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THE TWO PATHS OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN EUROPE AND THE CHINESE WORLD: THEIR ORIGINS AND THEIR ROUTES

1. The general and the particular in the trajectories of humanity's evolution

The concrete, the immediate, is always particular – this is virtually a truism. To stop there would make it impossible to understand the history of humanity. This seems – at the phenomenal level – as if it were composed of a succession of particular trajectories and evolutions, without any connections with each other, except by chance. Each of these successions can only be explained by particular causalities and sequences of events. This method reinforces the tendency towards ‘culturalisms’, that is, the idea that each ‘people’ is identified by the specifics of its ‘culture’, which are mostly ‘transhistoric’, in the sense that they persist in spite of change.

Marx is, for me, the key thinker on research into the general, as it goes beyond the particular. Of course the general cannot be announced a priori through reflection and idealized reasoning about the essence of phenomena (as Hegel and Auguste Comte would do). It must be inferred from analysis of concrete facts. In such conditions it is clear that there is no ‘absolute’ guarantee that the proposed induction will be definitive, or even accurate. But such research is obligatory: it cannot be avoided.

When you analyse the particular you will discover how the general makes itself felt through forms of the particular. That is how I read Marx.

With this in mind, I have proposed a reading of historical materialism based on the general succession of three important stages in the evolution of human societies: the community stage, the tributary stage and the capitalist stage (potentially overtaken by communism). And I have tried, within this framework, to see in the diversity of the societies at the tributary stage (as in the previous community stage), the particular forms of expression of the general requirements that define each of these stages (see my book *Class and Nation*). The proposition goes against the tradition of a banal opposition between the ‘European path’ (that of the famous five stages – primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism, which was not an invention of Stalin but the dominant view in Europe before and after Marx) and the so called “Asiatic” path (or, rather, impasse). The hydraulic thesis, as proposed by Wittfogel, then seemed to me overly infantile and mistaken, based on Eurocentric prejudices. My proposition also goes against another tradition, produced by vulgar Marxism, that of the universality of the five stages.

With this also in mind, I proposed looking at the contradictions within the large family of the tributary societies as expressions of a general requirement to go beyond the basic principles of

the organization of a tributary social system by the invention of those that define capitalist modernity (and, beyond, the possibility of socialism/communism). Capitalism was not destined to be Europe's exclusive invention. It was also in the process of developing in the tributary countries of the East, particularly in China, as we shall see later. In my early critique of Eurocentrism, I brought up this very question, which had been ejected from the dominant debate by the discourse on the 'European exception'.

However, once capitalism was constituted in its historic form, that is, starting from Europe, its worldwide expansion through conquest and the submission of other societies to the requirements of its polarising reproduction put an end to the possibility of 'another path' for the capitalist development of humanity (the 'Chinese path' for example). This expansion destroyed the impact and importance of the variations of local capitalisms and involved them all in the dichotomy of the contrast between the dominant capitalist/imperialist centres with the dominated capitalist peripheries, which defines the polarisation peculiar to historical capitalism (European in origin).

I am therefore now proposing a reading of the 'two paths' (that of Mediterranean/ Europe and that of the Chinese world), which is not that of the opposition five stages/ "Asiatic" impasse, but is based on another analytical principle that contrasts the full-blown forms of the tributary mode in the Chinese world with the peripheral forms of this same mode in the Mediterranean/European region. The full-blown form is visibly stronger and stable from its beginnings, while the peripheral forms have always been fragile, resulting in the failure of the successive attempts by the imperial centre to levy tribute, in contrast to its success in the Chinese empire.

2. The great pre-modern regionalisations and the centralisation of the tributary surplus

Nowadays, the term 'globalisation' is used in various ways, often vague and ambiguous. Moreover, the phenomenon in itself is considered as a given and unavoidable, an expression of the evolution of reality that is claimed to be ineluctable. Phenomena similar to modern globalisation which, for the first time in history concerns the entire world, are to be found in more ancient times. However these only concerned the large regions of the old world, the so-called pre-Columbian Americas being isolated and unknown by the former (as well as by the latter). I will call these globalisations 'regionalisations'.

I describe all these phenomena with one common criterion: that of organising command over the surplus of current production at the level of the whole region (or of its world) by a central authority and the extent of centralisation over that surplus used by that authority. This in turn regulated the sharing of access to the surplus that it commanded.

The regionalisations (or globalisation) concerned could be inclined towards homogeneity or polarisation, according to whether the redistribution of the surplus was subjected to laws and customs that aim expressly at one or other of these objectives, or they could be produced by deploying their own logic.

The centralisation of tributary surplus

In all the pre-modern systems (the old regionalizations) this surplus appears as a tribute, and in the modern (capitalist) system as profit for capital or, more precisely, the rent of dominant oligopolistic capital. The specific difference between these two forms of surplus is qualitative and decisive. Levying tributary surplus is transparent: it is the free work of the subjugated peasants on the land of the nobles and a proportion of the harvest creamed off by the latter or by the State. These are quite natural, non-monetary forms and even when they assume a monetary form it is generally marginal or exceptional. The levying of profit or rent by dominant capital is, in contrast, opaque as it results from the way the network of trade in monetarised goods operates: wages of workers, purchases and sales of the means of production and the results of economic activities.

Taxation of tributary surplus is thus inseparable from the exercise of political power in the region (large or small) where it operates. In contrast, that of capitalist surplus appears to be dissociated from the exercise of political power, apparently being the product of the mechanisms that control the markets (of work, products, capital itself). The (pre-modern) tributary systems were not applied over vast territories and large numbers of people. The level of development of the productive forces typical of these ancient times was still limited and the surplus consisted essentially of what was produced by the peasant communities. The tributary societies could be split up, sometimes to the extreme, with each village or seignery constituting an elementary society.

The fragmentation of tributary societies did not exclude them from participating in broader trade networks, commercial or otherwise, or in systems of power extending over greater areas. Elementary tributary systems were not necessarily autarchic, even if most of their production had to ensure their own reproduction without outside support.

The emergence of tributary empires has always required a political power capable of imposing itself on the scattered tributary societies. Among those in this category were the Roman, Caliphal and Ottoman empires in the Europe/Mediterranean/Middle East region, the Chinese empire and the imperial states that India experienced on various occasions during its history. This emergence of tributary empires in turn facilitated the expansion of commercial and monetary relationships within them and in their external relations.

The tributary empires did not necessarily pursue the political aim of the homogenisation of conditions in the region controlled by central power. But the laws and their usages governing these systems, dominated by the political authorities to which the functioning of the economy remained subordinated, did not in themselves create a growing polarisation between the sub-regions constituting the empire.

History has largely proved the fragility of tributary empires whose apogee was short – a few centuries – followed by long periods of disintegration, usually described as decadence. The reason for this is that the centralisation of the surplus was not based on the internal requirement necessary for the reproduction of the elementary tributary societies. They were very vulnerable to attack from outside and revolts from within, by the dominated classes or provinces, such as they were. Evolutions in the different fields, of ecology, demography, military armaments, the trade in goods over long distances, proved to be strong enough to turn this vulnerability into catastrophe.

The only exception – but it is a vital one – was that of the Chinese empire.

3. The peasant question at the heart of the opposition between the European and Chinese development paths

The Mediterranean/European path and the Chinese path diverged right from the beginning. The stability of the full-blown tributary mode involved a solid integration of the peasant world into the overall construction of the system and thus it guaranteed access to land. This choice has been a principle in China from the beginning. There were sometimes serious infringements in its implementation, although they were always overcome. In contrast, in Mediterranean/ Europe region access to land was radically abolished when the principle of private ownership of land was adopted. It became a fundamental and absolute right, with the installation of capitalist modernity in its European form.

Historical capitalism, which was the result, then proceeded with the massive expulsion of the rural population and, for many of them, their exclusion from the building of the new society. This involved large-scale emigration, which was made possible by the conquest of the Americas, without which its success would have been impossible. Historical capitalism became a military and conquering imperialist/ capitalism, of an unprecedented violence.

The path followed by capitalist development in China (before it submitted to the conquering imperialism of the second half of the 19th century) was quite different. It confirmed, instead of abolishing, the access to land by the peasantry as a whole and opted for the intensification of agricultural production and the scattering of industrial manufacturing in the rural regions. This gave China a distinct advantage over Europe in all fields of production. It was lost only later, after the industrial revolution had successfully proceeded to shape modern Europe.

4. Accumulation by dispossession is a permanent feature in the history of really existing capitalism

The vulgar ideology of conventional economics and the cultural and social ‘thinking’ that goes with it claims that accumulation is financed by the ‘virtuous’ savings of the ‘rich’ (the wealthy owners), like the nations. History hardly confirms this invention of the Anglo-American puritans. It is, on the contrary, an accumulation largely financed by the dispossession of some (the majority) for the profit of others (the minority). Marx rigorously analysed these processes which he described as primitive accumulation, such as the dispossession of the English peasants (the Enclosures), that of the Irish peasants (for the benefit of the conquering English ‘landlords’) and that of the American colonisation being eloquent examples. In reality, this primitive accumulation was not exclusively taking place in bygone and outdated capitalism. It continues still today.

It is possible to measure the importance of the accumulation through dispossession – an expression that I prefer to that of primitive accumulation. The measure that I am proposing here, is based on the consequences of this dispossession – and can be expressed in demographic terms and in terms of the apparent value of the social product that accompanies it.

The population of the world tripled between 1500 (450-550 million inhabitants) and 1900 (1,600 million), then by 3.75 during the 20th century (now over 6,000 million). But the proportion of the Europeans (those of Europe and of their conquered territories in America,

South Africa, Australia and New Zealand) increased from 18 per cent (at least) in 1500 to 37 per cent in 1900, to fall gradually during the 20th century. The first four centuries (1500 to 1900) correspond to the conquest of the world by the Europeans, the 20th century – which continues through to the 21st century – to the ‘awakening of the South’, the renaissance of the conquered peoples.

The conquest of the world by the Europeans constitutes a colossal dispossession of the Indians of America, who lost their land and natural resources to the colonists. The Indians were almost totally exterminated (a genocide of the Indians of North America) or reduced, by the effects of this dispossession and their over-exploitation by the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors, to a tenth of their former population. The slave trade that followed represented a spoliation of a large part of Africa that set back the progress of the continent by half a millennium. Such phenomena are visible in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Algeria, and still more in Australia and New Zealand. This accumulation by dispossession characterises the state of Israel, which is a colonisation still in progress. No less visible are the consequences of colonial exploitation among the peasantry subjected by English India, the Dutch Indies, the Philippines and of Africa, as evinced by the famines (the famous one of Bengal, those of contemporary Africa). The method was inaugurated by the English in Ireland, whose population – formerly the same as that of England – still today only represents a tenth of that of the English, caused largely by the organised famine denounced by Marx.

Dispossession not only affected the peasant populations, which were the great majority of peoples in the past. It also destroyed capacities for industrial production (artisanat and manufacturing) of regions that once and for a long time had been more prosperous than Europe itself: China and India, among others (the developments described by Amiya Kumar Bagchi, in his last work, *Perilous Passage*, provide indisputable proof of this).

It is important here to understand that this destruction was not produced by the ‘laws of the market’, European industry – claimed to be more ‘effective’ – having taken the place of non-competitive production. The ideological discourse does not discuss the political and military violence utilised to achieve it. They are not the ‘canons’ of English industry, but the cannons of the gunboat period. These won out because of the superiority – and not inferiority – of the Chinese and Indian industries. Industrialisation, which was prohibited by the colonial administration, did the rest and ‘developed the under-development’ of Asia and Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries. The colonial atrocities and the extreme exploitation of workers were the natural means and results of accumulation through dispossession.

From 1500 to 1800, the material production of the European centres progressed at a rate that was hardly greater than that of its demographic growth (but this was strong in relative terms for that era). These rhythms accelerated during the 19th century, with the deepening – and not the attenuation - of the exploitation of the peoples overseas, which is why I speak of the permanent accumulation by dispossession and not ‘primitive’ (i.e. ‘first’, ‘preceding’) accumulation. This does not exclude that the contribution of accumulation financed by technological progress during the 19th and 20th centuries – the successive industrial revolutions – then took on an importance that it never had during the three mercantilist centuries that preceded it. Finally, therefore, from 1500 to 1900, the apparent production of the new centres of the capitalist/ imperialist world system (western and central Europe, the United States and, a late arrival, Japan) increased by 7 to 7.5 times, in contrast with those of the peripheries which barely doubled. The gap widened as had never been possible in the history of all humanity. During the course of the 20th century, it widened still further,

bringing the apparent per capita income to a level of 15 to 20 times greater than that of the peripheries as a whole.

The accumulation by dispossession of centuries of mercantilism largely financed the luxuries and standard of living of the governing classes of the period (the 'Ancien Régime'), without benefiting the popular classes whose standard of living often worsened as they were themselves victims of the accumulation by the dispossession of large swathes of the peasantry. But, above all, it had financed an extraordinary reinforcement of the powers of the modern State, of its administration and its military power. This can be seen by the wars of the Revolution and of the Empire that marked the junction between the preceding mercantilist epoch and that of the subsequent industrialisation period. This accumulation is therefore at the origin of the two major transformations that had taken place by the 19th century: the first industrial revolution and the easy colonial conquest.

The popular classes did not benefit from the colonial prosperity at first, in fact until late in the 19th century. This was obvious in the tragic scenes of the destitution of workers in England, as described by Engels. But they had an escape route, the massive emigration that accelerated in the 19th and 20th centuries – to the point that the population of European origin became greater than that of the regions to which they emigrated. Is it possible to imagine two or three billion Asians and Africans having that advantage today?

The 19th century represented the apogee of this system of capitalist/imperialist globalisation. In fact, from this point on the expansion of capitalism and 'westernisation' in the brutal sense of the term made it impossible to distinguish between the economic dimension of the conquest and its cultural dimension, Eurocentrism.

The various forms of external and internal colonialisms, to which I refer here (for more details see *From Capitalism to Civilisation*) constituted the framework of accumulation by dispossession and gave substance to imperialist rent, the effects of which have been decisive in shaping the rich societies of the contemporary imperialist centre.

5. The Chinese itinerary: a long, calm river?

The preceding reflections concentrated on the Middle East/Mediterranean/Europe region. This region was the scene of the formation of the first (tributary) civilisations – Egypt and Mesopotamia – and later, of its Greek market/slavery periphery. Then, as from the Hellenistic period, it saw successive attempts to construct tributary empires (Roman, Byzantine, Caliphal, Ottoman). These were never really able to become stable and they experienced long and chaotic declines. Perhaps for this reason conditions were more favourable to the early emergence of capitalism in its historical form, as a prelude to the conquest of the world by Europe.

The itinerary of China was extremely different. Almost from the start it became a tributary empire that was exceptionally stable, in spite of the moments when it threatened to fall apart. Nevertheless these threats were always finally overcome.

Phonetic writing, conceptual writing

There are various reasons for the success of the construction of tributary centralisation throughout the Chinese world. Chinese authors, who are not very well known outside their country (like Wen Tiejun), have proposed different hypotheses, depending on the geography and ecology of their region. They emphasise the early invention of intensive agriculture, associated with a population density that gradually became considerably greater than that of the Mediterranean/Europe world. It is not our purpose here to open up debate on these difficult questions which have been barely studied much up until now, because of dominant Eurocentrism. Personally I would insist on the very long-term effects of the Chinese adoption of conceptual writing.

Phonetic writing (alphabetical or syllabic), invented in the Middle East, gradually became that of all the languages of the Mediterranean/European region and the Indian sub-continent. It is only understandable by those who know the meaning of the words pronounced in the written language, and it requires translation for the others. The expansion of this way of writing reinforced the differences between the languages and consequently the forms of identity that were based upon them. This constituted an obstacle to the expansion of regional political powers and therefore to tributary centralisation. Then, with capitalist modernity it created the mythology of the nation/state that was linguistically homogenous. This persists – and is even reinforced – in contemporary Europe and is thus an obstacle to its political unification. The obstacle can only (partially) be overcome by adopting a common language, foreign for many, whether it is the languages of the empires inherited by modern states (English, French and Portuguese in Africa, English in India and up to a point Spanish and Portuguese for the Indians of Latin America), or the ‘business English’ that has become the language of contemporary Europe.

The Chinese invented another way of writing which was conceptual and not phonetic. The same character described an object (like a door) or an idea (such as friendship) and can be read with a different pronunciation: ‘door’ or ‘bab’, ‘friendship’ or ‘sadaka’ by readers who are respectively French, English or Arab. This form of writing was an important factor promoting the expansion of the imperial power of the Chinese world at the continental level. It was a world whose population was comparable to that of all the Americas from Alaska to the Tierra del Fuego in Argentina and of Europe from Portugal to Vladivostok. The conceptual way of Chinese writing enabled phonetic reading in the different languages of the sub-continent. And it is only recently that, through generalised education, the Mandarin language of Beijing is becoming the (phonetic) language of the whole Chinese world.

China was five centuries ahead of Europe

The image of the Chinese trajectory as being the course of a ‘long, calm river’ is certainly somewhat forced.

Ancient China, until the introduction of Buddhism in the first centuries of the Christian era, was constituted of multiple tributary formations, organized in principalities and kingdoms that were often in conflict. There was, nevertheless, a tendency to unifying them into one single empire which had its early expression in the writings of Confucius, five hundred years before Jesus Christ, in the Warring States period.

The Chinese world then adopted a religion of individual salvation, Buddhism – although it was mixed with Taoism – following the example of Christian Europe. The two societies, feudal, Christian Europe and imperial, Buddhist China, had striking similarities. But there were also important differences: China was a unified, political empire which rose to remarkable heights under the Tang dynasty, while feudal Europe never achieved this. The tendency to reconstitute the right of access to land each time that it seriously deteriorated in China contrasted with the long- lasting fragmentation of European feudal property.

China freed itself from religion, in this case Buddhism, as from the Song period and definitively with the Ming. It therefore entered into modernity some five centuries before the European renaissance. The analogy between the Chinese renaissance and the later European one is impressive. The Chinese ‘returned to their roots’ of Confucianism, in a free, rational and non-religious reinterpretation, like that of the European renaissance that invented a Greco-Roman ancestor to break with what the Enlightenment described as the religious obscurantism of the Middle Ages.

All the conditions were then met to enable the modern Chinese world to accomplish remarkable progress in all fields: the organisation of the State, scientific knowledge, agricultural and manufacturing production techniques, rational thinking. China invented secularism five hundred years before it developed in Europe. Modern China put forward the idea that it was man who made history, a notion which later became a central theme of the Enlightenment. The impact of this progress was reinforced by the periodic correction of dangerous drifts towards the private appropriation of land.

The stability of the economic and political organisation of China constituted a model for the development of the productive forces based on the continued intensification of agricultural production which was in striking contrast with the model of historical European capitalism based on the private appropriation of agrarian land, the expulsion of the rural population, massive emigration and the conquest of the world associated with it. The model of this European capitalism was that of accumulation by dispossession, not only primitive but permanent (the other aspect of the polarisation inherent in capitalist globalisation). China was launched on a path that could have led to a capitalism of a different kind, closed up on itself rather than conquering. The prodigious expansion of commercial relations associated with the levying of tribute and not separated from it, show that this possibility did exist. But this association made the evolutionary process relatively slow compared with that of a Europe in transition towards full-blown capitalism.

For this reason China kept its advance – in terms of the average productivity of social work – over Europe until the industrial revolution of the 19th century.

As I said before, the Enlightenment in Europe recognised this advance of China, which it saw as a model. However, neither the Europe of the Enlightenment of the mercantilist transition period, nor, later on, Europe of the full-blown capitalism of the 19th century, managed to overcome the fragmentation of the kingdoms of the Ancien Régime, then of the modern nation-states, to create a unified power capable of controlling the centralisation of the surplus tribute, then capitalist surplus, as China had done.

For their part, Chinese observers clearly saw the advantage of their historic development. A Chinese traveller, visiting Europe in the aftermath of the French/Prussian war of 1870,

compared the state of the continent to that of the Warring States, five hundred years before Jesus Christ!

The decline of China, caused by a combination of the exhaustion of the model of the intensification/commercialisation of agricultural and rural production, together with European military aggression, was relatively short. It did not cause the break-up of this continental State, although the threat was apparent during the decline. Some of the essential characteristics of the Chinese revolution and of the path it took after its victory, in the successive Maoist and post-Maoist moments should be seen in this perspective of an exceptionally long duration.

6. Capitalism: a parenthesis in history

The development of historical capitalism is based on the private appropriation of agrarian land, the submission of agricultural production to the requirements of the 'market' and, on this basis, the continuing and accelerating expulsion of the peasant population for the benefit of a small number of capitalist farmers, who were no longer peasants and who ended up by forming an insignificant percentage of the population (from 5 to 10 per cent). They are, however, capable of producing enough to feed all their country's population (well), and even export much of the surplus production. This path, started by England in the 18th century (with the Enclosures) and gradually extended to the rest of Europe in the 19th century, constituted the essence of the historical path of capitalist development.

It seemed very effective. But whether it is effective or not (I shall return to this question in Chapter 5), can it be imitated today in the peripheries of the system?

This capitalist path was only possible because the Europeans had at their disposal the great safety-valve of immigration to the Americas, which we mentioned earlier. But this solution simply does not exist for the peoples of the periphery today. Moreover, modern industrialisation cannot absorb more than a small minority of the rural populations concerned because, compared with the industries of the 19th century, it now integrates technological progress – the condition of its efficiency – which economises the labour that it employs. The capitalist path cannot produce anything else than the 'slum planet' (which is visible in the contemporary capitalist Third World), producing and reproducing indefinitely cheap labour. This is in fact the reason why this path is politically unfeasible. In Europe, North America and Japan, the capitalist path – involving emigration outlets and the profits from imperialism – certainly created, rather belatedly, the conditions for a social compromise between capital and labour (particularly apparent in the period following the Second World War, with the Welfare State, although this had already existed in less explicit forms since the end of the 19th century). The conditions of a compromise based on this model do not exist for the peripheries of today. The capitalist path in China and Vietnam, for example, cannot create a broad popular alliance, integrating the worker class and the peasantry. It can only find its social basis in the new middle classes that have become the exclusive beneficiaries of this development. The 'social-democratic' way is now therefore excluded. The inevitable alternative is one of a 'peasant' development model, to which we shall return in Chapter 5.

The question of natural resources constitutes a second decisive issue in the conflict of civilisation that opposes capitalism to socialism in the future. The exploitation of the non-renewable resources of the South for the exclusive profit of the consumption wastage of the

North is also a form of accumulation by dispossession. The exchange of these resources against renewable goods and services jeopardises the future of the peoples of the South, who are being sacrificed on the altar of the super-profits of the imperialist oligopolies.

The destructive dimension of capitalism, at least for the peoples of the peripheries, makes it impossible to believe that this system can be sustainable and 'imitated' by those who seem to be 'backward'. Its place in the history of humanity is that of a parenthesis that creates the conditions for overtaking it. If this does not happen capitalism can only lead to barbarism, the end of all human civilization.

The course of really existing capitalism is composed of a long period of maturing, lasting over several centuries, leading to a short moment of apogee (19th century), followed by a probably long decline, starting in the 20th century, which could initiate a long transition to globalised socialism.

Capitalism is not the result of a brutal, almost magical apparition, chosen by the London/Amsterdam/Paris triangle to be established in the short period of the Reform/Renaissance of the 16th century. Three centuries earlier, it had experienced its first formulation in the Italian cities. The first formulas were brilliant but limited in space and thus crushed by the surrounding 'feudal' European world. This is why, having been set back by successive defeats, these first experiences collapsed. It is also possible to discuss various antecedents to these, in the commercial towns along the Silk Route of China and India to the Arab and Persian Islamic Middle East (see my comments on the Chinese path described in Chapter 2). Later, in 1492, with the conquest of the Americas by the Spanish and the Portuguese, began the creation of the mercantile/slavery/capitalist system. But the monarchies of Madrid and Lisbon, for various reasons which we shall not go into here, were unable to give a definitive form to mercantilism which, instead, the English, Dutch and French were to invent. This third wave of social, economic, political and cultural transformations, which was to produce the transition to capitalism in its historical form that we know would have been unthinkable without the two preceding waves. Why should it not be the same for socialism: a long process, lasting centuries, for the invention of a more advanced stage of human civilisation?

The apogee of the system did not last long: hardly one century separated the industrial and French revolutions from 1917. This was the century when these two revolutions were accomplished, taking over Europe and its North American offspring – as well as the challenges to them, from the Commune of Paris in 1871 to the 1917 revolution – and achieving the conquest of the world, which seemed resigned to its fate.

Could this historical capitalism continue to develop, allowing the peripheries of the system to 'overcome their backwardness' to become 'developed' capitalist societies like those in the dominant centres? If this were possible, if the laws of the system allowed it, then the 'catching up' by and through capitalism would have had an objective unavoidable strength, a necessary precondition to an ulterior socialism. But this vision, obvious and dominant as it seemed, was simply false. Historical capitalism is – and continues to be – polarising by nature, rendering 'catching up' impossible.

Historical capitalism must be overtaken and this cannot be done unless the societies in the peripheries (the great majority of humanity) set to work out systematic strategies of delinking from the global system and reconstructing themselves on an autonomous basis, thus creating

the conditions for an alternative globalisation, engaged on the long road to world socialism. I will not take up this analysis here, as it can be read in my *Obsolescent Capitalism* (Annex IV). Pursuing the capitalist path to development thus represents, for the peoples of the periphery, a tragic impasse. This is because the ‘developed’ capitalism of some – the dominant minority centres (20 per cent of the world population) – requires the ‘under-development’ of the others (80 per cent of the world population). The impasse can thus be seen in all dimensions of social, economic and political life. And it manifests itself most strikingly in the agrarian question.

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