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Samir Amin

# Theory is History



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# Foreword

This anthology follows the selection of texts published under the title *Samir Amin, Pioneer of the Rise of the South*. The texts chosen focus on a central concept which can be concisely formulated as *Theory is History*, meaning that the theory of capitalism can only be formulated on the basis of an analysis of its history. In contrast, bourgeois thinking replaces the analysis of historical capitalism with an abstract theory without any links to reality. ‘Economics’, which is the theory of an imaginary system, then becomes an *apologia* which reminds us of the medieval debates about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, and whose sole function is to give legitimacy to the behaviour of the owners of capital.

My views are those of an independent Marxist in that they do not necessarily, and definitely not unconditionally, belong to any school of thought of historical Marxism as formulated by parties that claim to be inspired by Marx. Nevertheless, I do not belong either to the purely academic sphere chosen by others, who I consequently believe to be Marxologists rather than Marxists. I am a militant who intends to contribute to ‘changing the world’. This is why, when I defend my opinion, I do so without any criticism of those who also intend to act from a socialist perspective by joining a party.

Does the reading of historical capitalism I propose add anything to Marx’s teachings? I believe so (but the reader must decide), since I pay specific attention to the globalization of the law of value in this interpretation. This is why I have decided to begin this anthology with the theoretical and political conclusions that I drew from formulating the globalized law of value. The chapters following illustrate my thesis (*Theory is History*) by focusing on the links between capital and ownership (Chap. 2), between modernity and religious interpretation (Chap. 3), and on questions of the global expansion of capitalism (Chaps. 4–6), and on the particular ways it has unfolded in certain countries, in this case Russia and China (Chaps. 7 and 8).

This anthology supplements my previous work, centred on the *Rise of the South*—my reading of capitalism having been one of the unfolding of its imperialist nature.



Photograph of Samir Amin. *Source* Photo from the author's personal photo collection



Photograph of Samir Amin in Dakar, World Social Forum, February 2011. *Source* Photo from the author’s personal photo collection



Photograph of Samir Amin in Bamako, World Social Forum, 2006. *Source* Photo from the author’s personal photo collection

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>The Globalized Law of Value</b> . . . . .	1
<b>2</b>	<b>Capitalism and Ground Rent</b> . . . . .	5
2.1	Rent and the Ownership of the Soil: Going Back to Capital . . . .	9
2.2	From the Capitalist Mode of Production to Capitalist Formations: Class Alliances and the Creation of the World Capitalist System. . . . .	14
2.3	The Development of Capitalism in Agriculture: The Theories of Kautsky, Lenin, and Chayanov . . . . .	18
2.4	The Domination of Agriculture by the Capitalist Mode of Production . . . . .	22
<b>3</b>	<b>Modernity and Interpretations of Religions</b> . . . . .	31
3.1	The Flexibility of Religious Interpretations . . . . .	31
3.2	Judaism, Christianity, Islam, One or Three Religious Metaphysics? . . . . .	34
3.3	Religion and Society: The Risk of Theocracy . . . . .	38
3.4	The Reformation, The Ambiguous Expression of Christianity's Adaptation to Modernity. . . . .	44
3.5	Political Islam . . . . .	52
3.5.1	The European Renaissance and the Arab Nahda . . . . .	52
3.5.2	Contemporary Political Islam . . . . .	55
<b>4</b>	<b>Re-reading the Post War Period</b> . . . . .	61
4.1	The Postwar Period, 1945–1992: An Overview . . . . .	61
4.2	Establishing the Global Economic System: 1945–1955 . . . . .	61
4.3	The Bandung Era: 1955–1975 . . . . .	63
4.4	The Collapse of the Global System: 1975–1992 . . . . .	64
4.5	Establishing the Global Economic System: 1945–1955 . . . . .	67



<b>5</b>	<b>Historical Capitalism: Accumulation by Dispossession . . . . .</b>	<b>79</b>
5.1	Capitalism: A Parenthesis in History . . . . .	82
5.1.1	The Twentieth Century: The First Wave of Socialist Revolutions and the Awakening of the ‘South’ . . . . .	85
5.1.2	Bandung and the First Globalization of the Struggles (1955–1981) . . . . .	85
5.2	The Long Decline of Capitalism and the Long Transition to World Socialism . . . . .	86
5.2.1	The Counter-offensive of Capitalism in Decline . . . . .	87
5.2.2	In Counterpoint: The Aims and Means of a Strategy of Constructing Convergence in Diversity . . . . .	88
5.2.3	For a Socialist Renewal of the Twenty First Century: The Capitalism/Socialism Conflict and the North/South Conflict are Inseparable . . . . .	89
5.3	The Plutocratic Oligarchies and the End of Bourgeois Civilisation . . . . .	91
5.3.1	The Wheeler-dealers, The New Dominant Class in the Peripheries . . . . .	91
5.3.2	Senile Capitalism and the End of Bourgeois Civilization . . . . .	93
5.3.3	The Fragility of Capitalist Globalisation . . . . .	93
5.3.4	Is Lucidity Possible in the Transformative Activities of Societies? . . . . .	95
	References . . . . .	98
<b>6</b>	<b>The Two Paths of Historical Development: The Contrast Between Europe and China . . . . .</b>	<b>99</b>
6.1	The General and the Particular in the Trajectories of Humanity’s Evolution . . . . .	99
6.2	The Peasant Question at the Heart of the Opposition Between the European and Chinese Development Paths . . . . .	100
6.3	Modern China Before Europe . . . . .	101
6.4	The Great Pre-modern Regionalisations and the Centralisation of the Tributary Surplus . . . . .	102
6.5	The Centralisation of Tributary Surplus . . . . .	102
6.6	The Chinese Itinerary: A Long, Calm River? . . . . .	103
6.7	Phonetic Writing, Conceptual Writing . . . . .	104
6.8	China was Five Centuries Ahead of Europe . . . . .	105
<b>7</b>	<b>Russia in the World System: Geography or History? . . . . .</b>	<b>107</b>
	References . . . . .	114

- 8 China: The Emerging Nation . . . . .** 115
  - 8.1 The Agrarian Question . . . . . 116
  - 8.2 Present and Future of Petty Production . . . . . 118
  - 8.3 Chinese State Capitalism . . . . . 120
  - 8.4 The Integration of China into Capitalist Globalization . . . . . 122
  - 8.5 China, Emerging Power . . . . . 124
  - 8.6 Great Successes, New Challenges . . . . . 127
  - References . . . . . 131
  
- World Forum for Alternatives . . . . .** 133
  
- About the Author . . . . .** 139
  
- About the Book . . . . .** 143

# Chapter 1

## The Globalized Law of Value

In the introduction to this work, I recalled that my reading of *Das Kapital* had aroused my enthusiasm yet had given me no greater understanding about the origin of Asian and African ‘underdevelopment’. And I noted that all my subsequent analytical work—during a half-century—has gone into an effort to fill that lacuna.<sup>1</sup>

In my view, Marx’s opus remained unfinished. I am certainly not alone in recognizing this. Marx himself, in a letter to Lassalle, wrote: “the whole is divided into six books: (1) Capital, (2) Landed Property, (3) Wage Labor, (4) The State, (5) International Trade, (6) The World Market”.<sup>2</sup>

As is well known, Marx published only the first volume of *Das Kapital* in his lifetime. Engels published the (nearly completed) manuscripts of Volumes II and III (parts of which deal with landed property and wage labor) posthumously; and Kautsky later published Marx’s notes for Volume IV, which covers the history of theories of surplus value. The contemplated volumes dealing with the state and the system of globalized capitalism were never written.

I am interpreting the ‘silences’ of that unfinished work, *Das Kapital*. I am indebted to Michael Lebowitz, author of *Following Marx*, for this expression.<sup>3</sup> *Das Kapital*—and here Lebowitz and perhaps several others, like the Englishman E. P. Thompson, share my view—dissects (or ‘deconstructs’) the logic of capital and adduces a critique of political economy (the subtitle of *Das Kapital*). The term ‘critique’ must be understood not as the substitution of a ‘good’ for a ‘bad’ (or, at best, imperfect) economics but as specifying the status of political economy (in the loftiest sense of the term) as the foundation of bourgeois ideology.

This dissection allows Marx to make visible what is concealed in political economy: value and surplus-value, which show up in political economy only in the forms of price and profit. This operation is basic. Without it capitalism cannot be grasped in its reality and so would appear as a ‘rational’ system of organizing production.

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<sup>1</sup> This text was first published in: *Samir Amin: Ending the crisis of capitalism or ending capitalism* (Oxford: Fahamu Books 2011). The author retains the copyright for all of his texts.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 22 February 1858; see: at: <[http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/marx/works/1858/letters/58\\_02\\_22.htm](http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/marx/works/1858/letters/58_02_22.htm)>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Lebowitz: *Following Marx: Method, Critique and Crisis* (Leiden: Brill 2009).

Marx thus envisaged completing this side of the analysis of capital with a book on wage-labor (the third book mentioned in the letter to Lassalle). Here Marx envisaged introducing the new class struggle (that of the wage-earning proletariat against the capitalist bourgeoisie) into the construction not of a “political economy” but of a “historical materialism” or “materialist history” (and I do mean materialist, plainly not “economic-determinist”). After all, wage labor is not a “fact of nature,” and human beings try to escape from it whenever possible. As Marx points out in discussing the “new colonization” (the settler colonization of North America): the ‘natural’ reproduction of the wage-labor force clashes with the handicap formed by its flight and establishment as independent farmers on conquered territory. Emancipation of those who, under capitalism, are wage laborers subordinate to capital (and exploited by it) comes through the abolition of wage labor (communism), not through its “humane management.” The fragments of an analysis of wage labor published in the volumes of *Das Kapital* (supplemented with writings by Marx and Engels from newspaper articles and from their correspondence) clearly point to that intention. But they are no more than an indication; this ‘silence’ would thus probably have been corrected in the third book that never appeared.

Pretty much the same can be said about the second book on “landed property”. Capitalism was not produced by “reason’s theoretical invention”, as the Enlightenment thinkers imagined. Capitalism was built—gradually, then imposed as dominant—through the social struggles of the emerging bourgeoisie against the Old Regime, in concrete historical conditions of time and place, themselves differing from country to country. I have always maintained that the same sort of contradictions were at work elsewhere, from China to the Islamic Middle East. I refer here to my contribution to discussions on “global history” and ‘globalizations,’ to my book *Class and Nation*, and to my early criticism of Eurocentrism. But that discussion is only indirectly at issue here. Landed property, as discussed by Marx, is characterized by the transformation of feudal property (with super-imposed rights of lords and—serf or free—peasant tenants) into purely capitalist agricultural property. Marx concentrates on that transformation, which he analyzes in some detail in his published writings (*Das Kapital* and other writings). What Marx inferred from this, in regard to ground rent, is discussed by me in this work and is further developed, even ‘corrected’.

But it is only in the *Formen (Forms)* that Marx takes up the same question for other—‘Asiatic’—societies. This work on pre-capitalist forms of production—one of Marx’s 1857–1858 manuscripts—was only published belatedly (as a complement to the manuscript on principles for a critique of political economy) by Maximilien Rubel.<sup>4</sup> I have rejected those propositions, which indeed Marx neither published nor expanded later. The second book, if it had been written, would perhaps have thrown more light on the subject, but nobody can really know.

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<sup>4</sup> Marx’s *Formen* is available in English in Eric Hobsbawm (Ed.): *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1965).

Although the fourth book, concerning the state, was also never written, the thought of Marx on this subject can be better understood than on the others. The bourgeois state is a concentrated expression of its economic reality, as Lenin expressed it. By that I mean not that it is solely “capital’s state” (“in the service of capital”) but that it is also the manager of the ‘whole,’ able if necessary to go against a multiplicity of capitalist interests in dealing with the wage-labor force. Still, it’s likely that if Marx had written that fourth book he would have told us more on the subject, going beyond his concrete analyses of concrete situations—in particular those involving the nineteenth century political history of France from the 1848 revolution to the Commune. I have put forth several propositions involving a possible theory of the (class) state in societies before capitalism (those which I have termed ‘tributary’), accentuating the reversal of the relationship between politics and economics accompanying the substitution of the bourgeois state for the tributary state.<sup>5</sup>

My work mainly has bearing on the fifth and sixth of the books promised in his letter to Lassalle. These two books appear to split a single question into two parts: first in terms of “international trade”—the fifth book—and then in terms of the “world market”—the sixth book. At first *sight*, this is a strange way of going about it. Nevertheless, I have followed in Marx’s footsteps on this question. I first (1973) offered a contribution to the discussions about “unequal exchange” in which I specified that this sort of exchange is a relationship between ‘countries’ in which the range of prices for labor-power (real wages) shows a much wider range than that of the productivities of social labor (in the Marxian sense, which is quite different from what bourgeois economists call the “factor-productivity of labor”). Unequal exchange (“North–South,” to put it simply) makes up only the visible part of the iceberg. The concept of “imperialist rent,” central to the construction of what I call the law of globalized value, implies a deconstruction of everything constituting “globalized capitalist economics.” Marx would perhaps have been led to advance some propositions on this subject if he had written that sixth book on “the world market.” But obviously we will never know.

So then, could the present work be termed the “sixth book of *Capital*”? If by that we were to understand an ‘imaginative’ exercise bearing on what Marx might have been able to write on the subject, the answer would be no. I have not undertaken in this work an exegesis of Marx’s scattered passages dealing with “the world market” (the globalized capitalist system) in order to construct a sixth book as close as possible to what Marx might have written. I have no idea whether he would have discovered the dynamic of polarization or if, on the contrary, he would have emphasized a homogenizing tendency of the globalization process. I put forward, taking off from my analyses of the development of capitalist globalization, an abstract formalization of the globalized law of value which extends that of

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<sup>5</sup> Samir Amin: *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1976); *Eurocentrism*, second edition (New York: Monthly Review Press 2009).

the law of value. Thus, in other terms, I am, in writing this sort of “sixth book” of *Capital*, deliberately placing myself in the contemporary world, not in that of 1875.

It is for the reader to judge whether this Marxist theory of the world capitalist system and of the law of globalized value is road-worthy, correctly extends the works of Marx, and respects their spirit. In any case, I hope that this publication will give rise to a discussion on the matter.



On the walls of Cairo in February 2011: The high command of the army is a snake with many faces. *Source* Photo from the author's personal photo collection

## Chapter 2

# Capitalism and Ground Rent

Before discussing the domination of capitalism over agriculture, we should agree on what capitalism is. It does not come within the purview of conventional economics or sociology.<sup>1</sup> It is possible to get as far as a doctorate in social science in the United States without knowing that one lives in a capitalist society! The basic concepts of social science are ahistorical: the three ‘factors’ of production (nature of land, capital—synonymous with production equipment—and labor) are combined in an infinite number of ways, always according to the well-known technical formulas of the society under study. Social science is not based on history, and even when history is not reduced to a direct sequence of events, it does not go beyond a comparative description of institutions and of social, moral, political, or aesthetic ideas. Sociology is grafted on to this shapeless mass; its aim is to examine, in terms of functionality, whether parts of social life, taken at random, are satisfactory or not. It is a risky proposition to study the birth and development of capitalism within this framework: if capitalism is confused with the use of the (so-called) factor capital, i.e., tools, then it has always been in existence. It is also often confused with commodity exchange. As a result, to some people a study of the development of capitalism in a particular sector boils down to a quantitative measure of the increase in capital equipment and of the expansion of trade.

To have a clear understanding of capitalism we must, from the start, look at social science from a different viewpoint, based on the concept of the mode of production.<sup>2</sup>

Here also, unfortunately, a common and highly empirical approach is too often adopted. For it is obvious from everyday experience what a capitalist enterprise is: an autonomous unit of production, privately owned and extensively equipped with production means operated by wage labor. As we discussed in the [Chap. 1](#), capitalism is then reduced to the sum total of these capitalist enterprises. Similarly, in agriculture, production is capitalist if it uses a large amount of capital equipment

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<sup>1</sup> This text is an extract from Samir Amin: *Imperialism and unequal development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, NY, 1976): 37ff. The author retained the copyright for all of his texts.

<sup>2</sup> A more detailed treatment will be found in *Unequal Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), ch. 1.

and wage labor. The extent of agrarian capitalism will therefore be measured by the size of the wage-labor force and the degree of mechanization. This is better than confusing capitalism with commercial relations, but it is still very inadequate and can lead to serious misinterpretation.

Let us examine the concept of the mode of production.<sup>3</sup> A production mode is defined as an equation, with two opposing classes: in the case of capitalism, bourgeoisie and proletariat, i.e., owners of production means which are themselves the product of social labor (equipment which becomes capital) and sellers of their own labor power. In the capitalist mode: (1) the entire social product assumes commodity form; (2) labor power itself is a commodity (labor is mobile); (3) capital, which is a social relation, is embodied in capital goods which are also commodities (capital is mobile). From this, it can be deduced that: (1) the ideology characteristic of the capitalist mode is economism, since the extracted surplus—fruit of the surplus labor of the proletariat, or surplus value—is masked by a proportionate redistribution to fragmented capital (surplus value takes the form of profit, and capital appears to be productive); (2) hence, the alienation characteristic of capitalism is commodity alienation (especially since the domination of nature is overcome); (3) the economic factor is not only determining in the last resort but is also dominant.

In contrast, in the tributary modes of production that dominate the history of precapitalist societies, the equation opposes peasant producers (organized in communities) to a state ruling class in control of access to the land. Landownership by the peasant communities (and/or by their members) is superimposed with that by the ruling class (and/or the state and its various constituent parts). The extracted surplus, here taking the form of a tribute (feudal ground rent corresponds to the feudal type of tributary production modes), is clearly obvious and variable, since it depends on the unequal generosity of nature (nature's domination is indeed quite marked). It can be deduced from this that: (1) neither the social product nor the surplus (except possibly a fraction of it, if one assumes trade relations between several tributary societies), nor labor power is a commodity; (2) the dominant ideology and the alienation are of a religious nature; (3) the ideological level is dominant but the economic level is as usual determinant in the last resort.

It must also be remembered that concepts of the mode of production, the most abstract in social science, form the basis of a second set of concepts relating to social formations, and of yet a third set relating to the systems of social formations linked with one another through trade relations. The social formation—a structured combination of several modes of production, dominated by one of them—implies that there is substance to the description of the “dominant mode of production.” Domination should not, under any circumstances, be reduced to the statistical predominance of one form of economic activity. The concept of domination is very

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<sup>3</sup> Concerning this subject, see the studies by Daniel and Alice Thorner: *Land and Labor in India* (1962; New York: Asia Publishing House, 1974), and *The Emergence of Capitalist Agriculture in India*, mimeo (Dakar: IDEP, 1973).



precise and includes: (1) domination by the fundamental law of the dominant mode, which determines the conditions of reproduction of the entire formation (thus, for example, the law of capitalist accumulation determines both the conditions of reproduction of capitalist society, and all the complex relations between its various parts, including a capitalist industrial economy and a peasant economy); (2) the consequent transfer of a portion of the surplus generated in the dominated modes to the dominant mode (thus, for example, the transformation of a portion of rent into profit); (3) the political supremacy of the dominant class in the dominant mode, the other dominant classes being, at best, reduced to the status of allies; (4) the supremacy of the ideology of the dominant mode.

We have distinguished between capitalist and precapitalist formations, pointing out that the fundamental law of the capitalist mode has the inherent tendency to bring about the disintegration and disappearance of the other modes, while this was not the case in the precapitalist formations. The capitalist formations tended to become homogeneous, to be reduced to the capitalist mode, while the precapitalist formations remain heterogeneous. The implication is that the dominated modes in the capitalist formations, insofar as they still exist, are profoundly impaired, transformed, distorted, and sometimes deprived of their substance. It will be seen that this point is fully substantiated by an analysis of the relations between industry and agriculture or between dominant capitalist country and dominated agricultural country. As the debate between Lenin and Chayanov shows, there is a specific set of problems that results from the clash between this tendency toward homogeneity, on the one hand, and the manifestation of domination by the capitalist mode over the other modes, on the other.

The social formations are, for their part, seldom isolated. There are systems of social formations. In the precapitalist world in particular, it often happens that a portion of the surplus generated in the various formations circulates; this is the root of the problem of long-distance trade which is of great import to some civilizations (e.g., Greece, the Arab world, and the Sahelian savanna). The nature and status of precapitalist commercial profits are a category of profit distinct from commercial capital.

A special feature of our contemporary world is that it constitutes a single system of capitalist formations characterized by: (1) the universal nature of commodities—in other words, the supremacy of world values (a more accurate expression than international values) over national values; (2) the universal nature of capital, i.e., its international mobility; and (3) labor markets persistently confined within national boundaries—in other words, the very limited international mobility of the labor force. In addition, we must draw an important distinction between two groups of capitalist formations: the mature, dominant, central formations, and the immature, dependent, peripheral formations.

Because of this, the question of international relations between the center and the periphery (commodity trade, capital flows, technological flows, political organization and stratification, ideological currents, etc.) must not under any circumstances be treated lightly or “in parts,” or too hastily compared with the problem of relations within the systems of precapitalist formations.

It is necessary to make one last methodological observation. We have so far considered only two class modes of production, capitalist and tributary. There are of course many others: (1) the slavery-based mode of production, regarded as an exceptional mode, particularly within highly developed mercantile formations; (2) the simple commodity mode, widespread but only dominant in exceptional cases (for example, in colonial New England); (3) the interrelations between these modes and the dominant tributary modes of precapitalist times; (4) the range of tributary modes, those referred to as ‘Asian,’ ‘African,’ and feudal (which in my view belong to one and the same family comprising a mature central type—China and Egypt), and the peripheral types (in particular, Western European and feudal Japanese). So far, we have not mentioned a peasant mode of production (singular or plural) since it raises very important questions that will be dealt with in our discussion of peasant societies.<sup>4</sup>

Returning to the capitalist mode, the immediate difficulty one meets in studying its relations with agriculture derives from the fact that the concept of capitalist mode does not take into account control of the soil, that is, access to the bounty of nature. In fact, in the capitalist mode there are only two classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat, and two ‘incomes,’ profits and wages. In other words, in conventional economics there are two factors of production, capital and labor. Hence there are no landowners, no rent, no factor termed ‘nature’ or ‘land.’ Would this be a simplification, land being also capital, rent also profit (from ‘land-capital’), and landowners a special type of capitalist? Undoubtedly not, although the precapitalist categories in question (landed property, landowners, and ground rent) take precisely the form mentioned, owing to their distortion through domination by the capitalist mode, as we shall see.

We must first clear up one possible misunderstanding. Any agronomist would disagree, justifiably, if agricultural land were called a virgin portion of nature. Agricultural land is the product of human labor repeated over successive generations. For the peasant, land is not different from the plough or the cow: it is an instrument of labor. Moreover, no productive process takes place in a void; it always calls into play the forces of nature: the windmill is driven by the wind, biological laws are instrumental in the growth of plants, the laws of chemistry operate to combine iron and carbon to form pig iron, etc. Finally, there is practically no economic activity that does not involve a geographical element, a necessary location: the factory takes up ground space, the doctor must have an office, and even a peddler uses the streets.

But the problem does not lie here. It is not a question of knowing whether ‘nature’ exists or not; it certainly exists. There is no doubt that the forces of nature intervene in the productive process. The question is to know the social conditions that govern the right to use these forces. This right is seldom really free—even the grazing land used by a tribe of nomadic herders is forbidden to others, although the

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Althusser: *For Marx* (New York: Pantheon, 1970) and: *Reading Capital* (New York: Pantheon, 1971). See also Chapter 3 in this volume: “In Praise of Socialism.”

sea is open to any fisherman, and the lands of the American West were for a long time open to all those who could slaughter the Indians occupying them. In precapitalist societies, agricultural land was essential and access was strictly controlled by the society. Whether access was open to all or restricted to some (to the members of a clan, for example), whether it was free or subject to the payment of a tithe or rent of some sort, it was always controlled. In contrast, tools were rudimentary and of secondary importance. It is no longer the same with the modern capitalist farm, as we shall see.

On the other hand, in the capitalist industrial enterprise the capital equipment is essential, while the ground is of secondary importance. Moreover, if the capitalist must purchase the land or pay rent, it is because when capitalism came into being, land was already an object of appropriation and subject to rights. 'Capital' is essentially embodied in the means of production, themselves products of social labor. In order to understand the capitalist mode, it is essential to distinguish between Department I (capital goods production) and Department II (consumer goods production), between bourgeoisie and proletariat, between surplus value and the value of labor power, including their many deceptive forms: profits and wages or savings and consumption. How then does this abstract capitalist mode, without any historical background or territorial basis, interrelate with the production mode from which and within which it has its real historical origin? That is the question, and that is the correct way to bring land-ownership and rent into the analysis of the capitalist formation.

## 2.1 Rent and the Ownership of the Soil: Going Back to Capital

Marx's Capital has been the subject of a flood of written comments. How to reconcile volume 1 with volume 3, how to transform values into production prices and surplus value into profits; how to reconcile the two antagonistic classes—bourgeoisie and proletariat—and the 'trinity formula' at the end of volume 3? Discouraged, many writers have given up or have resorted to eclecticism, have reconsidered the marginalist 'contribution' or have revised their conception of social classes. It was easy to argue that only volume 1 appeared during Marx's lifetime and that the other two, uncompleted drafts, remained as they were because Marx had found no solutions to the questions raised above. I do not share this opinion and believe that the order of the three books, as well as the way the questions are put, are carefully thought out and are significant.

The first two volumes deal with capital and labor alone and consider capital in its broadest sense, that is, in its social form and not in its component parts. Volume 1 contains only the most essential concepts, hence the most abstract and least empirical ones: the fetishism of commodities and the dialectics of value, social capital as a relation between classes, and labor power as a commodity. These

concepts suffice for an understanding of the essence of the capitalist mode, the surplus characteristic of this mode, and the way it is generated, precisely by contrasting it with the one which historically precedes it. This explains why the general law of the capitalist mode, i.e., the law of accumulation, is formulated in this volume, together with its historical genesis—primitive accumulation. No additional concepts are required to answer these three essential questions: What is capitalism? Where does it come from? Where is it heading?

The commodity is the key to the system: it is the medium of exchange-value; it conceals use-value; it is fetishized. Contrary to Althusser's view that the 'mature' Marx abandoned the theory of alienation, we believe that Marx, going beyond the critique of humanism formulated by the young Hegelians and by Feuerbach, had discovered that alienation changes its form and its sphere with the development of capitalism. Until then it is based on religion, since society is still ruled directly by nature; it becomes commodity alienation as soon as the development of the productive forces free society from this dependence on nature by subjecting it to another form of dependence, that is, on its own "economic laws."<sup>5</sup>

Labor power reduced to a commodity is the second key to the system. This commodity, whose use-value has the property of producing more value than it itself consumes, enables us to discover the source of the surplus (the surplus labor of the proletariat), to understand its specific form (surplus value), to define productive labor (productive of surplus value), to uncover its appearance (that of the productivity of capital), and to grasp the nature of the ideology of the capitalist mode (economism) and its relations with the base (the latter's dominance).

Hence capital appears primarily as a relation between social classes: it exists only because one class controls the means of production while the other class sells its labor power. Capital is therefore an overall social relation involving the whole society. Empiricism views capital from the angle of immediate phenomena: the equipment in which it is embodied, the individual production units where the equipment is installed. The microeconomic approach of conventional economics simply reflects its inability to understand that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Marx begins with the whole.

Volume 2 is a logical continuation, a step closer to the concrete. With these concepts established, Marx is able to formulate the model of the reproduction of the system in terms of quantitative relations, between constant capital and variable capital (the organic composition of capital), and between the latter and surplus value (the rate of surplus value). We have used this framework to reformulate the question of the relation between the objective forces (the law of accumulation) and the subjective forces (class struggle) at the level of the world capitalist system, that is, within a system of capitalist formations characterized by a compartmentalization of labor markets. Raising the question of international trade (unequal exchange) appears to us the only correct way to bring circulation and production into the reproduction process to form a comprehensive whole.

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Kautsky: *Die Agrarfrage* (The Agrarian Question) (Stuttgart: J. H. W. Dietz, 1899).

In volume 3, two further steps are taken toward the concrete. The first is to analyze the redistribution of surplus value among the components of capital and the second is to analyze its redistribution between the capitalists (profit) and the landowners (rent). At this point the transition from mode of production to social formation begins and the question of class alliances is introduced.

Ladislaus von Bortkiewicz is no doubt the first author to have systematically studied these two questions raised in volume 3. As Luca Meldolesi remarked in an account of the work of Bortkiewicz,<sup>6</sup> the latter was not concerned with a ‘correct’ and ‘complete’ formulation of the ‘transformation’ problem, but rather with examining the consequences of his formulation on the central themes of Capital. In doing this, Bortkiewicz demonstrated in detail what Sraffa was to rediscover 50 years later: that profit would not exist without surplus value and that the attempt to find a different basis for profit (as in the work of Bohm-Bawerk and Walras, of which Bortkiewicz wrote a fundamental critique) was based on a tautology. Bortkiewicz also found that the rate of profit depends on real wages and on the productivity of labor in the production of both wage-goods and the intermediate goods which directly or indirectly enter into their production, excluding luxury goods (and gold). On that basis, he reformulated the question of technical progress and its effects on the rate of profit.

We have seen that the inequality between the rate of profit and the rate of surplus value is necessary to explain the hidden nature of the “economic laws of the market,” the basis of the economic alienation inherent in the capitalist mode and everything related to it (the dominance of the economic plane). We have also seen that the conflict between capital as a global social reality (the class relation) and capital as a fragmented social reality (the competition between capitalists and the domination of the circulation process over the production process) reveals the irrational nature of capitalism and of the profitability calculus. For “resource allocation” depends not only on the relations between the proletariat and bourgeois classes but also on the internal contradictions characteristic of the bourgeoisie. Conventional economics, starting with the production unit, i.e., the firm, never achieves such insights: it becomes entangled in a host of superficial details, describes infinite varieties of competition (“pure and perfect,” ‘monopolistic,’ ‘oligopolistic,’ etc.), and reaches no conclusion. The failure of neoclassical economics and of marginalist attempts to refute Marx was complete by 1914, at least on the continent of Europe. England alone, totally alienated owing to its empirical tradition, could ignore this debate and produce Alfred Marshall who, without understanding either Ricardo, Marx, or the refutation attempts of Bohm-Bawerk, Walras, and Pareto, was to appear as a “great man.” Europe’s somber years between the two world wars and the transfer of wealth to the United States explain how a man as intellectually poor and undeveloped as Samuelson was able to become an authority on “economic science” by simply reformulating Marshall’s eclectic idiocies, completely ignorant of the tautology on which this

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<sup>6</sup> Luca Meldolesi, *La teoria economica di Marx* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971).

'science' rested. Then came the "crisis of civilization" of the sixties, followed by that of the economic system itself in the seventies. At this point the whole structure collapsed, leaving an ideological void reminiscent of that of the end of the Roman Empire.

The question of ground rent has elicited less commentary. The chapters devoted to it in *Capital* are reputedly the most difficult and this reputation is firmly entrenched. To Marx, rent is a precapitalist category which survives simply because capitalism did not originate in a void. The class alliance between the nascent bourgeoisie and the landowner class (of feudal or peasant origin) plays a crucial role in the process of primitive accumulation. It is instrumental in taxing the surplus value or profit made by this landowning class, i.e., absolute rent.

As we know, Marx distinguished between differential rent and absolute rent. It may be asked why he dealt at such length with differential rent. Contemporary economists, who possess no sense of history, thought it intelligent to 'generalize' the theory of rent once Marshall had opened the way. Are differences in "soil fertility" not of the same nature as the various differential advantages (of location, for example) found in industry? In this case, in addition to normal average profit, capital receives more or less substantial differential rents. In fact, differential rent is of an entirely different nature for the simple reason that it existed before capitalism came into being. As we have seen, the characteristic feature of feudal rent is that it is unequal: with the low level of development of the productive forces, nature's superiority appeared in those terms precisely because feudal rent did not circulate. In contrast, the differential advantages accruing to capitalist industry arise from the (unequal) competition among capital which does circulate (though imperfectly because of contradictions within the bourgeoisie).

As regards absolute rent, Marx sees it as the manifestation of the class alliance in question. It is interesting to look at Bortkiewicz' attempt to understand the problem of absolute rent. His analysis led him to two conclusions. First, absolute rent does not necessarily require that the organic composition in agriculture be less than that in industry. Thus the rate of absolute rent is not necessarily fixed, as Marx said, by the difference between the production price of agricultural products as such (the surplus value generated in agriculture being withdrawn from its general circulation) and what the price would be if capital, in circulating, did not have to contend with the monopoly of landed property. The rate of rent is determined through class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the landowners. I have reached the same conclusion, and have even drawn a parallel with industrial monopoly in which the redistribution of the surplus value depends on the struggle between the various segments of the bourgeoisie. It appears clearly when one compares urban ground rent in northern and southern Europe. In the first case, the industrial element of the bourgeoisie was strong enough to have reduced the small urban property owners to a state of bare subsistence: this became possible with the alliance between the social democrats and the working class, benefiting from better housing conditions. In the second case, the industrial bourgeoisie came up against a proletariat fighting against its integration; being less strong, this bourgeoisie formed an alliance with a parasitic middle class made up of urban property owners.

This alliance was not free, and the industrial bourgeoisie had to tolerate extortionate rents. Again, there is no economic rationality above the class struggle. However, Marx's apparent 'mistake' has an origin: in his time, the organic composition in agriculture, then still backward, was inferior to that in industry. Moreover, capitalism was emerging from the state of simple commodity relations of the preceding mercantilist period. These relations gave rise to a range of relative prices (from agricultural products to cottage industry, which eventually faced competition from industrial products) which explains the genesis of absolute rent in the terms in which Marx expresses it. Hence, it can be seen that rent necessarily brings history into play and prepares the transition from the capitalist mode as an abstract concept (it is in this sense that I qualified it as ahistorical) to the capitalist formation as a concrete and historical concept (a product of class struggle and alliances). Karl Kautsky has already analyzed absolute rent in historical and concrete terms. He noted that the organic composition in agriculture was less than the average organic composition because capitalism developed primarily in industry. But he further noted that as it penetrated agriculture, capitalism raised the latter's ratio of organic composition.<sup>7</sup>

Bortkiewicz' second solution is that absolute rent does not exist because the capitalist, instead of paying this rent for the least fertile land, can obtain the same result by intensifying his capital investment in more fertile land (in accordance with the model of intensive differential rent which Marx evolved side by side with the one for extensive differential rent). This assumes that the capitalists take advantage of the competition among the landowners in order to reduce absolute rent to zero. But such reasoning presupposes the very absence of a class alliance between the bourgeoisie and the landowners as a group. Again, the economic error of considering competition as a rigid and unbounded rule overlooks the collective class nature of the state power which controls this competition. Yet again, the class (the whole) comes before its individual members (the parts); the whole represents more than the sum of its component parts.

Taking Bortkiewicz' reasoning a step further, Luca Meldolesi observed that the theory of rent rests on the assumption that only one agricultural product (i.e., wheat) is grown. With the possibility of producing several products (each having a different price), the scale of fertilities or investments cannot be established independently of prices. The only solution would be to determine at one and the same time rent, prices, and profit rates, as Sraffa has done. In my opinion, this is a return to the empiricism of apparent facts, since products are infinitely less specific than the market illusion suggests. The food products that serve as inputs in the reproduction of the labor force form a "composite group of products" which, in Marx's time, was made up of a (large) proportion of cereals and a (small) proportion of meat. Today the proportions are different, varying with the evolution of the value

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<sup>7</sup> See Samir Amin: *L'échange inégal et la loi de la valeur* (Paris: Anthropos, 1973). Of course, if the products are not so specific as they appear to be, the whole conventional theory of supply and demand, the basis of marginalism, falls apart, revealing itself as a crude tautology.

of the labor power, itself related to the development of the productive forces, as we have seen. Ground rent therefore clearly invites us to switch our attention from the capitalist mode to the history of capitalist formations.<sup>8</sup>

## **2.2 From the Capitalist Mode of Production to Capitalist Formations: Class Alliances and the Creation of the World Capitalist System**

We know that the Industrial Revolution in Europe was preceded by an agricultural revolution. We also know that between the 'feudal' Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution there were three centuries of transition, difficult to describe owing to the complexity of their social and economic relations. Another known fact is that capitalist industry progressed rapidly in Europe in the nineteenth century while agriculture stagnated, retaining some backward features. And finally, we know that at the end of that century, or in some cases even after the First or Second World War, agriculture in Europe took a second leap forward with the widespread use of chemical fertilizers and machinery; in other words, agriculture became 'industrialized.'

Three stages can therefore be distinguished: (1) the stage which we call mercantilism, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, characterized by the first transformation of agriculture, its commercialization and the disintegration of feudal production relations; (2) the nineteenth century, characterized by the full development of the capitalist production mode in industry; (3) the twentieth century, characterized by the industrialization of agriculture. Corresponding to each stage, there were different relations between agriculture and other activities (manufacture and trade, later industry). The theory put forward here is as follows: capitalist production relations first appear in the countryside but to a limited degree, owing to opposition from the feudal mode of production. Later, these relations transfer to new areas of activity (i.e., urban industry) where they achieve their mature form, abandoning agriculture. Finally, these relations take a hold over all social life, embracing agriculture in a more comprehensive and profound way. This switching back and forth is characteristic of the history of capitalism's relations with agriculture in the central capitalist formations. We shall see that this is not the case for the peripheral capitalist formations.

Let us first look at the first stage, that of mercantilism. During that period the two poles essential for capitalism to achieve its completed stage, i.e., capital and the proletariat, were formed. But they did not actually confront each other until the Industrial Revolution. Capital was still in a prehistoric form, that of accumulation of money wealth by the commercial bourgeoisie of Atlantic Western Europe. That bourgeoisie was amassing wealth from its monopoly of the triangular

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<sup>8</sup> My analysis of rent agrees with the conclusions reached by P.-P. Rey: *Les alliances de classes* (Paris: Maspero, 1973).



trade and its control of the slave-based export agriculture of the Americas. However, this type of accumulation was not yet different from that of the pre-capitalist long-distance trade: it was merely a monopolistic extortion of slave surplus labor at one end and feudal rent at the other. In the real sense, it was only potential capital. Similar phenomena occurred elsewhere, in other precapitalist civilizations: in the Roman Empire, the Arab world, the Italian and the Hanseatic towns, the Islamized savanna areas of Africa, the seaport areas of southern China, etc.

The other aspect of mercantilism, which is of much more direct interest to us, is the disintegration of feudal relations, the proletarianization and commercialization of agriculture. This is characteristic of Europe during those three centuries, and it subsequently made the mercantilist period appear as a period of transition.

What happened to the feudal mode during that period? What sort of transformations did it undergo? In the feudal mode, the peasant is guaranteed access to land: a member of the village community cannot be driven away or proletarianized. Rent (that is, feudal rent, a special form of tribute) is paid in kind—in products and labor. But during those three centuries, first the feudal lords and sometimes some of the peasants became absolute owners of land. There was no longer any superposition of the rights of the two classes. This absolute right of ownership reintroduced the Roman law of *jus usi et abutendi*, with a different interpretation, i.e., as mercantile law. The class struggle between the peasants and the feudal lords decided in whose favor this transformation would be resolved.

What did these new absolute landowners (potential capitalist landowners, agrarian bourgeois, and peasants) do with their land? They invested capital in improving the land and sold a part of their output. In the case of former feudal lords or of the new bourgeoisie—derived nobility who had purchased land—rent in kind was replaced by money rent. In addition, land investments left a proportion of the rural population without employment. It was driven away, proletarianized. The people became vagrants, occasionally sold their labor power or were recruited into the king's armies. In England, this was also the period when people were hanged for theft. Another solution was to emigrate to America.

A market for agricultural products was established, based on the booming urbanization. In the towns could be found the Atlantic trading bourgeoisie, the royal courts and increasingly large centralized administration, the crafts workers who earned their living from this expanding market, and the first manufacturing industries created by the king to supply his army, and his administration.

The appearance of a market for agricultural products meant that henceforth rent circulated. It tended to lose its original characteristic of being unequal and began to even out over the different portions of land. It became, or tended to become, capitalist rent, although this process was not completed until after the Industrial Revolution.

Capitalist production relations and wage labor began to develop. This started in the towns with the development of manufacturing industries, but the process was slow since crafts workers remained organized in guilds, traders did not employ much wage labor except servants, and the administration paid its officials by

granting them privileges. In the countryside, there was a more rapid development of wage labor, however since money was still scarce, tenant farming and sharecropping very often constituted steps leading to the proletarianization of the peasantry. The development of rural capitalist relations was restricted by the smallness of an urban market which, still in the preindustrial stage, had only a limited range of products to offer.

The political economy of mercantilism, or physiocracy, was developed by Quesnay. There can be no political economy to explain the precapitalist modes: the surplus being transparent, there is no mystery to elucidate. Physiocracy is the political economy of the transition to capitalism, this special transition known as European mercantilism: there is already a capitalist surplus in existence (the surplus value in capitalist agriculture and manufacture) and it circulates, but most of it is still located in the rural areas where it is interrelated with the new form of rent. Another example of the political economy of this transitional formation is given in *Theorie economique du systeme feodal*, by Witold Kula.<sup>9</sup> Despite its title, it does not deal with a true feudal mode since the Polish feudal demesne of the seventeenth century was highly mercantilized, connected through the Hanseatic towns to Atlantic Europe.

Like long-distance trade, mercantile agriculture was not an exclusively European phenomenon. In the Roman Empire and the Arab world, among others, there were private estates which marketed at least a portion of their products. Money rent, agricultural wage labor, tenant farming, sharecropping, and the absolute ownership of land existed in the Arab world, as is evidenced by the mercantile nature of Islamic law.

However, what was peculiar to Europe was the relation which emerged between the development of the commercial bourgeoisie and the disintegration of feudal relations (the commercialization of agriculture and the appearance of capitalist relations in agriculture). In *Unequal Development*, this exceptional character was explained by the equally exceptional—peripheral—character of the feudal mode in the family of tributary modes, by the fact that it was incomplete owing to the absence of rent centralization. This exceptional character was reflected in the special type of class alliances during the mercantilist transition. We know that in order to withstand feudal disintegration, the absolute monarchies of Europe of the period made an alliance with the commercial bourgeoisie. They also tried to maintain a certain balance between the feudal class and the peasantry, sometimes allowing the scales in the class struggle to tip in favor of the peasantry, thereby speeding up the appearance of a peasant landowning bourgeoisie. In contrast, in the formations based on a mature tributary mode (China and Egypt), the ruling central power never had to form such alliances: there was never any feudal autonomy. In the formations based on long-distance trade (the Arab world, Sahelian Africa), the surplus extracted from agriculture was invariably too small to

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<sup>9</sup> Witold Kula: *Theorie economique du systeme fe'odal* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970).

enable the commercial class to bring about the disintegration of the rural world as it did in Europe.

The industrial revolution opened a new era. After appearing in embryonic form in the rural world, capitalist relations spread to industry where they achieved their completed form. There was money available which could be transformed into capital; the proletariat was also in existence. The handicraft market was too small to cope with the supply of agricultural products, thus a powerful motive appeared for some craftsmen to invent the first machines. Of course, the new industrial capitalist class did not necessarily derive from the former commercial bourgeoisie. The latter generally allowed itself to be absorbed by the system: it purchased lands or patents of nobility. The newly enriched peasant or the gentleman farmer, the financial adventurer or the court and army supplier grabbed the money accumulated elsewhere and set up new industries.

This industrial revolution took place through the alliance between the new bourgeoisie and the landowners. The motives involved were not simply political or ideological (the sacred nature of private property). As P.-P. Rey has shown in *Les alliances de classes*, the private ownership of land played an essential part in the development of capitalism. It made it possible to expel the surplus population which consequently swelled the ranks of the proletariat. This alliance took different forms according to historical circumstances. We may roughly distinguish between the form it took in England, where the bourgeoisie made an alliance with the big capitalist landlords until they merged into one single class, and the French pattern, in which the bourgeoisie joined with the peasants to bring about a radical agrarian reform leading to the emergence of a new rural class of the kulak type.

Whatever form this alliance took, its cost involved the extraction of a part of the surplus value in favor of the landowners. We can now refer to capitalist rent in the full sense of the term since it is retained from surplus value. The mechanism resulted in high prices for the basic necessities and hence in larger expenditure on wages and reduced profits for the capitalists. These high prices of basic necessities were simply a continuation of the prices prevailing in the transition period. In turn, this landownership monopoly freed its beneficiaries from the constant obligation to improve their production techniques, under the pressure of competition, from which no industrialist could escape. Thus the gulf widened between the modernization of industry and the comparative stagnation in agriculture.

The agricultural sector supplied the towns with their basic food requirements and raw materials for which, in return, it received manufactured consumer goods rather than production goods as during the mercantilist transition period. The relations were fairly evenly balanced.<sup>10</sup>

This autonomy of rural society—autonomy and not autarky—hindered the development of capital. It is obvious that rent was not a category of the capitalist mode and that it slowed down the accumulation of capital. Ricardo had already

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<sup>10</sup> See Christian Palloix: *Problemes de la croissance en economie ouverte* (Paris: Maspero, 1969); Samir Amin: *Unequal Development*, ch. 3.

perceived it as the source of a bottleneck which John Stuart Mill was later to express in very precise terms.

This is why capital attempted to reduce progressively this drain on the economy which rent represented. How? Land nationalization was certainly the most radical way. This is why Lenin regarded it not as a socialist reform but as a revolutionary bourgeois reform. The measures taken toward municipal ownership of urban lands in the most advanced social democracies were a step in that direction.

The third phase opened with the industrialization of agriculture which was henceforth to supply an increased number of products to the towns but, in return, was to receive not only manufactured consumer goods but also agricultural inputs (fertilizer, equipment, power). This phase took particularly varied forms since it started at a time when a world system was already being set up under the wing of monopoly capital. Reduction in rent was therefore being achieved by changing the internal and external class alliances. Consequently the agricultural sector of the periphery was becoming integrated and dominated by capitalism. But before dealing with this decisive question, it is useful to look into the debates in the socialist movement concerning the development of capitalism in agriculture.

### **2.3 The Development of Capitalism in Agriculture: The Theories of Kautsky, Lenin, and Chayanov**

In this field as in others, social democracy reduced Marxism to an economic level. The end of the nineteenth century in Europe saw the beginning of the third phase of the capitalist development in agriculture. Social democracy stated, in very simple terms, the law governing this development: competition must gradually bring about the replacement of the peasants by big agrarian capitalists having the necessary capital to start the process of mechanization. Concentration of landownership, like that of capital ownership, is the characteristic tendency of this development.

However, let us do justice to the Second International. While the popular version of social democracy saw the concentration of landownership as the only trend of evolution in agriculture, Karl Kautsky analyzed the capitalist domination of agriculture in more subtle and surprisingly modern terms in *The Agrarian Question*. Kautsky first noted the fact of resistance to concentration. He expanded on this, showing the contrast between the small peasant farm and the big capitalist farm in terms of “the harder work... on the part of the worker who produces on his own account, in contrast with the wage earner.” He drew the conclusion, as regards the small peasant, that “when the price obtained for his products, after deducting his expenses, is sufficient to pay for his labor, he can manage to live; he can forgo profit and ground rent.” Kautsky explicitly analyzed the problem of the relations between capitalism and agriculture in terms of political class alliances, in terms not of simple development of capitalist agriculture but of domination of

industrial capitalism over noncapitalist or precapitalist rural forms and in terms of actual dispossession although, in theory, landownership was retained. Kautsky went on to describe the small peasant as “a serf of industrial capital.” He gave the specific example of the firm of Nestle at Vevey whose “inhabitants are outwardly owners of their lands but no longer free peasants.” Kautsky also analyzed the competition from overseas products, noting that “we can divide into two categories the countries whose agriculture produces at lower cost than European agriculture: the plantations of oriental despots and the free or former colonies.” We shall be looking into these questions later.

As we know, Lenin borrowed extensively from Kautsky.<sup>11</sup> Thus it is with the assumption of the law of increasing concentration that he examined the development of capitalism in agriculture in Russia. Concentration of ownership of land and of the means of production (ox-drawn ploughs), the appearance and expansion of the number of agricultural workers in absolute and relative terms, increasing differentiation within the peasantry and the strengthening of the position of the rich peasants (kulaks) at the expense of the medium peasants—these were the trends of the system. Lenin nevertheless noted that these were only general trends. Forms of transition could, for a time, mask the fatal outcome: the outright proletarianization of the peasants.

However, it was Chayanov who made a shrewd and penetrating analysis of the interaction between capitalism and agriculture.<sup>12</sup> Chayanov began with an analysis of the peasant mode of production which is noncapitalist, based on family units of peasant workers—owners of their land whose product is intended mainly for family consumption, although a small fraction of it is sold (to pay taxes and to satisfy an urban demand which in return offers manufactured goods in competition with cottage-industry products). In this mode, he noted, it is not possible to differentiate between the factors of production (land, capital, labor) as is very artificially done in the marginalist theory. The basic unit is both the production and the consumption, and commodity trading is of marginal importance: rural economists are fully aware that peasant life is not simply concerned with production, as is the industrial enterprise; it is as much a way of life as a mode of production. With this in mind, Chayanov introduced the idea that the organization of production (the quantities of the various products, how intensive the method should be, etc.) depends on how the family’s needs are balanced against the hardship involved in the labor. This balance between the two factors is itself dependent on the size of the family (the ratio between nonproductive and productive members) and the size of the family plot. And since the size of the family alters in the course of time, as does the plot of land with every succession, Chayanov concluded that the rural world has a particular evolutionary differential

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<sup>11</sup> Lenin: *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899; New York: Beekman, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> A. V. Chayanov: *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (Chicago: Aldine, 1966); *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971).

rate which he termed “demographic differentiation” in contrast with the class differentiation emphasized by Kautsky and Lenin.

Chayanov’s theory has not generally been well received. The balance between the satisfaction of needs and the hardship involved in the labor is viewed as an unacceptable extension of Robinson Crusoe’s hedonistic economics. Actually, the critics fail to see that Chayanov’s analysis is the result of the following observation: the peasant in question is not a capitalist entrepreneur, he does not seek to maximize the profits from his ‘capital’ and to accumulate, but primarily to live off the land which is his by virtue of a peasant social organization.

In my view, the real problem lies elsewhere. It is to understand the nature of this peasant mode of production and its position among the various types of social formations. The following observations address that end.

First, this mode as presented by Chayanov belongs to the family of small commodity modes of production: the producer who owns his means of production (land and implements) trades his products (at least a part of them) with other commodity producers placed in a similar situation. But although these modes of production occur frequently throughout history it is never on their own and still less in a dominant position. In Chayanov’s view (reinforced by the studies of Daniel Thorner) a peasant economy of this type would become a predominant reality when a certain number of conditions are met: statistical predominance of the rural population, the vast majority of them being small freeholders; trade between town and countryside based on the specialization of rural crafts and urban manufactured products and involving only a minor proportion of agricultural products; a state system of the ‘peasant’ type, etc. These conditions would seem to have been fulfilled only in very special cases, since the state system is not generally based on the peasants but on a ruling class which exacts a tribute rather than taxes from the peasant communities. We should therefore analyze the social formation in question in terms of tributary society.

Mercantilist Europe, from the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century, was eminently suited to the development of a peasant economy of this type. Why? Because the feudal mode constituted an extreme, peripheral form within the family of tributary modes, an incomplete form characterized by the dispersion of the feudal surplus (feudal rent), its noncentralization and nonredistribution at the level of the state ruling class as in the mature tributary mode. Under these circumstances, the appearance and development of the centralized monarchies of Europe were based on the curtailment of feudal power, on its subordination. In this endeavor, the monarchies relied mostly on the traders and the towns but also on the peasants. It was therefore largely through the disintegration of feudal relations that the peasant economy in question developed.

This peasant economy, largely characteristic of seventeenth-century France, survived during the three centuries of transition from feudalism to capitalism, alongside the mercantilist commercial and manufacturing economy. Physiocracy, as we have seen, is broadly the political economy of this period.

This is not, however, the only form of transition to capitalism. In Eastern Europe, the peasant economy was linked with the large-estate economy in which

production was mostly sold, in particular to the more urbanized Western Europe. It is certainly not nonsensical to speak of peasant economies belonging to the family of simple petty-commodity modes! We find similar examples in the history of other peoples and other parts of the world. New England was basically such < a peasant economy, as, under other circumstances, was agriculture in the Arab world and some regions of precolonial Sahelian Africa.

One of Chayanov's most important discoveries concerning this mode of production relates to the price of land. The commercialization of its produce leads to land itself becoming a commodity subject to commercial dealings, whereas this did not occur in the direct tributary modes or in the feudal mode, characterized by the inalienable right of the peasant to the soil. Chayanov noted that in those modes the price of land was not equivalent to the capitalization of rent (which did not exist) but to the work required to satisfy the needs of the family.

His second observation was that the peasant mode of production, once integrated into a capitalist formation, is stripped of its content and dominated by the capitalist mode of production. Chayanov noted, in relation to Russia at the end of the last century, the peasant economy's strong capacity to fight capitalist competition. He positively stated that the small peasants could accept total earnings so low that they left capitalist agriculture unable to compete.

This observation is very important because it means that this peasant mode cannot be studied outside the context of the overall formation within which it falls. To speak of capitalist competition amounts to assuming that the small peasant must bring his prices into line with those of the most efficient agrarian capitalist competitors, whether nationals or foreigners in the form of the import of competitive products (American wheat in competition with English wheat is a classic example). What then did a reduction in peasants' earnings mean? That: (1) ground rent (rent imputed to ownership) was abolished; and (2) the rewards to labor—which amounted to the product prices—came into line with the value of proletarian labor power.

Thus dominant capital wiped out rent, i.e., abolished landownership. It proletarianized the peasant worker. The latter certainly remained the formal owner of the land but was no longer its effective owner. On the surface, the peasant remained a commodity producer who offered products on the market, but in actual fact, was a seller of labor power, this sale being masked under the cover of commodity production. Thus the peasant was actually reduced to the status of a person working at home under the domestic system.

Chayanov elucidated these points without always establishing all the links between the various elements of his theory. Comparing the results of regionally organized agricultural production without private landownership (organization based on the state's possibility of detailing agricultural producers to work on individual plots of land) with the results of a system with recognized landownership (Von Thiinen's assumption), Chayanov deduced that the first case gave rise to a greater intensification and a faster growth of production, hence capable of satisfying greater urban demand. In this way, he demonstrated that landownership and rent were obstacles to the development of capitalism.

He laid bare the mechanisms which stripped the peasants of their effective ownership of the land, leaving them only with nominal ownership. From an internal analysis of the various elements entering into production costs, he noted that the optimum farm was not necessarily the largest farm: under the conditions existing in Russia, the optimum was about 5,000 acres for extensive cereal cultivation and 1,235 acres for intensive cultivation of the same crop. Capital domination is therefore not explained by the unlimited concentration of land-ownership. It occurred, Chayanov pointed out, through vertical concentration, i.e., by placing food industries over a group of medium-range peasant farms. By controlling the sale of the produce, these industries could effectively manipulate the level of remuneration of the peasant. Postwar French agricultural economists have been greatly influenced by these views.<sup>13</sup>

Chayanov's analysis of the mechanisms by which the capitalist mode dominated the peasant economy introduces new elements which were disregarded in the narrow economic analysis of social democracy. Chayanov in fact noted that ground rent was high when the land was of poor quality and the rural population of high density. This is easily explained in the logic of his system where the peasant—who was not a capitalist entrepreneur—accepted in that case even lower rewards for his labor. Hassan Riad has analyzed the dialectics of “class differentiation” and “population differentiation” in Egypt along the same lines as Chayanov: evolution conditioned by the combined forces of population pressure together with increasing commercialization of agriculture in Egypt led to a continual increase in the rates of ground rent between 1880 and 1952.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.4 The Domination of Agriculture by the Capitalist Mode of Production

The third development phase of capitalism saw the actual beginning of the subordination of agriculture to capital. Furthermore, this subordination occurred throughout the world since this third phase coincided with that of imperialism, i.e., with the establishment of the world system in its present form.

The main consequence of the subordination of agriculture was the abolition of ground rent. England provides the first historical example of this liquidation which occurred even prior to the beginning of the third phase in question. We know that English capital abolished ground rent simply by liquidating agriculture in England: this was the reason for the repeal of the Corn Laws and for the recourse to American wheat which did not have to bear the cost of ground rent. This operation put an end to the class alliance between the industrial bourgeoisie and the big

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<sup>13</sup> See, among others, M. Gervais, E. Servote, and J. Weil: *Une France sans paysans*, and H. Mendras: *La fin des paysans*.

<sup>14</sup> See Hassan Riad: *L’Égypte nasserienne* (Paris: Minuit, 1965), pp. 26–31, 138–149.



capitalist landowners which had shaped the essential aspects of economic and political life in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the case of England, large estate ownership was linked with industrial capital. This largely made up for the former's loss of its economic importance, as did the maintenance of the political and social privileges of that class, represented by the House of Lords.

In continental Europe, the subordination of agriculture to capital did not occur in the same way. The new industrial bourgeoisie, weaker and sometimes threatened by the rising working class—early in France and much later in Germany—was compelled to form more permanent class alliances with the peasantry who benefited from the bourgeois revolution in France; with the middle strata of the former artisan and trading groups of the mercantilist period in southern Germany and Italy; with the big capitalist landlords in eastern Germany, Central and Eastern Europe, and in southern Italy and Spain. The process of subordination of agriculture there is thus of recent origin, very often occurring after the Second World War. The distortion of relative prices at the expense of agriculture which accompanied the intensified industrialization of agriculture is a typical example of the way in which peasant landownership, while maintained in theory, was rendered ineffective since it no longer produced rent and reduced the peasant's earnings to that of his labor power.

Conventional economic analysis does not understand this mechanism. It attributes this modification of price structure either to the structure of demand (the low elasticity of demand for food products) or to the market structure (opposing the low and dispersed agricultural supply to the concentrated demand of wholesale and food industry oligopolies). These observations are not wrong but they remain superficial and at the level of observed phenomena.

The first condition of this subordination of agriculture is the intervention of dominant capital in the actual process of production in agriculture. This is not the capital deployed in agriculture in the form of equipment utilized in agricultural production. It belongs to those food industries and trading concerns linked with the agricultural producers. Through the standardization of products, the expansion of industrial food processing, and the concentration of networks for collection and marketing, the agricultural producer's production plan is subjected to control by this capital. He is no longer really a free commercial producer producing, in the first place, what he likes and in his own way and later selling a part of it. He is reduced to the status of a proletarian working at home. This interference in the production process clearly indicates that capital is not the sum total of all individual capital. It is more than that; it is global prior to being fragmented. Again, we could never understand the meaning of capitalism if we confined ourselves to a survey of capitalist farms examined separately. The path of concentrating landed property and directly proletarianizing the peasantry is not the principal one followed by capitalism in developing its relations with agriculture but rather is the exception, more costly since it maintains—and often reinforces—the drain which rent represents. This path becomes the principal one only when a particular class alliance demands it. Capital prefers subordinating the peasantry according to the pattern described by Chayanov, for capital then obtains not only a better overall

rate of profit but also better political control over society. Remaining, in name only, the owners of their means of production, the peasants build an ideological picture of themselves which separates them from the proletariat. They believe that their interests diverge from those of the proletariat, and on the face of it they are right since higher prices for their products improve their situation at the expense of the working-class consumers. A contradiction thus develops among the people, of which capital takes advantage.

The second condition underlying the subordination of agriculture is of a political nature. Capital can only give up its class alliance with the landed aristocracy if it can replace it either by a social-democratic integration of the working class or by other class alliances. The first case no doubt applied to northern Europe and the United States. The path for this development was smoothed by the old social-democratic tradition of England (sustained by the immense and long-standing! size of its colonial empire), that of Scandinavia (encouraged by the limited extent of feudalism in that part of Europe, particularly in Sweden), and that of Germany (encouraged by the destruction of communism by Nazism and the force with which Nazism was rejected in the form communism took in East Germany). In North America, the integration of the working class took place even before that class had defined itself politically and ideologically. This did not occur in southern Europe (France, Italy, Spain, Greece) where the working class has never really had a share in political power, since this was threatened capital—as shown by the repeated short-lived experiments of popular front movements. Thus the development of capitalism occurred under authoritarian right-wing regimes (from the Second Empire to the rule of de Gaulle, Franco, Italian facism, etc.) which relied on the peasants, the petty traders, the notables and big landlords, the urban speculators, etc., depending on the case. During the last period of rapid development in this region of Europe (1948–1967), the illusion was fostered that capital could free itself from these alliances by replacing them with alliances with the upper crusts of the new ‘proletariat’ made up of cadres and technicians, through a policy of deliberately accentuating the inequality in income distribution. May 1968 in France, like the creeping ‘May’ movement in Italy, demonstrated the ideological failure of this attempt, the narrow base of the social-democratic working class, and forced capital to seek other alliances with parasitic sectors of the new “petty capitalism” of the tertiary sector, the urban speculator group, and so on.

But the subordination of agriculture is now increasingly taking place on a world scale. It is only in the last few years that the integration into the world capitalist system of countries which have become underdeveloped has begun to be the subject of a scientific, coherent, and systematic analysis. The outlines of the theory of the center and the periphery in the world system have now been developed. Starting with a systematic criticism of the conventional approach to ‘underdevelopment’ (one of the fields in which social science studies have most clearly failed) and with a critique of the linear vision of development characteristic of the mechanistic philosophy underlying the dominant economic ideology, this theory has now formulated in positive terms the nature and mechanisms of world

accumulation and unequal development. The criticism of Rostow and of 'dualism,' the debates on dependence, extraversion, and unequal exchange, and those relating to the periodization of the development of capitalism as a world system, are the steps in this formulation.<sup>15</sup>

Possibly because of its recent origin, this formulation, in spite of its wealth of ideas, does not come readily enough to mind when one is dealing with particular aspects of underdevelopment. One decisive result emerges from the theory of the world system: precisely that the unity of the system (not to be confused with homogeneity) is predominant, i.e., ultimately determines the nature of the components of that system. In other words, we would be making a fundamental mistake if each time we studied a particular phenomenon of the Third World, we looked for its 'cause' in the Third World itself instead of placing it within the dialectic of the world system. For example, there is the debate relating to 'marginality' which opposes the views of those who regard it as a phenomenon peculiar to the periphery and those who consider it as the effect, within the periphery, of the law of accumulation. There is also the debate on the relations between the state and social classes, opposing the views of those who define these relations in their immediate local context and those who place them in a world context. There is the critique of the theory of spatial planning and regional development, inappropriately transferred from the center to the periphery. These are all good examples of such blunders. The analysis of the relations between capitalist development and agriculture in the periphery may suffer the same fate.

Since capitalism at the periphery is the result of external aggression, and not of internal evolution, the first phase referred to above does not occur in it. We know that in the underdeveloped countries, there is no agricultural revolution prior to industrial revolution, as in Europe; on the contrary, the order is reversed: what we call the "green revolution" is a contemporary phenomenon. Daniel Thorner rightly notes that there was a nucleus of rich peasants in India as early as the nineteenth century but that the kulak class has become significant in Indian society only in the last ten years. Broadly speaking, the agrariaa re forms which gave rise to this type of rural capitalism became widespread only after the Second World War.

Capitalism was first introduced into the periphery through comprador trade in the hands of foreigners (the colonial companies and the Asian minorities in Tropical Africa) or of nationals (in Latin America, the East, and Asia). Later this occurred through the export of capital in mining and plantation agriculture owned either by settlers (French Maghreb, Kenya, Rhodesia, and South Africa) or by foreign companies established under colonial or semicolonial concessions (United Fruit in Central America, Unilever in the Belgian Congo, Firestone in Liberia, various types of European tea and rubber plantations in Ceylon, Indonesia, Indochina). In Latin America, the indigenous agriculture generally turned into a

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<sup>15</sup> W. W. Rostow: *The Stages of Economic Growth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960). For a bibliography concerning these debates, see Amin: *Unequal Development*, pp. 400–407.

capitalist latifundia agriculture for export (such as coffee plantations in Brazil, sugar plantations in Cuba, cattle ranches in Argentina). The phenomenon rarely occurred in the East and in Asia, and the agricultural products marketed, either through export or on the domestic market, derived generally from sectors still governed by production relations of a precapitalist type. Egypt, where the dominant form of latifundium was capitalist, is an exception. In sub-Saharan Africa, agricultural production for the market was practically unaffected by this type of direct agrarian capitalism.

Later, in the recent past, capitalism flourished anew on the wave of the industrialization linked with import substitution. Consequently, the demand for food products rose. But more often agriculture, hampered by precapitalist production relations, has been unable to meet this demand. Hence the paradox that the Third World, with the bulk of its population engaged in agriculture, becomes an importer of food products supplied by the center.

At this stage, not yet really superseded in the Third World and still less in sub-Saharan Africa, the capitalist mode of production is established in other sectors than agriculture and dominates the entire society. In this setting, the main functions of the subordinate, so-called traditional rural society are the following: (1) to supply cheap labor to the mining industry and to the plantations; (2) to supply food cheaply, thus enabling the value of labor power to be reduced in the directly controlled capitalist sectors; (3) to enhance the real value of luxury consumption of the privileged groups (comprador and bureaucratic bourgeoisie), particularly through the supply of cheap services (domestic, etc.).

These objectives are met through a series of economic and political measures applied according to circumstances. Very often, they are achieved through a class alliance between dominant foreign capital and the ruling classes of the precapitalist society. At this point, we must mention the entrenched position of the big landowners, common in Latin America, in the Arab Middle East, and in Asia. This leads to a worsening of the precapitalist forms of exploitation, particularly ground rent, which on the one hand provides a market for new capital (a market for luxury consumption) and on the other, pauperizes the peasants and drives from the land a proportion of them who then supply the required cheap labor. These methods must be studied in conjunction with unequal development—particularly in its regional effects—and the set of phenomena termed ‘marginalization.’

The variety of economic and political measures employed in sub-Saharan Africa must be examined in relation to the structures of dependency they developed. We can distinguish between three types of policies for the transition to underdevelopment, which correspond roughly to three regions of the continent south of the Sahara<sup>16</sup>: (1) the colonial trading system of West Africa; (2) the system of concession-owning companies of the Congo basin; (3) the system of reserves in eastern and southern Africa. In that context, I have elsewhere analyzed

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<sup>16</sup> Samir Amin: “Sous-développement et dépendance en Afrique noire,” *Tiers Monde*, no. 52 (1972).

the phenomena of unequal regional development (the genesis of countries and regions termed “least developed”)<sup>17</sup> and those of migration in West Africa<sup>18</sup> which arise from it and express the domination of capitalism over rural societies. These societies, while retaining their precapitalist appearance, are no longer really such, having been greatly distorted and transformed.

In the next stage, the pressures of urban capitalism led to great changes in the rural world. In Latin America, in the Arab countries of the Middle East, and in Asia, the era of agrarian reform began. More or less radical, these changes became generalized after the Second World War, with independence in India, with the wave of petty-bourgeois nationalism in the Arab world in the fifties, with the populist movement and especially that of *desar-rollismo* in Latin America, also in the fifties. These reforms, in bringing to an end the former class alliances between foreign capital and the big landowners, replaced them with the new triple alliance between foreign capital, the local urban bourgeoisie (private and/or state), and the kulaks. They formed the social basis of the green revolution which followed.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the pattern of evolution in agriculture is different: there is no social disruption similar to that caused by agrarian reform elsewhere, but only an extension and a more intensive application of the colonial trading system. The reason for this peculiarity lies in the nature of the class alliances under colonialism in Africa and the patterns of their neocolonial renewal. The colonial administration must not be seen simply as an apparatus for the political domination of conquered regions. It fulfilled crucial economic roles, leading P.-P. Rey to speak of a “colonial mode of production.”<sup>19</sup> European imperialism certainly met with a variety of societies ranging from the type which had almost no class structure to advanced tributary societies (termed feudal). But it was always confronted with comparatively weak societies in terms of human population and the degree of their state organization. This was largely due to the debility which sub-Saharan Africa suffered as a result of the slave trade, including ethnic fragmentation, breakup of large states, and reduction of the population. Under these circumstances, the colonial power could assume direct control of the social life of the peoples conquered, giving less importance to its alliance with the ruling classes of these societies than it did in the colonial Asian or Arab world or in independent Latin America and Asia. Not that such alliances did not exist in sub-Saharan Africa: during the first period, i.e., during the conquest and occupation which followed, they played an important part in the strategies used to establish foreign domination. But they lost importance as the occupation became secure, and were subordinated to direct administrative rule.

The colonial administration thus fulfilled the economic and social functions instead of the local propertied classes. Through administrative measures, it

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<sup>17</sup> Samir Amin: “C.N.U.C.E.D. III. Un bilan,” *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, no. 3 (Oslo, 1972).

<sup>18</sup> Samir Amin: *Migrations in West Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>19</sup> P.-P. Rey: *Colonialisme, neo-colonialisme et transition du capitalisme* (Paris: Maspero, 1971).

channeled the population into small reservations, as was the case in Kenya and southern Africa. Elsewhere, it took over from the concession-owning companies which were real private administrations. Through the imposition of money taxes, it also introduced forced labor and compulsory crops, and the establishment of the economic dc traitc. When it developed class alliances with the local ruling classes, these alliances served to reinforce its direct intervention.

These direct economic functions of the colonial administration in turn molded the nature of the economic dc traitc, a concept which is oversimplified and badly understood even when it is recognized. Anglo-Saxon economic terminology does not even have such an expression, using the meaningless translation, "trade economy." In the French-speaking world, the expression as it was introduced after the war by Marxist geographers, in particular Jean Dresch, lost its true meaning as it became more widely used. It was reduced to description of an economy characterized by peasant producers' specialization in export crops (peanuts, cotton, coffee, cocoa), exchanged against mass consumption manufactured goods (textiles, hardware), with colonial trading firms controlling trade in both directions. This description is correct but insufficient. To stop here I would imply that the extension of the economic dc traitc is achieved through the 'normal' economic laws of comparative advantage and that the persistent poverty of the producers is attributable to the obvious monopoly of the colonial firms in question.

But the producteur de traite, the producer under that system, is not a petty-commodity producer, in spite of appearances. The administration and capital intervene in the productive process and actually control it. There is a host of administrative measures employed to force the peasant to produce what is wanted and in the manner desired: from pure and simple compulsion to the slightly more subtle approach of taxation in money form. Meanwhile, the authorities are only prepared to buy one particular product from him. There is also the form of compulsion arising from promotion or modernization of the "rural training" services (agricultural extension accompanied by the almost forced purchase of equipment—ploughs, seeders, hoeing equipment, insecticides, fertilizers), "provident societies," and 'cooperatives.' The constant interference of the administration in the productive process ensures and supplements that of capital: both the visible part of that capital—colonial trade, minor agents, transport—and the invisible part, the capital of the processing industries located in Europe or on the coast of Africa. Again, capital is social prior to being fragmented.

Thus dominated, the producteur de traite is stripped of the real control of his means of production. In theory, he remains the traditional owner of the land, and the owner—in the bourgeois, individual sense—of the equipment. However, he is not in control of his production nor can he decide what to produce on the basis of comparative prices. He is therefore not really a commodity producer. His remuneration does not include either compensation for his ownership of the land, i.e., ground rent, or a return on his capital; he is reduced, owing to the domination of capital, to the value of his labor power or frequently to even less. Productivity gains induced by the vaunted improvement brought about by agricultural extension services are immediately taken back through price deterioration. The consequences

of this situation are known: the wastage of land through mining exploitation, the peasants' resistance to proposed 'modernization,' and so on. A peasant reduced to this status is a semiproletarian: a proletarian, because he is subjected to capital exploitation which extracts surplus value from him; a semiproletarian, because he retains the appearance of a free commodity producer. Objectively proletarianized, the peasant remains a small producer in terms of his class consciousness.

Independence has brought no change whatsoever to this system. The new African government fulfills the same functions as the former foreign administration. Hence we have the importance attached to education, its forms, the recourse to the foreign language and, arising from these, the characteristic alienations that occur in the course of the reproduction of this class. This class, like the administration it replaces, is not only a bureaucracy, it also intervenes in the process of production by the peasants.

This type of capital domination over agriculture is not particularly advanced, although it is highly profitable: in spite of the low levels of productivity it gives rise to, the remuneration of labor is so low that prices remain competitive. This explains the lateness of the green revolution in Tropical Africa. This profitability is obtained at the cost of soil exhaustion, deforestation, desert encroachment, and lateralization eventually revealed by drought. It is also obtained at the cost of a remuneration to labor below the value of labor power, which can be wasted, as seen in the exceptional level of mortality, malnutrition, and famine resulting from the fall in food production or rural depopulation.

Broadly speaking, there are two categories of *economies de traite*: the plantation economies and the other 'poorer' types. When the plantation zones are pinpointed on the map, obvious correlations appear between the expansion of these plantations and several other factors, among them: (1) a certain hierarchic division in precapitalist society, which permitted a favorable local class alliance ready to accept this strategic objective; (2) an average population density of thirty inhabitants per square kilometer; (3) the possibility of bringing in migrants foreign to the ethnic group of the plantation zone to initiate the process of proletarianization. We also distinguish between two subcategories of plantation economies in relation to these factors: kulak capitalist plantations, as in Ghana and the Ivory Coast; and the family microplantations, as in the Cameroon. As for the second category of *economies de traite*, i.e., the 'poor' savanna type, it also takes different forms. In predominantly Muslim areas, it frequently takes the form of religious brotherhoods and sultanates (Mouride in Senegal, Ashiqqa and Khatmia in the Sudan, and the emirates in Nigeria), and presupposes a class alliance with the leaders of the religious brotherhoods. Another form, common in the regions where such an alliance is not possible, is characterized by the presence of so-called intervention companies.

Has the *économie de traite* entered a period of grave crisis which heralds its decadence and imminent collapse?<sup>20</sup> By what type of economy could it be

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<sup>20</sup> Rolf G. Gustavsson has drawn my attention to these changes in progress.

replaced? Peasant cash-crop agriculture in the dry zones of the Sahel and the African savanna regions has been competitive only because the peasants have received extremely low rewards for their labor. Following the general law of unequal international specialization and of the consequent unequal exchange, the gap between the earnings of African peasants producing peanuts and that of capitalist soybean producers (these being mutually substitutable oil-yielding crops) was even greater than the gap between their productivities. A pauper economy of this type was only possible through a gradual exhaustion of the soil by mining without any concern to restore its productive capacity. It was also accompanied by an overexploitation of the peasantry which was reduced to a level of subsistence verging on starvation. The continually worsening conditions of the *économie de traite* were bound to lead to its eventual disappearance. The poor rainfall cycle of the last few years has suddenly revealed the destructive nature of this system.

As to replacing this primitive form of colonial exploitation with a new agrarian economy, it would seem that irrigated farming will become more intensive and more modernized. This 'improvement' of farming will certainly cause landownership to become a more important element of social differentiation than has been the case until now in extensive dry farming. This intensification is the precondition for bringing to tropical Africa the green revolution which, as we know, has accelerated class differentiation. Similarly in stockfarming, the trend is likely to be a gradual changeover from seminomad extensive herding to raising animals on ranches. An anonymous article in the English journal *The Economist*,<sup>21</sup> cynically informs us that the African Sahel is eminently suited to the production of meat for the developed world and that this vocation implies the disappearance of the seminomad herders who make up the present population. The new ranches which are increasing in number throughout the world under the impact of agribusinesses and foreign 'aid' and which have priority in the use of water resources, in fact only require a very small amount of labor. When deprived of water, these superfluous herdsmen will disappear. Thus African agriculture and stockfarming, boosted by the green revolution, will contribute to feeding the Europeans while the local populations will be asked to emigrate or 'disappear'.

In its various forms, capital's domination over African agriculture is already a characteristic feature of rural life throughout the African continent.

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<sup>21</sup> "The Golden Calves Could Help Us All," *The Economist*, October 6, 1974.



# Chapter 3

## Modernity and Interpretations of Religions

### 3.1 The Flexibility of Religious Interpretations

Modernity is based on the demand for the emancipation of human beings, starting from their liberation from the shackles of social determination in its earlier traditional forms.<sup>1</sup> This liberation called for the abandoning of the dominant forms of legitimating power—in the family, in the communities within which ways of life and production are organized, in the State—based up to then on a metaphysics, generally of religious expression. It therefore implies the separation of the State and religion, a radical secularization, which is the condition for the deployment of modern forms of politics.

Will secularization abolish religious belief? Some Enlightenment philosophers who placed religion in the realm of absurd superstitions thought and hoped so. This perception of the religious phenomenon found a favourable ground for expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries among the working classes acceding to political consciousness. If only because the working class left (and the organic intellectuals who expressed its ideologies) in practice came up against the conservative options of all organized Christian religious hierarchies, Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox. Anti-clericalism became frankly synonymous with anti-religion and, because of this, gained ground all over Europe, naturally in different degrees depending on the circumstances of the evolution of the ideological, political and social struggles. French society in particular counted among the most receptive to the new anti-clericalism—atheism—, for reasons which stem from the legacy of its Revolution's radical character. Soviet ideology took over this fundamental atheism and integrated it into its conception of dialectical materialism.

Nevertheless another reading can be made of Marx. The often cited phrase (“religion is the opium of the people”) is truncated, what follows lets it be understood that the human being needs opium, because he is a metaphysical animal, who cannot avoid asking himself questions about the meaning of life. He

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<sup>1</sup> This text was first published in: *Eurocentrism* (New York: MR Press, 2009, second ed.), chapter 1.

gives what answers he can, either he adopts those religion offers him, or he invents them himself, or else he avoids worrying about them.

In any case religions are there, are part of the picture of reality, even constitute an important dimension of it. It is therefore important to analyse their social function, that is to say in our modern world their articulation with what constitutes the modernity in place—capitalism, democracy, secularity. In what follows I will try to do this for the domain of the three so called religions of the Book. It will be seen that the religions in question have been subject to successive interpretations which have enabled them to survive, to adapt to gigantic social transformations and to accompany them.

The success of Christianity in this domain, which accompanied the modernity which arose in Europe (need it be recalled?), gave rise to a flourishing of ‘theories’ which do not convince me. The most common—which has become a sort of common ground generally admitted, without arousing the slightest critical questioning—is that Christianity bore within itself this exceptional evolution. The “genius of Christianity” is thus reconstructed as one of the myths—alongside others (the Greek ancestor among others, ‘Indo-European’ racism etc.)—from which the “European miracle” is explained (the fact that modernity was invented there and not elsewhere). The most extremist ideologies of this Eurocentrism adopt an idealist theory of history according to which capitalism is the product of this evolution of religious interpretation. I propose a systematic criticism of this theory in *Eurocentrism* (published in this work).

And the most extremist of the extremists reserve this genius creator of capitalist modernity for the Protestant Reformation. The famous thesis of Max Weber can be recognized here. It is, even less convincing in my opinion than what I call the ‘Christianophilia’ of Eurocentrism.

The arguments which Weber advances in this respect are confused, despite their apparent precision. They are moreover perfectly returnable; analogous to those previously advanced to explain the backwardness of China by Confucianism, then 50 years later to explain the take-off of that country by the same Confucianism! Superficial historians had explained the success of the Arab civilisation of the Middle Ages by Islam, while contemporary journalists, even more superficial, explain the stagnation of the Arab world by the same Islam. ‘Culturalism’ has no possible univocal response to any of these great historical challenges. In fact it has too many, because it can prove any formulation and its opposite.

As a counterpoint to these ideas—forced, false, but on which the dominant world ideology feeds—I propose the following theses:

- (i) Modernisation, secularism and democracy are not the products of an evolution (or revolution) of religious interpretations, but on the contrary, these interpretations have adjusted, with more or less felicity, to their demands. This adjustment was not the privilege of Protestantism. It operated in the Catholic world, in another manner certainly, but no less effectively. In any case it created a new religious spirit freed from dogmas.

- (ii) In this sense the Reformation was not the « condition » for the flowering of capitalism, even if this thesis (of Weber) is widely accepted in the societies it flatters (Protestant Europe). The Reformation was not even the most radical form of the ideological rupture with the European past and its ‘feudal’ ideologies—among others its earlier interpretation of Christianity. It was on the contrary its primitive and confused form.
- (iii) There was a “Reformation of the dominant classes”, which resulted in the creation of national Churches (Anglican, Lutheran) controlled by these classes and implementing the compromise between the emerging bourgeoisie, the monarchy and the great rural land owners, brushing aside the threat of the working classes and the peasantry who were systematically repressed. This reactionary compromise—which Luther expressed and Marx and Engels analysed as such—enabled the bourgeoisie of the countries in question to avoid what happened in France: a radical revolution. So the secularism produced in this model has remained tentative up until now. The retreat of the Catholic idea of universality which the establishment of national Churches manifests fulfilled a sole function: to further establish the monarchy and strengthen its role as an arbiter between the forces of the Ancien Régime and those represented by the rising bourgeoisie, strengthening their nationalism and delaying the advance of the new forms of internationalism that socialist internationalism would later propose.
- (iv) But there were also reform movements that took hold of the lower classes, the victims of the social transformations caused by the emergence of capitalism. These movements which reproduced old forms of struggle—those of the millenarianism of the Middle Ages—were not ahead of their time, but behind it in relation to its demands. So the French revolution—with its popular secular and radical democratic mobilisation—had to be awaited, then socialism before the dominated classes could learn to express themselves effectively in the new conditions. The protestant sects in question lived on fundamentalist type illusions. They created a favourable ground for the endless reproduction of ‘sects’ with apocalyptic visions that can be seen flourishing in the United States.
- (v) There were not only ‘positive’ adjustments, with the renovated religious interpretation opening the prospects for social transformation. There were also involutions, the religious interpretation becoming in its turn an obstacle to social progress. I will give as examples some forms of North American Protestantism.
- (vi) Positive and/or negative adjustments are not the monopoly of Christianity. Islam has experienced positive adjustments in the past and at present is experiencing an involution analogous in many respects to that of the American protestant sects in question. Judaism also. And I would add (as the reader will find explained in *Eurocentrism*) that this concerns the great Asian ideologies and religions as well.

- (vii) That these adjustments can be positive or negative pleads in favour of an interpretation of historical materialism based on “under determination”. I mean by this that each of the various levels of reality (economic, political, ideological) conceals its own internal logic and because of this the complementary nature of their evolution, which is necessary to ensure the overall coherence of a system, does not define in advance a given direction of a guaranteed evolution.

### **3.2 Judaism, Christianity, Islam, One or Three Religious Metaphysics?**

The three above mentioned religions claim that they are monotheistic and are proud of it. They even claim that they are the only one of this kind and for that reason scorn all other religions which were not supposedly able to conceive God as a unique abstract and universal divinity, and were consequently ‘primitive’ and ‘inferior’.

Furthermore the three religions claim the exclusivity of having been ‘revealed’ by God. Yet this is also of course the case for any other religion. The revelation of God and the sacred quality of the religion are thence synonymous. But the distinction between the religions based on the Book and the others should then be regarded as pure ideological contempt.

The kinship between the three religions based on the Book is an historical fact. The three religions have a book of faith in common the Bible of the Jews (what the Christians call the ancient Testament), although this Bible appears with very distinctive features in the Jewish and the Muslim religion, each religion claiming of course that only its version is the right one, that is to say the one which has been really revealed. Catholics and Protestants however accept the Jewish versions of the Bible, the former the corpus of the Jews of the Diaspora, the latter the one of the Jews of Jerusalem. This kinship could very well be explained by the very matter of fact of the proximity of the birth place of the three religions. Jesus Christ has lived in Palestine near the Jewish community of the country and may be among them. Islam was born in a nearby country which was pervaded by the faith of the Jews and the Christians, defied by them and especially by the Christianity of the civilised countries which almost encircled them, from Byzantium to Ethiopia.

In itself this kinship does neither preclude nor imply a priori the basic unity of the metaphysics of these religions. In order to take this problem and find an answer it will be necessary to gauge the meaning, whether it is fundamental or just casual, of the common stem of these religions. How far has it influenced the metaphysical choices and the social common experience of the groups of peoples who have chosen one of these three religions?

All peoples on this Earth explain their creation and their place in the universal order there of by a mythology. All of them assume the role of the elected people whose mythology is the one and only true explanation of the creation. Their gods are therefore the only real ones; all other people are mistaken or have been misled. At the very beginning all gods are seen as different and as being the specific representation of one people. Nevertheless, even at an early stage in history there has been several lucid minds who have put in perspective those mythological accounts of creation and the specificity of those gods. One of the first healthy reaction was to accept the plurality of the various revelations of truth through religion (each people believes in his own truth, but it is the same albeit expressed in different languages) and thence to accept the equivalence between the different gods. This reaction encouraged a syncretic approach which is to be found for instance in the Roman empire, which melted together peoples from various origins as we can see it operating in contemporary Africa. On the other hand it is more and more a proven fact that mythologies have substantially borrowed from each other. The advances in archaeology, in history and excavations have led to the discovery of so called root-mythologies like the one which relates the Floods in the Middle East or the myth of Gilgamesh.

Therefore the Jews are not the only people who proclaim themselves to be chosen. All of them have done so. Do the Jews go on believing in their being chosen? I doubt it strongly. In the social reality of our time, the vast majority of the Jews, even those who are true believers, know that they are but ordinary human beings, even though, because of the Diaspora, Jews have been inclined, in order to survive, to bring out their particularities, that is to say their religious persuasion. But they are by no means the only people who have done that.

Our modern society has somewhat achieved much progress since 2000 years, even though the very idea of progress is no more fashionable to day, in some circles. Many fellow human beings, even though they maintain a strong commitment to their faith, have to some extent relativised their religious convictions. They are probably more tolerant not only in their behaviour but, and that is distinctly more important, in their intimate respect of the beliefs of others.

Because of progress, the mythologies dealing with creation have been undermined. They are no longer articles of faith like they were earlier. Many fellow citizens of the earth, who once more have not given up their faith, have come to terms with the idea that those mythologies are no more than that, mythologies that are to be considered as stories with an educational purpose, even though, or precisely because, they are deemed to have been inspired by God Himself. Therefore the Bible of the three main religions or the mythology of the Bororo or Dogons is set on the same footing: their role is to be a sacred text in which the belief of one or more peoples is rooted.

On the other hand monotheism is by itself a strictly theological idea. To say that there is only one God does not amount to much. It is not obvious nor is it obviously untrue. Monotheism is probably more widely accepted than the followers of the deep formal cleavage between monotheistic religions and those religions they would have us believe, are polytheistic, would believe. Many of those who are in

most cases only the multifarious expressions of one and the same supernatural power was to be regarded as one and the same.

Furthermore it may be asked whether those who proclaim themselves monotheists are in fact such. All religions, the major ones included, refer to supernatural forces other than God. Himself, angels, demons, djins and so on. They proclaim that some human beings are inspired by the Deity, saints or prophets who have propagated the word of God. The three religions of the Book counterbalance God by Satan, even though they confer more power to the former. Before and after the religions of the Book, the same dualistic conception of the supernatural prevailed, such as in Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and others. And in Christianity the unity of God, who encompassed three Beings (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) is not explainable, feeding the debate between monophysitic Christians and others and contributing to mitigation of the dogma of monotheism. How is it possible, then, to distinguish the Word of God from those of His Son or His Prophets? From a metaphysical point of view, they are one and the same thing.

No doubt these three religions of the Book have enhanced more than other religions this monotheistic feature of their own, just as they rationalised to a certain extent some of their constitutive ethical and organisational parts. One is then tempted to draw a parallel between this religious evolution and the evolution of the societies of the ancient Middle East, which led them to give up the tribal organisation and create a state superstructure. But if this mutual adaptation of the religious basis to the political organisation is credible; it is not, historically speaking, the only one possible. Other societies which were not a lesser stage of development, have followed other ways: in China prevailed a non religious metaphysic, Confucianism, and in India another belief, allowing the people to invent a variety of religious forms.

Thought it may appear shocking to some, I would like to add that these three religions as the others have matured at times when the temptation of syncretism was great. Some learned researchers have discovered that those religions, have borrowed from others: Christianity has taken up parts of the ancient Egyptian creeds, Judaism has retained some parts of the beliefs of the ancient orient (Baal among others), and Islam has done the same with beliefs stemming from the Arabic peninsula. If you go deeper into the fabrics of those religions in matters regarding the rites, the alimentary taboos and other such articles of faith, the borrowing is even more blatant. But no man of faith will find those facts shocking: for him, they would only prove that God has inspired human beings during the whole course of their history even before his own religious persuasion was revealed.

Among the three religions of the Book, the proximity between Judaism and Islam is the most obvious. The learned have with very good arguments put forward that Islam is to a large extent an Arabisation of Judaism. Not only because its precepts, its law and its rites are to a large extent similar to those of Judaism but also, and that is more fundamental, because Islam shares with Judaism a common view of the relationship between society and religion. The Arabisation of Judaism started before the delivery of the message of the prophet of Islam. In history as

well as in the Koran you can find mention of those Hanifs who recognised Abraham without declaring themselves as being Jews. In this respect Islam has presented itself as the religion revealed to humanity from the very origin in as much as it was revealed to Adam himself. Islam would have, according to that, always existed even before it spoke through its Prophet Mohammed. But was either forgotten or misunderstood by some peoples (polytheism) or only partially understood by the others (Jews and Christians).

It is easier then to understand how important Muslims participate in a curious dispute. There are many writings, which are not regarded as heretic by the authorities, which are the self proclaimed defender of Islam, tending to prove that Abraham was not a Jew but an Arab. This demonstration presents itself as scientific based on archaeological findings in Mesopotamia, and linguistic etymology is invoked. For those who read the Bible like a mythology among others, this question has no meaning. You can't correct a mythology, you don't look for the real figure who hides behind its mythological representation.

It is easier to understand then why owing to that thesis of the Arabisation of Judaism. Islam does not refer to the Bible of the Jews as such. The Bible had to be revised and corrected.

Islam appeared in concordance with the political unification of the Arab peninsula, and a number of Arab historians have derived from that fact that monotheism, which replaced the plurality of tribal deities, was the vehicle of the formation of the Arab nation, since recognising the same God meant also submitting to the same political power. Of course the Arabs already knew Christian and Judaic monotheism. Had they opted for Christianity they would have run the risk of becoming dependent of Byzantium, which dominated the region and which was their major fear. Opting for a form of Judaism liberated them from that risk, Judaism not being associated with any State power. The Arabs were therefore much attracted by appropriating Judaism through a particular reading of its Scriptures, and therefore considering it not as the religion of a particular semitic people, the Hebrews, but as the religion revealed to their Arab (also Semitic) ancestors.

On the other hand the historical circumstances under which Christianity and Islam grew, were very different. Islam was constituted in the entire integrity of its dogmas inside an homogenous close circle, the one of the Arab tribes of Mecca and Medina. Therefore it had to reflect the main characteristics of those groups to the point it was uncertain at the beginning whether it would become an universalistic religion. In the first times of the Arab conquest beyond the peninsula, it was a common practice that the Arabs kept their religions for themselves and allowed other peoples to keep their own. If this practice had gone on, Islam would have remained an exclusively Arab religion. However two circumstances contributed to the opening of Islam to an universalistic vocation: first, large segments of the conquered nations converted to Islam; second the Arabs welcomed these conversions. Christianity in contrast developed in the cosmopolitan world of the Roman empire where a Hellenistic culture prevailed. Furthermore its development

was slow. It was therefore marked from the very beginning by this multicultural and multiethnic environment which contributed strongly to its universalism.

I will make a last remark. Is monotheism really a wonderful advance in the history of thought, a qualitative progress? There are plenty of devious minds (but when you say devious you could as well say perverted, inspired by the Devil) who draw a parallel between this unique God (who is represented in the popular picture lore, if not in the purified vision of the learned, as an old man with a white beard, which symbolises His wisdom and authority) and the patriarch of the patriarchal system, the autocrat of the power systems. In this imagery, which adequately reflects what is actually experienced; it is obvious that the wise old male is closer to God than a woman or a youth. This projection in the sky legitimises the patriarchal order and the autocracy which prevails on earth, as well as it eliminates the feminine deities, always important in non monotheist religions. Those devious minds will add that this only and all powerful God deprives them, poor bastards, of all power. For with numerous Gods, who were competing with each other and clashed, you may call for help the one who is best provided to help you and in the Greek way jeer at the one who aggravates you. Is it a coincidence that the Greek democracy is polytheistic? Is it a coincidence as well whether in the areas which will later be dominated by the major religions—Christianity and Islam in this case—this democracy disappears? But it may be objected that the power which adopts a non religious metaphysic in China and a religious pluralism in India was also nothing but autocratic.

### 3.3 Religion and Society: The Risk of Theocracy

Religions are not only metaphysics. They are major expressions of the social reality as well. Metaphysic and social functions mix and determine each other in a moving historical dialectic. The possible specificity of their expression at the metaphysical level are hence closely linked to the major features of the social systems in which they are enclosed and which they influence.

For those willing to answer the above mentioned question, that is whether the three major religions of the Book are basically one or multiple, it may be useful to analyse their respective conceptions of historical time.

Judaism believes in the end of times. When the Messiah comes who shall organise on the earth His Realm, that is to say a society at last just and happy, eternity will begin and time will end. The man of faith does not believe that human strivings can bring about this just world before the ascribed end of times. However the Messiah has not yet come. Therefore we are still awaiting the end of times.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Israel Shahak: *Jewish History, Jewish Religion: The Weight of Three Thousand Tears* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).



Islam on this major issue has adopted a completely different stance. The prophet has indeed organised on this earth, in Medina, a just society. To this extent and although he has been named himself the Prophet, even though he is the last one and though there won't be any Prophet after him, this Prophet may be considered as what the Jews call Messiah for he is the one who establishes the Realm of God on this earth. I am aware that this interpretations of Islam and of the time of the Prophet is not the only who prevails among Muslims. Many Muslims and not only a minority of them who would like to be regarded as learned, have never said, and don't say now that the structure of the Medina society should be reinstated. They underline that from this for ever bygone time you can only derive general lectures, moral values, examples and inspiration. Nothing more. There is one obvious reason to that: the Prophet is not here anymore and nobody has the authority to replace him. How then adapt those principles to the ever changing reality of time? A large space opens up for debate, for various opinions. This relativistic view of Islam has in fact prevailed in the history of Muslims. But it is only a view which can be rejected. Just as truthful might be the converse idea, owing to which the social organisation established at the time of the Prophet is the only valid one, ends history, and should for this reason also be invoked, reproduced or reinstated if society has drifted away from it. This may be fundamentalism since this view tends to come back to the origins. It exists and has always existed. It is today advocated by many. But it becomes center stage, prevails or seems to prevail only in particular circumstances which should be then closely scrutinised. The main issue is that this conception of religion places future in the past. The end of time began fifteen centuries ago and history stopped at this moment. What may have happened since then in real history is of little or no importance since this history does not provide Muslims who agree with this view of their religion no lesson worth heeding.

Christianity has adopted a third view of this question of the end of time, a view which separates it from Islam and Judaism and endows it with its specificity as well as a metaphysical interpretation of the world as a power which partakes in the modelling o social reality. But to bring out this difference, I must proceed to the analysis of the above mentioned social reality.

Judaism is not only an abstract from of monotheism, it was as well as structuring for of an historical society, the society of Jews in Palestine and this partially, the inspiring and structuring principle of the Jewish communities of the Diaspora.

The real history of the Jews in Palestine is not well known. Considerably less than the history of the other communities of the region, may be because those communities were stronger and more advanced and have left more written testimonials than the Jews. But what is precisely known is that Judaism has edited a very precise Law which goes into every detail. Not only some general principles, such as the Tables of Moses, which were, it seems, inspired by other religions, but furthermore a whole set of rules which give their framework to the individual, the family and social life of the Jews. Laws who settle everything in the field of personal rights, of matrimony, divorce, filiation and heritage. All those laws are fully part of religion, of the holy and hence difficult if not impossible to modify.

These laws and rules extend to the penal system and set some brutal, if not savage, retribution for some crimes (the hurling of stones at adulterous women for instance). Those rules themselves considered as holy. Furthermore the whole social life is regulated by a dense net of rites: circumcision, formal interdiction of working on the day of Sabbath and extensive alimentary prohibitions.

May be this all embracing formalism regarding law, rules and rituals, has been instrumental in preserving the Jews of the Diaspora from being ‘contaminated’, assimilated, by other cultures, or converted to other forms of religion. That it may be one of the reason of the hostility directed towards them (but explanation is by no means an excuse!).

What is certain however is that such a social involvement of religion does not allow a laic conception of society to develop. It produces only a theocratic concept of power, which the Jews did not implement only because they were living in the Diaspora. For, owing to this conception, political power is not allowed to produce laws; it may only interpret those laws which God has established once and for all. Nowadays one tends to call theocratic a form of power structure which operates through a religious caste who claims it has a monopoly on power because it is the only one which knows the laws that are admissible, whether this caste is called synod, church or anything else, or may be has no name at all. This narrowing of the word is inappropriate: theocracy means power of God and for practical purpose of those who claim they speak in His Name. Theocracy is in this respect opposing modernity if under this name one refers to the basic concept of modern democracy, owing to which human beings may establish freely their laws and are therefore responsible for their historic development.

The Jewish law is not, as it seems, very explicit regarding the organisation of the power structure, public law as we say now. Contrary to the more evolved states of the region—the Egypt of the Pharaohs, achemenidean and later sassanidean Iran, Mesopotamian countries, Greece and Rome which worked out very detailed models for the political and administrative structure of society (and it matters little in this respect whether those societies were democratic or not), Jews have kept to more primitive forms of political organisation which does not define exactly the limits of the power of Kings or Judges. But this very vagueness is one more argument in favour of theocracy. The power of God does not care about a precise outline of legislation.

Long forgotten among the Jews owing to the Diaspora, this natural propensity to theocracy was due to emerge once again in the framework of the contemporary Jewish state. Only those who don't want to see Judaism as a social organisation with a religious basis will be surprised.

In all those respects Islam offers a rigorous parallel with Judaism. Islam has regulated, in exactly the same manner, in details, and in its holy text, all the aspects of individual law. It did the same as regards the penal code, as harsh and formal as the penal code of the Jews (once more even in the provisions the similarity is perfect: thus adulteresses should be stoned...). It provides for the same rituals, circumcision, alimentary prohibitions, prayer at fixed times (not at any time) and in a unique repetitious form (which excludes any personalisation).

Therefore one has to deal with a body of rules and practices which hold society together tightly and leave little or no space to innovation or imagination. It matters little here that all this might have appeared or might still appear insufficient for the most demanding believers. In historic Islam, Sufism opens its doors for them and permits them the delightful enjoyment of non ritualised mystics.

Yet Jews and Muslims alike others are practical people. They need a business law to complete the personal laws. They borrowed it consequently from the environment. Muslims gave an Islamic tinge to the practices and laws they discovered in the civilised area they conquered; on this level Islamic law translates sometimes literally Byzantine law. They gave it Islamic clothing but it is only a clothing.

Muslims like Jews don't have a sophisticated public law. This is not regarded as a handicap, for the same reason as among the Jews. Yet it was necessary to fill up this gap and they did it by inventing the caliphate (which is posterior to Islam as professed by the Prophet) and by introducing the administrative Byzantine and sassanidean institutions. The conceptual vagueness surrounding the absolute power, which it is impossible to define as it lies only in the hand of God, will therefore never allow to go beyond pure and simple autocracy.

Autocracy and theology go along. For who can speak in the name of God, if not to make the law, (nobody is entitled to that) but to enforce the law? Interpret it or compensate for its lack? The Caliph or his representative, the Sultan, will do that without further ado. And the people will regard him as the shadow of God in this word, although the doctors of faith are cautious not to say so.

In this respect power in Islamic countries was always theocratic even though in practical terms this feature is toned down by the fact that it is not wielded by a special caste of religious men. The states where Muslims live can only be Islamic. In order to change this rule in the only Islamic countries which decided to become laic (Turkey and the former Soviet Central Asia) it was necessary to officially and forcibly break with Islam. Those countries may decide to the rule of Islam, but that is another story.

At this level, the contemporary political Islam is not an innovator. It only goes further, and it would like to transform these theocratic 'soft' states, contaminated by the surrounding modernity, into theocratic states in the strong sense of the word, that is to say, give the entire and absolute power to a religious cast, almost a Church, like in Iran or the Azhar in Egypt, which would have the monopoly of the right to speak in the name of 'the' law (of God), to purge the social practice of all, which, in their eyes, is not authentically Islamic, in the law and in the rites. Instead, that means that if that cast cannot impose itself as the sole holder of Islamic legitimacy, then anybody can pretend it—that is to say, in practice political leaders or whosoever. That is the permanent civil war, like in Afghanistan.

At its beginnings Christianity avoided theocracy, then it went that way until the Christian peoples moved away from it later.

At the time of his foundation Christianity does not seem to break up with the Jewish heritage as far as the end of times is concerned. The announcement of the Last Judgement and that of the Messiah has most certainly an eschatological

purport which has been underlined in the Apocalypse for instance. It is certainly the reason why in the history of Christianity there have been numerous messianic and millenarian movements.

Yet because of the very nature of his message, Christianity is actually a departure from Judaism. This departure is fundamental since what is so dramatically expressed in the history of Jesus Christ is obvious: the Realm of God is not on this earth and never will be. The reason the son of God was defeated on the Earth and crucified is obvious: His Father God never intended to establish His Realm on this Earth, the everlasting Realm of Justice and happiness. But if God does not intend to substitute Himself to His Creatures to settle their problems, they must assume this responsibility themselves. The end of time is no longer conceivable and Christ does not proclaim it as established whether now nor in the future. But in this case He is not the Messiah as announced by the Jews and Jews were right not to recognise Him as such. The message of Jesus Christ may then be interpreted as a summon to human beings to be the actors of their own history and if they act properly, that is if they let themselves inspire by the moral values which he enacted by his life and death, they will come closer to God after whom they have been created. This interpretation has eventually prevailed and given to modern Christianity its specific features which bases on a lecture of the Scriptures which enables us to image the future as the ultimate coming together between history as developed by human beings and the Realm of God as the final instance beyond history. The very idea of the end of times as brought about by an intervention from outside history has vanished.

The departure extends then to the whole area which was till then under the way of the holy law. Arguably Jesus Christ takes care to proclaim he has not come to this earth to upset the Law (of the Jews). This is in accordance with his core announcement: he did not intend to change ancient laws in order to replace them by better ones. It is man's concern to put these laws to trial. Jesus Christ will himself set an example by putting in question one the most harsh and the most formal penal laws that is again the hurling of stones at the adulterous wife. When he says that those who never sinned should throw the first stone, he opens the debate. What if this law was not just, what if its only purpose is to hide the hypocrisy of the real sinners? Christians will then give up the Jewish laws and the Jewish rituals: circumcision disappears, the rules of law adapt to the diversity of the situations all the more so because in its expansion beyond the Jewish world proper Christianity must adapt to different status and rituals, but by so doing does not enforce a Christian law which does not exist. For instance the alimentary taboos are no longer implemented.

On a more theoretical level, Christianity acts the same way. It does not break openly with Judaism, since it refers to the same holy scripture: the Bible. But it adopts it without criticism: neither is it reread or corrected. But by doing so it deprives the Holy Book of its strength and one might say of its scope. It is one holy scripture among others and more important are the new scriptures specific to Christianity—the Gospel. Moreover the morals of the Gospel (love they fellow creature like themselves, forgiveness, justice...), are substantially different from

those of the Ancient Testament. Additionally the Gospel are not precise enough to found a positive law regarding personal rights or a penal law. From this point of view those texts radically break with the Torah or the Koran.

Legitimate power and God (Give Caesar what belongeth to Caesar) can no longer be confused. But this precept cannot be pursued when after three centuries of prosecutions the rulers change their persuasion and become Christians. But even before, when Christians secretly founded churches to defend their faith and later when the Emperor himself became their armed protector a new law is worked out, a law which claims is Christian. First of all on the level of personal rights, what is a Christian family? This concept had to be defined. It will take time, there will be setbacks and a final agreement will never be reached. Because those taking part in the process recognise in fact only different previous laws. Slowly however those new laws will be recognised as sacred: the canonical law which is different for the western and oriental Catholic Churches and the juridical forms of the different Orthodox and Protestant Churches are the end of this slow process.

As far as the organisation of the power structure is concerned, the relationship between power and religion, the same fluctuations and evolution towards sacralisation can be observed. The churches which had been created after the model of clandestine political parties (as we would say today) remain as churches after Christians have taken up power. Although they had been democratic, be it only to be close to their followers, they must now depart from this feature. They integrate themselves into the power structure, go at some distance from the worshippers because from now onward they have to exert a control on them on behalf of the political power. The political power on the other side does not allow itself to be subservient to the churches. It maintains its own rules of dynastic inheritance, it institutionalises the requirements of the new system which is feudal in the Western world due to the Romano barbaric mixture and imperial in the Eastern part of the former Roman Empire and subjects the churches as much as possible to its own requirements. The melting between those two institutions proceeds further however and exactly as the Caliph, the Lord and the King acquire a quasi divine quality.

The Christian world becomes a kind of soft theocracy led by a coalition of priests and by lay people who, however, proclaim themselves exactly as religious as the priests. The same has happened in the Islamic world; but when in the Christian part of the world, the bourgeois revolution will put into question the eternity of the social establishment, which allegedly is founded on Christian principles allegedly intangible themselves, when this revolution opens the doors to modernity and invents the new democracy, however limited its implementation was, when the Enlightenment declares that men (and not women at this time!) are the main actors of their history and must choose their laws and have the right to strike them down, the defenders of the old order rebuke this mad ambition of liberating mankind of all bonds. It is then easy to understand that Joseph de Maistre as a typical representative of the France of the Restoration can rant against democracy as a nonsense, a dangerous and criminal dream because God only is the lawmaker and God produced the laws which the only duty of mankind is to

implement without going out of its way to invent new ones. Ayatollah Khomeini or Sheik El Azhar could just as well have written those lines! It is of no importance that at the time when Joseph de Maistre writes, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, nobody knows anymore what exactly those laws are which God established for the Christians. The Tables of Moses? Or, more prosaically, all those Roman, German and Slavic traditions, which were in that respect very little Christian, which are at the core of those European and allegedly Christian societies.

When Joseph de Maistre writes it is however too late. European societies have got used to making their rules themselves without referring to Christian principles, which are nevertheless put forward here and there but without great emphasis nor rigidity. Those societies are faced anyway with other problems that lead them to act this way. The theocratic risk belongs for ever to the past.

### **3.4 The Reformation, The Ambiguous Expression of Christianity's Adaptation to Modernity**

The Reformation is an extremely complex movement both in its doctrinal religious dimensions and in the scope of the social transformations which accompanied it. It was deployed in very different European terrains, in some of the centres the most advanced in inventing capitalism (the United Provinces, England) and in backward regions (Germany, Scandinavia). It is dangerous, in these conditions, to speak of 'Protestantism' in the singular.

On the dogmatic level all the great reformers have called for a "return to sources" and among other things, have, in this spirit, rehabilitated the Old Testament which Catholicism and Orthodoxy had marginalized. I developed above the idea that Christianity had in effect been constituted not in continuity with Judaism but in rupture with it. The use, which is current today, of the term 'Judeo-Christian', popularized by the expansion of a particular Protestant view (peculiar to the United States for the most part), implies a reversal in the vision of the relations between these two monotheistic religions, to which the Catholics (but still not yet the Orthodox) have belatedly rallied without much conviction, but rather through political opportunism.

The call for a "return to sources" is a method that is almost always found in movements that identify themselves with religion. But in itself it means almost nothing, the interpretation of the sources in question always being decisive. In the Reformation, the fragments of ideologies and value systems expressed on this religious ground retain all the hallmarks of primitive forms of reaction to the growing capitalist challenge. Certain aspects of the Renaissance had gone even further (Machiavelli is one of the most eloquent witnesses of this). But the Renaissance deployed on Catholic land (Italy). And the management of some Italian cities as real commercial companies controlled by a syndicate of the richest

shareholders (Venice is their prototype) established a still more clear-cut relationship with the first forms of capitalism than the Protestantism/capitalism relationship was to be. Later the Enlightenment which deployed in Catholic countries (France) as well as in other Protestant countries (England; Netherlands and Germany) was situated more in the secular tradition of the Renaissance than in that of the religious reformation. Finally the radical character of the French revolution gave secularity its full force, deliberately leaving the terrain of religious re-interpretations to place itself in that of modern politics, which is largely the product of its invention.

It can then be understood that, depending on historical circumstances, the Reformation was able to end either in the establishment of national churches in the service of the Monarchy/Ancien Regime/emergent upper middle class compromise, or in the retreat of the dominated classes into sects developing apocalyptic visions.

Catholicism, for long more rigid when confronted with the challenge of modern times, thanks to its hierarchical structure, also finished by opening up to the re-interpretation of dogmas, with finally no less remarkable results. I am not surprised, in these conditions, that the new progress in religious interpretation—I mean that which liberation theology represents today—has found fertile ground for reflection among Catholics rather than among Protestants. Obviously Weber's thesis has not of much value! There is also a fine example of involution in the religious interpretation associated with the Reformation.

The protestant sects which were obliged to emigrate from seventeenth century England had developed a very particular interpretation of Christianity, which was not shared by either the Catholics or the Orthodox, nor even—at least not to the same degree of extremism—by the majority of European Protestants, including of course the Anglicans, dominant in the ruling class of England.

This particular form of Protestantism established in New England was going to be summoned to mark American ideology with a strong stamp up until the present day. Because it was to be the means by which the new American society would go off on the conquest of the continent, legitimating it in terms drawn from the Bible (the violent conquest by Israel of the promised land repeated ad nauseam in North American discourse). Afterwards the United States was to extend their project of undertaking the task 'God' ordered them to accomplish to the entire planet because the American people sees itself to be the "chosen people"—synonymous in practice with *Herrenvolk*, to adopt the parallel Nazi terminology. We are really at this point today. And that is why American imperialism (and not the « Empire ») is destined to be even more savage than its predecessors (who did not claim to be invested with a divine mission to the same degree at least).

In any event, whether it is a case of Catholic or Protestant societies, one school or another, I do not allow the religious interpretation a decisive independent role in the organisation and the functioning of the true dominant power.

The past does not become "atavistic transmission" by force of circumstances. History transforms peoples and religious interpretations, even when they persist in

apparently ‘ancient’ and frozen forms, are themselves the subject of revision of their articulation to other dimensions of social reality.

That is because the subsequent paths of Europe on the one hand and the United States on the other have been different, that, Catholic or Protestant, European societies and United States society have divergent political cultures today.

Political culture is the product of history envisaged over the long term, which is of course always particular to each country. On this level, the history of the United States is marked by particularities which contrast with those characterising history on the European continent: the founding of New England by extremist Protestant sects, the genocide of the Indians, Negro slavery and the deployment of ‘communitarianism’ associated with successive waves of migration in the nineteenth century.

The “American revolution” so appreciated by many of the 1789 revolutionaries and today vaunted more than ever, was only a limited war of independence without social consequences. In their revolt against the British monarchy the American colonists wanted to transform nothing in economic and social relations, but only to no longer have to share their profits with the ruling class of the mother country. They wanted the power for themselves not to do anything different from what they were doing during the colonial period, but to continue doing the same thing with greater determination and profit. Their objectives were above all the pursuit of the expansion to the West, which implied among other things the genocide of the Indians. The maintenance of slavery was also not questioned. The great leaders of the American revolution were almost all slave owners and their prejudices in this respect were unshakeable.

The successive waves of immigration also played a role in the strengthening of American ideology. The immigrants were certainly not responsible for the misery and oppression which caused their departure. On the contrary they were the victims. But circumstances—that is to say their emigration—led them to abandon the collective struggle to change the common conditions of their classes or groups in their own country, in favour of adhering to the ideology of individual success in the host country. This adherence was encouraged by the American system which it suited perfectly. It delayed the development of class consciousness, which, scarcely had it started to develop, than it had to face a new wave of immigrants which frustrated its political crystallization. But simultaneously, the migration encouraged the « communitarianisation » of American society, because « individual success » does not exclude strong insertion into a community of origin (the Irish, the Italians etc.), without which individual isolation would risk being unbearable. Yet here again the strengthening of this dimension of identity—which the American system retrieves and flatters—is done at the expense of class consciousness and the formation of the citizen. Whereas in Paris the people got ready “to capture the sky” (here I refer to the 1871 Commune), in the United States gangs constituted by successive generations of poor immigrants (Irish, Italians etc.) killed each other, manipulated in a perfectly cynical way by the ruling classes.



Protestant Europe—England, Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia—shared in the beginning some fragments of an ideology similar to that of the United States, transmitted by the “return to the Bible”, although certainly in attenuated form, without comparison to the extreme forms of the sects which emigrated to New England. But in the countries in question the working class succeeded in raising itself to a proven class consciousness, which the successive waves of migrants had sterilized in the United States. The emergence of workers parties made the difference; in Europe it imposed combinations of liberal ideology and value systems (equality among others) which are not only foreign to it, but even conflicting. These combinations naturally had their particular histories which were different from one country and from one time to another. But they preserved the autonomy of the political sphere in the face of the dominant economic sphere.

In the United States, there is no workers party, there never has been. The communitarian ideologies could not constitute a substitute for the absence of a working class socialist ideology. Even the most radical of which, that of the black community. Because by definition communitarianism falls into the framework of generalized racism which it fights on its own ground, but no more.

The combination specific to the historical formation of United States society—dominant « biblical » religious ideology and absence of a workers' party—finally produced a still unparalleled situation, that of a de facto single party, the party of capital.

Today, American democracy constitutes the advanced model of what I call “low intensity democracy”. Its functioning is based on a total separation between the management of political life, based on the practice of electoral democracy, and that of economic life, ruled by the laws of capital accumulation. What is more, this separation is not subject to radical questioning, but is rather part of what is called the general consensus. But this separation annihilates all the creative potential of political democracy. It castrates the representative institutions (parliaments and others), made impotent in face of the « market », the dictates of which it accepts.

The American State is thus in the exclusive service of the economy (that is to say of capital of which it is the exclusive faithful servant, without having to concern itself with other social interests). It can be so because the historical formation of American society has blocked the development of political class consciousness, of a real citizen's consciousness, among the working classes.

In Europe in contrast, the State has been (and can become again) the obligatory crossing point for the confrontation of social interests, and, thereby encourage the historical compromises that give a meaning and a real significance to democratic practice. If the State is not constrained to fulfil this function by the class struggle and political struggles which remain independent from the exclusive logics of the accumulation of capital, then democracy becomes a derisory practice, which it is in the United States.

American ideology, like all ideologies is “eroded by time”. During the ‘calm’ periods of history—marked by strong economic growth accompanied by social spin-offs judged to be satisfactory—the pressure the ruling class exercises on its people weakens. From time to time then, according to the needs of the moment,

this ruling class ‘re-inflates’ American ideology by means which are always the same: an enemy (always external, American society being decreed good by definition) is designated (the Evil Empire, the Evil Axis) allowing the “total mobilisation” of all means intended to annihilate it. Yesterday it was communism, allowing, the cold war to be engaged and Europe to be subordinated by Mac Carthyism (forgotten by pro-Americans). Today it is ‘terrorism’, an obvious pretext, (the 11 September so much resembles the Reichstag fire), that gets the ruling class’s true project accepted: to ensure the military control of the planet.

But lets not be mistaken. It is not the fundamentalist ideology with religious pretensions that is in the driving seat and imposes its logic on the real holders of power—capital and its servants in the State. It is capital that alone makes all the decisions that suit it, then conscripts this ideology into its service. The means used—unparalleled systematic disinformation—are then effective, isolating critical minds, subjecting them to permanent unbearable blackmail. In this way the government is able to manipulate without difficulty an ‘opinion’ maintained in its foolishness.

From the debate of the past –reconciling Faith with Reason—to the modern debate—making social power laic.

To proclaim that God is the supreme law maker is a beautiful theory but with no or little practical feasibility. Muslims and Christians will experience that in their area where their religion prevails.

Highly civilised societies of the Muslim or European Middle Ages alike, had to solve a major antinomy: how conciliate Faith, or more precisely their religion which is the foundation of the legitimacy of political power in their own society and Reason which they need every day and not only to solve the petty technical problems of everyday life but furthermore to found new laws and rules in order to face the new arising challenges.

Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Diaspora would resolve this problem in the same way, by the same methods (the Aristotelian scholastic)—which are neither Jewish, nor Christian, nor Islamic, but Greek!—and with the same brilliant results. The avant gardists, Ibn Rochd among the Muslims, Saint Thomas Aquini among the Christians, or Maimonide among the Jews in Islamic lands, would go even further. They did know to put dogmas into a relative perspective, interpret the holy texts as well of necessary, to soften their insufficiencies, to substitute the textual reading by the image of the educating example. The most daring ones would be condemned later on as heretics (which was the case of Ibn Rochd) by the conservative interpreters at the service of the powers. But it does not matter. European society in rapid movement develops in fact along the prescriptions that the avant gardists recommend, while the Muslim world which refused to do this, enters from that fact onwards into decline from which it could not as yet recover. Ghazali, the spokesperson of Islamic Conservatism, the enemy of Ibn Rochd, becomes the definitive reference in all matters—up to this day—for the ‘revolutionary’ Ayatollahs of Iran as well as for the conservatives of El Azhar or Saudi Arabia.

Starting from the Renaissance but especially since the Enlightenment the European Christian West leaves behind the old debate in favour of a new beginning.

The issue is not anymore to reconcile Faith and Reason, but Reason and Emancipation. Reason took its independence, and it does not negate that there could exist a field which would be reserved for Faith, but it does not interest itself anymore for it. Henceforth, the task is to legitimise the new needs; the liberty of the individual, the emancipation of society, which takes up the risk to invent its laws, to mold its own future. Modernity resides precisely in that qualitative rupture with the past.

This new vision implies neatly and full laicisation, that is to say, the abandonment of the reference to religion or to any other meta social force in the debate about the laws. The different bourgeois societies would go more or less far, in this domain as well in others, according to circumstances. The more radical the bourgeois revolution is, the stronger is the affirmation of laicism. The more the bourgeoisie makes a compromise with the forces of the old regime, the less pronounced is laicism.

Modern Christianity has adapted to that profound social transformation. It had to re-interpret itself because of it, it had to renounce its ambition that its law rules, it had to accept to inspire the souls of its believers in liberty and in competition with its adversaries. A beneficial exercise because it had the effect that Christians discovered the dwindling of laws attributed to God by their ancestors. Modern Christianity became a religion without dogmas.

Whatever might have been the advances produced by the attempts to reconcile Faith and Reason, it is nonetheless necessary to recognise their limits. In effect, the advances among the Muslims and the Jews were bogged down in the old problematic, and then after left in benefit of a return to the orthodoxy of the origins. On the contrary, in the western Christian world, these very advances perhaps could have prepared—without necessarily having known it—their own overtaking. How can one try to explain such a miscarriage among the ones and such a success among the others, who would become the inventors of modernity? The materialist tradition in history has given priority to social development and supposed that the religions—in their quality as an ideological instance—would end up interpreting themselves to satisfy the necessities of the movement of reality. This research hypothesis is certainly more fertile than its opposite, according to which the religions would constitute dogmatic given entities, given one and forever, with invariable trans-historic characteristics. This second hypothesis—which at presently is sailing strong—prohibits all reflection on the general movement of the history of humanity taken as a whole and trapped in the affirmation of the “irreducible difference among the cultures”.

But the materialist hypothesis does not exclude the reflection on the reasons why certain evolution of religious thought took the way here and not there. Because the religious instance—like any other instance constituting the social reality (the ideology, the politics, the economy) is moving in its own logic. The logics of each of these instances can facilitate their parallel evolution, assuring the

acceleration of social change, or enter in conflict resulting in abstracting it. In that case which of those logics shall prevail? It is impossible to predict it, and it is in this under determination that the liberty of societies rests, where the choices make the real history characterised by the submission a particular instance to the logic imposed by the evolution of another.

This last reflection—and the hypothesis of under determination which I submit—will permit us perhaps to advance in the response of the question posed here.<sup>3</sup>

Judaism and Islam have constituted themselves historically by the affirmation that society (Jewish or Muslim) is a society where the true King is God. The principle of ‘hakiyama’ reintroduced by the Muslim fundamentalists of our age, do nothing but reaffirm this principle, with the most extreme force, to draw all possible conclusions. In addition, Judaism and Islam give their original Holy Scripture (the Torah and the Koran) the strongest possible interpretation: not a word is superfluous. To the point where men of religion in both cases have always expressed strongest reservations against any kind of translation of the text, Hebrew and Arabic respectively. The Jewish and Muslim people are the people of the exegesis. The Talmud among the Jews, the Fiqh among the Muslim don’t have their equivalent in the reading of the Gospels.

That double Judeo-Islamic principle explains without doubt many of the visible aspects of what were the Jewish or the Muslim societies. Because the Holy Scriptures can be read as collections of laws, or even, of Constitutions (Saudi Arabia proclaims that the Koran is the political constitution of the State) including all the details of everyday life (the law of persons, penal law, the liturgies) inviting the believer to “renounce his own will to submit himself integrally to that of God” as it was often repeated in writing, imagining this life, as it should be regulated in all details like in a monastery.

The conciliation between Faith and Reason has therefore developed within the limits imposed by this double principle, equally with the Muslim Ibn Rochd as with his Jewish contemporary Maimonide. And in both cases the traditionalist reaction brought back here the talmudic exegesis recommended by Judah Halevy, there the return to the Kalam of Ashari and Ghazali (two important fundamentalist Muslim thinkers). In both cases it will be proclaimed henceforth that certainly rests in Revelation and not in Reason. The page of philosophy among the Muslims and the Jews was turned. Accompanying the stagnation, later the decline of Muslim societies, this miscarriage of religious reform was balanced in both cases, by the accentuation of the formalistic and ritualistic interpretation of the religion. The compensation for such a form of impoverishment was found in both cases in the development of mystic sects, Muslim Sufis and Jewish Kabalists, who by the way largely borrowed their methods from traditions coming from India.

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<sup>3</sup> I have developed this concept of ‘under-determination’ in history in *Spectres of Capitalism: A Critique of Intellectual Fashions* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), Chapter 3.

If Christianity finally became more flexible, and if, from that point onwards, the locking within the horizons of the conciliation between Faith and Reason could be broken, that was possible, at least partially, for the reasons which were spelt out above: because Christianity did not propose to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth, because Gospels did not erect a positive system of laws. Now one can also comprehend the following paradox: even that the Catholic Church was strongly organised and had an official authority which could impose its interpretation of the religion, she did not resist the assault of the new problematic separating Reason and Faith, and it was Christianity which gave itself to adapt to the new emancipatory conception of Reason, while the absence of such an authority in Islam after the prophet and in Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the Sanhedrin could not prevent the maintenance of the orthodoxy of origins.

The Jews of the Diaspora on European soil could not but be affected by these radical transformations and the new conceptions about the relationship between society and religion.

Moises Mendelsohn attempts, then, in the eighteenth century to undertake this step and make in Judaism a revolution analogous to the one in which Christian society is engaged. By interpreting freely the Torah, not anymore as an obligatory legislation, but only a source of inspiration which everybody can do according to his desire, Moises Mendelsohn engages himself on the way of laicisation of society. The very evolution of European society contributes to facilitate this assimilation of the Jews, whose community is declared dead by the French Revolution which only recognises citizens, eventually of Israelite confession. From there the risk was great that Jewry disappears progressively in the indifference, which the Israelite bourgeoisie of Western and Central Europe shared with all its class and comprising its fractions of Christian believers.

The persistent anti-Semitism—for all types of religious or simply political reasons—especially in Eastern Europe, did not let the Reform triumph in Judaism as in the populations of Christian origin. A counter—reformation was then designed, which developed in the ghettos, and took the shape of Hassidism, permitting the Jews to find a compensation for their inferior status shouldering their humiliation for the love of God.

The culture of the modern world is not 'Christian', and neither it is 'Judeo-Christian', as it is henceforth written in the contemporary media. That last expression has by the way strictly speaking no sense at all. How can one explain then its frequent usage? Very simply, according to my view. Christian Europe was strongly anti-Jewish (one could not say anti-Semitic because the reference to a pseudo 'race' had substituted religion only in the late nineteenth century) for reasons whose discussion would be beyond the framework of these reflections. After anti-Semitism led to the horrors of Nazism, Europe, becoming aware of the dimension of its crime, adopted the expression of 'Judeo-Christian' in a sympathetic and laudable intention to eradicate its anti-Semitism. It would have been more convincing to recognise directly the decisive contributions of so many 'Jewish' thinkers to the progress of Europe. The hyphens are used here because simply modern culture is not Christian, nor Judeo-Christian: it is bourgeois.

The criterion is removed from the field dominated by the old debate (to reconcile Faith—a religion—and Reason) to situate itself on a terrain which ignores religion. Modern thinkers henceforth are fundamentally not Christian, nor Jewish, they are bourgeois, or beyond, socialist, although they might be of Christian or Jewish origin. The bourgeois civilisation is not the creation of Christianity, or Judeo-Christianity. Inversely, it were the Christianity and the Judaism of the Jews of Western Europe which adapted themselves to the bourgeois civilisation. One expects that Islam would now be the next to make it. This is the condition that the Muslim people participate in the making of the world and that they don't exclude themselves.

### 3.5 Political Islam

Modernity is based on the principle that human beings create their history individually and collectively and that, to that effect, they have the right to innovate and to disregard tradition. Proclaiming this principle meant breaking with the fundamental principle that governed all the pre-modern societies, including of course that of Feudal and Christian Europe. Modernity was born with this proclamation. It had nothing to do with rebirth; it was simply a question of birth. The qualification of Renaissance that Europeans themselves gave to history in that era of history is therefore misleading. It is the result of an ideological construction purporting that the Greek-Roman Antiquity was acquainted with the principle of modernity, which was veiled in the “Middle Ages” (between the old modernity and the new modernity) by religious obscurantism.<sup>4</sup> It was the mythical perception of Antiquity that in turn paved the way for Eurocentrism, whereby Europe claims to go back to its past, “to return to its sources” (hence, the Renaissance), whereas in fact, it is engineering a break with its own history.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.5.1 *The European Renaissance and the Arab Nahda*

The European Renaissance was the product of an internal social process, the solution found to contradictions peculiar to the then Europe through the invention of capitalism. On the other hand, what the Arabs by imitation referred to as their Renaissance—the Nahda of the nineteenth century—was not so. It was the reaction to an external shock. The Europe that modernity had rendered powerful and

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<sup>4</sup> George Tarabishi: *The Trajectory of Philosophy in the Christian and Islamic Countries* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 1998), in Arabic.

<sup>5</sup> Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) sought the return of Islam to its sources, the Koran and the Sunna.—Trans.

triumphant had ambiguous effect on the Arab world through attraction (admiration) and repulsion (through the arrogance of its conquest). The Arab Renaissance takes its qualifying term literally. It is assumed that, if the Arabs ‘returned’ to their sources, as the Europeans would have done (that is what they themselves say), they would regain their greatness, even if debased for some time. The Nahda does not know the nature of the modernity that enhances Europe’s power.

This is not the place to refer to different aspects and moments marking Nahda’s deployment. I will just state briefly that Nahda does not forge the necessary break with tradition that defines modernity. Nahda does not recognise the meaning of secularism, in other words, separation between religion and politics, the condition to ensure that politics serves as the field for free innovation, and for that matter, for democracy in the modern sense. Nahda thinks it can substitute for secularism an interpretation of religion purged of its obscurantist drifts. At any rate, to date, Arab societies are not adequately equipped to understand that secularism is not a ‘specific’ characteristic of the western world but rather a requirement for modernity. Nahda does not realise the meaning of democracy, which should be understood as the right to break with tradition. It therefore remains prisoner of the concepts of autocratic State; it hopes and prays for a ‘just’ despot (al moustabid al adel)—even if not ‘enlightened’ and the nuance is significant. Nahda does not understand that modernity also promotes women’s aspiration to their freedom, thereby exercising their right to innovate and break with tradition. Eventually, Nahda reduces modernity to the immediate aspect of what it produces: technical progress. This voluntarily over-simplified presentation does not mean that its author is not aware of the contradictions expressed in Nahda, nor that certain avant-garde thinkers were aware of the real challenges posed by modernity, like Kassem Amin and the importance of women’s emancipation, Ali Abdel Razek and secularism, and Kawakibi and the challenge posed by democracy. However, none of these breakthroughs had any effects; on the contrary, the Arab society reacted by refusing to follow the paths indicated. Nahda is therefore not the time marking the birth of modernity in the Arab world but rather the period of its abortion.

Since the Arab States have not yet embraced modernity, whereas they bear the bunt of the daily challenge, Arabs still accept to a large extent these principles of autocratic power, which maintains its legitimacy or loses it in fields other than its non-recognition of the principle of democracy. If it is able to resist imperialist aggression—or to give that impression —, if it is able to promote a visible improvement of the material living conditions of many, if not all, the autocratic power enjoys guaranteed popularity even if it now appears as an enlightened despotic power. It is also because Arab societies have not embraced modernity that the latter’s brutal pompous refusal presented as the sole ideological theme placed at the centre of the Islamic project can find a favourable echo as powerful as it is known to be (cf. Political Islam later on).

Beyond this non-modernity principle, the autocratic power therefore owes its legitimacy to tradition. In some cases, this could refer to a tradition of national and religious monarchy like that of Morocco (in which case the specific feature consists in the fact that no Moroccan political party questions the eloquent motto of

this monarchy—Allah, The Nation, The King) or of a tribal monarchy in the Arabian Peninsula. But there is another form of tradition—the one inherited from the Ottoman Empire dominant in the territory between Algeria and Iraq, and therefore influencing the largest segment of the Arab world—which I describe as the tradition of “Mameluke power”.

What is it about? It is about a complex system that associated the personalised power of warlords (relatively structured and centralised, or otherwise scattered), businessmen and men of religion. I emphasise men, since women are obviously not allowed to assume any responsibilities. The three dimensions of this organisation are not merely juxtaposed; they are actually merged into a single reality of power.

The Mamelukes are men of war who owe their legitimacy to a certain concept of Islam that places emphasis on the opposite of Dar El Islam (Muslim world—a community governed by the rules of peaceful management)/Dar El Harb (an extra-Muslim world, the place for the pursuit of Jihad, “Holy War”). It is not by chance that this military concept of political management was fabricated by the conquering Seldjoukide Turks and the Ottomans, who called themselves ‘Ghazi’—conquerors and colonisers of Byzantine Anatolia. It is not by chance that the Mamelukes’ system was built from the era of Salah El Dine, liberator of the lands occupied until then by the Crusaders. Populist powers and contemporary nationalists always mention the name of Salah El Dine with respectful admiration without ever considering or making any allusion to the ravages of the system from which it originated. At the end of the Crusades, the Arab world (which became Turkish-Arab) entered into a military feudalisation and isolation process reflecting a decline that put an end to the brilliant civilisation of the early centuries of the Caliphate while Europe was beginning to discard feudalism and preparing to embark on the invention of modernity and move on to conquer the world.

In compensation for this service as protectors of Islam, the Mamelukes gave the men of religion monopoly in the interpretation of dogmas, of justice rendered in the name of Islam and in the moral civilisation of the society. Relegated to its purely traditional social dimension—respect for rites being the sole important consideration—religion is absolutely subjugated by the autocratic power of men of war.

Economic life is then subject to the mood of the military-political authority. Whenever possible, the peasantry is directly subjected to the whims of this ruling class and private property is jeopardised (the related principle being indisputably sacralised by the fundamental texts of Islam). The proceeds of trade are no less tapped.

The Mameluke ruling class naturally aspired to the dispersion of its autocratic power. Formally responsible to the Sultan-Caliph, the Mamelukes took advantage of the long distance then separating them from the capital (Istanbul) to personally exercise full powers within the radius of the land under their control. In areas with an age-old tradition of State centralisation, such as Egypt, there have been successive attempts to discipline the whole military corps. It is not by chance that Mohamed Ali established his centralised authority by massacring the Mamelukes,



but only to re-establishing a military–real estate aristocracy under his personal authority from that time onwards. The Beys of Tunis tried to do likewise on a more modest scale. The Deys of Algiers never succeeded in doing so. The Ottoman Sultanate did so in turn, thereby integrating its Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian provinces of Anatolia and its Arab provinces of historic Syria and Iraq under an authority ‘modernised’ that way.

Just modernisation? Or just a modernised autocracy? Enlightened despotism? Or just despotism? The fluctuations and variants are situated in this range, which does not usher in anything making it possible to go beyond.

Certainly, the typical autocratic model of Mameluke had to reckon with the numerous and diverse realities that always defined the real limits. Peasant communities that took refuge in their fortified mountains (Kabylans, Maronites, Druzeans, Alaouites, etc.), Sufi brotherhoods almost everywhere and tribes obliged the dominant authorities to reach a compromise with and tolerate the rebellious groups. The contrast in Morocco between Maghzen and Bled Siba is of a similar nature.

Have the forms in which power was exercised in the Arab world changed so much to justify the assertion that those described here belong to a distant past? The autocratic State and the related forms of political management certainly exist to date, as will be seen later. However, they are beset with a profound crisis that has already curtailed their legitimacy, as they were increasingly incapable of meeting the challenges posed by modernity. Some of the testimonies in this regard are the emergence of political Islam, overlapping political conflicts as well as the resumption of social struggles.

### ***3.5.2 Contemporary Political Islam***

The fatal error lies in thinking that the emergence of mass political movements identified with Islam is the inevitable outcome of the rise of culturally and politically backward people who cannot understand any language other than that of their quasi-atavistic obscurantism. Unfortunately, such an error is not only widely circulated by the dominant simplifying media; it is also echoed in the pseudo-scientific discourses on eurocentrism and awkward ‘orientalism’. Such views are based on the biased assumption that only the West can invent modernity, thereby confining Muslims in an immutable ‘tradition’ that makes them incapable of apprehending the significance of the necessary change.

Muslims and Islam have a history, just like those of the other regions of the world. It is a history fraught with diverse interpretations concerning linkages between reason and faith, a history of mutual transformation and adaptation of both society and its religion. However, the reality of this history is denied not only by eurocentric discourses but also by the contemporary movements associated with Islam. In fact, the two entities have the same cultural bias whereby the ‘specific’ features ascribed to the different careers of their own peoples and

religions are allegedly intangible, infinite and trans-historical. To the Western world's eurocentrism, contemporary Political Islam solely opposes an inverted eurocentrism.

The emergence of movements claiming to be Islamic is actually expressive of a violent revolt against the destructive effects of the really existent capitalism and against its attendant unaccomplished, truncated and deceptive modernity. It is an expression of an absolutely legitimate revolt against a system that has nothing to offer to the peoples concerned.

The discourse of the Islam proposed as an alternative to the capitalist modernity (to which the modern experiences of the historical socialisms are clearly assimilated), is political by nature, and by no means theological. The 'fundamentalist' attributes often ascribed to Islam by no means correspond to this discourse, which, moreover, does not even allude to Islam, except in the case of certain contemporary Muslim intellectuals who are referred to in such terms in western opinion more than in theirs.

The proposed Islam is in this case the adversary of every liberation theology. Political Islam advocates submission and not emancipation. It was only Mahmoud Taha of Sudan who attempted to emphasise the element of emancipation in his interpretation of Islam. Sentenced to death and executed by the authorities of Khartoum, Taha was not acknowledged by any 'radical' or 'moderate' Islamic group, and neither was he defended by any of the intellectuals identifying themselves with "Islamic Renaissance" or even by those who are merely willing to 'dialogue' with such movements.

The heralds of the said "Islamic Renaissance" are not interested in theology and they never make any reference to the classical texts concerning theology. Hence, what they understand by Islam appears to be solely a conventional and social version of religion limited to the formal and integral respect for ritual practice. The Islam in question would define a community to which one belongs by inheritance, like ethnicity instead of a strong and intimate personal conviction. It is solely a question of asserting a "collective identity" and nothing more. That is the reason why the term "Political Islam" is certainly more appropriate to qualify all these movements in the Arab countries.

Modern political Islam had been invented by the orientalist in the service of the British authority in India before being adopted intact by Mawdudi of Pakistan. It consisted in 'proving' that Muslim believers are not allowed to live in a State that is itself not Islamic—anticipating the partition of India—because Islam would ignore the possibility of separation between State and Religion. The orientalist in question failed to observe that the English of the thirteenth century would not have conceived of their survival either without Christianity!

Abul Ala Al Mawdudi therefore took up the theme stipulating that power comes from God alone (*wilaya al faqih*), thus repudiating the concept of citizens having the right to make laws, the State being solely entrusted with enforcement of the law defined once and for all (*The Shariah*). Joseph de Maistre had already written similar things accusing the Revolution of inventing modern democracy and individual emancipation.

Refuting the concept of emancipatory modernity, Political Islam disapproves of the very principle of democracy—the right of society to build its own future through its freedom to legislate. The Shura principle is not the Islamic form of democracy, as claimed by Political Islam, for it is hampered by the ban on innovation (*ibda*), and accepts, if need be, only that of interpretation of the tradition (*ijtihad*). The Shura is only one of the multiple forms of the consultation found in all pre-modern and pre-democratic societies. Of course, interpretation has sometimes been the vehicle for real changes imposed by new demands. However, the fact remains that by virtue of its own principle—denial of the right to break with the past—interpretation leads into deadlock the modern fight for social change and democracy. The parallel claimed between the Islamic parties—radical or moderate, since all of them adhere to the same ‘anti-modernist’ principles in the name of the so-called specificity of Islam—and Christian-Democrat parties of modern Europe is therefore not valid, strictly speaking, even though American media and diplomatic circles continue to make allusion to the said parallel so as to legitimise their support of possibly ‘Islamist’ regimes. Christian-Democracy is an element of modernity of which it upholds the fundamental concept of creative democracy as the essential aspect of the concept of secularism. Political Islam refuses modernity and proclaims this fact without being able to understand its significance.

Hence, the proposed Islam does not deserve at all to be qualified as ‘modern’ and the supporting arguments advanced in this regard by friends of ‘dialogue’ are extremely platitudinous: they range from the use of cassettes by its propagandists to the observation that these agents are recruited from among the ‘educated’ classes—engineers for instance! Moreover, these movements’ discourse solely reflects Wahabite Islam, which rejects all that the interaction between historical Islam and Greek philosophy had produced in its epoch, as it merely turned over the unimaginative writings of Ibn Taymiya, the most reactionary of the theologians of the Middle Ages. Although some of his heralds qualify this interpretation as “a return to the sources”, it is actually a mere reference to the notions that prevailed 200 years ago, notions of a society whose development has been stalled for several centuries.

The contemporary Political Islam is not the outcome of a reaction to the so-called abuses of secularism, as often purported, unfortunately. It is because no Muslim society of modern times—except in the former Soviet Union—has ever been truly secular, let alone appalled at the daring innovations of any atheistic and aggressive power. The semi-modern State of Kemal’s Turkey, Nasser’s Egypt, Baathist Syria and Iraq merely subjugated the men of religion (as it often happened in former times) to impose on them concepts solely aimed at legitimising its political options. The beginnings of a secular idea existed only in certain critical intellectual circles. The secular idea did not have much impact on the State, which sometimes retreated in this respect when obsessed with its nationalist project, thereby causing a break with the policy adopted by the Wafd since 1919, as testified by the disturbing evolution inaugurated even at the time of Nasser. The reason for this drift is perhaps quite obvious: whereas the democracy of the said

regimes was rejected, a substitute was found in the so-called homogeneous community, with its danger obviously extending to the declining democracy of the contemporary Western world itself.

Political Islam intends to perfect an evolution already well established in the countries concerned and aimed at restoring a plainly conservative theocratic order associated with a political power of the 'Mameluke' type. The reference to this military caste that ruled up to two centuries ago, placed itself above all laws (by pretending to know no law other than the 'Shariah'), monopolised profits from the national economy and accepted to play a subsidiary role in the capitalist globalisation of that era—for the sake of 'realism'—instantly crosses the mind of anyone who observes the declined post-nationalist regimes of the region as well as the new so-called Islamic regimes, their twin brothers.

From this fundamental point of view, there is no difference between the so-called 'radical' movements of Political Islam and those that wanted to appear 'moderate' because the aims of both entities are identical.

The case of Iran itself is not an exception to the general rule, despite the confusions that contributed to its success: the concomitance between the rapid development of the Islamist movement and the struggle waged against the Shah who was socially reactionary and politically pro-American. Firstly, the extremely eccentric behaviour of the theocratic ruling power was compensated by its anti-imperialist positions, from which it derived its legitimacy that echoed its powerful popularity beyond the borders of Iran. Gradually, however, the regime showed that it was incapable of meeting the challenge posed by an innovative socio-economic development. The dictatorship of turbaned men of religion, who took over from that of the 'Caps' (military and technocrats), as they are referred to in Iran, resulted in a fantastic degradation of the country's economic machinery. Iran, which boasted about "doing the same as Korea", now ranks among the group of "Fourth World" countries. The indifference of the ruling power's hard wing to social problems facing the country's working classes was the basic cause of its take-over by those who described themselves as 'reformers' with a project that could certainly attenuate the rigours of the theocratic dictator, but without renouncing, for all that, its principle enshrined in the Constitution ("wilaya al faqih"), which constituted the basis of the monopoly of a power that was therefore gradually induced to give up its 'anti-imperialist' postures and integrate the commonplace compradore world of capitalism of the peripheries. The system of Political Islam in Iran has reached deadlock. The political and social struggles in which the Iranian people have now been plunged might one day lead to the rejection of the very principle of "wilaya al faqih", which places the college of the men of religion above all institutions of the political and civil society. That is the condition for their success.

Political Islam is in fact nothing other than an adaptation to the subordinate status of the compradore capitalism. Its so-called 'moderate' form therefore probably constitutes the principal danger threatening the peoples concerned since the violence of the 'radicals' only serves to destabilise the State to allow for the installation of a new compradore power. The constant support offered by the pro-American

diplomacies of the Triad countries towards finding this ‘solution’ to the problem is absolutely consistent with their desire to impose the globalised liberal order in the service of the dominant capital.

The two discourses of the globalised liberal capitalism and Political Islam do not conflict; they are rather complementary. The ideology of American ‘communitarianisms’ being popularised by current fashion overshadows the conscience and social struggles and substitutes for them, so-called collective ‘identities’ that ignore them. This ideology is therefore perfectly manipulated in the strategy of capital domination because it transfers the struggle from the arena of real social contradictions to the imaginary world that is said to be cultural, trans-historical and absolute, whereas Political Islam is precisely a ‘communitarianism’.

The diplomacies of the G7 powers, and particularly that of the United States, know what they do in choosing to support Political Islam. They have done so in Afghanistan by describing its Islamists as “freedom fighters” (!) against the horrible dictatorship of communism, which was in fact an enlightened, modernist, national and populist despotism that had the audacity to open schools for girls! They continue to do so from Egypt to Algeria. They know that the power of Political Islam has the virtue—to them—of making the peoples concerned helpless and consequently ensuring their compradorisation without difficulty.

Given its inherent cynicism, the American Establishment knows how to take a second advantage of Political Islam. The ‘drifts’ of the regimes that it inspires—the Talibans for instance—who are not drifts in any way but actually come within the logic of their programmes, can be exploited whenever imperialism finds it expedient to intervene brutally, if necessary. The ‘savagery’ attributed to the peoples who are the first victims of Political Islam is likely to encourage ‘islamophobia’ and that facilitates the acceptance of the perspective of a “global apartheid”—the logical and necessary outcome of an ever-polarising capitalist expansion.

The sole political movements using the label of Islam, which are categorically condemned by the G7 powers, are those involved in anti-imperialist struggles—under the objective circumstances at the local level: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. It is not a matter of chance.

# Chapter 4

## Re-reading the Post War Period

### 4.1 The Postwar Period, 1945–1992: An Overview

The past half-century can now be seen as the completion of a historic period. We are entering a new and probably markedly different cycle. With hindsight, the period just completed can be described more accurately than was possible even a few years ago.

The postwar system rested on three pillars: Fordism in the Western countries, Sovietism in the East European countries, and developmentalism in the third world. These pillars defined the social and political order for each of the regions and the economic, political, and ideological relations between them. The international order was itself the effect of confrontations between the dominant forces in each of the world's subsystems. These competing and complementary systems gradually wore down until at the end of the cycle they collapsed one after another.<sup>1</sup> A period of storms accompanied the restructuring and subsequent articulation along qualitatively new lines. The postwar period may be subdivided into three phases.

### 4.2 Establishing the Global Economic System: 1945–1955

World War II provided the United States with an unexpected opportunity to escape from the deep crisis of the 1930s, to speed up the modernization of its productive system through diffusion of the Fordist model (begun in the 1920s), and to acquire a leadership role in all fields, sadly symbolized by the exercise of its nuclear

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<sup>1</sup> See my articles “A propos de la regulation,” published in Arabic in: *The Arab Economic Review*, no. 1 (1992): 24; “Trente ans de critique du systeme sovietique 1960–1990,” in: *Africa Development* 16, no. 2 (1991): 73–94, and partially in English in “Thirty Years of Critique of the Soviet System”, in: *Monthly Review*, 44, no. 1 (1992): 43–50; and “II y a trente ans, Bandoung” published in 1985 and collected in the revised and expanded edition of *L'Echange inegal et la loi de la valeur* (Paris: Economica 1988; hereafter *L'Echange inegal*).

monopoly in the August 1945 bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The backwardness of Europe and Japan (shown in the weak penetration of the Fordist model) was apparent in the wake of World War I and was aggravated by the exhausting struggles between victors and vanquished that followed the war. The backwardness reached dramatic proportions as a result of the massive destruction caused by World War II.

However, the European and Japanese social fabric was sufficiently strong to avoid a recurrence of the revolutionary radicalization of 1919. On the contrary, Europe under the Marshall Plan and Japan under the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco underwent speedy development on the Fordist model. The historic compromise between capital and labor that formed the basis of ideological regulation was still audible in 1919, although the ideological underpinning had been achieved through the massive recruitment of working classes by their imperialist bourgeoisies since the end of the nineteenth century and especially since 1914. Accordingly, what I call "Socialism I" was certainly over by then. In 1945 everything was set for speedy implementation of Fordism. Rapid modernization came within the framework of a U.S. hegemony that was accepted without reservation in the 1949 creation of NATO, despite some rhetorical rearguard actions fought by the old colonialists. The system was fully in place by the mid-1950s with the Japanese economic takeoff and the 1957 Treaty of Rome.

Sovietism crystallized in the 1930s. The Russian Revolution faced contradictory demands from the outset. Should priority be given to the need to catch up, meaning broadly replicating capitalist structures, or should the goal of building an alternative, classless society take precedence? From 1930 the first option was favored; the system gradually moved away from its original socialist aims.

Sovietism subsequently underwent a baptism of fire. It emerged victorious from its confrontation with Nazi rule and played a decisive part in defeating it. Despite massive losses in the war, the Soviet Union enjoyed enormous prestige in 1945 and was able to cross the first threshold of the Cold War declared on it by the United States. The USSR was on the defensive in 1945 and did not reach military parity with its American rival until the end of the 1960s. Hence I maintain that the bipolar international system was in place not under the Yalta Agreement, as is often too readily said, but after the Potsdam Conference. At Yalta the United States did not yet have nuclear weapons and was therefore obliged to accept the Soviet Union's demand for a protective flank in Eastern Europe against a possible recurrence of German militarism; at Potsdam, the United States, confident of military supremacy, decided to impose a debilitating arms race on the USSR.

Until Stalin's death in 1953, postwar Sovietism was on the defensive. In subsequent years it launched a counteroffensive by uniting with third world nationalism and supporting the Bandung front established in 1955. For complex reasons related to differences between Maoism and Sovietism and a divergent view of third world revolt, a split between the two great powers of the Eastern world occurred after 1957.

At the end of World War II the African and Asian countries on the periphery of the world capitalist system were still subject to colonial rule. From 1800 on, the

center—periphery polarization took the form of a contrast between industrialized areas and areas linked to colonialism and deprived of industry. The peoples of Asia and Africa, inspired by half a century of ideological and political redefinition around a new nationalism, burst into revolt after 1945. In the ensuing 15 years, first Asia, then Africa regained their political independence. Everything was set for what Bandung called new ‘developmentalism’: independence, modernization, industrialization. The strategic alliance between this movement and the Soviet Union enabled the latter to escape isolation.

A dialogue was opened between the Afro-Asian movement and that in Latin America, which was not faced with the struggle for political independence and the affirmation of a non-European culture but was concerned with the demands of modernization and industrialization of the continent.

### 4.3 The Bandung Era: 1955–1975

If I define Bandung as the dominant characteristic of the second phase of the postwar period, it is not from any “third worldist” predilection, but because the world system was organized around the emergence of the third world.

Modernization and industrialization brought radical change to Asia, Africa, and Latin America, in varying degrees that will be discussed in detail in this book. The world of today and tomorrow can no longer be what it was in the five previous centuries of capitalist deployment. Accumulation of capital on a world scale has taken on a new dimension.

The Bandung era, with the triumph of the ideology of development, was based on a range of seeming truths, specific to each region of the world but all deeply rooted in prevailing beliefs: Keynesianism; the myth of catching up through Soviet-style ‘socialism’; and the myth of catching up through third world interdependence. These prevailing myths have been subject to critical examination, but to a limited and little-understood degree.

Throughout the period the third world was the stage for constant confrontation between various ‘developmentalist’ lines of differing degrees of social, ideological, and cultural radicalism. Maoism between 1965 and 1975 represents the apogee. During this period the Soviet Union escaped from its isolation by allying with the rising tide of third world national liberation. This gave the world system the appearance of a bipolarity determined by conflict between two superpowers. It was only a matter of appearances. The Soviet Union gradually wore itself down in the arms race imposed by Washington. The strategic goal of the Soviet Union’s efforts to smash NATO was not to conquer Europe or to export ‘socialism,’ but merely to end U.S. world hegemony and replace it with peaceful coexistence in a multi-centric world. The strategy has finally failed.

Throughout the period, Western capital has remained glued to the United States, not through fear of Soviet expansionism—the Western ruling class knew this was an unreal danger despite manipulation of public opinion—but for the



profound reason that capitalist accumulation was penetrating on a world scale. Europe and Japan made advances but did not perceive their conflict with the United States as analogous to imperialist conflicts in previous stages of history.

#### **4.4 The Collapse of the Global System: 1975–1992**

The third phase of the postwar cycle saw the collapse of the three pillars on which internal and world order rested. The crisis began in the capitalist West and called into question the myth of unlimited growth, with 1968 as the decisive turning point. The subsequent years offered hope for a possible revival of a Western left stupefied by a pro-imperialist recruitment from the end of the nineteenth century. Such hopes were rapidly extinguished in inconsistent projects. By 1980 the way was open for a neoliberal offensive that held sway but could not lead the Western societies out of the dark tunnel of prolonged crisis or revive the illusions of unlimited growth.

In turn a hardening of North–South relations accompanying the crisis of capitalist accumulation hastened the disillusionment with developmentalism in the third world. Radical regimes collapsed one after the other and surrendered to reactionary structural adjustment policies imposed by the West during the 1980s. The collapse was the result not of external aggression but of a combination of the internal contradictions of the Bandung project and a new external crisis accompanying the overthrow of the existing world system.

The failure of the Bandung project also revealed the weakness of Soviet support. Sovietism, the third pillar of the postwar system, had the most shattering collapse. The edifice seemed so solid that conservative ideologues described it as “irreversible totalitarianism.” But it was gnawed away from within and collapsed in the space of a few months, leaving behind nothing but chaos. Here too, of course, collapse resulted from a dramatic acceleration in the Soviet Union’s ‘conventional’ capitalism, as well as from external factors, namely, Washington’s victory in the arms race.

History never stops. The completed postwar cycle can also be seen as a transition between what came before and what follows. At the end of World War II, actually existing capitalism still retained certain fundamental characteristics of its historical heritage.

The historically constructed national bourgeois states formed the political and social framework for national capitalist economies, with national productive systems broadly controlled and directed by national capital; these states were in strong competition with each other and together constituted the centers of the world system. After the centers had their successive industrial revolutions during the nineteenth century, there was a near total distinction between industrialization at the center and absence of industry at the periphery.

Since World War II both characteristics have gradually changed. After regaining their political independence, the peripheries embarked on industrialization, although on unequal terms, to the point that apparent homogeneity previously induced by a shared lack of industry gave way to increasing differentiation between a semi-industrialized third world and a fourth world that had not begun to industrialize. Capitalist globalization throughout the centers broke through the boundaries of national productive systems and began to reshape them as segments of a worldwide productive system.

The postwar cycle may now be regarded as a period of transition between the old system and the new. The essential characteristics of the new system need to be described, and its contradictions and trends identified. The uneven development at the periphery and the globalization of capital are the main challenges facing theoretical analysis and social and political practice.

Is third world industrialization the start of a geographical spread of capitalism that will gradually obliterate the center-periphery polarization? Or will the polarization be replicated in new forms? If so, what forms?

Is the lack of industrialization in the “fourth world” a mere delay in the homogenizing expansion of capitalism on a world scale? Is the delay attributable to internal factors specific to the societies in question or to profound laws whereby polarization differentiates among the peripheral countries and marginalizes some of them? Does the decline of efficiency in the nation-states require an alternative system of political management of the capitalist system on national and world scales? Are we on the road to building such a system? If so, what will its characteristics be and what laws will operate?

To answer these questions we must take into account both the laws governing capital accumulation and the political and ideological responses of different social sectors to the expansion of capitalism. The future remains uncertain. Actually existing capitalism must adapt to the political solutions of the struggles occasioned by the conflict of social interests.

I shall summarize the answer I have given in recent years. Third world industrialization will not end the polarization that I believe is inherent in world capitalism. It will shift the mechanisms and forms to other levels determined by the financial, technological, cultural, and military monopolies enjoyed by the centers, but it will not replicate the developed countries’ social evolution. Western society was first transformed by the Industrial Revolution and the ongoing agricultural revolution. The vast lands of the Americas served as an escape valve for the pressure brought by European population growth, while colonial conquest assured an abundance of cheap raw materials. Fordism came along to alleviate the historic tension between capital and labor, facilitated by the reduction of the reserve army of labor in the centers. By contrast, the industrializing third world has none of these favorable factors to soften the savage effects of expanding capitalism. Here the coexistence of a rapidly increasing active labor army and an ever plentiful reserve labor army leads to acute and potentially revolutionary social

conflict. This characteristic situation of modern peripheral capitalism creates political and ideological circumstances conducive to the formation of popular alliances between the active working class, the peasants, and the impoverished marginalized masses in the reserve army of labor.

In the fourth world the social system becomes grotesque. The overwhelming majority are the marginalized poor and peasant masses excluded from any agricultural revolution. The minority ruling class can make no claim to historical legitimacy. Struggles in the workplace are weak because of the marginalization, so the conflict shifts to the cultural plane. This is symptomatic of the crisis but offers no genuine response to its challenge.

In the developed West the conflict between the globalization of capital penetration eroding the historic role of the nation-state as the management framework for historic social compromises and the permanence of political and ideological systems based on national realities will not be easily resolved. Neither U.S. military hegemony nor a German-dominated European 'supermarket' can resolve the problem. Dividing responsibilities on a regional basis by linking various parts of the South and the East to one of the three centers in the developed North or West is no answer, either. In the short term the Soviet collapse is bound to bring a capitalist expansion similar to that of the periphery. Social democratic responses along Western models will not be allowed to develop here.

During the postwar cycle political and ideological conflicts and the expression of progressive alternative projects have been constrained by the historical shortcomings of the three prevailing ideologies: Western social democracy, Eastern Sovietism, and Southern national liberation ideology. The left on a world scale has shown signs in the recent past of going beyond these visions.

The unexpected crisis in Europe in the mid-1970s gave hopes of a leftist revival and a redefinition of the socialist outlook free of the dogma of the old social democracy, whose success was closely linked to postwar modernization and the dogma of Sovietism. These hopes were speedily dashed, and the retreat of social democracy has so far redounded to the benefit of the old right.

In third world countries there was constant debate and often violent conflict between moderates favoring state power in the Bandung mold and others who argued that radicalization was the only possible response to the decline of non-democratic populism and its inevitable cooptation by world capitalism. These debates form a background to the discussion in this book.

The debate revolved around a central issue: What is actually existing capitalism? Had it achieved its historic role? What was the struggle for socialism? This debate led naturally to questioning Sovietism. From the mid-1950s—and more precisely after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956—Stalinism became subject to criticism. While the prevailing critique made in the Soviet Union—from Khrushchev to Gorbachev—came from the right, in the 1960 and 1970s Maoism offered a critique from the left.

These issues must be picked up again today. The rapid collapse of the myths of the postwar period enables us to go much further than before. World War I ended the first cycle of the development of socialist thought and action. The second

cycle, initiated by the Russian Revolution, is also closed. In response to the challenge of capitalism, which has itself embarked on a new cycle of operations, the third cycle of socialism remains to be built.

If a new socialist alternative is not developed, and if progressive social and ideological forces do not struggle for that alternative, the contradictions within capitalism will not generate a “new order” (as the neoliberals in power everywhere like to call it), but merely catastrophic chaos.

## 4.5 Establishing the Global Economic System: 1945–1955

With hindsight we can see that the first postwar decade was the period of the establishment of the system that would operate in the 1960s and reach crisis in the 1970 and 1980s.<sup>2</sup> The United States emerged from the war with a revived and flourishing economy—the only one of the time—with a monopoly on the ultimate weapon. It decided at the Potsdam Conference in 1945 to attack the USSR and to establish world hegemony by imposing a Cold War. This was dreamed up by Churchill, who had not forgotten the defeat of the imperialist powers when they tried to overthrow the Russian Revolution after World War I. As a first step, the United States had to recruit Western Europe and achieve a reconciliation with the vanquished—Germany and Japan. The American people were ideologically prepared for this policy by an unprecedented hammering of Communism that culminated in semi-fascist state-sponsored McCarthyism and the odious Rosenberg trial.

U.S. strategy in Europe and Japan soon achieved total success, thanks to the unconditional recruitment of the entire bourgeoisie and all political parties, including socialist and social democratic parties. Communist parties were isolated after their exclusion from government in France and Italy in 1947. The Marshall Plan paved the way for a rapid rebuilding of Europe, where the United States encouraged reconciliation and a commitment to economic integration. The Organization for European Economic Cooperation was created, which became the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1961; it was followed by the Council of Europe in 1949, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, and the Treaty of Rome in 1957. These bodies were not conceived to build a Europe able to compete with the United States and achieve autonomy, but to create a subsystem of an open worldwide system necessary for U.S. hegemony. The groundwork for the Fordist expansion of the 1960s was laid at the economic level (gradual globalization of the market), and at the social and

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<sup>2</sup> From November 1949 to February 1953, sixteen issues of the journal *Etudiants Anticolonialistes* appeared under the direction of Jacques Verges. Contributors included officials of the Association des Etudiants Musulmans Nord-africains (AEMNA), the Vietnamese Vo The Quang and Do Dai Phuoc, students from Reunion and the Caribbean (Justin, Fardin), and my first sub-Saharan African friends (Malik Sangaret, Abdou Moumouni). The journal supported peace for Vietnam, for North Korea, and for Egypt during partisan attacks on the Suez Canal in 1951.

political level (the historic compromise between capital and labor). In Japan, the San Francisco Treaty of 1951, the establishment of a controlled democracy, and the reconstitution of the *zaibatsu* oligopolies were preliminary to the takeoff of following years.

From the start the strategy of U.S. hegemony was to establish an anti-Soviet military bloc with the United States in the political leadership role. The Truman doctrine (1947); the creation of NATO (1949); the admission into NATO of Turkey, Greece, and Germany (1952); the incorporation of Portugal (1951) and Spain (1953) into the U.S. military system, although these two countries remained fascist; and the San Francisco Treaty (1951), complemented later by the U.S.-Japan security pact (1960), were part of this dimension of military control within the U.S. hegemonic strategy.

In the face of this deployment, the USSR remained in isolation and on the defensive until the mid-1950s. It was obliged to join the arms race to end the U.S. monopoly in this field. At Yalta the USSR gained the right to establish a protective flank in Eastern Europe, but no more. The establishment of supporting regimes in the region created difficulties that were never really overcome. The anticapitalist and antifascist social forces were too weak to take power alone (Poland, Hungary, Rumania). Or the local Communists did take power by liberating their countries from the Fascist yoke (Yugoslavia and Albania) and had no intention of becoming agents of Soviet policy. However, we accepted the establishment of these regimes. What was the alternative? The terrible repression of Greek Communism (1945–1948) showed us that the West would not have established anything other than fascist regimes in Eastern Europe. Even the pro-Western populism of Kemal Atatürk's Turkey did not seem to suit them, and so imperialism imposed Menderes in 1950 through multiparty elections. The strategy was repeated later in many third world countries.

The creation of the Cominform in 1947 had the goal of legitimizing the defensive posture of the USSR by closing ranks around the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Zhdanov doctrine (1948) divided the world into two camps—capitalist and socialist—assigned the countries of the West and the East to each of the camps, and overlooked the third world liberation movement.

Moscow met difficulties in its strategy of consolidating its protective flank, as indicated by the series of trials against opponents from the right and left in the new people's democracies (1947–1948), the condemnation of Titoism (1948), the attempted blockade of Berlin (1948–1949), and signs of revolt in Yugoslavia and Berlin (1951). The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) was created in 1949 in response to the Marshall Plan, but it never really coordinated the development plans of countries in the region. The Warsaw Pact was formed in 1955 in response to NATO.

After the death of Stalin in 1953 and the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956, the USSR embarked on a new strategy aimed at breaking the previous isolation through an alliance with the third world, whose emergence was signaled in the Bandung conference of 1955. The Soviet system began to catch up militarily

(Sputnik was launched in 1957) but remained politically weak, as the uprisings in Poznan and Budapest showed.

The real obstacle to U.S. hegemony came from the Afro-Asian national liberation movement. The countries in these regions were determined to throw off the colonial yoke of the nineteenth century. Imperialism has never been able to make the social and political compromises necessary to install stable powers operating to its advantage in the countries of the capitalist periphery. I interpret this failure, about which I shall have more to say, as evidence that such compromise is objectively unattainable, that the polarization caused by capitalist expansion creates in the periphery an objective situation that is by its very nature explosive and unstable, and potentially revolutionary.

Fifteen years after World War II the world political structure had been radically transformed. For the first time in history the system of sovereign states was extended to the entire globe. From the time of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, when this system replaced Christian feudalism, through the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, this system had been restricted to the West. The United States was integrated in a second phase from the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 to the formation of the League of Nations in 1922. Asia and Africa were treated as nonsovereign spaces—fair game for competitive expansion from the centers. The formation of the United Nations in 1945, and particularly the winning of independence by the peoples of Asia and Africa from 1945 to 1960, brought a qualitative change in the political organization of the world capitalist system.

The transformation came about through the national liberation struggles that mobilized all the peoples of Asia and Africa. Imperialism never made the slightest concession without a struggle. The formation of our current international system is not something that capitalism sought and planned for. On the contrary, it is the result of global capital's successful short-term adjustment to changes forced on it. The hegemonic power of the postwar system—the United States—adapted more readily than the old colonial powers in decline, and in the case of the weakest national liberation movements surrendering to neocolonial compromise, it could sometimes even appear to support the evolution. Conversely, the United States led the imperialist fight against the strongest radical movements—those that were led by Communist parties (China, Vietnam, Cuba) or by determined nationalists supported by a radicalized popular movement (Nasserism, Arab and African socialism). The United States was our principal enemy. Naturally, Europe and Japan were in solidarity with the hegemonic power.

Of course the qualitative transformation in the world political system considered here is not the “end of history,” nor does it guarantee any real stability. The new hierarchy of powers appearing after 1980 only provides a semblance of stability. There is no firm historical compromise that will bring stability.

There is no doubt that the great tide of national liberation (1945–1975) was marked by real gains for Asia, Africa, and Latin America. But the advances were inadequate since they fell short of their goal. By the end of the postwar cycle, third world states were turned back into a comprador role. It is of little interest to make a

global assessment of the pluses and minuses. The ever present question was where and how far the movement could go to create the most favorable conditions for long-term change.

The most striking advances were made in China, then Vietnam and Korea, where the fight for national liberation was merged with the fight for socialism. From 1947 to 1949 I followed the progress of the People's Liberation Army on the map of China. I read Mao Zedong's *On New Democracy* (1940) in a French edition and accepted the view that the age was no longer one of bourgeois revolution because the colonial bourgeoisie had joined the imperialist project for expansion. Rather, it was the period of socialist revolution, developing in an unbroken succession on the periphery of the capitalist system. The democratic, anti-imperialist revolution was led by the proletariat and its (Communist) party in close alliance with the peasantry. It neutralized the national bourgeoisie and isolated the comprador feudal bloc. The circumstances were ripe for speedy passage to the building of socialism.

I saw that North Korea was engaged in a similar process. The local anti-imperialist front had liberated the country from Japanese colonialists, although it was later obliged by the military context of Japanese capitulation to surrender the southern part of the country to the dictatorship established by the U.S. occupying forces. I saw that Vietnam was also following this path after 1945. The appalling colonial war waged by France with US support until their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 attested to imperialism's determination to keep national liberation off the agenda. The Geneva agreement in 1954 and the provisional partition of the country seemed to me justified, as I believed that in a second phase struggle in the south would achieve its goal.

The Korean war (1950–1953) was further evidence of the collective will of the imperialists to oppose the movement. The refusal to recognize the People's Republic of China and the isolation imposed by the West were reminiscent of earlier imperialist attitudes toward the Russian Revolution.

The success of the national liberation movement was reckoned by its greatest advances. I believed that any liberation that did not go this far had not completed its task. I believed the objective conditions existed to complete the task throughout Asia and Africa, beginning with Egypt.

Like all young Egyptians of the time I was excited by the radicalization of the anti-imperialist and popular social movement, which culminated in the general strike of February 21, 1946, and by the success of the new Communist movement. The first Communist party, founded in the wake of the Russian Revolution, had been subject to severe repression and was virtually wiped out in the 1930s. Revived in World War II, it quickly won the respect of all those in Egypt with a patriotic and social conscience. It was the sole force opposing the monarchy that was loathed by politicized elements of the popular classes and the radicalized petty bourgeoisie. It seemed capable of leading a united front similar to those in China and Vietnam. Egypt had never enjoyed any genuine democracy in its modern history and repression was a constant. The exploiting classes and the imperialist powers feared Communism. This did not prevent the red flag from waving over the

Nile Valley. A genuine bourgeois democracy at the time would have allowed the Communists to win mass support, and possibly even elections. Neither the bourgeoisie nor the Western powers could run that risk.

The establishment of the state of Israel and the first Palestine war in 1948 gave the local reactionary forces breathing space. The debate around the 1948 events ensured the collapse of the monarchy, the central political pillar of imperialist and reactionary domination. The Wafdist electoral victory in 1950, the demand to abrogate the unjust Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936, and the beginning of partisan action against the occupied Suez Canal zone gave hope that an antifeudal, anti-comprador revolution was feasible. The burning of Cairo (early 1952), the ousting of the Wafdist government, and the ensuing ungovernability of the country led to the Free Officers' Coup in July 1952. This simultaneously raised hopes of possible social advance and cut the ground out from under the feet of the progressive forces.

Nasserism nurtured hopes of Western support. Egypt made all the necessary concessions, but ultimately it came to realize that it could expect nothing from the United States. After the tripartite declaration of 1950 (United States, Great Britain, and France), the United States sought to control the entire region through compliant regimes in Israel and Turkey. The United States required the Arabs to join military pacts (on the pretext of a nonexistent Soviet threat) and took over from the discomfited British and French protectorates. When Nasser refused to sign the Baghdad pact in 1954, Washington began an offensive to overthrow him. This was the precise moment of the crystallization of the Bandung front. The USSR arranged for a delivery of Czech weapons to Egypt. In response to Egypt's support for the Algerian Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) and the nationalization of the Suez Canal, France and Britain set out to bring Nasser down. The conservatives in London and the socialists in Paris were shoulder to shoulder, but they failed in this final colonial adventure because they had forgotten they could act only according to U.S. plans and instructions. This opened a new chapter for national liberation in Egypt under circumstances very different from those of the previous decade. The bourgeoisie in Egypt, and elsewhere, resumed or seemed to resume leadership of national liberation, in contradiction with the fundamental positions I had supported since 1945.

The Mashreq (West Asia) prepared to challenge the uneasy balances of the period between the world wars. The establishment of the Ba'ath Party, which would determine the fate of the region from the end of the 1950s on, did not go unnoticed, any more than the ideological competition between the Communist and Ba'ath movements. We were skeptical about the Ba'ath Party's anti-imperialist stance and disturbed by its sometimes fascist style. After the riots at Setif in 1945 and in Tunisia in 1952, we knew that the days of colonial power in the Maghreb (northwest Africa) were numbered. But who would lead the liberation? Could neocolonial order be imposed by the Moroccan monarchy and the Tunisian bourgeoisie to whom France handed power in 1956? Would the powerful grass-roots movement of the Algerian FLN overcome the anticommunism of its leaders? The anticommunism was fueled, all too sadly, by the servile attitude of the



Maghreb Communists to the French Communist Party (PCF), whose policy was at best ambiguous.

The apparent power of the Tudeh Party in Iran fueled our optimism, despite the Soviet abandonment of the autonomous republics of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in 1945. The chauvinism the Shah exploited through this was short-lived. Mossadegh nationalized oil during his brief period in power (1951–1953), but with his overthrow, the Shah's bloody dictatorship was ensured for a quarter of a century. In 1954, Iran and Turkey aligned with the United States, which was subjecting the entire region to its mania for pacts.

Because of the solidarity between our group of young Egyptians and black African students, I followed the embryonic sub-Saharan liberation struggles with great enthusiasm. The Rassemblement Democratique Africain (RDA) had just held its founding congress at Bamako, signalling the certain end of colonialism. In 1951 came the distressing 'treachery' of the RDA's break with the PCF (although the latter's policy of supporting the French Union also seemed to us ambiguous). Were there any social and political forces with more vision than these moderates, to whom the colonial powers would later entrust the task of managing neocolonialism? The ruthlessly quelled rebellion in Madagascar in 1947, the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in 1952, and the guerrilla action waged by the Union des Populations Camerounaises in Cameroon in 1955 all suggested that such forces existed. We were delighted by the foundation of the Parti Africain de Pindependance (PAI) in Senegal in 1957. We did not think that imperialism was over and that Western 'democracies' had suddenly taken note of the intolerable injustice of colonialism when Ghana gained independence in 1957, when the All-African Peoples Conference met in Accra in 1958, when at last the French government envisaged autonomy for its colonies in a French community. We believed that the African peoples had forced the change and that imperialism was merely trying to preempt radicalization of their liberation struggle.

We were convinced that the Asian and African liberation struggles were in the foreground of the world scene after 1945. We also believed that we must count on our own resources, as the USSR and China in defensive isolation could offer only moral support. We did not expect much from the prevailing Western orthodoxy. The socialists and social democrats were renowned in all the colonial wars. Even the PCF, on its own and taking a brave stand over the Vietnam War, gradually succumbed to chauvinist pressures over Algeria and Africa. The Fourth Republic was brought down by a dogged Algerian people's struggle and the equivocation of French democrats in the face of fascist agitation from the settlers. Would the new Gaullist regime take a tougher line on the Algerian war? We feared so—but we were wrong.

We judged national liberation by the standard of the victories in China and Vietnam. We attributed the same potential to the liberation and partisan wars throughout Southeast Asia after 1945—in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. In the early 1950s, the reactionary powers or local moderate nationalists took over and established a measure of internal order. We believed this was only a temporary setback. We thought that in the new Bandung era the conflict between imperialism and third world nations would take a different shape from before.

We also believed that the partition of India in 1947 and the establishment of Congress Party rule were major victories for imperialism. Imperialism had been able to call a brutal halt to a Chinese-style liberation war. The diplomatic rapprochement between Nehru's India and China and the signing of a treaty over Tibet in 1954 seemed to us positive, but our opinion of the Congress Party did not change. The year after Bandung things began to look different.

When I was at university, Latin America seemed a distant unknown. We had a better understanding of what was happening in the Caribbean—in Haiti, Jamaica, or Guadeloupe—than of the politics of Brazil, Mexico, or Argentina. I found out about the problems of Latin America when I read the first reports of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America under its mentor Raul Prebisch.

We had no awareness of the purpose and effect of Latin American populism of the 1930 and 1940s and saw it through the eyes of the Brazilian, Argentine, and Mexican Communist parties. If we saw populism as too moderate for the challenge, the United States still saw it as an adversary to be conquered. Vargas was deposed by the Brazilian military in 1945. Batista seized power in Cuba and Peron was overthrown in Argentina in 1955.

These events showed that the United States could and would dominate the continent only through loathsome and obedient dictatorships, corralled together in 1948 in the Organization of American States. The OAS complemented the inter-American defense agreement signed at Rio de Janeiro in 1947—a new expression of the Monroe Doctrine. We were therefore only too ready to support the new liberation movement launched by Fidel Castro.

I have attempted here to portray the events of the first postwar decade as I experienced them at the time. I retain today the same overall perception of this evolution, although I obviously could not foresee that it would lead to the new Bandung phase of liberation and progress for our societies in Asia and Africa. As of that date the conflict was to be waged in very different circumstances.

Until the late 1950s and the Sino-Soviet split in 1956, I shared the prevailing Marxist-Leninist view of the basic nature of socialism and socialist construction in the USSR. I had not yet realized that the theory of capitalist polarization which I had begun to formulate in my doctoral thesis called for a rethinking of the challenge posed by actually existing capitalism. On the other hand, some of us were not fooled by the idyllic image of a perfect society furnished by Soviet propaganda. We had traveled in 'socialist' countries, noted the absence of democracy, and read enough to be aware of brutal repression. But two other factors that Western Communists tended to overlook seemed to us more significant than the shortcomings of Sovietism.

The first was the intransigent hostility of the Western powers to the Soviet Union (I am thinking of McCarthyism, or 30 years later the Reagan and Bush image of the "Evil Empire"). We knew that the Soviet Union was on the defensive, but the level of the West's hostility led us to believe that the country's system represented a real threat to capitalism. We never thought for a moment that any sane Western politician could believe that Stalin had any intention of invading Western Europe. Our solidarity with the USSR did not require total belief in the

system. We had become used to the thought that since 1492 the Western powers had never intervened in any third world area for any justifiable cause, but always and without exception to harm the people. We believed almost spontaneously that imperialist capitalism could not allow any country to refuse its dictates. The West blamed the USSR for doing just that.

The second factor was that we had a much more radical critique of bourgeois democracy than did many Western progressives. We saw every day how such democracy was systematically denied our peoples and how Western diplomacy only sought democracy when it was in its tactical interests to do so. There has been no change in this. The argument for bourgeois 'democracy' has no psychological appeal. Socialism or any popular advance must be more democratic than any bourgeois democracy. We turned their argument on its head. However, when it came to our own countries we were justifiably strict about the democratic shortfall of the populist nationalist regimes. Our doubts and criticisms of Nasserism from the outset were on this score. We were right, but we should have seen that this argument also applied to the USSR.

About the general crisis of capitalism, as portrayed in the Soviet terminology of the time, we were highly optimistic. We believed that the objective conditions were essentially the same as China's for all or nearly all third world countries. Hence radical national liberation struggles and the quest for socialist revolution were on the agenda. The later emergence from Bandung of a new national bourgeois initiative shows in retrospect that we oversimplified. We did not believe that socialist revolution was on the agenda except on the periphery of the system. This brought much soul-searching, especially in the relations between our overseas student movement (and our journal *Etudiants Anticolonialistes*) and a French Communist Party that sacrificed colonial independence on the altar of an illusory socialist reconstruction of France, which would sweep dependent territories into the revolution.

Of course I was particularly conscious of the struggles waged in Egypt and the Arab world between 1945 and 1957. The journal *Moyen Orient*, published in Paris from 1949 on was a faithful but partial mirror of our concerns of the time, as the emphasis in the magazine was on the international aspects of the conflicts.<sup>3</sup> With hindsight, the analysis of the time seems to have hit the nail on the head.

The Palestine issue was always a major concern for us. In December 1947, the USSR supported the partition of Palestine, as did all the Communist parties of the time, including those in the Arab world. This provoked spirited debate and conflict, followed by well-meant self-criticism which was, in my view, insufficiently grounded. The Third International and the Egyptian and Arab Communists have always condemned Zionism, not only as nationalist and racist but also because it promotes a settlement colony that denies indigenous Palestinians the right to

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<sup>3</sup> From June 1949 to July 1953, twenty-five issues of the Journal *Moyen Orient* appeared under the direction of Maxime Rodinson. Contributors included Ismail Abdallah; Iraj Eskandari, a Tudeh Party leader; Raymond Aghion; and Yves Benot. It produced interesting studies such as a history of Tudeh and of the Muslim Brotherhood. It advocated the notion of Arab neutralism several years ahead of the Bandung era.

existence. The Egyptian Communist movement may still be proud of supporting the anti-Zionist trend among progressive Jews in Egypt since the 1940s. It has no need of self-criticism on this point even if Zionist propaganda has been quick to confuse anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

The partition of Palestine deserves closer examination. What tends to be forgotten is that the Soviet Union and the Arab, Palestinian, and Egyptian democratic forces sought independence for a unified, secular Palestinian state open to all its inhabitants, including recent Jewish immigrants. This last was no mean concession. Zionists always rejected this solution. They were backed by the Western powers and allowed to collect weapons and form a state within a state while the Palestinian liberation movement was disarmed. The *fait accompli* benefitted Zionist expansion. It is debatable whether in these circumstances the partition proposal was the best or the worst tactic for damage control. Note that the UN resolution for partition was accepted by all the Western countries and all of the socialist bloc of the time, but it was rejected by all the African and Asian countries. Perhaps the Soviets had broad tactical reasons for backing partition. The USSR was extremely isolated and was trying desperately to break the U.S. monopoly on nuclear weapons. The recruitment of Egyptian Communists to this tactic was debatable. The subsequent one-sided self-criticism seems to be an oversimplification of the situation in 1947 and 1948.

The Egyptian Communist movement has always taken an intelligent stand on Arab unity. It has never accepted the proposition of a multiplicity of so-called Arab nations and of state recognition as the goal of liberation. It has similarly never ignored regional differences much further in history than imperialist partition of the Arab world. It has never adopted idealist arguments of pan-Arab nationalism. The Egyptian (Wafd) and Sudanese (Umma) bourgeois nationalist movements clouded the character of Sudan. The Egyptian and Sudanese Communist movements defined a strategy of common struggle of two fraternal peoples against common external and internal enemies. Egypt and Syria formed a United Arab Republic in 1958 when progress in Arab unity seemed possible after the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq. The Egyptian Communist movement did not hesitate to criticize the Nasser regime for its anti-democratic methods, which overlooked the specifics of the countries concerned. History has proved us right, as these methods were largely to blame for the failure of the union. Communist organizations on the ground took different stands, but the differences now seem marginal. The democratic movement for national liberation (Hadeto) held back its criticism of Nasser. The Egyptian Communist Party was more openly in support of the Iraqi prime minister of the time, Abdel Karim Kassem. In my view now, both positions were weak but fell within a broadly correct line.

From the time of the revival of Egyptian Communism (1942–1945) to the dissolution of the two parties in 1965 there was a multiplicity of Communist organizations. Violent personal disputes between the organizations prevented sober consideration of real differences in analysis and strategy. I now wonder if the search for unity (or the alternative of a ‘victory’ snatched by one organization) was not the effect of the prevailing idea of the ‘party’ as the sole and essential defender of the

“correct line.” A better approach to internal democracy within one or several parties would bring clearer debate without preventing a common front on many issues.

The multiplicity of organizations concealed a differing view of the broad revolutionary strategy on the historical agenda. For some national liberation came first. I may be stating this position in extreme terms but without wishing to be tendentious. According to this analysis, Egypt needed a democratic bourgeois national revolution. Others emphasized the need to move quickly from this phase to socialist construction. I do not think that the names of the various organizations can be pinned to the two lines, as they ran the gamut, even if the dogmatism of the time brought obscurity. Both sides cited as authorities the Soviet Union, Mao's *On New Democracy*, and so on. The ambiguities of debate and personality clashes worked against the brief unity in 1958, although we were happy to see it at the time.

The Free Officers' Coup of July 1952 and the emergence and evolution of Nasserism from 1955 to 1961 shifted the choice from the strategic to the immediate question: critical support or opposition to the new regime. Hindsight and a reexamination of the positions taken and the various justifications abound in the progressive Egyptian literature of today. It rarely grasps what I believe to be the essential point. Some activists in Hadeto argued that since they had been in the clandestine Free Officers' Organization, their party was better able to make a correct assessment of the progressive character of Nasserism from its birth. This does not seem to be the real issue.

Since 1960 I have argued that Nasser's program was essentially a bourgeois national proposal from the outset and never went any further. Its populist style did not contradict its content. It was the only possible way of implementing a bourgeois national proposal. The so-called liberal Egyptian national bourgeoisie was historically weak. Support of the popular classes was necessary and it was feared they would not fulfill the project (hence the stubborn anti-democratic side of Nasserism). The statist form of the proposal had nothing to do with the “transition to socialism,” but was the only effective way to implement it. Unfortunately the strategic alliance between the Soviet Union and third world national liberation movements after Bandung, combined with the statism of the Soviet Union, had the broad effect of confusing statism and socialism.

With hindsight I believe that history has proved me right. Nasserism gave way to Sadatism, just as Brezhnev gave way to Yeltsin, although neither of these abrupt changes can be described as counterrevolution. I see them rather as an acceleration of the internal tendencies of the two systems. The new bourgeois class formed within and by statism is obliged to normalize its status. I have also said and written that in neither case was the evolution inevitable. A leftward evolution was possible, but it depended on a maturity of the socialist forces within these (and other) societies. In retrospect I feel quite comfortable in describing the bourgeois national project as utopian.

With this view I re-read the stands taken by the Egyptian Communist movement in a different way from the usual. I believe that Hadeto's critical support, sometimes challenged by the anticommunism of the authorities, was a fundamental mistake. It stemmed from the idea that a bourgeois national stage was

essential and desirable and would be supplanted by socialism. My position is that actually existing capitalism as a polarizing world system makes any bourgeois plan essentially comprador. To deny this is to nurture the illusion of the bourgeois national utopia. I can now advance this position with greater clarity than 30 years ago, but I had an inkling even then.

I differ with the strong criticism that the Egyptian Communist Party, which I totally supported from 1950 to 1951, was fundamentally wrong about the character of the Nasserist proposal. The criticism has been shared by the Egyptian Communist Party since 1956 and is repeated ad nauseam today. It seems to me one-sided and coming out of a strategy that history has shown to be a failure. I leave aside secondary matters such as the ‘fascist’ nature of the regime and possible imperialist complicity. Was it a mistake to see in the proposal a bourgeois plan doomed to failure?

The leftist position of the 1950s contrasted two alternatives: either a socialist revolution unbroken into stages or a bourgeois national revolution. I can now say that this antithetical approach came from an analysis, common to both options, that underestimated the polarization inherent in capitalist expansion. I can now say that Marxism was gradually stifled for failing to take this aspect into account. The social democrats seeking bourgeois revolution or the Leninist-Maoists seeking socialist revolution miss the real point. What is the character of revolution on the agenda when polarization makes both bourgeois revolution and socialist revolution out of the question?

I started my doctoral thesis in 1954, immediately after gaining the necessary higher diplomas. I did not have to hunt for a topic. I had long since decided to contribute to a Marxist analysis of the origins and course of ‘underdevelopment.’

I had a clear idea of what I wanted to do: to examine the birth of underdevelopment and its implementation as a product of worldwide capitalist expansion—and not as a backward form of capitalist development. I chose as supervisor Maurice Bye. He and François Perroux responded favorably to my first outline and were always strongly supportive. They made detailed comments and encouraged me to be more precise while respecting my strong methodological choices.

I wrote the thesis fairly quickly and have maintained this habit. As I said above, I do not take the academic approach of an illusory quest for ‘perfection’ sustained by an excess of footnotes. I prefer to be a militant whose writings aim to carry the debate forward. The work was well advanced in the autumn of 1955, and I virtually completed it in the first half of 1956. The Suez Canal was nationalized in July. Subsequent events, including the attack on Egypt in October, kept me fully occupied for a while, and I did not return to my manuscript until early 1957. I presented my thesis in June, married Isabelle in Paris in August, and returned to Egypt in September.

Without false modesty I may say that I am proud of my insights of the time. I had taken a position well ahead of its time. I argued that development and underdevelopment were two sides of the same coin: capitalist expansion. I chose a straightforward title for my thesis: “On the Origins of Underdevelopment:

Capitalist Accumulation on a World Scale.” For reasons of academic propriety my supervisor persuaded me to substitute a more esoteric title.<sup>4</sup>

Never before to my knowledge had underdevelopment been seen as a product of capitalism. The central idea was that an ‘underdeveloped’ economy did not exist of itself but was an element in the world capitalist economy. The societies of the periphery were subjected to a constant structural adjustment (the very term used in my thesis) to the demands of capital accumulation on a world scale. In other words, there was no answer to polarization within the framework of capitalism. This was a new idea. The *desarrollismo* theory was just being formulated. The criticism by the so-called Latin American dependency school did not emerge until the late 1960s. The methodological hypothesis of the so-called world economy school was formulated still later, in the 1970s. The opposite theory—Rostow’s “stages of economic growth”—was not formulated until several years after I had written my thesis. My thesis was, I believe, a prior critique of Rostow.

The thesis was a substantial text of 629 pages. I was constrained by the examination requirements, as I prefer brief syntheses without a display of the background material. It was expected that conclusions would be given statistical backing, although statistics do not reveal much. I was then a beginner unaccustomed to a strict choice of the truly significant facts. I also had to outline the positions I wished to criticize—a good student exercise no doubt, but an encumbrance on the final text. I wanted to link the particular arguments to the fundamental theories from which they derived. I decided to include a critical reading of conventional economics and the basic principles of the law of value, the system’s dynamic of accumulation and reproduction, money, the business cycle, international exchange, and so on.

After the thesis was written I put it away in a drawer. Much later when the dependency school popularized the ideas that I had pioneered, I was invited to publish the thesis, and did so as *Accumulation à l’échelle mondiale* in 1970 (published in English by Monthly Review Press as *Accumulation on a World Scale in 1974*).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Les Effets structurels de l’integration internationale des economies precapitalistes: Une Etude theorique du mecanisme qui a engendre les economies dites sous-developpees” [The structural effects of the international integration of precapitalist economies: A theoretical study of the mechanism that has engendered the so-called underdeveloped economies] (Paris: University of Paris 1957, hereafter “Les Effets structurels”).

<sup>5</sup> See Samir Amin, *L’Accumulation à l’échelle mondiale* (Paris: Anthropos 1970), and in English, *Accumulation on a World Scale*, 2 vols. (New York: Monthly Review Press 1974, hereafter *Accumulation*).

## Chapter 5

# Historical Capitalism: Accumulation by Dispossession

Dominant bourgeois thought has replaced the historical reality of capitalism by an imaginary construction based on the principle, claimed to be eternal, of the rational and egoistic behaviour of the individual.<sup>1</sup> ‘Rational’ society—produced by the competition required by this principle—is thus seen as having arrived at the “end of history”. Conventional economics, which is the fundamental base of this thinking, therefore substitutes the generalised ‘market’ for the reality of capitalism (and the “capitalist market”).

Marxist thought has been built up based on quite another vision, that of the permanent transformation of the fundamental structures of societies, which is always historical.

In this framework—that of historical materialism—capitalism is historical, has had a beginning and will have an end. Accepting this principle, the nature of this historical capitalism should be the object of continual reflection, which is not always the case in the ranks of the “historical Marxisms” (that is, Marxism as interpreted by those who claim it). Certainly one can accept the very general idea that capitalism constitutes a ‘necessary’ stage, preparing conditions for socialism—a more advanced stage of human civilization. But this idea is too general and insufficient precisely because it reduces “capitalism—necessary stage” to really existing historical capitalism.

I shall sum up my reflections on this question in the following points that will be developed in the following pages:

*Accumulation through dispossession is a permanent feature in the history of capitalism.*

- Historical capitalism is, therefore, imperialist by nature at all stages of its development, in the sense that it polarises by the inherent effect of the laws that govern it.
- From this it follows that this capitalism cannot become the ‘unavoidable’ stage for the peoples of the peripheries of the historical capitalism system, that is necessary to create, here as elsewhere (in the centres of the system), the

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an extract from my book: *Ending the crisis of capitalism or Ending Capitalism* (Oxford: Fahamu Books, 2011).



conditions for overtaking it by ‘socialism’. “Development and under-development” are the two inseparable sides of the historical capitalism coin.

- This historical capitalism is itself inseparable from the conquest of the world by the Europeans. It is inseparable from the Eurocentric ideology which is, by definition, a non-universal form of civilization.
- Other forms of response to the need for “accelerated accumulation” (compared with the rhythms of the accumulation of the ancient epochs of civilization), a necessary premise for the socialism of the future, would have been ‘possible’. This can be discussed. But these forms, perhaps visible in an embryonic way elsewhere than in the Europe of the transition to capitalism (in China, among others), have not been implemented as they have been crushed by the European conquest.
- Thus there is no alternative for human civilisation other than to engage in a construction of socialism, this in turn being based on the strategic concepts that must command the objective results produced by the globalised and polarising expansion of ‘western’ capitalism/imperialism.

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 twentieth 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 % (at most) in 1500 to 37 % in 1900, to fall gradually during the twentieth century. The first four centuries (1500–1900) correspond to the conquest of the world by the Europeans, the twentieth century—which continues through to the twenty first 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 plunder 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 British 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 one 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 “aws 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 in spite 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 nineteenth century and twentieth 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 nineteenth 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 nineteenth century and twentieth 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 7–7.5 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 twentieth century, it widened still further, bringing the apparent per capita income to a level of 15–20 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 nineteenth 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 nineteenth 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 nineteenth century and twentieth 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 nineteenth 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 Civilization*, p. 108 et seq.) 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.

## 5.1 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 %). They are, however, capable of producing enough to feed (well) all their country’s population, and even export much of the

surplus production. This path, started by England in the eighteenth century (with the Enclosures) and gradually extended to the rest of Europe in the nineteenth century, constituted the essence of the historical path of capitalist development.

It seemed very effective. But whether it is effective or not, 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 nineteenth 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 nineteenth 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.

The question of natural resources constitutes a second decisive issue in the conflict of civilization 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 (nineteenth century), followed by a probably long decline, starting in the twentieth 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 sixteenth 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. 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 (the Ancien Régime) 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 % of the world population)—requires the “under-development” of the others (80 % 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.

### ***5.1.1 The Twentieth Century: The First Wave of Socialist Revolutions and the Awakening of the ‘South’***

Thus the apogee of the system lasted only a short while: hardly a century. The twentieth century experienced the first wave of the great revolutions conducted in the name of socialism (Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba) and the radicalization of the liberation struggles of Asia, Africa and Latin America (the peripheries of the imperialist/capitalist system) whose ambitions were expressed in the “Bandung project” (1955–1981).

This coincidence was not by chance. The globalisation of capitalism/imperialism had imposed the greatest tragedy in human history on the peoples of the peripheries concerned, showing up the destructive character of capital accumulation. The law of pauperisation formulated by Marx at the level of the system was still more violent than the father of socialist thought had imagined. This page of history has been turned over for good. The peoples of the periphery will no longer accept the destiny that capitalism reserves for them. This change of fundamental attitudes is irreversible. It means that capitalism has entered into its decline. This does not exclude various illusions: those of reforms capable of giving capitalism a human face (which it has never had for the majority of peoples), those of a possible “catching up” in the system, which is cherished by the governing classes in the ‘emerging’ countries, exhilarated by momentary success, those of nostalgic retreat (para-religious or para-ethnic) into which many of the ‘excluded’ peoples have sunk at the moment. These illusions continue as we are still in the trough of the wave. The wave of the revolutions of the twentieth century is spent and that of the new radicalism of the twenty first century has not yet affirmed itself. And in an interregnum, “a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”, as Gramsci wrote. The awakening of the peoples of the periphery has made itself felt since the twentieth century, not only because of their demographic catching up, but also by their express desire to reconstruct their State and their society, delinked from the imperialism of the four preceding centuries.

I therefore proposed looking at the twentieth century as one of the first wave of struggles for the emancipation of the workers and of peoples, of which I mention here only the main theses.

### ***5.1.2 Bandung and the First Globalization of the Struggles (1955–1981)***

The governments and peoples of Asia and Africa proclaimed at Bandung, in 1955, their desire to reconstruct the world system on a basis of recognizing the rights of nations that had up until then been dominated. This “right to development” was the foundation of globalisation at that time, implemented in a multipolar negotiated framework imposed on an imperialism that was forced to adjust to these new requirements.

The industrialisation progress that started during the Bandung era was not the result of imperialist logic but it was imposed by the victories of the peoples of the South. Undoubtedly, this progress cherished the illusion of “catching up” which seemed on the way to becoming a reality, while imperialism, forced to adjust to the demands of the development of the peripheries, recomposed itself around new forms of domination. The old contrast of imperialist countries/dominated countries, which was synonymous with the contrast of the industrialised countries/non-industrialised countries, gradually gave way to a new contrast based on the centralisation of the advantages associated with the “five new monopolies of the imperialist centres” (control over new technologies, natural resources, the global financial system, communications and weapons of mass destruction).

## 5.2 The Long Decline of Capitalism and the Long Transition to World Socialism

Is the long decline of capitalism the same as the long positive transition to socialism? If it is to be so, it is necessary that the twenty first century prolongs the twentieth century and radicalises the objectives of social transformation. This is completely possible but the conditions must be spelt out. Otherwise the long decline of capitalism will turn into the continual degradation of human civilization. I shall refer here to what I wrote on this subject more than 25 years ago: “Revolution or decadence?” (*Class and Nation*).

The decline was not a continuous, linear process. There were moments of revival, of the counter-offensive of capital, like the counter-offensive of the governing classes of the Ancien Régime on the eve of the French Revolution.

The present time is of that kind. The twentieth century was a first chapter in the long apprenticeship of the people in going beyond capitalism and inventing new socialist forms of living, to borrow the expression of Dominico Losurdo (*Fuir l'Histoire*, Delga, 2007). Like him, I do not analyse its development in terms of ‘failure’ (of socialism, of national independence) as reactionary propaganda, which has the wind in its sails today, tries to make out. On the contrary it is the very successes and not the failures of this first wave of socialist and national popular experiences which are at the origin of the problems of the contemporary world. I have analysed the projects of this first wave in terms of three families of social and political advances: the Welfare State in the imperialist West (the historical compromise between capital and labour of the period), the really existing socialisms (Soviet and Maoist), and the national popular systems of the Bandung era. The analysis is made in terms of their complementarity and conflictuality at the world level (a different perspective from that of the “cold war” and the bipolarity proposed today by the defenders of the “capitalism-End of History” school, as I stress the multipolar character of globalisation in the twentieth century). The social contradictions of each of these systems, the tentative nature of

these first advances, explain their loss of impetus and finally their defeat, and not their failure (Samir Amin, *Obsolescent Capitalism*, pp. 7–21).

It is thus this inertia that created favourable conditions for the current capital counter-offensive: the new “perilous passage” of the liberations of the twentieth century to those of the twenty first century. It is therefore important now to tackle the nature of this ‘trough’ moment that separates the two centuries and to identify the new challenges that confront the peoples of the world.

### ***5.2.1 The Counter-offensive of Capitalism in Decline***

The contrast of centres with the peripheries is no longer similar to that of industrialised countries and non-industrialised countries. The polarisation of centres/peripheries, which gave the expansion of world capitalism its imperialist character, continues and even increases through the “five new monopolies” that the imperialist centres enjoy (as previously explained). In these conditions, the pursuit of accelerated development by the emerging peripheries, implemented with unquestioned success (in China, particularly, but also in other countries of the South) has not got rid of imperialist domination. It has led to a new contrast between the centres and the peripheries, not to its overtaking.

Imperialism is no longer written in the plural as in the earlier phases of its development: it is a “collective imperialism” of the Triad (United States, Europe, Japan). In this sense, the common interests shared by the oligopolies based in the Triad are greater than the conflicts of (‘mercantile’) interests that could oppose them to each other. This collective character of imperialism is expressed through the management of a world system by the common instruments of the Triad: at the economic level, by the World Trade Organization (the colonial ministry of the Triad), the International Monetary Fund (the colonial collective monetary agency), the World Bank (the propaganda ministry), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (constituted to prevent Europe from extricating itself from liberalism); at the political level, by the G7/G8, the armed forces of the United States and their subordinate instrument, NATO (the marginalization/domestication of the United Nations completing the picture). The US hegemonic project, implemented through a programme of the military control of the planet (involving, among other things, the abrogation of international law and the law that Washington has conferred upon itself to conduct the “preventive wars” of its choice) is articulated through collective imperialism and makes it possible for the American leader to over-compensate for its economic deficiencies.



### 5.2.2 *In Counterpoint: The Aims and Means of a Strategy of Constructing Convergence in Diversity*

The peoples of the three continents (Asia, Africa and Latin America) are confronted today with the expansion of the imperialist system called globalised neoliberalism, which is nothing less than the construction of *apartheid* at the world level. The new imperial order will be challenged. By whom? And what will result from this challenge?

Here I shall just outline the main proposals that I have developed elsewhere (*From Capitalism to Civilization*, p. 127 *et seq.*).

There is no doubt that the image of the dominant reality makes it difficult to imagine an immediate challenge to this order. The governing classes of the countries of the South, defeated as they are, have largely accepted to play their role of subordinate comprador classes while the peoples, confused and caught up in the daily struggle for survival, often seem to accept their lot or even, worse still, to harbour new illusions that their own governing classes hold out before them.

The governing classes of certain countries of the South have obviously chosen a strategy that is neither that of a passive submission to the dominant forces in the world system, nor of declared opposition to them: a strategy of active interventions upon which they base their hopes to accelerate the development of their country. China, through the solidity of its national construction given to it by its revolution and Maoism, by its option to conserve control of its currency and capital movements, by its refusal to question the collective ownership of the land (the main revolutionary conquest of the peasants), is better equipped than the others to make this choice and to achieve incontestably brilliant results.

Can this experience continue? And what are its limits? After analysing the contradictions inherent in this option I have concluded that the idea of a national capitalism capable of imposing itself on equal terms with the main powers of the world system is based largely on illusions. The objective conditions inherited from history do not make it possible to implement a social compromise between capital, labour and peasantry that guarantees the stability of the system. In time it has to drift to the right (and then be confronted by the growing social movements of the popular classes) or evolve towards the left by building “market socialism” as a stage along the long transition to socialism. The problems of Vietnam are similar. The apparently analogous choices made by the governing classes of the other so-called ‘emerging’ countries are still more fragile. Neither Brazil nor India—because they have not had a radical revolution like China—are capable of opposing a similar strong resistance to the double pressures of imperialism and the reactionary local classes.

And yet the societies of the South—at least some of them—are today equipped with the means enabling them to completely rid themselves of the ‘monopolies’ of the imperialist centres. These societies are capable of developing by themselves without falling into dependency. They have the potential of a technological mastery that would enable them to use it for themselves. They can constrain the

North, recover the use of their natural resources and force the North to adjust to a consumption pattern that is less scandalous. They can extricate themselves from financial globalisation. Already they are questioning the monopoly of weapons of mass destruction that the United States wants to reserve for itself. They can develop South-South trade—of goods, services, capital, technologies—which was unthinkable in 1955, when none of these countries possessed industries and the mastery of technology. More than ever before, the possibility of delinking is on the agenda.

Will these societies do it? And who will undertake it? The existing governing bourgeois classes? I very much doubt it. The popular classes in power? Probably, it will first be national/popular transitional regimes.

### ***5.2.3 For a Socialist Renewal of the Twenty First Century: The Capitalism/Socialism Conflict and the North/South Conflict are Inseparable***

The North/South (centres/peripheries) conflict is a major issue in the whole history of capitalist development. It is the reason why the struggle of the peoples of the South for their liberation—which in general is becoming victorious—is based on a questioning of capitalism. This is inevitable. The capitalism/socialism conflicts and those of the North/South are inseparable. Socialism is inconceivable without the universalism that involves the equality of peoples. Here again I refer the reader to the proposals that I developed in *From Capitalism to Civilization*.

As capitalism is a world system and not just the juxtaposing of national capitalist systems, political and social struggles, if they are to be effective, must be conducted simultaneously in the national arena (which remains decisive because the conflicts, alliances and social and political compromises are to be worked out there) and at the world level. This viewpoint, which is obvious to me, seems to have been that of Marx and the historical Marxisms (“Workers of the world, unite!”) and, in its enriched Maoist version, “Proletarians of all countries, oppressed peoples, unite!”

It is impossible to foresee the trajectory that will be traced by the unequal advances of the struggles in the South and in the North. My feeling is that at this moment the South is going through a crisis, but that it is a crisis of growth, in the sense that the pursuit of the liberation objectives of its peoples is irreversible. The peoples of the North would do well to take their measure, all the more so if they maintain this perspective and associate it with the construction of socialism. There was a moment of solidarity of this kind at the time of Bandung: young Europeans proclaimed their solidarity with the Third World. It was doubtlessly naïve, but how much better than their current turning in on themselves!

Without going back to the analyses of actually existing world capitalism that I have developed elsewhere, I will just recall their conclusions. In my opinion,

humanity cannot engage seriously in the construction of a socialist alternative to capitalism unless things change in the developed West. That does not mean at all that the peoples of the periphery have to wait for this change and, until it happens, content themselves by ‘adapting’ to the possibilities offered by capitalist globalisation. On the contrary, it is more probable that, to the extent that things begin to change in the peripheries that the Western societies, forced into it, could be led, in their turn, to evolve as required for the progress of humanity as a whole. If this does not happen, the worst is most probable: barbarism and the suicide of human civilisation. Of course I envisage the desirable and possible changes in both the centres and in the peripheries of the global system in the framework of what I have called “the long transition”.

In the peripheries of globalised capitalism—by definition the “storm zones” in the imperialist system—a form of revolution certainly remains on the agenda. But its aim is by nature ambiguous and vague: national liberation from imperialism (and the maintenance of much, or even of the essential of the social relationships that belong to capitalist modernity)—or will it be more than that? Whether it is the radical revolutions of China, Vietnam and Cuba or those which were not radical elsewhere in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the challenge remains: “catching up” and/or “doing something else”. This challenge is in turn linked to another task generally considered of equal priority: to defend the Soviet Union which is being encircled. The Soviet Union and later China find themselves confronted by the strategies of systematic isolation used by dominant capitalism and the Western powers. One can therefore understand why, revolution not being on the immediate agenda elsewhere, the priority is generally given to saving the post-revolutionary states.

The Soviet Union and China have experienced the vicissitudes of the great revolutions and have also had to confront the consequences of the unequal expansion of world capitalism. Both these factors gradually sacrificed the original communist objectives to the immediate requirements of economic catching up. This shift, abandoning the aim of social ownership by which the communism of Marx defined itself, substituted State management. This was accompanied by the decline of popular democracy, which was crushed by a brutal (and sometimes bloody) dictatorship of the post-revolutionary power and it accelerated the evolution towards the restoration of capitalism. In both experiences priority was given to the “defence of the post-revolutionary State” and internal means were used for this purpose, as well as external strategies giving priority to such defence. The communist parties were thus invited to fall in line with this option, not only as concerns the global strategic direction but also in their tactical day-to-day adjustments. This inevitably caused a rapid weakening of critical thinking among the revolutionaries whose abstract discourse on the ‘revolution’ (always ‘imminent’) was far removed from an analysis of the real contradictions of society and this was supported by maintaining almost military forms of organisation against all odds.

The avant-gardes who refused to align themselves, and sometimes dared to face the reality of post-revolutionary societies, nevertheless did not renounce the original Leninist hypothesis (the “imminent revolution”), without taking into account that this was clearly refuted by the facts. Thus there was Trotskyism and the parties

of the Fourth International. Then there were a good number of organizations of activist revolutionaries, inspired by Maoism or by Guevarism. Examples of this are numerous, from the Philippines to India (the Naxalites), from the Arab world (with the nationalist/communist Arabs—les *qawmiyin*—and those emulating them in South Yemen) to Latin America (Guevarism).

The great national liberation movements in Asia and in Africa, in open conflict with the imperialist order, came up against, as did those who conducted revolution in the name of socialism, the conflicting needs of “catching up” (“national construction”) and the transformation of social relationships in favour of the popular classes. On this latter concern, the “post-revolutionary regimes” (or simply re-conquered post-independence regimes) were certainly less radical than the communist powers, which is why I would describe these regimes, in Asia and Africa, as “national/popular”. They were also sometimes inspired by forms of organisation (single party, non-democratic dictatorship, State management of the economy) that had been developed during the experiences of “really existing socialism”. They usually diluted their efficiency by their vague ideological choices and the compromise with the past that they accepted.

It is in these conditions that these regimes, like the critical avant-garde (historical communism in the countries concerned) were, in turn, invited to support the Soviet Union (and, more rarely, China) and benefit from its support. This constitution of this common front against the imperialist aggression of the United States and their European and Japanese partners was certainly beneficial for the peoples of Asia and Africa. It opened up a margin of autonomy both for the initiatives of the governing classes of the countries concerned and for the actions of their popular classes. This is proved by what happened following the Soviet collapse.

### **5.3 The Plutocratic Oligarchies and the End of Bourgeois Civilisation**

The logic of accumulation is that of the growing concentration and centralisation of capital. Contemporary capitalism is a capitalism dominated by a plutocratic oligarchy that is unprecedented in history, to which I have already drawn attention (*From Capitalism to Civilization*, Chap. 4 and *The World We Wish to See, the Plutocracy: New Ruling Class of Obsolescent Capitalism*, p. 47 et seq.).

#### ***5.3.1 The Wheeler-dealers, The New Dominant Class in the Peripheries***

The centre/periphery contrast is not new: it accompanied the globalised capitalist expansion from the beginning, five hundred years ago. Thus the local governing

classes in the countries of peripheral capitalism, whether they were independent countries or even colonies, have always been subordinated governing classes, but nevertheless allied by the profits they obtained by being inserted into globalised capitalism.

These classes, most of them coming from those that previously dominated their societies before submitting to capitalism/imperialism, are very diverse. Their change, because of this integration/submission, is also considerable: former political mentors becoming large landowners, old aristocracies becoming leaders of the modernised State, etc. The re-conquest of independence often involved replacing these old subordinated classes (collaborators) by new governing classes—bureaucracies, State bourgeoisies, etc. They had greater legitimacy in the eyes of their peoples (at the beginning) because of their association with the national liberation movements.

But here again, in the peripheries dominated by old imperialism (the forms preceding 1950) or by the new imperialism (that of the Bandung period until about 1980), the local governing classes benefited from a relative visible stability. Successive generations of aristocrats and new bourgeois for a long time, then the new generation coming from the political forces that directed national liberation, shared value systems, moral and national. The men (and more rarely the women) who represented them, enjoyed various degrees of legitimacy.

The upheavals brought about by the capitalism of the oligopolies in the new collective imperialist centre (United States, Europe, Japan) have completely eradicated the power of all these old governing classes of the peripheries, replacing them by a new class that I call “wheeler-dealers”. This term has in fact spontaneously circulated in many countries of the South. A wheeler-dealer is a ‘businessman’, not a creative entrepreneur. He obtains his wealth from his relationships with existing power and the foreign masters of the system, whether it is representatives of the imperialist countries (CIA, in particular) or the oligopolies. He operates as a very well-paid intermediary, who benefits from a veritable political rent from which he draws the wealth that he accumulates. The wheeler-dealer does not belong to any system of moral or national values whatsoever. He is a caricature of his alter ego in the dominant centres, for he knows nothing else but ‘success’, money, the covetousness that lies behind his alleged praise for the individual. There, again, mafia-like and criminal behaviour is never very far away.

It is true that phenomena of this kind are not completely new. The very nature of imperialist domination and the subordination of the local governing classes to them used to encourage the emergence of this kind of man in power. But, what is surely new, is that this kind of person is now dominating the whole scene of politics and wealth. They are the ‘friends’, the only friends of the dominant plutocracy at the world level. Their vulnerability lies in the fact that they have no legitimacy whatsoever in the eyes of their peoples, neither the legitimacy conferred by ‘tradition’ nor that given by participation in national liberation.

### ***5.3.2 Senile Capitalism and the End of Bourgeois Civilization***

The characters of the new dominant classes described here are not coincidental, they correspond strictly to the requirements of contemporary capitalism and its functioning.

Bourgeois civilisation—like all civilisation—is not only reduced to the logic of the reproduction of the economic system. It integrates ideology and morality: praise for individual initiative, of course, but also honesty and respect for the law, if not solidarity with people, at least at the national level. This ensured a certain stability in social reproduction as a whole and it pervaded the world of the political representatives at its service.

This system of values is in the process of disappearing—making way for a system which has no values. There are many clear signs of this transformation: a criminal US President, buffoons at the head of European states, insignificant autocrats in a number of countries in the South, who are not “enlightened despots” but just despots, ambitious obscurantists (the Talibans, the Christian and other ‘sects’, the pro-slavery Buddhists). They are all admirers of the “American model” without any reservation. Lack of culture and vulgarity are characteristics of a growing majority of this world of those who ‘dominate’.

A dramatic evolution of this kind proclaims the end of a civilization. It reproduces what we have already seen in the decadent epochs of history. A “new world” is being born. But not the (better) one which many of the naïve social movements are calling for. They do of course see the extent of the destruction but they do not understand the reasons. A world that is much worse than that of the bourgeois civilization is being imposed.

For all these reasons, I consider that the contemporary capitalism of the oligopolies must be now described as senile, whatever its apparent immediate success, because it is a success that is sinking into a new barbarism. (I refer here to the concluding chapter, “Revolution or decadence, thoughts on the transition from one mode of production to another” in my book *Class and Nation*, written almost 30 years ago.)

### ***5.3.3 The Fragility of Capitalist Globalisation***

Capitalism can be defined as the reversal of the relationship of dominance between the political body and the economic one. This reversal goes along with the new market alienation and the obscuring of social production, with the levying of the surplus that accompanies it (Marx).

This invention has produced positive effects which in my view are indisputable, therefore irreversible. These are, among others: (i) liberation of the spirit of economic enterprise and overwhelming acceleration, through the rapid development of

the productive forces; (ii) the combination of conditions enabling the emergence of social sciences (including economics) the formulations of which have been freed from morality and replaced by the search for objective causalities; (iii) the emergence of modernity, formulated in terms of the emancipation of the human species, capable of making its own history and, with that, bringing together the conditions for modern democracy.

Capitalism is the first system which could become genuinely global. The reason is that the power that it enabled to develop, far beyond that of the most advanced societies of the past, put its conquest of the entire planet on the agenda. This power, which was already visible in the centuries of the mercantilist transition (1500–1800) asserted itself as limitless as from the industrial revolution. Contrary to the naïve vision of economists, capitalist globalisation involved the political (and military) intervention of the new imperial powers. It was through these unequal political relationships that ‘markets’ were opened up and conquered, while the economic structures of the periphery, now dominated, ‘adapted’ to the requirements of this form of expansion. The new polarisation, to an extent unprecedented in the history of mankind, was established by political means and not, in any way by the victorious competition of the industries of the dominant centres. As a consequence, the countries of the periphery could re-conquer their political independence without it putting an automatic end to their dominated status.

Polarisation is inherent in historical capitalism. Capitalism and imperialism are inseparable. Imperialist by nature, the world expansion of this historical system has shown that it was neither acceptable nor accepted by the majority of humanity—its victims—and that therefore it is considerably more fragile than believed by the economists, among others. The development of the crisis under way will certainly show this.

The status of a dominated country has never been accepted by the peoples concerned, apart from the new comprador classes that benefit from capitalist/imperialist globalization. During the twentieth century, this refusal turned into revolutions conducted under the flag of socialism or national liberation struggles, both victorious, which forced the imperialist powers to adjust to these unprecedented changes.

The counter-offensive of capitalism/imperialism, which has been at work for some thirty years, has been made possible by the exhaustion of the alternative forms produced by the historic socialisms and nationalisms of the twentieth century. This counter-offensive wraps itself up in the flag of ‘globalisation’. But, in fact, it cannot attain its aims without undertaking a new permanent war of reconquest. The project of contemporary globalisation is inseparable from the permanent military engagement of the dominant powers, the new Triad of collective imperialism.

Extrication from capitalist globalisation (what I call delinking) is a first condition for extrication from peripheral capitalism status (in vulgar terms, getting out of “under-development” or of ‘poverty’). Extrication from capitalist/imperialist globalisation and extrication from capitalism cannot be dissociated. This equation

creates problems and it is therefore crucial to know how it has, or has not been taken into account.

The dominant thinking, which is essentially Eurocentric, is impervious to the arguments developed here. For these thinkers, there is no alternative to the “Western model”. It has to be—and can be—imitated by others. That capitalism/imperialism has rendered impossible this development by imitation is beyond their capacity to understand.

Marxist thought is not Eurocentric by nature. Marx inaugurated the only way of modern thinking that was capable of ridding itself of the prejudices and the straitjacket of Eurocentrism. But the schools of historical Marxism were victims of its limitations. The drift from Marx took the form of the alignment of the European worker and socialist movement with a linear vision of history, which was not that of Marx himself. In this perspective, the “socialist revolution” could only occur when the countries had become fully capitalist, as in the developed industrial world. Everywhere else the obligatory passage of a capitalist development through a “bourgeois revolution” was declared unavoidable. Historical Marxism to a large extent ignored the consequences of the inherent polarisation of historical globalised capitalism and hence the real nature of the challenge.

Polarisation delayed the necessary ripening of the socialist consciousness in the centre whose peoples received benefits from the dominant position of their nations. In the peripheries it prevented the construction of new national capitalisms like those of the dominant centres, and hence it closed off the way to the bourgeois revolution. This created a double challenge to the alternative of the popular revolution: that of accelerating the development of the productive forces and simultaneously building social relationships that break with capitalism. It therefore has perspectives and strategies of the transition from world capitalism to world socialism that are different from those imagined by the historical socialisms and Marxisms. It has created new and unforeseen conditions for constructing the internationalism of the peoples.

### ***5.3.4 Is Lucidity Possible in the Transformative Activities of Societies?***

The modernity of the Enlightenment, by declaring ‘man’ the author of his history, inaugurated a new chapter of history involving the possibility of lucidity.

Lucidity and alienation are the two opposite poles of the same dialectical contradiction. Lucidity is defined by the knowledge of need, and the power, based on this knowledge, to act freely and transform reality. Lucidity involves the emergence of a social science that makes it possible to know these objective necessities. In contrast, alienation is defined by the submission of human beings to forces seen as being exterior—supernatural—even if they are in fact the result of the human thinking and action that shape social reality.



Lucidity, which is absent in all pre-modern societies, European and others, thus realises that the passing from one stage of social evolution to another is not conceived and implemented by a social force that develops such a project (which one might describe as revolutionary), but it imposes by itself, through chaotic evolutions and is, therefore, associated with what one could describe as moments of decadence (from the old regime in decline). The passing of the slave society of the Roman Empire to the feudalism of the Middle Ages is a good example of this mode of transformation in which lucidity is lacking. Lack of lucidity is not the same as lack of intelligence. Our ancestors were no less intelligent than us: they were only less equipped to control the necessary transformation—even when this control was only relative. Actors use tactics of intelligent actions. But they do not know where their choices will lead them, they do not pose the question of the results they will really be producing.

With modernity and the emergence of lucidity, the ways of transforming society underwent a Copernican revolution. The sages of the Enlightenment formulated, for the first time, a holistic and coherent project of transformation. This was to establish capitalism on the rubble of the Ancien Régime, a new society based on Reason, itself a condition of Emancipation. The project, which described what essentially became the bourgeois ideology, was, in turn, based on the separation of the regulations proposed for managing economic life (to be ordered on the principle of the new private ownership and the freedom of enterprise and to draw up contracts) and that of the model for managing political life (ordered by what was gradually to become democracy: respect for the diversity of opinions, removing the sacred from power, the formulation of the rights of man and of the citizen). The two sides of the project were legitimate in terms of Reason.

The lucid project of the capitalist modernity to be constructed was defined by itself as establishing a transhistoric and definitive Reason—the End of History, following non-reasonable pre-history. Auguste Comte, in his time, had a definitive vision which encapsulated the essential ideology of bourgeois modernity. But the victims of the new system of triumphant capitalism—the working classes—saw their project of transforming reality in a completely different perspective, that of overtaking capitalism and building socialism. By so doing they showed the relative character of bourgeois lucidity. From the idealistic formulations of utopian socialisms up to the one initiated by Marx—historical materialism—there is clearly visible progress in recognizing the need to found the transformation project on it.

Associating the democratization of society in all the dimensions of its economic and political management, associating therefore this to social and human progress, definitively rejects the dissociation in the bourgeois formula of the Enlightenment, unmasks the market alienation that is peculiar to this formulation, and so gives to the Reason/Emancipation association a new meaning, representing the advances in the communism project that was initiated by Marx. That this perspective, which in turn consigned capitalism to pre-history, had sometimes imagined the communist future as the authentic end of history is another story.

The fact remains that lucidity, however relative it may be, made it possible to invent the revolutionary path as a way of transforming society, replacing the decadence of the Ancien Régime and the crystallization of the new through, controlled chaos.

The revolutionary path was indeed the one that capitalism imposed, first in its early revolutions in the Netherlands and in England, then partly through the independence war of the English colonies of North America and finally, and above all, in the French Revolution. In its turn, the revolutionary path was imposed as a lucid way of transformation, as it proposed to open the way to socialist/communist construction. The ‘revolution’ in question has often been seen as the great moment that makes it possible, once and for all, to give a rational/emancipatory response to the contradictions of a reality that had outrun its course (the Ancien Régime for the bourgeois revolutionaries, capitalism for the worker and socialist movements). One could compare the scope of these imaginary visions and replace, for the concept of “the revolution” (in the singular), that of “revolutionary advances” (in the plural) which take on different forms according to the conjunctures, but are always driven by an expression of objectives and means that aspire to lucidity.

At the present time we are being invited urgently to abandon what is described as the “illusion of lucidity”. No doubt the reason is that the first wave of implementing projects for socialist construction wore out its capacities to successfully transform the societies concerned. Lucidity, which is always relative (sometimes the headiness of early success tends to make people forget this) is even brought into question as a very principle. However, the reasons for the collapse of the first wave of socialist projects should—with the benefit of hindsight—be very clear: historical Marxism, which inspired these projects, had under-estimated—which is the least one can say—the polarising character of historical globalised capitalism. The second wave—to be created in the future—must draw the necessary lessons. The history of the formation of capitalism itself shows how it was a succession of waves that made it possible for the final victory to emerge: the Mediterranean wave of the Italian towns, which aborted, preceded by three centuries the wave of Atlantic mercantilism which prepared the success of the definitive form of European capitalism/imperialism and ensured its conquest of the world.

To renounce the principle of the will for lucidity means not opening up new avenues for the future, but closing them by a return to the obscurantism of the pre-modern epochs. This obscurantism is at the forefront of the scene at the present moment, in the trough between the collapse of the first wave of socialist advances and the emergence of the second wave, which is necessary and possible. This obscurantism takes on different forms, ‘hard’ and ‘soft’. The hard versions take the form of a return to the apocalyptic hope, whose extreme and caricatural expression is found in the discourses of the ‘sects’, but its ravages are no less visible when it comes disguised behind the masks of so-called religious or ethnic fundamentalisms.

It is not a case of returning to the ‘spirituality’ denied by the gross materialism of the consumerism of capitalist modernity but, in a more commonplace sense, it is the expression of peoples’ powerlessness confronted by the challenges of ageing capitalism. The ‘soft’ version contents itself with renouncing the idea of a coherent

global project which, necessarily poses the question of power, replacing it by the wonderful belief that ‘individuals’ can change the world just by the miracle of their own behaviour. From the so-called autonomist movements to the philosophies—à la Negri—of the ‘bobos’ (the bourgeois bohemians, typical of individuals of the upper middle classes who lean to the left as long as their own privileges are maintained) of our time, this ‘soft’ mode of obscurantist renunciation of lucidity, by thus obliterating the reality of existing power (oligopolies, military interventions, etc.), is now fashionable because its discourse is trumpeted by the media.

There is always a need for lucidity, even if it is, as always, relative. Abandoning it is like withdrawing into obscurantism and it can only lead to the horror of an uncontrolled transition towards “another world” which is still more barbaric than that of our senile globalised capitalism.

Lucidity involves supporting universalism which is different from really existing globalisation. The religious universalisms of ancient times (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and others), which accompanied the formation of tributary empires, should be considered as quite distinct from the necessary universalism, both modern (Man makes his own history) and socialist (the progress of humanity must be based on cooperation and solidarity, and not on competition).

The renunciation of lucidity opens the way to the possibility of returning to the model of transformation through chaos and decadence. Senile capitalism can, in this way, inaugurate a new era of immense massacres, with the means available today. Nearly a century ago Rosa Luxemburg described the alternative: “socialism or barbarism”. Today one could say: capitalism or civilisation? Decadence and criminal chaos or lucidity and the renaissance of the socialist project?

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## Chapter 6

# The Two Paths of Historical Development: The Contrast Between Europe and China

### 6.1 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 ‘trahistoric’, 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”

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was extracted from my book: *Ending the crisis of capitalism or Ending Capitalism* (Oxford: Fahamu Books, 2011): 40ff.

(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 Asian path (or, rather, dead end). 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 organisation 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/Asian dead end, 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 strong 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.

## **6.2 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 nineteenth 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.

### 6.3 Modern China Before Europe

European thinkers were aware of the superiority of China, which became the 'model' *par excellence*, as Étienne and others recognized. It was a model of administrative rationality: China very early on invented the public service, independent of the aristocracy and the religious clergy, recruiting a State bureaucracy, with competitive entrance examinations. Hundreds of years had to pass before Europe discovered this form of administrative modernity (only in the nineteenth century), which was gradually imitated by the rest of the world. It was a model of rationality in the way it implemented advanced technologies for agricultural and artisanal/manufacturing production. This admiration for the Chinese model only disappeared when the Europeans succeeded, through their military superiority (and by that alone), in breaking the Chinese model.

China was therefore engaged on the path of inventing capitalism along lines that would have been very different from those of the conquering globalised imperialist capitalism.

Why did the modern Chinese path, the beginnings of which predated that of Europe by at least 500 years, not take off? And why did the European path, which started later, take definite shape in a short space of time and which was then able to impose itself at the world level? My effort in trying to explain this is based on an emphasis of the 'advantages' of the European tributary societies on the periphery (the 'feudal' path) as opposed to the inertia imposed by the solidity of the central form of the Chinese tributary mode. This is a more general expression of what I have described as unequal development: the peripheral forms, because they were

less solid and more adaptable, made it easier to overtake the contradictions of the old system, while the centralised forms, which were more solid, slowed the movement down.

#### **6.4 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-Colombian 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.

#### **6.5 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 labour, 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.

## 6.6 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.

## 6.7 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 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.

## 6.8 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, 500 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 500 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 labour—over Europe until the industrial revolution of the nineteenth 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 nineteenth 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, 500 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.

## Chapter 7

# Russia in the World System: Geography or History?

The double collapse of Sovietism as a social project distinct from capitalism and of the USSR (now Russia) as a State calls into question all the theories that have been put forward both regarding the capitalism/socialism conflict and the analysis of the positions and functions of the different countries and regions in the world system. These two approaches—the first giving priority to history, the second to geography, are often exclusive of one another.<sup>1</sup>

In the tradition of historical Marxism, and particularly in its predominant version in the former USSR, the only great problem of the contemporary world recognized as worthy of scientific treatment was that of the passage of capitalism to socialism. As from Lenin a theory of revolution and socialist construction was gradually formulated, of which I will summarise the theses in the following terms:

- (i) capitalism must finally be overturned throughout the world through the class struggle conducted by the proletariat;
- (ii) the socialist revolution has started in certain countries (Russia, later China) rather than in others because the former constituted, for various reasons, the “weak links” in the chain of world capitalism;
- (iii) in those countries the construction of socialism is possible in spite of their late development;
- (iv) the transition of capitalism to socialism will therefore evolve in and through the competition between the two State systems, some of which have become socialist, the others having (provisionally) remained capitalist.

In this type of analysis, history—which governs the social and political particularities that constitute the different societies in the modern world (including those of the “weak links”)—plays the key role, to the point that the geography of the world system, in which the various positions and functions of these societies are determined, is entirely subordinated to history. Of course, the reversal of history, overturning the “irreversible socialism” on behalf of capitalism, must question the whole theory of the transition to socialism and its construction.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is an extract from my book: *Global History* (Oxford: Fahamu Books, 2011): 176ff.

Geography, however, takes on another dimension in, for example, an analysis of the movement of modern history inspired by the fundamental principle of what one can call, to be brief, the current way of thinking within the “world system” approach. What happens at the level of the whole (the world system) controls the evolution of the parts that compose it. The roles played by the Russian Empire and by the USSR would therefore be explained by the evolution of the world system and this is what makes it possible to understand the collapse of the Soviet project. Just as the extremists among the historical Marxists only know the class struggle through history, there is an extremist interpretation possible of the world system approach that virtually eliminates the class struggle because it is incapable of changing the course imposed on it by the evolution of the system as a whole.

I should also mention here that theories about the specificity of Eurasia and its particular place in the world system had preceded the formulation of the world system approach by several decades. Already in the 1920s the Russian historians (Nikolaj Trubetzkoy and others) had put forward such proposals, which were then forgotten by official Soviet conformism, but they were resuscitated in recent years. The theses developed in an article by Andrei Foursov in *Review* (of the Fernand Braudel Center, Binghamton) recalls the theory of the Eurasian specificity in certain aspects, distinguishing it from others. I would be in favour of a synthesis of the two types of analysis, particularly as concerns the Russian-Soviet case, having in fact already defended such an approach, in more general terms, which I believe to be enriching for Marxism (Amin 1992a, b).

The world system between the years 1000–1500, was clearly composed of the three main blocs of advanced societies (China, India, the Middle East), to which can be added a fourth, Europe, whose development was extremely rapid. It was in this last region, which had been marginal until the year 1000, that the qualitative transformations of all kinds crystallized and inaugurated capitalism. Between Europe and eastern Asia—from the Polish frontiers to Mongolia—stretched the Eurasian land mass whose position in the global system of the period largely depended on the articulation between the four poles of what I have called the system of the ancient world (precapitalist, or tributary, if my definition of their social systems is accepted).

It seems to me impossible to give a convincing picture of the birth of capitalism without taking into consideration at the same time the two sets of questions concerning (i) the dynamics of the local transformations in response to the challenges confronted by their societies, particularly the dynamics of social struggles; and (ii), the articulation of these dynamics in the evolution of the ancient world system seen as a whole, in particular the transformation of the roles of the different regions that compose it (and therefore what concerns us directly here, the functions of the Eurasian region).

If we are to take the global viewpoint into consideration and thus relativise the regional realities, we must recognize that the great majority of the civilised population of the ancient world was concentrated, until very late, in the two Asian blocs (China and India).

Moreover, what is striking is the regularity of growth of these two blocs, whose population of some 50 million inhabitants grew, every two centuries before the Christian era, to respectively 330 and 200 million in 1800 and 450 and 300 million in 1850. These extraordinary increases compare with the stagnation of the Middle East, precisely from the Hellenistic period. The population of the latter probably attained its maximum—50 million—at this time and then declined almost regularly, stabilising at around 35 million on the eve of the industrial revolution and European penetration (it should be recalled that the population of Egypt, which had been from 10 to 14 million inhabitants at certain epochs of the pharaonic age fell to 2 million in 1800 and that the decline of Mesopotamia and Syria was of the same order). Comparison should also be made with the stagnation of barbarous Europe until the year 1000 (from 20 million two centuries before the Christian era, probably less than 30 million towards the year 1000), then its explosion, with 180 million inhabitants in 1800 and 200 million in 1850).

It is then easy to understand that Europe, when it became aware of itself, became obsessed with the idea of entering into relationships, if not conquering, this fabulous Orient. Until late in the eighteenth century the Chinese Empire was, for the Europeans, the supreme point of reference, the society that was the most civilised, the best administered, with its technologies that were the finest and most effective (Étiemble 1972). Its power was such that it was only as from the end of the nineteenth century that anyone dared to attack it. In contrast, India, which was more fragile, had already been conquered and its colonisation played a decisive role in the British progress. Fascination with the Far East was the main impulse of the European initiatives. However the discovery and then the conquest of the Americas absorbed European energies for three centuries. The function of Eurasia must be seen in this perspective.

The Middle East, which I consider the region that was the heir of Hellenism (a synthesis of five cultures: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria-Phoenicia, Greece-Anatolia, Iran) constituted the third pole of advanced civilisation.

The intense trade between these three poles thus affected the dynamic of the ancient world. These “silk routes”, as they are called, crossed the southern region of Eurasia, central Asia, from the Caspian Sea to China, to the south of the Kazakh steppe, from Tian Shan and from Mongolia (Amin 1991).

Nevertheless the relative stagnation of the Middle East pole (for reasons that are not relevant to this study) ended in a gradual decline of its foreign trade. There were at least two important consequences. The first was that Europe became aware, as from the Crusades, that the Middle East was not a rich region to conquer for itself, but the zone to be crossed or bypassed to reach the really interesting regions of Asia. The second was that China and India diverted their sights from the West to the East, constituting the peripheries that really interested them in Korea, Japan, Vietnam and in South-East Asia. The two eastern poles did not actively search for relations with the Middle East in decline and still less with Europe. The initiative was therefore taken by the Europeans. The Eurasian land mass and the ocean were the two main competing passages enabling the Europeans to enter into Asia.

Europe was, as we have already said, marginal until towards the year 1000. Like Africa—which remained so after the year 1000—it was a region in which the people were not really settled, or constituted in tributary state societies. But this poor periphery of the ancient system suddenly took off, within a particular structure that combined a peripheral feudal tributary form (the fragmentation of powers) and a European universalism of Roman Christianity. During its progress which was to conclude by becoming the centre of the capitalist and industrial world as from the nineteenth century, it is possible to distinguish successive periods which, in turn, define the roles that Eurasia was to play in the accelerated dynamism of the system.

The Crusades (1100–1250) were the first stage in this rapid evolution. Western (Frankish) Europe then sought to break the monopoly of the Middle East, the obligatory (and expensive) passage for its relationships with eastern Asia. This monopoly was in fact shared between Orthodox Christian Byzantium and the Islamic Arab-Persian Caliphate. The Crusades were directed against both these two adversaries and not only the Muslim infidel, as is so often said. However, finally expelled from the region, the Europeans tried other ways of overcoming this obstacle.

The Crusades accelerated the decline of the Middle East, reinforcing still further the lack of interest of the Chinese in the West. In fact, the Crusades facilitated the ‘turkisation’ of the Middle East: the increased transfer of powers to Turcoman military tribes which were called in for that purpose and hence they prepared the simultaneous destruction of Byzantium and the Caliphate, which were succeeded, from 1450–1500 by the Ottoman Empire.

Furthermore the Crusades enriched the Italian towns, giving them the monopoly over the navigation in the Mediterranean and prepared their active role in seeking ways to bypass the Middle East. It is interesting to note that two major routes were opened up by Italians: Marco Polo, who crossed the Russo-Mongol Eurasian land mass and, two centuries later, Christopher Columbus, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

Eurasia entered into history at that time, between 1250 and 1500, that is, during the course of the second phase of this history. Its entry marginalised the ancient silk routes that linked the Middle East to China and to India by the southern part of central Asia, to the benefit of a direct Europe-China liaison, passing further to the north, through the Eurasia of the Genghis Khan Empire (this was exactly the route of Marco Polo). In turn, it opened the secular struggle for the control of Eurasia between the Russians of the forest and the Turko-Mongols of the steppes. The formation of the Muscovite state, its liberation from the Mongol yoke, then its increased expansion through Siberia, its military conquest of the southern steppes up to the Black, Caspian and Aral Seas and the Caucasus mountain range, and finally southern central Asia itself and Transcaucasia: such were the stages of this impressive advance.

This history bequeathed Eurasia with some special characteristics which strongly differentiated it from the European formations as well as those of China. It did not, as is said rather superficially, become (or remain) ‘half-Asian’ (the

expression obviously being in a pejorative sense). In fact it is too far away from the Chinese model to be so described. But nor did it become constituted into a densely populated, homogenous state as gradually happened in Europe, with its absolute monarchies and then with its modern bourgeois nation states. The occupation of such a large area weakened such characteristics, in spite of the desire of St. Petersburg, as from 1700, to imitate European absolutism. Also, in the Russian Empire the relationship between the Russians and the Turko-Mongol peoples of the steppes was not the same as that developed by the Europeans in their colonisation abroad. The former did not 'exploit' the work of the latter, as the Europeans did in their colonies; it was a political power (Russian) that controlled the spaces occupied by both peoples. This was, in a way, perpetuated in the Soviet Union, where the Russians dominated in political and cultural terms but did not economically exploit the others (on the contrary, the flow of wealth went from Russia to central Asia). It was the popularisation by fashionable media that confused these profoundly different systems by superficially terming them both Empires (Amin, *Le défi de la mondialisation*).

Eurasia did not however play the role of a passageway linking Europe to China except for a short period, between 1250 and 1500, moreover at a stage when Europe did not yet have sufficient absorption capacity to bestow on the transit role of Eurasia the financial brilliance that the maritime commerce had later on. From 1500, in fact, the Atlantic/Indian Ocean route replaced the long continental crossing. And it was not only a geographical substitution. On their westward way the Europeans 'discovered' America, conquered it and transformed it into a periphery of their budding capitalism, a destiny that Eurasia had escaped and which it would not be possible to impose upon it. At the same time the Europeans had also learnt how to colonise Asian countries (transforming them into peripheries of world capitalism), starting with India, the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines, then Africa and the Middle East, which was done in different ways from those invented by the Russian expansion into Asia.

The maritime route 're-marginalised' Eurasia as from 1500 until 1900 and even after that. The Russians responded to the challenge in an original, and in many aspects, a brilliant way. Foursov remarked that in 1517, the monk Philopheus had proclaimed Moscow to be the third Rome. This observation is worth bearing in mind because, as it was made so shortly after the maritime route had been opened, it gave Russia an alternative perspective, an exclusive role in history. There were some, like Nikolai Berdyaev, for example, who believed that Soviet communism pursued this aim of the Messianic role for Russia in the advancing the progress of all humanity.

Russia therefore built itself up from then on, made an effective synthesis of retreating into itself and opening to the West. The former task, that of a self-centred construction, was therefore in complete opposition to the peripherisation of world capitalism. There was no equivalent to this except for the self-centred construction of the United States pursued since their independence until 1914, or even until 1941.



So there were two large spaces that organised themselves as self-centred continents, obeying one sole political power. There have been no others, except for China as from 1950. Nevertheless, one cannot but note the mediocre results obtained by Russia/USSR compared with the brilliant ones of the United States. There is a conventional explanation for this which contains a lot of truth: the advantage of the United States not having a feudal heritage (an argument that I reinforce when I say that New England was not constituted as a periphery of capitalism). But it is necessary to add that, 'isolated' on the American continent, the United States was free from the vicissitudes of European politics and had only one adversary—Mexico—which was too weak to be anything other than a prey, half of whose territory was taken away from it. On the other hand Russia was not able to avoid the European conflicts and had to deal with rivals from western and central Europe: it was thus invaded by the armies of Napoleon, had to endure the affront of the Crimean war and was then twice more invaded, in 1914 and 1941.

This continual interference in the history of Russia and that of Europe was at least in part the result of the Russian—then Soviet—choice not to close itself up in Eurasia but to remain, or to become, as modern—that is, as European, as possible. It was the choice of the St. Petersburg Empire, symbolised by the two-headed eagle, one of whose heads looked towards the West. But it was also the choice of the USSR which infused its ideology into the traditions of the European workers' movement. Its total rejection of Slavophil and Eurasian ideologies, which had always survived in the Russian Empire, despite its official pro-Western option, is an obvious consequence of this.

The Russian revolution does not seem to me to have constituted at all a less important phenomenon which would hardly influence the course of history, once the Soviet parenthesis was closed. I do not find any other convincing explanation for this revolution than by involving simultaneously history (the new contradictions introduced by capitalism) and geography (the position of Russia in the capitalist economic world).

For capitalism certainly introduced a new challenge to the whole of humanity, to the peoples of its advanced centres and to those of its backward peripheries. On this essential point, I remain completely Marxist. By this I mean that capitalism cannot continue 'indefinitely' as permanent accumulation and the exponential growth that it entails will end up in certain death for humanity.

Capitalism itself is ripe to be overtaken by another form of civilisation, more advanced and necessary, through the leap in peoples' capacities of action that accumulation has enabled (and which is a parenthesis in history) and by the ethical and cultural maturation that will accompany it.

The question that the Russians posed in 1917 is neither artificial nor is it the odd product of their so-called 'Messianic' or the particular circumstances of their country. It is a question that is now posed to the whole of humankind.

The only questions that have now to be answered are, in my opinion, the following:

- (i) why did this need to overtake capitalism so strongly manifest itself here, in Russia, and then in China, and not in the advanced capitalist centres?
- (ii) why did the USSR fail to change this need into a lever of irresistible progressive transformation?

In responding to the first question I would say that the geography of the world system certainly played a decisive role. The Leninist formulation of the “weak link” is, I think a first effort to explain what, in that sense, Mao generalised for the peripheries of the system in the theory of the continuous revolution by stages, starting from New Democracy. It is an explanation that takes into consideration the polarisation produced by the world expansion of capitalism, even though it does it imperfectly, as can be seen today. I would say here that the Russia who believed to be “starting the world revolution” was not a peripheral country. It had the self-centred structure of a centre, but a backward one, which explained the violence of the social conflicts that took place. I would also say that the second great revolution—that of China—developed in the only large country which was not well and truly ‘peripherised’ as in Latin America, the Middle East, India and South-East Asia. It had never been colonised. Instead of the well-known Chinese Marxist formula—a country that is “half-feudal, half-colonial”—I would replace it with another which I consider to be more correct: a country “three-quarters tributary, one-quarter colonial”, while the other peripheries are “one-quarter tributary (or feudal if you prefer) and three-quarters colonial”!

The second question requires a response that starts by challenging the theory of the “socialist transition” as has been sketched above. I think that this is inexact, as concerns both the history and the geography of capitalism. It is based on an under-estimation of the (geographical) polarisation of the centres and peripheries, not recognising that it is not due to particular historical circumstances (the ‘natural’ tendency of capitalist expansion being to homogenise the world) but is the immanent result of this very expansion. It therefore does not see that the revolt of the peoples who are victims of this development, which is necessarily unequal, has to continue as long as capitalism exists. It is also based on the hypothesis that the new (socialist) mode of production does not develop within the old (capitalist) one, but beside it, in the countries having broken with capitalism. I would replace this hypothesis with the one that, in the same way that capitalism first developed within feudalism before breaking out of it, the “long transition” of world capitalism to world socialism is also defined by the internal conflict of all the societies in the system between the trends and forces of the reproduction of capitalistic relations and the (anti-systemic) trends and forces, whose logic has other aspirations—those, precisely, that can be defined as socialism. Although it is not the place here to develop these new theses concerning the “long transition”, I felt it necessary to mention them as I think they explain the reasons for the failure of Soviet Russia.

We may conclude by posing the questions that can throw light on the debate concerning not only Russia but also the world system.

The Soviet failure is not due to Russia, nor to the nineteenth century, nor to—as Foursov suggests—the pre-St. Petersburg Moscovite period. For Russia, as for any

other country, going back in history makes no sense. It is more a case of freeing oneself from this superficial kind of exercise and look at the future from the viewpoint of an analysis of the present and its new features compared with the past.

How to get out of capitalism and go beyond it, remains the central question for the Russians, the Chinese and all the other peoples of the world. If the thesis of the long transition that is sketched out here is accepted, the immediate step is to deal with the challenge which confronts us all: building up a multipolar world that makes possible, in the different regions that compose it, the maximum development of anti-systemic forces. This implies for the Russians and for the other peoples of Eurasia (ex USSR), not an illusory capitalist development but the reconstruction of a society capable of going beyond it. A series of problems arising from this study should consider whether the Russians or the Chinese will be able to do this in the immediate future, or whether other peoples will do it more easily.

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## Chapter 8

# China: The Emerging Nation

The debates concerning the present and future of China—an ‘emerging’ power—always leave me unconvinced.<sup>1</sup> Some argue that China has chosen, once and for all, the “capitalist road” and intends even to accelerate its integration into contemporary capitalist globalization. They are quite pleased with this and hope only that this “return to normality” (capitalism being the “end of history”) is accompanied by development towards Western-style democracy (multiple parties, elections, human rights). They believe—or need to believe—in the possibility that China shall by this means “catch up” (in terms of per capita income) to the opulent societies of the West, even if gradually, which I do not believe is possible. The Chinese right shares this point of view. Others deplore this in the name of the values of a “betrayed socialism”. Some associate themselves with the dominant expressions of the practice of *China bashing*<sup>2</sup> in

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter owes much to the debates organized in China (November–December 2012) by Lau Kin Chi (Linjiang University, Hong Kong), in association with the South West University of Chongqing (Wen Tiejun), Renmin and Xinhua Universities of Beijing (Dai Jinhua, Wang Hui), the CASS (Huang Ping) and to meetings with groups of activists from the rural movement in the provinces of Shanxi, Shaanxi, Hubei, Hunan and Chongqing. I extend to all of them my thanks and hope that this chapter will be useful for their ongoing discussions. It also owes much to my reading of the writings of Wen Tiejun and Wang Hui.

<sup>2</sup> *China bashing*. This refers to the favored sport of Western media of all tendencies—including the left, unfortunately—that consists of systematically denigrating, even criminalizing, everything done in China. China exports cheap junk to the poor markets of the Third World (this is true), a horrible crime. However, it also produces high-speed trains, airplanes, satellites, whose marvelous technological quality is praised in the West, but to which China should have no right! They seem to think that the mass construction of housing for the working class is nothing but the abandonment of workers to slums and liken ‘inequality’ in China (working class houses are not opulent villas) to that in India (opulent villas side-by-side with slums), etc. *China bashing* panders to the infantile opinion found in some currents of the powerless Western ‘left’: if it is not the communism of the twenty third century, it is a betrayal! *China bashing* participates in the systematic campaign of maintaining hostility towards China, in view of a possible military attack. This is nothing less than a question of destroying the opportunities for an authentic emergence of a great people from the South.

the West. Still others—those in power in Beijing—describe the chosen path as “Chinese-style socialism”, without being more precise. However, one can discern its characteristics by reading official texts closely, particularly the Five-Year Plans, which are precise and taken quite seriously.

In fact the question (is China capitalist or socialist?) is badly posed, too general and abstract for any response to make sense in terms of this absolute alternative. In fact, China has actually been following an original path since 1950, and perhaps even since the Taiping Revolution in the nineteenth century. I shall attempt here to clarify the nature of this original path at each of the stages of its development from 1950 to today–2012.

## 8.1 The Agrarian Question

Mao described the nature of the revolution carried out in China by its Communist Party as an anti-imperialist/anti-feudal revolution looking toward socialism. Mao never assumed that, after having dealt with imperialism and feudalism, the Chinese people had ‘constructed’ a socialist society. He always characterized this construction as the first phase of the long path to socialism.

I must emphasize the quite specific nature of the response given to the agrarian question by the Chinese Revolution. The distributed (agricultural) land was not privatized; it remained the property of the nation represented by village communes and only the use was given to rural families. That had not been the case in Russia where Lenin, faced with the fait accompli of the peasant insurrection in 1917, recognized the private property of the beneficiaries of the land distribution.

Why was the implementation of the principle that agricultural land is not a commodity possible in China (and Vietnam)? It is constantly repeated that peasants around the world long for property and that alone. If such had been the case in China, the decision to nationalize the land would have led to an endless peasant war, as was the case when Stalin began forced collectivization in the Soviet Union.

The attitude of the peasants of China and Vietnam (and nowhere else) cannot be explained by a supposed ‘tradition’ in which they are unaware of property. It is the product of an intelligent and exceptional political line implemented by the Communist Parties of these two countries.

The Second International took for granted the inevitable aspiration of peasants for property, real enough in nineteenth century Europe. Over the long European transition from feudalism to capitalism (1,500–1,800), the earlier institutionalized feudal forms of access to the land through rights shared among King, Lords and peasant serfs had gradually been dissolved and replaced by modern bourgeois private property, which treats the land as a commodity—a good that the owner can freely dispose of (buy and sell). The socialists of the Second International accepted this fait accompli of the “bourgeois revolution”, even if they deplored it.

They also thought that small peasant property had no future, which belonged to large mechanized agricultural enterprise modeled on industry. They thought that

capitalist development by itself would lead to such a concentration of property and to the most effective forms of its exploitation (see Kautsky's writings on this subject). History proved them wrong. Peasant agriculture gave way to capitalist family agriculture in a double sense; one that produces for the market (farm consumption having become insignificant) and one that makes use of modern equipment, industrial inputs and bank credit. What is more, this capitalist family agriculture has turned out to be quite efficient in comparison with large farms, in terms of volume of production per hectare per worker/year. This observation does not exclude the fact that the modern capitalist farmer is exploited by generalized monopoly capital, which controls the upstream supply of inputs and credit and the downstream marketing of the products. These farmers have been transformed into subcontractors for dominant capital.

Thus (wrongly) persuaded that large enterprise is always more efficient than small in every area—industry, services and agriculture—the radical socialists of the Second International assumed that the abolition of landed property (nationalization of the land) would allow the creation of large socialist farms (analogous to the future Soviet *sovkhozes* and *kolkhozes*). However, they were unable to put such measures to the test since revolution was not on the agenda in their countries (the imperialist centers).

The Bolsheviks accepted these theses until 1917. They contemplated the nationalization of the large estates of the Russian aristocracy, while leaving property in communal lands to the peasants. However, they were subsequently caught unawares by the peasant insurrection, which seized the large estates.

Mao drew the lessons from this history and developed a completely different line of political action. Beginning in the 1930s in southern China, during the long civil war of liberation, Mao based the increasing presence of the communist party on a solid alliance with the poor and landless peasants (the majority), maintained friendly relations with the middle peasants and isolated the rich peasants at all stages of the war, without necessarily antagonizing them. The success of this line prepared the large majority of rural inhabitants to consider and accept a solution to their problems that did not require private property in plots of land acquired through distribution. I think that Mao's ideas, and their successful implementation, have their historical roots in the nineteenth century Taiping Revolution. Mao thus succeeded in realizing what the Bolshevik Party failed to do: to establish a solid alliance with the large rural majority. In Russia, the fait accompli of summer 1917 eliminated later opportunities for an alliance with the poor and middle peasants against the rich ones (the kulaks) because the former were anxious to defend their acquired private property and, consequently, preferred to follow the kulaks rather than the Bolsheviks.

This "Chinese specificity"—whose consequences are of major importance—absolutely prevents us from characterizing contemporary China (even in 2012) as 'capitalist' because the capitalist road is based on the transformation of land into a commodity.

## 8.2 Present and Future of Petty Production

However, once this principle is accepted, the forms of using this common good (the land of the village communities) can be quite diverse. In order to understand this, we must be able to distinguish petty production from small property.

Petty production—peasant and artisanal—dominated production in all past societies. It has retained an important place in modern capitalism, now linked with small property—in agriculture, services and even certain segments of industry. Certainly in the dominant triad of the contemporary world (the United States, Europe and Japan) it is receding. An example of that is the disappearance of small businesses and their replacement by large commercial operations. Yet this is not to say that this change is ‘progress’, even in terms of efficiency, all the more so if the social, cultural and civilizational dimensions are taken into account. In fact, this is an example of the distortion produced by the domination of rent-seeking generalized monopolies. Hence, perhaps in a future socialism the place of petty production will be called upon to resume its importance.

In contemporary China, in any case, petty production—which is not necessarily linked with small property—retains an important place in national production, not only in agriculture, but also in large segments of urban life.

China has experienced quite diverse and even contrasting forms of the use of land as a common good. We need to discuss, on the one hand, efficiency (volume of production from a hectare per worker/year) and, on the other, the dynamics of the transformations set in motion. These forms can strengthen tendencies towards capitalist development, which would end up calling into question the non-commodity status of the land, or can be part of development in a socialist direction. These questions can be answered only through a concrete examination of the forms at issue, as they were implemented in successive moments of Chinese development from 1950 to the present.

At the beginning, in the 1950s, the form adopted was petty family production combined with simpler forms of cooperation for managing irrigation, work requiring co-ordination, and the use of certain kinds of equipment. And the insertion of such petty family production into a state economy that maintained a monopoly over purchases of produce destined for the market and the supply of credit and inputs, all on the basis of planned prices (decided by the center).

The experience of the communes that followed the establishment of production cooperatives in the 1970s is full of lessons. It was not necessarily a question of passing from small production to large farms, even if the idea of the superiority of the latter inspired some of its supporters. The essentials of this initiative originated in the aspiration for decentralized socialist construction. The Communes not only had responsibility for managing the agricultural production of a large village or a collective of villages and hamlets (this organization itself was a mixture of forms of small family production and more ambitious specialized production), they also: provided a framework to attach industrial activities that employed peasants available in certain seasons; articulated productive economic activities with the

management of social services (education, health, housing); and began the decentralization of the political administration of the society. Just as the Paris Commune had intended, the socialist state was to become, at least partially, a federation of socialist communes. Undoubtedly, in many respects, the Communes were in advance of their time and the dialectic between the decentralization of decision-making powers and the centralization assumed by the omnipresence of the Communist Party did not always operate smoothly. Yet the recorded results are far from having been disastrous, as the right would have us believe. A Commune in the Beijing region, which resisted the order to dissolve the system, continues to record excellent economic results linked with the persistence of high quality political debates, which disappeared elsewhere. Current (2012) projects of “rural reconstruction”, implemented by rural communities in several regions of China, appear to be inspired by the experience of the Communes.

The decision to dissolve the Communes made by Deng Xiaoping in 1980 strengthened small family production, which remained the dominant form during the three decades following this decision (1980–2012). However, the range of users’ rights (for village Communes and family units) has expanded considerably. It has become possible for the holders of these land use rights to ‘rent’ that land out (but never ‘sell’ it), either to other small producers—thus facilitating emigration to the cities, particularly of educated young people who do not want to remain rural residents—or to firms organizing a much larger, modernized farm (never a *latifundia*, which does not exist in China, but nevertheless considerably larger than family farms). This form is the means used to encourage specialized production (such as good wine, for which China has called on the assistance of experts from Burgundy) or test new scientific methods (GMOs and others).

To ‘approve’ or ‘reject’ the diversity of these systems *a priori* makes no sense, in my opinion. Once again, the concrete analysis of each of them, both in its design and the reality of its implementation, is imperative. The fact remains that the inventive diversity of forms of using commonly held land has led to phenomenal results. First of all, in terms of economic efficiency, although urban population has grown from 20 to 50 % of total population, China has succeeded in increasing agricultural production to keep pace with the gigantic needs of urbanization. This is a remarkable and exceptional result, unparalleled in the countries of the ‘capitalist’ South. It has preserved and strengthened its food sovereignty, even though it suffers from a major handicap: its agriculture feeds 22 % of the world’s population reasonably well while it has only 6 % of the world’s arable land. In addition, in terms of the way (and level) of life of rural populations, Chinese villages no longer have anything in common with what is still dominant elsewhere in the capitalist Third World. Comfortable and well-equipped permanent structures form a striking contrast, not only with the former China of hunger and extreme poverty, but also with the extreme forms of poverty that still dominate the countryside of India or Africa.

The principles and policies implemented (land held in common, support for petty production without small property) are responsible for these unequalled results. They have made possible a relatively controlled rural to urban migration.



Compare that with the capitalist road, in Brazil, for example. Private property in agricultural land has emptied the countryside of Brazil—today only 11 % of the country's population. But at least 50 % of urban residents live in slums (the favelas) and survive only thanks to the “informal economy” (including organized crime). There is nothing similar in China, where the urban population is, as a whole, adequately employed and housed, even in comparison with many “developed countries”, without even mentioning those where the GDP per capita is at the Chinese level!

The population transfer from the extremely densely populated Chinese countryside (only Vietnam, Bangladesh and Egypt are similar) was essential. It improved conditions for rural petty production, making more land available. This transfer, although relatively controlled (once again, nothing is perfect in the history of humanity, neither in China nor elsewhere), is perhaps threatening to become too rapid. This is being discussed in China.

### 8.3 Chinese State Capitalism

The first label that comes to mind to describe Chinese reality is state capitalism. Very well, but this label remains vague and superficial so long as the specific content is not analyzed.

It is indeed capitalism in the sense that the relation to which the workers are subjected by the authorities who organize production is similar to the one that characterizes capitalism: submissive and alienated labor, extraction of surplus labor. Brutal forms of extreme exploitation of workers exist in China, e.g., in the coalmines or in the furious pace of the workshops that employ women. This is scandalous for a country that claims to want to move forward on the road to socialism. Nevertheless, the establishment of a state capitalist regime is unavoidable, and will remain so everywhere. The developed capitalist countries themselves will not be able to enter a socialist path (which is not on the visible agenda today) without passing through this first stage. It is the preliminary phase in the potential commitment of any society to liberating itself from historical capitalism on the long route to socialism/communism. Socialization and reorganization of the economic system at all levels, from the firm (the elementary unit) to the nation and the world, require a lengthy struggle during an historical time period that cannot be foreshortened.

Beyond this preliminary reflection, we must concretely describe the state capitalism in question by bringing out the nature and the project of the state concerned, because there is not just one type of state capitalism, but many different ones. The state capitalism of France of the Fifth Republic from 1958 to 1975 was designed to serve and strengthen private French monopolies, not to commit the country to a socialist path.

Chinese state capitalism was built to achieve three objectives: (i) construct an integrated and sovereign modern industrial system; (ii) manage the relation of this

system with rural petty production; and (iii) control China's integration into the world system, dominated by the generalized monopolies of the imperialist triad (United States, Europe, Japan). The pursuit of these three priority objectives is unavoidable. As a result it permits a possible advance on the long route to socialism, but at the same time it strengthens tendencies to abandon that possibility in favor of pursuing capitalist development pure and simple. It must be accepted that this conflict is both inevitable and always present. The question then is this: do China's concrete choices favor one of the two paths?

Chinese state capitalism required, in its first phase (1954–1980), the nationalization of all companies (combined with the nationalization of agricultural lands), both large and small alike. Then followed an opening to private enterprise, national and/or foreign, and liberalized rural and urban petty production (small companies, trade, services). However, large basic industries and the credit system established during the Maoist period were not de-nationalized, even if the organizational forms of their integration into a 'market' economy were modified. This choice went hand in hand with the establishment of means of control over private initiative and potential partnership with foreign capital. It remains to be seen to what extent these means fulfill their assigned functions or, on the contrary, if they have not become empty shells, collusion with private capital (through 'corruption' of management) having gained the upper hand.

Still, what Chinese state capitalism has achieved between 1950 and 2012 is quite simply amazing. It has, in fact, succeeded in building a sovereign and integrated modern productive system to the scale of this gigantic country, which cannot be compared with that of the United States. It has succeeded in leaving behind the tight technological dependence of its origins (importation of Soviet, then Western models) through the development of its own capacity to produce technological inventions. However, it has not (yet?) begun the reorganization of labor from the perspective of socialization of economic management. The Plan—and not the 'opening'—has remained the central means for implementing this systematic construction.

In the Maoist phase of this development planning, the Plan remained imperative in all details: nature and location of new establishments, production objectives, prices. At that stage, no reasonable alternative was possible. I will mention here, without pursuing it further, the interesting debate about the nature of the law of value that underpinned planning in this period. The very success—and not the failure—of this first phase required an alteration of the means for pursuing an accelerated development project. The 'opening' to private initiative—beginning in 1980, but above all from 1990—was necessary in order to avoid the stagnation that was fatal to the USSR. Despite the fact that this opening coincided with the globalized triumph of neo-liberalism—with all the negative effects of this coincidence, to which I shall return—the choice of a "socialism *of* the market", or better yet, a "socialism *with* the market", as fundamental for this second phase of accelerated development is largely justified, in my opinion.

The results of this choice are, once again, simply amazing. In a few decades, China has built a productive, industrial urbanization that brings together 600

million human beings, two-thirds of whom were urbanized over the last two decades (almost equal to Europe's population!). This is due to the Plan and not to the market. China now has a truly sovereign productive system. No other country in the South (except for Korea and Taiwan) has succeeded in doing this. In India and Brazil there are only a few disparate elements of a sovereign project of the same kind, nothing more.

The methods for designing and implementing the Plan have been transformed in these new conditions. The Plan remains imperative for the huge infrastructure investments required by the project: to house 400 million new urban inhabitants in adequate conditions, and to build an unparalleled network of highways, roads, railways, dams and electric power plants; to open up all or almost all of the Chinese countryside; and to transfer the center of gravity of development from the coastal regions to the continental west. The Plan also remains imperative—at least in part—for the objectives and financial resources of publicly owned enterprises (state, provinces, municipalities). As for the rest, it points to possible and probable objectives for the expansion of small urban commodity production as well as industrial and other private activities. These objectives are taken seriously and the political economic resources required for their realization are specified. On the whole, the results are not too different from the 'planned' predictions.

Chinese state capitalism has integrated into its development project visible social (I am not saying 'socialist') dimensions. These objectives were already present in the Maoist era: eradication of illiteracy, basic healthcare for everyone, etc. In the first part of the post-Maoist phase (the 1990s), the tendency was undoubtedly to neglect the pursuit of these efforts. However, it should be noted that the social dimension of the project has since won back its place and, in response to active and powerful social movements, is expected to make more headway. The new urbanization has no parallel in any other country of the South. There are certainly 'chic' quarters and others that are not at all opulent; but there are no slums, which have continued to expand everywhere else in the cities of the Third World.

## **8.4 The Integration of China into Capitalist Globalization**

We cannot pursue the analysis of Chinese state capitalism (called "market socialism" by the government) without taking into consideration its integration into globalization.

The Soviet world had envisioned a delinking from the world capitalist system, complementing that delinking by building an integrated socialist system encompassing the USSR and Eastern Europe. The USSR achieved this delinking to a great extent, imposed moreover by the West's hostility; even blaming the blockade for its isolation. However, the project of integrating Eastern Europe never advanced very far, despite the initiatives of Comecom. The nations of Eastern Europe remained in uncertain and vulnerable positions, partially delinked—but on

a strictly national basis—and partially open to Western Europe beginning in 1970. There was never a question of a USSR-China integration, not only because Chinese nationalism would not have accepted it, but even more because China's priority tasks did not entail it. Maoist China practiced delinking in its own way. Should we say that, by reintegrating itself into globalization beginning in the 1990s, it has fully and permanently renounced delinking?

China entered globalization in the 1990s by the path of the accelerated development of manufactured exports possible for its productive system, giving first priority to exports whose rates of growth then surpassed those of the growth in GDP. The triumph of neo-liberalism favored the success of this choice for 15 years (from 1990 to 2005). The pursuit of this choice is questionable not only because of its political and social effects, but also because it is threatened by the implosion of neo-liberal globalized capitalism, which began in 2007. The Chinese government appears to be aware of this and very early began to attempt a correction by giving greater importance to the internal market and to development of western China.

To say, as one hears ad nauseam, that China's success should be attributed to the abandonment of Maoism (whose 'failure' was obvious), the opening to the outside and the entry of foreign capital is quite simply idiotic. The Maoist construction put in place the foundations without which the opening would not have achieved its well-known success. A comparison with India, which has not made a comparable revolution, demonstrates this. To say that China's success is mainly (even 'completely') attributable to the initiatives of foreign capital is no less idiotic. It is not multinational capital that built the Chinese industrial system and achieved the objectives of urbanization and the construction of infrastructure. The success is 90 % attributable to the sovereign Chinese project. Certainly, the opening to foreign capital has fulfilled useful functions: it has increased the import of modern technologies. However, because of its partnership methods, China absorbed these technologies and has now mastered their development. There is nothing similar elsewhere, even in India or Brazil, a fortiori in Thailand, Malaysia, South Africa and other places.

China's integration into globalization has remained, moreover, partial and controlled (or at least controllable, if one wants to put it that way). China has remained outside of financial globalization. Its banking system is completely national and focused on the country's internal credit market. Management of the yuan is still a matter for China's sovereign decision making. The yuan is not subject to the vagaries of the flexible exchanges that financial globalization imposes. Beijing can say to Washington: "the yuan is our money and your problem", just like Washington said to the Europeans in 1971: "the dollar is our money and your problem". Moreover, China retains a large reserve for deployment in its public credit system. The public debt is negligible compared with the rates of indebtedness considered intolerable in the United States, Europe, Japan and many of the countries in the South. China can thus increase the expansion of its public expenditures without serious danger of inflation.

The attraction of foreign capital to China, from which it has benefitted, is not behind the success of its project. On the contrary, it is the success of the project

that has made investment in China attractive for Western transnationals. The countries of the South that opened their doors much wider than China and unconditionally accepted their submission to financial globalization have not become attractive to the same degree. Transnational capital is not attracted to China to pillage the natural resources of the country, nor, without any transfer of technology, to outsource and benefit from low wages for labor; nor to seize the benefits from training and integration of offshored units unrelated to nonexistent national productive systems, as in Morocco and Tunisia; nor even to carry out a financial raid and allow the imperialist banks to dispossess the national savings, as was the case in Mexico, Argentina and Southeast Asia. In China, by contrast, foreign investments can certainly benefit from low wages and make good profits, on condition that their plans fit into China's and allow technology transfer. In sum, these are 'normal' profits, but more can be made if collusion with Chinese authorities permits!

## 8.5 China, Emerging Power

No one doubts that China is an emerging power. One current idea is that China is only attempting to recover the place it had occupied for centuries and lost only in the nineteenth century. However, this idea—certainly correct, and flattering, moreover—does not help us much in understanding the nature of this emergence and its real prospects in the contemporary world. Incidentally, those who propagate this general and vague idea have no interest in considering whether China will emerge by rallying to the general principles of capitalism (which they think is probably necessary) or whether it will take seriously its project of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. For my part, I argue that if China is indeed an emerging power, this is precisely because it has not chosen the capitalist path of development pure and simple; and that, as a consequence, if it decided to follow that capitalist path, the project of emergence itself would be in serious danger of failing.

The thesis that I support implies rejecting the idea that peoples can leap over the necessary sequence of stages; thus China must go through a capitalist development before the question of its possible socialist future is considered. The debate on this question between the different currents of historical Marxism was never concluded. Marx remained hesitant on this question. We know that right after the first European attacks (the Opium Wars), he wrote: the next time that you send your armies to China they will be welcomed by a banner: “Attention, you are at the frontiers of the bourgeois Republic of China”. This is a magnificent intuition and shows confidence in the capacity of the Chinese people to respond to the challenge, but at the same time an error because in fact the banner read: “you are at the frontiers of the People's Republic of China”. Yet we know that, concerning Russia, Marx did not reject the idea of skipping the capitalist stage (see his

correspondence with Vera Zasulich). Today, one might believe that the first Marx was right and that China is indeed on the route to capitalist development.

But Mao understood—better than Lenin—that the capitalist path would lead to nothing and that the resurrection of China could only be the work of communists. The Qing Emperors at the end of the nineteenth century, followed by Sun Yat Sen and the Kuo Ming Tang had already planned a Chinese resurrection in response to the challenge from the West. However, they imagined no other way than that of capitalism and did not have the intellectual wherewithal to understand what capitalism really is and why this path was closed to China, and to all the peripheries of the world capitalist system for that matter. Mao, independent Marxist spirit, understood this. More than that, Mao understood that this battle was not won in advance—by the 1949 victory—and that the conflict between commitment to the long route to socialism, the condition for China’s renaissance, and return to the capitalist fold would occupy the entire visible future.

Personally, I have always shared Mao’s analysis and I shall return to this subject in some of my thoughts concerning the role of the Taiping Revolution (which I consider to be the distant origin of Maoism, the 1911 revolution in China and other revolutions in the South at the beginning of the twentieth century), the debates at the beginning of the Bandung period and the analysis of the impasses in which the so-called emergent countries of the South committed to the capitalist path are stuck. All these considerations are corollaries of my central thesis concerning the polarization (i.e., construction of the center/periphery contrast) immanent to the world development of historical capitalism. This polarization eliminates the possibility for a country from the periphery to “catch up” within the context of capitalism. We must draw the conclusion: if “catching up” with the opulent countries is impossible, something else must be done; it is called following the socialist path.

China has not followed a particular path just since 1980, but since 1950, although this path has passed through phases that are different in many respects. China has developed a coherent, sovereign project that is appropriate for its own needs. This is certainly not capitalism, whose logic requires that agricultural land be treated as a commodity. This project remains sovereign insofar as China remains outside of contemporary financial globalization.

The fact that the Chinese project is not capitalist does not mean that it ‘is’ socialist, only that it makes it possible to advance on the long road to socialism. Nevertheless, it is also still threatened with a drift that moves it off that road and ends up with a return, pure and simple, to capitalism.

China’s successful emergence is completely the result of this sovereign project. In this sense, China is the only authentically emergent country (along with Korea and Taiwan, about which we will say more later). None of the many other countries to which the World Bank has awarded a certificate of emergence is really emergent because none of these countries is persistently pursuing a coherent sovereign project. All subscribe to the fundamental principles of capitalism pure and simple, even in potential sectors of their state capitalism. All have accepted

submission to contemporary globalization in all its dimensions, including financial. Russia and India are partial exceptions to this last point, but not Brazil, South Africa and others. Sometimes there are pieces of a “national industry policy”, but nothing comparable with the systematic Chinese project of constructing a complete, integrated and sovereign industrial system (notably in the area of technological expertise).

For these reasons, all these other countries, too quickly characterized as emergent, remain vulnerable, certainly in varying degrees, but always much more than China. For all these reasons, the appearances of emergence—respectable rates of growth, capacities to export manufactured products—are always linked with the processes of pauperization that impact the majority of their populations (particularly the peasantry), which is not the case with China. Certainly the growth of inequality is obvious everywhere, including China; but this observation remains superficial and deceptive. Inequality in the distribution of benefits from a model of growth that nevertheless excludes no one (and is even accompanied with a reduction in pockets of poverty—this is the case in China) is one thing; the inequality connected with a growth that benefits only a minority (from 5 to 30 % of the population, depending on the case) while the fate of the others remains desperate is another thing. The practitioners of *China bashing* are unaware—or pretend to be unaware—of this decisive difference. The inequality that is apparent from the existence of quarters with luxurious villas, on the one hand, and quarters with comfortable housing for the middle and working classes, on the other, is not the same as the inequality apparent from the juxtaposition of wealthy quarters, middle class housing and slums for the majority. The Gini coefficients are valuable for measuring the changes from 1 year to another in a system with a fixed structure. However, in international comparisons between systems with different structures, they lose their meaning, like all other measures of macroeconomic magnitudes in national accounts. The emergent countries (other than China) are indeed “emergent markets”, open to penetration by the monopolies of the imperialist triad. These markets allow the latter to extract, to their benefit, a considerable part of the surplus value produced in the country in question. China is different: it is an emergent nation in which the system makes possible the retention of the majority of the surplus value produced there.

Korea and Taiwan are the only two successful examples of an authentic emergence in and through capitalism. These two countries owe this success to the geostrategic reasons that led the United States to allow them to achieve what Washington prohibited others from doing. The contrast between the support of the United States to the state capitalism of these two countries and the extremely violent opposition to state capitalism in Nasser’s Egypt or Boumedienne’s Algeria is, on this account, quite illuminating.

I will not discuss here potential projects of emergence, which appear quite possible in Vietnam and Cuba, or the conditions of a possible resumption of progress in this direction in Russia. Nor will I discuss the strategic objectives of the struggle by progressive forces elsewhere in the capitalist South, in India,

Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Arab World and Africa, which could facilitate moving beyond current impasses and encourage the emergence of sovereign projects that initiate a true rupture with the logic of dominant capitalism.

## 8.6 Great Successes, New Challenges

China has not just arrived at the crossroads; it has been there everyday since 1950. Social and political forces from the right and left, active in society and the party, have constantly clashed.

Where does the Chinese right come from? Certainly, the former comprador and bureaucratic bourgeoisies of the Kuo Min Tang were excluded from power. However, over the course of the war of liberation, entire segments of the middle classes, professionals, functionaries and industrialists, disappointed by the ineffectiveness of the Kuo Min Tang in the face of Japanese aggression, drew closer to the Communist Party, even joined it. Many of them—but certainly not all—remained nationalists, and nothing more. Subsequently, beginning in 1990 with the opening to private initiative, a new, more powerful, right made its appearance. It should not be reduced to ‘businessmen’ who have succeeded and made (sometimes colossal) fortunes, strengthened by their clientele—including state and party officials, who mix control with collusion, even corruption.

This success, as always, encourages support for rightist ideas in the expanding educated middle classes. It is in this sense that the growing inequality—even if it has nothing in common with inequality characteristic of other countries in the South—is a major political danger, the vehicle for the spread of rightist ideas, depoliticization and naive illusions.

Here I shall make an additional observation that I believe is important: petty production, particularly peasant, is not motivated by rightist ideas, like Lenin thought (that was accurate in Russian conditions). China’s situation contrasts here with that of the ex-USSR. The Chinese peasantry, as a whole, is not reactionary because it is not defending the principle of private property, in contrast with the Soviet peasantry, whom the communists never succeeded in turning away from supporting the kulaks in defense of private property. On the contrary, the Chinese peasantry of petty producers (without being small property owners) is today a class that does not offer rightist solutions, but is part of the camp of forces agitating for the adoption of the most courageous social and ecological policies. The powerful movement of “renovating rural society” testifies to this. The Chinese peasantry largely stands in the leftist camp, with the working class. The left has its organic intellectuals and it exercises some influence on the state and party apparatuses.

The perpetual conflict between the right and left in China has always been reflected in the successive political lines implemented by the state and party leadership. In the Maoist era, the leftist line did not prevail without a fight. Assessing the progress of rightist ideas within the party and its leadership, a bit like the Soviet model, Mao unleashed the Cultural Revolution to fight it.



“Bombard the Headquarters”, that is, the Party leadership, where the “new bourgeoisie” is forming. However, while the Cultural Revolution met Mao’s expectations during the first 2 years of its existence, it subsequently deviated into anarchy, linked to the loss of control by Mao and the left in the party over the sequence of events. This deviation led to the state and party taking things in hand again, which gave the right its opportunity. Since then, the right remains a strong part of all leadership bodies. Yet the left is present on the ground, restricting the supreme leadership to compromises of the ‘center’—but is that center right or center left?

To understand the nature of challenges facing China today, it is essential to understand that the conflict between China’s sovereign project, such as it is, and North American imperialism and its subaltern European and Japanese allies will increase in intensity to the extent that China continues its success. There are several areas of conflict: China’s command of modern technologies, access to the planet’s resources, the strengthening of China’s military capacities and pursuit of the objective of reconstructing international politics on the basis of the sovereign rights of peoples to choose their own political and economic system. Each of these objectives enters into direct conflict with the objectives pursued by the imperialist triad.

The objective of the United States’ political strategy is military control of the planet, the only way that Washington can retain the advantages that give it hegemony. This objective is being pursued by means of the preventive wars in the Middle East, and in this sense these wars are the preliminary to the preventive (nuclear) war against China, cold-bloodedly envisaged by the North American establishment as possibly necessary “before it is too late”. Fomenting hostility to China is inseparable from this global strategy, which is manifest in the support shown for the slaveowners of Tibet and Sinkiang, the reinforcement of the American naval presence in the China Sea and the unstinting encouragement to Japan to build its military forces. The practitioners of *China bashing* contribute to keeping this hostility alive.

Simultaneously, Washington is devoted to manipulating the situation by appeasing the possible ambitions of China and the other so-called emergent countries through the creation of the G20, which is intended to give these countries the illusion that their adherence to liberal globalization would serve their interests. The G2 (United States/China) is—in this vein—a trap that, in making China the accomplice of the imperialist adventures of the United States, could cause Beijing’s peaceful foreign policy to lose all its credibility.

The only possible effective response to this strategy must proceed on two levels: (i) strengthen China’s military forces and equip them with the potential for a deterrent response and (ii) tenaciously pursue the objective of reconstructing a polycentric international political system, respectful of all national sovereignties, and, to this effect, act to rehabilitate the UN, now marginalized by NATO. I emphasize the decisive importance of the latter objective, which entails the priority of reconstructing a “front of the South” (Bandung 2?) capable of supporting the independent initiatives of the peoples and states of the South. It implies, in turn, that China becomes aware that it does not have the means for the absurd

possibility of aligning with the predatory practices of imperialism (pillaging the natural resources of the planet), since it lacks a military power similar to that of the United States, which in the last resort is the guarantee of success for imperialist projects. China, on the other hand, has much to gain by developing its offer of support for the industrialization of the countries of the South, which the club of imperialist ‘donors’ is trying to make impossible.

The language used by Chinese authorities concerning international questions, restrained in the extreme (which is understandable), makes it difficult to know to what extent the leaders of the country are aware of the challenges analyzed above. More seriously, this choice of words reinforces naive illusions and depoliticization in public opinion.

The other part of the challenge concerns the question of democratizing the political and social management of the country.

Mao formulated and implemented a general principle for the political management of the new China that he summarized in these terms: rally the left, neutralize (I add: and not eliminate) the right, govern from the center left. In my opinion, this is the best way to conceive of an effective manner for moving through successive advances, understood and supported by the great majority. In this way, Mao gave a positive content to the concept of democratization of society combined with social progress on the long road to socialism. He formulated the method for implementing this: “the mass line” (go down into the masses, learn their struggles, go back to the summits of power). Lin Chun has analyzed with precision the method and the results that it makes possible.

The question of democratization connected with social progress—in contrast with a ‘democracy’ disconnected from social progress (and even frequently connected with social regression)—does not concern China alone, but all the world’s peoples. The methods that should be implemented for success cannot be summarized in a single formula, valid in all times and places. In any case, the formula offered by Western media propaganda—multiple parties and elections—should quite simply be rejected. Moreover, this sort of ‘democracy’ turns into farce, even in the West, more so elsewhere. The “mass line” was the means for producing consensus on successive, constantly progressing, strategic objectives. This is in contrast with the ‘consensus’ obtained in Western countries through media manipulation and the electoral farce, which is nothing more than alignment with the requirements of capital.

Yet today, how should China begin to reconstruct the equivalent of a new mass line in new social conditions? It will not be easy because the power of the leadership, which has moved mostly to the right in the Communist Party, bases the stability of its management on depoliticization and the naive illusions that go along with that. The very success of the development policies strengthens the spontaneous tendency to move in this direction. It is widely believed in China, in the middle classes, that the royal road to catching up with the way of life in the opulent countries is now open, free of obstacles; it is believed that the states of the triad (United States, Europe, Japan) do not oppose that; American methods are even uncritically admired; etc. This is particularly true for the urban middle classes,

which are rapidly expanding and whose conditions of life are incredibly improved. The brainwashing to which Chinese students are subject in the United States, particularly in the social sciences, combined with a rejection of the official unimaginative and tedious teaching of Marxism, have contributed to narrowing the spaces for radical critical debates.

The government in China is not insensitive to the social question, not only because of the tradition of a discourse founded on Marxism, but also because the Chinese people, who learned how to fight and continue to do so, force the government's hand. If, in the 1990s, this social dimension had declined before the immediate priorities of speeding up growth, today the tendency is reversed. At the very moment when the social democratic conquests of social security are being eroded in the opulent West, poor China is implementing the expansion of social security in three dimensions—health, housing, pensions. China's popular housing policy, vilified by the *China bashing* of the European right and left, would be envied, not only in India or Brazil, but equally in the distressed areas of Paris, London or Chicago!

Social security and the pension system already cover 50 % of the urban population (which has increased, recall, from 200 to 600 million inhabitants!) and the Plan (still carried out in China) anticipates increasing the covered population to 85 % in the coming years. Let the journalists of *China bashing* give us comparable examples in the “countries embarked on the democratic path”, which they continually praise. Nevertheless, the debate remains open on the methods for implementing the system. The left advocates the French system of distribution based on the principle of solidarity between these workers and different generations—which prepares for the socialism to come—while the right, obviously, prefers the odious American system of pension funds, which divides workers and transfers the risk from capital to labor.

However, the acquisition of social benefits is insufficient if it is not combined with democratization of the political management of society, with its re-politicization by methods that strengthen the creative invention of forms for the socialist/communist future.

Following the principles of a multi-party electoral system as advocated ad nauseam by Western media and the practitioners of *China bashing*, and defended by ‘dissidents’ presented as authentic ‘democrats’, does not meet the challenge. On the contrary, the implementation of these principles could only produce in China, as all the experiences of the contemporary world demonstrate (in Russia, Eastern Europe, the Arab world), the self-destruction of the project of emergence and social renaissance, which is in fact the actual objective of advocating these principles, masked by an empty rhetoric (“there is no other solution than multi-party elections”!). Yet it is not sufficient to counter this bad solution with a fallback to the rigid position of defending the privilege of the ‘party’, itself sclerotic and transformed into an institution devoted to recruitment of officials for state administration. Something new must be invented.

The objectives of re-politicization and creation of conditions favorable to the invention of new responses cannot be obtained through ‘propaganda’ campaigns.

They can only be promoted through social, political and ideological struggles. That implies the preliminary recognition of the legitimacy of these struggles and legislation based on the collective rights of organization, expression and proposing legislative initiatives. That implies, in turn, that the party itself is involved in these struggles; in other words, reinvents the Maoist formula of the mass line. Re-politicization makes no sense if it is not combined with procedures that encourage the gradual conquest of responsibility by workers in the management of their society at all levels—company, local, national. A program of this sort does not exclude recognition of the rights of the individual person. On the contrary, it supposes their institutionalization. Its implementation would make it possible to re-invent new ways of using elections to choose leaders.

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# World Forum for Alternatives

## Manifest of the World Forum for Alternatives

### **It is time to reclaim the march of history**

Humanity's future is at stake. Scientific progress and technical advances, the supreme achievements of knowledge, fortify the privilege and comfort of a minority. Instead of contributing to the well-being of all, these feats are used to crush, marginalize and exclude countless human beings. Access to natural resources, especially in the South, is monopolized by the few and is subject to political blackmail and threats of war. *It is time to reclaim the march of history.*

### **It is time to make the economy serve the peoples of the world**

The economy provides goods and services mainly to a minority. In its contemporary form, it forces the majority of the human race into strategies for abject survival, denying tens of millions of people even the right to live. Its logic, the produce of neo-liberal capitalism, entrenches and accentuates grotesque inequalities. Propelled by faith in the markets self-regulating virtue, it reinforces the economic power of the rich and exponentially increases the number of the poor. *It is time to make the economy serve the peoples of the world.*

### **It is time to break down the wall between North and South**

Monopolies of knowledge, scientific research, advanced production, credit and information, all guaranteed by international institutions, create a relentless polarization both at the global level and within each country. Trapped in patterns of development that are culturally destructive, physically unsustainable and economically submissive, many people throughout the world can neither define for themselves the stages of their evolution, establish the basis of their own growth, or provide education for their younger generations. *It is time to break down the wall between North and South.*

**It is time to confront the crisis of our civilization**

The confines of individualism, the closed world of consumption, the supremacy of productivism—and, for many, an obsessive struggle for sheer daily survival obscure humanity's larger objectives: the right to live liberated from oppression and exploitation, the right to equal opportunities, social justice, peace, spiritual fulfillment and solidarity. *It is time to confront the crisis of our civilisation.*

**It is time to refuse the dictatorship of money**

The concentration of economic power in the hands of transnational corporations weakens, even dismantles, the sovereignty of States. It threatens democracy—within single countries and on global scale. The dominance of financial capital does more than imperil the worlds monetary equilibrium. It transforms states into mafias. It proliferates the hidden sources of capitalist accumulation, drug trafficking, the rams trade, child slavery. *It is time to refuse the dictatorship of money.*

**It is time to replace cynicism with hope**

Stock prices soar when workers are laid off. A competitive edge is gained when mass consumerdom is replaced with elite niche markets. Macro-economics indicators react positively as the ranks of the poor multiply. International economic institutions coax and compel governments to pursue structural adjustment, widening the chasm between classes and provoking mounting social conflict. International humanitarian aid trickles to those reduced to despair. *It is time to replace cynicism with hope.*

**It is time to rebuild and democratize the state**

The programme of dismantling the state, reducing its functions, pilfering its resources and launching sweeping privatizations leads to a demoralized public sector, weakened systems of education and health and the eventual usurping of the state by private economic interests. Neoliberal globalization divorces the state from the population and encourages corruption and organized venality on an unprecedented scale: The state becomes a repressive instrument policing the privilege of the few. *It is time to rebuild and democratize the state.*

**It is time to recreate the citizenry**

Millions of people are deprived of voting rights because they are immigrants. Millions more fail to vote because they are angry or discouraged, because parties are in crisis or because they feel impotent and excluded from political life. Elections are often distorted by influence-mongering and deceit. But democracy is about more than elections. Democracy means participation at every level of economic, political and cultural life. *It is time to recreate the citizenry.*

**It is time to salvage collective values**

Modernity, conveyed by capitalism and ideologized by neo-liberalism, has destroyed or profoundly corrupted existing cultures. It has imploded solidarities

and dismantled convictions, extolling instead the high-performance individual evaluated on the basis of economic success. Rather than bringing emancipation to the peoples of the world, modernity is generating a crisis in education, fuelling social violence and triggering an explosion of insular movements that seek salvation and protection in nationalist, ethnic or religious identity politics. *It is time to salvage collective values.*

### **It is time to globalize social struggles**

In all this, it is not the internationalization of the economy per se that is to blame. It could represent a dramatic step forward for material, social and cultural exchanges between human beings. But in its neoliberal form it becomes a nightmare lived by the victims of unemployment, young people traumatized by the future, workers shut out of the productive system and nations subjected to structural adjustment, labour deregulation, the erosion of social security systems and the elimination of networks serving the poor. It purports to link and unite, yet separates and imprisons. *It is time to globalize social struggles.*

### **It is time to build on peoples' resistance**

Across the world, people are organizing resistance, engaging in social struggles and creating alternatives. Women, men, children, unemployed people, excluded and oppressed people, workers, landless peasants, communities suffering from racism, impoverished city dwellers, indigenous peoples, students, intellectuals, migrants, small business people, outcasts, declining middle classes—citizens—are asserting their dignity, demanding respect for their human rights and natural heritages, and practising solidarity. Some have given their lives for these causes. Others practice heroism in their day-to-day existences. Some are rebuilding knowledge on the basis of the concrete situations, some are trying out new economic forms, some are creating the basis of a new kind of politics, and some are inventing new cultures. *It is time to build on peoples' resistance.*

### **Now is the time for joining forces**

Convergence of struggles, of knowledge, of resistances, of innovations, of minds and hearts for a world of justice and equality, invention and material progress, optimism and spiritual development. We can build this world by seeking and discovering viable alternatives to neoliberalism and unilateral globalization, alternatives based on the interests of peoples and respect for national, cultural and religious differences. *Now is the time for joining forces.*

### **A time of creative universal thought has arrived**

Honest, probing analysis of the current economic organization and its economic, social, ecological, political and cultural consequences can only delegitimize this phenomenon which is paraded to the world as the paragon of progress. The search for a balance between personal initiative and the pursuit of collective goals—based on a celebration of human diversity and creativity—must open the way to new models. Studies of expanding non-market sectors, productive techniques that



respect the well-being of those who use them, and the organization and nature of work will help create more human forms of organization. *A time of creative universal thoughts has arrived.*

### **The time to rebuild and extend democracy is here**

Democracy is no longer merely a goal for the organization of societies. It is also the key for the functioning of communities, social movements, political parties, businesses, institutions, nations and international bodies. It is progressively experienced as an essential contribution to the respect of popular interests, and the preservation of national and international security. By prizing open spaces for all cultures—not patronizingly, but because they represent humanity’s endowment—we can reverse the retreat into enclaves of narrow self-interest and the seclusion of identity politics. The existence of democratic, competent and transparent states is considered the basis for restoring their power to regulate. Regional economics and political groupings based on international complementary are viable answers to the real needs of the population and a necessary alternative to neoliberal globalization. Strengthening and democratizing regional and international institutions is a realistic imperative. It is a condition for progress in international law and the indispensable regulation of economic, social and political relations at the global level, particularly in the fields of financial capital, taxation, migration, information and disarmament. *The time to rebuild and extend democracy is here.*

### **Adopted in Cairo in 1997**

The members of the *Board of World Forum for Alternatives* (WFA) have been since September 2010:

Chair: Samir Amin

Secretariat: Executive Secretaries: Remy Herrera (France)  
and Krishna Murthy Padmanabhan (India)

Webmaster: Carlos Tablada (Cuba)

Vice Presidents:

Francois Houtart (Belgium/Ecuador)

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Bernard Founou-Tchuigoua (Cameroun)

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Lau Kin Chi (China)

Amiya Bagchi (India)

Mamdouh Habashi (Egypt)

Wim Dierckxsens (Costa Rica)

Paulo Nakatani (Brasil)



Photograph of Samir Amin, HQ of Ho Chi Minh in the northeast mountains of Vietnam, visited by Samir Amin in 1980. *Source* Photo from the author's personal photo collection



Photograph of Samir Amin, in Cairo in 2011. *Source* Photo from the author's personal photo collection

## About the Author



**Samir Amin** (Egypt/France), was born in Cairo as son of an Egyptian father and a French mother (both medical doctors). He spent his childhood and youth in Port Said, where he attended a French High School and obtained a Baccalauréat (1947). He studied in Paris (1947–1957) with degrees in political science (1952), statistics (1956) and economics (1957). His PhD thesis (1957) was on: *The origins of underdevelopment—capitalist accumulation on a world scale* but retitled *The structural effects of the international integration of precapitalist economies. A theoretical study of the mechanism which creates so-called underdeveloped*

*economies*. He worked in Cairo (1957–1960) for the government’s “Institution for Economic Management”. He was an adviser to the Ministry of Planning in Bamako (Mali) (1960-1963). In 1963 received a fellowship at the *Institut Africain de Développement Économique et de Planification* (IDEP), where he worked until 1970 besides being a professor at the university of Poitiers, Dakar and Paris (of Paris VIII, Vincennes). In 1970 he became director of the IDEP, which he managed until 1980. In 1980 Amin left the IDEP and became a director of the Third World Forum in Dakar.

Samir Amin wrote more than 30 books: *Les effets structurels de l’intégration internationale des économies précapitalistes. Une étude théorique du mécanisme qui a engendré les économies dites sous-développées* (1957); *Trois expériences africaines de développement: le Mali, la Guinée et le Ghana* (1965); *L’économie du Maghreb, 2 vols.* (1966); *Le développement du capitalisme en Côte d’Ivoire* (1967); *Le monde des affaires sénégalais* (1969); *The Class struggle in Africa* (1969); *Le Maghreb moderne (The Magrheb in the Modern World)* (1970); 1970, *L’accumulation à l’échelle mondiale (mdöAccumulation on a world scale)* (1970); with C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Histoire économique du Congo 1880–1968* (1970); *L’Afrique de l’Ouest bloquée* (1971); *Le développement inégal (Unequal development)* (1973); *L’échange inégal et la loi de la valeur* (1973); *Neocolonialism in West Africa* (1973); ‘*Le développement inegal. Essai sur les*

*formations sociales du capitalisme peripherique* Paris: Editions de Minuit (1973); *L'échange inégal et la loi de la valeur* (1973); with K. Vergopoulos): *La question paysanne et le capitalism* (1974); with A. Faire, M. Hussein and G. Massiah): *La crise de l'impérialisme* (1975); 'Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism' New York: Monthly Review Press (1976); *L'impérialisme et le développement inégal (Imperialism and unequal development)* (1976); *La nation arabe (The Arab Nation)* (1976); *La loi de la valeur et le matérialisme historique (The law of value and historical materialism)* (1977); *Classe et nation dans l'histoire et la crise contemporaine (Class and nation, historically and in the current crisis)* (1979); *L'économie arabe contemporaine (The Arab economy today)* (1980); *L'avenir du Maoïsme (The Future of Maoism)* (1981); *Irak et Syrie 1960–1980* (1982); with G. Arrighi, A. G. Frank and I. Wallerstein): *La crise, quelle crise? (Crisis, what crisis?)* (1982); *Transforming the world-economy? Nine critical essays on the new international economic order* (1984); *La déconnexion (Delinking: towards a polycentric world)* (1985); 1988, *Impérialisme et sous-développement en Afrique (expanded edition of 1976)* (1988); *L'eurocentrisme (Eurocentrism)* (1988); with F. Yachir): *La Méditerranée dans le système mondial* (1988); *La faillite du développement en Afrique et dans le tiers monde* (1989); *Transforming the revolution: social movements and the world system* (1990); *Itinéraire intellectuel; regards sur le demi-siècle 1945–90 (Re-reading the post-war period: an Intellectual Itinerary)* (1990); *L'Empire du chaos (Empire of chaos)* (1991); *Les enjeux stratégiques en Méditerranée* (1991); with G. Arrighi, A. G. Frank et I. Wallerstein): *Le grand tumult* (1991); 'Empire of Chaos' New York: Monthly Review Press (1992); *L'Ethnie à l'assaut des nations* (1994); *La gestion capitaliste de la crise* (1995); *Les défis de la mondialisation* (1996); *Critique de l'air du temps* (1997); *Spectres of capitalism: a critique of current intellectual fashions* (1999); *L'hégémonie des États-Unis et l'effacement du projet européen* (2000); *Mondialisation, comprendre pour agir* (2002); *Obsolescent Capitalism* (2003); *The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World* (2004); with Ali El Kenz, *Europe and the Arab world; patterns and prospects for the new relationship* (2005); 2006, *Beyond US Hegemony: Assessing the Prospects for a Multipolar World* (2006); with James Membrez, *The World We Wish to See: Revolutionary Objectives in the Twenty-First Century* (2008); 'Aid for Development' in 'Aid to Africa: Redeemer or Coloniser?' (2009); 'Eurocentrism—Modernity, Religion and Democracy: A Critique of Eurocentrism and Culturalism' (2010); 'Ending the Crisis of Capitalism or Ending Capitalism?' (2010), 'Global History—a View from the South' (2010); 'Maldevelopment—Anatomy of a Global Failure' (2011).



Samir Amin with Thomas Sarkaya in 1983. *Source* Personal photo collection of the author



Samir Amin with Wang Hui at the World Social Forum, Dakar, February 2011. *Source* Personal photo collection of the author

# About the Book

## Samir Amin: Theory is History

Samir Amin (Egypt/France) is a leading intellectual on underdevelopment and the critique of capitalism. The selected texts focus on a central concept which can be concisely formulated as “*Theory is History*”. The theory of capitalism can only be formulated on the basis of an analysis of its history. In contrast, bourgeois thinking replaces the analysis of historical capitalism with an abstract theory without any links to reality. “Economics”, which is the theory of an imaginary system, then becomes an *apologia* whose function is to give legitimacy to the behaviour of the owners of capital. Does the reading of historical capitalism I propose add anything to Marx’s teachings? I believe so, since I pay specific attention to the globalization of the law of value in this interpretation. The chapters of this book illustrate my thesis by focusing on the links between capital and land ownership, between modernity and religious interpretation, and on questions of the global expansion of capitalism, on the particular ways it has unfolded in certain countries, in this case Russia and China. This anthology supplements my previous work, centered on the rise of the South—my reading of capitalism having been one of the unfolding of its imperialist nature.

The eight chapters in this book address: The Globalized Law of Value—Capitalism and Ground Rent—Modernity and Interpretations of Religions—Re-reading the Post War Period—Historical Capitalism: Accumulation by Dispossession—The Two Paths of Historical Development: The Contrast between Europe and China—Russia in the World System: Geography or History?—China: The Emerging Nation.