested in filling in the blank regions of the literary map than in radically revising our understanding of world literature.

The singular accomplishment of the Warwick Research Collective’s (WReC) *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* is to break through this scholarly consensus. The book aims to provide a Marxist, materialist alternative to what the authors diagnose as the “idealist version of comparatism” guiding much of the current scholarship on world literature (24-5). The main problem with these studies is that they champion what the WReC calls the “level playing field thesis,” which they define as the belief that literary studies should strive to study all languages and literatures equally (22). For the WReC, this belief is not only an idealist fantasy but a dangerous one at that, since it obscures the very real economic and political inequalities that make some languages and literatures more dominant than others. To say that Swahili, Urdu, Armenian, and other “minor” languages should be studied with the same rigor as English may sound like a progressive project, but one can only imagine that these languages are “equal” to English if one completely ignores the fact that English has become the language of the marketplace for a good portion of the world’s population. And by failing to register this fact, “idealist” comparatism can ultimately end up fetishizing “multilingualism ... (and hence the authority of professional experience)” over and against the power relations that are encoded in the ways that language is actually used in everyday life (27).

*Combined and Uneven Development* proposes replacing this idealist fantasy with a renewed focus on how the capitalist world-system has shaped the formal and geographical make-up of world literature from the 1800s up to today. Building on Trotsky’s dictum that capitalism expands through “uneven and combined development,”

the WReC authors identify capitalism's distinguishing characteristic as a tendency to weld itself onto pre-existing class and power structures, which continue to exist side-by-side with more "advanced" capitalist formations (10). For the WReC, this "unevenness" is not simply the economic background against which literary texts are produced, but the very substance out of which literary form is created. Texts written in an "uneven" environment will retain echoes of their patchwork origins in their depictions of "discrepant encounters, alienation effects, surreal cross-linkages, unidentified freakish objects" (17). The authors claim that this "unevenness" appears in both the form and the content of such texts, but the emphasis falls much more heavily on formal structure than on content. As is often the case for Marxist-inflected literary theory, genres tend to operate here as synecdoches for larger socioeconomic formations, so that economic relations are expressed most immediately on the level of narrative form.

On this note, it is important to stress that *Combined and Uneven Development* is as much a theoretical reflection on the ontology of world literature as it is an examination of actually existing world literature. While the book does contain several case studies (e.g., of Tayeb Salih, Victor Pelevin, Ivan Vladislavic, and Peter Pist'aneek) and references an imposingly vast range of novels from across the globe, its focus is first and foremost on articulating a general theory of world literature. In addition to the "combined and uneven development" of the book's title, the central term for this theory is "irrealism," a designation that the WReC applies to any novel that mixes the formal characteristics of "ideal-type" realism with local, "residual forms"—folkloric knowledge, oral storytelling, local dialects, and so on (72, 76). These texts are described as "irrealist" because their stylistic heterogeneity often appears as fantastical when confronted from the perspective of the "ideal-type" realist novel. Yet it would be a mistake, the WReC cautions, to categorize "irrealism" as the antithesis of realism, given that such narrative forms manage to register a socioeconomic reality that "ideal-type" realism simply cannot. Rather, the formal unevenness of such "irrealist" texts are symptomatic of their "(semi-)peripheral" position in the world-system, where the effects of structural unevenness are felt more acutely than in the core regions of the world-system (57). As the WReC explains, authors in these "(semi-)peripheral" regions are quick to lose faith in the bureaucratic data "that would come in time to constitute the 'raw material' for the realist novel," which is seen by them more as a tool for capitalist and/or imperial oppression than as an archive of "objective" fact (74). This leads these writers to search for "alternative cultural archives" from which to mount a critique of capitalist domination, and thus to the mixing of realist novel and local narrative form that we find in magical realism, gothic fiction, and other "irrealist" genres (76).

The other feature of *Combined and Uneven Development* that will likely prove interesting to scholars is its method of composition. The book is the product of a joint authorship amongst the seven scholars who together make up the WReC: Sharae Deckard, Nicholas Lawrence, Neil Lazarus, Graeme Macdonald, Upamanyu Pablo

Mukherjee, Benita Parry, and Stephen Shapiro. Individual members of the WReC drafted the various sections of the book, which were then revised by the group's other members. The authors point out that this collaborative method "should never be mistaken for the harmonious reconciliation of differences," yet what is most striking about *Combined and Uneven Development* is how well its sections cohere (ix). The approach to "irrealist" literature remains remarkably consistent across the book's six chapters, with the later case studies in chapters 3 through 6 helping to concretize what can otherwise veer into a very abstract discussion of Marxist literary theory. Rather than reveal any significant differences, these later chapters serve more to reinforce the authors' initial theoretical frame by showing how it can apply to any number of temporally and geographically distant locales, from the Sudan in the 1960s to present-day Russia.

The collaborative nature of this work also means that it needs to be read in dialogue with the WReC members' individual scholarship. Indeed, one of the limitations endemic to any book as far-reaching and ambitious as this one is that finer details tend to get lost in the midst of sweeping theoretical claims. Thus, while we receive a convincing account of how capitalism's uneven nature affects literary form, the volume contains rather sparse details about the material realities of specific literary cultures. The focus is more on how capitalism operates on a systemic level than on how particular literary cultures have developed in tandem with capitalist pressures. I do not necessarily see this as a shortcoming, but it does mean that a curious reader will have to direct his or her attention to the monographs and articles written by individual WReC members, which contain much more expansive details about book history, the publishing industry, literary movements, and mass culture (e.g., Stephen Shapiro's *Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel*, Neil Lazarus's *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, and Pablo Mukherjee's *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire*). In this sense, it is perhaps best to treat *Combined and Uneven Development* as a sort of theoretical overture to the WReC's other scholarship. It presents a sweeping historical narrative that no monograph on a single literary subspeciality could support, yet one whose intricacies can only be fully worked out in more specialized works. As such, I would recommend the book as an introductory piece that can double as an entrée into the WReC's other projects, all of which are well worth the read.