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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.1177/09213740241274454

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Peer reviewed

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Cultural Dynamics
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–8
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DOI: 10.1177/09213740241274454

journals.sagepub.com/home/cdy



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Abstract

In this article, I explore Karl Marx's evolving understanding of the temporal dimensions within capitalism, particularly focusing on his reflections during the 1850s and 1860s. This period marks a significant shift in Marx's theoretical framework, prompted by his in-depth analysis of the world market and diverse modes of exploitation. The article highlights coexisting forms of exploitation and their entanglement in terms of temporalities. From this perspective, capitalism and its history can be investigated as a complex interplay of temporal layers rather than a linear progression. Marx's 1858 letter serves as a starting point, emphasizing the importance of accumulation as a long-term process and the challenges of a revolutionary project in a globalized capitalist context. Finally, the paper emphasizes Marx's mature writings, where he envisions the potential for combining historical layers to challenge capitalism. This nuanced understanding has contemporary implications for globalized capitalism and social change discussions.

Keywords

capitalism, slavery, world market, temporalities, original accumulation, historical layers

In a letter of October 8, 1858, after having written hundreds of pages of the *Grundrisse* and having seen the crisis dissolve without any kind of overthrow of the capitalist mode of production, Marx drafts for Engels an initial statement on the reorganization of capital after the crisis:

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There is no denying that bourgeois society has for the second time experienced its 16th century, a 16th century which, I hope, will sound its death knell just as the first ushered it into the world. The proper task of bourgeois society is the creation of the world market, at least in outline, and of the production based on that market. Since the world is round, the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan would seem to have completed this process. For us, the difficult question is this: on the Continent revolution is imminent and will, moreover, instantly assume a socialist character. Will it not necessarily be crushed in this little corner of the earth, since the *movement* of bourgeois society is still, in the *ascendant* over a far greater area?

This letter set the course for Marx's theoretical and political work throughout the 1860s. Marx raised at least three crucial issues. The "second sixteenth century" of capitalism forces us to think of accumulation as a long-term process. Capitalist accumulation cannot, therefore, be limited to the protohistory of the capitalist mode of production. Second, not only theoretical analysis, but also political analysis, has to be thought in terms of the world market. The world is round, and the world-market creates connections between different geographic areas and different forms of exploitation. Capitalism cannot be analyzed simply by looking at the nations where it is most highly developed. Neither should we imagine that these nations are the locomotive that tows the other cars of the train. Finally, and, indeed, as a result of these reflections, Marx asked himself, as well as his friend Engels, what possibilities of success a revolution might have – and *not* only in one single country but *even* a European revolution – in the face of the globalization of the market. Without an international perspective, the revolution would necessarily be crushed. These three points, which made up Marx's frame for his work over the following years, were to be ignored in much of twentieth-century Marxism. And with serious consequences. Whereas after the crisis at the end of the '50s, while investigating the relationships between the various forms of exploitation, Marx sought a theoretical and political repositioning in terms of the world market, much of Marxism opted for guaranteed roads to socialism, either in one country alone, or to communism at the high points of capitalist development. With these problems to consider, we must reconsider the entire theoretical framework of Marx's analysis.¹

Layers of exploitation within the world market

Science and technology, both in its description in *Capital* and in the *Grundrisse*, work as productive forces objectified in fixed capital. What changes between the two descriptions, between those of '57-'58 and that of 1867, is the theoretical framework. Considering an increase in the productive force, Marx encounters a number of difficulties, which comes from the consideration of exchange value as labor time effectively objectified in a product, and not as socially necessary labor time.

During the 1860s Marx reconsidered his previous perspective on value and the problem posed in the *Grundrisse* and relative to the collapse of the law of value became senseless: not only "machines create no new value" (Marx, 1996: 390), but their diffusion

in a given branch of production also eliminates the possibility of obtaining extra surplus value that their sporadic introduction permitted:

As the use of machinery becomes *more general* (*Verallgemeinerung*) in a particular industry, the social value of the product sinks down to its individual value, and the law that *surplus value does not arise from the labour-power that has been replaced by the machinery, but from the labour-power actually employed in working with the machinery, asserts itself* (Marx, 1996: 409-10).

When a technological innovation has been diffused, the growth of productive power of labor obtained through its use becomes socially dominant and the possibility of gaining higher quantities of social surplus-value by means of the production of relative surplus-value is reduced. Machines, therefore, stated Marx during the 1860s, do not create value; they transfer their own value to the product. These artificial forces are, however, able to extend the working day beyond natural limits: not only until the workers are physically and mentally worn out, turning day and night into a continuum, but also, through increased productive force, until 30 or more hours of socially necessary labor time have been obtained within the natural limit of the 24 hours. Newton's absolute time ceases to be the natural measure. It is replaced by socially necessary labor-time, the universal measure of human labor subsumed in capital.

These analyses, and the comparison of different forms of production and different forms of uprising, are what opened new perspectives for Marx, even if he did not always explore all of them fully. It became possible for him to imagine the capitalist mode of production not according to a pattern defined by *origin, development, and crisis*, but rather as a constantly concurrent combination of those three moments and of their temporalities. *Original accumulation (ursprüngliche Akkumulation)* was to be conceived *not* as an initial form, but, rather, as an always-present method of the extortion of surplus-labor. Herein lay the possibility of a non-historicist interpretation of the different modes of production.

As the case of the American colonies shows, the flight of workers is the fundamental problem of the accumulation of capital from 1500 to 1800 (Boutang, 1998: 25). The purpose of English legislation in the 16th and 17th centuries is the immobilization and disciplining of labor-power, even through slavery which, "far from representing an abnormal excrescence in the colonies . . . [it] constitutes an authoritarian, homogenous response of control of the mobility on the European and North-American labor-market, of which indenture is a particular declination" (Boutang, 1998: 175). Capitalist slavery arises from the control and discipline of wage laborers. It is not the slave trade that produces the slave, but bonded wage labor that produces the modern forms of slavery (Boutang, 1998: 244). Slavery is not a residual of pre-modern times, but it is one form of exploitation of labor adequate to the modern capitalist mode of production. Original accumulation, which is not confinable to a historical moment located at the dawning of the capitalist mode of production, is constantly reproduced by the capitalist mode of production itself. Through the means of the state and colonial violence, it disciplines workers, limits their movements, and creates new forms of compulsory labor.

The problem that Marx manages to pose at the end of the 1860s regards the co-existence of various forms of exploitation, their interweaving as regards the relationship between absolute surplus-value and relative surplus-value, on the basis of the capitalist need to obtain ever increasing quantities of absolute surplus-value able to support the labor intensified through technological innovations. Hence, the importance of extra-economic means in order to manage to squeeze as much surplus-value as possible out of the great mass of workers: the disciplinary power of the state on Chinese workers (Ngai 2005); new forms of forced labor around the world;² racism and the production of insecurity in migrant workers (Gambino and Sacchetto, 2013).

The process of accumulation is characterized, as Rosa Luxemburg realized in 1913, by the intervention of extra-economic elements. An important difference from Luxemburg's argument is that accumulation does not necessary require non-capitalist areas. Accumulation's processes also take advantage of the differences between national and local wages, intensity and productivity of labor-forces. These differences are also created by extra-economic factors, such as the imposition of new ethnic divisions of labor or the total blackmailing of migrant workers who are without residence permits. Thus, alongside the terrorism of separation of the workers from the means of production, there is also the continual recourse to violent extra-economic means to increase the absolute exploitation of the workforce both in terms of intensity and hours worked. The globe was the theater for the genesis of the capitalist mode of production. In Marx's terms, "world trade and world market date from the sixteenth century, and from then on the modern history of capital starts to unfold" (Marx, 1996: 248).³ This is a history founded on extermination and enslavement:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the *chief momenta of primitive accumulation*. On their heels treads the *commercial war* of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre (Marx, 1996: 739).

According to Marx, the different momenta of original accumulation distribute themselves now, more or less in geographical and "chronological order (*zeitliche Reihenfolge*)," from Spanish colonialism to the European trade wars, they arrive at a "systematical combination" in England, "embracing the colonies, the national debt, the modern mode of taxation, and the protectionist system" (Marx, 1996: 739). All these systems required economic and extra-economic violence.

Violence and history

Capital comes into the world with blood, displaying its deadly side right from the very beginning. This violence is extreme "in plantation-colonies destined for export trade only, such as the West Indies, and in rich and well-populated countries, such as Mexico and India, that were given over to plunder" (Marx, 1996: 741). The tones on the civilizing

nature of British colonialism of the '50s are long gone. In an article published in 1853, Marx wrote that English colonialism in India would have a “double mission . . . : one being destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (MECW 12: 217-8). In the *Grundrisse*, Marx regarded the “propagandistic (civilising) tendency” (MECW, 28: 466) of capital positively, and believed in the thoroughness with which British colonial industrial capital would destroy non-capitalist societies in the process of its worldwide expansion. He also stressed the “great civilising influence of capital” (MECW, 28: 336) in order to reach a new stage of society. However, after he had investigated the competition of capitals and the intertwining of different forms of exploitations, after his research on the history of colonialism in India, Ireland, America, and elsewhere, Marx changed his perspective. This concerns colonial violence, the treatment of the populations of the colonies by Christian Europe, the colonial administration of Holland, the stealing of men in Celebes to procure slaves for Java. The colonial system promoted the development of the industrialist capitalist system, but this was hardly progressive history (Anderson, 2010). The historical material assembled by Marx in these pages is used to tell the counter-history of a development that was possible through the “great slaughter of the innocents” (Marx, 1996: 745). This change of view on India is clear in the late Marx. In 1881 he wrote: “as for the East Indies, for example, everyone except Sir Henry Maine and others of his ilk realizes that the suppression of communal landownership out there was nothing but an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people not forwards but backwards” (MECW, 24: 365). The supposed ‘regenerating’ side of colonial capitalism disappears, and the destruction of the native industry of India or Ireland by British capital is no longer regarded as ‘revolutionary’. The destruction of the common possession of land is no longer depicted as progressive, but instead as a regressive phenomenon.

Marx wants to understand the entanglement of different forms of production like slavery and the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, slavery, subsumed in the capitalist mode of production inasmuch as it becomes labor destined for world commerce, takes on a new form in which the *rhythm* and *intensity* of labor are regulated by the clocks of the world stock markets. Thus, the development of the “international character of the capitalistic regime,” leads to the “entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world market” Marx (Marx, 1996: 750). Insofar as forms of slave labor enter the world market, they can no longer be considered as having been left over from former times (Tomich, 2003). The network of the world market not only supports various forms of exploitation by simultaneously combining them, but it also puts different working populations in contact with one another. Here Marx indicates not only a scheme of historical analysis in terms of the present, i.e., the combination of the forms of exploitation in the world market, but he also indicates the level that the organization of labor must assume.

There is capitalist development that tends to destroy and subsume pre-existing forms of production; there is the state violence that destroys pre-existing legal forms to make room for new formally free workers and private property relationships; there are new concentrations of workers that configure new forms of conflict within the capitalist society; there are pre-existing historical forms in tension with the extra-economic violence of original accumulation. The historical dialectic characterized by the capital-labor

contradiction is now complicated by adding historical-social layers in tension with both the state and the capitalist attempt to subsume them into new forms of exploitation. The capitalist mode of production encounters pre-existing forms of production and it “encounters them as antecedents (*Voraussetzungen*), but not as antecedents established by itself, not as forms of its own life process” (MECW, 32: 464). This encounter of different temporal trajectories gives rise to a “heterogeneous mix rather than the destruction of one made by another” (Harootunian, 2015: 206). Capital subsumes and re-configures pre-existing forms of production in a new framework, and the result is a “heterogeneous mix” of temporalities and forms of life and production. Capitalist subsumption characterizes the encounter/collision between the temporality of the capitalist mode of production and different temporalities. The capitalist form of subsumption, which Marx calls *formal* could be understood as a *form* that denotes how the capitalist mode of production encounters and subsumes existing forms without creating a homogeneous world. Indeed, the capitalist mode of production requires and utilizes hierarchies and differences, which it configures in terms of different temporalities. The expansion of capital and its constant attempt to subsume different forms of production into the global market generates a multiplicity of temporal frictions, asynchronies and anachronisms that, on the one hand, capital uses to its own advantage, and, on the other hand, give rise to a multiplicity of conflicting elements and possibilities for the re-orientation of the trajectories of modernity.

It is in his mature writings that Marx becomes particularly attentive to the possibilities of a political combination of historical layers. In his well-known reply to Vera Zasulich, who asked him whether the rural commune was an archaic form condemned to perish by history (Shanin, 1983: 98-99), Marx wrote that the analysis of *Capital* provides no reasons “either for or against the viability of the rural commune, but the special study I have made of it [...] has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia” (MECW, 24: 371). In the first draft of the letter, Marx wrote that Russia is not constrained to pass through the “the fatal dissolution of the Russian peasants’ commune” (MECW, 24: 349), which could instead become “an element of collective production on a nationwide scale” (MECW, 24: 349). According to Marx, the “history of the decline of primitive communities (it would be a mistake to place them all on the same level [*sur la même ligne*]; as in geological formations [*formations géologiques*], these historical forms contain a whole series of primary, secondary, tertiary types, etc.) has still to be written” (MECW, 24: 358). Investigating the origin of the German “agricultural commune” as the “the most recent type of the archaic form of societies” (MECW, 24: 352), Marx reinterprets the historical development of western Europe as a period of transition from communal property to private property, as a period of transition from the *primary* to the *secondary* formation, depending on the geological metaphor employed. In the historiographical draft of Marx, there are two acquisitions that should not to be missed: on the one hand, this passage, limited to the history of western Europe, does not determine in any way whatsoever a historical law on the dissolution of communal property;⁴ on the other hand, the geological metaphor expresses an overlapping of layers, not a succession of stages. The *secondary* layer is superimposed on the *primary* layer without cancelling it out. The materialist historian, treating historical periods like geological eras, can render

the various strata visible at one and the same time. The historical forms, arranging themselves not according to the linearity of the past and present but as “geological formations” in which the *then-and-there* co-exists alongside the *here-and-now* makes it possible to think in terms of the simultaneous presence of temporalities on a plane and not according to the image of a linear vector. The encounter between different historical temporalities can ignite new possibilities of liberation where the Russian commune can anticipate a form of non-capitalist economy.

Marx’s perspective is not romantic. The archaic, being contemporary, is not condemned to die, but can be combined with the temporality of the working class struggles, thus giving rise to a new social formation that is alternative to the capitalist modernity. Marx’s “geological” vision, in layers, of historical periods does not derive from a reflection on the philosophy of history. Rather, it arises from the need to construct a historiographic paradigm appropriate to the competition between capitals and the combination of different forms of exploitation, on the one hand, and, from the need to consider the entire globe, on the other: the European corner of the world together with the three-quarters of the planet on the plunder of which the wealth of the former is produced.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. This chapter draws freely on Tomba (2013, 2013a).
2. According to the Global Estimates of Modern Slavery, in 2021, 28 million men, women, and children are subjected to forced labor. Among them, nearly one in eight are children, totaling 3.3 million. More than half of these children are exploited in commercial sexual activities. Each year, forced labor generates a staggering 236 billion US dollars in illicit profits: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/50-million-people-worldwide-modern-slavery-0>. See also LeBaron (2019).
3. My friend Dale Tomich has never ceased to remind me of the profound importance of this passage.
4. “But does this mean that in all circumstances [and in all historical contexts] the development of the “agricultural commune” must follow this path? Not at all” (MECW, 24: 352).

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