

Marx, Imperialism, and the Question of Capitalist Progress

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When it comes to the question of how progressive is capitalism, Marx is profoundly ambivalent. The traditional interpretation is that, while Marx views capitalism as an extraordinary brutal system, it also represents a ‘higher stage’ in the development towards socialism. Avineri succinctly summarizes this interpretation when he writes:

... [Marx] is careful not to mistake a condemnation of the social evils inherent in capitalism for a romantic search after the idyllic preindustrial times. It is true that capitalism is the most brutalizing and dehumanizing economic system history has ever known; after all, there have been few critiques of capitalism more outspoken than Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *Das Kapital*. Yet to Marx, capitalism is still a necessary step toward final salvation, since only capitalism can create the economic and technological infrastructure that will enable society to allow for the free development of every member according to his capacities.¹

However, in this essay I will suggest that the traditional interpretation is problematic, both because it takes Marx’s thought as monolithic and internally consistent, and because it tends to downplay the shift in Marx’s thought from the 1840s and 1850s to the 1860s and 1870s. The first section of this paper will discuss the prevalence of social evolutionary concepts in the 19th century, and how these ideas must have colored Marx’s view of the world. The next two sections will utilize a case study approach – I will look at Marx’s views on imperialism and the related idea of how he viewed the impact that capitalism would have on the periphery. I’ve chosen these topics, because I think they best illuminate Marx’s views on capitalist progress – if capitalism is ‘progressive’ then capitalist imperialism and the imposition of capitalism on the periphery, while it may be destructive does serve progressive purposes: it helps bring countries into a higher stage of development, creating the material conditions for socialism in these places².

I will discuss Marx’s early views on the subject by looking at how he viewed India, and then Marx’s later views on imperialism and progressivity of capitalism in relation to Ireland and Russia. In conclusion, I will attempt to relate Marx’s views of the progressive nature of capitalism with that of later marxists.

1. SETTING THE STAGE: SOCIAL EVOLUTION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The idea that we progress from a ‘lower stage’ to progressively higher stages in terms of our structure is referred to as social evolution. While the concept of social evolution is not new, the 19th century was the heyday of such a concept. Many of the most well-known social thinkers of the day – Sainte-Simon Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Henry Lewis Morgan and others – embraced a notion of social evolution³.

Further accentuating the belief in social evolution, was the revolution in science, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, which explained processes of biological evolution. Many of the social theorists in question took ideas from the natural sciences, and then they committed the naturalistic fallacy of suggesting that because there existed biological evolution, it must mean the existence of social evolution. Herbert Spencer in particular, coined the term ‘Social Darwinism’ to describe the application of Darwinian principles to society.

Living in this environment it would be hard not to be affected by ideas of social evolution. There is evidence to suggest that Marx was strongly influenced by such ideas:

In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels describe several stages of ownership forms – tribal, ancient, feudal, and capitalist. [T]he Preface [mentions] progressive epochs. That Marx and Engels had viewed society as developing in stages is further suggested by their enthusiastic reception of Lewis Henry Morgan’s *Ancient Society* and by Engels’ heavy reliance on that work in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.⁴

Perhaps most tellingly Engels in his funeral oration: “Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in history.....”⁵

However, without denying there are social evolutionary elements within Marx’s thoughts, one can derive another interpretation from other passages. Marx, for example, writes that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”⁶ – this suggests something extremely important, Marx is not giving agency to something that doesn’t have any agency (history). Another passage further illuminates this point:

History does nothing; it does not possess immense riches, it does not fight battles. It is men, real, living, who do all this. ... It is not ‘history’ which uses men as a means of achieving – as if it were an individual person – its own ends. History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends.⁷

In contrast, social evolutionists tended to see history as having ‘objective laws’ that lie totally outside human agency (i.e. ‘history just progresses’). Georg Lukacs would later refer to the giving of agency to an abstraction like history, as reification⁸.

Thus, for Marx, it’s not that capitalism was progressive, based on some sort of ‘historical laws’ of social development (as the bourgeois social theorists thought); rather, it was because Marx believed that capitalism would create a revolutionary class (the revolutionary working class) who would bring about the negation of capitalism (socialism/communism). He thought that forcing people into the factories would make workers realize their collective class interests in opposition to the capitalists, and they in turn would become the agents of revolutionary social change (to socialism/communism). If capitalism doesn’t fulfil this function, then for Marx, capitalism is not progressive. In the 19th century, with the emergence of a fairly militant and radical working class, Marx’s conclusion seemed reasonable because he saw the emergence of a revolutionary working class. But if Marx had seen how the progress of capitalism in the 20th century resulted in the working class’s growing mystification (‘repressive consciousness’⁹), he would have seriously doubted the progressive nature of capitalism (and in fact, as we shall see, even Marx started to doubt the progressive nature of capitalism in the 1860s and especially the 1870s). Marx, by emphasizing the role of agency in the creation of human history keeps the door open for the possibility that capitalism will NOT create its own gravediggers, and thus would instead degenerate into greater and greater barbarism without getting any closer to socialism/communism. In fact, this is what so many marxists in the 20th century suggest: just such an phenomenon (eg Luxembourge, Lukacs, Korsch, Reich, Adorno, Camatte etc).

2. MARX, IMPERIALISM AND THE *NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE*

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social

state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was unconscious tool of history in bringing about the revolution.¹⁰

England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.¹¹

Much of Marx's views on imperialism and the non-European world was material published in the *New York Daily Tribune* (including the above). In many respects, it is often these views that underline arguments that stress Marx's belief in the inherent progressive nature of capitalism¹². While, later on I will discuss the importance of social context, for now it is important to attempt to investigate how Marx viewed the 'Orient' and how this colored his writings.

Marx certainly has a strong element of Eurocentrism in him (Perelman 1989). He had trouble understanding non-European societies, because they didn't fit into the modes of production he saw in Europe. So he developed another type of mode of production to describe all of Asia – the 'Asiatic Mode of Production' (ASM)¹³. It is quite curious that he would use such a term, because the other modes of production (ancient, feudal, modern bourgeois) are analytical and historical, while the ASM is a geographic term. But this stems from how he perceived Asia, he saw Asian society as static¹⁴ and unchanging¹⁵ and endogenously despotic¹⁶. For the early Marx, the productive forces didn't develop endogenously; rather, it was up to exogenous forces like British imperialism to develop these productive forces which in turn would create an industrial working class creating the material conditions for socialist transformation¹⁷.

However, it is important to recognize the context for Marx's writings on imperialism¹⁸. He wasn't writing deep theoretical pieces. Rather he was writing newspaper articles for the general public, and thus there is a tendency for him to simplify complex ideas so they are easily digestible to the general public. But more importantly, he was engaging in a polemical debate with another writer for the *New York Daily Tribune*, Henry Carey.

Henry Carey was an American economist, whom Marx wasn't particularly fond of.¹⁹ Carey was a supporter of protectionism, and had a strong belief that Britain was the reason for American economic problems and the cause behind why there was 'disharmony' (i.e. class conflict) keeping the United States economy 'down'. Carey didn't like the classical economists because they tended to suggest the existence of class conflict (eg Ricardo)²⁰ and he believed that the capitalist economic development could occur without such class conflict.

He and Marx were battling for ideological control of the NYHT, and thus Marx's writings should be seen in this light. Marx was writing not to elucidate his views, but rather to undermine Carey's influence at the NYHT and its readership. "In this respect they (the articles on India) may reflect Marx's views on Carey rather than on India."²¹

In fact, there is textual evidence even from his writings on India that while the dominant tendency in the early Marx's thought was that capitalism was a necessary evil for progress, there is also a contradictory tendency developing within Marx's thought that suggest something rather opposite.

England pays now, in fact, the penalty for her protracted misrule of that vast Indian Empire. The two main obstacles she has now to grapple with in her attempts at supplanting American cotton by Indian cotton are the want of means of communication and transport throughout India, and the miserable state of the Indian peasant, disabling him from

improving favourable circumstances. Both these difficulties the English have themselves to thank for.²²

However, I think Perelman overstates his case: there are quite a few other passages, not in the NYHT, which also tend to suggest the early Marx predominantly believed capitalist imperialism was a necessary evil for progress:

(1) the well known paragraph of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) in which he likens the cheap prices of British commodities to heavy artillery battering down the Chinese walls, and emphasize that the British bourgeoisie creates a world after its own image; ... (3) in numerous passages of the *Grundrisse* written in 1857-1858.”²³

Nonetheless, the fact that so much of the attempt to ‘re-construct’ Marx’s ‘progressivist’ view of capitalism simply on the basis upon the NYHT articles (eg Avineri 1968) should be qualified for both the reason that it was under a certain specific social context, and that Marx’s thoughts on capitalist progress became more nuanced as his thought developed.

3. THE POST-1860S MARX’S VIEW OF IMPERIALISM IN IRELAND AND THE RUSSIAN QUESTION

It is interesting to note that Marx’s early views on the progressive nature of imperialism in India are well-known, yet the later Marx’s views on imperialism are relatively unknown, even by many marxists²⁴. However, to a certain extent this is understandable, because much of Marx’s later writings on imperialism was not in the form of formal journalistic articles but in more informal pieces (letters, drafts, etc.), many of which were not discovered until the 20th century.

Kenzo Mohri has looked at Marx’s views on British imperialism in Ireland, and this suggests that Marx was developing a much more negative attitude towards capitalist imperialism in the periphery. For example, Marx wrote:

Since 1846 the oppression, although it has become less barbaric in form, has been annihilating in substance, and there are no alternatives to voluntary emancipation of Ireland by England or the life-or-death struggle.²⁵

Marx prefigures Dependency Theory by suggesting capitalism, far from promoting the progressive development of the means of production, is rather promoting the “development of underdevelopment”²⁶:

Every time Ireland was just about to develop herself industrially, she was ‘smashed down’ and forced back; into a mere agricultural country ... Ireland was compelled to contribute cheap labor power and capital for the establishment of the ‘great factory of Britain’.²⁷

Thus it is fair to say that Marx became more critical about the inherent progressive nature of capitalist imperialism and capitalism more generally, in the 1860s.

But perhaps even more dramatic was his changed attitude towards Russia in the 1870s. Marx’s NYHT writings on Russia are not complimentary in the 1850s (probably some of this dislike stemmed from the fact that Carey was a Russophile²⁸). But, in the 1870s, Marx started to become more interested in Russia (and the Russian Peasant communes in particular) and was increasingly convinced that capitalism would, far from being an engine of progress for Russia, be antagonistic to real progress there. Shanin offers four reasons for this shift in Marx’s thinking:

The Paris Commune of 1871 offered a dramatic lesson and a type of revolutionary rule never known before. The very appearance of the ‘dawn of the great social revolution which will forever free mankind from the class-split society’ had altered the terms of establishment of a socialist society and set a new contemporaneous timetable to it. It also provided the final crescendo to Marx’s activities in the First International which ended in 1872, to be followed by a period of reflection. Second a major breakthrough within the social sciences occurred during the 1860s and 1870s – the discovery of prehistory which ‘was to lengthen the notion of historical time by some tens of thousands of years, and to bring primitive societies within the circle of historical study by combining the study of material remains with of ethnography’. The captivating impact of those developments on the general understanding of human society was considerable, centring as it did on ‘men’s ideas and ideals of community’ – then as now the very core of European social philosophy. Third, and linked with the studies of pre-history, was the extension of knowledge of the rural non-capitalist societies enmeshed in a capitalist world, especially the works of Maine, Firs and others on India. Finally Russia and the Russians offered to Marx a potent combination of all of the above: rich evidence concerning rural communes (archaic yet evidently alive in a world of capitalist triumphs) and of direct revolutionary experience, all encompassed by the theory and practice of Russian revolutionary populism.²⁹

We see a very sharp change in his attitude prior to the 1870s. Marx held a rather low view of the ancient peasant communes, suggesting capitalism’s destruction of these communes was progressive, for very much the same reason that he saw capitalist imperialism as positive for India³⁰. In the 1870s, he increasingly saw the peasant communes in Russia, not as an anachronism, but rather as prefiguring the *Geimenweisin* or material human community.³¹

It is possible to speculate that Marx was starting to recognize that the cultural and social characteristics that capitalism engendered on people would make the transition to socialism more difficult, rather than easier. Capitalism, by promoting competition, rugged individualism, etc, would make it harder for people to realize their essentially communal natures. It is easier to move from a parochial and provincial communal society to a cosmopolitan communal society achieve than to move from a society which promoted atomization and competition (capitalism) to a communal society.³²

Marx’s 1870s work on Russia illustrates quite a few shifts within Marx’s thoughts towards a far more negative attitude towards capitalism – rejecting the idea that capitalism is progress even in the sense of a ‘destructive but a necessary stage’. Conversely, Marx’s views on peasants become much more positive, often tending to see them as a ‘revolutionary agent’ as opposed to seeing them as fairly reactionary, as in his earlier work:

If Russia continues along the road which it has followed since 1861 (capitalist development), it will forego the finest opportunity that history has ever placed before a nation and will undergo all the fateful misfortune of capitalist development.³³

If the revolution occurs in time, if it concentrates all its forces ... to insure the free flower of the rural commune, then the latter will develop itself before long as an element in the regeneration of Russian society, as a point of advantage when compared to the nations enslaved by the capitalist system.³⁴

The only Possible answer to this question at the present time is the following: If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two can

supplement each other, then present Russian communal land ownership can serve as a point of departure for a communist development.³⁵

However, we can still locate passages in the late Marx to suggest that he continued to hold to the idea that capitalism was ‘necessary evil’ on the road to socialism. In the 1872 edition of *Capital*, this passage remained:

The ancient social organisms, of production (in the ‘modes of production of ancient Asia, of antiquity’ etc.) are extraordinarily much simpler and more transparent than the bourgeois (mode). But they are based either on the immaturity of the individual human who has not yet severed his umbilical chord connecting him with others in a natural community (of a primitive tribe), or the direct relations of lordship and bondage. They are conditioned by a low level of development of the productive powers of labour and correspondingly the narrowness of the relations of human beings as between themselves and with nature in the process of production of material life.³⁶

Thus, even though we see a shift in Marx’s thought in the 1860s and 1870s away from social evolutionist ideas, he didn’t fully abandon these ideas either. He becomes more sceptical of the inherent progressiveness of capitalism, but he doesn’t totally repudiate the idea as well.

CONCLUSION: MARX AND THE MARXISTS

It has often been thought and written that communism would blossom after the destruction of the capitalist mode of production, which would be undermined by such contradictions that its end would be inevitable. But numerous events of this century have unfortunately brought other possibilities into view : the return to "barbarism," as analyzed by R. Luxemburg and the entire left wing of the German workers' movement, by Adorno and the Frankfurt School; the destruction of the human species, as is evident to each and all today; finally a state of stagnation in which the capitalist mode of production survives by adapting itself to a degenerated humanity which lacks the power to destroy it. In order to understand the failure of a future that was thought inevitable, we must take into account the domestication of human beings implemented by all class societies and mainly by capital, and we must analyze the autonomization of capital.³⁷

“No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.” (Theodor Adorno)

As we saw from the last section, Marx became more pessimistic and negative about capitalist development. He increasingly saw capitalism as being antagonistic to real progress. Twentieth century marxists have increasingly emphasized the negative dimensions to capitalism; and with good reason too: the horrors of the twentieth century brutality and the failure of capitalism to create a revolutionary working class made marxists much more sceptical about the inherent progressiveness of capitalism³⁸.

The marxism that became institutionalized in the Second International (and later the Bolsheviks) had a far more positive view of capitalism than Marx’s writings. They tended to adopt a very determinist reading of capitalist development (and totally ignoring the question of class consciousness). They saw capitalism as progressive and predestined to break down by its own logic and that is when a socialist revolution would occur. But until that breakdown were to occur, capitalism must be seen as progressive because it develops the productive forces.³⁹ Unlike Marx,

they had no appreciation of, for example, the progressive potential of the Russian peasant communes; an oversight that led to tragic results in the Soviet era.⁴⁰

The basic assumptions that undergirded their positivism and their stageism, is far more reminiscent of a pre-Hegelian materialism (what Marx would describe as ‘vulgar materialism’) than Marx’s work. Amadeo Bordiga was quite correct to see the ‘marxism’ of the Second International was in fact merely the ideology of capitalist development⁴¹. In other words, the Second International’s ‘marxism’ was in fact the ideological expression of an effort to complete the capitalist revolution in Central and Eastern Europe⁴².

It would be absurd of course, to suggest that there is no basis for the Second International and the Bolshevik’s ‘marxism’ in Marx’s thought, because as I suggested before, Marx was still trying to wrestle free from the dominant bourgeois ideologies of his day⁴³.

The horrors of WWI forced many marxists to challenge the basic assumptions of economic determinists who called themselves ‘marxists’, and in the process helped rediscover some of Marx’s insights. For many of these ‘rebellious’ marxists, they wanted to understand why WWI happened. How could WWI with all its barbarism, be seen as a product of a progressive system? Why did the working class, instead of making a social revolution against an obviously decadent capitalism, instead take part in killing their fellow workers? For Rosa Luxemburg, that the working class had to choose between socialism or barbarism⁴⁴ – it was not a matter of ‘social evolution’ it was a matter of what the working class deciding what type of society they wanted. For Georg Lukacs, the progress of capitalism was not synonymous with the progress of a revolutionary working-class consciousness, because, far from producing such consciousness, capitalism produced greater levels of mystification (false consciousness or reification) among the working class – thus suggesting that capitalism was antagonistic to the development of socialism/communism⁴⁵. For Wilhelm Reich, the progress of capitalism entailed the progress of psychological disfigurement. This disfigurement would create working class subjects who were attracted not to the workers movement and socialism, but rather to authoritarian politics culminating in fascism.

In all these cases we see an increasing interest in questions of subjectivity. One of the reasons why (especially the young) Marx believed capitalism was progressive was because it created a revolutionary working class which would serve to negate capitalism. Seeing the horrors of WWI, Luxemburg, Lukacs, and Reich and others, were not so sure. But they in a similar manner to the late Marx, still retained the somewhat schizophrenic and contradictory view that capitalism was historically progressive. For example, in that same pamphlet in which Luxemburg writes about the choice between socialism and barbarism, she also writes:

Bourgeois class domination is undoubtedly an historical necessity, but, so too, the rising of the working class against it. Capital is an historical necessity, but, so too, its grave digger, the socialist proletariat.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, their view of capitalist progress is much more qualified than the Second International, the Bolsheviks and possibly even Marx himself (or at least the early Marx).

After the Holocaust, quite a few marxists became even more negative to the question of capitalist progress. For example, many of the members of the Frankfurt School (especially Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse) saw Auschwitz as the inevitable outcome of ‘capitalist progress’. The Adorno quote that started this section, is a succinct description of the overall outlook of many member of the Frankfurt School.

During the Cold War, they further developed their critique of ‘capitalism as progress’ with their analysis of how the development of the Culture Industries (a by-product of capitalist development) served to weaken rather than strengthen the possibility of revolutionary social change because of how the Culture Industries colonize the minds of the oppressed. The retreat into barbarism for Adorno and Horkheimer (and to a lesser extent Marcuse⁴⁷) was a much more likely scenario than moving towards socialism/communism.⁴⁸

It is ironic that ‘neo-marxists’ (e.g. the Frankfurt School) believed they were rebelling against Marx’s overly positive views of capitalist progress, when in fact their analyses were prefigured in his mature work. While it is the Orthodox or Fundamentalist Marxists who claim they are ‘returning to Marx’, they are rather returning to the vulgarized marxism of the Second International.

At any rate, Marx’s views on the ‘progress’ that capitalism has wrought is incredibly ambivalent, and contradictory – as this essay has demonstrated, he often disagreed with himself. The most important contradiction within Marx’s oeuvre has been shown by Jacques Camatte – the technological advances that capitalism has engendered allows us to overcome technical barriers to a world revolution⁴⁹. But at the same time, the development that capitalism brings means greater and greater “repressive consciousness” among the working class. The paradox is that the impact of the capitalist development on subjectivity moves it further and further away from socialism, just as capitalism’s technical development increases the technological possibility of a global socialist revolution. It is this paradox, that Marx and the more creative marxists seem to have sensed, with their seemingly contradictory attitude towards capitalist progress.

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¹ Avineri, 1968, p.3

² "The adoption of the idea of Progress (shared by very few nowadays) implies also the endorsement of such 'progressive' conclusions as the [Orthodox] Marxist one about the 'progressive' role of colonialism[18]" (Fotopoulos and Gezerlis 2002)

³ Zeitlin, 1996

⁴ Zeitlin, 1996

⁵ Engels cited in Zeitlin, 1996

⁶ Marx, 1848

⁷ Marx 1845, Ch 6

⁸ Lukacs, 1971, orig. 1923

⁹ Camatte, 1973

¹⁰ Karl Marx, 'The British Rule in India'

¹¹ Karl Marx, 'The Future Results of British Rule in India'

¹² eg Warren, 1980; Avineri 1968

¹³ Avineri, 1968

¹⁴ "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive invaders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society." (Marx, 1968, orig. 1853)

"Marx saw such societies as perpetuating natural vegetative existence", i.e. Showing cyclical and quantitative changes while lacking an inbuilt mechanism of necessary social transformation." (Shanin 1984: 5)

¹⁵ It is important to recognize that Marx and Engels abandoned the concept of Asiatic Mode of Production in the late 1850s (The *Grundrisse* was the last time they used the term, see *Encyclopedia of Marxism* 'Asiatic Mode of Production')! This is very important, because it indicates that Marx and Engels had begun to abandon Eurocentric notions, they started to realize the essential plurality (and non-static) nature of non-European societies and not conceive of them in such a monolithic and unchanging way. The reason for this, may have stemmed from the fact, that Marx's extensive research on Russia (who he had previously classified as 'semi-Asiatic', see Shanin 1984), perhaps convinced him, that the idea of Asiatic Mode of Production was very faulty)

¹⁶ For example, Marx used ‘Oriental Despotism’ synonymously with ASM.

¹⁷ The Althusserian, Robert Paul Resch, articulates this best when he writes :

“In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels rejected the possibility of ‘socialism in one country’. They understood that no economic system can outproduce capitalism because no conceivable system of coercion is capable of extorting as much surplus value from its workers or more effectively compelling its ruling class to expand and innovate. No social system, in short, is more ‘totalitarian’ than capitalism. Understanding the nature of capitalism, Marx and Engels understood that communism as a ‘local event’ – that is, socialism in one country – would be destroyed by its relative backwardness, by its ‘limiting effect on the universalization’ of the ‘intolerable powers of capital.’ The possibility of communism presupposes the development of capitalism as a global system whose class structure is truly international and homogeneous. Capitalism is a global process whereby ‘separate individuals ... with the broadening of their activity into world-historical activity, become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them ... a power which has become more and more enormous and, in the last instance, turns out to be the world market.” (Marx and Engels 1978, 163).

“If capitalism is indeed a world-historical force and its development global rather than national, then its transformation must also be understood globally rather than nationally. Capitalism will disintegrate only when it has become general, when the ‘universal development of productive forces ... produces in all nations simultaneously the phenomenon of the ‘propertyless’ mass (universal competition) [and] makes each nation dependent on the revolutions of the others.” (Marx and Engels 1978, 161-62). The contradictions of capitalism – the elimination of real scarcity by creating artificial scarcity, the integration and interdependence of social production by reproducing class inequalities of wealth and power, the development of productive technology by producing crises, dislocation, and suffering – become progressively more irrational and intolerable as capitalism eliminates its rivals and begins to collapse in on itself in an orgy of ‘creative destruction’ whose only real purpose will be the restoration of profitability for the ruling class. However, until it has subsumed completely every aspect of social existence in every region of global space, capitalism will always appear progressive and will always be able to resolve temporarily its contradictions by expansion as well as destruction.” (Resch 1992: Introductory Conclusion)

¹⁸ 6. As Karl Korsch puts it so eloquently:

“With Marx and Engels, as indeed with most writers on the field of social, historical, political thought, books have not only a history of their own, but those histories of books – their times and conditions of birth, their addressees, their very titles and their further adventures in new editions, translations, etc. – form an inseparable part of the history of the theories themselves. It is therefore, a deplorable fact that hitherto not only the bourgeois critics of the so-called ‘Marxian contradictions’ but even the most faithful adherents to Marx’s materialistic science should have quoted his diverse theoretical statements without reference to time, addressees, and other historical indices necessary for their materialistic interpretations.” (Korsch, 1964, orig. 1938, p.12)

¹⁹ “H.C. Carey, the only American economist of importance, is a striking proof that civil society in the United States is as yet by no means mature enough to provide a clear and comprehensible picture of the class struggle.” (Marx in Perelman, 1987)

²⁰ “He attacks Ricardo, the most classic representative of the bourgeoisie and the most stoical adversary of the proletariat as a man whose works are an arsenal for anarchists, Socialists and all enemies of the bourgeois system. He reproaches not only him but Malthus, Mill, Say, Torrens, Wakefield, McCulloch, Senior, Whately, R. Jones, and others, the leading economists of Europe, with rendering society asunder and preparing civil war because they show that the economic bases of the different classes are bound to give rise to a necessary and ever growing antagonism among them. He tried to refute them ... by attempting to show that economic conditions: rent (landed property), profit (capital) and wages (wage labour), instead of being conditions of struggle and antagonism, are rather conditions of associations and harmony. All he proves, of course is that he taking the ‘underdeveloped’ conditions of the United States for ‘normal conditions’.” (Marx cited in Perelman 1987, p.14)

²¹ Perelman, 1987

²² Marx cited in Sayer and Corrigan, 1984, p.81

²³ Mohri, 2000, orig. 1989, p.136

²⁴ Mohri, 1989

²⁵ Marx, 1867 cited in Mohri, 1989, p.138

²⁶ This is very interesting because many Dependency theorists have criticized Marx for adopting a unilinear and progressive understanding of capitalism in the peripheries. For example, “Whatever its speed and whatever its zigzags, the general direction of the historical movement seems to have been the same for the backward echelons as for the forward contingents.” (Baran cited in Mohri, 1989, p.134)

²⁷ Marx cited in Mohri, 1989, p.138

²⁸ Perelman, 1987

²⁹ Shanin, 1987, p.6

³⁰ “In a letter to Engels he was clearly delighted with ‘all that trash’, i.e. The Russian peasant communal structure ‘coming now to its end’” (Shanin, 1984)

³¹ Goldner, 1991 – this is perhaps the best introduction to the little known Italian left-communist Amadeo Bordiga in the English language.

³² Shanin, 1984; Wada, 1984

³³ Marx cited in Wada, 1984

³⁴ Marx cited in Wada, 1984

³⁵ Marx and Engels cited in Wada, 1984

³⁶ Marx cited in Chattopadhyay, 2003

³⁷ Jacques Camatte, ‘Decline of the Capitalist Mode of Production or Decline of Humanity?’, 1973

³⁸ This is not to deny the existence of marxists who continue to hold to the idea that capitalist development is a necessary stage to get to socialism. I’ve already mentioned a few of them throughout my essay, (i.e. Bill Warren, Robert Paul Resch). However, these figures are in a minority among Marxists. Alan Lipietz perhaps best captures my feelings to arguments associated with Warren and Resch – ‘Marx or Rostow?’ (Lipietz, 1982)

³⁹ Aufheben, 1993

⁴⁰ “In the battle between Lenin and the Populists in the 1890’s, the battle to introduce this truncated 2nd International ‘Marxism’ into Russia, the whole pre-1883 dimension of the Marxist analysis of the ‘Russian question’, unearthed by Bordiga, was totally lost in a productivist chorus. The linear, mechanistic affirmation of ‘progress’ that is the core of Enlightenment historical thought, which was taken over into a ‘stage’ theory of history by vulgar Marxism, has no feel for the Russian agrarian commune, as Marx did. The Gemeinwesen (material human community) telos of communism is suppressed for productivism.” (Goldner, 1991)

⁴¹ Goldner, 1991

I think it is important to recognize a discrepancy that can locate if one compares ‘What is False Consciousness?’ (WFC) with this paper. In WFC, I suggest a phenomenon of the ‘bureaucratization’ of the working class movement which accounts for the ‘betrayals of the working class’ that the Second International, SPD and other groups engaged in: “After Marx died, an increasingly economic interpretation of Marx started to predominate within the socialist movement. In essence, Marxism became a form of reformist economic determinism. According to this reformist tendency, by its laws of motion, capitalism was doomed to breakdown, and thus, reforms could accelerate its breakdown.” (Aufheben, 1993). They didn’t talk about the working class’s revolutionary potential. Rather, they tended to accept its potential as a given, but only when capitalism broke down. There was very little discussion of how the working class’s view of the social world affects the possibility of revolutionary struggle.

There were structural factors associated with this changing ideology. Increasingly, trade unions and left political parties were becoming bureaucratized. People at the top of these unions and parties did not want a revolution – rather they wanted to maintain their social privileges.

This helps explain why most of the European socialist parties supported WWI, despite the fact it involved mass slaughter of the working class. The leaders of the trade-unions and the socialist parties believed that opposing the war, would make them lose their status as relatively privileged individuals. In addition, because workers thought the socialist and trade union movement had their best interests in mind, they accepted the movement’s views. (ie their false consciousness). (Student ID: #324597 yr: 2003)

The argument I outlined in WFC is derived from Weber, the Italian Elitist School of Sociology (eg Pareto, Michels, Mosca etc) and among marxists, Lukacs. The argument I have developed in this paper, is somewhat different, suggesting that the official organs of the working class movement became something to complete the ‘capitalist revolution’, it was a ‘substitute bourgeois revolution’. It may be possible these two theories are compatible and thus can be integrated together, but I haven’t worked out how such a synthesis could occur. My current view is, is that the analysis I’ve provided in this paper is theoretically a lot stronger and more satisfying.

⁴² 15. “As many people asked themselves after discovering the 1844 Manuscripts, the *Grundrisse*, the Hegelian ‘fingerprints’ in *Capital*, the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, Lukacs, Korsch, etc., how could the classical workers’ movement have been taken over by ‘vulgar Marxism’? Why does pre-Kantian materialism (i.e. materialism that, unlike Marx’s, has not passed through the dialogue with German idealism and Feuerbach) seem so similar to the 18th century materialism of the Anglo-French Enlightenment, i.e. the ideology of the bourgeois revolution? How does one arrive at a Marxist explanation of the historical hegemony of vulgar Marxism, since Marxism rejects out of hand the psychological/moralistic judgment that ‘they had the wrong ideas’? The answer did not seem so complicated: if the materialism of the classical workers’ movement centered in the SPD from 1860 to 1914, and extended by the Russian Revolution, was epistemologically little different from revolutionary materialism of a bourgeois character, it must be that the classical workers’ movement in Central and Eastern Europe was an extension of the bourgeois revolution. Placing oneself in the position of the admirers of the heroic early SPD, it is hard to think of any other explanation that makes sense. This is, after all, not so very far from Trotsky’s theory of combined and uneven development: where the bourgeoisie is weak and unable to take on the *ancien régime*, the task falls to the working class. (Trotsky’s effort was to believe that the working class was making the socialist revolution.) This ‘vulgar Marxism’ provided the ‘world view’ expressed in the popular pamphlets of the late Engels, and the writings of Bebel, Kautsky, William Liebknecht, the pre-revisionist Bernstein, and Plekhanov – the grey eminences of the Second International, who educated Lenin and the Bolsheviks. It should never be forgotten that Lenin did not begin to see through Kautsky and the SPD ‘center’ of

orthodoxy until 1910-1912, and in 1914 could not believe the newspaper reports that the SPD had voted for war credits. He was that close to these influences. He wrote 'Imperialism' to explain the collapse of the SPD; Trotsky later added the 'absence of revolutionary leadership' to explain the defeat in Western Europe after the war. Raya Dunayevskaya's portrait of Lenin rushing to the Zurich library in September 1914 to read Hegel's Logic (35) to understand the debacle of the SPD may or may not be apocryphal; nevertheless, the 'late Lenin' had no impact on official Marxism after 1917, including in the Fourth International. (Goldner, 1991)

⁴³ 16. "This is not to say that there is no basis for this productivist discourse in Marx's work; it is simply to say that the gulf that separates Marx from all 2nd, 3rd (and 4th) International Marxism is precisely that he is beyond 'pre-Kantian' materialism and way beyond 'monopoly capital' economics that both express a state civil service view of the world." (Goldner, 1991)

⁴⁴ Luxemburg, 1916

⁴⁵ Lukacs, 1971, orig. 1923

⁴⁶ Luxemburg, 1916

⁴⁷ Marcuse is somewhat more optimistic about the possibility of radical social change in the late 60s, than either Adorno and Horkheimer (Adorno was so pessimistic about radical social change, that he retreated in aesthetics – seeing this as a site to keep alive a radical/critical world-view. Horkheimer retreated into religion) However, by the 1970s, he became somewhat more pessimistic (Bronner, 1994)

⁴⁸ Bronner, 1994

⁴⁹ Nick Dyer-Witford perhaps captures this argument best, when he writes:

"Strangely, in the era of that supposedly marked the triumph of the free market, the most technologically advanced medium for planet-wide communication was in fact created on the basis of state support, open usage and cooperative self-organisation. A proliferation of autonomous activity transformed a military-industrial network into a system that in many ways **realises radical dreams of a democratic communication system: omni-purpose, multi-centred, with participants transmitting as well as receiving, near real-time dialogue, a highly devolved management structure** [bold is mine] ..." (Dyer-Witford 1999: 249)