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Passage to Socialism: The Dialectic of Progress in Marx

Introduction

The basic theme of this article is the passage for the 'pre-history of human society' to humanity's history through the revolutionary transformation of the old society.¹ Humanity's progress here is considered as a contradictory movement, a manifestation of the dialectic of negativity. First, the paper restates and discusses Marx's central proposition that capital, through its inherent contradictions, creates the conditions of its own demise as well as the elements for building a union of free individuals. Then, the paper examines whether the capitalist mode of production (capitalist mode of production) is the necessary precondition for building the new society in light of Marx's correspondence with the Russians in his later years. Finally, the question of the revolutionary transformation of society is discussed within the broad Marxian purview of human progress. It is

¹ This is a substantially rewritten and enlarged version of a paper I have presented earlier in Berlin and London. The following version was presented at the Marxism and the World Stage Conference at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst on November 6, 2003, for the session organised by MÉGA on 'Marx and the Non Western World'. I am grateful to Alfredo Saad-Filho for his encouragement and to the editors of *HM* and the anonymous readers for their helpful suggestions.

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argued that Marx is a great 'rethinker' of progress, that his perspective is not a unilinear view (positive or negative) of human advancement (or regression) and that progress in this view is an aspect of the dialectic of negativity pervading the critique of political economy.

Socialism: the offspring of Capital

Marx's 'Critique of Political Economy' ('Critique' for short) is informed, one could say, by what he wrote in two texts referring, respectively, to Spinoza and Hegel. In his Parisian manuscripts (1844), referring to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Marx underlined that its 'greatness' lay in the 'dialectic of negativity as the moving and creating principle'.² Many years later, in the first manuscript of *Capital*, Volume 2, Marx completed Spinoza's well-known phrase in this way: 'all determination is negation and all negation is determination'.³ Marx shows how capital creates the subjective and objective conditions of its own negation and, simultaneously, the elements of the new society destined to supersede it – socialism. In the 'Critique', socialism (equivalently communism) signifies a 'society of free and associated producers' based on the 'associated mode of production (AMP)'. This 'union of free individuals', in which individuals are subject neither to personal dependence, as in pre-capitalism, nor to material dependence, as in capitalism, excludes, by definition, private property in the means of production, the commodity-form of the product of labour, wage-labour and the state. Here, the freely associated 'social individuals' are the masters of their own social movement, subjecting their social relations to their own control.⁴

The individual's freedom from material dependence, necessarily associated with the collective (social) domination of the conditions of production by the 'union of free individuals', depends first of all on the existence of an abundance of material wealth. This is based on a high degree of development of the productive forces at the universal level including the quantitative and qualitative development of the 'greatest productive force', the proletariat – the revolutionary class – in its 'world-historical existence'.⁵ First, the development of productive forces, which is basically the 'development of the wealth of

² Marx 1973d, p. 575.

³ Marx 1988, p. 316. This manuscript is not included in Engels's edition of *Capital*, Volume 2.

⁴ Marx 1987, p. 110; 1965, p. 614.

⁵ Marx 1965, p. 135; Marx and Engels 1973, p. 34.

human nature as an end in itself', is an absolutely necessary 'practical (pre)condition of human emancipation because without it only the penury and the necessity will be generalized and, with the need, shall also start the struggle for necessity'.⁶ Moreover, with the growth in the productive powers of labour, also increases the disposable time beyond the necessary labour-time – that is, the increase in society's free time which is the basis of all creative activities for individuals.⁷ On the other hand, 'only with this universal development of the productive powers can universal intercourse [*Verkehr*] of human beings be posited'.⁸ Society's (collective) domination over the conditions of production in its turn implies the mastery by individuals of their own social relations. However, this situation defining socialism is not something naturally given. It is the product of a 'long and painful history of development'.⁹ More specifically, it is capital which creates the requisite material conditions of the proletarian (and thereby human) emancipation.

The contradictory character of the necessary labour/surplus-labour relation, true for all class societies, takes on a special meaning with labour's subsumption under capital. In precapitalist modes of production where use-values, rather than exchange-values, dominate, surplus-labour is circumscribed by a definite circle of needs. In these early class societies, labour-time is extended to produce, beyond the subsistence of the immediate producers, a certain amount of use-values for the masters. However, surplus-labour acquires a far greater importance when exchange-value becomes the determining element of production. Under capital, which is basically generalised commodity production, the constraint on labour to extend labour-time beyond necessary labour-time is maximal.¹⁰ 'This is a production which is not bound either by limited needs nor by needs which limit it. This is one side, positive side if you like, as distinguished from the earlier modes of production.'¹¹ Along this compulsion on labour, capital also pushes labour to diversify its needs and the means to satisfy them. To that extent 'capital creates culture, it performs a historical-social function'.¹²

⁶ Marx and Engels 1973, pp. 34–5; Marx 1959a, p. 107.

⁷ 'The true wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. It is then no more the labour time but the disposable time that is the measure of wealth' (Marx 1953, p. 596).

⁸ Marx and Engels 1973, p. 33.

⁹ Marx 1953, p. 79; 1987, p. 110.

¹⁰ Marx 1976, p. 174.

¹¹ Marx 1988, p. 107. The expression 'if you like' appears in English in the text.

¹² Marx 1976, pp. 173, 175.

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Wealth in its autonomous being exists only for either directly forced labour, slavery, or indirectly forced labour, wage-labour.¹³ Directly forced labour does not confront wealth as capital, but only as a relation of (personal) domination. On this basis of directly forced labour, there will only be the reproduction of the relation of (personal) domination for which wealth itself has value only as enjoyment, not as wealth as such, 'a relation, therefore, which can never create universal industry'.¹⁴

The original unity between the labourer and the conditions of production has two main forms (leaving aside slavery where the labourer himself is a part of the objective conditions of production): the Asiatic community (natural communism) and the small family agriculture (bound with household industry) in one or the other forms. Both are infantile forms and equally little suited to develop labour as *social labour* and productive power of social labour, whence the necessity of separation, of rupture, of the opposition between labour and ownership (in the conditions of production). The extreme form of this rupture within which at the same time the productive forces of social labour are most powerfully developed is the form of capital. On the material basis which it creates and by the means of the revolutions which the working class and the whole society undergoes in the process of creating it can the original unity be restored.¹⁵

Production for production's sake takes place under capitalism 'at the cost of the human individual', alienating the individual in relation to oneself and to others. The social means of production become, in the hands of capital, 'a system of robbery, during work, of the conditions of life of the worker, of space, air, light and the personal conditions of safety against the dangers and the unhealthy environment of the productive process', a most 'shameless robbery' of the normal conditions of labour's functioning.¹⁶ Thus, under capital, the 'productive forces know only a unilateral development and become the destructive forces for the majority'.¹⁷

The development of antagonisms within a social form of production is the 'only historical (real) way towards its dissolution and metamorphosis'.¹⁸ It is

¹³ See the interesting and pertinent paper by Banaji 2003.

¹⁴ Marx 1953, p. 232.

¹⁵ Marx 1962, p. 419. Emphasis in the text. The expressions 'the productive forces . . . developed', and 'the whole society undergoes' are in English in the text.

¹⁶ Marx 1987, pp. 413, 443; 1965, pp. 959–60, 983; 1988, p. 107.

¹⁷ Marx and Engels 1973, p. 60.

¹⁸ Marx 1987, p. 467; 1965, p. 993.

capital itself which creates the conditions of its own negation. In an early text, addressed to the workers, Marx clearly underlines what he calls the 'positive side of capital': without the big industry, free competition, the world market and the corresponding means of production 'there would be no material resources for the emancipation of the proletariat and the creation of the new society'. He adds that, 'without these conditions the proletariat would not have taken the road of union nor known the development which makes it capable of revolutionizing the old society as well as itself'.¹⁹ At the same time, capital transforms the dispersed, isolated, small-scale labour into large-scale socially organised labour under its direct domination and thereby also generalises workers' direct struggle against this domination. 'With the material conditions and social combinations of production' capital develops, simultaneously, the contradictions and antagonisms, 'the forces of destruction of the old society and the elements of formation of a new society'.²⁰

Capital itself comes to constitute a material barrier to capitalist production. The *limits* within which it valorises and reproduces itself continually enter into contradiction with the *methods* of production capital must employ to do so, thus leading towards an unlimited increase in production, production becoming an end in itself. The means – the unconditional development of the social productive powers – runs into continual conflict with the limited end, the valorisation of existing capital. The increasing inadequacy of the productive development of society in relation to its hitherto existing production relations is expressed in sharp contradictions, crises, convulsions.

The violent destruction of capital, not through the relations external to it, but as the condition of its self preservation [is] the most striking form in which advice is given to it to be gone and to give room to a higher state of social production.²¹

In this sense, the capitalist mode of production constitutes the transition to the socialist or the 'associated mode of production'.²²

¹⁹ Marx 1973a, p. 555.

²⁰ Marx 1965, pp. 995–6; 1987, p. 475.

²¹ Marx 1953, pp. 635–6; the word 'advice' and the whole expression starting with 'to be gone' is in English in the text.

²² Marx 1962, p. 426; 1992, pp. 504, 662; 1964, pp. 456, 621.

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The 'late Marx' and the road to socialism

It has been widely held that Marx in his last years, particularly and notably in his writings on Russia,²³ did *fundamentally* change, if not contradict, his earlier position that the elements of the new society are generated within capital through a process of creating the conditions of its own negation. This was especially emphasised recently by Teodor Shanin and Haruki Wada in a book which has had a certain influence on scholars – Marxist or otherwise.²⁴ In these writings, Marx addresses a question posed to him by his Russian correspondents: could the existing Russian rural communes be the basis for building socialism (communism) in Russia without going through the capitalist mode of production, or did Russia need to pass through a capitalist stage in order to arrive at the new society?

In his reply, Marx first observed that, in *Capital*, he had underlined that his analysis of capitalist mode of production was confined strictly to 'Western Europe'.²⁵ He derisively rejected any claim to possess a 'master key of a general historical-philosophical theory fatally imposable' on all peoples irrespective of the specific historical circumstances in which they found themselves.²⁶ Thus, the analysis in *Capital* could not offer either a positive or a negative answer to the question posed by the Russian correspondents. But, added Marx, he had concluded from his independent studies on Russia that the Russian rural commune could serve as the point of departure for a 'social regeneration' in Russia. However, this transition would not be automatic. The communal ownership in land, the point of departure for this 'regeneration', had already been affected by adverse forces – working inside and outside the commune – which undermined the system. On the one hand, parcellary cultivation of land and private appropriation of its fruits by its members, and, on the other hand, the states' fiscal exactions, fraudulent exploitation by usury and merchant capital happening since 1861 when the Tsarist state adopted measures for the 'so-called emancipation of the peasants'. Hence,

²³ These are Marx's letter to Mikhailovsky 1877, his letter as well as several drafts of the letter to Vera Zassulitch 1881 and his and Engels's joint preface to the Russian edition 1882 of the *Communist Manifesto*. The correspondence with the Russians Marx wrote in French.

²⁴ Shanin 1983.

²⁵ Marx is here referring to the chapter on the 'Secret of the Original Accumulation of Capital'. The reference to 'Western Europe' in this connection was added in the French version of the book, not reproduced in any of the German editions. See Marx 1965, p. 1170.

²⁶ To Mikhailovsky, in Marx 1968, p. 1555.

'social regeneration' would be possible provided that the negative factors were eliminated, most importantly by a 'Russian Revolution' conducted by the peasant masses. In this process, the commune could benefit from the scientific and technological acquisitions of the existing capitalism of the West.

From this, Shanin concludes that Marx assumes that a peasant revolution in Russia could serve as the prototype for an immediate transition to socialism from peasant societies in backward countries, just as England had served as the prototype for the capitalist world.²⁷ For Shanin, the Russian case added a fourth dimension to 'Marx's analytical thought'. Hence, to the 'triple origin suggested by Engels – German philosophy, French socialism and English political economy' – should be added 'a fourth one, that of Russian revolutionary populism'.²⁸ According to Dussel, Marx underwent a 'change of direction' while reflecting on the Russian communes. This was not a 'fundamental change in Marx's theoretical position', but signified the 'opening up of a broad road for the development of Marx's discourse on the different ways' to socialism – one for the central, more developed capitalism, the other for the less developed countries of the periphery.²⁹ A few years later, Löwy considered Marx's Russian correspondence as the 'antipode of the evolutionist and deterministic reasoning of the articles on India in 1853', where Marx had argued in favour of the 'historically progressive mission' of the English bourgeoisie in that country.³⁰ Similarly, Dunayevskaya reads this correspondence as signifying that the Russian case lent itself to a 'concept of revolution which changed everything, *including economic laws*', as if it was on par with the Western European case, 'choosing a different path'.³¹

Examining more closely the context of Marx's writings on Russia in 1877 and 1881, it is important to stress that Marx had insisted on what he called the 'uniqueness' of the Russian case. This excludes the possibility that this case could be generalised into some kind of a 'law' applicable to backward

²⁷ Shanin 1983, p. 18.

²⁸ Shanin 1983, p. 20.

²⁹ Dussel 1990, pp. 260–1.

³⁰ Löwy 1996, p. 200.

³¹ Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 259. Emphasis in text. We should, however take note of another statement by the author which largely attenuates this rather strong position: 'When Marx describes that the accumulation of capital is not the universal, he does not mean that it is not the universal in capitalism. He does mean that it is no universal for the *world*, and that the undeveloped, non-capitalist countries can experience other forms of development. But even then he qualifies it by saying that they must do it together what the advanced capitalist countries do' (Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 312); emphasis in original. We are grateful to Peter Hudis for referring us to this statement.

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peasant societies, as, for example, the 'law of motion of capital' which applies to the capitalist societies. For Marx, the Russian 'agricultural communes' offered a 'unique situation, without any precedent in history'.³² First, in contrast to India, the victim of a foreign conqueror who had violently destroyed its rural communes with 'common land ownership', Russia had no foreign conqueror, and it was the 'only European country' where 'till today' its communes 'have maintained themselves on a national scale'. Secondly, Russia could benefit from its historical environment, the contemporaneity of capitalist production in Western Europe, which offered a ready-made material condition for 'cooperative labour on a vast scale' which allowed it to incorporate all the 'positive acquisitions of the capitalist system', the 'fruits with which capitalist production has enriched humanity' and allowed them to avoid going through capitalism.³³

There was, however, also a negative side to the communes that stemmed from the 'dualism inherent in the Russian communal constitution': along with the communal ownership of land there was also 'parcellary labour, the source of private appropriation', enabling the communes' members to 'accumulate moveable property, money and sometimes even slaves and serfs, uncontrolled by the commune'. This constituted a 'dissolvent of the original social and economic equality.'³⁴ Thus, the 'dualism' of the communes offers an alternative: 'either its [private] ownership element will prevail [*l'emportera*] over its collective element or its collective element will prevail over the [private] ownership element'.³⁵ One should not forget that the 'agricultural commune' constituting the 'last phase of the primitive formation of society' was 'at the same time the phase of transition to the society based on private property including the series of societies founded on slavery and serfdom'.³⁶ 'Theoretically speaking', the Russian commune could conserve its soil by developing its base, the communal ownership of the land, and by eliminating the 'principle of private ownership which it also implies', and thereby 'become a direct point of departure of the economic system to which the modern society tends'.³⁷ However, 'coming down from the theory to reality', nobody can hide the fact that the 'Russian commune today is facing a conspiracy of

³² Marx 1968, p. 1566. My emphasis.

³³ Marx 1968, pp. 1561, 1565, 1566.

³⁴ Marx 1968, p. 1564.

³⁵ Marx 1968, p. 1565.

³⁶ Marx 1968, pp. 1564-5.

³⁷ Marx 1968, p. 1565.

powerful forces and interests'. Besides exercising 'incessant exploitation on the peasants, the State has facilitated the domination (within the commune) of a certain part of the capitalist system, stock market, bank, railway, commerce'.³⁸ Similarly, the commune was 'exploited fraudulently by the intruding capitalists, merchants, landed "proprietors" as well as undermined by usury'. These different factors have 'unleashed inside the commune itself the conflict of interest already present and rapidly developed its germs of decomposition'.³⁹ This 'concourse of destructive influences, unless smashed by a powerful reaction will naturally end in the death of the rural commune'.⁴⁰ For this reason, Marx emphasises the need for a 'Russian Revolution'.⁴¹ However, even if this 'Revolution' is victorious and defeats the commune's transformation into capitalism, the building of communism in the peasant (and technologically backward) Russia would absolutely require the help of advanced productive forces, the 'positive acquisition elaborated by the capitalist system'.⁴² Russia could not obtain this material aid from capitalist régimes. This could probably only come from the victorious proletariat in Western Europe, which naturally would also serve as a bulwark against any attempted capitalist armed intervention in Russia from the outside. This seems to be the clear message of the 'Preface' to the Russian edition of the *Manifesto*, the last to appear under the joint signatures of its authors. There, they observed that, though the Russian commune had already been 'seriously undermined [*stark untergrebene*]', it could still directly go over to the 'communist form of collective ownership' provided that there was a 'revolution' in Russia which provided a signal to a 'proletarian revolution' in the West and that they would complement one another.⁴³

³⁸ Marx 1968, p. 1570. Marx also notes this 'dualism, manifesting the contradictory reality of the Russian countryside', in one of the last manuscripts of *Capital II* written one year after his letter to Mikhailovsky. There he observed that 'following the so-called 'emancipation of peasants' the Russian landowners now operate with wage-labourers instead of unfree serfs' but that, at the same time, these landowners 'lack sufficient purchasable labour power at their own chosen moments following the as yet incomplete separation of labourers from the means of production – thus having "free wage-labourers" – due to common landownership of the village' (1973b, p. 39).

³⁹ Marx 1968, 1570–1. This is confirmed by recent research. 'According to commune's practice, tools and livestock were privately owned, and it was widely recognized that the more prosperous could manipulate the decision-making process of village assemblies so as to exclude the poor and even deprive them of land' (Kingston-Mann 1990, p. 31).

⁴⁰ Marx 1968, pp. 1570–2.

⁴¹ Marx 1968, p. 1573.

⁴² Marx 1968, p. 1566.

⁴³ Marx and Engels 1972b, p. 576.

Shanin imputes uniquely to Engels the position that the Russian revolution needed a proletarian revolution as a complement and asserts that 'Marx was moving away from such views'.⁴⁴ Wada, in his turn, in an otherwise well-researched paper, adds that the 'Preface' of 1882 'expresses the opinion of Engels, more directly than that of Marx'. According to him, Marx, being 'in low spirits [due to his wife's death,] asked Engels to make the draft and simply put his signature to it',⁴⁵ as if Marx had resigned himself to put his name to whatever Engels wanted to draft. Dussel, in turn, though not going to Wada's extreme extent, writes:

[The 1882 Preface] is a text of compromise between Marx and Engels on the question of the Russian commune (that is, between Marx's 'Russian Revolution' and Engels's 'proletarian revolution') and the 'compromise' contained a contradiction indicative of the future.⁴⁶

In his different drafts and the final version of his letter to Zassulitch as well as in his letter to Mikhailovsky, Marx does not explicitly refer to the 'proletarian revolution' (by name) in the West as a complement to the Russian (peasant) revolution. As a result, the 'proletarian revolution' in the 1882 'Preface' seems to come uniquely from Engels who had, in a polemic in 1875 'at Marx's demand and developing their common point of view',⁴⁷ explicitly spoken of the necessity of this complement for successfully transforming the existing commune system into a higher form.⁴⁸ However, a careful reading of Marx's

⁴⁴ Shanin 1983, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Wada in Shanin 1983, p. 70. The opposite of Wada's position is offered by the editors of Dunayevskaya 2002, p. 316, who refer to Marx as the *sole* author of the 1882 'Preface' and nowhere mention Engels as its joint author.

⁴⁶ Dussel 1990, p. 262.

⁴⁷ Rubel in Marx 1968, p. 1552.

⁴⁸ In this polemic, Engels, affirming the possibility of the existing commune system to change into a higher form 'without passing through the intermediate stage of bourgeois parcellary property', emphasised that this possibility could not be realised without the help of a successful proletarian revolution in Western Europe which (alone) could offer the Russian peasant particularly the materials which the peasant needs to 'carry through a revolution in his whole agricultural system', 1964, pp. 47–8. At the same time, Engels underlined the importance of a revolution in Russia: 'Undoubtedly, Russia is on the eve of a revolution. . . . Here all the conditions of a revolution are united, . . . a revolution of the highest importance for Europe, since it will destroy with one stroke the reserve of the whole European reaction till now remaining intact (1964, pp. 49–50). The similarity with what Marx wrote two years later is striking: 'Russia has been standing at the threshold of a revolution for a long time. All its elements are ready. . . . The revolution this time begins in the East where the bulwark of the reserve army of counter-revolution has as yet remained unhurt' (Marx 1973c, p. 296).

drafts shows that the question of a 'proletarian revolution' in the West as an aid to the peasant revolution in Russia is present there, even if not in the specific terms used later. In the very first draft,⁴⁹ Marx considers as a 'very favourable circumstance' for the agricultural commune to go over to a higher form of society without passing through capitalism the fact that, after having survived a period when the capitalist system still appeared intact, bearing its technological fruits, the commune is now witness to this (capitalist) system

struggling, on the one hand with its *labouring masses* and, on the other, with science and the productive forces which it has itself engendered, in a word, in a *fatal crisis* which will end in the *system's elimination* by a return of the present society to a higher form of the most 'archaïque' type of collective ownership and production.⁵⁰

What else is he saying here but indicating – as if paraphrasing his famous, much misunderstood, 'Preface' of 1859 – a situation of acute contradiction between the relations of production and the material forces of production within Western capitalism, which would end in a 'fatal crisis' of the whole system and lead to its substitution by a society of a higher type through a revolution by its 'labouring masses'. If our textual reading of Marx is correct, Marx's position here is basically the same as that of the 'Preface' of 1882, only expressed in a different way, and is certainly not very different from Engels's. This can be easily verified when one reads Engels's two texts closely, those of 1875 and of 1894, the first of which was published at Marx's demand and with his full accord (Rubel asserts this, and even Wada concedes this)⁵¹ despite being unaware of Marx's drafts.⁵²

A couple of points should be stressed here concerning Marx's depiction of a future socialist society as a return, in a higher form, of the most 'archaïque' type. This is, in fact, a paraphrase of a sentence from Morgan – whom Marx mentions as an 'American author' – where this author speaks of a 'new system' as 'a revival in a superior form of an archaïque type' towards which the modern society tends. Shanin cites Marx's expression⁵³ and argues (without mentioning Marx's source) that this represents a kind of (new) enlightenment for Marx confronted with the Russian commune. We would, however, submit

⁴⁹ Engels was not aware of these drafts, later discovered by David Riazanov.

⁵⁰ Marx 1968, p. 1570. My emphasis.

⁵¹ In Shanin 1983, pp. 53–4.

⁵² Engels 1964 and 1972a.

⁵³ Shanin 1983, p. 17.

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that the *idea* underlying Marx's expression here is not really a new position. Rather, he found in Morgan's statement a re-affirmation of his and Engels's earlier position, held, it is true, in a more condensed *theoretical* manner without much of an empirical reference. Thus, in his 1865 lecture to the workers, Marx speaks of three 'historical processes' of the relation between what he calls the 'Man of Labour and the Means of Labour' – first, their 'Original Union', then their 'Separation' through the 'Decomposition of the Original Union', third, the 'restoration of the original union in a new historical form' through a 'fundamental revolution in the mode of production'.⁵⁴ Earlier, we referred to a passage from Marx's 1861–3 manuscript where Marx, in the same way, speaks of the 'original unity between the labourer and the conditions of production', as in family agriculture and 'natural communism', of their separation under capital and of the 'restoration of the original unity by means of a working class revolution'.⁵⁵ Engels, in turn, writes in his preparatory notes towards *Anti-Dühring*:

All Indo-Germanic peoples started with common ownership. In course of social development, in almost all of these, this common ownership was eliminated, negated, thrust aside by these forms. . . . It is the task of the social revolution to negate this negation and to *restore* [*wieder herzustellen*] the common ownership to a higher stage of development.⁵⁶

In the draft, we also find an interesting depiction of the most *archaïque* type of community, which broadly corresponds to Marx's portrait of communism drawn in a few bold strokes in *Capital* (1867) and later in somewhat greater detail in the *Gothakritik* (1875). Here is the laconic sentence in the draft characterising the most *archaïque* type (as opposed to its derivative, the 'agricultural commune'): 'in the more primitive communities (besides the common ownership of land) labour is done in common and the product, which is also common, is distributed (to the members) according to the needs of consumption after having put aside the part reserved for reproduction'.⁵⁷ It is striking to see the similarities between this text and a passage in *Capital*

⁵⁴ Marx 1988, p. 412. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁵ Krader paraphrases this passage and connects this with Marx's draft of letter to Zassulitch, but specifically with reference to the 'Asiatic mode of production' (Krader 1973, p. 178), not as illustrating the *general position* of Marx regarding the configuration of the new society in relation to the 'archaïque', as we are trying to do here (by also referring to Marx's 1865 London lecture).

⁵⁶ Engels 1962, p. 583.

⁵⁷ Marx 1968, p. 1563.

(Volume 1) about the 'union of free individuals' labouring with common means of production and in which the product of labour is a 'social product' of which one part is reserved in order to serve again as means of production while the rest is distributed among the members for consumption.⁵⁸ This, indeed, looks like the primitive *archaïque* society appearing at a higher level in a new form which Marx reaffirms in his 1881 draft citing Morgan.

The crucial question here is whether Marx's position on the Russian commune constitutes a *fundamental* departure from his point of view on the transition to a society of free and associated labour. As we mentioned, the references to the *singularity* and 'uniqueness' of the Russian case (underlined by Marx more than once) excludes any *generalisation* of this case (as a prototype) to other precapitalist peasant societies. Hence, this unique example does not affect Marx's *general* position.⁵⁹ It is quite clear from Marx's correspondence that, in its effort to go over to a higher type of society through a successful 'Russian Revolution', the commune cannot avoid capitalism. It still needs it to develop elsewhere and foster the conditions for a proletarian revolution through its own contradictions, just as it needs it to create advanced forces of production, which would be made available by the victorious proletariat in the West. The commune's transformation into a higher type of society would be impossible in the absence of capitalism elsewhere. However, even *before* arriving at this point, the Russian commune already faces a sombre future which Marx discerns in his dissection of the elements of its decomposition, contained integrally in its 'dualism', on the basis of the 'Russian reality', as we saw earlier.⁶⁰ Even

⁵⁸ Marx 1987, p. 109.

⁵⁹ Shanin's and Dussel's effort to extend the Russian case to the peasant world in general has no basis in Marx's texts. Nor is there much in Marx's texts to support Dunayevskaya's affirmation referred to earlier. To generalise this case for peasant societies, one has to show the existence, at a considerable scale, of the communal ownership in them and the availability of capitalism's positive acquisitions for them. There is little textual evidence for this.

⁶⁰ The enthusiasts of the 'Russian road' leading directly to communism seem to have paid little attention precisely to the 'dialectic of negativity' in the commune's 'dualism', as Marx calls it. These readers mainly saw the positive side of the 'dualism', not the elements of contradiction contained in it, which Marx repeatedly stresses. For a recent example see the otherwise important paper by Anderson 2002. The recent work of a Russian scholar seems, broadly, to confirm Marx's position. He writes: 'The reform of the 1860s intensified bourgeois tendencies of development. The village was not left untouched by this progress, it too experienced the strong growth of commodity-money relations and a degree of involvement of the peasantry in the countryside market. . . . Despite the phenomenal vitality of the commune, its days were numbered because it did not exist in a social, economic and cultural vacuum. Certain phenomena in the commune itself (such as "commodity-money relations", "growth of individualism struggling against collectivism" etc.) contributed to this development. As yet no more

before he had composed the drafts to his letter to Zassulitch, Marx's letter to Mikhailovsky (1877) already indicated the possibility of decomposition of the commune and clearly emphasised that the path of 1861, if continued, would push the commune under the general case of *Capital*, which in fact turned out to be the case.⁶¹

The Russian case rather confirms Marx's 1860s assertion that the two basic preconditions for building the new, 'free association', namely the development of labour as social labour and the high development of the productive powers of labour, could not be generated in the different forms of natural 'communism' (and small family mode of production). In Russia, not only were the productive powers of labour backward but the rural commune was 'struck by a weakness – besides the parcellary mode of labour – namely, its isolation as a 'localized microcosm' with a 'lack of contact of its life with the life of the other communes' (far from developing labour as social labour).⁶²

This 'weakness' of the commune system – even with common ownership of land – constituted an obstacle to its transformation into a new type of society and was already established *theoretically* in the first edition of *Capital* (1867) (reiterating his 1860s position) that is, *before* his exposure to Chernyshevsky in 1870 which, according to Wada, was a 'turning point for Marx'.⁶³

than tendencies, these phenomena nevertheless undermined the commune and threatened to destroy it' (Mironov in B. Eklof and S. Frank (eds.) 1990, pp. 28, 31, 32).

⁶¹ More than a decade later, in a letter to Danielson (1892), Engels recalled Marx's 1877 letter to Mikhailovsky where Engels observed: 'our author said that if the line entered upon in 1861 was persevered in, the peasants '*obshchina*' must go to ruin. That seems to me to be in course of fulfilment just now. . . . I am afraid we shall have to treat '*obshchina*' as a dream of the past and reckon, in future, with a capitalist Russia. No doubt a great chance is thus being lost' (in Marx, Engels 1972c, p. 338). In his 'Afterword' (1894) Engels would cite again this letter to make the same point while stressing the importance of a 'Russian Revolution' both for 'preserving what remains of the commune' and for 'giving the workers' movement in the West a new push and new, better conditions of struggle and thereby hastening the victory of the proletariat without which today's Russia can neither from capitalism nor from the commune come to a socialist transformation', (Engels 1972a, pp. 431, 435). In a well-researched work, a contemporary historian of Russia emphasises this tendency towards decomposition of the commune arising from economic factors both internal and external. Among the first he mentions land shortage, rural overpopulation, underemployment of labour leading large numbers of peasants to seek wage employment outside. The external factor was the increasing demand for wage-labour arising from the growth of urban centres and development of modern industry aided by the construction a national network of railways after 1850s (Moon 1999, pp. 287, 383–4).

⁶² Marx 1968, p. 1567.

⁶³ In Shanin 1983, p. 45.

Very interestingly, Marx retained, in the second edition of *Capital* (1872) as well as in its French version (1875), this same passage word for word:

The ancient social organisms, of production [in the 'modes of production of ancient Asia, of antiquity' etc.] are extraordinarily much simpler and more transparent than the bourgeois [mode]. But they are based either on the immaturity of the individual human who has not yet severed his umbilical chord connecting him with others in a natural community (of a primitive tribe), or the direct relations of lordship and bondage. They are conditioned by a low level of development of the productive powers of labour and correspondingly the narrowness of the relations of human beings as between themselves and with nature in the process of production of material life.⁶⁴

As we see, much of this central idea about the old communal system is carried over and gets confirmed in the concrete case of Russia, as seen in Marx's 1881 correspondence (after he has read Kovalevsky and Morgan).

It would, of course, be wrong to affirm that there was nothing new in Marx's reflections on the Russian communes. Marx and Engels were undoubtedly impressed by the vitality of these communes still having about half the land under communal ownership, as nowhere else at the time.⁶⁵ This is reflected in their continued interest for this question for at least two decades beginning with the early 1870s. Common ownership of the means of production by the producers being the very basis of a new society, its existence in the

⁶⁴ Marx 1983, p. 48; 1987, pp. 109–10; 1965, p. 614.

⁶⁵ Years later, Rosa Luxemburg, in her posthumously (and fragmentarily) published lectures on political economy in the party school (beginning 1907), gave figures on the gradual erosion of the communal land ownership in European Russia for the period of 1890–1900. In our calculation from these figures, it appears that communal land ownership came down from about 34 per cent to 31 per cent of the total land ownership in European Russia during this period (Luxemburg 1972, p. 97). Luxemburg did not cite her source. However the relevant Russian official data cited by a modern authority on Russian history do not show much difference from Luxemburg's data. They show the extent of the rural communal land in Russia's total land area at the end of the nineteenth century to be 34.3 per cent (Grünwald 1975, p. 169). The data on the proportion of communal land in the total Russian land, for the subsequent period from around 1905 to 1917 are subject to controversy (more importantly their interpretation). See the critical survey by Atkinson 1973, pp. 773–89. It is interesting to note that Luxemburg's view about the Tsarist policy regarding the Russian communes was directly opposite to Marx's, based on the findings of his Russian sources. Comparing the destiny of the rural communes elsewhere (India *et al.*) where these communes were destroyed through the 'collision with the European capitalism', in Russia 'history has followed another course', she wrote, where the 'state did not seek to destroy violently the rural communes, but sought to save and preserve them by all means' (Atkinson 1973, p. 95).

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Russian communal system appeared to Marx (and Engels) as a very favourable factor enabling the Russian peasants to skip the stage of capitalist private ownership. However, this did not *fundamentally* change Marx's thought, because it did not affect his *general* position on the preconditions for the transition to socialism: on the one hand, the existence of *social* labour (with the socialisation of production), not at a local level, but at the level of the whole society and, on the other hand, a high development of the productive powers of social labour to free individuals from the struggle for necessity and to increase their 'free time' beyond labour-time.⁶⁶ Ideally, capitalism need not be the system where these conditions are created, and it would certainly be better if it were not. Historically, however, as Marx repeatedly emphasised, it is only capital which has, through its contradictions, generated these conditions. Even as an exceptional case, with its communal land ownership, the Russian communal system had to depend on capitalism's positive achievements, particularly the 'ready made material conditions of cooperative labour'.⁶⁷ Finally, it was only the Western proletariat, through its own revolution, that could stand as a bulwark against foreign interventions in order to ensure a successful Russian Revolution against the Tsarist régime, the 'head of European reaction', as the 1882 'Preface' observes.⁶⁸ In short, what was new in Marx's thinking, confronted with the Russian commune, was his theoretical non-exclusion of the possibility for a society to go over directly to socialism without passing through capitalism. At the same time, Marx severely qualified this idea by emphasising the *uniqueness* of the Russian case and underlining the negative factors inherent in the commune's 'dualism' working steadily against this possibility. The events of history, the 'best of all Marxists' as Hilferding used to say,⁶⁹ vindicated Marx's dire prognostic.

At this point, it is important to clarify a serious confusion resulting from an *ideological* reading of Marx's writings on Russia that emerged around the First World War. Various scholars have read Marx's idea of a 'Russian Revolution' in his correspondence and in the 'Preface' (1882) to the *Manifesto*

⁶⁶ Marx 1962, p. 255. The expressions 'free time', 'free activity' are in English in the text.

⁶⁷ Marx 1968, p. 1566.

⁶⁸ Marx and Engels 1972b, p. 576. It is interesting to note that at the same period when Marx was composing his correspondence in question – in 1880, to be precise – he, in a different context, also maintained that the 'material and intellectual elements of the collective form of the means of production are constituted by the development of the capitalist class itself' (Marx 1965, p. 1538).

⁶⁹ In Howe 1972, p. 517.

as the prefiguration of twentieth-century revolutions, particularly those led by Marxists, beginning with the Bolshevik seizure of power. According to Shanin, Marx's new position was vindicated by victorious revolutions in backward countries in which Marxists such as 'Lenin, Mao and Ho, proved socialist in leadership and results', whereas 'no socialist revolution came in the West'.⁷⁰ Similarly Dussel has written:

Russia has certainly followed the road foreseen by Marx [*siguio el camino previsto por Marx*]. Without passing through capitalism it has realised its revolution allowing the rural Russian commune to pass, in great measure, *directly* from the communal ownership to the social ownership . . . since the revolution of 1917.⁷¹

Michael Löwy, in his turn, writes:

It is often forgotten that, in their preface to the Russian translation of the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels envisaged a hypothetical situation in which socialist revolution could begin in Russia and then spread to western Europe.⁷²

Similarly, Raya Dunayevskaya interpreted the 1882 'Preface' as 'projecting the idea that Russia could be the first to have a proletarian revolution ahead of the West'.⁷³

Marx's writings discussed here, however, contain no reference to a 'proletarian' or 'socialist' revolution in Russia. They refer, rather, to the 'Russian Revolution' *tout court*, a revolution by Russian communal peasants against the principal enemy of the communal system – the Tsarist régime. Naturally, for Marx (and Engels), following his materialist conception of history, there could be no proletarian revolution in the quasi-absence of a proletariat. The idea of a proletarian revolution occurring in a technologically backward society, where the proletariat constitutes only a small part of society, gained its *droit de cité* through a theory propagated around the time of the First World War when the idea was advanced of a possible proletarian revolution breaking out in the 'weakest link' in the world capitalist chain.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Shanin 1983, pp. 25, 254.

⁷¹ Dussel 1990, p. 261. Emphasis in text.

⁷² Löwy, 1998, pp. 18–19.

⁷³ Dunayevskaya 1991, p. 187.

⁷⁴ However, the principal proponent of this idea at the time correctly acknowledged, in contrast to many later Marxists and non-Marxists, that such a revolution had not been foreseen by Marx and Engels.

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More fundamentally, there is an unbridgeable gulf between Marx's conception of the socialist revolution led by the producers themselves and the revolutions that took place in the twentieth century under the leadership, not of the producers themselves, but of small groups of radicalised intelligentsia acting in their name, even if with mass *support* at the *initial* stage. The Bolshevik seizure of power, far from inaugurating the 'rule of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority', as the *Communist Manifesto* famously put it, excluded from the start the immediate producers from any real power. Even in Marx's correspondence discussed here, one is struck by the emphasis he puts on the creative power of the immediate producers in the transformation of their society. He never mentions the need for a special apparatus to substitute itself to the spontaneous self-activity of the masses towards their own emancipation.⁷⁵ Marx thus insists on the need for 'substituting the governmental institution *volost* by an assembly of peasants elected by the communes themselves and serving as the economic and administrative organ of their interests'.⁷⁶ This is in stark contrast with the systematic elimination of the producers' organs of self-rule which occurred very rapidly under the Bolshevik régime. This culminated in the bloody liquidation of Kronstadt's soviet democracy, a 'bustling, self-governing, egalitarian and highly politicized, the like of which had not been seen in Europe since the Paris commune (of 1871)', in the words of perhaps the most authoritative academic historian of the question.⁷⁷ Russia's popular uprising of February 1917, in fact, would corresponded more closely to Marx's idea of a 'Russian Revolution'. It was initiated by the producers themselves without any party guidance, as an immense revolutionary mass movement in an open-ended, plural revolutionary process, though without 'socialism' being proclaimed as their immediate aim. The Bolsheviks put a brake on this process, and destroyed this revolutionary democracy.⁷⁸

Marx, 'rethinker of progress'

Marx, it is well known, places the 'bourgeois mode of production' as the last of the 'progressive epochs of the economic-social formation' before its

⁷⁵ See the pertinent remarks by Rubel 1971, p. 419.

⁷⁶ Marx 1968, p. 1567.

⁷⁷ Getzler 1983, p. 246.

⁷⁸ See in particular, on the whole question, Anweiler 1958; Daniels 1967; Ferro 1967; 1980.

replacement by the AMP. Though the term 'progressive' refers here to a chronological ordering of the epochs – capitalism preceded by feudalism, slavery and communal modes of production – does this mean that he shared the conception of progress associated with Bacon, Descartes, Pascal, the Encyclopaedists and the positivists of the nineteenth century? More precisely, was Marx a partisan of the idea of 'progress', conceived basically as a cumulative and continuing improvement in the situation of the human beings due notably to the continuing advances in science and technology?⁷⁹

Far from answering this question in the positive, we submit that Marx reconceptualised progress in a radical way. Marx firmly placed (human) progress in its historical context, never taking it as an absolute, abstract category, with a unilinear direction. He warned against taking the 'concept of progress in the commonplace (customary) abstract' sense.⁸⁰ Progress was always considered by him as a contradictory movement, simultaneously positive and negative.⁸¹ Hence, most of the criticisms of progress made today could be shown to apply to the *pre-Marxian* unilinear idea of progress. As a matter of fact, the misdeeds of capitalist progress were already emphasised by Marx, and in a more penetrating way than most modern critics of progress. But, unlike these critics, whose ideas on progress are also equally unilinear as the ideas of their opponents, Marx clearly saw the profoundly contradictory character of progress under capital.

Given that the extraction of unpaid surplus-labour is the common basis of all hitherto existing social formations (at least from a certain period in history), Marx considers the capitalist social formation superior to earlier social formations precisely because capital, unlike any earlier mode of production, contributes to the universal development of the productive powers of labour,

⁷⁹ Thus the article on the 'Idea of Progress' in the authoritative *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Volume 6, Macmillan, New York, 1967) brackets Marx with John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte in this regard.

⁸⁰ Marx 1953, p. 29.

⁸¹ In a work of early 1840s, Marx writes: 'In spite of the pretensions of "progress" we see all the time *regressions* and *circular movements* [*Kreisbewegungen*]. . . . The category of *progress* is wholly abstract and devoid of content. . . . All the communist and socialist writers start from their observation that . . . all the *progress of spirit* has been till now *progress against the mass of humanity* which has been driven to an increasingly *inhuman* situation. They have therefore declared progress as an inadequate, abstract *phrase*. They have supposed [this] as a fundamental affliction of the civilized world. They have therefore subjected the *real* basis of the present day society to a decisive critique. To this communist critique has corresponded simultaneously the movement of the *great mass* against whom the earlier historical development had taken place' (Marx-Engels 1972a, pp. 88–9). Emphasis in text.

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a basic condition for building the new society. This is achieved, of course, at a tremendous cost to society undergoing 'a long and painful history of development'.⁸² This tendency of capital towards the universal development of the productive powers of labour, Marx sees as a 'positive side' to capital only in comparison with precapitalist modes of production in which human development 'had only a limited and local character'.⁸³ However, Marx underlines, more than any other critic of capital, the antagonistic character of this 'positive side' of capitalist progress.

Marx's position on progress follows from his rejection of the 'dogmatic distinction between the good and the bad' in favour of the 'dialectical movement', which consists of the necessary 'coexistence of two contradictory sides and their fusion into a new category'.⁸⁴ Marx, approvingly cites a passage from Richard Jones where the latter speaks precisely of 'progress' under modern society as certainly 'not the most desirable state of things' (as regards the relation between the labourers and the 'accumulated stock') but which nevertheless has to be viewed as 'constituting a stage in the march of industry which has hitherto marked the progress of advancing nations', Marx interprets Jones as asserting, on the one hand, that capitalist mode of production constitutes an 'immense progress as opposed to all the earlier forms when one considers the productive powers of social labour' while underlining, on the other hand, the 'antagonistic form' of this progress which contains also the 'necessity of its downfall'.⁸⁵

The very principle of production for production's sake, the recognition of wealth for its own sake as supreme virtue, leading to the universal development of the productive powers of social labour which marks the 'positive side' of the 'modern world', also shows the other backward and inferior character of progress in the 'modern world' when compared with the 'ancient world'. Thus, the ancient idea that the human being is the aim of production, not production the aim of the human being, appears 'very lofty against the modern world'. When compared with the form of 'complete emptiness' of the modern world (the 'bourgeois economy'), the 'childlike ancient world appears superior'.⁸⁶ In his comments on Morgan, referring to the early period of human evolution, Marx contrasts the absence of passion for possession in the early

⁸² Marx 1987, p. 110.

⁸³ Marx 1953, p. 313; 1988, p. 107.

⁸⁴ Marx 1965, p. 81.

⁸⁵ Marx 1962, p. 425.

⁸⁶ Marx 1953, p. 387.

humans with possession being ‘such a commanding *force in the human mind* now’.⁸⁷ Again, in the first draft of his letter to Zassulitch, Marx asserts that ‘one should not be afraid of the word “archaic”’, that the ‘vitality of the primitive communities was incomparably greater’ not only compared to the Semitic, Greek, Roman, but ‘even more so compared to the modern capitalist societies’, and adds that some bourgeois writers ‘infatuated [*épris*] with the capitalist system and aiming to praise this system and show its superiority are incapable of understanding [this]’.⁸⁸ Years earlier, Marx had sarcastically written the following:

Antipatros, a Greek poet of Cicero’s time, greeted the discovery of the watermill as the liberator [*Befreierin*] of the female slaves and the builder of the golden age. Oh those pagans! They, as the learned Bastiat and, before him, still more gifted MacCulloch have discovered, understood nothing of political economy and Christianity. Among other things, they did not grasp that the machine is the most tested means for prolonging the working day. These pagans excused the slavery of one as the means towards the full human development of another. But they lacked the specific Christian charity of preaching the slavery of the masses for turning the crude or half educated upstarts into ‘eminent spinners’, ‘extensive sausage makers’ and ‘influential shoe black dealers.’⁸⁹

Marx’s view of progress under capital as contradictory (antagonistic) also clearly comes out in his observations on the two great classical economists – Ricardo and Sismondi – regarding their respective points of view on the development of productive powers of labour under the capitalist mode of production. Ricardo, who considered capitalist production as the absolute form of production and who insisted on the creation of wealth for the sake of wealth, production for the sake of production, showed a ‘profound understanding of the *positive* nature of capital’. Sismondi, in his turn, ‘profoundly grasped’ capital’s ‘limitedness [*Borniertheit*]’, its ‘*negative* unilaterality’ with his ‘profound sentiment that capitalist production is contradictory’ and that the contradictions grow with the growth of the

⁸⁷ In Krader 1974, p. 128. Emphasis in the text. This expression appears in English. ‘Modern family contains in germ not only *servitus* but also serfdom. It contains in miniature all the antagonisms within itself which later broadly developed in society and its state’ (Marx in Krader 1974, p. 120).

⁸⁸ Marx 1968, p. 1568.

⁸⁹ Marx 1987, pp. 396–7. Words under single quotation marks appear in English in the text.

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productive powers of labour. Ricardo understood more the universal tendency of capital, Sismondi more its limitedness. Whereas Ricardo's viewpoint was 'revolutionary' in relation to the old society, Sismondi's was 'reactionary' in relation to capitalist society.⁹⁰

It would be completely wrong to depict Marx – as some ecologists often do – as a productivist *par excellence*, a high priest of production for production's sake.⁹¹ Marx's concern for the environment under capital is clear in the following passage:

Capitalist production destroys not only the physical health of the urban and the intellectual life of the rural labourers but also destroys the spontaneously grown conditions of organic exchanges between the earth and the human being. . . . In agriculture as in manufacture the capitalist transformation of productive process appears simultaneously as the martyrdom of the producers, the means of labour appear as means of subjugating, exploiting and impoverishing the labourers, the social combination of the labour process appears as organised suppression of labourer's vitality, freedom and individual independence. The capitalist production develops technology and the combination of the social process of production only by exhausting simultaneously the two sources from which springs all wealth: *the earth and the labourer*.⁹²

The same concern is expressed in practical/empirical terms in the questionnaire that Marx set up in 1880 on the living and working conditions of the French working men and women.⁹³

Everybody knows the *Communist Manifesto's* 'compliments' to the bourgeoisie for their material achievements, the immense development of the productive powers of labour. We also referred earlier to the great importance Marx attaches to the growth of these powers as a condition for human emancipation. Indeed, Marx considers Ricardo's insistence on the need for unlimited production without any regard for individuals as 'just' and considers Ricardo's critics in this regard as 'reactionaries'.⁹⁴ However, we should be careful to note that, when Marx refers to Ricardo's position of 'equating the proletariat

⁹⁰ Marx 1953, p. 314; 1962, pp. 48, 50. Our emphasis.

⁹¹ See, for example, Benton 1989 and Sikorski 1993. For an excellent refutation of Benton's 'neo-Malthusian Marxism' see Burkett 1998.

⁹² Marx 1987, pp. 476–7; 1965, pp. 998–9. Emphasis in the French version following the first edition. See 1983, p. 413.

⁹³ Marx 1965, pp. 1527–36.

⁹⁴ In his 'Urtext' (1858), Marx detects this insistence on production for production's

with machines or beasts of burden or a commodity', and goes so far as to say that this point of view is 'not mean of Ricardo' and that this is 'stoic, scientific, objective', Marx is doing this because 'from [Ricardo's] point of view "production" is enhanced this way', because the proletarians are 'merely machines or beasts of burden or they are really simple commodities in *bourgeois production*'. In other words, 'Ricardo's ruthlessness [*Rücksichtslosigkeit*] was not only scientifically honest, but also scientifically necessary from his point of view', inasmuch as Ricardo, 'rightly for his time', simply gave a scientifically honest representation of *bourgeois reality* because 'capitalist production [was] the most advantageous for creating wealth.'⁹⁵ Of course, this praise for Ricardo goes hand in hand with Marx's severe critique of Ricardo for his denial of the contradictory character of the capitalist mode of production, taken by him as the 'absolute form of production'.

As Marx never fails to emphasise, the very nature of capital cannot but be inherently antagonistic, cannot but have profoundly destructive dimensions. For Marx, the

negative or the contradictory character of capitalist production [is that] this production is indifferent and in opposition to the producers. The producer [is] a simple means of production, the material wealth is the end in itself. Therefore the development of this material wealth [is] *in opposition to and at the cost of the human individual*.⁹⁶

However, as long as capital continues, we cannot have one without the other. In general, given a society divided in classes, 'if there is no antagonism, there is no progress'. This is the 'law that civilization has followed *till our times*. *Till now* the productive forces have developed thanks to the antagonistic régime of classes.'⁹⁷

sake much earlier in Petty reflecting the 'energetic, merciless, universal drive for enrichment of the English nation in the 17th century' (1953, p. 890).

⁹⁵ Marx 1959a, pp. 106, 107, 108. Our emphasis. In his first manuscript for *Capital*, Volume 2 (not included in Engels's published version) Marx noted that Ricardo, for whom 'the capitalist mode of production is the natural and absolute form of social production', and for whom 'the productive labouring class exists on the whole only as a machine for producing surplus-value for the possessors of the conditions of labour', was the 'economist of the big industry and sees [saw] things from the standpoint of the big bourgeoisie' (1988, p. 376). About two decades earlier, Marx had pointed out that the 'Ricardian doctrine resumes rigorously and ruthlessly [*impitoyablement*] the whole English bourgeoisie which itself is the type of the modern bourgeoisie' (1965, p. 21).

⁹⁶ Marx 1988, p. 107. Our emphasis.

⁹⁷ Marx 1965, pp. 35–6. Our emphasis.

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While Marx praises Sismondi for his profound analysis of capital's contradiction (which Ricardo could not understand), Marx reproaches Sismondi for trying to eliminate these contradictions by setting 'moral and legal limits' to capital 'from outside', which, as 'external and artificial barriers' capital necessarily throws overboard.⁹⁸ How astonishingly modern this sounds!⁹⁹ Indeed, the critics of capital's tendency towards unlimited development of productive powers fail to realise that, even if this development is achieved '*at first at the cost of the majority of human individuals and even of the entire classes*', it 'ends up by breaking through this antagonism and coincides with the development of the singular individuals'. Hence, the 'higher development of the individuality is *brought only through a historical process in which the individuals are sacrificed*'.¹⁰⁰ This catastrophic situation – the destruction of the majority as a cost of 'progress' – Marx certainly does not posit as a universal law valid for all times. This is valid only during what Marx famously calls the 'pre-history of human society'. Marx puts this very clearly in almost identical terms in two texts:

It is in fact only at the greatest waste of individual development that the development of general men is secured in the *epochs of history which preludes to a socialist constitution of mankind*.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Marx 1953, p. 314.

⁹⁹ For an example of an ecological socialist who would like to see capital's ecological destruction eliminated while retaining 'money, wage-labor, the rational features of the market and privately owned enterprise', that is, who wants what he considers as the 'good' side and not the 'bad' side of the capitalist mode of production, see Kovel 1995. Proudhon's influence seems to be abiding!

¹⁰⁰ Marx 1959a, p. 107. Our emphasis.

¹⁰¹ Marx 1976, p. 327; 1992, pp. 124–5. The whole sentence appears in English almost identically in the two manuscripts. Our emphasis. In Engels's edition of *Capital*, Volume 3, the original English expression is translated in German not quite faithfully, notably replacing 'socialist constitution of mankind' by 'conscious reconstruction of the human society'. See Marx 1964, p. 99. Regarding the domination of capital over labour, Marx writes elsewhere: '*historically considered, this inversion appears as a necessary stage of transition [Durchgangspunkt] to obtain, by violence and at the cost of the majority, the creation of wealth as such that is, the unlimited productive powers of social labour which alone can build the material basis of a free human society. This antagonistic form has to be traversed just as the human must give his spiritual forces a religious form and erect them as an independent power confronting him*' (1988, p. 65. Emphasis in text).

Two recent contributions on the question of progress

Before we conclude, let us consider two recent contributions in the area of our discussion – those by Jeffrey Vogel (1996) and Michael Löwy (2000). For matters of convenience, let us reverse the chronological order and start with Löwy and then come back to Vogel. Löwy holds that there are two conflicting conceptions of progress in Marx. The first is ‘Eurocentric, Hegelian, teleological and *closed*’, while the second is ‘critical, non-teleological and *open*’.¹⁰² The first conception can be found in ‘certain writings of Marx which seem to treat the development of productive forces – originating in Europe – as identical to progress, in the sense of necessarily leading to socialism’.¹⁰³ In this regard, the author specifically mentions Marx’s 1850s writings on India.¹⁰⁴ The second and opposite conception considers history simultaneously as progress and catastrophe, ‘the outcome of the historic process not being pre-determined’. This is seen in ‘certain passages of *Capital* as well as in Marx’s later writings on “primitive communism” as well as on Russia’.¹⁰⁵ The first conception, the ‘linear’ view of progression, whose ‘outcome is pre-determined by the ‘contradiction between forces and relations of production’, served the Second International and the Third after 1924 in their ‘deterministic conception of socialism as the inevitable result of the development of the forces of production (in growing contradiction with capitalist relations of production’.¹⁰⁶ While Löwy discusses Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky and other more contemporary Marxists in opposing the ‘determinist’ view of progress, we will leave aside his account of other ‘Marxists’ and deal exclusively with his views on Marx in order not to overburden the paper.

Regarding the charge of ‘Eurocentrism’ in Marx’s ‘certain writings’, which Löwy shares with a number of leftists, it stems from a misreading of Marx’s texts. True, among all the regions of the world, Marx’s focuses mostly on Europe. The reason is simple. It is here that the capitalist mode of production first emerged and started its journey towards world domination. And it is the capitalist mode of production which was Marx’s increasing concern, starting with his ‘critique of political economy’ (1844), long before he formally declared his preoccupation with the ‘discovery of the law of motion of capital’ (1867). Needless to add, Marx saw capital as the most revolutionary mode

¹⁰² Löwy 2000, pp. 35, 37. Emphasis in text.

¹⁰³ Löwy 2000, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴ Löwy 2000, pp. 35–6.

¹⁰⁵ Löwy 2000, pp. 37–8.

¹⁰⁶ Löwy 2000, pp. 36, 40.

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of production so far, breaking down all narrowness and localism of earlier modes of production and having a universal character by the very logic of its nature. He saw the capitalist mode of production as the only mode of production so far which created – antagonistically – the necessary subjective and material conditions for building a ‘union of free individuals’ – the only ‘historical justification’ for its existence in Marx’s view. And the capitalist mode of production happened to originate in and spread from Europe. In fact, *geographically*, the reference point of Marx is not even Europe, but Western Europe, if not England, with France occupying a distant second place. The reason is obvious. It is capital, not Europe, that Marx’s is concerned with.

As for the accusation that Marx viewed social development in a teleological way that is as serving a (predetermined) purpose or design, then Marx’s conception of history is certainly not teleological.¹⁰⁷ Marx and Engels made this clear from their early days in discussing Hegel’s view that the ‘Truth is an *automation* which is self-demonstrating, to be followed by the human’. Marx had earlier criticised Hegel for sharing the point of view of the ‘old teleologists’ for whom ‘*History*, like the *Truth* becomes a metaphysical subject of which the real humans are only the supporting elements [*Träger*]’. Then Marx added:

Surely it is not ‘history’ which uses the human as a means to achieve its ends – as if it is a person apart. History does nothing, it does not produce (immense) wealth, does not wage battles. History is nothing but the activities of the humans following their own objectives.¹⁰⁸

In a following text, Marx and Engels wrote:

Religion, morality, metaphysics and all the rest of ideology have neither history, nor development; it is on the contrary the humans who, while developing their material production and communication, transform, along with their own reality, their thought and its products.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Lukács has convincingly argued that, in contrast to his great predecessors, Aristotle and Hegel, Marx had no teleology in his conception of history (Lukács 1971). Curiously, Löwy mentions Hegel only in connection with the teleological conception (of history) which Marx had completely rejected, and he is silent on concepts and ideas which Marx took over from Hegel by ‘putting them back on their feet’.

¹⁰⁸ Marx and Engels 1972a, pp. 83, 98. Emphasis in text. Much later, after reading Darwin, Engels wrote, in a letter to Marx (11 or 12 December, 1859), ‘till now, in one respect [*nach einer Seite hin*] teleology had not been destroyed. This has happened now’, Engels 1963, p. 524.

¹⁰⁹ Marx and Engels 1973, pp. 26–7.

The only presupposition allowed in this materialist conception of history is the 'previous historical development',¹¹⁰ that is, the individuals in their 'real, empirically perceptible practical activities in the practical process of evolution under definite conditions', there is no place here for 'a recipe or a design for arranging historical epochs'.¹¹¹ It is in this anti-teleological rein that communism is presented by Marx and Engels in their very first works on the materialist conception of history as a 'movement', not a 'doctrine'. Its 'point of departure' is not

theoretically determined principles, but *facts* . . . to the extent it is theoretical, communism is the theoretical expression of the position of the proletariat in the class struggle and the theoretical synthesis of conditions of liberation of the proletariat.¹¹²

Communism is not an ideal to which the reality should conform. It is a 'real movement'. The 'conditions of this movement', 'which is going on under our eyes', 'result from the previously given prerequisites which exist at present.'¹¹³ Fifteen years later, Marx emphasised:

The only solid theoretical basis [of communism] is the scientific insight into the economic structure of the [existing] bourgeois society. It is not a question of setting up any utopian system. It is a question of self conscious participation in the historical revolutionary process of society which is going on before our eyes.¹¹⁴

Such a conception of history excludes, by definition, a teleological outlook.

As an example of Marx's 'teleological, determinist, economistic approach', Löwy refers to Marx's two articles on India (1853). In one of them, he points to Marx's assertion that the British bourgeoisie was acting as the 'unconscious tool' of history in 'bringing about a social revolution' in India through the destruction of the old social structure and the introduction of steam and science in that country.¹¹⁵ We submit that what Marx says here is simply a variation of a central theme of the materialist conception of history that can

¹¹⁰ Marx 1953, p. 387.

¹¹¹ Marx and Engels 1973, p. 27.

¹¹² Engels 1972b, p. 321. Emphasis in original.

¹¹³ Marx and Engels 1973, p. 35; 1979, p. 70.

¹¹⁴ Marx 1972, p. 439. About a decade later, Marx famously declared: 'Workers have no ready made utopias to introduce, no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society is pregnant' in Marx, Engels 1971, p. 36.

¹¹⁵ Löwy 2000, pp. 35–6.

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be found in other writings by him (and Engels). In one of his early texts, he was already asserting that:

Private property in its economic movement drives itself towards its own dissolution, but only through a movement – conditioned by the nature of things – which is independent of it, of which it is not *conscious*, and (is) against its (own) will.¹¹⁶

Then, in the *Manifesto* (1848), the bourgeoisie is depicted as continually revolutionising the forces and relations of production through the destruction of earlier modes of production and serving as the ‘passive and unconscious vehicle [*willenlose Träger*]’ of industrial progress, generating its own ‘grave diggers’ the proletariat.¹¹⁷ Years later, in the manuscript of *Capital III*, having referred to the development of the productive forces of labour as the ‘*historical task and justification of capital*’, Marx added: ‘thereby it creates *unconsciously* the material conditions of a higher mode of production’.¹¹⁸ And the famous section on the ‘*historical tendency of capitalist accumulation*’ in *Capital I* precisely ends by citing the *Manifesto*’s passage just mentioned. Marx’s 1853 writings on India are non-teleological, just as the texts mentioned above.

To show that there are texts in Marx which, in contrast to those on India, point to a different ‘*dialectic of progress*’, which is ‘*critical, non-teleological, and fundamentally open*’,¹¹⁹ Löwy cites from *Capital I* the sentence ‘each economic advance is at the same time a calamity’, and then a long passage on capital’s disastrous ecological record. First, one should note that these texts appear in the same chapter in *Capital* (‘*Big Industry*’), which should be read as a whole. Thus the single sentence cited by Löwy (as given above) is immediately qualified by Marx in the same passage as the ‘*negative side*’ of capitalist production. Interestingly, after citing, in the same passage, a few lines from the *Manifesto* (1848) emphasising the eminently ‘*revolutionary role*’ of the bourgeoisie through the destruction of all that was fixed and venerable in earlier modes of production, Marx points out that the

catastrophes themselves, created by big industry, impose the recognition of the variation of labour and thereby the maximum possible all-sidedness of the labourers as the general law of social production. . . . Big industry compels

¹¹⁶ Marx and Engels 1972a, p. 37. ‘Private property’ here, as in his Parisian manuscripts (1844), stands for capital.

¹¹⁷ Marx and Engels 1979, pp. 61, 62, 69.

¹¹⁸ Marx 1992, p. 333. First emphasis is Marx’s, the second is ours.

¹¹⁹ Löwy 2000, p. 37. Emphasis in text.

society to replace the fragmented individuals, the simple bearers of detailed labour, by the totally developed individual.

In the same paragraph, Marx sums up brilliantly the whole approach: 'The development of contradictions of a historical form of production is the only historical way towards its dissolution and transformation' and then adds significantly (in the French version): 'therein lies the secret of historical movement which doctrinaires, utopians, and socialists do not want to understand'.¹²⁰ We argue that it is essentially the same message that we get from Marx's 1850s articles on India. Let us take the same articles that Löwy chooses to illustrate Marx's 'teleological, determinist and economic approach' to progress. One reads:

All that the English bourgeoisie may be forced to do will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social condition of the mass of the people. But what they will not fail to do is to lay down the material premise for both. Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth. Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and peoples through the blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?¹²¹

These lines illustrate once more how Marx's general thesis informed his whole life work, emphasising the historically revolutionary role – simultaneously positive and negative – of the bourgeoisie, compared with the earlier classes and in relation to the advent of the 'union of free individuals'.

Löwy dismisses as 'linear', 'Eurocentric', and 'teleological',¹²² Marx's emphasis on the development of productive forces as a fundamental factor of human progress as well as Marx's strongly held idea – derived from a close study of past history – that the productive forces/production relations contradiction is the mother of all social dynamics (including revolutions). As Marx reminded the English workers: 'Antagonism between the productive powers and the social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be

¹²⁰ Marx 1965, pp. 992, 993; 1987, pp. 466–7. In the French version, 'contradiction' is replaced by a stronger term, 'antagonism' 1965, p. 993. We could refer here to what Marx wrote to Kugelmann (17 March 1868): 'I present *big industry* not only as the mother of antagonism but also as the creator of the material and intellectual conditions towards solving this antagonism'. Marx and Engels 1972c, p. 162; emphasis in original.

¹²¹ In Marx 1959b, pp. 85, 87.

¹²² Löwy 2000, pp. 36, 40.

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contradicted'.¹²³ Unfortunately, Löwy does not adequately explain his position besides denouncing the Second International and Stalin for (mis)using these complex of ideas. This is, of course, a poor substitute for a rigorous demonstration based on Marx's own *texts*. As a matter of fact, Löwy's position amounts to nothing short of a rejection, pure and simple, of the whole materialist conception of history as we find it in Marx (and Engels). How does this conception consider productive forces? Marx had pointed out in one of the first elaborations of his 'new materialism' that 'the history of productive forces is the history of the development of the individual's own forces'.¹²⁴ In the immediately following work, Marx characterises the 'proletariat, the revolutionary class', as the 'greatest productive power among all the instruments of production'.¹²⁵ In that text, Marx writes:

The social relations are intimately related to the productive forces. By acquiring the new forces of production the humans change their mode of production and by changing the latter they change all their social relations.¹²⁶

This 'intimate relation' between the productive forces and the relations of production, including their growing antagonism, would find its most rigorous formulation in the famous 1859 'Preface'. This would again be taken up by Marx in an important methodological note in *Capital I*:

Technology reveals how the human actively relates to nature, the process of production of the material life (of the human), and, consequently, the origin of social relations and the ideas which follow therefrom.

Such a view is presented within the context of the discussion of what Marx considers as the 'only materialist and, therefore, scientific method'.¹²⁷

Returning to the importance of the development of productive forces, one finds Marx emphasising that limited productive forces would simply not allow human emancipation. Until now, humans have gained their liberation only to the extent that the existing forces of production 'prescribed and allowed it'.

¹²³ Marx 1980b, p. 655.

¹²⁴ Marx and Engels 1973, p. 72.

¹²⁵ Ten years later, Marx would qualify the 'human individual' as 'the principal productive force' (1953, p. 325). There is not a trace of this specific Marxian meaning of the 'productive force' in Löwy.

¹²⁶ Marx 1965, p. 79.

¹²⁷ Marx 1965, p. 915. The term 'social relations' in the French version replaces 'social relations of life' in the German version. See Marx 1987, p. 364.

Till now all the freedoms have been based on limited productive forces. Their production, insufficient to satisfy the whole society, allowed progress only if some individuals satisfied their needs at the expense of others, such that the ones – the minority – obtained the monopoly of progress while the others – the majority – because of their continuous struggle for bare necessities, were provisionally excluded from all progress.¹²⁸

In his ‘little speech in English’, as Marx called it, of 1856, Marx starkly told the English workers: ‘Steam, electricity, and the self-acting mule were revolutionists of a rather more dangerous character than even citizens Barbès, Raspail and Blanqui.’¹²⁹ About a decade later, he would emphasise: ‘creation of wealth as such, that is, unlimited [*rücksichtslosen*] productive powers of social labour, alone can constitute the material basis of a free human society’.¹³⁰ As we already know, the creation of such wealth is the only ‘historical justification’ of capital.

Finally, regarding Löwy’s contention that the ‘late’ Marx’s writings fundamentally differ from the writings of the earlier period by their ‘non-teleological’ and ‘open’ conception of progress, it should be clear from our earlier detailed discussion that Marx’s writings on Russia still fall basically within the framework of the materialist conception of history which governs *all* his texts from the early 1840s onwards. As an example of Marx’s ‘teleological’ and ‘determinist’ conception of progress, Löwy quotes from *Capital I*: ‘capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of nature, its own negation. It is the negation of the negation’.¹³¹ However, the ‘late’ Marx, in his reply to a Russian correspondent, while reiterating that his analysis of capital accumulation applied uniquely to Western Europe, cited the very first sentence of Löwy’s quotation (given here) and added that, if he had not given any ‘proof’ for this assertion, that was because it was ‘only a “résumé sommaire”, of the ‘long developments (already) given in the chapters on capitalist production’.¹³²

Let us turn now to Vogel’s article, which takes a different perspective on the question of progress. This piece is informed by the idea – ascribed to Marx – that the development of productive forces, creating the objective and

¹²⁸ Marx and Engels 1973, p. 417.

¹²⁹ Marx 1980b, p. 655.

¹³⁰ Marx 1988, p. 65.

¹³¹ Löwy 2000, p. 39.

¹³² Marx 1968, p. 1554.

subjective conditions for a 'fully human social order' achieved at the cost of the majority, is 'the tragedy of history'.¹³³ This argument starts by placing Marx within the framework of the 'two fundamental values' derived from Enlightenment: a belief in human rights or human dignity and a belief in human progress or human destiny. Vogel notes an 'irreconcilable conflict' between these two values in Marx's theory of history – human progress being 'unavoidably painful and conflict ridden'. To illustrate this, Vogel mentions Marx's 'complex attitude' to ancient Greek slavery and, 'more importantly', Marx's conflicting attitude to 'early capitalism' – including 'primitive accumulation' and colonial conquests.¹³⁴ As I will show, however, Vogel fails to interpret consistently the writings of Marx and Engels on both these phenomena.¹³⁵ This is particularly the case, for example, when interpreting Marx's characterisation of slavery as a 'progressive epoch' of social-economic formation.¹³⁶ At the same time, Vogel refers to Marx's point that the record so far has shown that culture and material progress for the few required oppression and enslavement of many. 'For Marx this is the tragedy of history'. Although a large part of Vogel's paper is devoted to his debate with some contemporary thinkers on progress in relation to Marx's views on progress, we will again concentrate on his discussion of Marx.

First, it is not clear why Marx should consider this process as a *tragedy* if 'tragedy' means a drama with an *unhappy* ending. There is no textual evidence for this. More generally, the recognition that the development of productive forces has so far been at the cost of the majority would be considered a 'tragedy' if it were accepted as a fatal law destined to govern human society forever. However, it could not be considered a tragedy if the process of this development is seen only as a *transitory* phase at the end of which humans begin their own real 'history' in the 'union of free individuals'.¹³⁷ Vogel successively deals with Marx's treatment of ancient slavery and early capitalism which he finds 'difficult to interpret consistently'. Particularly hard to understand is the 'progressiveness' of slavery.¹³⁸ Yet, the sentence from which this characterisation of slavery is taken by Vogel¹³⁹ does not, we submit, carry

¹³³ Vogel 1996, p. 41.

¹³⁴ Löwy 2000, pp. 39, 46.

¹³⁵ Vogel 1996, p. 37.

¹³⁶ Vogel 1996, p. 37.

¹³⁷ Marx 1980a, p. 101; 1987, p. 109.

¹³⁸ Vogel 1996, p. 37.

¹³⁹ Marx's 1859 'Preface.'

any *value judgement* in the use of the term 'progressive'. Rather, it refers to 'progress' as the *chronological* order of succession. This is seen in the full sentence which speaks of 'Asiatic, antic, feudal and bourgeois modes of production' as the 'progressive epochs of the social economic formation'. Our interpretation seems to be in line with what Marx and Engels wrote elsewhere. Thus, to the affirmation of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) that the class of 'freeman and slave was the starting point of 'all hitherto existing society', Engels added in its 1888 English edition that the post-1848 research had shown that classes (including, of course, freemen and slaves) arose from the 'dissolution' of the 'village community' which had existed earlier as 'the form of society everywhere from India to Ireland'.¹⁴⁰ Marx, in his turn, held that 'slavery, serfdom etc. . . is always secondary, never original, though a necessary and consequent result from property based on community and labour in community' where he placed 'Asiatic' as the first form of communal property.¹⁴¹

Vogel refers to a passage from Engels which emphasises the necessity of (ancient) slavery as 'contributing to the whole economic, political and intellectual development'.¹⁴² Writing with reference to 'direct slavery' of the blacks in the South and North America of his day, Marx saw 'no need' to speak of its 'bad side' – which was well-known – and held that 'the only thing which has to be explained is the good side of slavery'. He stressed that 'direct slavery is the pivot of our present day industrialisation. . . . Without slavery North America would have been transformed into a patriarchal land. Hence slavery is a category of extreme importance'.¹⁴³ The 'good side' here refers to Marx's emphasis on the positive contribution of slave labour, although under abject subjugation, to humanity's development. This 'positive' view of slavery in Marx and Engels will be puzzling unless we know the role which the materialist conception of history assigns to labour. Indeed, labour plays a central role in this conception, it being the active agent – aided by nature –

¹⁴⁰ Marx and Engels 1970, pp. 35–6.

¹⁴¹ Marx 1953, p. 395. Vogel, in support of his contention, writes, 'Marx displays sympathy for Aristotle who "excused the slavery of one person as a means to the development of another"'. This is, however, a mistaken reading of Marx's text. This particular expression appears in a passage (cited earlier in this paper) which refers not to Aristotle but to a poet who appeared a couple of centuries later. What in fact Marx quotes from Aristotle immediately preceding this reference to Antipatros speaks rather of the possibility of the total *disappearance of slavery* in case tools could be invented which could do the appropriate work (Marx, 1987, p. 396).

¹⁴² In Vogel 1996, p. 37.

¹⁴³ Marx 1965, p. 1438.

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for production and reproduction of material life, the basis of all society.¹⁴⁴ But, so far in society's evolution, starting with the appearance of classes, labour has been under subjection – either 'personal' as with direct slaves (serfs) or 'material' as with 'wage slaves'.¹⁴⁵ The materialist conception of history, indeed, recognises both negative and positive – enslaving and creating – sides existing in labour simultaneously and inseparably, unlike 'political economy which knows labour only as a beast of burden', which is 'a purely negative definition'.¹⁴⁶

Moreover, it is not clear why Vogel is preoccupied uniquely with Marx's views on *early* capitalism and 'primitive accumulation' of capital. What Vogel calls 'Marx's horror at the vast suffering and wonder at the potentialities for human development'¹⁴⁷ applies to *all* stages of capitalism, not simply to its 'early stage.'

In the developed proletariat the abstraction of humanity, even of the appearance of humanity is completed. . . . The conditions of existence of the proletariat resume all the conditions of the present society which have reached the paroxysm of inhumanity.¹⁴⁸

This view of universal alienation is a general view of Marx that applies to the proletariat at *all* stages of its existence. Similarly, the *Manifesto's* more concrete characterisation of the labourer under capital as an 'accessory of the machine' and her subjugation under the 'despotism of the bourgeoisie'¹⁴⁹ applies equally to the situation of labour under capital in all its phases, not simply in its 'early' phase.

The so-called 'tension' in Marx's treatment of labour in relation to capital in the broad perspective of 'progress' can be seen in his writings from the 1840s onwards. The 'tension', in fact, lies in the reality itself of which Marx's analysis is only the theoretical expression, not a reflection of any 'tension' in his personal conscience. This analysis is firmly based on Marx's dialectical principle condensed in the Spinoza-Marx (via Hegel) formula cited at the

¹⁴⁴ Engels wrote that the 'new orientation' initiated by Marx (and himself) 'recognized in the history of development of labour the key to the understanding of the whole history of society' (Engels 1979, p. 222).

¹⁴⁵ Marx 1953, p. 75.

¹⁴⁶ Marx 1953, p. 505; 1979a, p. 23. Hegel seems to have gone beyond political economy by emphasising the labour's positive side in transcending nature's constraint. Hence, there is 'a moment of liberation in labour' (Hegel 1972, p. 177).

¹⁴⁷ Vogel 1996, p. 39.

¹⁴⁸ Marx and Engels 1972a, p. 38.

¹⁴⁹ Marx and Engels 1979, p. 65.

beginning of this paper. Earlier in this paper, we referred to Marx's several texts showing capital as being negative and positive at the same time. The same goes for labour:

Grasped *negatively*, the living labour is complete denudation [*Entblössung*] of all objectivity. . . . Labour as absolute poverty, poverty not as shortage, but as complete exclusion from objective wealth . . . grasped *positively*, labour not as object, but as activity, . . . as its universal possibility. In other words, labour on the one hand is absolute poverty as object, and on the other hand, universal possibility of wealth as subject.¹⁵⁰

It is hard for most people to understand that the negative itself is positive. Marx faulted the 'utopian theorists' for viewing 'misery as only misery without seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side which will overturn the old society.'¹⁵¹ Thus victim of the 'paroxysm of inhumanity', the 'proletariat finds itself compelled by the misery which is ineluctable, imperious, and can no longer be glossed over, to revolt against this inhumanity'.¹⁵² Marx goes further. On the capital-labour antithesis, one reads in two manuscripts separated by two decades,

the possessing class and the proletarian class represent the same human alienation . . . [but] in the *process of alienation*, . . . from the beginning the labourer is superior to the capitalist. The latter is rooted in the process of alienation and finds absolute satisfaction in it while the labourer who is the victim is from the outset in a state of rebellion.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Marx 1953, p. 203. Our emphasis. The same ideas appear in almost identical terms in Marx 1976, p. 35.

¹⁵¹ Marx 1965, p. 93.

¹⁵² Marx and Engels 1972a, p. 38.

¹⁵³ Marx and Engels 1972a, p. 37; Marx 1988, p. 65. Emphasis in the text. In the earlier of these two manuscripts Marx cites Hegel on 'rebellion against abjectness within abjectness'. Indeed, in his well-known discussion of the lordship-bondage relation, Hegel asserts the superiority of the bondsman over the lord inasmuch as the latter's only concern is immediate satisfaction of needs 'which has no significance for human development as it is only momentary' whereas the 'act of fashioning the object is the pure self expression of consciousness which now acquires an element of permanence' (1987, pp. 147-8). Elsewhere, Hegel wrote: 'the plough is more honourable than the immediate enjoyments produced by it. The instrument is preserved while the enjoyment passes away' (1963, p. 398).

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Conclusion

In 1865, Marx told the workers, in a statement that summed up very well his position, where there is no trace of any blind fatality:

The very development of modern industry must progressively turn the scales in favour of the capitalist against the working man. . . . Such being the tendency of things in this system, is this saying that the working class ought to renounce their resistance against the encroachment of capital, abandon their attempts at making the best of the occasional chances for their temporary improvement? If they did, they would be degraded to one level mass of broken wretches past redemption. . . . By cowardly giving way in their conflict with capital, they would certainly disqualify themselves for the initiative of any large movement. . . . They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and social forms necessary for an economical reconstruction of society.¹⁵⁴

It is the old society itself which contradictorily creates the conditions of its own negation together with the conditions of building a society of freely associated producers. Two basic material conditions in this regard are an immense development of productive powers of labour and the development of labour as social labour. The capitalist mode of production alone, among all the hitherto existing modes of production, creates these conditions. Even though socialism could arise in an essentially non-capitalist society, given some form of communal ownership in the means of production not already undermined from within, the process would prove unviable unless it was helped by the material acquisitions of the capitalist mode of production from outside. Such help is difficult to conceive in the absence of a victorious proletarian revolution in capitalist countries.

However, the creation of the material conditions in question – commonly called material progress – under capital is necessarily bought at a tremendous cost to human beings including their surroundings, given the specific nature of capital. Capital cannot create the conditions of its own negation and those for building the new society except by devouring, *à la* Timur, ‘myriads of human souls’. Many have stressed unilaterally the regressive or negative progress under capital just as many have stressed equally unilaterally its

¹⁵⁴ Marx 1988, pp. 431–2.

positive side. Marx 'rethought' progress more profoundly and more clearly than perhaps anyone else by underlining the non-separability of these contradictory aspects belonging to the same process of capitalist development. You cannot simply have only the 'good' side and not the 'bad' side of progress under this tremendously antagonistic social formation. In fact, the negative side itself proves to be positive by generating, as necessarily as it generates the bad side, massive resistance and struggle by capital's victims to uproot the basic cause itself.¹⁵⁵ As Marx emphasises in the French version of *Capital*, 'in history, as in nature, putrefaction is the laboratory of life.'¹⁵⁶

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¹⁵⁵ 'In proportion as the social labour develops, and thereby becomes the source of wealth, poverty and demoralization among the labourers and wealth and culture among the non-labourers develop. This is the law of the whole hitherto existing history. In the present day capitalist society, material etc. conditions have finally been created which enable and compel the labourers to smash this historical malediction [*geschichtliche Fluch*]' (Marx 1979b, pp. 175–6).

¹⁵⁶ Marx 1965, p. 995; not reproduced in the German version.

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