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Marx’s Theory on the Dialectical Function of Capitalism

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ABSTRACT
This article analyses Marx’s conviction that the expansion of the capitalist mode of production was a basic prerequisite for the birth of communist society. It overviews this idea through the whole of Marx’s oeuvre, from his early political writings to the studies of the last decade. Particular relevance is given to the analysis of Capital and its preparatory manuscripts, where Marx highlighted in depth the fundamental relationship between the productive growth generated by the capitalist mode of production and the preconditions for the communist society for which the workers’ movement must struggle. Finally, the article shows that in the end of his life—for example when he studied the possible developments of the rural commune (obshchina) in Russia—Marx did not change his basic ideas about the profile of future communist society, as he sketched it from the Grundrisse on. Guided by hostility to schematism he thought it might be possible that the revolution would break out in forms and conditions that had never been considered before.

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1. The Importance of the Development of Capitalism in Marx’s Early Political Works

The conviction that expansion of the capitalist mode of production was a basic prerequisite for the birth of communist society runs through the whole of Marx’s oeuvre. In one of his first public lectures, which he gave at the German Workers’ Association in Brussels and incorporated into a preparatory manuscript entitled “Wages,” Marx spoke of a “positive aspect of capital,” of large-scale industry, of free competition, of the world market” (1976, 436). To the workers who had come to listen to him, he said:

I do not need to explain to you in detail how without these production relations neither the means of production—the material means for the emancipation of the proletariat and the foundation of a new society—would have been created, nor would the proletariat itself have taken to the unification and development through which it is really capable of revolutionizing the old society and itself. (Marx 1976, 436)

In the Manifesto of the Communist Party, he argued with Engels that revolutionary attempts by the working class during the final crisis of feudal society had been doomed to failure, “owing to the then-undeveloped state of the proletariat, as well as to the absence of the material conditions for its emancipation, conditions [.] that could be
produced by the impending bourgeois epoch alone” (Marx and Engels 1976, 514). Nevertheless, he recognized more than one merit in that period: not only had it “put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations” (486); “for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it [had] substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (487). Marx and Engels did not hesitate to declare that “the bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part” (486). By making use of geographical discoveries and the nascent world market, it had “given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country” (488). Moreover, in the course of barely a century, “the bourgeoisie [had] created more colossal and more massive productive forces than all preceding generations together” (489). This had been possible once it had “subjected the country to the rule of the towns” and rescued “a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life” so widespread in European feudal society (488). More important still, the bourgeoisie had “forged the weapons that bring death to itself” and the human beings to use them: “the modern working class, the proletarians” (490); these were growing at the same pace at which the bourgeoisie was expanding. For Marx and Engels, “the advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association” (496).

Marx developed similar ideas in The Class Struggles in France, arguing that only the rule of the bourgeoisie “tears up the roots of feudal society and levels the ground on which a proletarian revolution is alone possible” (Marx 1978, 56). Also in the early 1850s, when commenting on the principal political events of the time, he further theorized the idea of capitalism as a necessary prerequisite for the birth of a new type of society. In one of the reviews, he wrote hand in hand with Engels for the Neue Rheinische Zeitung, he argued that in China “in eight years the calico bales of the English bourgeoisie [had] brought the oldest and least perturbable kingdom on earth to the eve of a social upheaval, which, in any event, is bound to have the most significant results for civilization” (Marx and Engels 1978, 267).

Three years later, in “The Future Results of British Rule in India,” he asserted: “England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (Marx 1979a, 217–218). He had no illusions about the basic features of capitalism, being well aware that the bourgeoisie had never “effected a progress without dragging individuals and people through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation” (221). But he was also convinced that world trade and the development of the productive forces of human beings, through the transformation of material production into “scientific domination of natural agencies,” were creating the basis for a different society: “bourgeois industry and commerce [would] create these material conditions of a new world” (222).

Marx’s views on the British presence in India were amended a few years later, in an article for the New York Tribune on the Sepoy rebellion, when he resolutely sided with those “attempting to expel the foreign conquerors” (Marx 1986, 341). His judgment on capitalism, on the other hand, was reaffirmed, with a more political edge, in the brilliant “Speech at the Anniversary of the People’s Paper.” Here, in recalling that historically unprecedented industrial and scientific forces had come into being with capitalism, he told the militants present at the event that “steam, electricity and the self-acting mule
were revolutionists of a rather more dangerous character than even the citizens Barbès, Raspail and Blanqui” (Marx 1980, 655).

2. The Conception of Capitalism in Marx’s Economic Writings

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx repeated several times the idea that certain “civilizing tendencies” of society manifested themselves with capitalism (Marx 1973, 414). He mentioned the “civilizing tendency of external trade” (256), as well as the “propagandistic (civilizing) tendency” of the “production of capital,” an “exclusive” property that had never manifested itself in “earlier conditions of production” (542). He even went so far as to quote appreciatively the historian John Wade (1788–1875), who, in reflecting on the creation of free time generated by the division of labour, had suggested that “capital is only another name for civilization” (585).

At the same time, however, Marx attacked the capitalist as “usurper” of the “free time created by the workers for society” (Marx 1973, 634). In a passage very close to the positions expressed in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* or, in 1853, in the columns of the *New York Tribune*, Marx wrote:

production founded on capital creates universal industriousness on one side [. . . and] on the other side a system of general exploitation of the natural and human qualities, a system of general utility [. . .]. Thus, capital creates the bourgeois society, and the universal appropriation of nature as well as of the social bond itself by the members of society. Hence the great civilizing influence of capital; its production of a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere local developments of humanity and as nature-idolatry. For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself. [. . .] In accord with this tendency, capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this, and constantly revolutionizes it, tearing down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces. (Marx 1973, 409–10)

At the time of the *Grundrisse*, therefore, the ecological question was still in the background of Marx’s preoccupations, subordinate to the question of the potential development of individuals.

One of Marx’s most analytic accounts of the positive effects of capitalist production may be found in volume one of *Capital*. Although much more conscious than in the past of the destructive character of capitalism, his magnum opus repeats the six conditions generated by capital—particularly its “centralization”—which are the fundamental prerequisites that lay the potential for the birth of communist society. These conditions are: 1) cooperative labour; 2) the application of science and technology to production; 3) the appropriation of the forces of nature by production; 4) the creation of large machinery that workers can only operate in common; 5) the economizing of the means of production; and 6) the tendency to create the world market. For Marx,

hand in hand with [. . .] this expropriation of many capitalists by a few, other developments take place on an ever-increasing scale, such as the growth of the co-operative form of the labour process, the conscious technical application of science, the planned exploitation of the soil, the transformation of the means of labour into forms in which they can only be
used in common, the economizing of all means of production by their use as the means of production of combined, socialized labour, the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world market, and, with this, the growth of the international character of the capitalist regime. (Marx 1992a, 929)

Marx well knew that, with the concentration of production in the hands of fewer and fewer bosses, “the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation” (Marx 1992a, 929) was increasing for the working classes, but he was also aware that “the cooperation of wage-labourers is entirely brought about by the capital that employs them” (Marx 1992a, 453). He had come to the conclusion that the extraordinary growth of productive forces under capitalism—a phenomenon greater than in all previous modes of production—had created the conditions to overcome the social-economic relations it had itself generated, and hence to advance to a socialist society. As in his considerations on the economic profile of non-European societies, the central point of Marx’s thinking here was the progression of capitalism towards its own overthrow. In volume three of Capital, he wrote that “usury” had a “revolutionary effect” in so far as it contributed to the destruction and dissolution of “forms of ownership which provide[d] a firm basis for the articulation of [medieval] political life and whose constant reproduction [was] a necessity for that life.” The ruin of the feudal lords and petty production meant “centralizing the conditions of labour” (Marx 1993, 732).

In volume one of Capital, Marx wrote that “the capitalist mode of production is a historically necessary condition for the transformation of the labour process into a social process” (Marx 1992a, 453). As he saw it, “the socially productive power of labour develops as a free gift to capital whenever the workers are placed under certain conditions, and it is capital which places them under these conditions” (Marx 1992a, 451). Marx maintained that the most favourable circumstances for communism could develop only with the expansion of capital:

He [the capitalist] is fanatically intent on the valorization of value; consequently, he ruthlessly forces the human race to produce for production’s sake. In this way he spurs on the development of society’s productive forces, and the creation of those material conditions of production which alone can form the real basis of a higher form of society, a society in which the free and full development of every individual form the ruling principle. (Marx 1992a, 739)

Subsequent reflections on the decisive role of the capitalist mode of production in making communism a real historical possibility appear all the way through Marx’s critique of political economy. To be sure, he had clearly understood—as he wrote in the Grundrisse—that, if one of the tendencies of capital is “to create disposable time,” it subsequently “converts it into surplus value” (Marx 1973, 708). Still, with this mode of production, labour is valorized to the maximum, while “the amount of labour necessary for the production of a given object is [. . .] reduced to a minimum.” For Marx this was a fundamental point. The change it involved would “redound to the benefit of emancipated labour” and was “the condition of its emancipation” (Marx 1973, 701). Capital was thus, “despite itself, instrumental in creating the means of social disposable time, in order to replace labour time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum, and thus to free everyone’s time for their own development” (Marx 1973, 708).
Marx also noted that, to bring about a society in which the universal development of individuals was achievable, it was “necessary above all that the full development of the forces of production” should have become “the condition of production” (Marx 1973, 542). He therefore stated that the “great historical quality” of capital is:

to create this surplus labour, superfluous labour from the standpoint of mere use value, mere subsistence; and its historic destiny is fulfilled as soon as, on one side, there has been such a development of needs that surplus labour above and beyond necessity has itself become a general need arising out of individual needs themselves—and, on the other side, when the severe discipline of capital, acting on succeeding generations, has developed general industriousness as the general property of the new species—and, finally, when the development of the productive powers of labour, which capital incessantly whips onward with its unlimited mania for wealth, and of the sole conditions in which this mania can be realized, have flourished to the stage where the possession and preservation of general wealth require a lesser labour time of society as a whole, and where the labouring society relates scientifically to the process of its progressive reproduction, its reproduction in a constantly greater abundance; hence where labour in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased. [. . .] This is why capital is productive; i.e. an essential relation for the development of the social productive forces. It ceases to exist as such only where the development of these productive forces themselves encounters its barrier in capital itself. (Marx 1973, 325)

Marx reaffirmed these convictions in the text “Results of the Immediate Process of Production.” Having recalled the structural limits of capitalism—above all, the fact that it is a mode of “production in contradiction, and indifference, to the producer”—he focuses on its “positive side” (Marx 1992b, 1037). In comparison with the past, capitalism presents itself as “a form of production not bound to a level of needs laid down in advance, and hence it does not predetermine the course of production itself” (1037). It is precisely the growth of “the social productive forces of labour” that explains “the historic significance of capitalist production in its specific form” (1024). Marx, then, in the social-economic conditions of his time, regarded as fundamental the process of the creation of “wealth as such, i.e. the relentless productive forces of social labour, which alone can form the material base of a free human society” (990). What was “necessary” was to “abolish the contradictory form of capitalism” (1065).

The same theme recurs in volume three of Capital, when Marx underlines that the raising of “the conditions of production into general, communal, social conditions [. . .] is brought about by the development of the productive forces under capitalist production and by the manner and form in which this development is accomplished” (Marx 1993, 373).

While holding that capitalism was the best system yet to have existed, in terms of the capacity to expand the productive forces to the maximum, Marx also recognized that—despite the ruthless exploitation of human beings—it had a number of potentially progressive elements that allowed individual capacities to be fulfilled much more than in past societies.

Deeply averse to the productivist maxim of capitalism, to the primacy of exchange-value and the imperative of surplus-value production, Marx considered the question of increased productivity in relation to the growth of individual capacities. Thus, he pointed out in the Grundrisse:
Not only do the objective conditions change in the act of reproduction, e.g. the village becomes a town, the wilderness a cleared field, etc., but the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language. (Marx 1973, 494)

This greatly more intense and complex development of the productive forces generated “the richest development of the individuals” (541) and “the universality of relations” (542). For Marx,

Capital’s ceaseless striving towards the general form of wealth drives labour beyond the limits of its natural paltriness, and thus creates the material elements for the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labour also therefore appears no longer as labour, but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one. (325)

In short, for Marx capitalist production certainly produced “the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities” (162). Marx emphasized this point a number of times.

In the Economic Manuscripts of 1861–1863, he noted that “a greater diversity of production [and] an extension of the sphere of social needs and the means for their satisfaction [. . .] also impels the development of human productive capacity and thereby the activation of human dispositions in fresh directions” (Marx 1988a, 199). In Theories of Surplus Value (1861–1863), he made it clear that the unprecedented growth of the productive forces generated by capitalism not only had economic effects but “revolutionises all political and social relationships” (Marx 1991, 344). And in volume one of Capital, he wrote that “the exchange of commodities breaks through all the individual and local limitations of the direct exchange of products, [but] there also develops a whole network of social connections of natural origin [gesellschaftlicher Naturzusammenhänge], entirely beyond the control of the human agents” (Marx 1992a, 207). It is a question of production that takes place “in a form adequate to the full development of the human race” (Marx 1992a, 638).

Finally, Marx took a positive view of certain tendencies in capitalism regarding women’s emancipation and the modernization of relations within the domestic sphere. In the important political document “Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council: The Different Questions,” which he drafted for the first congress of the International Working Men’s Association in 1866, he wrote that “although under capital it was distorted into an abomination [. . .] to make children and juvenile persons of both sexes co-operate in the great work of social production [is] a progressive, sound and legitimate tendency” (Marx 1985a, 188).10

Similar judgments may be found in volume one of Capital, where he wrote:

However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes. (Marx 1992a, 620–621)
Marx further noted that “the capitalist mode of production completes the disintegration of the primitive familial union which bound agriculture and manufacture together when they were both at an undeveloped and childlike stage.” One result of this was an “ever-growing preponderance [of] the urban population,” “the historical motive power of society” which “capitalist production collects together in great centres” (637). Using the dialectical method, to which he made frequent recourse in *Capital* and in its preparatory manuscripts, Marx argued that “the elements for forming a new society” were taking shape through the “maturing [of] material conditions and the social combination of the process of production” under capitalism (635). The material premises were thus being created for “a new and higher synthesis” (637). Although the revolution would never arise purely through economic dynamics but would always require the political factor as well, the advent of communism “requires that society possess a material foundation, or a series of material conditions of existence, which in their turn are the natural and spontaneous product [naturwüchsige Produkt] of a long and tormented historical development” (173).

### 3. Capitalism in Marx’s Later Political Interventions

Similar theses are presented in a number of short but significant political texts, contemporaneous with or subsequent to the composition of *Capital*, which confirm the continuity of Marx’s thinking. In *Value, Price and Profit*, he urged workers to grasp that, “with all the miseries that [capitalism] imposes on them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and the social forms necessary for an economic reconstruction of society” (Marx 1985c, 149).

In the “Confidential Communication on Bakunin” (1985d) sent on behalf of the General Council of the International Working Men’s Association to the Brunswick committee of the Social-Democratic Workers’ Party of Germany (SDAP), Marx maintained that “although revolutionary initiative will probably come from France, England alone can serve as the lever for a serious economic revolution.” He explained this as follows:

> It is the only country where there are no more peasants and where landed property is concentrated in a few hands. It is the only country where the capitalist form—that is to say, combined labour on a large scale under capitalist masters—embraces virtually the whole of production. It is the only country where the great majority of the population consists of wage labourers. It is the only country where the class struggle and the organization of the working class by the trade unions have attained a certain degree of maturity and universality. It is the only country where, because of its domination on the world market, every revolution in economic matters must immediately affect the whole world. If landlordism and capitalism are classical features in England, on the other hand, the material conditions for their destruction are the most mature here. (Marx 1985d, 86)

In his “Notes on Bakunin’s Book *Statehood and Anarchy*,” which contain important indications of his radical differences with the Russian revolutionary concerning the prerequisites for an alternative society to capitalism, Marx reaffirmed, also with respect to the social subject that would lead the struggle for socialism that “a social revolution is bound up with definite historical conditions of economic development; these are its premises. It is only possible, therefore, where alongside capitalist production the industrial proletariat accounts for at least a significant mass of the people” (Marx 1989e, 518).
In the Critique of the Gotha Programme (1989f), in which he took issue with aspects of the platform for unification of the General Association of German Workers (ADAV) and the Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Germany, Marx proposed: “In proportion as labour develops socially, and becomes therefore a source of wealth and culture, poverty and destitution develop among the workers, and wealth and culture among the non-workers.” And he added: “What had to be done here [. . .] was to prove concretely how in present capitalist society the material, etc., conditions have at last been created which enable and compel the workers to lift this historical curse” (Marx 1989f, 82–83).

Finally, in the “Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers’ Party” (1989g), a short text which he wrote three years before his death, Marx emphasized that an essential condition for the workers to be able to appropriate the means of production was “the collective form, whose material and intellectual elements are shaped by the very development of capitalist society” (Marx 1989g, 340).

Thus, with a continuity stretching from his early formulations of the materialist conception of history, in the 1840s, to his final political interventions of the 1880s, Marx highlighted the fundamental relationship between the productive growth generated by the capitalist mode of production and the preconditions for the communist society for which the workers’ movement must struggle. The research he conducted in the last years of his life, however, helped him to review this conviction and to avoid falling into the economism that marked the analyses of so many of his followers.

4. A Not Always Necessary Transition

Marx regarded capitalism as a “necessary point of transition” (Marx 1973, 515) for the conditions to unfold that would allow the proletariat to fight with some prospect of success to establish a socialist mode of production. In another passage in the Grundrisse, he repeated that capitalism was a “point of transition” (540) towards the further progress of society, which would permit “the highest development of the forces of production” and “the richest development of individuals” (541). Marx described “the contemporary conditions of production” as “suspending themselves and [. . .] positing the historic presuppositions for a new state of society” (461).

With an emphasis that sometimes heralds the idea of a capitalist predisposition to self-destruction, Marx declared that “as the system of bourgeois economy has developed for us only by degrees, so too its negation, which is its ultimate result” (Marx 1973, 712). He said he was convinced that “the last form of servitude” (with this “last” Marx was certainly going too far),

assumed by human activity, that of wage labour on one side, capital on the other, is thereby cast off like a skin, and this casting-off itself is the result of the mode of production corresponding to capital; the material and mental conditions of the negation of wage labour and of capital, themselves already the negation of earlier forms of unfree social production, are themselves results of its production process. The growing incompatibility between the productive development of society and its hitherto existing relations of production expresses itself in bitter contradictions, crises, spasms. The violent destruction of capital not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation, is the most striking form in which advice is given it to be gone and to give room to a higher state of social production. (Marx 1973, 749–750)
Further confirmation that Marx considered capitalism a fundamental stage for the birth of a socialist economy may be found in *Theories of Surplus Value*. Here he expressed his agreement with the economist Richard Jones (1790–1855), for whom “capital and the capitalist mode of production” were to be “accepted” merely as “a transitional phase in the development of social production.” Through capitalism, Marx writes, “the prospect opens up of a new society, [a new] economic formation of society, to which the bourgeois mode of production is only a transition” (Marx 1991, 346).

Marx elaborated a similar idea in volume one of *Capital* and its preparatory manuscripts. In the famous unpublished “Appendix: Result of the Immediate Process of Production,” he wrote that capitalism came into being following a “complete economic revolution”:

> On the one hand, it creates the real conditions for the domination of labour by capital, perfecting the process and providing it with the appropriate framework. On the other hand, by evolving conditions of production and communication and productive forces of labour antagonistic to the workers involved in them, this revolution creates the real premises of a new mode of production, one that abolishes the contradictory form of capitalism. It thereby creates the material basis of a newly shaped social process and hence of a new social formation. (Marx 1992b, 1065)

In one of the concluding chapters of *Capital*, volume one—“The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation”—he stated:

> The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reaches a point at which they become incompatible with the capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated. (Marx 1992a, 929)

Although Marx held that capitalism was an essential transition, in which the historical conditions were created for the workers’ movement to struggle for a communist transformation of society, he did not think that this idea could be applied in a rigid, dogmatic manner. On the contrary, he denied more than once—in both published and unpublished texts—that he had developed a unidirectional interpretation of history, in which human beings were everywhere destined to follow the same path and pass through the same stages.

### 5. The Possible Path of Russia

In the final years of his life, Marx repudiated the thesis wrongly attributed to him that the bourgeois mode of production was historically inevitable. His distance from this position was expressed when he found himself drawn into the debate on the possible development of capitalism in Russia. In an article entitled “Marx before the Tribunal of Yu Zhukovsky,” the Russian writer and sociologist Nikolai Mikhailovsky (1842–1904) accused him of considering capitalism as an unavoidable stage for the emancipation of Russia too (Mikhailovsky 1877, 321–356). Marx replied, in a letter he drafted to the political-literary review *Otechestvennye Zapiski* (Fatherland Annals), that in volume one of *Capital* he had “claim[ed] no more than to trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist economic order emerged from the womb of the feudal economic order” (Marx 1983, 135). Marx referred to a passage in the French edition of volume one of
Capital (1872–1875), which suggested that the basis of the separation of the rural masses from their means of production had been “the expropriation of the agricultural producers,” but that “only in England” had this process “so far been accomplished in a radical manner,” and that “all the countries of Western Europe [were] following the same course” (Marx 1983, 135). Accordingly, the object of his examination was only “the old continent,” not the whole world.

Marx referred to a passage in the French edition of Capital (Le Capital, Paris 1872–1875), where he asserted that the basis for the separation of the producers from their means of production was the “expropriation of the agricultural producers,” adding that “only in England [had this been] accomplished in a radical manner,” but that “all the other countries of Western Europe [were] following the same course” (Marx 1989h, 634). This is the spatial horizon within which we should understand the famous statement in the preface of Capital, volume one: “The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.” Writing for a German readership, Marx observed that, “just like the rest of Contential Western Europe, we suffer not only from the development of capitalist production, but also from the incompleteness of that development.” In his view, alongside “the modern evils,” the Germans were “oppressed by a whole series of inherited evils, arising from the passive survival of archaic and outmoded modes of production, with their accompanying train of anachronistic social and political relations” (Marx 1992a, 91). It was for the German who might “in optimistic fashion comfort himself with the thought that in Germany things are not nearly so bad,” that Marx asserted “De te fabula narratur!” (90).

Marx also displayed a flexible approach to other European countries, since he did not think of Europe as a homogeneous whole. In a speech he gave in 1867 to the German Workers’ Educational Society in London, later published in Der Vorbote (The Harbinger) in Geneva, he argued that German proletarians could successfully carry out a revolution because, “unlike the workers in other countries, they need not go through the lengthy period of bourgeois development” (Marx 1985b, 415).

Marx expressed the same convictions in 1881, when the revolutionary Vera Zasulich (1849–1919) solicited his views on the future of the rural commune (obshchina). She wanted to know whether it might develop in a socialist form, or whether it was doomed to perish because capitalism would necessarily impose itself in Russia, too. In his reply, Marx stressed that in volume one of Capital he had “expressly restricted [. . .] the historical inevitability” of the development of capitalism—which had effected “a complete separation of the producer from the means of production”—to “the countries of Western Europe” (Marx 1989c, 360).

In the preliminary drafts of the letter, Marx dwells on the peculiarities deriving from the coexistence of the rural commune with more advanced economic forms. Russia, he observed, is contemporary with a higher culture, it is linked to a world market dominated by capitalist production. By appropriating the positive results of this mode of production, it is thus in a position to develop and transform the still archaic form of its rural commune, instead of destroying it. (Marx 1989c, 362)

The peasantry could “thus incorporate the positive acquisitions devised by the capitalist system without passing through its Caudine Forks” (Marx 1989d, 368).
To those who argued that capitalism was an unavoidable stage for Russia too, on the grounds that it was impossible for history to advance in leaps, Marx asked ironically whether this meant that Russia, “like the West,” had had “to pass through a long incubation period in the engineering industry [. . .] in order to utilize machines, steam engines, railways, etc.” Similarly, had it not been possible “to introduce in the twinkling of an eye, the entire mechanism of exchange (banks, credit institutions, etc.), which it took the West centuries to devise?” (Marx 1989d, 349). It was evident that the history of Russia, or of any other country, did not inevitably have to retrace all the stages that the history of England or other European nations had experienced. Hence, the socialist transformation of the obshchina might also take place without necessarily having to pass through capitalism. 18

In the same period, Marx’s theoretical research on precapitalist community relations, compiled in his Ethnographic Notebooks, were leading him in the same direction as the one evident in his reply to Zasulich. Spurred on by his reading of the work of the US anthropologist Lewis Morgan (1818–1881), he wrote in propagandistic tones that “Europe and America,” the nations where capitalism was most developed, could “aspire only to break [their] chains by replacing capitalist production with cooperative production, and capitalist property with a higher form of the archaic type of property, i.e. communist property” (Marx 1989c, 362). 19

Marx’s model was not at all a “primitive type of cooperative or collective production” resulting from “the isolated individual,” but one deriving from “socialization of the means of production” (Marx 1989b, 351). He had not changed his (thoroughly critical) view of the rural communes in Russia, and in his analysis the development of the individual and social production preserved intact their irreplaceable centrality.

In Marx’s reflections on Russia, then, there is no dramatic break with his previous ideas. 20 The new elements in comparison with the past involve a maturation of his theoretical-political position, which led him to consider other possible roads to communism that he had earlier considered unrealizable. 21

6. Conclusions

The idea that the development of socialism might be plausible in Russia did not have as its sole foundation Marx’s study of the economic situation there. Contact with the Russian populists, like his contact with the Paris Communards a decade earlier, helped to make him ever more open to the possibility that history would witness not only a succession of modes of production, but also the irruption of revolutionary events and of the subjectivities that produce them. He felt called upon to pay even more heed to historical specificities, and to the uneven development of political and economic conditions among different countries and social contexts.

Beyond his unwillingness to accept that a predefined historical development might appear in the same way in different economic and political contexts, Marx’s theoretical advances were due to the evolution of his thinking on the effects of capitalism in economically backward countries. He no longer maintained, as he had in 1853 in an article on India for the New York Tribune, that “bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world” (Marx 1979a, 222). Years of detailed study and close observation of changes in international politics had helped him to develop a vision
of British colonialism quite unlike the one he had expressed as a journalist in his mid-thirties. The effects of capitalism in colonial countries now looked very different to him. Referring to the “East Indies,” in one of the drafts of his letter to Zasulich, he wrote that “everyone [. . .] realizes that the suppression of communal ownership there was nothing but an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people backwards not forwards” (Marx 1989d, 365). In his view, “all they [the British] managed to do was ruin native agriculture and double the number and severity of the famines” (Marx 1989d, 368). Capitalism did not, as its apologists boasted, bring progress and emancipation, but the pillage of natural resources, environmental devastation and new forms of servitude and human dependence.

Marx returned in 1882 to the possibility of a concomitance between capitalism and forms of community from the past. In January, in the preface to the new Russian edition of the Manifesto of the Communist Party, which he co-authored with Engels, the fate of the Russian rural commune is linked to that of proletarian struggles in Western Europe:

In Russia we find, face to face with the rapidly developing capitalist swindle and bourgeois landed property, which is just beginning to develop, more than half the land owned in common by the peasants. Now the question is: can the Russian obshchina, a form of primeval common ownership of land, even if greatly undermined, pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership? Or must it, conversely, first pass through the same process of dissolution as constitutes the historical development of the West? The only answer possible today is this: If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for communist development. (Marx and Engels 1989a, 426)

In 1853, Marx had already analysed the effects produced by the economic presence of the English in China in the article “Revolution in China and in Europe” written for the New York Tribune. Marx thought it was possible that the revolution in this country could lead to “the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political revolutions on the Continent.” He added that this would be a “curious spectacle, that of China sending disorder into the Western World while the Western powers, by English, French and American war-steamers, are conveying ‘order’ to Shanghai, Nanking and the mouths of the Great Canal” (Marx 1979b, 98).

Besides, Marx’s reflections on Russia were not the only reason for him to think that the destinies of different revolutionary movements, active in countries with dissimilar social-economic contexts, might become entwined with one another. Between 1869 and 1870, in various letters and a number of documents of the International Working Men’s Association—perhaps most clearly and concisely in a letter to his comrades Sigfrid Meyer (1840–1872) and August Vogt (1817–1895)—he associated the future of England (“the metropolis of capital”) with that of the more backward Ireland. The former was undoubtedly “the power that has hitherto ruled the world market,” and therefore “for the present the most important country for the workers’ revolution”; it was, “in addition, the only country where the material conditions for the revolution have developed to a certain state of maturity” (Marx and Engels 1988, 474–475).

However, “after studying the Irish question for years,” Marx had become convinced that “the decisive blow against the ruling classes in England”—and, deluding himself, “decisive for the workers’ movement all over the world”—“cannot be struck in England,
but only in Ireland.” The most important objective remained “to hasten the social revolution in England,” but the “sole means of doing this” was “to make Ireland independent” (Marx and Engels 1988, 473–476). In any event, Marx considered industrial, capitalist England to be strategically central for the struggle of the workers’ movement; the revolution in Ireland, possible only if the “forced union between the two countries” was ended, would be a “social revolution” that would manifest itself “in outmoded forms” (Marx 1985d, 86). The subversion of bourgeois power in nations where the modern forms of production were still only developing would not be sufficient to bring about the disappearance of capitalism.

The dialectical position that Marx arrived at in his final years allowed him to discard the idea that the socialist mode of production could be constructed only through certain fixed stages. The materialist conception of history that he developed is far from the mechanical sequence to which his thought has been reduced several times. It cannot be assimilated with the idea that human history is a progressive succession of modes of production, mere preparatory phases before the inevitable conclusion: the birth of a communist society.

Moreover, he explicitly denied the historical necessity of capitalism in every part of the world. In the famous “Preface” to the Critique of Political Economy, he tentatively listed the progression of “Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production,” as the end of the “prehistory of human society” (Marx 1987, 263–264) and similar phrases can be found in other writings. However, this idea represents only a small part of Marx’s larger oeuvre on the genesis and development of different forms of production. His method cannot be reduced to economic determinism.

Marx did not change his basic ideas about the profile of future communist society, as he sketched it from the Grundrisse on. Guided by hostility to the schematisms of the past, and to the new dogmatisms arising in his name, he thought it might be possible that the revolution would break out in forms and conditions that had never been considered before.

Notes
1. On the studies conducted by Marx in this period see Musto (2010).
2. See also “Marx’s letter to Engels of 14 June 1853,” in which, though maintaining that “the whole administration of India by the British was detestable and remains so today,” he told his friend that in a press article he had described “England’s destruction of native industries” as “revolutionary.” The New York Tribune article in question prompted Edward Said not only to argue that Marx’s economic analyses are perfectly fitted [. . .] to a standard Orientalist undertaking,” but also to insinuate that they depended on the “age-old distinction between Orient and Occident” (Said 1995, 154). In reality, Said’s reading of Marx’s work was one-sided and superficial. The first to bring out the flaws in his interpretation was Sadiq Jalal al-Azm (1934–2016), who, in an article “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse” wrote: “This account of Marx’s views and analyses of highly complex historical processes and situations is a travesty. [. . .] There is nothing specific to either Asia or the Orient in Marx’s body of work (al-Azm 1980, 14–15). With regard to “productive capacities, social organization, historical ascendancy, military might and technological development, [. . .] Marx, like anyone else, knew of the superiority of modern Europe over the Orient. But to accuse him [. . .] of turning this contingent fact into a necessary reality for all time is simply absurd” (al-Azm 1980, 15–16). Similarly, Aijaz Ahmad in In
Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures, well demonstrated how Said “decontextualized quotations” from Marx’s work, with little sense for what the passage in question represented, simply in order to slot them into his “Orientalist archive” (Ahmad 1992, 231, 223). Against the idea of Marx’s supposed Eurocentrism, see also Irfan Habib, “Marx’s Perception of India” (2006). At any event, Marx’s articles of 1853 offer a still very partial and simplistic vision of colonialism, when compared with the reflections that he subsequently developed on the matter.

3. Marx was referring to Armand Barbès (1809–1870), François Raspail (1794–1878) and Auguste Blanqui (1805–1881).

4. See John Wade, History of the Middle and Working Classes (1835, 122–132), where he asserts that “the division of employment saves time” (Wade 1835, 123). Marx copied extracts from Wade’s work as early as 1845, see Marx (1988b, 288–301; 1988c, 303–308). The most striking lines are those such as the following: “An employment reduced to its minimum of simplicity must leave the mind at leisure for reflection and conversation; and these are the effects known to be produced in many manufactories” (Marx 1988b, 288).

5. According to Ranajit Guha,

   this eloquent passage, taken in isolation from the great body of its author’s critique of capital, would make him indistinguishable from any of the myriad nineteenth-century liberals who saw nothing but the positive side of capital. […] Read in its proper context, however, [it] is to be understood as nothing but the initial movement of a developed critique. (Guha 1997, 15–16)

The founder of the journal Subaltern Studies here targeted a misguided and superficial position which, paradoxically, was adopted by many of Marx’s epigones: “Some of Marx’s writings—certain passages from his well-known articles on India, for instance—have indeed been read in isolation and distorted to the point of reducing his evaluation of the historic possibilities of capital into the adulation of a technomaniac.” In Guha’s view, Marx’s critique “distinguished itself unequivocally from liberalism,” and appears all the more forceful if we consider that it was developed in an “ascendant and optimistic phase,” when capital “was growing from strength to strength and there seemed to be no limit to its expansion and capacity to transform society” (Guha 1997, 15–16).

6. On the making of Capital, see Another Marx: Early Manuscripts to the International (Musto 2018, 137–168). On Marx’s magnum opus, see also Musto’s recent Marx’s Capital after 150 Years: Critique and Alternative to Capitalism (2019).

7. In a similar earlier passage in volume one of Capital, Marx listed in almost the same way five of the six questions mentioned here:

   how the development of the social productivity of labour presupposes cooperation on a large scale; how the division and combination of labour can only be organized on that basis, and the means of production economized by concentration on a vast scale; how instruments of labour which, by their very nature, can only be used in common, such as systems of machinery, can be called into existence; how gigantic natural forces can be pressed into the service of production; and how the production process can be transformed into a process of the technological application of scientific knowledge. (Marx 1992a, 775)

On the theme of the global dimension of the capitalist mode of production, see Marx’s letter to Engels of October 8, 1858, in which he stated that “the proper task of bourgeois society is the creation of the world market, at least in outline, and of production based on that market” (Marx and Engels 1983, 347).

8. In In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (1992), Ahmad correctly observed that “Marx’s denunciation of pre-colonial society in India is no more strident than his denunciations of Europe’s own feudal past” (Ahmad 1992, 224). For Marx, he continues, the idea of a progressive role for colonialism was linked to the idea of a progressive role for capitalism in relation to what existed before it, “within Europe as much as outside it” (225–226); “the
destruction of the European peasantry in the course of primitive accumulation” is “described in similar tones to the changes that took place in India” (227).

9. See Marx’s letter to Engels of December 7, 1867, in which he listed for his friend (who was preparing a review of *Capital*) the main arguments in his work that he would like to see mentioned. He also saw *Capital* as useful in demonstrating that “present society, economically considered, is pregnant with a new, higher form.” Following what today may appear a far-fetched comparison of his discoveries to Darwin’s theory of evolution, Marx claimed that his work showed there was “hidden progress even where modern economic relations are accompanied by frightening direct consequences.” Owing to his “critical approach” and “perhaps in spite of himself,” he had “sounded the death-knell to all socialism by the book, i.e., to utopianism, for evermore.” In the end, what stands out most from the phrases that he suggested to Engels is the conviction he had developed of the importance of capitalism, as if it was something absolutely evident: “whereas Mr. Lassalle hurled abuse at the capitalists and flattered the backwoods Prussian squirearchy, Mr Marx, on the contrary, shows the historical ‘necessity’ of capitalist production” (Marx and Engels 1987, 494).

10. On the life of the so-called “First International” and on the political role of Marx in this organization, see Musto (2014).

11. In a letter of 29 July 1879 to Carlo Cañiero, Marx complimented the Italian revolutionary on his compendium of extracts from volume one of *Capital*. However, he also noted that his preface contained “an apparent gap”: “there is no proof that the material conditions indispensable to the emancipation of the proletariat are engendered in spontaneous fashion by the progress of capitalist production” (Marx and Engels 1991, 366).

12. We should not forget that the *Grundrisse*, which was not intended for publication, was written in the special climate of 1857–1858, when the first global economic crisis in history was under way. See Marcello Musto, “History, Production and Method in the ’1857 Introduction’” (2008, 3–32).


14. The text was reworked a couple of times, but in the end it was left as a draft, with signs of a number of deletions. The letter was never actually sent, but it contained interesting foretastes of the arguments that Marx would later use.

15. See also *Le Capital* (Marx 1989h, 634). This addition to the original 1867 edition, which Marx introduced when revising the French translation of his book, was not included by Engels in the fourth German edition of 1890, which later became the standard version for translations of *Capital*. Maximilien Rubel called this “one of the most important additions to this chapter” of *Capital*: see Œuvres. Économie I (Marx 1963, 1701). The edition published by Engels states: the history of primitive accumulation “assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs. Only in England, which we therefore take as our example, has it the classic form.” (Marx 1992a, 876).


17. In the French edition, Marx slightly restricted the scope of this phrase: “Le pays le plus développé industriellement ne fait que montrer à ceux qui le suivent sur l’échelle industrielle de leur propre avenir” (Marx 1989h, 12). In his *Provincealizing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty misinterprets this passage as a typical example of historicism that follows the principle of “first in Europe, then elsewhere” (Chakrabarty 2000, 7). He further presents the “ambiguities in Marx’s prose” as characteristic of those who regard “history as a waiting room, a period that is needed for the transition to capitalism at any particular time and place. This is the period to which [. . .] the third world is often consigned” (Chakrabarty 2000, 65). At any event, Neil Lazarus has rightly pointed out that “not all historical narrativization is teleological or ‘historicist’” (Lazarus 2002, 63).

18. In the final text that he sent to Zasulich, Marx’s considerations were decidedly more concise, and his tone more cautious, than in the preliminary drafts. This probably indicates that he
thought his treatment of such a complex question was still too superficial, and that some theoretical uncertainties continued to hound him. In reality, the multiple drafts indicate how much time he had devoted to the matter, without resolving it in a way that satisfied him. See Musto (2020b, 65–74).

19. See also Lewis Morgan: “It will be a revival in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes,” extracted and copied by Marx in The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx (Krader 1972, 159).

20. See the argument in Late Marx and the Russian Road (Shanin 1983, 60) that the drafts showed a “significant change” since the publication of Capital in 1867. Similarly, Enrique Dussel speaks of a “break” in El último Marx (1863–1882) y la liberación latinoamericana (1990, 230, 237). Other authors have suggested a “third-worldist” reading of the last Marx, in which the revolutionary subject is no longer factory workers but the masses in the countryside and the periphery.

21. See Marian Sawer’s excellent work Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic Mode of Production:

What happened, in the 1870s in particular, was not that Marx changed his mind on the character of the village communities, or decided that they could be the basis of socialism as they were; rather, he came to consider the possibility that the communities could be revolutionized not by capitalism but by socialism. [...] He does seem to have entertained seriously the hope that with the intensification of social communication and the modernization of production methods the village system could be incorporated into a socialist society. In 1882 this still appeared to Marx to be a genuine alternative to the complete disintegration of the obshchina under the impact of capitalism. (Sawer 1977, 67)

22. For a further discussion of this topic, see also “the letter from Marx to Danielson on 19 February 1881” (Marx and Engels 1992).

23. Marx is therefore very different from most of his followers on this. Partha Chatterjee described this well in his book The Politics of the Governed: Popular Politics in Most of the World: “Marxists have, in general, believed that the sway of capital over traditional community was the inevitable sign of historical progress” (Chatterjee 2004, 30).

24. In Marx and Latin America, José Arico observes that Marx contemplated the possibility of a revolution in the colonial world that, unlike the one that he had hypothesized before 1848, would not now depend on the revolutionary political action of the popular classes of the metropolis, but rather would itself decisively condition both capitalist development in the central countries and the outbreak of proletarian revolution in Europe (Arico 2014, 18–19). Sawer observed that Marx was also interested in the non-Western world from the point of view of its role in prolonging the life of European capitalism. This argument became particularly important to Marx and Engels in and after 1850, with the disappointment of their early revolutionary hopes (Sawer 1977, 42).

25. Arico in Marx and Latin America puts too much emphasis on his own arguments when he suggests that the “Irish case” had represented a “strategic turn” for Marx. If it were true that Ireland “led Marx to pay ever-greater attention to the peripheral countries” (Arico 2014, 25), this attention only led Marx to develop a more “open mind towards the new phenomena in the world driven by the universalization of capitalism” (20). His views on the socialist revolution continued to recognize the centrality of the struggle of the workers.

26. Lawrence Krader argues that Marx’s divisions of human history, which were the subject of extensive theoretical elaboration over his lifetime, at the end opted for a “multilinear and not unilinear” movement through time, composed of “historical lines among different peoples. While these were set forth in a tentative way in the works composed in the period 1857–1867, they were set forth more definitively, although still not finally, by him in the period 1879–1881” (Krader 1975, 139).

27. See also Musto’s chapter “Communism” in The Marx Revival: Key Concepts and New Interpretations (2020a, 24–50).
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