

Marx: Communism as Strategy

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Abstract: Marx's thought evolved throughout his life, and this was particularly true of his political thinking. In this respect, the defeat of the 1848 revolution was a turning point, which led him to resume his analysis of class struggles and the issues at stake, while developing a critique of political economy that would give rise to *Capital*. But, far from being separated from each other, these two aspects of his thinking are organised around individual and collective resistance to exploitation and domination, resistance which is the condition for revolutionary mobilisation. Marxian communism, far from being a predefined political construction, is presented as the form of the reappropriation of politics, making the aspiration to individual emancipation the condition and the means of collective emancipation.

Keywords: communism, revolution, state, self-organisation, emancipation, class struggle

Following the defeat of the 1848 revolution, Marx's political thinking, addressing all the concrete issues of the time, became all the more analytical and precise as study of the essential logic of capitalism came to dominate the agenda. From this standpoint, even though he remained politically active, we can say that, from the 1850s, his thought became ever more immanent in his theoretical activity, while casting its net wider. Critical development became one of the main sites of active engagement in a period of relative decline of the revolutionary movement. This is the sense in which Marx described *Capital* as 'the most terrible missile that has yet been hurled at the heads of the bourgeoisie (landowners included)',² after having stated his wish to 'deal the bourgeoisie a theoretical blow from which it will never recover'.³

Another feature of the period, inseparable from the preceding one, is that after 1848 Marx was more than ever attentive to world history. Social and political struggles in France, in England, but also popular revolts in China and India, the American Civil War and slavery, national liberation movements in Ireland and Poland, populist mobilizations in Russia – these afforded opportunities to resume his strategic thinking and sometimes to rectify his previous analyses. Meanwhile, the critique of political economy sought to grasp the contradictions affecting the capitalist mode of production and bourgeois economic science in their

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2 Marx 1987, p. 358.

3 Ibid., p. 4.

complex logic. The profound unity of these two approaches is what all those commentators who stress the incoherence of Marx's argument have not perceived – indeed, have not wished to perceive. According to them, it is torn between a descriptive and determinist approach, on the one hand, and a historical analysis doing justice to the free initiative of individuals on the other. The other obstacle to an understanding of Marx's political and strategic thought is the standard reading of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which purports to find in it the summary and last word of Marx's strategic reflection on the subject of communism, reducing revolution to a scenario in two predefined phases.

We must, therefore, read in tandem the texts pertaining to the critique of political economy (principally *Capital* and the preparatory texts) and texts studying the recent conjuncture, which focus on world affairs, the Paris Commune and revolutionary prospects in Russia, highlighting the inter-twining of economic conditions, social processes and political struggles. Marx's texts in this period, different not only in their style but also their concepts and formats, prove to be profoundly united by their object – capitalism – grasped from different angles and viewpoints. They all contribute to one and the same critique in theory and, in practice, of politics. In them, the term communism continues to refer above all to a political struggle and orientation, not to a societal project to be described in its forms and stages. Marx's attention was focused on the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production and the space they opened up for revolutionary intervention, one of its conditions being precise knowledge of this dialectic, which nurtures awareness of the historical possibilities it is pregnant with. His already old definition of science was refined, allocated the task of identifying laws and tendencies, but also countertendencies, which open up their own field for collective action.

In short, what Marx now called the 'critique of political economy' renewed the initial project with a more coherent integration, in changed conditions, of the various lines of theoretical analysis, on the one hand, and revolutionary intervention on the other. After 1848, this project was reconstructed around a twofold imperative: in-depth analysis of the capitalist mode of production and an analysis of the political situation and redefinition of political intervention assimilating the defeat of 1848. The issue of re-appropriation continued to flexibly unify all the others and invested from within research that sought to be a reflection of its objective. Once again, communism was to be sought in the undertaking itself – something that in no way diminishes its goals, but makes their constant re-working constitutive of their very definition. Given this, mediations are not to be sought in the production of a scenario in stages, but are inscribed in the depths of a process of transformation. For such an objective to acquire concrete scope, consciousness must be collective and organized as a social force. Marx would continue to come

up against this fluctuating, problematic historical premise, like all those today who in the absence of any imminent revolutionary prospect regard radical social change as indispensable.

What needs to be re-opened is the loop of a seemingly circular causality: the diffusion of revolutionary ideas, which is one of the parameters of popular mobilization, is also one of its consequences. Two consequences follow. On the one hand, critical work is always possible and necessary, even though its impact should not be over-estimated. On the other, capitalist exploitation is inseparable from all the forms of domination that condition its reproduction, always striving to turn in on itself the logic of expropriation and alienation. *Capital* and the preparatory texts endeavour both to describe this logic and to overturn it, inaugurating a new kind of knowledge, inseparable from its active social and political dimensions, which it is urgent to explore afresh today. Three themes warrant in-depth treatment, having been broached by the theorists of the alternative studied above. They are the issue of labour and its capitalist appropriation; the question of democracy as conquest; and finally, the requisite combination of forms of emancipation. These three headings all reveal communism to be an attempt at re-appropriation, negation of the negation of a new kind, which remains charged with deploying its mediations in real history.

Labour-Power: A Revolutionary Power

At the heart of social conflict, the communist project is born out of real contradictions, but immediately comes up against the dominant ideology and the spontaneous representations emanating from the capitalist mode of production. For Marx, the discovery of the essential logic of capitalism does not dissolve the appearances that result from it, even though it makes it possible to understand them. As a world turned upside down, set on pursuing the valorization of value not the satisfaction of social needs, capitalism generates inverted representations. The consequences of this thesis are political as well as epistemological. In the pages of the first chapter of Volume One of *Capital* devoted to commodity fetishism,⁴ Marx emphasizes that value ‘transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyph’,⁵ concealing from human beings the nature of their activity. This concealment goes hand in hand with a social organization of production and existence, which explains why its denunciation is not a sufficient condition for its transformation, but why, on the contrary, ‘the veil is not removed from the countenance

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4 William Clare Roberts stresses that fetishism is to be understood as a form of domination rather than a form of false consciousness: see Roberts 2017, p. 110.

5 Marx 1976a, p. 167.

of the social life-process ... until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control.¹⁶ In other words, it is communism as an alternative, actually realized mode of production, rid of the exploitation of labour and capitalist commodity relations, which makes possible an understanding of the social process that is also its precondition. On the one hand, *Capital* represents this endeavour in advance; on the other, the famous description of a 'free association' of human beings that immediately precedes this passage attempts to impart concrete shape to the alternative via fiction.

In the society imagined in *Capital* Volume One, chapter 1, labour time is what makes it possible to measure individual participation: 'the social relations of the individual producers, both towards their labour and the products of their labour, are here transparent in their simplicity, in production as well as in distribution.'¹⁷ But how is the leap from one world to another to be conceived? This passage serves as a hypothetical counterpoint the better to underscore the opacity of the capitalist economic world. Communism here is a thought experiment, the presupposed abolition of the law of value enabling the rationalization of social relations. Thus, it is expressly presented as the outline of a communism severed from its political dimension, whether it be the struggles that precede it or the steps that punctuate it. But Marx immediately signals that the 'material conditions of existence' which make communism possible are 'in their turn the natural and spontaneous product of a long and tormented historical development',¹⁸ thus recalling the reciprocal causality of conditions and consequences which, by definition, pertains to the political dialectic of real premises. Thus, far from offering the image of an irenic, transparent communist solution, the anticipated extreme difficulty of its establishment is what opens Volume One, at the very point when Marx stresses the inability of classical political economy to explain 'why labour is expressed in value'¹⁹ – in other words, its inability to rationally justify capitalism.

The ensuing chapters transform the theoretical impasse of bourgeois economics into a historical question, focusing on the concrete conditions that made the transition from feudalism to capitalism possible, this historical question also concerning by extrapolation the issue of the transition to communism. Chapter 32, the last chapter of Volume One, devoted to the 'historical tendency of capitalist accumulation', represents the pendant to the Robinsonnade of the first chapter, the issue of communism framing in the strict sense Volume

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6 Ibid., p. 173.

7 Ibid., p. 172.

8 Ibid., p. 173.

9 Ibid., p. 174.

One. It takes up and reworks the Hegelian notion of the 'negation of the negation' already employed by Marx in the third of the 1844 *Manuscripts*. Original capital accumulation has as its condition the 'expropriation of the immediate producers',¹⁰ owners of their means of labour. The previous mode of production combined 'the development ... of the free individuality of the worker' and 'the fragmentation of holdings', imposing strict limits on production and social existence, but furnishing the conditions for its expansion: it 'brings into the world the material means of its own destruction' – in the event, 'the expropriation of the great mass of the people from the soil [that] forms the pre-history of capital'.¹¹ This negation of private ownership of the means of production establishes, through violence and 'under the stimulus of the most infamous, the most sordid, the most petty and the most odious of passions',¹² the social concentration of property and the dispossession of the individual producer, destined to become a proletarian.

The analysis continues with a presentation of the transition from capitalism to communism that seems to credit the thesis of a necessitarian and teleological view of history in Marx, which explains why this passage is generally cited against him. The text does indeed affirm that the increasing centralization of capitalism is accompanied by 'the growth of the co-operative form of the labour process'.¹³ According to Marx, 'the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds.' And Marx adds: 'capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation.'¹⁴ The determinist tonality of these lines prompts their extraction from an analysis that is, in fact, much more complex, interspersed with rarely mentioned considerations, which re-inject class struggle and consciousness into social transformation.

In fact, Marx immediately specifies that the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the passage that is due to lead from capitalism to communism, are profoundly different. Communism is foreshadowed predominantly not on the terrain of property relations and their spontaneous transformation under the impact of unforeseen social circumstances, but within relations of exploitation and the collective

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¹⁰ Ibid., p. 927.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 927-8.

¹² Ibid., p. 928.

¹³ Ibid., p. 929.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 929.

consciousness they generate among those compelled to sell their labour-power. Whereas on the side of capital the logic of monopoly is progressively and mechanically imposed, on the side of workers 'the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows; but with this there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production'.¹⁵

Anonymous logics, analysis of them, and conscious class conflicts intermingle and delineate a singular political space, communism once more being the dynamic of conscious elaboration of its own concrete premises, at the same time as a goal immanent in the restoration of 'individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era'.¹⁶ And it is precisely the prerequisite of collective consciousness that makes communism the most gigantic effort, without precedent in the course of human history, for conscious control by humanity of its own social organization.

Yet this text does tend to present the transition to communism as inevitable, citing in a note an extract from the *Communist Manifesto* declaring that 'what the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable'.¹⁷ From the standpoint of our present, any such claim is irredeemably dated, even if it remains to examine the character of such retrospection and the other, invisible determinism that haunts it. For the failure of nineteenth- and twentieth-century revolutions no more erases the reality of their outbreak, or the rise of mass working-class organizations in the course of this sequence, than it does the growing urgency of an exit from capitalism, which calls for a precise analysis of the causes of this failure.

The resurfacing of the strategic question amid the present context of general crisis, including of the ruling ideas, encourages us to attend once more to Marx's analyses of the pathways to a possible re-appropriation by workers of the process of production and the social process as a whole, as well as the obstacles to it. The definition of this re-appropriation is extended by Marx beyond the objective of restoring individual property, conceived as a guaranteed right of access to goods and services, in the direction of the conditions of their production and collective control, but also for the purpose of developing individual capacities. The associated producers have to wrest back what, in reality, they never had, but which they are now manifestly lacking: collective control of their conditions of labour and production, and of the

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¹⁵ Ibid., p. 929.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 929.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 930 n. 2.

allocation of the wealth produced. For Marx, by their violence capitalist social relations stamp their form on an activity whose outcomes and also exercise are thereby confiscated, this fundamental dispossession striking the human subject with full force.

Going significantly beyond the traditional critique of private property while including it, this allows Marx to inscribe communism in a long-term history that it ruptures and consummates in equal measure. Marker and motif of this rupture, re-appropriation is also the re-appropriation by social individuals of themselves, in as much as the human essence 'is no abstraction inherent in each single individual', but consists in 'the ensemble of social relations'.¹⁸ Once the scope of the re-appropriation has been redefined, as being not a reversion to an initial state but the fulfilment of unprecedented potentialities, the real difficulty consists in making it a credible, mobilizing political objective, to be placed at the heart of revolutionary strategy. This is precisely the question tackled by Marx both in *Capital* and in his political texts, whether interventionist or analytical, inter-linking the issue of ends with that of mediations.

The communist question must therefore be situated at the centre of the 'laboratory of production'. In the chapters of *Capital* devoted to surplus-value and its extortion, Marx describes the gradual division of labour that ends up pitting 'mental labour' against 'physical labour', which initially belonged to the same labour process.¹⁹ This transformation results in the formation of a 'combination of workers',²⁰ of a collective labourer who brings out the cooperative character of capitalist production. On the other hand, the activity of labour is subjected to the production of surplus-value. The valorization of capital is what steers the whole productive process and subsequently ends up defining productive labour as such: 'the concept of productive labour also becomes narrower.'²¹ This 'narrowing' of the concept goes hand in hand with work's loss of meaning and the lengthening of the working day beyond necessary labour time. This logic makes it possible *a contrario* to define communism as economy of necessary labour time, an egalitarian allocation of the latter and an increase in free time. While not employing the term communism, this is precisely what Marx describes when he affirms that:

the time at society's disposal for the free social and intellectual activity of the individual is greater, in proportion as work is more

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¹⁸ Marx 1976b, p. 7.

¹⁹ Marx 1976a, p. 643.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 643.

²¹ Ibid., p. 644.

and more evenly divided among all the able-bodied members of society ... The absolute minimum limit to the shortening of the working day is, from this point of view, the universality of labour.²²

By contrast, in the capitalist mode of production, the limit concerns only the tendency to extend the working day, reducing the living time of the producer to working time, subtracted from the minimum time required for the reproduction of labour-power. Alienation consists in the tendency of capitalist domination to subject social activity and living time wholly to the valorization of capital. Behind these two modes of production – capitalism and communism – two definitions of human time are ranged against one another. We might add that two conceptions of human individuality clash, even if capitalism, despite all its efforts, cannot reduce labour-power to a commodity and manufacture its own docile, anaesthetized foot soldiers. For the labour-power captured by the logic of value is, and remains, in all modes of production the means of self-development, the site of the formation of capacities but also aspirations to a different life. While capitalist exploitation and domination are indeed exercised at the level of labour-power, resistance to a domination that cannot be total is also manifested there. On condition that it is politically developed into a collective force and a project, this resistance is forever reviving and nurturing the desire for radical social change.

At once objective and subjective, this contradiction stems from the fact that the labour-power purchased by the capitalist 'as' a commodity is not, and cannot be, such. By definition, a capitalist commodity is produced through unpaid surplus-labour for the purpose of extracting surplus-value. The formation of labour-power does not result from a capitalist process of production and its reproduction does not yield surplus-value that workers themselves could appropriate as owners of this labour-power.²³ While the neoliberal ideology of 'self-entrepreneur' abolishes class relations in purely imaginary fashion, purporting to plug accumulation into life itself, Foucault's theorization of biopolitics lends credence to these theses. But the refusal to consider social mediations makes it impossible to conceive the contradictions lodged at the heart of human individuality by capitalism, which trigger a clash between the principle of wage-earning, on the one hand, and the aspiration to free development of oneself and the emancipation of all, on the other. The 1857-58 *Manuscripts* explore this question, emphasizing that real wealth consists in the re-appropriation of time and the expansion of human needs of which the individual is the source, a condition of the flourishing of human capacities.

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22 Ibid., p. 667.

23 Hai Hac 2003, p. 222.

From this viewpoint, the basic spring of resistance to capitalism is not to be found in the anonymous opposition between living labour and accumulated dead labour – Negri's thesis – but in the ever more acute contradiction between the purchase and sale of labour-power, on the one hand, and its formation as concrete individuality, on the other. This contradiction comes to nestle at the very heart of modern subjectivity, for labour-power consists, above all, in the sum total of individual labourers, either coordinated externally by capital which devours their living power, or consciously collaborating in their own rationally and democratically conducted social existence. The production, or, rather, formation, of this labour-power derives from unproductive labour. It aims to reproduce and maintain, but also to educate and socialize, a set of human capacities and physical, nervous, intellectual or artistic characteristics, vulnerable to their increasing capitalist appropriation, but which remain the stake of collective emancipation, especially the emancipation of women, who are primarily allotted the tasks of social reproduction.

Against bourgeois political economy, Marx therefore affirms loud and clear that 'labour is the substance, and the immanent measure of value, but it has no value itself',²⁴ so that 'what the worker sells to the capitalist is not a commodity, but her personal subjection to capitalist during the working day.'²⁵ It is at this precise point that exploitation and domination are bound together and confront the anger they arouse, forming a contradiction which is profoundly economic as well as social and individual: 'it is not labour which directly confronts the possessor of money on the commodity-market, but rather the worker.'²⁶ It is their capacities, at once created and denied, and their emancipation, glimpsed but confiscated, that induce the producers to struggle for the reduction of the working day and, ultimately, against capitalism as such. In the instructions written by Marx on the occasion of the IWA in 1866, he accorded a central place to the issue of labour time, as means and end of an emancipated politics: 'a preliminary condition, without which all further attempts at improvement and emancipation must prove abortive, is the *limitation of the working day*.'²⁷ Marx specifies that it will secure for the workers 'the possibility of intellectual development, sociable intercourse, social and political action',²⁸ attesting to the direct connection in his view between individual and collective emancipation.

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24 Marx 1976a, p. 677.

25 Hai Hac 2003, p. 235.

26 Marx 1976a, p. 677.

27 Marx 1985, p. 187.

28 Ibid, p. 187.

Nevertheless, the tendency to counter the exploitation lodged at the heart of labour-power comes up against a powerful countertendency, which derives from the wage form itself, in that it creates the illusion of the sale of labour at a fair price, masking the exploitation of labour-power from those who suffer it. Marx stresses that the wage form not only conceals the extortion of surplus-labour, giving workers the impression that they sell their labour at its just price, but also introduces relations of domination of a new kind. In the chapter of *Capital* devoted to piece-wages, he indicates that ‘the very form of the wage [renders] superintendence of labour ... to a great extent superfluous’, introducing a hierarchy among labourers which facilitates ‘the exploitation of one worker by another’ as a tool of capitalist exploitation.²⁹ But this type of wage also encourages the extension of the working day, seemingly decided by the wage-earner herself: ‘the wider scope that piece-wages give to individuality tends to develop both that individuality, and with it the worker’s sense of liberty, independence and self-control, and also the competition of workers with each other.’³⁰ This artificial autonomy leads to a general fall in wages, seemingly in response to the aspirations of wage-earners but actually to the desire of capitalists.

However, this tendency, at once alienating and individualizing, corresponds neither to a mere managerial stratagem, nor to subterfuge. It is the promise, never kept but always repeated, of autonomy and self-realization, leading (depending on the circumstances) either to more intense internal competition between the dominated or to rejection of exploitation. The second option requires what Marx in the same passage calls an understanding of ‘essential relations’, highlighting the fact that ‘in their appearance things are often presented in an inverted way’.³¹ Critical knowledge and political rebellion form a whole, just as, conversely, ignorance of capitalist laws and contradictions reinforces seemingly ineluctable domination. The originality of Marx’s approach attaches to the dialectical nature of his analysis of contradictions, which is no mere juxtaposition of opposed tendencies: the capitalist labour process is not alienating in one respect and emancipatory in another, but interweaves these two tendencies at the very heart of the labourer’s individuality and of social relations. Contrary to analyses affirming the consumerist integration of the working-class, in line with the theses of certain Frankfurt School theoreticians, and the relegation of opposition to the margins of the wage-earning class and social existence, the political possibility of its supersession is played out at the very heart of the organization of production and the wage relationship. The problem

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29 Marx 1976a, p. 695

30 Ibid., p. 697.

31 Ibid., p. 677.

consists in knowing how to structure this contradiction to enable its transcendence – that is, the transition to another mode of production, or communism, via the destruction of class domination. And if the word is so rarely used in *Capital*, it is no doubt because the designation of the goal would tend to mask the identification of its motor, located at the heart of the immense dialectic of social relations.

This analysis is developed in the pages that examine the historical progress of the division of labour, which should be read as one of Marx's great texts on alienated subjectivity. The division of labour leads to an extreme parcellization of tasks, so that the worker 'who performs the same simple operation for the whole of his life converts his body into the automatic, one-sided implement of that operation'.³² This de-skilling of the individual producer corresponds to a transfer of skill to 'the collective worker, who constitutes the living mechanism of manufacture, [and] is made up solely of such one-sidedly specialized workers'.³³ Dispossession involves not only collectively produced wealth, but, more fundamentally, the activity of the individual labourer, which has become dead labour objectified in accumulated labour: 'what is lost by the specialized workers is concentrated in the capital which confronts them. It is a result of the division of labour in manufacture that the worker is brought face to face with the intellectual potentialities of the material process of production as the property of another and as a power which rules over him'.³⁴ More than the paradoxical autonomy of the wage-earner, it is the alienating dispossession of the labourer that opens up the converse prospect of communist re-appropriation, requiring all the mediations and the protracted time of social and political struggle. This analysis completes and extends the denunciation of bourgeois property of early communism in the direction of an extended, radicalized critique, which makes it possible to define the objectives of an emancipatory mode of production beyond an egalitarian distribution of wealth. For, if one of the stakes is the re-conquest of their own capacities by the individual, it is the transformation of the whole of the economic and social formation that is its condition as well as its aim. In *Capital*, Marx stresses that capitalism itself creates the need for professional versatility: 'the partially developed individual, who is merely the bearer of one specialized function, must be replaced by the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn'.³⁵ Conceived thus, the condition of re-appropriation is shared knowledge of the overall social process and its contradictions,

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32 Ibid., p. 458.

33 Ibid., p. 458.

34 Ibid., p. 482.

35 Ibid., p. 618.

the elaboration of a critique of political economy. While its modalities are multiple and circumstantial, its goal is single: the recovery of social power, alienated and incorporated into the general machinery under the authoritarian command of capital. But this re-appropriation does not consist in a straightforward return to individual ownership of the means of production, by dint of a non-dialectical conception of the negation of the negation. Individual emancipation involves and realizes the re-conquest of the whole of the production process, as a mode of social existence whose procedures and objects are to be rationally and democratically redirected. This re-conquest begins with struggles for reductions in the working day and in favour of genuinely protective employment law, which should be regarded not as a temporary recourse to law prior to its definitive abolition, but a form of re-appropriation of politics itself, taking cognizance of its juridical dimension.

Therewith a solution is foreshadowed to the problem of replacement of the state by the democratic reorganization of social existence; and the fact that Marx says nothing precise about it is of little moment. For his analysis clearly suggests that it is basically one and the same cleavage that separates capital from the labour process it derives from and severs the state from the social existence of which it is the coercive, administrative 'machinery'. Their kinship is essential. In capitalism, on account of its class logic, the products of human activity congeal, separate and rebound against the latter and against the labourers. It is therefore a single re-appropriation that is to be set in train, comprising both the labour process and the state institution, substituting for the economic, social and political alienation they organize a mode of production finally embodying the emancipation of labour by the workers themselves.

Even so, this reunification is not the restored unity of a society transparent to itself: it involves the construction of permanent collective mediations of decision-making and organization, capable of coordinating the separated tasks of conception and execution. Reconciling individual and collective dimensions, this objective defines communism proper not as a 'state' – this is, neither a state nor a market – but as a 'real movement',³⁶ social existence returned to itself and creating its own premises as it goes. This re-reading of Marx can be encapsulated in a hypothesis: if the term communism is rarely used in *Capital*, it is because the emancipatory project outlined there is subject to future political intervention, which will have to give concrete shape to a distinctive project fundamentally bound up with its historical premises and determinate mediations. Even so, in *Capital*, Marx develops an orientation that is sharply and constantly polemical as regards republican socialism, advocating forms of separate working-

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36 Marx 1976b, p. 49.

class organization and insisting on the necessity of expropriation.³⁷ In other words, before thinking communism qua emancipated politics as a theoretician, Marx thinks emancipatory strategy as a communist.

A 'Very Possible Communism'

The Paris Commune sprang up in March 1871 as a brief but potent embodiment of this approach to communism, subjecting it definition to actual revolutionary invention. The Parisian insurrection and its rapid unfolding confirmed for Marx that re-appropriation of social existence took the form of a redefinition of politics, subverting its statist forms and reinventing it as genuinely democratic mediation of collective life. This exceptional insurrection must be analysed in the light of a longer sequence, chronicled by Marx in *Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. *The Civil War in France*, which completes the trilogy, attests to Marx's passionate attention to the French labour movement, his analysis concerning in particular Bonapartism and the issue of the transformation of the state.

However, Marx had initially conceived France's defeat at the hands of Prussia as an opportunity, assuming it would facilitate the unity of the German proletariat even as Bonapartism was paralyzing the French labour movement. But, once Prussian dynastic interests converted a defensive war into a war of conquest, aiming to annex Alsace and Lorraine, Marx and Engels deemed the siege of Paris reactionary and saluted the daring initiative of the people of Paris, which continued and radicalized the aspirations of 1848. Shortly before the 'Bloody Week', Marx declared in a letter: 'the present rising in Paris – even if it is crushed by the wolves, swine and vile curs of the old society – is the most glorious deed of our Party since the June Insurrection in Paris.'³⁸ Once convinced of its importance, Marx proposed to the IWA that he write an address to the workers of Paris in the name of the International, which was profoundly divided. Given what was at stake in the event, he transformed it into a document intended for the global working-class.

It opens with an anti-nationalist sally taken from the *Inaugural Address* of 1864: 'if the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's

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³⁷ On this point see the original and powerful reading offered by William Clare Roberts, analysing *Capital* as a political intervention taking aim at the socialist theorists of the time, Saint-Simonian, Owenite and Proudhonian (Roberts 2017, chapter 6).

³⁸ Marx 1989, p. 132.

blood and treasure?’³⁹ Published in June 1871, *The Civil War in France* was immediately distributed in numerous languages, highlighting the importance that Marx attributed to an off-the-cuff analysis of events in Paris. They afforded him an opportunity to develop more general political and strategic considerations, which were never separated from this specific historical context. The main lesson of the work is precisely the reiterated assertion of the dependence of strategy on concrete circumstances. Thus, while presented as a compressed analysis of the conjuncture, which even sketches portraits of the political leaders of the moment, the text can be read as a pendant to the *Manifesto*, refreshing its political objective and revolutionary ardour, as indicated by the preface written by Marx for its republication in 1872. If *The Civil War in France* entirely alters its literary and analytical form, a comparison between the two texts, suggested by Marx himself, brings out the crucial importance he attributed to recasting two inseparable questions: the perspective of the destruction of the state and the role of a revolutionary programme.

As regards programme, Marx affirmed the need to abandon advance presentation of the measures to be adopted, as in the *Manifesto*, whose second section listed the expropriation of landed property, the abolition of the right of inheritance, the centralization of credit, and free education. In the 1872 Preface, he made it clear that in view of ‘the gigantic strides of Modern Industry’, but also ‘the party organization of the working class’, and ‘the practical experience gained, first in the February Revolution, and then, still more, in the Paris Commune, it was to be revised or, rather, relegated to a secondary level, given that ‘the practical application of the principles will depend ... everywhere and at all times[,] on the obtaining historical conditions’.⁴⁰ In the light of this analytical reorientation, assigning collective invention a more decisive role than ever, we can understand a claim, at first blush enigmatic, which has remained famous: ‘the great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence.’⁴¹ While it is, no doubt, also to be construed as registering an ultimately meagre balance-sheet, the formula resounds as a dialectical definition, formulated in Aristotelian terms, of communism. The latter consists in the actualization of a social power that only partially pre-exists it, this endeavour being more effective and decisive than any catalogue of measures announced in advance. Even so, concrete measures have to be taken. In the event, they were decisive: from the start, the Commune legislated on the length of the working day, night work for women, but also on public education,

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39 Marx 1985, pp. 12-13.

40 Marx 1988, pp. 174-5.

41 Marx 1986, p. 339.

politicizing the reorganization of social life while introducing radical reforms that directly threatened the prerogatives of capital.

When it comes to the modern state, the rectification of Marx's analysis was considerable. Bonapartism did not contradict its development, but accompanied its metamorphosis into a complex, ramified state apparatus. That is why the initial hypothesis of its tranquil withering away has to cede to the hypothesis of its necessary destruction. Marx is keen to repeat in the 1872 Preface what he wrote in *The Civil War in France*: 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.'⁴²

This twofold correction on the subjects of state and programme leads Marx to a more than ever political approach to communism, not only as a social alternative in gestation, but above all as revolutionary mobilization and political restructuring of forms of militancy, 'party' as well as 'popular government'. These forms, no longer confiscatory but mediating and structuring, involved both a democratic modus operandi and a new kind of representation, as well as combative decisions responding to those of the class opponent, of unlimited violence. Yet Marx does not engage in any theoretical generalization on these subjects. If communism begins to re-engage with its etymology in Paris, the communal form is not a trans-historical model. It remains the invariably distinct form of a resurgent aspiration to autonomy from the medieval commune, via 1792, to 1848.

Combining democratization of political forms and politicization of cooperative social forms, the communal form must, by the same token, make possible the re-appropriation by workers of their social activity and the tasks of political organization that have been separated and subtracted from it. In this sense, it corresponds in the first instance to the class struggle waged up to the threshold of the future abolition of classes:

If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the Capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of Capitalist production – what else, gentlemen, would it be but Communism, 'possible' Communism?⁴³

Thus, it must be stressed, communism is primarily defined not by the list of social changes it has the task of making, but as a living potential and

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42 Ibid., p. 328.

43 Ibid., p. 335

active political mediation, which gradually constructs the perspective of an integral social re-appropriation, in the course of a decisive confrontation with bourgeois power in all its dimensions, economic, political, social and cultural.

Despite his initial doubts about the opportuneness of the Paris uprising, and his subsequent criticisms of the timidity of the revolutionary government (in particular, its refusal to requisition the Banque de France and march on Versailles), the importance of the Commune was therefore unprecedented for Marx. It embodied a non-descriptive definition of communism as a 'real movement', as elaborated by him for some years in line with the formulation in *The German Ideology*, whose terms he adopted here word for word. Among its distinctive features, the palimpsestic nature of this text must be emphasized. Explicitly taking up the *Inaugural Address* of 1864 and *The German Ideology*, and, more implicitly, the *Communist Manifesto*, drafting *The Civil War in France* provided Marx with an opportunity to rearticulate his past analyses in a new reflection which, by dint of real history and the critical renewal it alone made possible, supersedes them all.

Anxious to single out this moment without idealizing it, Marx wrote:

The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realize, but to see free elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.⁴⁴

In these lines, which represent one of his most extended passages on communism, Marx stresses the fact that only real history and its 'long struggles' can construct an emancipatory project – in other words, a different 'form of existence' finally satisfying the individual and collective aspirations that are the very motor of those struggles. But we must also highlight the assertion that 'elements of the new society' are contained in the old, for this idea seem to advocate an already present communism, whose pre-existing seeds are destined to bloom one day. Yet this interpretation comes up against what these pages describe: not a different mode of production, which the Commune did not have time to establish, but a set of political and legal decisions – in other words, a mode of supersession and emancipation delineated via a new political form paradoxically invented by Jacobins, Blanquists and Proudhonians,

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44 Ibid., p. 335.

who proved capable of overcoming their initial ideological affiliations. We may add Marx himself, who finally rallied to the federal idea, Proudonian in ancestry: the peculiarity of an effective revolution is that it succeeds in upending even the convictions of those who work for it.

In *The Civil War in France*, it is precisely this unprecedented, combative and inventive democratic organization that Marx salutes: ‘when plain working men for the first time dare to infringe upon the Governmental privilege of their “natural superiors” ... the old world writhes in convulsions of rage at the sight of the Red Flag, the symbol of the Republic of Labour’.⁴⁵ An embodiment of permanent revolution, the Paris Commune is placed by Marx in the political tradition of the defeated revolution of 1848. This leads him to rework his definition of the working-class as the universal representative of society formulated in the 1844 *Introduction*, without dismissing a notion that had since been rendered more complex and dialectical. It is now the Commune itself – a political construct, not a social class – that becomes ‘the true representative of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore the truly national Government’.⁴⁶ Such a representation is neither metonymic nor delegated, but instituted as ‘a government of the people by the people’.⁴⁷ On this basis, it becomes possible to take egalitarian tax decisions and intervene concretely in the organization of labour. This expanded political – i.e. social and economic – leadership, restored to the historical subject that is the mobilized, self-organized working-class, confers on the term ‘communism’ its full meaning, embodying but above all reorienting the young Marx’s analyses of the proletariat and democracy.

The Paris Commune is therefore the ‘real movement’, not fixed but relayed by ‘a thoroughly expansive political form’, ‘the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour’.⁴⁸ It involves both preserving the social dynamic and organizing it into the self-government of the producers, which reinvents representation and delegation. The introduction of the binding mandate, given to revocable delegates, aims to maintain ‘the unity of the nation’ while working for ‘the destruction of the State power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity’.⁴⁹ Groping towards their junction are militant forms of organization and the democratic planning of labour (a ‘public power’).

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45 Ibid., p. 336.

46 Ibid., p. 338.

47 Ibid., p. 339.

48 Ibid., p. 334.

49 Ibid., p. 332.

Surprising on account of its critical accents and pessimistic tone, the letter from Marx to the Dutch social-democratic militant Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis in 1881, ten years after the crushing of the Commune, at a time when he had retired from activism, does not say anything different. To his correspondent, who questioned him about the legislative measures to be taken in the event of socialists coming to power, Marx repeated that everything ‘depends ... on the actual historical circumstances’ and that ‘a doctrinaire and of necessity fantastic anticipation of a future revolution’s programme of action only serves to distract from the present struggle.’ Clearly irritated, he added: ‘[your] question [is] posed out of the blue’.⁵⁰ In passing, adopting the term socialism from the social-democracy flourishing in the country of which his correspondent was a representative, Marx added that if a victory of socialists occurred, the first measures would be political in character, consisting in winning time for autonomous, collective decision-making: ‘a socialist government will not come to the helm in a country unless things have reached a stage at which it can, before all else, take such measures as will so intimidate the mass of the bourgeoisie as to achieve the first desideratum – time for effective action.’⁵¹ Time, conceived here as strategic room for manoeuvre, enables Marx to review the Commune experiment to distinguish its political conditions, and the subsequent stages of their alteration, from a positively ‘socialist’ intervention: ‘the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it have been. With a modicum of common sense, it could, however, have obtained the utmost that was obtainable – a compromise with Versailles beneficial to the people as a whole’,⁵² but on condition that it ‘appropriat[ed] the Banque de France’ – something the communards did not dare do. In the light of the preceding lines, this is cast less as a lasting social conquest than as an additional delay secured in the context of a pitiless class struggle, when the Commune had hardly any chance of prevailing. Marx adds: ‘the moment a truly proletarian revolution breaks out, the conditions for its immediate initial (if certainly not idyllic) *modus operandi* will also be there.’⁵³ In other words, the conquest of political power only paves the way for an ongoing class struggle, more bitter than ever, not for a sum of legislative measures that the bourgeoisie will submit to without a fight.

This letter, which confirms Marx’s withdrawal from activism and bitterness following the Parisian defeat, and after his support for the Commune had alienated the English trade unionists in the IWA, whereas

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50 Marx 1992, pp. 66-7.

51 Ibid., p. 66.

52 Ibid., p. 66.

53 Ibid., p. 67.

they had hitherto been his allies in the struggle against Bakunin,⁵⁴ heralded a new period of defeat and retreat for the labour movement, which for Marx no 'socialist' programme could succeed in overcoming. He closed as follows:

My own conviction is that the critical conjuncture for a new international working men's association has not yet arrived; hence I consider all labour congresses and/or socialist congresses, in so far as they do not relate to the immediate, actual conditions obtaining in this or that specific nation, to be not only useless but harmful. They will invariably fizzle out in a host of rehashed generalized banalities.⁵⁵

The distance taken by the late Marx from the ongoing organization of the social-democratic current indicates his doubts as regards strictly institutional victory, by means of a party that is certainly the bearer of a programme, but not of an anti-statist revolutionary dynamic. This judgement clarifies Marx's withdrawal from the framework that he had helped to construct: the First International.

We may venture the hypothesis that his increasing pessimism about revolutionary prospects in Europe was one factor in Marx's growing interest in different scenarios and different parts of the world. A few days after the letter to Nieuwenhuis, his response to a letter from Vera Zasulich's attests to this concurrent concern in Marx's critical analysis of a different communal form, the Russian *obshchina*. The latter is presented not so much as an immediate instrument for the construction of communism, but as an alternative political path to European social-democracy. And, in fact, after Marx's death two years later, the history of the labour movement – social-democracy as institution and then as party-state – would verticalize and bureaucratize this structure, concentrating on social gains incorrectly adjudged cumulative and irreversible. Identifying with Marxism, it would help erase what for Marx was the dual imperative of a party in the sense, only sketched, he gave the term: anchorage of revolutionary combat in the demands of the working-class, but also a specific structuration, organizing and maintaining broad popular mobilization beyond the moment of insurrection, as the Paris Commune had tried to do.

All in all, communism is predominantly the political form of a social existence that has finally been restored to itself. This new image of communism is what contemporary theoreticians paradoxically help us rediscover in Marx. For, far from defending the statist relapse of which

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54 Sperber 2013, p. 382.

55 Letter to Nieuwenhuis, p. 67.

Badiou accuses him, Marx evinces two worries that correspond very precisely to the defects of subsequent communist strategy: detaching organization from its ends and uncoupling political decisions from reflective strategy, and then separating both from constant democratic control. In this respect, the Paris Commune is the experience that fully chimes with Marx's last, most developed strategic reflection. It is not as a social response, but as an open question, that communism proves to be an indispensable political instrument: it names the project of a social re-appropriation, basing itself on a desire for re-conquest of the self and its time, which implies a struggle waged politically. If the term communism also undoubtedly designates the objective of a different mode of production, its strategic pertinence stems mainly from the fact that it outlines a mode of supersession of capitalism, protracted and difficult, in which a new society is foreshadowed.

What to Make of the Gotha Programme?

This analysis of communism as a project for a social existence restored to itself is, however, undermined by an obvious objection. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, written in 1875, Marx does not propose a clearly defined alternative, which takes the form of a distinction between two successive phases in establishing communism? This text is the principal evidence against the thesis of an explicitly strategic Marxian communism, never set down as a programme. Indeed, this phased project seems to assign juridical and institutional transformation a central place, overshadowing the issues of popular mobilization and inventiveness inherent in a revolutionary process, highlighted elsewhere by Marx. On account of this interpretation in terms of phases, the text, which became canonical in the framework of the Third International, had superimposed on it by Lenin a distinction between socialism and communism that Marx does not formulate therein. However, when read in the context of its composition, a quite different argument emerges.⁵⁶ Marx does not in fact posit any distinction between phases, his object being not to define socialism and communism, but to present as essential the problem of the political transition and mediations that lead to the abolition-transcendence of capitalism, in accordance with the analyses that precede and follow this late text.

We must begin by recalling that Marx's text is predominantly an intervention of a strategic and political kind. While he had not been involved in drafting the programme of unification between the General German Workers' Association (ADAV), founded by Ferdinand Lassalle, and the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany (SADP) of Wilhelm

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⁵⁶ For a developed version of this analysis, see Isabelle Garo 2012, pp. 97-132.

Liebknicht and August Bebel, Marx reacted with a sense of urgency to the draft programme that had appeared in the German press. He decided to send his correspondent Wilhelm Bracke his 'marginal notes on the unity programme', accompanied by a letter explaining his motives. His intervention, conceived from a distance and a position of relative political weakness, aimed to provoke an internal discussion and was never intended as a general theoretical essay on the question of communism. The scale of the disagreement and the unfavourable situation he found himself in led Marx to a textual commentary which, although modest, was intended to be primarily pedagogical, noting Lassalle's ideas as they dominated debates over unification. In the letter to Bracke accompanying his glosses, Marx describes himself as trapped by a situation that weighs on him, prompted to give his opinion from a distance and against his will, but compelled to do so precisely because he found himself in complete disagreement with the proposed programme, which 'is altogether deplorable as well as demoralising for the party'.⁵⁷ On this basis, his riposte seeks to adapt itself to the circumstances and views of the authors.

Above all, the juridical axis of the programme is what Marx deems inept, because it precludes thinking relations of exploitation as such. If Marx briefly seems to adopt its perspective, it is to highlight more clearly the aberrations to which it leads. Thus, assuming that 'the individual producer receives back from society ... his individual quantum of labour', the principle of allocation remains fundamentally that of market exchange between property-owning individuals, an exchange of 'equal values', whether measured by labour time or market prices. Marx concludes that '*equal right* here is still in principle – *bourgeois right*',⁵⁸ the demand for fairness in no way impairing the principles of capitalism, but serving to mask them that little bit more. This is precisely what, as early as 1846, he had objected to Proudhon's proposal to replace money by labour vouchers. For Marx, 'money is not a thing, it is a social relation':⁵⁹ it is not the cause of a social injustice deriving from a perversion of exchange, which production could easily be rid of thanks to a system of labour vouchers. It is hard to see how a proposal deemed a complete dead end by Marx in 1846 could suddenly become the first phase of communism in 1875.

It must be added that Marx always condemned detailed programming in advance of a political movement which, by definition, had to make its way in its own complex, unpredictable historical conditions. From the young Marx to the old, Marxian communism is

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⁵⁷ Marx 1989, p. 78.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁹ Marx 1976c, p. 145.

not so much a project as a practice. That is why it seems necessary to overturn the usual interpretation. The first phase broached in the *Critique* corresponds to an initial, immature politico-theoretical stage of the analysis, to the bungling of the German socialists, to which Marx thought it judicious to concede a relative pertinence as a first phase not in the history of emancipation itself, but in socialists' understanding of it. We must conclude that the 'first phase' designates neither 'socialism', nor even some 'socialization of the means of production' (mention of which is singularly absent from Marx's text and the Gotha Programme alike), but an illusion to be corrected – a just law as spearhead of an overthrow of capitalism, or even as a means of its improvement for the sake of social justice (the Gotha Programme demanding 'the abolition of the wage system' and 'the elimination of all social and political inequality').⁶⁰

An initial conclusion imposes itself: not referring to any socialism, past or future, the expression 'first phase' plays three combined roles, which make reading this text particularly awkward. Firstly, it characterizes a moment of political analysis, anachronistic in 1875, which leads to socialist solutions that have already been tried and condemned to failure. Secondly, it preserves the possibility of a dialogue with the leaders of German social-democracy, at the time of the unification congress, but also after it. Finally, it raises a question that is very real in Marx's view – transitions – which he thinks politically, and which is only partially targeted in the remainder of the text, devoted to this aspect and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Contrary to the usual reading of the *Critique* as a breviary of revolution, for Marx communism is not the result of a linear process of radical transformation. As to the 'higher phase', the anonymity of the process evoked should suffice to alert any informed reader: 'after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished', and so forth.⁶¹ When did they 'vanish'? And by what miracle? No struggle, no political moment here, which an economic reading of Marx prompts us to accept without question. Following the Paris Commune and its repression, can it seriously be thought that Marx believed in the automatic effects that would be induced by reform of a legal kind, which is unfeasible moreover, and whose constitutively 'bourgeois' character he affirms a few lines earlier? In addition, how can it be thought that Marx has suddenly forgotten the communist challenge to capitalist property, in particular ownership of the means of production, which absent here when for Marx it is the site of the junction between the juridical, the political and the economic? Equitable distribution and its confused perspectives as the

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⁶⁰ Quoted in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, p. 91.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

only source of a radical transformation? One might as well erase with a stroke of the pen all the earlier texts, including the *Communist Manifesto*, which is most marked by historical optimism about an imminent victorious revolution, but even so imputes no simple linearity to the latter. What is striking here is the telescoping of the individual and political levels, so lacking is the mediation of social struggles, including those leading to the simple Magna Carta mentioned by *Capital*⁶² – a metaphorical designation for a hard-won employment law.

In short, if we adopt the orthodox reading, the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* would be Marx's most a-political text, even though it was intended as an eminently partisan intervention in the context of the construction of one of the first European labour parties. Given this, and granted the interpretative hypothesis that renders description of the first phase a rhetorical concession making it possible to develop a violent condemnation of vulgar socialism, once again, it is the paragraph on communism proper that poses a considerable problem: simple continuation of the process, bifurcation between socialism and communism, or a more complex operation? We must read the following passage carefully:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life, but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!⁶³

While these formulations correspond more closely than others to Marx's actual theses, we might be struck by the incomplete, succinct character of this description, which concludes with the sole requirement of transcending bourgeois right, regardless of whether one agrees that its maintenance characterizes the first phase. Everything leads us to believe that Marx's line of argument here retains its simultaneously polemical and pedagogical objective, addressed to those – the programme's drafters, in the first instance – who think primarily in terms of law and labour, both of them abstractly conceived. Marx seems to be endeavouring to adjust to their categories and prejudices a reasonable suggestion for correction

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62 Marx 1976a, p. 416.

63 Marx 1989, p. 87.

of the incriminated articles. By the same token rectifying the abstraction of 'useful labour' by introducing the capitalist division of labour and the productive forces, including concrete individuals, he stresses what would represent analytical progress rather than concrete historical progress, a logical phase rather than a real phase.

Given the insufficiencies, catastrophic in his view, of the programme he is criticizing, Marx's goal could not be to induce the leaders of the German party to refine a two-stage process, which was as foreign to their thinking as to his own options. We may venture the hypothesis that the point was to insist, in relatively diplomatic and pedagogical fashion, on what as a minimum this programme should contain by way of a political perspective: a project for abolishing capitalist relations of production, the division of labour inseparable from them, and a radical democratic supersession of the juridical viewpoint, which contaminates even the most political socialist traditions. In addition to the tacit reference to Proudhon encountered earlier, the paragraph includes with a formula borrowed from Louis Blanc and already cited in the *Manifesto*: 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' – a formula that once again refers to a simple principle of individual distribution of wealth. While French socialism is not named, it is precisely this tradition that Marx is thinking about here, from the angle of its constitutive limits and crying inadequacies, even if (and precisely because) he acknowledges its historical role. For Blanc's key political proposal was the creation of national workshops funded by the state – a conception inherited by the Gotha Programme.

Louis Blanc's conception probably seeming rather more advanced and flexible than Lassalle's, Marx borrowed a slogan at once in tune with the spirit of the programme's drafters and capable of expressing a more authentically revolutionary project: his own. Already employed in the *Manifesto*, Blanc's formula lends itself to this fresh annexation. It seems impossible to read this paragraph as the most fully developed expression of Marx's views, when he was someone who conceived communism from the standpoint of the abolition of capitalist relations and as the result of a non-state political process of revolutionary popular mobilization that must, where appropriate, utilize universal suffrage. That this complex process is absent from the *Critique* is scarcely surprising: for Marx the definition of communist society can only be an active definition, a movement of revolutionary, expansive democratization, without a preconceived model, which for this reason cannot be described programmatically, although its general objectives are clearly defined.

Re-read thus, the nature of Marx's text changes radically. Far from being the manual he always refused to provide, it was a circumstantial intervention intended not for publication, but to get various corrections accepted by the German socialist leaders, attempting to undo the worst

blunders that the programme was full of in Marx's view. Thus, 'first phase' is the euphemistic term for a socialist tradition that remains immature and statist, whereas the second aims to induce the drafters to agree to take a further step in the direction of what Marx presents to them as being nothing other, basically, than their own theses, with the prudent and scarcely compromising endorsement of a Louis Blanc. Yet the second formulation remains radically discrepant with Marx's conception of communism, developed elsewhere, and, above all, incompatible with its definition of a political process that must create its premises as it proceeds, constantly rectifying and reorienting itself.

If this interpretation is correct, it consigns the 'classical' reading, which attributes a two-stage strategy to Marx, to sheer misinterpretation. Certainly, the abolition of capitalism will take the pathway of a progressive exit, necessarily singular and complex, but its moments cannot be predefined. Above all, they cannot be initiated by a reform from above of a legal kind— a project that characterizes the socialist tradition from which Marx was intent on demarcating himself. Placing socialism and communism in a chronological order, it is not their bifurcation that is illustrated by the *Critique*. But these 'marginal notes' are now covered over by the accumulated layers of an interpretation that has hallowed its theses, to the point of diffusing the well-nigh hallucinatory belief that therein Marx defined 'socialism' – a term that is absent – as the 'socialization of the means of production' – a phrase that is absent. Ultimate paradox, Lenin was the initiator of this reading in *The State and Revolution* – a text written on the eve of the October Revolution, which, in turn, was to be read as a definitive treatise of political theory rather as a circumstantial intervention. Concealment of the strategic dimension of certain texts, become canonical against the grain, has in its turn helped to banish any preoccupation of this kind from Marxism.

In truth, it is the Gotha Programme itself which, when dealing with labour and law, transforms a complex, changing historical reality into an abstraction. The treatment of the key political question of the fate of the state in a communist society demonstrates this. Marx ferociously criticizes any idea of appealing to the state to support the construction of workers' associations. But he remains averse to an anti-statism suppressing the apparatus of domination without envisaging the construction of an alternative instance of cooperation and decision-making, tasked with adjusting production to the satisfaction of social needs:

The question then arises: what transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions? This question can only be answered

scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousandfold combination of the word people with the word state.

Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*.⁶⁴

This approach to the issue of transition proves that Marx did indeed conceive the passage to communism as a protracted process. But this transition is not the one formulated by the two phases described earlier. A continuous political process, revolution is punctuated by moments that are themselves political, with the capture of state power making way for its radical transformation. It is no longer a question here of the legal transformation of distribution and simple monetary reform of the conditions of exchange. The establishment of communism must be conceived not as a process operated within state forms as they are, but as a movement recasting politics itself, which Marx had already dubbed ‘permanent revolution’, and which requires popular mobilization and the invention of original institutional forms. In the text of 1875, here and only here, do we find the true definition according to Marx of the process of reconstruction of social existence. We can understand why he is concerned to add that the Gotha Programme ‘deals neither with this nor with the future state of communist society’.⁶⁵

Without prejudging future institutional forms, Marx affirms the need for a seizure of power that must in principle coincide with the onset of destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus. It is indeed a radical, abrupt revolutionary process – the condition for a transformation of social relations, including property and distribution relations. This political transition seems to be Marx’s proposed alternative to the dubious transition of the Gotha Programme, whose impasse he has previously signalled. We must then grant that the last part of the text tries to correct its opening, relying on what it should have enabled its addressees, alerted to the disagreement, to spot but also to concede. The pedagogy employed would prove highly ineffective, judging from the abiding misinterpretations prompted by these unduly wily marginal notes, once the context that conferred their meaning on them had disappeared. More generally, in this way, antithetical receptions of Marx’s strategic reflection, first neutralized by orthodoxy and then by a

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64 Ibid., p. 95.

65 Ibid., p. 95.

certain kind of academic approach, have helped to displace a number of his texts onto a terrain alien to them – abstract political theory, long concealing one of the most fertile dimensions of his analysis.

This is particularly true of the treatment of the state in the notes, which combines theoretical analysis and programmatic position. Marx opposes the new party's economic and social statism, as well as its political incoherence, deriving from its complete misunderstanding of the bourgeois state structure. The stakes of this approach are directly strategic. Just as it is important in Marx's view to demand a 'democratic republic', with a view to establishing genuine popular sovereignty, so this democratic republic must be thought of as 'the last form of state of bourgeois society' in which 'the class struggle has to be fought out to a conclusion'.⁶⁶ For Marx, who since the 1850s, in the context of his study of the French situation, had analysed the state as a 'governmental machine', the Gotha Programme erred completely as regards what was to be expected of it in the way of social advances. Given this, the strategic approach to the bourgeois state must be as dialectical as its essence, taking on board the limited but very real role of parliamentary democracy in the process of outflanking it. The strategic dimension of the analysis resolves the aporias of the strictly theoretical approach characteristic of the Kreuznach manuscript.

The dictatorship of the proletariat forms part of this concrete democratic perspective. Very rare from Marx's pen, the expression figures as a hypothesis inseparable from the historical circumstances that render it a possible response to the question of the conquest of the state, drawing on a long tradition. Daniel Bensaïd once noted that 'in the nineteenth century the word "dictatorship" still evoked the virtuous Roman institution of an exceptional power, duly mandated and limited in time, to confront an emergency'.⁶⁷ Dictatorship is conceived here not as the abolition of bourgeois democracy, but as its radicalization, the latest episode in a class struggle fought to its conclusion, which will have to deal with the fierce resistance of the dominant classes, but which serves as a prelude to the disappearance of any class division. This political conception of transition stands out against the proposals of the Gotha Programme (education, freedom of science, restricting the working day to a length naively characterized as 'normal'), which are too partial to be vectors of a revolutionary dynamic. As for basic economic and social reforms, no mention is made here of any stage concerning them, because exclusive focus on distribution-production, which skips over the conquest of power, has been dismissed.

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⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

⁶⁷ Bensaïd 2011, p. 49.

In this regard, the end of the notes is firmer and more in line with Marx's own ideas, after the opening has supposedly paved the way for their reception by the leaders of German social-democracy. What is crucial is the political question, at the antipodes of the themes of equity and individual right. What matters to Marx is not the determination of phases defined, or even prescribed, in advance, but a process of transition, combining political mobilization, democratic functioning, economic and social transformation, and egalitarian redistribution. Nevertheless, the process has two aspects. On one side, political mobilization defines its goals as it proceeds and eludes any prior sequencing. On the other, it aims at an alternative *modus operandi*, whose conditions of coherence and viability remain to be defined. The text therefore leaves hanging the question of the correlation between political moments and social transformation – a correlation left to the real historical movement that a working-class party programme must not pre-empt.

Workers of the World...

Added to this question is the international dimension of the anti-capitalist struggle. One of Marx's great militant texts in this regard is the *Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association*, written in 1864 following a meeting organized in London. Intervening on the subject of industrial struggles in England and in favour of the Ten Hour Bill, Marx describes its conquest as the result of 'the great contest between the blind rule of the supply and demand laws which form the political economy of the middle class, and social production controlled by social foresight, which forms the political economy of the working class'.⁶⁸ This clash can be backed up by the creation of 'co-operative factories', whose importance (so Marx declares) 'cannot be over-rated':

By deed, instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labour need not be monopolised as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the labouring man himself....

They have also shown that wage-labour 'is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear'.⁶⁹

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68 Marx 1985, p. 11.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

But Marx also stresses their limits: 'co-operative labour, if kept within the narrow circle of the casual efforts of private workmen, will never be able to arrest the growth in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries.' He specifies: 'to save the industrious masses, co-operative labour ought to be developed to national dimensions, and, consequently, to be fostered by national means. ... To conquer political power has therefore become the great duty of the working classes.' The pre-condition of this conquest is not only the advantage of numbers, for 'numbers weigh only in the balance, if united by combination and led by knowledge'⁷⁰ – a point on which Marx's consistency, from his youth to this last period, is patent.

In addition to the greater precision of this strategic reflection, its innovations are to be underscored. In this intervention, Marx sets about very directly linking working-class emancipation and internationalism. During this period, his attention to the international construction of the working-class movement, over and above principled displays of solidarity, was continuously increasing. The meeting at St. Martin's Hall, when Marx delivered a spoken version of the text, founded the International Working Men's Association, later dubbed the 'First International', and supported Polish demands for national liberation. The Polish people were 'the cosmopolitan soldier of the revolution', Marx would say in 1875,⁷¹ highlighting the support it had provided for Hungarian, German and Italian struggles and for the Paris Commune. Marx referred to it in the written version: 'if the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure?'⁷² This concrete internationalist commitment confers its real meaning on the famous formula with which the text concludes: 'the fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes. Proletarians of all countries, Unite!'⁷³ Here too the communist objective is inseparable from a strategy that foreshadows its social and cultural lineaments in the present.

Marx's awareness of the crucially and concretely internationalist dimension of communist politics developed during the 1850s, when he interested himself in the global expansion of capitalism and his analysis of colonialism and work as a journalist for the *New York Daily Tribune* led him to study various national and regional trajectories,

.....
70 Ibid., p. 11.

71 Quoted in Anderson 2016, p. 76.

72 Marx 1985, pp. 12-13.

73 Ibid., p. 13.

particularly those of India and China, Ireland and Poland, as well as the United States. His analyses of colonial domination and what was at stake in anti-colonial struggles brought out the full significance of the phrase 'domination-subordination' used in Chapter 6 of *Capital*.⁷⁴ Kevin Anderson, who has tracked Marx's evolution towards increasingly clear anti-colonial positions, has shown that he thus broke with his initial idea of a partially positive role of British colonialism, trace of which are to be found in some earlier texts. At the same time, Marx developed a multi-linear conception of history, increasingly integrating the dimensions of race and sex, but without systematizing his approach. His strategic thinking here forms a pendant to, and continuation of, the analysis of the development of individuality in *Capital*, leading him to politicize the latter beyond the ethical considerations traditionally associated with it. The angle of this politicization was twofold. The crushing of human potential and capacities first and foremost concerned the colonized, whose will to emancipation was a major revolutionary source. And, secondly, non-Western societies that had undergone colonization evinced, and to a certain extent retained, communal social forms capable of nurturing alternatives to capitalism.

Marx's attention to colonization was not a recent phenomenon. But it belatedly assumed decisive importance. Within the First International, Marx highlighted the revolutionary dimension of the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery. The Address to Abraham Lincoln that he wrote in the name of the IWA proclaimed:

While the working men, the true political power of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic; while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned labourer to sell himself and choose his own master; they were unable to attain the true freedom of labour or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation.⁷⁵

Marx advocated not only unity, but realization of the essential intertwinement of the dimensions of race and class.

In his letter of 9 April 1870 to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, taking up elements of a confidential circular written shortly before, Marx made the Irish agrarian revolution 'the prerequisite for the proletarian revolution in England',⁷⁶ rather than its potential outlet. He spelt out his reasons:

.....
74 Marx 1976a, p. 1023.

75 Marx 1985, p.19.

76 Marx 1988, p. 474.

All industrial and commercial centres in England now have a working class *divided* into two *hostile* camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who forces down the standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker, he feels himself to be a member of the *ruling nation* and, therefore, makes himself a tool of his aristocrats and capitalists *against Ireland*, thus strengthening their domination *over himself*.⁷⁷

In these circumstances, the priority was the achievement of unity through the struggle against racism, both 'religious, social and national' prejudices and institutional racism, as long as they divided the British and Irish labourers. For Marx, this did not mean struggling against religion in general or against national demands in general, but taking on board the articulation of representations and practices that impeded the political unity of wage-earners. Without creating a hierarchy of forms of domination, and without disconnecting them from the essential logic of capitalism, strategic priority must be given to the struggle against forms of discrimination internal to the struggle of the dominated. Here, Marx was violently opposed in the IWA to Bakunin, for whom the Irish cause was merely a diversion that obstructed the proletarian cause.⁷⁸

This needs stressing, so unfamiliar are these analyses that contradict the reputation of a fanatically anti-religious Marx, predominantly concerned with the lot of the white proletariat in the Western countries. During these years, he showed himself more than ever attentive to what blighted the unity of the dominated, deploring the fact that the English worker's attitude to the Irish 'is roughly that of the poor whites to the n[....]s in the former slave states of the American Union'.⁷⁹ To highlight the importance of ideological questions (and this at a time when the word 'ideology' was no longer used),⁸⁰ and the active role of representations once they adhere to social practices, Marx pointed out in the case of Ireland that 'this antagonism is kept artificially alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, on short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling class'.⁸¹ Far from being exclusively descriptive, this

.....
77 *Ibid.*, p. 474.

78 Anderson 2016., p. 146.

79 Marx, letter to Meyer and Vogt, pp. 474-5.

80 On the history of the concept in Marx, see Garo2009.

81 Marx, letter to Meyer and Vogt, p. 475.

observation enabled Marx to call for action within the framework of the International: 'the special task of the Central Council in London is to awaken the consciousness of the English working class that, *for them, the national emancipation of Ireland* is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment, but *the first condition of their own social emancipation*.'⁸²

But were the internal colonization of Ireland by England and slavery in the USA comparable? Not in Marx's view. For him the principal issue in the American Civil War was not the division of the proletariat and it could not be described as a clash between cultures or nations, even if these dimensions existed.⁸³ Not to be compared with the crushing of national aspirations, the South according to Marx was waging a veritable 'war of conquest for the extension and perpetuation of slavery'.⁸⁴ 'This would be in full accord with the loudly proclaimed principle that only certain races are capable of freedom'⁸⁵ – a principle extended to certain white immigrants, giving rise to a racist variant of capitalism. According to Marx, this perspective led the North to concede the emancipation of the slaves as a condition of maintaining its own social relations of exploitation. The scale and the stakes of slave domination were unique and in no way was it an anachronistic vestige. That is why Marx campaigned for the levying of black troops, whereas Lincoln backed off from this, on the grounds that he might be accused of fomenting a racial war. Marx's declarations in the name of the IWA were to have a real political impact in the USA: they led to the formation of American sections struggling for racial and sexual equality,⁸⁶ sparking an internal debate that ultimately resulted in the victory of the current dominated by trade unionists hostile to women's rights as well as the struggle for racial equality. In short, over and above the issue of secession, and despite the faint-heartedness of Lincoln, the North's victory, without ceasing to concern the emancipation of individuals, had global political implications.

These concerns, increasing in the texts of the late Marx, went hand in hand with greater attention to the diversity of historical trajectories and the resources they afforded from a global revolutionary perspective. Once again, the identification of the goal (construction of a classless society on a planetary scale) must not lead to underestimating the distinctive mediations and divergent paths. From 1879 until his death,

.....
82 Ibid., p. 475.

83 Blackburn 2011, p. 7ff.

84 Marx, 'The Civil War in the United States' *Die Presse*, 7 November 1861, quoted in Ibid., p. 157.

85 Ibid., p. 158.

86 Blackburn 2011, p. 72ff.

Marx filled dozens of notebooks on the subject of non-Western societies, skimming the anthropological literature of his time, without managing to write a book on these questions, which increasingly preoccupied him.

A Russian Revolution?

Marx's strategic thinking underwent a final development at the start of the 1880s, when he re-explored the transformation of property relations in conjunction with reflection on the revolutionary potential of certain traditional social structures, particularly in Russia. Marx's notes and studies of non-Western societies are numerous, many predating this last period, so that we can spot various inconsistencies and variations. As regards the property question, traditionally located at the heart of the communist project, Kevin Anderson, following Peter Hudis, stresses that as early as the *Grundrisse*, written in 1857-8, Marx regarded communal forms of production as prior to, and more fundamental than, communal property.⁸⁷ In these societies, as in later social forms, the transformation of property rules is not an end in itself and is subordinated to the transformation of the whole mode of production. These issues have been debated, notably in the works of E.P. Thompson, Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Wood and David McNally, with a view to rejecting a mechanical distinction between base and superstructure peculiar to a certain Marxism and foregrounding the role of class struggle in rethinking the historical emergence of capitalism.

Without being able to go into the contributions of these rich debates, decisive for thinking the transition from one mode of production to another, we may note that Marx, who polemicized with Proudhon and his 'extra-economic origin of property',⁸⁸ conceived property as a mediation between the individual and social wealth, which as a result concentrated the features of a given mode of production. At the same time, property is always a mode of appropriation that concerns individuals and helps structure them from top to bottom. The famous text of the *Formen*⁸⁹ of this same period contains this exceptional passage on true wealth, which illustrates the issue of re-appropriation that Marx makes the link between pre-capitalist and post-capitalist forms: 'if the narrow bourgeois form is peeled off, what is wealth if not the universality of the individual's needs, capacities, enjoyments,

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87 Anderson 2016, pp. 156-7 and Hudis 2004, pp. 51-67.

88 Marx 1986, p. 412.

89 It is customary to refer by this title to the chapter of the 1857-8 manuscripts devoted to 'Forms Preceding Capitalist Production': *ibid.*, pp. 399-439.

productive forces, etc., produced in universal exchange[?].⁹⁰ This analysis of appropriation highlights the permanent co-determination of social relations and forms of individuality. But how about the conditions and means of transformation of actually existing property forms and the social relations associated with them? What role do individuals play in the course of a transformation that first and foremost concerns them?

In the course of his ethnographic reading, work on colonialism and political role in the IWA, at a time when he was abandoning any linear conception of the course of history, Marx ended up reflecting on the social and political resources furnished by pre-capitalist modes of production still extant in some parts of the world alongside, or underneath, the capitalist forms that were seizing hold of them. The point was not to reactivate their original features, but to activate their political potential. This is demonstrated by the correspondence with Vera Zasulich in 1881 about Russian communal agrarian traditions. It is because common property forms concern the totality of social relations, and the forms of individuality engendered in them, that they have political potential, facilitating a type of strategic intervention capable of reconciling revolutionary politics and its ultimate goal – communism – without recourse to the slightest philosophy of history, and far removed from any assertion of the exclusive historical mission of the white, male working-class – theses often attributed to Marx.

The interest of this correspondence stems from its immediate stakes in a turbulent political context. In February 1881, when debate was raging within the populist movement, Vera Zasulich sought Marx's opinion on the subject of Russian rural communism. In search of a Russian road to revolution without a transition via capitalism, the populists redirected their activity towards the peasantry and banked on the assets of the Russian rural commune, the *obschchina* (or *mir*), for transforming social relations. Its main features were an assembly of household heads and periodic distribution of the land in accordance with a principle of equality in proportion to household size. Despite its archaic, profoundly patriarchal character, the populists believed it could become a revived form of local power in the context of the democratic regime they desired.

Marx wrote four draft responses, which were much longer than the brief letter he ended up sending, where in essence he declared: 'the analysis provided in *Capital* does not adduce reasons either for or against the viability of the rural commune'.⁹¹ But, he added, the commune could be 'the fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia'. The drafts are more eloquent. In them Marx seems to reflect for his own sake,

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⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 411.

⁹¹ Marx 1989, p. 371.

independently of the delicate task of advising a political organization that seemed to expect the gospel truth from him. Refraining from any prediction, he envisaged that the Russian commune could, on certain conditions, 'detach itself from its primitive features and develop directly as an element collective production on a nationwide scale'. He straight away clarified: 'it is precisely thanks to its contemporaneity with capitalist production that it may appropriate the latter's *positive acquisitions* without experiencing all its frightful misfortunes. Russia does not live in isolation from the modern world: neither is it the prey of a foreign invader like the East Indies.⁹² Here, we find elements of the strategic dialectic long explored by Marx. The point is to develop the communal form while conserving it, initiating its transcendence in the complex sense of the German term *Aufhebung* already referred to, which tends here more to 'conservation' and 'elevation' than 'abolition'. But, Marx insists, this hypothesis assumes a developed capitalism elsewhere. Its eventual materialization depends on a unique national or regional trajectory within the framework of a global process of capitalist expansion and the resistance it arouses. In passing, Marx developed the idea of uneven and combined development, adopting it from the Russian populist Pyotr Chaadayev. Rather than regarding capitalism as a source of homogenization of social relations throughout the world, as in the *Communist Manifesto*, the perpetuation of locally non-capitalist relations serves its domination. That is why wagering on the emancipatory potentiality of the *obschchina* represents a predominantly political hypothesis, subject to the activation of an effective revolutionary process and its conscious choices. In his 1882 Preface to the second Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx added a new condition destined for a protracted controversy – namely, the conjunction between Russian revolution and world proletarian revolution: 'if the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for communist development.'⁹³ Once again Marx's objective here is not to propose a pre-written revolutionary scenario, but to inscribe communism in an extended, global history, at once determined and open-ended, which includes the fact of capitalist expansion without this mode of production being a mandatory stage in human emancipation. Consequently, the persistence of non-capitalist historical conditions, integrated into a strategy mobilizing social groups marked by these traditions, could support a general counter-offensive aimed at the transcendence-abolition of capitalism. Paradoxically, uneven development would be

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92 'Drafts of the letter to Vera Zasulich' (first draft), in Marx 1989, p. 349.

93 Marx 1989, p. 426.

the condition for a revolutionary process capable of being globalized. Such reasoning pertains to the critique of political economy in that it is political. If the underlying logic that engendered capitalism is not the expansion of the market, but 'the complete separation of the producer from the means of production' and, more specifically, 'the expropriation of the agricultural producer';⁹⁴ and, if communism aims at the re-appropriation by individuals of their own social powers, then social forms predating this separation, and surviving locally after it, can offer fulcra for a revolution tending to become global while necessarily being constructed in national conditions to start off with.

This historical reflexion by the mature Marx on the causes of capitalism's birth, and those of its possible demise, thus remain inseparable from the revolutionary project of its abolition and strategic reflection on its concrete conditions, conditions at once historically given and politically developed into premises. In one respect, these conditions are internal to the functioning of capitalism in its essential contradictions, as they are analysed in *Capital*. But they are also external to it or, more precisely, they derive from the contradiction between a capitalism born in the (British) agricultural world and a different social history, which can obstruct and offer an alternative to the installation of such relations of production and exploitation, on condition, however, of becoming the linchpin of a political struggle.

And this is precisely the case in Russia. Marx stresses that as a social form based on sharing and equality, on communal property and individual-personal property, the Russian commune is distinguished from more 'archaic' communities. Marx's communism is not collectivism understood as authoritarian suppression of any private property, but a certain kind of socialization of the means of production. And it is this exclusive particularity of the Russian commune that leads Marx to modify his initially negative judgement, while he continues to condemn its patriarchal character. From a strategic standpoint, the property question thus remains crucial in his view, on condition of regarding it not as a strictly legal form, but as both revolutionary political lever and gradient of individual development. By this twofold token, the Russian agrarian commune contains potentialities that can be converted into means of peasant mobilization and, as such, into premises of communism.

Nevertheless, its possible revolutionary reprise has two conditions, which are highly problematic. The first consists in the introduction of capitalist productive forces and techniques. The second is the intervention of the peasants themselves in the active transformation of the traditional rural commune into the local structure of a general socialization of production. Over and above the circumstantial character

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⁹⁴ Marx 1976a, chapter 32, quoted in Marx, first draft of the letter to Vera Zasulich, p. 346.

of this debate in late nineteenth-century Russia, the Russian rural commune makes it possible to pose the problem of transition in full, from the angle of its material conditions on the one hand and its political conditions on the other. In passing, the Russian case confirms that the standard reading of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is a misinterpretation. In it communal forms are explicitly viewed as possible fulcra of a political dynamic involving the mobilization of individuals and determinate classes. Here re-appropriation is much more than a simple abolition of private ownership of the means of production. Above all, it aims at self-re-appropriation, an emancipation synonymous with the individual and social development of human capacities, which are mutilated by all relations of domination. This re-appropriation is not defined as reversion to a prior condition, but as an endeavour to abolish alienation and dispossession – an effort rooted in the acute contradictions of the present. Such a will to emancipation is not a utopian aim, but the fuel of the revolutionary flame, resuming an argument already developed in *Capital*. And in fact, at the start of his draft, Marx refers to the chapter of *Capital* devoted to ‘so-called “original accumulation”’. The 1881 notes take up this text and continue it, while modifying it to adapt it to the Russian case.

In *Capital*, Marx distinguishes three phases in property forms, extended to the mode of development of individuals and the social conditions of production. The first is ‘the private property of the worker in his means of production’,⁹⁵ highlighting that the condition of ‘the development ... of free individuality’ goes hand in hand with slavery, serfdom and ‘other situations of dependence’, excluding cooperation and ‘the free development of the productive forces’.⁹⁶ The second phase is the result of a negation generated by the development of the first, which gives birth to both ‘socially concentrated means of production’, large-scale property at the price of ‘the expropriation of the mass of the people’, and the proletarianization of labourers.⁹⁷ The third phase has as its spring ‘the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour’, which have become ‘incompatible with their capitalist integument’.⁹⁸ The productive forces are credited not only with unprecedented productivity, but with an advanced level of cooperation that directly paves the way for communism. This third phase is that of revolution: ‘the knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.’⁹⁹

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95 Marx 1076a, p. 927.

96 Ibid., p. 927.

97 Ibid., p. 928.

98 Ibid., p. 929.

99 Ibid., p. 929.

This hypothesis of several phases is what Marx adjusted in 1881 to the Russian situation. Starting from the Russian communal form, which is more individualizing than archaic forms, two options can be envisaged in the face of capitalist expansion: 'either the element of private property which it implies will gain the upper hand over the collective element, or the latter will gain the upper hand over the former.'¹⁰⁰ The reforms of 1861 had sought to demolish the rural commune and to transform Russian agriculture in a capitalist direction, adulterating personal property. The third, specifically revolutionary phase presupposed the victory of the Russian collective element, the socialization of large, landed property, but also the 'domains of the state',¹⁰¹ combined with the advanced socialization of labour inherent in capitalist productive forces. This whole social dynamic, not merely a technical dynamic, was to be imported under the rubric of 'mechanical industry'. The development of the agrarian commune on a national scale, as well as its modernization, then becomes possible: 'the *contemporaneity* of western production, which dominates the world market, allows Russia to incorporate in the commune all the positive acquisitions devised by the capitalist system without passing through its Caudine Forks.'¹⁰² Thus the traditional commune is to be conceived not as a model to be generalized, but as the possible social and, above all, political lever of an alliance between the working-class and the exploited peasant class, at once indispensable and extremely difficult to construct, as has been proved by the failure of the 1848 and 1871 revolutions. For we must note that, far from essentializing the peasantry, Marx never defined it as comprising a single 'reactionary mass' – a formulation of Ferdinand Lassalle's that he promptly rejected.¹⁰³ Although he highlighted the reactionary political role of the French peasantry during the 1851 coup d'état, it was while indicating the reactionary logic of the 'parcel' when not accompanied by any communitarian logic or independent political consciousness. Elsewhere, however, Marx did not stop proclaiming the need for the 'proletarian revolution' to construct 'the choir without which its solo becomes a swan song'.¹⁰⁴ And the Russian situation precisely made it possible to envisage such a choir.¹⁰⁵

.....
100 Marx, first draft of the letter to Vera Zasulich, p. 352.

101 Ibid., p. 358.

102 Ibid., p. 353.

103 Marx 1989, p. 89.

104 Marx 1979, p. 193 n. b.

105 Luca Basso highlights that the expression 'acting in common' that we find in *Capital* clarifies Marx's non-naturalistic conception of the common (Basso 2012, p. 106).

Even so, the Russian peasants who (according to the 1881 text) could become spokesmen for an 'economic need' will not necessarily be the agents of a political project that extends far beyond it. Marx says nothing about the way that the rural commune could progressively transform its own traditional communitarian *modus operandi* from within, in the direction of the 'self-government of the producers' he saluted in the Paris Commune. Is a process no longer working-class and urban, but rural and rooted in tradition, capable of engendering not only its own educated and politicized actors, but also new, democratically organized relations of production? This question contains a conjunctural strategic dimension, but is at the very heart of the definition of communism. Able neither to treat it nor to omit it, *Capital* seems to reformulate it in condensed fashion and Hegelian terms as the 'negation of the negation', at the risk of exposing itself to the accusation of reverting to the philosophy of history. It may be that the ambiguity of Marx's formulations in this chapter of *Capital* is precisely what motivated Vera Zasulich's letter. And Marx's reply shows that he does not consider the question as settled in advance. On the contrary, it implies a Russian Revolution that in 1881 he could only ardently desire.

All in all, this 1881 analysis outlines a strategy in the full sense, coinciding with the redefinition of politics whose project had been set out by Marx in his earliest texts. Awaiting actual fruition, this strategic communism encompasses all the dimensions of Marx's earlier thought, linking the issue of the democratic reorganization of work to that of the construction of the historical subject of revolutionary transformation. For the time being, Marx stuck to reflecting on the conditions for the peasant masses rallying to revolutionary struggle and socialist transformation. And precisely because the latter was not their main concern, he signalled that forced collectivization would simply result in peasant secession: 'go and seize from the peasants the product of their agricultural labour beyond a certain measure, and despite your gendarmerie and your army you will not succeed in chaining them to their fields!'¹⁰⁶ This advice, given to a Tsarist government hostile to ancestral communitarian forms, would prove premonitory of the failure of the policy of authoritarian collectivization in the USSR.

If the idea of bypassing the capitalist stage has lost all relevance today, it remains the case that logics of uneven development persist and suggest distinctive roads to politicization and subversion of the dominant social relations. It is important to affirm that resistance to capitalist commodification and its social logic remains fundamentally immanent in it. Costas Lapavitsas has shown that non-commodity relations survive which capitalism needs in order to exist. This does not mean thinking that such non-commodity relations are immediately

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¹⁰⁶ Marx, first Draft of the Letter to Vera Zasulich, p. 354.

socialist, or that demands for free provision and the right to share suffice to open up a political pathway as such, but 'transform[ing] these non-economic relations by altering the economic foundations of society',¹⁰⁷ in such a way as to redefine the relations between non-economic sphere and economic sphere.

At the heart of this problem, we once again find the issue of labour-power in as much as, fundamentally, it is not a commodity, but the preserve of social individuals. Labour-power's multifaceted resistance to attempts at its complete neoliberal submission forms one of the key contradictions of contemporary capitalism, running through the very individuality of wage-earners as well as all structures of social existence. However, it is not as such the vector of any definite alternative. If the goal is not rest content with temporary enclaves or minority utopias, then it is the politicization of these contradictions that specifically defines a communist politics. And, among these contradictions, must be counted all forms of domination and oppression, which are combined with exploitation without being reducible to it.

In his late texts, Marx develops this original political thinking, without being able to resolve any of these problems. Furthermore, far removed from the imagery of the bearded prophet certain of the advent of communism, he highlighted the enormous challenge that would have to be met not by a realized communism, which he did not describe, but by a communist politics, whose most astute thinker he remains, which must at any moment be able to elaborate democratically an unprecedented historical rationality. Impossible task? In our day, it is impossible to defer it any longer. It remains to invent modes of cooperation that are also political modes of struggle and the conquest of power, rethinking the political subject, at once multiple and coordinated, of radical transformation. This figure of communism as political dynamic, at once goal and transition, project and mediations, is what emerges from a re-reading of Marx inspired by contemporary reflections, but which in return confronts them with a strategic dimension they have lost. To conclude this investigation, it remains to develop more precisely, and in the present, the hypothesis of a renewal of strategic communism.

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¹⁰⁷ Lapavitsas 2003, p. 128.

- Anderson, Kevin B. 2016, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
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