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Into the World Market. Karl Marx and the Theoretical Foundation of Internationalism

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Sandro Mezzadra

Abstract

The chapter focuses on the theoretical imagination that allowed Marx to grasp the global dimension of capitalism and to respond to such dimension with the theory and practice of proletarian internationalism. The notion of the world market takes center stage in the analysis pursued here. Starting with the *Communist Manifesto* and the *German Ideology*, the link between the global dimension of capitalism and internationalism is underscored. The peculiarity of Marx's notion of world market is then investigated with respect to the critique of political economy, from the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*, with a specific focus on the world history of the "so-called primitive accumulation." While there is no coincidence between the theoretical between the theoretical framework of the world market and Marx's political internationalism in the 1860s and 1870s, the last section of the chapter highlights a set of resonances between the two, particularly focusing on his writings on the U.S. and Ireland.

5 keywords

World market; world history; primitive accumulation; internationalism; Ireland.

Expanded list of keywords

Internationalism; cosmopolitanism; nationalism; individuals; international division of labor; England and the world market; limit and obstacle; abstract labor; world money; *Communist Manifesto*; *German Ideology*; *Grundrisse*; *Capital*; U.S.A; Ireland; America; California; Australia; China; Japan; India; Africa; England; France; Russia; Italy

List of names not mentioned in the bibliography

Bakunin, Michail
Blanqui, Auguste
Mazzini, Giuseppe
Proudhon, Pierre- Joseph

Bio

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In a concrete sense, we can suggest that it was more difficult for Marx than it is for us today to imagine the workers of the world, as Michael Denning puts it, “constituting an interconnected global labor force sharing a common situation” (Denning 2007, 126). While Marx was forging his theory and implementing a political practice of proletarian internationalism the world (including Europe) was still in the process of becoming “international.” One can think whatever he or she wants regarding Jacques Derrida’s book *Specters of Marx*, but on this point he was right. “No organized political movement in the history of humanity,” he writes, “had ever yet presented itself as *geopolitical*, thereby inaugurating the space that is now ours and that today is reaching its limits, the limits of the earth and the limits of the political” (Derrida 2006, 47).

In this chapter I want to focus on the theoretical imagination that allowed Marx to grasp the global dimension of capitalism and to respond to such dimension with the theory and practice of proletarian internationalism. Readers will not find yet another detailed discussion of Marx’s engagement in the first International, of his leading role in the General Council, or of his feud with Bakunin (see for instance Bellamy Foster 2000; Bravo 2014; Musto 2014 and 2018; Eckhardt 2016; Herres 2018). Although I will definitely have something to say about the first International at the end of the chapter, the main focus here will be on the notion of *world market*. I will follow Marx’s elaboration of that notion from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* through early writings like *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and I will then delve into the laboratory of the critique of political economy, from the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*. The final section on the first International will selectively analyze a couple of topics, not to demonstrate a coincidence of Marx’s political positions with the theoretical framework of the world market (which is not at all the case) but to explore some resonances of the latter in the former.

1. *Working Men of All Countries, Unite!*

These are definitely among the most memorable words written by Marx and Engels, a rallying cry that has politically interpellated intellectuals and militants, factory workers, peasants, and students across the planet. The history of the circulation, reception, and readings (which also means translations, not merely in a linguistic sense) of the *Manifesto* is an instance of embodied internationalism. There is a need to delve into the conditions that made possible such a wide circulation and appropriation of the text, which at the end of the day was strictly

connected to the conditions in Europe on the eve of the revolutions of 1848 (see Hardt and Mezzadra 2018). Needless to say, those conditions are multiple and diverse, but I am convinced that the decidedly internationalist and even global tone of the text figures prominently among them. Since the very beginning of the *Manifesto*, the embodiment of the “specter” of communism is presented – although “negatively” – as an international, a European process. “Communism,” Marx and Engels write, “is already acknowledged by all European powers to be itself a power” (Marx and Engels 2008, 31).

Even more important is the analysis of capitalism (of the “bourgeoisie”) that is articulated in the text. There are definitely national bourgeoisies according to Marx and Engels. But what characterizes the bourgeoisie as a new ruling class is the fact that it operates within a wider space that is defined through the notion of world market. And it is precisely through the exploitation of the world market that the bourgeoisie has “given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country” (38). Proletarian internationalism is clearly a response to this cosmopolitanism of the bourgeoisie – a response that on the one hand is inscribed into the space created by the development of capitalism while on the other hand it challenges and subverts the principles of its working. This is just the opening of an internationalist horizon, but it is a powerful opening.

Note that the global scope of the operations of the bourgeoisie is the first feature highlighted by Marx and Engels, immediately after contending that the “epoch of the bourgeoisie” “has simplified class antagonisms” (34). “The discovery of America,” we read, “the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie” (34). The opening of new markets (in India and China), colonial endeavors in the Americas, the multiplication of exchanges and trade with colonies played according to Marx and Engels crucial roles for the establishment of bourgeois rule in Europe. In other words, world politics was conceived of as a basic condition for understanding domestic and European politics. With the further historical development of capitalism, and above all with the rise of large-scale industry, the world market, “for which the discovery of America had paved the way,” emerged in full shape. And this market, Marx and Engels write, “has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its turn, reacted on the extension of industry” (35).

The world market appears here as a fundamental driver of the development of capitalism (of the “bourgeoisie”). One can even say that without world market there is according to Marx and Engels no capitalism. The lines of the *Manifesto* I have just commented upon have often been interpreted in recent years as a prophetic anticipation of contemporary globalization. What seems more interesting to me is to underscore that for Marx and Engels capitalism was “global” since its inception and that the necessary spatial horizon for the operations of modern capital is the world market. There is a need therefore to analyze in detail the uses of that notion in Marx’s work, from his early writings to the critique of political economy. This is also because the world market appears both as a condition for the existence of capitalism and as a condition for Marx’s internationalist political imagination.

If one looks at the political content of Marx and Engels’ rallying cry, *working men of all countries, unite!*, it is important to highlight a significant oscillation in the evaluation of the nation, which will characterize Marx’s writings also in the years of the first International. Marx and Engels famously write that “the working men have no country.” But at the same time, “since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word” (61). In an age in which nation states were emerging and consolidating as unescapable political spaces and arenas, Marx and Engels are convinced that the struggle of the proletariat must necessarily go through the national step, since “the proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie” (50). But they are convinced that the proletariat itself will further prompt the “vanishing of “national differences and antagonism,” already inaugurated by the bourgeoisie under the pressure of the world market (61). And the communists have the task to “point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality” (52).

Were Marx and Engels underestimating nationalism, even within the labor movement? Was their idea of a proletariat stripped by the development of modern industrial labor and subjection to capital “of every trace of national character” (49) somehow naïve?

Retrospectively, this may be definitely the case. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind the kind of dialectical relationship between the national struggles of the proletariat and proletarian internationalism. One can say that the nation is in the *Manifesto* the concrete moment that allows a political articulation of internationalism. What matters more is that the

powerful concluding rallying cry of the book is formulated against the background of a specific awareness of the fact that the very development of capitalism had created an overarching space (the “world market”) in which nations themselves are located and subject to powerful pressures and transformations. It is against this background that proletarian internationalism emerges both as a realistic and as a necessary political stance (on the question of the nation, nationalism, and ethnicity in Marx, see Anderson 2020).

2. *Genealogy of the World Market*

The Marxian notion of world market has a distinct genealogy and cannot be equated to the one of “foreign trade” employed by classical economists, like for instance David Ricardo (1817/2001, 85-103). As I will demonstrate particularly discussing *The German Ideology* that notion emerges out of a reflection upon the concept of “world history,” and one can say that taken together the two notions shed light on what we can call the spatial and temporal coordinates of social and political action. It is not by accident that the earliest formulation of internationalism in Marx’s work is directly connected, as we will see, with the question of the world market. In this section I will examine the ways in which that question is dealt with by Marx in *The German Ideology* and in *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

The concept of world history (*Weltgeschichte*) was a common notion in German philosophy between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Hegel had stressed even more than previous philosophers the normative aspects of that notion, which is therefore often translated with “universal history.” If one looks at the ways in which it is deployed in *The German Ideology*, what is striking is the emphasis on the geographical component of the concept, meaning that what Marx seems to have in mind is first of all a history that involves the whole world. And it is from this point of view that the link with the world market emerges. “In history up to the present,” Marx writes, “it is certainly an empirical fact that separate individuals have, with the broadening of their activity into *world-historical* activity, become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them (a pressure which they have conceived of as a dirty trick on the part of the so-called world spirit, etc.), a power which has become more and more enormous and, in the last instance, turns out to be the *world market*” (Marx and Engels 1998, 59, first emphasis added).

I think that this reference to a power that “has become more and more enormous” and that “turns out to be the *world market*” is particularly relevant once we emphasize its link with “the broadening of the activity [of the individuals] into world-historical activity.” The two dimensions (the temporal and the spatial) appear to be nested with each other, and we can say that they jointly “extract” individuals from their locality projecting them onto the world scale. The power of the world market is definitely a highly abstract power, whose operations raise the question of “estrangement,” since the individuals “become more and more enslaved” under that power. But it has momentous implications for the very subjectivity of individuals. We are confronted here, as Marx writes employing a powerful philosophical figure, with “empirically universal individuals” (57), “abstract individuals, who are, however, by this very fact put into a position to enter into relation with one another *as individuals*” (96). The world market, in its connection with world history, builds the connecting fabric between such individuals.

The link between world history and world market is a guiding thread that runs through the whole first chapter of *The German Ideology*. In particular, it spurs Marx’s reflections upon communism and revolution, with a clear internationalist twist. Let us read a famous passage. “The mass of workers,” Marx writes, “who are *nothing but workers* [...] presupposes the *world market*. The proletariat can thus only exist *world-historically*, just as communism, its activity, can only have a ‘world-historical’ existence. World-historical existence of individuals, i.e., existence of individuals which is directly linked up with world history” (57). The world market becomes here the condition of the existence of the proletariat and therefore of its subversive “activity” – communism. This implies a displacement of the spatiality of communist politics with respect to the national scale. The link between the world market and internationalism that I stressed with respect to the *Manifesto* is foreshadowed in *The German Ideology* in a powerful although definitely problematic way. “Empirically,” we read, “communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples ‘all at once’ and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and world intercourse bound up with them” (57). One can legitimately ask who are the “dominant peoples” and whether it is possible to imagine a simultaneous insurrection of those peoples. From the first point of view we can observe that Marx’s geographical and political imagination was in those years strictly bound to Europe (what will continue to be true also for the first International). From the second point of view we can say that Marx became aware of the uneven temporality of the revolution only in the wake of 1848.

The world market is moreover the regulative principle that enables the universalization of competition within each capitalist country (54-57). Nevertheless, the world market is not for Marx a smooth space, it is rather the stage of processes of division and hierarchical organization. In *The German Ideology* we read that in its early stage, “the splitting-up of the world market into separate parts, each of which was exploited by a particular nation” was an element that slowed down “the movement of capital” (80). It seems clear that for Marx the establishment of the British hegemony on the world market was an advancement in this respect. In *The Poverty of Philosophy* he refers therefore to the rank that England occupies “in the hierarchy of the world market” (Marx 1976b, 210). And he provides an analysis of the transformations engendered by technological progress and the “invention of machinery” in a perspective that is largely geographical. Once upon a time, Marx writes, “the industry of a country was carried on chiefly with raw materials that were the products of its own soil.” Now, thanks to the mechanization of production, “the spinner can live in England while the weaver resides in the East Indies.” The consequences of such transformation are momentous. “Thanks to the application of machinery and steam,” Marx goes on, “the division of labor was about to assume such dimensions that large-scale industry, detached from the national soil, depends entirely on the world market, on international exchange, on an international division of labor” (187).

This is a very important passage, where we can find one of first occurrences of the concept of an “international division of labor,” bound to become an important notion in economics and sociology and widely used still today (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 75-79). What emerges once again here is the strategic relevance for capitalism of a spatial scale exceeding the national territoriality (the “national soil”). Capital produces and organizes its own spaces taking the world market as a crucial reference. In the age of large-scale industry, it is moreover impossible to grasp the working of social division of labor without taking into account the international division of labor on the world market. This is a point that Marx makes particularly clear in a letter to Pavel Vasilevič Annencov (December 28, 1846). His criticism of Proudhon focuses here on the fact that “he neglects to do what even profane economists do. In discussing the division of labor, he feels no need to refer to the *world market*.” The link between the social division of labor and the world market is a matter of fact and a methodic principle for Marx. “Must not the division of labor,” he asks in the letter, “in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when there were as yet no colonies, when America was

still non-existent for Europe, and when Eastern Asia existed only through the mediation of Constantinople, have been utterly different from the division of labor in the seventeenth century, when colonies were already developed?" (Marx 1982, 98).

It should be clear by now that already in his early work the world market is a full-fledged concept for Marx and not simply an empirical description of the scale of capital's operations. In its connection with the notion of world history it has crucial implications for communist politics and foreshadows its necessarily internationalist dimension. As a regulative principle, moreover, the world market spurs competition and division of labor, which are of course distinctive features of capitalism. The space of the world market is on the one hand an abstract space, while on the other it is crisscrossed by lines of division (the international division of labor) and is organized around specific hierarchies. From this point of view Marx's analysis underscores more and more the role of England, its ability to create, through the "concentration of trade and manufacture" a specific "relative world market" for itself (Marx and Engels 1998, 81). In *Wage Labor and Capital* Marx goes so far as to call England "the despot of the world market" (Marx 1977, 198).

The awareness of the hierarchical constitution of the world market is an important aspect in Marx's theoretical understanding of its working, since it opens an angle on the role played by territorial states and empires while it foreshadows the question of the hegemony within cycles of capitalist accumulation at the world scale raised by world system theory (see for instance Arrighi 2007). For Marx it also has important political implications. After the defeat of the revolutions of 1848 he writes in *The Class Struggles in France* that in England, in this country "which dominates the world market," the revolution is necessarily bound to find its new "organizational beginning" (1978b, 117). In the meanwhile, Marx had moved to London, to the metropolitan capital of the "despot of the world market," and had already started to work on the critique of political economy, his scientific response to the defeat of 1848. In that work the concept of world market would continue to play important roles and to spur Marx's internationalist spirit. It is to that work that we now turn.

3. In the Laboratory of the Critique of Political Economy

In the second half of the 1840s the world market was for Marx an important epistemic background for his theory of proletarian internationalism. This is particularly clear in *The*

German Ideology, but it also shapes Marx's formulation of the latter in the *Manifesto*.

Moreover, the notion of world market also gives a planetary imprinting to his critical analysis of what he would soon call the capitalist mode of production. One could even say that, while the process of nationalization of the state was still underway even in Europe, Marx anticipates the critique of "methodological nationalism." This is a remarkable theoretical reflection (and at the same time a foundation) of his political internationalist stance. And it is worth following Marx in the laboratory of the critique of political economy precisely from this point of view. As we will see, the notion of world market will continue to play pivotal roles in the *Grundrisse* and in *Capital*, further nurturing Marx's awareness of the global nature of capitalism (from a different perspective, see Jessop 2010: 189-192). Several topics that we have been analyzing thus far are reworked within a new theoretical framework in the critique of political economy. And although we will not find here direct references to internationalism it is clear the reflection upon the notion of world market contributes to the refining of Marx's political sensibility in an internationalist direction.

It is well known that the crisis of 1857 was a defining moment in the development of Marx's project of a critique of political economy. Under the impression of the crisis and the excitement for the possible opening of a revolutionary perspective Marx wrote the *Grundrisse*, the first systematic outline of that project. His journalistic work as a correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune* since 1852 was particularly important for defining the scope of and providing materials for the *Grundrisse* (see Bologna 1974; Espinoza Pino and Mezzadra 2018). One can say that through that work the very notion of world market, characterized in the early writings by a high degree of abstractness, was filled more and more with concrete content. Marx's articles on the colonial world (first of all on India), his detailed analysis of China in the age of the opium wars, his emphasis on the imbalances and potential disruption engendered by the inflow on the European markets of huge stocks of money due to the recent discovery of new goldfields in America, Australia, and Russia were milestones for his understanding of the crisis of 1857 as well as for setting the scientific standards for the critique of political economy.

It is against this backdrop that Marx decidedly takes in the *Grundrisse* the world market as the spatial and conceptual framework for his analysis of capitalism. There is first of all a need to emphasize that for Marx the world market does not coincide with international trade and economic relations. In the outline of a working plan presented toward the end of the

introduction, Marx distinguishes the “international relation of production,” the fourth part of the work, from the “world market and crises,” the fifth and concluding part (Marx 1973, 108). More generally, the world market appears in the *Grundrisse* even at the conceptual level the moment of crowning and closure in the working of the capitalist mode of production. The world market, Marx writes, necessarily forms the conclusion of the whole system, “in which production is posited as a totality together with all its moments, but within which, at the same time, all contradictions come into play.” The world market, Marx concludes, “forms the presupposition of the whole as well as its substratum” (227-8).

Discussing the division of the market into “home market” and “foreign market” Marx emphasizes once again the peculiarity of the world market as overarching framework for the operations of capital. Indeed, the world market, Marx writes, “is not only the internal market in relation to all foreign markets existing outside it, but at the same time the internal market of all foreign markets as, in turn, components of the home market” (280). From this point of view, it is easy to see that the world market becomes the very condition of existence of markets in the capitalist mode of production, while it is at the same time “the general foundation of all industries” (529). In the *Grundrisse* Marx also picks up again on a topic that he had discussed in the *German Ideology*, writing that “in the case of the world market *the connection of the individual with all, but at the same time also the independence of this connection from the individual, have developed to such a high level that the formation of the world market already at the same time contains the conditions for going beyond it*” (161). Precisely because it is the moment of crowning of the rule of capital it also designates a crucial field of theoretical struggle where the possibility of its overcoming appears in a particularly clear way.

In an important passage Marx writes in the *Grundrisse* that “the tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit (*Grenze*) appears as an obstacle (*Schranke*) to be overcome” (408). There is a need to emphasize that the creation of the world market appears here as a “tendency,” whose deployment is continuously characterized by capital’s encounter with limits and borders (remember that the German word *Grenze* also designates geopolitical boundaries), which have to be converted into “obstacles” to be overcome. While the world market is even conceptually the necessary horizon of capital’s operations, it has to be again and again fabricated through the dialectic of limit and obstacle that Marx employs also elsewhere in the *Grundrisse* to grasp the logic of

capital. Importantly, Marx stresses that the limits capital “tore down were limits to its motion, its development, and realization.” “Within its own limits,” he adds, “it feels free, and free of barriers, i.e. as limited only by itself, by its own conditions of life” (650). This implies that while it converts limits into barriers to overcome them capital establishes its own limits. The space of the world market is therefore striated by all sorts of mobile limits and barriers, including the ones established by capital as well as by states and empires. And the latter can work as basis for the further expansion of capital, while they can also limit it in historically and geographically specific ways.

It is in this sense that one has to make sense of the fact that, as Marx writes in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, the world market is “at once the precondition and the result of capitalist production” (Marx 1989a, 388). It is the *precondition* because capitalist production, as well as its basic components, is predicated upon the existence of the world market. “It is only the foreign trade,” Marx writes, “the development of the market to a world market, which causes money to develop into world money and *abstract labor* into social labor. Abstract wealth, value, money, hence *abstract labor*, develop in the measure that concrete labor becomes a totality of different modes of labor embracing the world market. Capitalist production rests on the *value* or the development of the labour embodied in the product as social labour. But this is only [possible] on the basis of foreign trade and of the world market” (388). At the same time, however, the latter is also the *result* of capitalist production since the expansion of capital, in its unstable alliance with territorial powers, continually redraws, disrupts, and reassembles the geography of the world market.

In *Capital* Marx continues to be concerned with the question of the world market. The history of capitalism, he writes, begins with the “great discoveries of the end of the fifteenth century” (Marx 1976a, 914). “World trade and the world market date from the sixteenth century, and from then on the modern history of capital starts to unfold” (247). As we read in an important letter to Engels (October 8, 1858), Marx was convinced that in the nineteenth century “bourgeois society has for the second time experienced its 16th century.” The process of creation of the world market, “since the world is round,” appears to him as completed with “the colonization of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan.” In this letter Marx further mentions the political implications of the process of constitution of the world market, asking whether it is possible to imagine a socialist revolution in Europe (“in

this little corner of the earth”) while the uneven temporality of capitalist development is reshaping the whole world at different paces (Marx 1983, 346-7).

Marx repeats again and again, for instance in *Capital*, volume 3, that the establishment of the world market is a “historical task” of the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1981, 359), one of its “cardinal facts” (375), and even its “basis” (451). The “entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world market” is a further distinctive feature of the capitalist mode of production that has potentially important political implications (Marx 1976a, 929). As far as industrial capitalists are concerned, the world market is the immediate reference for their economic calculation. The industrial capitalist, Marx writes, “is constantly faced with the world market; he compares and must compare his own cost prices not only with domestic market prices, but with those of the whole world” (Marx 1981, 455). In *Capital*, volume 2, Marx adds that the circulation process of industrial capitalism is characterized by the many-sided character of its origins” and is therefore predicated upon the “existence of the market as world market” (Marx 1978a, 190). In the section on the turnover of capital, he stresses a striking correlation between the shortening of “circulation time for a given quantity of commodities,” enabled by the capitalist development of the means of transport and communication, and the “necessity of working for ever more distant markets, in a word, for the world market” (329). Acceleration of time and extension of space appear as distinctive features of the capitalist mode of production in the framework of the world market.

It should be clear by now that the concept of world market plays outstanding roles in Marx’s critique of political economy. It defines the scope of his analysis and is inscribed onto the very theoretical paradigm that guides his endeavor, challenging the very possibility of a national delimitation of the object of critique. As we saw before commenting upon a passage from the *Theories of Surplus Value* basic notions of the critique of political economy become practically true only on the basis of the world market. In *Capital*, volume 1, Marx expands on the question of money, focusing on the moment in which it leaves the domestic sphere of circulation, enters the sphere of world trade, and becomes therefore “world money.” Again, it is through this move onto the stage of the world market that “money first functions to its full extent as the commodity whose natural form is also the directly social form of realization of human labor in the abstract. Its mode of existence,” Marx concludes, “becomes adequate to its concept” (Marx 1976a, 240-1). The world market, as the moment of crowning and closure (and at the same time as the precondition) of the capitalist mode of production, sheds light on

its constitutive elements and logics, as for instance the division of labor (474), or the “civilized horrors of over-work” it imposes on “the lower forms of slave-labor, the *corvée*, etc.” (Marx has in mind the example of slavery in the U.S. American South) once they are driven into the vortex of capitalist production for the world market (345).

Marx repeatedly stresses in *Capital* what he once calls the “diabolic influence of England on the world market” (705), acknowledging as we already saw in *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy* the hierarchies that structure the world market and the important roles played by state and empire in the fabrication of the planetary space for the expansion of capital. More generally, the “general law of capitalist accumulation” discussed in chapter 25 of *Capital*, volume 1, is characterized by the existence of different forms of exploitation at the world scale, within the framework of an international division of labor that is shaped by inflexible hierarchies (see Jeong 2020). Colonialism is a pivotal element in such hierarchical organization of the world market, and it is precisely its link to the world market that distinguishes for Marx the modern from the ancient colonial system (see Marx 1981, 809). This is an important conceptual distinction that leads us to further investigate the role of colonialism in the historical development of capitalism, focusing in the next section on Marx’s analysis of the “so-called primitive accumulation.”

4. *The World History of Primitive Accumulation*

The question of primitive accumulation, which means of the transition to capitalism, has been tested and reworked over the last years in critical debates (see for instance Perelman 2000; De Angelis 2001; Sanyal 2007; Samaddar 2009; Mezzadra 2018, appendix; Chakrabarty, Cullenberg, and Dhar 2018). While Marx states that primitive accumulation builds the “prehistory” of the capitalist mode of production, its historical origin, a heterogenous cohort of thinkers share the hypothesis that it rather constitutes a systemic and recurrent feature in the development of capitalism. This is particularly true in the moments of dramatic transformation and internal transition that mark its tumultuous history. The work of Rosa Luxemburg (1913/2003) is often invoked as a precedent in these debates, for instance in David Harvey’s influent formulation of a theory of “accumulation by dispossession” as a result of his discussion of primitive accumulation (Harvey 2003). The whole set of “extra-economic” measures and procedures, shaped by violence and expropriation, that according to Marx characterize primitive accumulation are considered as options that remain available to capital

throughout its history and that blur the boundary between exploitation and dispossession. There is for us a need to ask which is the connection between primitive accumulation and the world market.

Writing of capital in the strategic chapter 6 of *Capital*, volume 1, Marx explains that the “historical conditions of its existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities.” This is because capital is a social relationship, predicated upon its encounter with a “free worker” available on the market “as the seller of his own labor power.” “And this one historical pre-condition,” Marx adds, “comprises a world’s history. Capital, therefore, announces a new epoch in the process of social production” (Marx 1976a, 274). This is of course a reference to the analysis of the so-called primitive accumulation that will conclude the book. And there is a need to stress that once again, as we saw in *The German Ideology*, Marx’s use of the notion of world history has an important geographical component, referring at the same time to the epoch-making character of the process at hand and to its planetary spatial scope. The very existence of labor power, which can be considered the most important concept in Marx’s mature critique of political economy, originates from this planetary history. And this opens an important angle on the question of primitive accumulation.

As we know the historical emergence of labor power (and of the related labor market) is an important stake in Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation. And this analysis is basically centered on England (while he adds that it is basically valid for Western European countries). The history of enclosures of common land, the mobilization of poor peasants, the “bloody legislation against the expropriated,” with the criminalization of vagabondage, set the stage for the channeling of proletarians into what Marx calls in the *Grundrisse* the “narrow path to the labor market” (Marx 1973, 507). This is a brilliant analysis, which raises such important questions as for instance the statute of the commons and the political constitution of the labor market. Violence and expropriation are the drivers of the whole process, which ends up in England in the emergence of the industrial proletariat. The power of the state, “the concentrated and organized force of society,” works “to hasten, as in a hothouse, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition” (Marx 1976a, 915-6), building the framework of the whole process. Feudalism and the customary rights of the poor to common land were the two basic limits encountered

(and transformed into barriers to be overcome) by capital in England. And the nature of those limits shapes the specific form taken by primitive accumulation there.

In Marx's analysis we find however interesting references to different histories and different geographies of primitive accumulation. This is particularly the case when he raises the question of the opening of the world market, which is connected as we saw earlier with the "great discoveries at the end of the fifteenth century" (914). The role played by conquest and colonialism is of course of paramount importance here. It is worth quoting at length the crucial (and well known) passage in this respect:

"The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation" (915).

This is not the place to provide a full-fledged interpretation of Marx's positions on colonialism (see Mezzadra and Samaddar 2020). Suffice it to stress that conquest and colonial rule, alongside with the Middle Passage, build the privileged tools for the opening of the world market – and therefore the "modern history of capital" (Marx 1976a, 287). We have already seen that it is precisely the link with the world market (which also means with the expanding frontiers of capital) that characterizes for Marx modern colonialism and distinguishes it from the ancient. The passage we have just read provides in a few lines an effective summary of the geographies and manifestations of European modern colonialism. Historically it is clear that precisely Marx's emphasis on the world market as a constitutive element and basis of the capitalist mode of production leads him to acknowledge the founding role of colonialism for capitalism. And while the main focus of Marx's analysis of the so-called primitive accumulation, as well as of *Capital* writ large, is definitely England, the notion of world market works in the text as a kind of powerful shifter, decentering and potentially opening it up toward other histories and other geographies, characterized by capital's encounter with peculiar limits to its expansion.

Anticolonial thinkers and black Marxists have precisely followed the lead of Marx's passage on colonialism to prompt such a decentering and opening. Writing for instance in 1946, in his *The World and Africa*, W.E.B. Du Bois quotes the passage at hand in his analysis of the "worldwide meaning and effect" of the Middle Passage and concludes that "it was Karl Marx who made the great unanswerable charge of the sources of capitalism in African slavery" (Du Bois 1992, 56). Stressing the "enormous contribution" of the "triangular trade" to "Britain's industrial development" (58), Du Bois is clearly decentering the geographical and historical coordinates of the primitive accumulation taking Africa as material and epistemic epicenter for the constitution of capitalism and of the world market. The decentering also involves the history of struggles, since Du Bois writes that "the slave revolts were the beginnings of the revolutionary struggle for the uplift of the laboring in the modern world" (60). Needless to say, this is a move that one can imagine (and that has indeed been pursued) with respect to the other locations mentioned by Marx – from the Americas to India. And in fact, such a pluralization of the history of primitive accumulation, staging an interplay between the different experiences, can contribute to a better understanding of the origins of capitalism – with significant implications also for a theory of its contemporary formation.

It is well known that Marx himself, in his late years, relativized the focus on England in his analysis of primitive accumulation. In 1877, writing to the editorial board of a Russian magazine, he warns against transforming "the historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples" (Marx 1989b, 200). Four years later, in a now famous letter to Vera Zasulich (March 8, 1881), he stresses even more clearly that the "historical inevitability" of the transition to capitalism described in his analysis of primitive accumulation in *Capital*, volume 1, "is expressly limited to the *countries of Western Europe*" (Marx 1989c, 370). Marx's interest for non (Western) European societies intensifies in the last years of his life and it leads him to consider the need to pluralize and decenter his narrative of the primitive accumulation. His encounter with the anthropologists and ethnologists of his time is part and parcel of such widening of horizon, which results in a further entrenchment of the multilinear theory of history that he had already been pursuing since the *Grundrisse* (see Anderson 2010). From the point of view of this chapter, the very concept of world market is made at once more concrete and more fragmentary by Marx's explorations of other worlds and societies in the last years of his life. And the expansion of capital's frontiers at the world scale is confronted

with new limits, including the panoply of anticolonial struggles and resistances (see Mezzadra 2018, chapter 10).

5. *Internationalism, reloaded*

Our reading of Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation sheds light on the multiple and tumultuous constitution of the world market, which as we saw is "at once the precondition and the result of capitalist production" (Marx 1989a, 388). There is a need to repeat that the world market is according to Marx a constitutive element of the capitalist mode of production, to be distinguished from "foreign trade" and analyzed in its autonomy. The main concepts that Marx employs in his critique of political economy, from abstract labor to money, from labor power to the division of labor, are forged against the background of the world market. The global scale of the operations of capital has definitely distinct political implications and Marx's theory of proletarian internationalism, as we already saw in the *Manifesto*, is clearly a response to that scale. In the early twentieth century, Marx's notion of world market would play outstanding roles in the great debate on imperialism, pushing Marxist theory and politics beyond the limited scope of the Euro-Atlantic world (see Ferrari Bravo 1975/2018).

Having said this, Marx's internationalism in the time of the first International is far from coincident with the theoretical framework of the world market that we have been discussing thus far. In particular, Marx's political and organizational endeavor remains focused on Europe (and the United States), what cannot be surprising once the organizing processes and conditions of labor movements in that age are considered. The colonial question did not play any significant role in the debates surrounding the activity of the International. Needless to say, Marx's political internationalism has to be historically contextualized in a world in which the process of nationalization of the state was far from accomplished in Europe and the project to "combine and generalize the *spontaneous movements* of the working classes" in Europe (Marx 1985b, 190) was already a Herculean task. New, powerful waves of workers' strikes in several European countries in the second half of the 1860s definitely encouraged Marx and fully captured his intellectual and political energies.

Marx dialectical understanding of the relation between national and international struggle, foreshadowed in the *Manifesto*, is to be read as an anticipation of the process of nationalization of the state and at the same time as an attempt to bend it in an internationalist

direction. It is not by accident that the first International underwent a deep crisis after the defeat of the Paris Commune, because of that defeat but even more importantly because of the powerful transformations engendered by the Italian and by the German unification, which in a way concluded the process of nationalization of the state in Europe. Nevertheless, it is definitely significant that in 1875, writing his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx harshly criticizes the national (and even nationalist) emphasis of the founding text of the German workers' party precisely through a reference to the world market. "But the 'framework of the present-day national state'," he contends, "for instance, the German Empire, is itself in its turn economically 'within the framework of the world market', politically 'within the framework of the system of states'" (Marx 1989d, 90). An internationalist stance was therefore absolutely necessary.

Marx's militancy in the first International was in many senses a crucial chapter in his political life, with significant theoretical implications (see for instance Musto 2018, part 3). Such important questions as the relation between economic and political struggle, unions and parties, spontaneity and organization were tested and developed by Marx in the heated debates and controversies surrounding the activities of the International. In such debates Marx had the occasion to settle accounts with important interlocutors and political opponents, from Mazzini to Proudhon, from Blanqui to Bakunin, further refining his own political positions. One of his most powerful, brilliant, and politically dense writings, *The Civil War in France*, was written and published as an address of the General Council of the International. The support for the Union in the U.S. American civil war, the struggle for the liberation of Ireland, the opposition to the French-Prussian war in 1870 provided Marx with opportunities to deploy and deepen his knowledge of international politics, that was already conspicuous due to his training as a correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune* in the 1850s and to his work on the world market in the laboratory of the critique of political economy.

While I repeat that there is definitely no coincidence between the theoretical framework of the world market and Marx's internationalist militancy in the 1860s and early 1870s, there is no shortage of resonances between the two. One of the most striking aspects of Marx's understanding of the International is for instance his emphasis, in the *Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association*, on the "duty" for the working classes "to master themselves the mysteries of international politics" (Marx 1985a, 13). This is because, as Marx

explains in another *Address* of 1869, workers have the “glorious task to prove the world that now at last the working classes are bestriding the scene of history no longer as servile retainers but as independent actors, conscious of their own responsibility, and able to command peace where their would-be masters shout war” (Musto 2014, 260). This idea of the working class as an independent actor, and indeed as an autonomous power factor, in international politics challenges and destabilizes the monopoly of politics claimed by states first of all in the international arena and opens up a different angle on world politics. This is a point that Marx had already made with respect to the Civil War in the U.S., noting in *The Inaugural Address* that it “was not the wisdom of the ruling classes, but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic” (Marx 1985a, 13).

Although colonialism in the extra-European world did not play any role in the activities of the International Marx was concerned toward the end of the 1860s with a crucially important instance of *internal* colonialism, which means English rule in Ireland (see Rodden 2008). The Fenian Rising of 1867 was indeed a turning point in Marx’s thinking not only on the Irish question but more generally on the political perspectives of the English working class. “Quite apart from all ‘international’ and ‘humane’ phrases about *Justice for Ireland*,” he writes for instance to Engels on December 10, 1869, “it is the direct and absolute interest of the English working class to get rid of their present connection with Ireland” (Marx 1988b, 398). It was the material interest of the English proletariat to separate its “attitude towards Ireland quite definitely from that of the ruling classes,” Marx explains to Ludwig Kugelmann on November 29, 1867. Dissolving the Anglo-Irish Union established in 1801 and “substituting a free federal relationship for it” builds for him the condition for a political offensive of the English working class (Marx 1988a, 390). This is also because of the condition of the Irish migrant workers in England and of the profound racism surrounding them, which is critically grasped by Marx as a crucial factor of division within the working class. The ordinary English worker, he explains to Sigfried Mayer and August Vogt on April 9, 1870, “harbors religious, social, and national prejudices against [the Irish proletarian]. His attitude towards him is roughly that of the *poor whites* to the *niggers* in the former slave states of the American Union” (Marx 1988c, 474-5).

This was a striking contradiction within the working class and a radical challenge for the International. In order to tackle it Marx was convinced that a shift was needed, that the

“periphery” (Ireland) had to become the crucial stage of political action to engender a transformation in the metropolitan “center” (in England). In the letter to Engels of December 10, 1869, he sums up a change of perspective that had led him to revise his previous positions on the Irish question. “For a long time,” he writes, “I believed it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy. I always took this viewpoint in the *New-York Tribune*. Deeper study has convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. This is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general” (Marx 1988b, 398). It should be clear that the Irish question was important also for the further development of Marx’s internationalism. On the one hand, he had to confront the materiality of racism from a proletarian viewpoint, a topic that he had already deal with in his writings on the U.S. “Labor in a white skin,” he importantly writes in *Capital*, volume 1, “cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin” (Marx 1976a, 414). On the other hand, the Irish question confronted him with the tricky case of a colonial relationship within Europe. In principle, the shift in the relationship between colony and metropole imagined by Marx with respect to Ireland could be engendered also with respect to other colonial relationships, foreshadowing an internationalist theory and practice within the framework of the world market.

To conclude, I repeat once again that Marx’s political internationalism is far from coincident with his analysis and theory of the world market. Nevertheless, I am convinced that such an analysis and theory played paramount roles in refining his internationalist sensitivity and in providing the foundation of his internationalist militancy. In this chapter I attempted to demonstrate that the notion of world market is a guiding thread that runs through Marx’s whole work, from his early writings to the critique of political economy and to the late study of Russia and non-European societies. Marx definitely plays an important role in the history of proletarian internationalism due to his militancy and somehow leading role in the first International. While there is a need to further investigate this militancy, it seems to me even more important to shed light on the internationalist theoretical framing of Marx’s work through the concept of world market. To develop a political theory and practice of internationalism up to the challenge posited by that concept is a task for the next future.

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