Marx's theory of history and the question of colonies and non-capitalist world

Alexis Nicolas Saludjian[1]
André Guimarães Augusto[2]
Flávio Ferreira de Miranda[3]
Hugo Figueira Corrêa[4]
Marcelo Dias Carcanholo[5]

Introduction

There is a not unusual the belief that Marx's theory of History is just another Eurocentric perspective, among so many others in which the 'peripheral societies', or 'least developed' countries as some prefer, would be treated with nothing but contempt. According to that view, Marx saw the introduction of capitalism in those societies as a natural and welcome result of the 'process of civilization' that would allow the development of productive forces. Those familiar with Marx's social critique should know that nothing is farther from the truth. Marx's theory of history was never a positive theory of development, and never lost its critical contours when dealing with the results of the emergence of capitalist mode of production. However, and that is precisely how his defamers usually work, it is actually possible to extract from both Marx and Engels writings passages to corroborate this supposed 'Eurocentrism'. But if so into what account should we take his theory of history and his views on non-capitalist world?

The Argentinian Marxist Néstor Kohan (1998) presents this question with an interesting hypothesis to explain the apparent contradiction. According to him, there were two well defined paradigms in Marx's thoughts about the colonies and the non-capitalist world. The first is the 'paradigm of the *Manifesto*', followed by Marx until the end of the 1850's. During that time, Marx supposedly associated the development of capitalism and the notion of progress, leading him to greet the expansion of capitalism for destroying pre-modern and pre-capitalist social relations through the development of productive forces.

So in the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels would make affirmations indeed close to a 'universal philosophy of history', supposing the existence of an almost inexorable pathway from barbarism towards civilization. This conception would not limit itself to the *Manifesto*, being present all other works of them during those early years.

[1] Ph.D. in Economics (Univ. Paris 13 – France) and Associated Professor at the Institute of Economics at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) – Brazil. Email: saludjian@ie.ufrj.br
[2] Ph.D. in Economics (UFRJ – Brazil) and Associated Professor at the Economics Department of Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) – Brazil. Email:andre@economia.uff.br
[3] M.Sc. in Economics (UFRJ – Brazil) and currently involved in the Ph.D. program in Economics at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) – Brazil. Email: flavioferreiramiranda@hotmail.com
[4] Ph.D. in Economics (UFF – Brazil) and Associated Professor at the Economics Department at the Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (UFES) – Brazil. Email: h.correa@gmail.com
[5] Ph.D. in Economics (UFRJ – Brazil) and Associated Professor at the Economics Department at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) – Brazil. Email: mdccarc@uol.com.br

But in the 1850's, seeing the consequences of imperialism around the world, Marx would begin to change his views, going through a transition phase, and leading him to coin the category of Asiatic mode of production (in June of 1853). This condemnation would be still restricted to moral fields though, like in his censure of the savage form assumed by the rule of capitalist powers in colonies and in the non-capitalist world. According to Kohan (1998), however hard it was this censure, Marx still then regarded this process as something 'tragically inevitable'. And, in that sense, Marx still held a teleological (deterministic) conception of history, in a Hegelian garb. Thus colonialism would be the 'unconscious tool' that realizes the finalistic reason (the Absolute Idea) of 'History'.

By the end of the 1850's, however, there would be a radical rupture with that paradigm.[6] Kohan holds that from that time on, especially in the 1860's and 1870's, Marx embraced a new paradigm, based on a dialectical view of the world market, and on the contradictions (between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' capitalist countries) it generates.[7]This paradigmatic change could be explained by three sets of factors: (I) on the philosophical level by the revision of the category of *progress*, the denial of every determinism in history and the abandonment of the hegelian notion of 'non-historic' peoples; (II) on the scientific level by the use of a more complex notion of 'historical development', the abandonment of the dichotomy barbarism-civilization and by Marx's increasing interest in the economy and ethnology of peasant rural communes and primitive societies; (III) on the political level by the 'discovery' of national and colonial questions and the revolutionary potential of peripheral countries peasantry and through Marx's militancy on the International Workers Association and his consequent relation with revolutionaries from the non-European world.

This paper aims to look over the evolution of Marx's ideas to answer: are there really two paradigms in Marx's views of colonies and non-capitalist countries? We shall try to argue that, unlike what is said by some of Marx's contenders (and even by some of his followers) it is possible to see traces of a non-Eurocentric, non-teleological, non-'civlizatory' etc. theory of history present in Marx works at least since his sketches to the *German Ideology*, in 1846-1847.[8]

We are aware that this attitude raises the questions of 'how could this theory cohabit with the

---

[6] Kohan claims that Engels have never really departed from this paradigm of the *Manifesto*. In fact, others before him, like Rosdolsky (1991) for example, had already denounced Engels for his contempt towards the non-capitalist world. Notwithstanding, we think that to debate such a strong affirmation would be necessary, at least, a careful examination of Engels writings, impossible for the time being. In this paper we will try to set aside the problems of Engels and concentrate on Marx positions, even though we know that separation cannot be fully achieved.

[7] Although not based on the assertion of a 'paradigmatic shift', the same point is made by Anderson (2010), for whom the Eurocentric claims in Marx's works should be considered in view of the evolution through the time of his own perspective.

[8] Kohan himself recognizes this when he writes that, when switching paradigms Marx 'sees himself obliged to criticize explicitly the universal philosophy of history as an autonomous and "independent' discipline […] *in a very similar way to that made three decades before, in* German Ideology'. (1998: 240, emphasis added) In the same direction, Mcllelan (1983) remarks that Marx famous criticism on Feuerbach, in which the materialist theory of history is stated, was written in the end of 1845.

so-called 'paradigm of the *Manifesto*' and why a proper look at the "colonial question" remained only latent until Marx later years. We shall try to address those questions along the paper through a closer look upon Marx work.

We start by outlining Marx's theory of history, trying to define what is and what is not possible to state from its original line of thought. The section's purpose is clear up why a lot of the criticism on Marx is based on misunderstandings of his perspective, and then to illuminate his views on history. Next, we examine the accusations of 'Eurocentric-determinism' directed towards him. Finally, we try to set forth some conclusions.

1. What is and what is not Marx's theory of history

1.1. Some popular myths

To talk about Marx's approach on history is always something that immediately raises a great deal of polemics, accusations (some of them presented as compliments) and a lot of misconceptions. So our starting point is to clarify how we understand Marx's theory of history by dialoguing with some of its most famous criticisms.

Some critics accuse Marx of reducing everything to economics. This claim cannot resist to a closer look. Indeed, it is not casual that his main work is subtitled *critique of political economy* – and that has a triple meaning.

First, it means a critic of capitalist society, where social relations are mediated by economic relations of commodity exchange, under the law of value. Social relations in that mode of production are not given directly (without mediation) among persons. So it should be fairly obvious that Marx's theory of value does not limit itself to explain the mere quantitative determination of prices, but is a theory of the capitalist sociability – i.e., a theory about a society in which social relations are reified, subordinated by the destiny of commodities, following the desiderata of capital.

Second, Marx's 'critique of political economy' is a critique of economic theory (the classical political economy and the first manifestations of neoclassical economics, called 'vulgar economy'). What Marx does when he begins to examine the economic matters is precisely to establish a radical critique of the 'bourgeois science of political economy' for its falsity and for its (mystifying) role on the reproduction of capitalist society. From a Marxian standpoint, that theoretical critique is only possible because it supposes a critique of a (capitalist) reality that allows misconceptions of itself. In other words, it is a materialist critique, instead of an idealist/speculative one – as typical in neo-Hegelian philosophers, against whom Marx explicitly goes on *The holy family* and *German Ideology*.

Third, the kind of critique proposed by Marx can also be understood as a critique of the

economic reductionism (as a method) applied in the study of economy. It was an opposition against the idea of tearing 'economic facts' apart of social relations as a whole (as presupposed in the division scientific disciplines, such as Economics, Sociology, Philosophy, History etc.) This positivist heritage, that curses social theory until now, was already a target of Marx social critique, for whom economic aspects of reality (as well as political, ideological, historical etc. ones), despite the fact that they can be analyzed through an abstraction procedure, cannot be reduced to themselves, for they are inseparable parts of social being in its totality, and therefore can only be understood (including in it non-empirical laws) from the totality point of view.

Thus in Marx's perspective a social law could never be reduced to economic factors – what should be clear, if one remembers, for instance, that capital itself (a category so central to understand this society that Marx named his main work after it) is described as a *social relation* (value constantly seeking for valorization). Hence even in his work more often taken as an economics book, *Capital*, he was not reducing everything to economics. Only if one reads value theory as a problem of mere determination of relative prices, and capital as just an increased amount of money and/or its crystallization in machines and equipment (fixed capital), only then it could be said that *Capital* is an economics book. But not standing for Marx. In fact we could even say that, in this sense, economic reductionism is only possible from a non-Marxist position.

Another criticism on Marx emerges from the argument that his theory, made on the 19th century, is out of date. In spite the fact that his theory was actually written back then,[9] this claim is unacceptable. Of course Marx, as everyone else, lived in a particular context, and that context establishes, to some extent, limitations and possibilities for his theory.[10] On the other hand, his studies are directed towards capitalist society, and if we still live in a capitalist society it is pure nonsense to declare his 'theoretical death' on that basis, however important may have been the transformations experienced in that mode of production. His work tries to capture capitalisms general laws of motion and it is not incompatible with the fact that those laws assume different forms of manifestation.

That point helps us to clarify another relevant one. The historicity of social being, as one of its intrinsic features, cannot be confused with the historicity within some specific kind of sociability. In other words, to consider the historical character of capitalism, just to stay among the limits of the present social formation, means to notice that different modes of production emerge, develop (unfold its possibilities) and transform themselves into new ones. Thus, capitalism had a socio-historical process of emergence, have its own laws of motion within its historical pathway, and also

---

[9] In fact, any form of mystification (at least any form that deserves to be taken seriously) can only exist because it has *some* truth. But when this partial truth is exaggerated (exasperated) it creates a false, mystified, image of reality.

[10] We could even demonstrate that all the so-called 'modern' economics was already defined, at least in its principles, in 19th century. Unfortunately, there is no space here to develop this curiosity.

have (historical) limits to its development.

Therefore the historicity *of* capitalism cannot be reduced to (or mistaken with) the historicity *within* capitalism. The later means that, although general laws of capitalist mode of production are present at any point of capitalism history, its manifestation at any time holds historical specificities. Determinants of capital accumulation have unique features at each moment of time, making capitalist laws to appear (i.e., manifest themselves) differently through time. But still, as long as we live in a capitalist society, the general laws of sociability will (obviously) remain being defined by capitalism, no matter how unique are its concrete form at that moment.

Some of Marx detractors (and some of his false defenders) could agree to some extent with the conclusions above. The problem is that, according to those, the general laws of motion (both in historicity *of* and in historicity *within* capitalism) are treated by Marx in a *deterministic* or *teleological* way. Again, we cannot abide this conclusion.

General laws of motion of capital are laws of tendency.[11] They do not emanate from empirical realm (nor can be empirically checked at any moment).[12] They are not inexorable (for there are also counter-tendencies at motion). And they do not suppose any beforehand determined end. Otherwise stated: they are not deterministic (teleological). To put in Lukács' (2008: 56, our translation) words, a 'tendency is the verification of a law in conditions which are negative, conductive, inhibitory etc.; law can never operates directly, without overcoming dialectical contradictions, and it may even occur that, in some cases, it does not act in its fundamental direction, being temporarily withstood by unfavourable conditions'. Hence laws of tendency define a set of possibilities of social development, nevertheless they do not determine which path will be actually followed by history. History is open, and its course will always depend upon human action.[13]

The last bastion of the reductionist view of Marx (as declared by his opposers or his supporters) criticizes him for his 'Hegelian contamination'. Being more specific, the hermeneutics that dialectical logic introduces in a theory that could be stated in simplified way, so to eliminate its contradictions bred by dialectics.

One can never confuse a contradictory speech (theory) with a theory that describes the contradictory nature of social reality. Marx did not construct a contradictory theory, but he had to

---

[11] 'Tendencies, in short, are potentialities which may be exercised or in play without being directly realized or manifest in any particular outcome. [...] A statement of a tendency, in other words, is not a conditional statement about something actual or empirical but an *unconditional* statement about something non-actual and non-empirical. It is not a statement of logical necessity subject to *ceteris paribus* restrictions, but a statement of natural necessity without qualifications attached. It is not about events that would occur if things were different but about *a power that is being exercised whatever events ensue*'. (Lawson, 1997: 23, emphasis from the original)

[12] 'The general and necessary tendencies of capital must be distinguished from their forms of manifestation'. (Marx, 1959: 218).

[13] 'For historical process is not causal, is not teleological, it is multiple, never being unilateral or straight forward, but always an evolving trend unchained by real interactions and interrelations of acting complexes'. (Lukács, 2010: 70).

deal with a kind of logics that recognizes contradictions because his object of study demands that. In other words: because capitalism is built upon social contradiction, Marx needed dialectics to understand its laws of motion. In this sense, dialectics is not a method that he had chosen over another; it is not a 'methodological choice', but an ontological obligation.

That is, by the way, what differs Marx's materialist theory of history from Hegel's (from whom he takes the dialectical logics) idealistic one. Hegel constructs a conceptual system from the idea/reason using a dialectical logic, and sees concrete reality as a manifestation of this abstract conceptual system. His abstractions are consequently purely ideal. For Marx, on the other hand, abstractions (in thought) are not ideal constructs built by logic; they must be real.[14]

Take for instance the category *abstract labour*. Some interpretations of Marx's value theory understand its abstract character as an ideation by Marx – as if he had simply abstracted the concrete determination of labour (only on an ideal plan, and in pretty Hegelian garb), so to create a 'subjective theory of value' founded on labour. On the contrary, we maintain that for Marx the abstract character assumed by labour is the outcome of social dynamics itself. When commodities are exchanged one by another through the exchange of equivalent values, the (concrete, real) exchange process homogenizes the concrete labour involved in producing any of the particular commodities. One concrete labour is equalized to the other through exchange. The concrete aspects are abstracted, thus, not by the thinker, but by a real/concrete determination of reality. The abstract character of the category *abstract labour* is therefore engendered by a 'concrete abstraction'. So Marx's dialectics cannot be mistaken for Hegel's, as the critique of Hegelian idealism (surely necessary from a Marxian point of view) cannot be mistaken for a critique of dialectical thinking (equally necessary from a Marxian point of view).

Finally, we should address one last question, namely the idea that the theory of history put down by Marx cannot be used to treat of the relationship among nations, because it is 'too abstract'. Most of those critics do not understand properly the meaning of the 'general laws' (in Marxian terms), confuse levels of abstraction or are simply looking for an excuse to reject Marx's work.

Sure the general laws are for Marx placed in high level of abstraction. However it does not imply that they are just 'mental constructs' and also that Marx had not taken into account the

[14] Some misconceptions about the relationship between 'abstract' and 'concrete' also deserve some enlightening. In a plain, and wrong, understanding 'abstractions' are related to what is more deep or complex concerning a phenomena; while the 'concrete' would be the opposite, i.e., what is directly observable, hence, simpler. But that is not correct. In fact, the other way around is more precise. For the 'abstract' can only be so if the concrete determinations of a phenomena are erased, and therefore it should be taken as simpler than the concrete, since it has less (concrete) determinations. The 'concrete' would be the phenomena with all its determinations, and therefore it is more complex. What distinguish Marx materialist theory from an idealist-speculative philosophy is that, for him, to abstract from concrete determinations on an ideal plan is just possible because abstractions are product of social reality itself. In this sense, they are 'concrete abstractions'. That is why 'the starting point of an investigation cannot be abstracitons, but the actual facts in which those abstractions are based. Contradictions found in scientific abstractions have its roots in objective reality'. (Llanos, 1988: 149).

relation between countries because he was constructing an ideal model of 'closed economy' (similar to neoclassic economics models). The first mistake is not understanding Marxian notions of 'abstraction' and 'general law', and thus to expect from Marx a debate over the forms of manifestation of general laws (applied to the relationship between nations) in different particular historical contexts. Nor it is possible to conclude that Marx saw the question of spatial differences as irrelevant. As Rosdolsky (1977) remembers, Marx had thought in one of his first plans for *Capital* in treating the world market in a specific volume of the book, even though it looks like this plan has been abandoned later on.

In spite of that, most of those critiques come to the conclusion that Marx oversaw world market history, except when writing about capitalism transition. And in this sense world history would appear just in the 'rear-view mirror'. On the next section we shall make clear that (for better or worse) Marx does talk about those relations in 'present tense'. For now we desire only to emphasize that although he never wrote the (initially) planed volume on world market he does look at this problem within *Capital*. This seems rather clearly when, for instance, he writes on *Capital*' volume III:

> And when in the 16th, and partially still in the 17th, century the sudden expansion of commerce and emergence of a new world market overwhelmingly contributed to the fall of the old mode of production and the rise of capitalist production, this was accomplished conversely on the basis of the already existing capitalist mode of production. *The world-market itself forms the basis for this mode of production.* On the other hand, *the immanent necessity of this mode of production to produce on an ever-enlarged scale tends to extend the world-market continually*, so that it is not commerce in this case which revolutionises industry, but industry which constantly revolutionises commerce. (Marx, 1959b: 219, emphasis added)

In fact, already in *Capital*'s volume I he had observed that 'A new and international division of labour, a division suited to the requirements of the chief centres of modern industry springs up, and converts one part of the globe into a chiefly agricultural field of production, for supplying the other part which remains a chiefly industrial field'. (Marx 1959: 296)

Marx was aware of the concrete transformations made by capitalist laws of motion in concrete geographical regions and historical context. World history does not appear on *Capital* only in 'rear-view mirror' as supposed by those critics. Above all because the 'world history' is not absent from his theory of history (due to an 'abstraction'). As we said before, Marxian abstractions are actually real – which means in the particular case that Marx had conscience that the development of capitalism could only be understood as result of world market. For without it there would be no wool from America, cotton from India etc. that allowed British textile industry to develop; and for capitalism itself is always guided by the world market. So it is not by chance, we

believe, that *Capital*'s volume I last chapter deals with the 'modern theory of colonization' – at a time in which the 'national question' was not even a major one just yet.

Once we describe what, in our perspective, is not Marx's theory of history, we shall now turn our attention to what it is. That is the point we will try to make on the next section.

1.2. Marx's theory of history

In this section we will try to demonstrate that Marx's theory doesn't hold determinism, economicism, teleology and linear development. We defend that although such theory of history has been developed within Marx's works, it was already present in his early pieces, having the *German Ideology* as its starting point. First of all we present productive forces and relations of production categories and the form they relate to each other. Then we treat the thesis of linear development of productive forces.

To comprehend the category *productive forces* it is necessary to begin with the first presupposition of history, mankind material reproduction. Humans have needs and must interact with nature to satisfy then through work. In doing so, nature is transformed in accordance with an end posited by humans, adapting the objects spontaneously given by nature to its needs.[15]

In working process humans set in motion the natural forces which belong to their own body to transform nature, acting over nature's causal relations. Furthermore, 'By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature'. (Marx, 1959: 124) This allows us a first assessment on the concept of productive forces: the potentialities that allow humans to transform nature.

In this sense, productive forces are not a natural and exogenous given fact to human action that solely allows producing in more efficient way. On the contrary, productive forces are the objectification of human capacities that has been presented in the most variable forms in history – from a number of production means till the forms of organization of production and knowledge and the ability of producers.

As objectifications of human capacities, productive forces is a social category, not a natural given fact. Marx clearly and recurrently refers to *social* productive forces, as he also distinguishes natural and social conditions when talking about the determinants of labour productivity. Thus, among productive forces Marx places those characterized as socials, such as the application of science and cooperation.

The definition of productive forces allow us to reject two common misconceptions about historical materialism: its reduction to material content as distinct and separated from social form[16]

[15] See Marx (1959, especially the chapter 7) and Marx and Engels (1968).
[16] See Cohen (2000)

and its reduction to means of production.[17]

In part such misconceptions can have its origin in the way the production process is presented in Marx's *Capital*. For Marx (1959: 124) starts Chapter VII affirming that he will initially treat of 'labour-process independently of the particular form it assumes under given social conditions'. On our view it just a matter of the method of presentation, as in the passage are omitted, because unnecessary, the relations among workers. This does not mean that such relations do not exist. Actually they are always presupposed – as the working process is social since the beginning. The wrong impression due to the mode of presentation of the book can be undone if we remember that since *German Ideology* Marx and Engels (1968) note that 'Thus it is quite obvious from the start that there exists a materialistic connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production, and which is as old as men themselves. This connection is ever taking on new forms, and thus presents a "history" independently of the existence of any political or religious nonsense which in addition may hold men together'.

Clearly means of production are a productive force, through it humans improve its capacity of transformation of nature, making possible the exertion of its bodily organs and objectifying its intellectual potencies. Nevertheless, in *Capital* the means of labour do not appear in any moment as determinants, but as indicators and measures of social development. In this way they shed into light the social conditions of labour process – including the relations of production – and permit the comparison between different economic epochs, though not determine then. It must be remembered that in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and in *Grundrisse* Marx does not refer to the distinguished epochs on the basis of instruments of production, but of the forms of extraction of surplus labour and property.

The next necessary step for this paper is to expose the category of relations of production. Here, as in the case of the productive forces, Marx starts out from the material reproduction of mankind. In the process of its material reproduction humans appropriate nature in a historically determined form.

In labouring, as process of appropriation, humans submit the elements of production to its control according to an end. But the question of appropriation, of the control over the elements of labour process, becomes more complex if we consider a dimension that cannot be eliminated of human material reproduction: the fact that only by cooperation of different individuals, which in this way establish relations and connections among each other, production activity takes part. Thus, since the beginning, material reproduction is a social relation, as it encompasses a number of individuals. In another words, it is through relations of production that mankind appropriate nature. The fundamental dimension of relations of production is appropriation, i.e., the control of the

[17] See Bukharin (1925).

elements of production – means of production and productive activity – by means of relations between humans.

In this sense it is possible to observe a distinction between the forms of controlling the elements of production in Marx's work. First, appropriation denotes the control of means of production and labour power. This dimension can be identified in the concept of possession. If possession means the control of the use of the elements of production, this control can be exercised by an individual hypothetically isolated.

But there is a dimension of the control of production distinct from the control of the use of the elements of production, although related to it. Inasmuch as labour process is social, effected by the cooperation of various producers, the question of the distribution of means of production and labour among the diverse members of society is put. This distribution of the means of production and labour implies the control of the access to the elements of production, a property relation. Property necessarily supposes relation among individuals.[18]

Now it must be established which is the mode of relation between productive forces and relations of production in Marx's theory of history. The interpretation of historical materialism as technological determinism postulates, in terms of "base" determination by, a necessary, unique and exhaustive relation of antecedence between productive forces and relations of production.

Although the relation of temporal antecedence of productive forces with respect to relations of production is opposed to the analysis made by Marx of the genesis of capitalist relations of production and productive forces. Capitalist relations of property and exploitation come prior to the outcome of manufacture and modern machinery as dominant forms of production. Marx explicitly affirms that the transformation in the mode of producing occurs after the outcome of capitalist relations.[19] In this way, the birth of new productive forces within capitalism is, at least partially, a consequence of the subordination of the labour process to the production of surplus value, i.e., to capitalist relations of production. It can be taken from Marx's analysis of the development of capitalism that the rhythm of transformations and productive forces own character depends on relations of production.

Nevertheless to observe solely the influence of the relations of production over productive forces would keep the necessary antecedence relation between both, just by inverting the terms of technological determinism.[20] Productive forces also influence relations of production. It is true, for

---

[18] 'It is, for instance, evident that the individual is related to his language as his own only as the natural member of a human community. Language as the product of an individual is an absurdity. But so also is property'. (Marx, 1964)

[19] 'The general character of the labour-process is evidently not changed by the fact, that the labourer works for the capitalist instead of for himself; moreover, the particular methods and operations employed in bootmaking or spinning are not immediately changed by the intervention of the capitalist. […] Changes in the methods of production by the subordination of labour to capital, can take place *only at a later period* […].' (Marx, 1959: 128, emphasis added).

[20] Such an inversion can be found, for instance, in Bettelheim (1975).

instance, that the relation of exploitation, the property of surplus labour by those that do not work, supposes certain productive development in the production of the means of subsistence.

In capitalist production, productive forces modify the relations of production. Marx describes the process of real subordination of labour to capital in which the relations of possession changes as follows. With manufacture and machinery capitalist typical relations of production are consolidated. Those go beyond property relations, reaching the possession of instruments of production by capital. In the same way, capitalist relation of production suppose the dissolution of the ties between producers and means of production; but such dissolution is only possible within developed urban handicraft.

Hence the relation between productive forces and relations of production is not of necessary antecedence in any direction, but of reciprocal determination. Specific productive forces modify relations of production, whose reproduction, in its turn, modifies productive forces. If in *Capital* and its preparation manuscripts this relation of reciprocal determination appears in the analysis of the development of capitalism, in *German Ideology* it was already present in more general assessments, for example: 'Industry and commerce, production and the exchange of the necessities of life, themselves determine distribution, the structure of the different social classes and are, in turn, determined by it as to the mode in which they are carried on'. (Marx and Engels, 1968)

The reciprocal determination relation occurs as a result of the nature of both productive forces and relations of production. This can be seen by the observation of the two categories. They are aspects of the social production process and, in this sense, make a unity. reciprocal determination the form of relation between the elements of a totality.

This allows us to understand the correspondence and contradiction that Marx points as the form of relation among productive forces and relations of production.[21] If, by one side, the reproduction of the relations of production reinforces the development of productive forces and, by the other, the development of the later allows for the amplified reproduction of the former, there is a relation of correspondence in the dynamic and complex interactions between productive forces and relations of production. Nevertheless this correspondence relation turns into its contrary in so far as the process of development of productive forces and the reproduction of the relations of production goes on: the reproduction of the relations of production modifies productive forces own nature, turning itself into an obstacle for their development.[22]

---

[21] 'In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. […] At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto'. (Marx, 1977)

[22] The development of machinery and the use of science in production process, for instance, is restricted by capitalist relations of production: 'The use of machinery for the exclusive purpose of cheapening the product, is limited in this way, that less labour must be expended in producing the machinery than is displaced by the employment of that

This aspect is constantly marked as the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production, yet this is just one aspect of the referred contradiction. In this case it is also valid the reciprocal determination, as not only the development of the relations of production breaks the development of productive forces, but also the later becomes an obstacle to the reproduction of the former.[23]

The substitution of the necessary antecedence for the reciprocal determination contains in itself arguments to eliminate the thesis of "base" determination out of historical materialism. However it is also necessary to assert the other dimensions in which the deterministic thesis is also equivocated. Shall we take the existence of a necessary bond between two stages of development of productive forces and relations of production, i.e., the thesis that for a given state of productive forces there is only one possible set of relations of production. Actually this relation seems to be more complex and there is a reason for that. The existence of certain relations of production seems to depends not only on inherited productive forces, but also on an internal dynamics of the relations of production. Thus a specific set of productive forces can be related to different relations of production, depending on the later own dynamics. This doesn't mean that for a given state of productive forces any relations of production are possible; the relations of production suppose not only a determined set of previous relations, but also the conditions established by pre-existent productive forces.

This is fundamental for if the relation between productive forces and relations of production is of reciprocal determination, the productive forces are the *predominant* moment. This is due to the fact that relations of production in its most primitive form are taken in pre-existent material base given by nature, the soil resources and human body constitution.

At every moment, therefore, previously existent productive forces constitute the material base for the relations of production. But its role as predominant moment is one of conditioning, of setting limits to possibilities, and not of a determinant that imposes an inexorable and unique necessity. In shedding light on the pre-existence of the material conditions of production at the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels (1968) says: 'By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life'.

In this sense the reciprocal determination between productive forces and relations of production does not suffice to deny the deterministic theory of history. In a functional explanation of teleological nature it can be affirmed that capitalist relations of production emerged to develop

---

machinery. For the capitalist, however, this use is still more limited. Instead of paying for the labour, he only pays the value of the labour-power employed; therefore, the limit to his using a machine is fixed by the difference between the value of the machine and the value of the labour-power replaced by it'. (Marx, 1959: 267)

[23] The last dimension of the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production lies in the (increasing) redundancy of living labour as consequence of the use of machines, lessening thus the presence of surplus-value fountain, and (given all the mediations) leading to the tendency of the profit rate to fall.

productive forces.[24] In such interpretations the origin of the contradiction and correspondence between productive forces and relations of production would be in the development of productive forces. The later would have a linear and teleological character, following necessary steps of an autonomous development.

If the social nature of productive forces and the influence of the relations of production over then suffice to deny the existence of an autonomous development, the presentation of the development of capitalist productive forces by Marx is in direct conflict with such linear thesis. In several moments Marx observes that the category that compose the productive forces in its most simple form emerge initially in previous historical periods.[25] Marx indicates also that the entirely developed form of machinery is a result of manufacture. But if such precedence of manufacture is necessary for the outcome of machinery in its most developed form, it consists only in its material base and presupposes also machinery in its most simple form. Thus, instead of linearity, the development of productive forces occurs in leaps and bifurcations. Moreover, the development of productive forces can hold the return of antecedent in modified forms. In summary, the mechanized production supposes manufacture as its material basis, although this does not mean that one necessarily follows the other but solely that manufacture is its starting point.

Marx points the existence of a general tendency for the development of productive forces towards mechanized production: 'The variety of the transition forms, however, does not conceal the tendency to conversion into the factory system proper'. (1959: 308) It seems here that the entirely developed capitalist productive forces, in another words the mechanized production, tends to universalization and therefore to homogenize in its general lines the forms of production as capitalism advances and expands itself. However it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that such transformation appears as a tendency. In accordance with the previous observation, in the absence of abstract lines between societies development epochs the tendency realizes itself always amid leaps, bifurcations and returns to modified antecedent forms. The tendency reveals nothing but the great and general traces of the development of productive forces, instead of to where, in fact, such process is going to develop.

It is worth to emphasize the already observed non-existence of a univocal relation between productive forces and relations of production. Hence, if there is a tendency to the development of productive forces in capitalism towards mechanization, it does not refer to a simple linear passage

[24] For Cohen (1978: 161) the antecedence of productive forces is explanatory instead of historical; the relations of production are explained for effecting the development of productive forces: 'It is that effect which explains the nature of the relations, why they are as they are. The forces would not develop as they do were the relations different, but that is *why* the relations are not different – because relations of the given kind suit the development of the forces'.

[25] Making reference to the transformation of tools in machines Marx (1959: 258) notes that: 'Here and there, long before the period of manufacture, and also, to some extent, during that period, these implements pass over into machines, but without creating any revolution in the mode of production'.

from one stage of the development of productive forces to another, neither of relations of production. The non-linear character of the development of productive forces is an aspect of Marx's theory of history already present in *German Ideology*, referred then to a wider historical development and not only to capitalism. In this work Marx and Engels observe that the development of productive forces holds regressions and unequal development in world scale: 'In primitive history every invention had to be made daily anew and in each locality independently'.

This characteristic of the development of productive forces is attributed by Marx to a poorly developed world commerce: 'It depends purely on the extension of commerce whether the productive forces achieved in a locality, especially inventions, are lost for later development or not'. Here, as in *Capital*, Marx seems to concede a homogenizing, universal and linear role to the development of productive forces in capitalism. Although in *German Ideology* those peculiar aspects of the development of productive forces are attributed to the formation of the world market, meanwhile in *Capital* the machinery would bring this result. In despite of that it must be noted again that this development come as a tendency.

It is possible to infer from this observation that for Marx if, in general, the development of productive forces leads to the increase of productivity in long periods – and thus to the decrease in the necessary production time – this does not occur in a linear manner. This can be seen in the contrast Marx establishes in *Capital* between the development of productive forces in capitalism and in previous societies. In doing so Marx notes that the technical base of production in capitalism is revolutionary, while in previous modes of production it was not. In the handicraft based production once the highest level of technical progress is achieved, changes are due to slow improvements in the instruments of production and the emergence of new materials. In this way Marx points out that the rhythm and the nature of the development of productive forces differs in diverse historical epochs and this is so fundamentally because of the influence of relations of production over the development of productive forces.

Such observations could lead to the simple conclusion that Marx makes a contrast between an accelerated development of productive forces under capitalism – with a consequent increase in the diversity in the production of use-values and an accelerating decrease in labour time – and societies that tends to stagnation and immutability. In this sense capitalist society would have a progressive character in terms of the development of productive forces, in comparison with 'delayed' societies.

Nonetheless Marx also asserts the contradictory character of the development of productive forces. If productive forces are objectifications of human capacities, it is not about capturing its development solely in terms of the increase in productivity but also in terms of the development of those capacities. On this aspect the contradictory character of the development of productive forces

in capitalism is synthetized by Marx (1959: 326) in *Capital*: 'Capitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the labourer'.

This last observation is completely compatible with another in *German Ideology* that capitalist productive forces becomes 'destructive forces': 'These productive forces received under the system of private property a one-sided development only, and became for the majority destructive forces'.

Capital's productive forces lead to continuous productivity increases as never before in human history. Yet, on the other side, this is done not only for capital, but against humans. Human capacities in capitalism objectify themselves as capital's productive forces and, thus, becomes alien and hostile to individuals. Productive forces are not anymore individuals own forces but capital's and are, for that reason, alienated. Hence human capacity in capitalism realizes itself only as potencies that cannot be fully exercised by all.

Summing up it can be concluded that Marx observes that the development of productive forces, despite the fact that it realizes a tendency to decrease the necessary labour time for human material reproduction, does not bring about unilateral 'progress' or 'improvement' due to its contradictory character. It is central to observe that such contradictory character was already present in *German Ideology*. In this way it cannot be attributed to them, already in 1845, a linear theory of 'progress' in the sense of a succession of unilaterally better stages.

If *Capital's* 'paradigm' in terms of theory of history can be synthetized in the assertion that 'for epochs in the history of society are no more separated from each other by hard and fast lines of demarcation, than are geological epochs' (as cited before), in *German Ideology* can be found a similar synthetic methodological assessment:

> At the best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of men. Viewed apart from real history, these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history. (Marx and Engels, 1968)

Hence there is no philosophy of history in Marx because history cannot be derived from abstract principles. It is not about the confrontation of an idealist philosophy of history – history as the development of consciousness – and a materialist one – history as the development of productive forces (the latter supposedly present in Marx). A Marxian theory of history, put down since *German Ideology*, can be summed in the principles that productive forces are social, that relations of production and productive forces reciprocally determine each other and that the role of

productive forces as predominant moment is only of conditioning, of limiting possibilities. Thus, there isn't any determinism in Marx's theory of history. Also the development of productive forces and social development are not linearly represented, although *post festum* it can be observed its general evolutional traces amidst bifurcations, leaps and regressions.

2. National and colonial questions in Marx's perspective and the 'Eurocentric-deterministic hypothesis'

Since Marx's theory of history is one of the main features of his social theory – one might even say it is his social theory – why there are so many works affirming that we can find in his writings of the early, and even of the late, 19th century a 'Eurocentric-deterministic' perspective? The answer can only be found in his writings. In this section we collect some of the main texts usually cited as examples of Eurocentrism in Marx so to conform what Kohan called the 'Manifesto paradigm'. At the same time, we try to show that Marx ideas had evolved during his lifetime moving away from any kind of such Eurocentric perspective. Furthermore, we argue that those instances of Eurocentrism do not invalidate Marx's theory of History and that lies precisely on this theory the key to understand the apparent contradiction of his thought.

2.1. Historical determinism and Eurocentrism

The most remembered evidence of Marx's Eurocentrism comes from one of his major early works, written along with Engels, *The manifesto of the communist party*. There Marx opposes explicitly the *civilised* capitalist Europe and the *barbarian* pre-capitalist world. As evidenced in one of the most frequently quoted passages:

> The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. (..) It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.
>
> The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West. (Marx and Engels, 1969)

Because of capitalism's capacity to revolutionize production, it could, and indeed needed, to overflow the whole world with its commodities, opening markets everywhere, spreading capitalist relations of production and, thus, creating the world market. This is a widely remembered instance

of Marx and Engels' so-called Eurocentrism, for it refers to the non-capitalist world as 'barbarians' (as opposed to the 'civilized Europeans'). In the *Manifesto* is clear that by *barbarians* Marx and Engels means the non-capitalist world, but just using a terminology common to their time. And it is worth to argue that this is secondary within the quoted lines. Is it not one of the tendencies of capitalist mode of production to compel all nations to become capitalists?[26] Doesn't that mean that this boundless drive to expansion of bourgeois production corresponds to the creation of a 'world after its own image'?

Yet, the above quoted passage raises more objections with respect to its terminology that is, sometimes, morally condemned nowadays. The *Manifesto* refers to rural life as one of 'idiocy'. Although this is certainly not a compliment, in a previous passage of the text the authors point the narrow-mindedness and one-sidedness of cultural manifestations bounded within local limits, in opposition to a world culture seen as a positive outcome of the universalization of social relations that became possible under capitalist mode of production (although in an alienated form). Moreover, urban life, in itself is also seen as one-sided by the authors. Thus, the expression refers to regions where social changes and time itself flow more slowly, that are more tightly bounded to traditional ties and, for that reason, the emancipatory potential of the universalization of human relations, an outcome of the social character of capitalist sociability, may be delayed – even though that potential cannot, after all, be fully realized in urban spaces either.

By this we do not intend to suggest that, sometimes, the choice of words in the text is not execrable and that they do not express prejudices that, at least by the time of the composition of the text, the authors possessed. Such feature do deserve further analysis, as they may shed light into the political and intellectual formation of such important theorists and revolutionaries that, sometimes, remarkably stood straight forward the general cultural tendencies of their time, but others not. Nevertheless, the combination of the most immediate objectives of this paper among with its exiguous lines imposes another focus. It seems theoretically more promising to analyse the evolution of the mentioned authors in their treatment of the possibilities of social development in oriental or/and non-typically occidental countries.

In this respect, Marx's articles on India in the early 1850's offers good examples. It is once again important to delimit our specific interest in those articles with respect to our objectives in this paper. For instance, when talking about India Marx makes some considerations about Hindu religion and its underlying form of social organization that might give the creeps on the post-

[26] This idea is reinforced for Marx within *Capital*, when he writes that: 'On the one hand, the immediate effect of machinery is to increase the supply of raw material in the same way, for example, as the cotton gin augmented the production of cotton. On the other hand, *the cheapness of the articles produced by machinery, and the improved means of transport and communication furnish the weapons for conquering foreign markets*. By ruining handicraft production in other countries, machinery forcibly converts them into fields for the supply of its raw material. In this way East India was compelled to produce cotton, wool, hemp, jute, and indigo for Great Britain'. (1959: 296, emphasis added)

modern politically correct patrol (a type hypocritical moralistic behaviour that is quite popular nowadays) or take some of his conservative critics to a truly cathartic joy.

> We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Kanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow. (Marx, 1853a)

It is inexcusable to take out of context such affirmation in order to inflict any moral sanction to its author. Till this point of the famous *The British Rule in India*, published in the New York Daily Tribune by June 25, 1853, Marx condemned with vehemence the brutal violence brought to India by British domination standing out its peculiar economic face with relation to previous forms of domination over that country. To let him talk through his own words:

> There cannot, however, remain any doubt but that the misery inflicted by the British on Hindostan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindostan had to suffer before. I do not allude to European despotism, planted upon Asiatic despotism, by the British East India Company, forming a more monstrous combination than any of the divine monsters startling us in the Temple of Salsette. This is no distinctive feature of British Colonial rule, but only an imitation of the Dutch (…).England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindoo, and separates Hindostan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history. (Marx, 1853a)

Next, he describes in very general terms the type of social formation that was being dissolved under such ignominy, the so-called *village system*. Marx then says that this stereotype form of social organism is being dissolved 'not so much through the brutal interference of the British tax-gatherer and the British soldier, as to the working of English steam and English free trade'. Thus, he says that this dissolution is brought about by the destruction of India's economic base.

Finally we can go back to the first quotation of the referred article in this paper. It must be clear now that on that passage Marx was throwing away any kind of romantic assessment on the analysis of pre-capitalist societies. In another words, he was demystifying the idyllic character of that sort of community. It was, without no doubt, the conflict among a brutal form of social domination against another brutal form of social domination, though substantially different ones. Moreover, his approach on Hindu religion is a perfectly historical materialist one. He analyses

religion in the basis of the material development of that society, i.e., taking into account the relation of those human beings within nature. Polytheism is suitable with that specifically high level of submission to nature, in comparison to modern capitalist society.

Nevertheless, Marx does not stop here and problems do arise:

> England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution". (Marx, 1853a)

It is clear that in this sentence history seems to bear subjectivity. Well, what would be mankind's destiny in such perspective? Communism? Unfortunately (and Marx was certainly aware of this) this cannot be guaranteed. What about India? Should the country necessarily follow the European steps towards industrial capitalism? Truth is that regardless the answer it would not change the fact that the composition reveals a teleological perspective about history otherwise unthinkable in Marxian terms as showed above in the previous section.

Before we go on let us illustrate such misconception with some passages extracted from an article that was supposed to conclude his observations on India published in the same newspaper, by August 8, 1853, with the title *The Future Results of British Rule in India.* Here, this sort of Eurocentric historical determinism is even more explicit[27].

> Such a country and such a society, were they not the predestined prey of conquest? (...) India, then, could not escape the fate of being conquered, and the whole of her past history, if it be anything, is the history of the successive conquests she has undergone. Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. (Marx, 1853b)

What kind of society 'has no history at all'? Is it the incapacity of building a centralized modern State, a sort of 'hegelian prejudice' as imputed to Engels by Roman Rosdolsky (1991), or some society's incapacity of independently making it's own history?[28] Further on the article he talks about political unity as a positive result of British domination, something more consolidated than ever in India by that time, and as the first condition for the countries regeneration, putting special hopes on the introduction of a 'free press" and the opening of communication veins between the country and the rest of the world (specially within Europe). If this interpretation is correct, such texts gives margin for the idea of necessary stages of development towards an emancipated society, as the emergence of a bourgeois State would necessarily have to be accomplished. This is not only

---

[27] By this we mean that such passages can be interpreted as suggesting that Marx was acknowledging the need for pre-capitalist countries to follow European countries development path in order to create the necessary conditions for social emancipation.

[28] 'What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society'. (Marx, 1853b)

contradictory with Marx theory of history (as already noted) but also was later abandoned on Marx analyses on each and every level of abstraction, i.e., even in for conjectural analysis as such. In this way, those passages, in some sense, justify Britain's imperialism as a sort of necessary evil. In Marx's words: "The question, therefore, is not whether the English had a right to conquer India, but whether we are to prefer India conquered by the Turk, by the Persian, by the Russian, to India conquered by the Briton". (Marx, 1853b)

2.2. The evolution of Marx's thoughts about the colonies and the non-capitalist world

When one look at those passages it is hard not to conclude that Marx (let alone Engels) saw the future of non-capitalist world in a narrow deterministic and Eurocentric way. But then is not also true that before coming to this conclusion one should also try to understand this position in its context? In this sense, Eric Hobsbawm (1992: 34-35), speaking about that kind of accusation directed against Engels, points out correctly that "it is sheer anachronism to criticize him [Engels] for his essential stance, which was shared by every impartial mid-nineteenth-century observer". The principles that guided the theoretical thought about *nations* and *nationalism* back then recognized the absorption of smaller nations as the result of progress indeed.

One can always assert that this is no excuse to Marx's position, although it could certainly help us to clarify the constitution of his ideas. But it seems to us, then, that the reason why this accusations of 'Eurocentric-determinism' cause so much discomfort when directed towards Marx arrives precisely because this conception is rather strange to his view of history.

We believe that to address properly this question – of whether or not did Marx held an 'Eurocentric-deterministic' view – the first thing that must be done is to look at the evolution of Marx's thought. According to Kohan, as mentioned elsewhere, there really are in Marx early writings an undoubted 'barbarism-civilization' dichotomy. This view would be slowly abandoned from 1850's on, leading him first to more dialectical approach towards non-capitalist world, and then to a truly new paradigm, in which there were no place to that opposition. It is true though that some critics of Marx's thought do take those accusations further and affirm that even in his late works, like *Capital*, there still are signs of a linear determinism.

Those critics argue that Marx's description of capitalist mode of production simply took into account the features of British society and then supposed that the whole world should follow that same path. So any non-capitalist nation would *inevitably* just follow British primitive accumulation path, turning themselves into capitalist countries (and then, when capitalist crises downfall comes, become socialists). We have already tried to show how wrong such an interpretation is previously in this paper. But we should emphasize here that the notion of *classic form* attributed by Marx to the development of British capitalism has nothing to do with a Eurocentric and deterministic perspective. On the contrary, following Lukács (1978), one should take the notion of *classic form* as

the expression of capitalist laws operating in its purest form.[29]

Anderson (2010: 196) maintains that three strands would mark Marx's shift of position towards the non-capitalist world: the first one being his work on *Capital* French edition; the second strand being his interest in non-Western societies, from 1879 to 1882;[30] and his writings about Russia, from 1877 to 1882, being the third strand. Still according to Anderson, this changes were gradually developed since the 1850's, already appearing in Marx's *Grundrisse* a *multilinear* (or better yet, we would say a *non-linear*) perspective on the social development of non-typically capitalist countries. Notwithstanding it is possible to see through the period of each strand the evolution of his ideas.

That is why although this change was produced rather gradually, in its last moment it was established a landmark to the debate (sometimes even conceived as a turning point): the vision expressed by Marx in his correspondence with Vera I. Zasulich, in 1881. Zasulich, a Russian revolutionary activist, wrote a letter to Marx on February 16, 1881, acknowledging *Capital* as an opus of great influence on Russian revolutionary movement and asking him about his opinions on the "agrarian question" and the prospects for a revolution in Russia. In her letter, she writes:

> For there are only two possibilities. Either the rural commune, freed of exorbitant tax demands, payment to the nobility and arbitrary administration, is capable of developing in a socialist direction, that is, gradually organising its production and distribution on a collectivist basis. In that case, the revolutionary socialist must devote all his strength to the liberation and development of the commune.
>
> If, however, the commune is destined to perish, all that remains for the socialist, as such, is more or less ill-founded calculations as to how many decades it will take for the Russian peasant's land to pass into the hands of the bourgeoisie, and how many centuries it will take for capitalism in Russia to reach something like the level of development already attained in Western Europe. (Zasulich, 1983: 98)

She goes on explaining that a lot of people that defended the later hypothesis - i.e., that the 'rural commune was an archaic form condemned to perish by history' – called themselves Marx's 'disciples *par excellence*: "Marksists" [sic]', and often had as their strongest argument 'Marx said so'. (idem: 99)

Marx's reply took almost a month, on March 8, 1881, and his delay may reflect some discomfort with the content, although his bad health conditions were certainly a problem.[31] He outlined four drafts before giving his letter a very concise final form. In his response, Marx starts by

---

[29] In Lukács (1978: 116) words: 'If we are to understand correctly Marx's concept of classical development, we must insist, on this question, too, on its completely value-free and objective character. What Marx calls "classical" is simply a development in which the economic forces that are ultimately determinant find an expression that is clearer, more perceptible, less disturbed and refracted than elsewhere'.

[30] See Krader (1972).

[31] See Marx (1983a: 123).

quoting *Capital* to conclude that 'The "historical inevitability" of this course', he means the so-called primitive accumulation, 'is therefore expressly restricted to the countries of Western Europe',[32] and in consequence that:

> The analysis in *Capital* therefore provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian commune. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. But in order that it might function as such, the harmful influences assailing it on all sides must first be eliminated, and it must then be assured the normal conditions for spontaneous development. (Marx, 1983a: 124)

There Marx shows no sign of disregard for rural workers, as those supposed present when he spoke of the 'idiocy' of the peasantry.[33] On the contrary, the rural commune appears on the very center of the revolutionary possibilities to Russia.

Marx makes his rejection to those 'Marksist' analyses mentioned by Zasulich even more explicit in his previous drafts to the letter. According to Marx (1983b: 100), 'the only conclusion they would be justified in drawing from the course of things in the West is the following: If capitalist production is to be established in Russia, the first step must be to abolish communal property and expropriate the peasants, that is, the great mass of the people'. That is precisely why, in his opinion 'From a historical point of view, the only serious argument in favour of the *inevitable dissolution* of communal property in Russia is as follows: *Communal property existed everywhere in Western Europe, and it everywhere disappeared with the progress of society*'. (idem: 101)

Of course, that was not a simple question (as Marx himself admits in his final answer). In all first three drafts of his letter, Marx goes on from that point to an extensive discussion about the character of the Russian rural commune. And in all cases he explicitly denies the necessity of this linear development by observing that the rural commune, rather than merely an 'archaic' form of occupation of land, was bearer of a 'unique combination of circumstances'. As he puts on his first draft:

> My answer is that, thanks to the unique circumstances in Russia, the rural commune, which is still established on a national scale, may gradually shake off its primitive characteristics and directly develop as an element of collective production on a national scale. Precisely because it is contemporaneous with capitalist production, the rural commune may appropriate all its positive achievements without undergoing its frightful vicissitudes. Russia does not live in isolation from the modern world, and nor has it fallen prey, like East Indies, to a conquering foreign power. (Marx, 1983b: 105-6)

---

[32] As Anderson (2010) points out this 'restriction' to Western Europe of capitalist course of development was a difference stressed in *Capital*'s French edition, as reviewed by Marx.

[33] As mentioned before we do not think that such claims deserve as much attention was it was driven by its critics. Nonetheless, the main point here is to show that in Marx`s letter to Zasulich, peasantry is not only not treated as reactionary force but also seen as a revolutionary one.

In his second draft he makes this even clearer, as he points out that 'The archaic or primary formation of our globe itself contains a series of layers from various ages, the one superimposed on the other'.[34] In these very rich texts, Marx leaves no doubt about the open character of history in his perspective, for not only he admits the possibility of the 'archaic' rural commune develops in a different way (rather than the mere capitalist expropriation), but also he perceives the need of studies about history of the 'decline of primitive communities' and all its 'twists and turns'. (1983b: 107-8 *et passim*)

One important feature of the passage above is that Marx sees the relationship of 'archaic' Russia with the 'advanced' capitalist world as an essential element to understand why Russia could actually have taken a different way. A glimpse about the nature of this relationship would also appear in the preface of 1882 to the Russian edition of the *Manifesto*. There Marx and Engels start recognizing the role of Russia (and United States) in mid-nineteenth-century developments of capitalism. However from its initial reactionary role, the still 'archaic' Russia would jump ahead of most European modern civilizations in its revolutionary possibilities. In their words:

> During the Revolution of 1848-9, not only the European princes, but the European bourgeois as well, found their only salvation from the proletariat just beginning to awaken in Russian intervention. The Tsar was proclaimed the chief of European reaction. Today, he is a prisoner of war of the revolution in Gatchina, and *Russia forms the vanguard of revolutionary action in Europe*. (Marx and Engels, 1969. Emphasis added)

In short, we have tried to show along these last pages that even though the 'Eurocentric-determism' hypothesis can be found in some of Marx's writings, so does the opposite view. This must be analysed, however, through the evolution of Marx's thought that led him to progressively drift away from prejudices of his time, and conceive a broader range of interests and possibilities about the effective historical course of development.

3. Conclusion

Through this paper we have tried to present Marx's views on colonies and the non-capitalist world. As pointed out on section 2, the hypothesis that Marx held an Eurocentric-deterministic perspective is grounded, above all, in his early writings. There, in some passages, the author indeed does seems to believe in the progressiveness of capitalist development, in spite of the savagery involved in the introduction of capitalism in the colonies.

Nevertheless, the thesis we put forward here is that one should understand such claims by considering: first, the evolution of the Marx's own perspective on this subject across the time; second, the general orientation of Marx's theory of history, as outlined in some of his major works

[34] Marx (1983b: 103). There are clearly links here with the question of *uneven and combined development*, so much debated further on by Marxists, although we cannot treat of it now.

(especially in *German Ideology* and in some of his latter works, such as the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*); and third, the contradictory character of historical development itself, which one's lack of recognition implies the impossibility of realizing that the emergence of capitalist production may be, indeed, both 'progressive' and 'savage'.

On the opening section we have recalled Kohan's two 'paradigms' theory. Kohan is right in drawing attention on the evolution of Marx's ideas. For if the 'Eurocentric-determinist' hypothesis can be corroborated in some of Marx works, so can be the opposite view (as shown in 2.2). In that sense, when that hypothesis is overstated forgetting all Marx latter efforts on the subject, what one have is nothing but an incomplete (and sometimes dishonest) approach to Marx's conception of the relations among different countries in the world market.

However we do not fully agree with Kohan either. First of all, because he does not give proper attention to the fact that Marx had developed, at least since the end of 1840's, a theory of history that was in no ways linear or deterministic (this was extensively debated in 1.2). This leads to an apparent incongruence in Marx's theory of history. On the one hand, we have his early statements on the progressiveness of capitalist production (operated by progress of productive forces) and the backwardness of non-capitalist world. On the other, we have his defence of history openness, also drafted already in his early writings though later developed. One of the keys to understand this contradiction is found in the contradictory character of his object of study, of capitalism itself; another might be to give a close look to Marx's intention when writing its different texts (which, of course, implies in difference among the levels of abstraction applied), for if he does states that India has no history in 1853, he was certainly not intending to advance on that article a general theory of history (as he does earlier on the *German Ideology*).

We do not mean that Marx always had it perfectly clear. His disregard towards non-capitalist world, his relative indifference with the destiny of Indian and Chinese societies etc. may be seen as a partial apprehension of the process, based solely on one side of that contradiction. However, the remarkable unity in Marx's theory of history (let us say: at least from 1845-46 to the end of his life, as showed by his writings on Russia) is confirmed by the evolution of his analyses of the periphery of capitalism, instead of being denied by then. The direction of those changes is such that his late analyses of the peripheral are perfectly compatible with his early theory of history. Although he might have fallen for prejudices (typical of his time), the general sense of his work points in another direction and leaves no room to a simplified notion of 'progress', taken as linear, deterministic, straight forward etc. If we should not expect from Marx more that he could give, we certainly must not give up what he had to offer.

References:

Anderson, K. (2010). *Marx at the margins: on Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Bettelheim, C. (1975). *Cultural Revolution and industrial organization in China: changes in management and the division of labour*. New York: Monthly Review.

Bukharin, N. (1925). *Historical Materialism: a system of sociology*. New York: International Publishers. Source: Marx-Engels Internet Archive.

Cohen. G. (2000) *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defence*. Oxford: Oxford University.

Hobsbawm, E. (1987). *Age of empire, 1875-1914*. New York: Pantheon Books.

_____. (1992). *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kohan, N. (1998). *Marx en su (Tercer) Mundo: hacia un socialismo no colonizado*. Buenos Aires: Biblos.

Lawson, T. (1997). *Economics and Reality*. London: Routledge.

Llanos, A. (1988). *Introdução à Dialética*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.

Lukács, G . (1978) *Marx's basic ontological principles. The ontology of social being 2*. London: Merlin.

_____. (2008). *A luta entre progresso e reação*. In: *G. Lukács. Socialismo e Democratização, escritos políticos 1956-1971*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ.

_____. (2010) *Prolegômenos para uma ontologia do ser social*. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial.

Krader, L. (Ed.). (1972). *The ethnological notebooks of Karl Marx*. Assen: Van Gorcum.

Mandel, E. (1972). *O Capitalismo Tardio*. São Paulo: Abril Cultural.

Marx, K. (1853a). The British Rule in India. *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 25, 1853.

_____. (1853b). The Future Results of british rule in India. *New-York Daily Tribune*, August 8, 1853.

_____. (1959). *Capital: critique of political economy.* Volume I. Moscow: Progress Publishers. Source: Marx-Engels Internet Archive (www.marxists.org).

_____. (1959b). *Capital: critique of political economy.* Volume III. Moscow: Progress Publishers. Source: Marx-Engels Internet Archive (www.marxists.org).

_____. (1964). *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. New York: International Publishers. Source: Marx-Engels Internet Archive (www.marxists.org).

_____. (1977). *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. Source: Marx-Engels Internet Archive (www.marxists.org).

_____. (1983). Letter to Zasulich. 8 March, 1881. In: T. Shanin (Ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian road: Marx and the 'peripheries of capitalism'*. New York: Monthly Review.

_____. (1983b). Drafts of a reply (February/March). In: T. Shanin (Ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian road: Marx and the 'peripheries of capitalism'*. New York: Monthly Review.

Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1968). *German Ideology*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. (Marx/Engels Internet Archive, 2000)

_____. (1969). Manifesto of Communist Party. In: K. Marx & F. Engels, *Marx/Engels Selected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. Source: Marx-Engels Internet Archive (www.marxists.org)

Mcllelan, D. (1983) A Concepção Materialista da História. In: E. Hobsbawn. (Org.) *História do Marxismo*, vol. I (O Marxismo no tempo de Marx). Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.

Overbeek, H. & Silva, P. (1986). *Marx y el Tercer Mundo*. Revista Mexicaa de Sociologia, Vol. 48, nº 1, pp. 115 – 134. Ciudad de Mexico: UNAM.

Rosdolsky, R. (1977). *The Making of Marx's Capital*. Bristol: Pluto Press.

_____. (1991). Engels and the 'Nonhistoric' Peoples: The National Question in the Revolution of 1848. *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 18 (special issue).

Zasulich, V. I. (1983). Letter to Marx (16 February, 1881). In: T. Shanin (Ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian road: Marx and the 'peripheries of capitalism'*. New York: Monthly Review.