

Marx and the 'Non-historic' Peoples

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In “The Future Results of British Rule in India”, written on July 22, 1853, Marx refers to this nation as having no history at all. Marx refers here to what he would later call *Asiatic Mode of Production*. The absence of history in this mode of production would be an expression of its stagnant and immutable character. Some authors like Edward Said (2003[1979]) claims that this is a Eurocentric hypothesis of Marx. According to this interpretation Marx's affirmations about the Orient, and more broadly about non-European societies, are biased by his sources. The use of the term non-historic, especially, would be an uncritical repetition of Hegel. Marx, as Hegel, would be committed with an ontological superiority of Europe.

In this paper, we argue that Marx's claims about non-historicity and stagnant character of the Orient are not a commitment with an innate superiority of European peoples. At first, we present the features of the Asiatic Mode of Production in Marx's works. Secondly, we argue that the ‘Asiatic societies’ in Marx are characterized by the endogenous perpetuation of its economic structure. This stability contrasts with the intense economic dynamic of capitalism. Also in this section, we show that according to Marx these societies are capable of a capitalist development on their own once the ancient economic structures were destroyed by the exogenously imposed capitalism.

In the final section, we argue that the supposed superiority of capitalist European societies is restricted to its economic dynamism, especially to the development of productive forces. We will show that Marx stress the superiority of ‘Asiatic’ societies relative to the European ones in many non-economic relations. Thus, it is argued that the Asiatic Mode of Production should be analysed in the light of the unequal development of the social structures in history.

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I - Marx and the *Asiatic mode of production*

Marx gives for the first time some elements about the specificity of the modes of production outside Western Europe in some articles written to the *New York Daily Tribune*, about the British rule in India. There Marx points that, in Oriental societies, the decisive question is the provision of economic public works by the State. The centralization of some economic functions by the State was an outcome of geographical conditions that forced the use of large scale work of irrigation for agriculture.² Besides that, there was the union of domestic agriculture and manufacture with the commerce dispersed in small centers.³

The village system was an outcome of economic functions of government and the union of domestic agriculture and manufacture. A consequence of this village system was the ‘*oriental despotism*’, in which there was a central government above the and with total rule over the villages. Another result of the village system was the ‘stagnatory and vegetative life’ of the Orient. The isolation of the villages and their ‘equilibrium by mutual repulsion’ leads to absence of a proper history in India and in the ‘orient’ in general. The history of India was a succession of intruders on a passive society that remains unchanged.

In the remarks about China, in the article “Chinese affairs” of 1862, Marx generalizes those features of India to all oriental societies. There Marx writes that ‘oriental empires demonstrate constant immobility in their social substructure, with unceasing change in the persons and clans that gain control over political superstructure’.⁴

Marx resumes the issue of the Asiatic form of propriety in the *Grundrisse*. There he points that the decisive factor in the oriental societies was the system of communal property organized in self-sufficient villages. Marx holds that the centralized government is an outcome of that form of property. In this account of the Oriental societies, the unity of the communal propriety is centralized in the king and the gods, with the villages having only the possession of land. Hence, in this system there was no private propriety. The absence of private propriety and the unity of community in the central government would be the key to understand the Asiatic form of propriety.

As Oriental societies are showed as rural societies, cities appear as places of commerce or of exchange of surplus produced by the village communities – and so as places that did not have an independent production.⁵ More importantly, Marx stress there a new feature (absent in the *New York Tribune* articles) is the appropriation of the surplus of the village communities by the central government, in the person of the king and of the priests of the temples, as product or directly as labour.

² Marx (1979), *Collected Works* (CW), v. 12, p. 127. From now on all references to *Marx and Engels Collected Works* will be abridged to the initials CW, followed by the number of its volume and page.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216-7.

⁵ (Marx, K.1973 , p.474)

A few years before the *Grundrisse* Marx had already noted the relation between religion and the extraction of surplus in some articles about the Ottoman Empire. In these works, Marx (CW13, p. 71) affirms that ‘the Turkish State, like all Oriental States, is founded on the most intimate connection, we might almost say, the identity of State and Church, of Politics and Religion’. Marx also notes that in the muslim Ottoman Empire, not muslim people had to pay a tax for muslims. The religion of subject people was maintained, but the hierarchical character of the relations between muslim and orthodox priests, and just among orthodox priests, ‘has its moneyed price’.⁶ It is possible to infer that the ‘despotic’ character of Oriental States is softened in that article, since the subjugation of orthodox Greeks are made only by the paying of tribute. This is developed in some of Marx's remarks on the Asiatic mode of production in *Capital*, as we shall see.

Another point in the *Grundrisse* is that the ‘Asiatic’ form of propriety is extended beyond the geographical orient. Here, Marx includes under this rubric communities of Mexico (Aztecs) and Peru (Incas), and the Celts. Marx also mention the Slavic communities as a variety of the Asiatic form of propriety, but not develop its specificity.⁷

The extension of the Asiatic form of propriety and the different possibilities of the organization of the work in these societies led Marx to soften his previously identity between ‘Asiatic form of property’ and ‘Oriental despotism’. For he perceives that in these communal forms of propriety work could be done by each family in the parcel of the land allotted by the community; with collective work appearing as a complement of the work of the families or as a tribute to the central government; or the work could also be done directly by the village community. And so Marx would now uphold that the Asiatic form of propriety could lead to more democratic or despotic forms of government.⁸

The softening of the despotic character of ‘Asiatic’ societies, however, does not preclude Marx to identify the situation of the individuals in these societies with a *generalized slavery*. Due to the unity of agriculture and manufacture these societies did not develop the same kind of slavery of the Western Europe. Notwithstanding, Marx points that in ‘Asiatic’ societies, the individual, as part of the land, is a propriety of the central unity.⁹ Thus in the *Grundrisse* the stagnant and unchangeable character of the Asiatic mode of production is also reaffirmed. This unchangeability would result from the absence of autonomy of the individuals relative to the community. In other words, the stagnant feature of the Asiatic mode of production is an outcome of the absence of private propriety.

The stagnant feature appears too as a result of the low level of the division of labour in these

⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

⁷ (Marx, K.1973, p.473)

⁸ (Marx, K.1973, p.473)

⁹ (Marx, K. 1973, p.493)

societies, i.e, of the union between agriculture and manufacture. Since the village communities are self-sufficient, their isolation and reciprocal repulsion perpetuate itself.¹⁰ Therefore, Marx maintains in the *Grundrisse* that the Asiatic societies were unable to have an endogenous economic development.

Around the same time that he was writing the *Grundrisse*, Marx would reinforce the stagnant feature of 'Asiatic' societies in a series of articles about China, in the *New York Daily Tribune*. In the 'History of the Opium trade' (1858), Marx refers to China as a 'giant empire, containing almost one-third of the human race, vegetating to the teeth of time' (CW16, p. 16). In the "Trade with China" (1858), Marx notes that the economic structure of China 'depending upon the combination of minute agriculture with domestic industry' is the same as in India, at least on this aspect'. (CW16, p.536).

In *Capital*, Marx adds some other elements to the Asiatic mode of production. The communal property of land is maintained with the observation that "The form of the community varies in different parts of India" (Marx, K. 1976, p.473). The self perpetuation of the general division of labour in the communities is added to explain the 'unchangeability of the Asiatic societies' (Marx,1976, p.479). Marx list several handicraft and administrate works that are dependent on the production of the village communities. According to Marx this division of labour is reproduced in exactly the same way every time that a community has to expand itself.

Another element of the Asiatic mode of production developed in *Capital* is the mode of extraction and appropriation of surplus from the village communities. Here the surplus is characterized as a prior form of land rent that is conflated with the tributes, being appropriated by the State (Marx, K. 1981, p.927). Marx points that the surplus is extracted directly as work or most often as products. He also adds elements related to the trade of commodities in the Asiatic mode of production: the village communities would not produce commodities, due to its self-sufficient character and the extraction of surplus directly from the communities. Nevertheless, the surplus would be actually traded as commodities by the representatives of the State (Marx, K. 1987b, p.409).

The issue of 'Asiatic despotism' reappear in *Capital* softened again, and this time associated with the mode of extraction of the surplus. Marx points that because the village communities have the possession of land their organization of work is not subjected to the control of the State. However, the extraction of surplus depends on extra-economical coercion, since the property does not belong to the village communities. Marx points that this extra-economic coercion is a characteristic of all pre-capitalist societies in which propriety is dissociated from possession of the land.

¹⁰ (Marx, K1973, p486)

The extra-economic coercion in the Asiatic mode of production, however, have some specific characteristics. Whereas when the surplus is appropriated by private proprietaries there are personal dependence and subjection of direct producers, in the Asiatic mode of production “the relationship of dependence does not need to possess any stronger form, either politically or economically, than that which is common to all subjection to this state” (Marx, K. 1981, p.927). Furthermore, since the surplus is appropriated as products, the “compulsion no longer confronts” the producers “in its previous brutal form” (Marx, K. 1981, p.932), as when the surplus was appropriated directly as work.

But Marx still maintains the stationary nature of the Asiatic mode of production in *Capital* despite all those new elements. The explanation here again is the self-sustained community that reproduces itself apart from the trade of commodities, centralized by the State. One additional element for the explanation of the stationary character of the Asiatic mode of production in *Capital* is the extraction of surplus of the communities as products by the State (Marx, K.1981, p.932).

II – The 'non-historic' Peoples

As we saw, the stagnant feature of the Asiatic mode of production is recurrent in Marx works. In this section we try to interpret what Marx means with the reference of the ‘stagnant’ and ‘vegetative life’ of ‘non-historic people’ of the Asiatic mode of production. Despite the derogatory note of these terms, we believe that they can be interpreted in the breadth of Marx’ s work. Interpreting the ‘stationary feature’ of the Asiatic mode of production in the light of the larger scope of Marx's work can give some clues for what it mean.

As an introductory observation we have to note first that Marx’ s theoretical work concerns primarily the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, Marx’ s references to non-capitalist modes of production are in general related to the origin and the development of capitalism (Hobsbawn, 1964). Usually Marx refers to the pre-capitalist modes of production as a way to analyse the necessary conditions to the emergence of capitalism. Also, we believe, with Lukács (1978, p. 45), that all Marx’ s comparative observations about pre and capitalist mode of production are bound to a broad ontological conception of the development of social being. That means that Marx’ s observations about the pre-capitalist mode of production are correlated with a very specific conception of progress. According to Lukács:

It is very fashionable today to laugh condescendingly at ideas of progress, and to make use of the contradictions that necessarily arise with every development in order to render any idea of progress, i.e. any development from an ontologically lower stage to a higher one,

scientifically disreputable as a subjective value judgement. (Ibid.)

Secondly is necessary to observe that Marx makes scanty theoretical claims about the geographical expansion of capitalism. This analysis was beyond the object of his main work, *Capital*, as Marx himself admitted (Heinrich, 1997, p. 462). We can find some concrete analysis of the possible results of the geographical expansion of capitalism in some of Marx's articles about conjuncture, as we saw before. The main subject of these articles is the collision between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. We can conclude that Marx's observations about the Asiatic mode of production are comparative with capitalism. Marx however does not make comparative history but historical comparisons.

This comparative mode of analysis is evident in *Forms Preceding Capitalist Production* in *Grundrisse*. In this text Marx restricts his analysis to the historical economic presuppositions of the capitalist mode of production (CW 28, p. 399). More specifically, Marx was concerned with the way in which the separation of the workers from the objective conditions of production and the juridical liberty of individuals could emerge. Marx analyses if the internal dynamics of pre-capitalist modes of production could set endogenously these conditions for capitalism¹¹. In many moments, Marx states clearly his aims. For instance:

What concerns us for the moment here is this: the relation of labour to capital or to the objective conditions of labour as capital, presupposes an historical process that dissolves the different forms in which the labourer is a proprietor or the proprietor works. This means first and foremost: 1) *Dissolution* of the relations to the earth – to land or soil – as a natural condition of production to which man relates as his own inorganic being (...). 2) *Dissolution of the relations* in which he appears as the *proprietor of the instrument* (...). 3) Included in both is the fact that man possesses the means of consumption prior to production; this necessary to enable him to keep alive as producer (...). 4) On the other hand, *dissolution*, also, of the relations the *workers themselves* (...) are still a direct *part of the objective conditions of production* and are appropriated as such – are therefore slaves or serfs. (Ibid., pp. 421-422)

In this text, Marx is mainly concerned with three forms of propriety at a general level: the Oriental, the Ancient and the Germanic forms. In all these forms, the individual ‘relates simply to the objective conditions of labour as his own’. This behaviour, however, is mediated by the existence ‘more or less historically developed and modified being of the individual as a *member of a community*’¹².

Despite the similarity among pre-capitalist formations, Marx points out that their differences

¹¹ “What requires explanation is not the *unity* of living and active human beings with the natural, inorganic conditions of their exchange of matter with nature, and therefore their appropriation of nature; nor of course is this the result of an historical process. What we must explain is the *separation* between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active being, a separation which is posited in its complete form only in the relationship between wage labour and capital” . (CW 28, p. 413)

¹² Ibid., p. 409.

was due partially to the ‘economic conditions under which’ these formations relate to the ‘soil as proprietor’.¹³ This form of appropriation of land depends upon geographical and social historical factors, like the kind of relation with other communities, migrations, etc.¹⁴

The contradictions of any form of social reproduction lead to a tendency of the dissolution of its presuppositions. ‘In all these forms, the basis of development is the *reproduction of presupposed* relationships between the individual and his commune (…). The development therefore is from the outset a *limited* one, but once the limit is transcended, decay and ruin ensue’ . (Ibid., pp. 410-411) At some point the form of social reproduction become incompatible with its grounds. Thus, the conditions to overcome this form of social reproduction are set.

The limits of the reproduction of the Asiatic mode of production are very stretchy. Like all pre-capitalist modes of production, the Asiatic mode of production is grounded in the preservation of its economic structure. But the peculiarities of its economic structure give it a persistent nature:

The Asiatic form necessarily survives longest and most stubbornly. This is inherent in its presupposition, namely that the individual does not become independent vis-à-vis the commune; that there is a self-sustaining circle of production, a unity of agriculture and handicrafts, etc. (Ibid., p. 410)

The division of labour, the structure of propriety and the modes of surplus extraction results in the isolation and endogenous perpetuation of the economic structure of Asiatic societies. Preservation through tradition and heredity are the main principles in these societies. In India the mode of production rested on the caste system, with its hereditary division of labour. Marx notes that this system was a ‘decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power’ (CW12, p. 221). Commenting on the difficulties of the British commerce on China, Marx observes that ‘Absence of wants, and predilection for hereditary modes of dress, are obstacles which civilized commerce has to encounter in all new markets.’ (CW16, p. 538)

Terms like ‘unchegeability’ and ‘stagnation’ that Marx use to characterise the Asiatic societies are not incompatible with some kind of movement in its reproduction. That movement, however, is one of a dynamic equilibrium, a stability in which the contradictions lead to its preservation instead of a constant change. Marx notes the ‘equilibrium by mutual repulsion’ for India. Also commenting on the Taiping revolution on China, Marx observes that the revolutionaries ‘are aware of no task, except changing the dynasty’ and that after ten years ‘they have destroyed everything and produced nothing’ (CW19, p. 217). In other words, the traditional ‘revolutions’ in Asiatic society were a mean to its preservation and not of its defeat.

¹³ Ibid., p. 398.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 410.

If the reproduction of Asiatic mode of production goes through a dynamic stability, it is on an exogenous factor that it could be overcome. And that is what Marx saw in the clash between the stable Asiatic societies and the society where ‘all that is solid melts into air’. In ‘The Future Results of British Rule in India’, Marx furnishes a conclusion of his observations about that country (CW 12, p. 217). In this article Marx observes that the British rule in India was an ‘organic result of the whole system of production as it is now constituted’. (Ibid., p. 222). In other words, the British rule was a result of the laws of capitalist development that impel the geographical expansion of capitalist social relations.

The main question that Marx seeks to answer in this text is ‘How came it that English supremacy was established in India’? In a comparative way, Marx points to the clash of two different dynamics of the mode of production. Capitalism rests ‘on the supreme rule of capital’, in which the accumulation is ‘essential to the existence of capital as an independent power’, (Ibid., p. 222). Capitalism is grounded on an intense economic dynamism, while the dynamic of the Asiatic mode of production was grounded on the preservation of its economic structure. The result from the clash of these two different dynamics was the domination of capitalism. It is to note that the intense economic dynamism of capitalism includes destruction as one of its moments, therefore its domination is a domination through destruction of old modes of production.

These comparative observations are linked to a conception of human development, i.e., of progress. The main tendency of human development is a progressive, although never complete, detachment of nature. Along this main tendency human beings become increasingly socialised. According to Lukács:

There can be no doubt that a development is involved here, and just as little doubt that a progression can be established, from a purely ontological standpoint, in so far as this new form of social being increasingly comes into its own in the course of the development process, i.e. it is achieved more and more in independent categories, and increasingly maintains its natural form only in transcended way. (Lukács, 1978, p. 46)

The condition for this progress is the development of productive forces. Along the main stream of development and in the broad span of time there is a gradual, but not linear, material development in societies. This material development brings the possibility to surpass the class societies in which human development occurred until now.¹⁵ That way, the next possible stage of human development is the free development of all human beings, the communist society.

¹⁵ “When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous, pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain”. (Marx, 1979, p. 222)

Marx observes that in the village communities of India, human beings were subjects to the external circumstances. This leads to the “brutalizing worship of nature” in a situation in which men ‘fell down on their knees in adoration of Kanuman, the monkey, anda Sabbla, the cow’ . (CW12, p. 132). On this criterion, British was an agent to raise India to a higher point of human development. In other words, the clash with capitalist society could lead India to distant itself from its submission of nature and become more socialised.

In this sense, Marx understood that the British rule in India, was potentially regenerating, although it came through destruction (CW12: 218). According to Marx, British rule brought to India *a condition of progress*, the development of productive forces. For example, Marx (Ibid., p. 220) affirms that ‘the railway-system will therefore become, in India, truly the forerunner of modern industry’ . The railway-system would bring spillover effects, increasing agricultural productivity, stimulating the implementation of accessory industries and developing internal trade.

The main effect of the development of productive forces brought by the British rule would be to break down the isolation of the Indian village communities. Marx point out that the isolation of village communities was “the prime law of its stagnation” . This would broaden the social relations on India, enriching it in variety and scope. Therefore, the main effect of the break down of isolation of village communities would be to turn India more socialised, raising it to a higher point of human development.

The regeneration of India, however, would depend ‘not only on the development of the productive powers, but on their appropriation by the people’ . (CW12, p. 221). The British could not maintain the control of productive forces developed in India for their own interests solely, the conditions for the productive forces would have to fall under the control of Indians. In other words, Indian colonial status was not an eternal condition for its development. The stagnation and the vegetative life, in this sense, was not an ethnic or natural feature of Indian or ‘Oriental people’ . Marx suggests that, once the capitalism have been brought from abroad to the Orientals, they would be capable of setting their own development. Nevertheless, if the colonial condition was a medium to the destruction of the ‘stationary and vegetative live’ , it was also a hindrance for the actualisation of the potential of development of the Asiatic societies.

The condition for the actualisation of the potential of development of India was a national revolt against the British rule. In other words, the Indian people would have to grow ‘strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether’ . (Ibid.) We have to note that in many texts Marx not only point that the colonial rule would bring an unbearable condition but also the means to overcome this condition. Commenting India Sepoy revolt Marx notes that ‘there is something in

human history like retribution; and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself'. (CW15, p. 353) Thus the capitalist development of productive forces also brings the spectre of revolution to 'Asiatic' societies.

National liberation, however, would not be the sufficient condition for the actualisation of all potentialities brought by the development of productive forces. Marx points that the bourgeoisie develops the productive forces and nothing else. Therefore, the true appropriation of the productive forces by the producers and its transformation in a medium to human development requires their emancipation from the bourgeoisie itself. Another condition for the development of India would be the revolution of workers in Britain.

This is a key point in Marx's argument about 'Asiatic' societies and its relation with western capitalist societies. Marx never conceived the struggle of oppressed peoples detached from the class struggle. The first without the second would only lead to the expansion of the capitalist accumulation and bourgeoisie domination around the world. The second could have the first as a condition. This kind of strategic thinking is recurring in Marx analysis of conjuncture, from the Taiping revolt in China to the Russian *narodnik* movement against the Czar.

At some point Marx seems to believe that Indian people would liberate itself from British rule. This actually happened with the Sepoy revolt in 1857.¹⁶ Marx affirms that what Britain 'considers a military mutiny is in truth a national revolt'. (CW 15, p. 316) Contrary to the representation of Indians as a naturally passive people, Marx points that 'to the talk about the apathy of the Hindoos, or even their sympathy with British rule, it is all nonsense' and that 'It is a curious quid pro quo to expect an Indian revolt to assume the features of a European revolution' (CW15, p. 329)

The revolt of Sepoys, however, did not lead to liberation of Indian people. Hence, Marx recognises, in 1882, that the British imperialism have pushed 'the native people not forwards but backwards' (CW24, p. 365). Since the conditions for the development of India stressed earlier by Marx have not actually happened until that date, his evaluation of the results of British rule changed according to the objective movement of history.

The fact that India until that point had not regenerated but was pushed backwards by British rule is not incompatible with Marx's conception of social progress. This only means that social

¹⁶“This refers to the major national liberation uprising of the Indian people against the British rule in 1857-59. (...)The revolt broke out in the spring of 1857 (preparations for it began in mid-1856) among the sepoy units (see Note 256) of the Bengal army quartered in Northern India. They became the military core of the revolt, which assumed wide scope and spread to large areas of Northern and Central India, chiefly Delhi, Lucknow, Cawnpore, Rohilkhand and Bundelkhand.”(Page me15.674, note 351)

“Sepoys —mercenary troops in the British-Indian army recruited from the Indian population and serving under British officers. They were used by the British to subjugate India and to fight the wars of conquest against Afghanistan, Burma and other neighbouring states.”(Page me15.665, note 156)

progress depends upon real conditions that may or may not become effective. Social progress is an outcome of real contradictions, of clash between peoples and modes of productions, and, more fundamentally, on the results of class struggles. In other words, progress for Marx is not a mechanical succession of predetermined phases but a main stream of human development that happens in a non-linear way, as we will further argue on next section.

Now we can return to the main argument of the paper and make some concluding remarks on this section. First, we have to observe that although Marx repeatedly refers to the stagnant life of the Asiatic mode of production, he seldom refers to these societies as ‘non-historic’. The only reference of India as non-historic that we find is in the article ‘The Future Results of British Rule in India’. However, there is one other relatively known reference to ‘non-historic people’ that we found in Marx’s work – but instead of an Asiatic society, it refers not to a European nation.

In a passage of the *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels make a comment on the relationship between the development of productive forces and forms of exchange. In this comment they make an evaluation of the Germany ruled by Frederick William IV:

But it is also clear that in Germany it is impossible to write this sort of history [of industry and exchange], because the Germans lack not only the necessary power of comprehension and the material but also the 'sensuous certainty', for across the Rhine one cannot have any experience of these things since their history has stopped happening. (CW 5, p. 43)

Comparing the ‘absence of history’ in Germany with the ‘non-history’ of India we can conclude that Marx’s reference is to an absence of an intense economic dynamism in these societies. These societies only preserve their economic structure in the same way they existed for centuries, without transforming their social ground, the relationship between communities and the central government. It seems that the ‘absence of history’ relates only to economic and not to all human relations and capacities.

We can conclude also, that the Marx use of the ‘non-history’ is in truth an ironic materialist inversion of its meaning in Hegel and not one of his fundamental categories. Whereas for Hegel ‘non-historic’ people refers to the absence and absolute impossibility of the development of the Spirit, for Marx it looks like it refers to the comparative absence of an intense economic dynamism. It is also an inversion in the sense that in many instances Marx affirms the development and even the higher ‘spirit’ of the ‘non-historic’ people in relation to the capitalist societies. We will further develop this argument in the next section.

III – Progress, uneven development and the ‘non-historic people’.

As we tried to show above, to present the usage by Marx of ‘non-historic’ or ‘stagnant’ people as a synonym to a prejudice against (supposedly inferior etc.) Asiatic societies is incompatible with his own views of history and progress. No category can make this clearer than the category of *uneven development*.

When one talk about uneven development most Marxists probably think of the economic disparities existent among countries (or communities). Therefore the great question posed is that capitalist geographical expansion creates a heterogeneous space, in which conditions of production and consumption evolve at different rhythms.¹⁷ Furthermore, some thinkers would remember that this is so because the less advanced nations would combine elements of capitalist production with pre-capitalist ones.

It is rather easy to know the reasons why of that emphasis, since the most prominent studies of the uneven development derive from Lenin’s and Trotsky’s works. Both Lenin and Trotsky, in the turn of twentieth century, were worried about the particular development of capitalism in Russia and the consequences of imperialism around the world. Concerning the question of imperialism, Lenin rises the idea of a ‘hierarchical stratification’ in the world, which was divided into capitalist ‘colonial-powers’, ‘colonies’ and dependent nations. These nations were ‘transitional forms of state dependence’ that still under the influence of colonial-powers but where capitalism was advancing. However, not even with the complete development of capitalist mode of production those nations would be levelled – quite the opposite, as Lenin argues to refute Kautsky’s ultra-imperialism theory.

Just as important in the argument above is the possibility of abiding pre-capitalists social relations in the course of capitalist development. In his seminal work, *Development of capitalism in Russia*, Lenin writes that:

whether the development of capitalism in Russia is slow or rapid, depends entirely on what we compare this development with. If we compare the pre-capitalist epoch in Russia with the capitalist (and that is the comparison which is needed for arriving at a correct solution of the problem), the development of social economy under capitalism must be considered as extremely rapid. If, however, we compare the present rapidity of development with that which could be achieved with the general level of technique and culture as it is today, the present rate of development of capitalism in Russia really must be considered as slow. And it cannot but be slow, *for in no single capitalist country has there been such an abundant survival of ancient institutions that are incompatible with capitalism, retard its development, and immeasurably worsen the condition of the producers*, who ‘suffer not only from the development of capitalist production, but also from the incompleteness of that development’. (Lenin, V. I, 1960. p.600, Emphasis added.)

This idea would be further explored by Trotsky, when formulating his ‘law of uneven and

¹⁷ In this sense, the category uneven development is sometimes taken in even more narrow-minded way, meaning simply the capitalist trend of improving world inequalities.

combined development' of history:

Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of *combined development* – by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of the separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms. Without this law, to be taken of course, in its whole material content, it is impossible to understand the history of Russia, and indeed of any country of the second, third or tenth cultural class. (Trotsky, 2003, p.27-28)

Trotsky upholds that because of this law there can be no schematic comprehension of history as a succession of predetermined modes of production. According to this law it was possible to the backward nation to get elements of the most developed and leap forward.

We do not intent here to argue for or against this usage of uneven development category. This is surely *one dimension* of the problem, but not the only one. For instance, in Marx notes on the unfinished *Introduction of 1857*, published in the *Grundrisse*, we find an explicit mention to the problem. Dealing with the analysis of 'production', Marx recollects some point that should not be forgotten, the sixth one being:

The unequal development of material production and e.g. art. In general, the concept of progress is not to be taken in the usual abstract form. With regard to art, etc., this disproportion is not so important and [not so] difficult to grasp as within practical social relations themselves, e.g. in culture. Relation of the United States to Europe. However, the really difficult point to be discussed here is how the relations of production as legal relations enter into uneven development. For example, the relation of Roman civil law (this applies in smaller measure to criminal and public law) to modern production. (CW 28, p. 46)

Despite its fragmentary style, it is possible to see that Marx recognized there the problem of uneven development considering the relation between material production and other spheres (complexes) of social life, such as art, culture and law. First, one should note that, even though Marx did not stressed out much these ideas, he did explain a bit more, affirming that “As regards art, it is known that certain periods of its florescence by no means correspond to the general development of society, or, therefore, to the material basis, the skeleton as it were of its organisation”. (Ibid.) And he explains why it would be impossible to the Greek art to be developed in modern times – although it stilled to some extent the standard model of art –, as it presupposes all the Greek mythology, and so a limited knowledge about the world, a naive perspective toward nature etc.¹⁸

Even though there is no space here to debate this question in more details, we agree with Lukács when he maintains that the problem is to analyse in what extent certain objective conditions

¹⁸ As for the 'key' problem of 'legal relations', according to Lukács (1979, p. 124), the basis of an uneven development would be social division of labour.

of production, what we could call the general tendency of development, are favourable or unfavourable for the development of a work of art, artistic genre etc. In this sense, it is pretty interesting, for instance, Lukács' observation that 'the same capitalist development led to an upswing of music that had no previous precedent, while for architecture it was the source of a constantly developing problem that became ever more difficult to resolve'. (Lukács, 1979, p. 132)

It follows from this argument that Lenin and Trotsky understanding of unequal development, though correct, is incomplete, for it deals only with its geographical aspect. From a broader perspective, one should note that reality is made of different *complex structures* that interact with each other also in a complex way. Therefore, it is always possible that forward movements in one complex (e.g., labour or productive forces) to be accompanied by backward movements in others (e.g., art, legal relations etc.).

The uneven development among different complex of societies gives a more precise, dialectical meaning to the correspondence of 'base' and 'superstructure'. The ground is reflected upon the 'superstructure', but this does not mean that they have the same determinations, the same being. As Hegel notes in the dialectic of essence, the superstructure of a house arises from the ground in difference and opposition to it¹⁹.

One key problem that arises when defending this category of uneven development is whether or not the category of *progress* still applies to history. In other words, considering that there is no single (or straight) line in the course of history, should we consider impossible to make any claims about an objective development? We maintain that the answer is no, as we have already pointed on the previous section and shall develop from now on. Although historical development is subjected to an unevenness still there is a main tendency of objective development, a progress. According to Lukács, there are three indicatives of progress in human history.²⁰

The first one is the improvement of productive forces, the fact that today it is possible to produce and reproduce material conditions for human life in a much smaller time. The second is what Lukács, following Marx, calls the 'retreat of natural boundaries', this means that humanity progressively drifts away from its merely biological necessities, creating for itself a world predominately dominated by social categories. Of course, as humans will always continue to be an organic life form, that retreat of natural boundaries can never be complete, but between our natural

¹⁹Hegel,(2008, p.140)

²⁰ We will not deal here with the question of objective progress in global development, notwithstanding human 'problems'. *En passant*, we can quote Lukács (2008, p. 345) to express our opinion about it: 'evolution and retreat exist only under a given standpoint. Whether or not a life form can subsist through biological adaptation, will mean a progress or not only from the standpoint of that life form. But I think that global development have nothing to do with that: it runs its course irreversibly, in last instance, in a causal form. Considering men again: the biological adaptation, which is a passive adaptation to the environment, is suppressed with human labour by an active adaptation, which transforms the ambient'.

necessities and its fulfilment there tend to be a range, each time greater, of purely social categories.

Finally, the third moment of progress would be the formation of humanity itself as a being that exists not only 'in itself' but 'for us' and even 'for itself'.²¹ For universal history is a historical product; only through a long historical process humanity could recognize itself, at first only in particular determinations as tribes, communities, castes etc. With the integration of human communities through the world market, there is the objective conditions for humanity recognizes itself as an universal, having a being 'for us'.

It is important to note that all this tendencies that substantiate the progress in history came, until now at least, through means that are contradictory with it. It is through war, exploitation and human degradation that the development of productive forces, the retreat from natural boundaries and the formation of humankind as universal being comes about in the history. In other words the objective progress comes through alienated means. This is another aspect of uneven development that is referred to progress itself.

The contradictory nature of progress gives a theoretical meaning to Marx's uses of the terms 'barbarian' and 'civilized'. At first we have to note that the term 'barbarian' was of common usage to refer to non-Europeans people when Marx wrote the articles in *New York Dayle Tribune* for a large audience (being used even in official English reports about the conditions of the colonies). We cannot deny that Marx was a man of his time, sharing some believes of the century in which he have lived. We cannot forget however that Marx was mainly a *critic* of his time, including the bourgeois believes of Victorian society.

Asking himself about whether English capitalists would 'emancipate and mend the conditions of the mass of the people' in India Marx suggests that what they 'will not fail to do is to *lay down the material premises* for both. Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and people through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?' (CW 12, p. 221. Emphasis added) Here, it is possible to find an undoubted example of Marx's conception of progress and the unevenness of the historical development. Because although he is talking about progress – more precisely about opening the possibility of progress –, he is also recognizing the social tragedy associated to it.

Indeed, we think that the term 'barbaric' in Marx has a specific a theoretical meaning. *It means any condition that hinders human development*, whereas civilized means any condition that may allow it. In the article 'Revolution in China and in Europe', of 1853, for instance, Marx refers to the 'barbarous and hermetic isolation' of China, broke by England. We understand that Marx defines the isolation as barbarous because it hinders human development, in the objective sense

²¹ Ibid., pp. 135.

stressed above, restricting the diversity of human relations and capabilities – impeding the trend to what we call the conformation of human race. On this aspect, the capitalist Western society are more civilized than ‘barbaric’ isolated ‘Asiatic’ societies. In this passage, however, the barbaric condition refers only to the isolation and not to an all embracing and eternal condition of China.

Understood as such, it becomes clear why Marx applies the ‘barbarism’ also to the Western capitalism. For capitalism, though progressive in comparison to precedent social formation, with its ‘two-sided’ development also hinders an effective emancipation of humanity; as it constraint human kind to the imperatives of its own labour; as it creates conditions of unfolding potentialities for only part of human kind (at cost of the remaining)²².

In that context, it also becomes comprehensible why the ‘barbarism’ of ‘Asiatic’ societies (and, in contrast, the ‘civilization’ of Western capitalism) gets an obvious ironic connotation. Commenting on the article of the England and China treaty of 1858 that prohibited the use of the term ‘barbarian’ in British official documents, Marx wrote a fine piece of irony:

The Chinese authorities styling themselves Celestial, how humble to their understanding must not appear John Bull, who, instead of insisting on being called divine or Olympian, contents himself with weeding the character representing the word barbarian out of the official documents. (CW16, p. 49)

Marx’s sarcasm is directed to the auto proclaimed civilization of Western capitalism. Again, in the article ‘Trade with China’, Marx switches the terms of his opposition from ‘barbarian’ versus-”civilized world’ to ‘barbarian’ versus-‘mercantile world’ and remarks: ‘Absence of wants, and predilection for hereditary modes of dress, are obstacles which civilized commerce has to encounter in all new markets’. (CW16, p. 537-8) And referring to the British rule in India he writes: ‘the profound hypocrisy and *inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization*’ that recurs to the an ‘atrocious rapacity’ in India (CW 12, p. 221. Emphasis added).

That is also why in the *Manifesto of communist party* – for some one of the main examples of Marx’s prejudice toward the ‘barbaric’ communities – Marx and Engels say that capitalism ‘forces the *barbarians*’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate’, but just to afterwards explains that this is how they compel all peoples to ‘introduce *what it calls civilisation* into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves’. (CW 06, p. 488)]

²² As Marx and Engels put it in the *Manifesto*: ‘In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ (CW 06, p.506)

IV – Conclusion

As conclusion, let us now get back to Marx's perspective on 'Asiatic' societies. As previously seen Marx used the category 'Asiatic mode of production' to consider the stationary condition of some societies. And dealing with this question have also used terms adjectives like 'non-historical' and 'barbarians' to talk about some of this societies. Does that mean an intrinsic prejudice towards those people? We do not think so.

As we maintains in the previous sections, the 'non-historical' has no theoretical meaning in Marx, and the stationary condition of "Asiatic' Societies is only comparative. We argued also that Marx observations about 'Asiatic' societies are included in a broad conception of historical progresses that is contradictory, non linear and unequal. This not only gives a theoretical meaning to term 'barbarian' as also allow us to comprehend Marx's regards 'Asiatic' societies as even 'more civilized' than Western ones, in some aspects. We end with some examples of Marx's observations about the superiority of "Asiatic" societies relative to the Western capitalism.

Examining the conditions to the social regeneration of India, Marx list some features of Indian people that points to its higher human development in relation to Europeans. So he notes that the Indians 'whose gentle natives are, to use the expression of Prince Soltykov, *plus fins et plus adroits que les Italiens*' and that they 'have astonished the British officers by their bravery' (CW12, p. 221). Marx also notes the Indians developed forms of conscience higher than Europeans, being "the source of our languages, our religions". (Ibid.)

Analysing the opium trade in China, Marx stress the higher ethical position of Chinese relative to Britons. Although Marx notes the paternalistic relation of Emperor with people of China, it clear states that this relation stands for a higher ethical concerns than 'the principle of pelf' of English capitalists. The British are moved only to concerns about making profits in the trade with China, 'at the expense of human life and morality' (CW 15, p. 234). The Opium trade opposes the 'antiquated world' to 'modern society' in a 'deadly duel', with the first 'prompted by ethical motives', while the second 'fights for the privilege of buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest markets'. (CW 16, p. 16)

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