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World Literature and Economic Hegemony: Free-Trade Imperialism and 'Whole Populations Conjured Out of the Ground' in *The Communist Manifesto*

Chris Andre

The concept of world literature follows historical trends in international economic development, and emerges most forcefully at moments of systemic consolidation. This relationship between the concept of world literature and the state of economic development has been consistent throughout the century and a half of its existence, and continues into the present moment. This can be seen in the most recent manifestation of the concept, beginning in the late 1980s, which figures as the ideological justification of the post-hegemonic system of multinational capitalism. Prior to this, the concept of world literature had functioned as the ideological legitimation of U.S. hegemony, for during the 1960's the emergence of the Latin American Boom and decolonization-era African literatures gave credence to U.S. claims that its hegemonic dominance was productive of the world-wide development of culture.¹ The term "world literature" has shifted remarkably during its historical life, mutating to fulfill a perennial conceptual need for an emblem of the supreme cultural development linked inextricably to each particular stage of economic development.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels present a cultural teleology tied to the perpetual expansion of the capitalist mode of production.

In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (22)

The logic of this move, from "national and local literatures" to "a world literature," is entirely consistent with Marx's understanding of intellectual history as a dependent of economic history. With the liberalization of trade under British hegemonic authority, capitalism spread throughout the world; as a seemingly necessary result, local manifestations of intellectual culture would become enmeshed within a unified intellectual system in a process not unlike that of the subsumption of local economies into international commerce. Marx's concept of "whole populations conjured out of the ground" (Manifesto 23) reflects a movement toward nation-building within the development of a more pervasive economic system, and for Marx it is in the conceptual space between inter-state finance and national politics that "world literature" might be said to have its proper home.

I will be addressing this particular problem, that of the expansion of literature into a unified world-wide system, as an intellectual construction that corresponds to the economic moment within which it operates. In order to assess Marx's position properly, I would like to present a trajectory of positions on this question and simultaneously to place this trajectory within an economic framework based on the progressive expansion of interstate commerce. Each intellectual position corresponds to a particular moment in the development of this socio-economic system and seems to articulate the ideological concerns and demands of the system at diverse historical moments. I will thus move from Goethe, who originated the concept of "world literature," through Marx and Engels, whose position we have just seen, and finally to Gramsci, who theorized the development of something that could be called "world literature" but was obviously responding to economic concerns quite different from either Goethe's or Marx's. The terminus of this trajectory is not, however, Gramsci, for while the contemporary situation of interstate trade differs greatly from that faced by Gramsci, the problem of "world literature" continues to be posed.

The key issue regarding all of these positions will be the situation of each particular conceptualization of "world literature" vis-à-vis "world hegemony," or the dominant ideological formation which allows one particular state to control the economic destinies of a number of other sovereign states. Some recent scholars, particularly Wallerstein and Arrighi, have described the

development of the world economy through the successive operations of world hegemonic orders, its most profound shifts in world order coming with the establishment of British hegemony in the early nineteenth century, and US hegemony in the early twentieth century. Goethe, and by association Hegel, write throughout the early development of British free-trade imperialism, while Marx and Engels write throughout the duration of a consolidated British hegemonic system. Gramsci's work is from the early days of US hegemonic dominance, while the current situation of "world literature" must be understood in light of the collapse of US hegemony.

Toward the end of his long career as one of the dominant European intellectuals, Goethe became increasingly concerned with a concept that he termed "world literature." During the last years of his life he posed this problem numerous times, both in his theoretical writings and in his conversations with Eckermann. In his earlier writings, notably his "Response to a Literary Rabble-Rouser" (1795),² Goethe had stressed the importance of developing a unified German national literature, of constructing a "cultural center" that would provide the proper environment for the production of a unified literature. It was only in the aftermath of the Settlement of Vienna (1815), as Britain reorganized the interstate system along the lines of free-trade imperialism, that Goethe began to discuss the possibilities of a "world literature."

In his essay "On Carlyle's *German Romance*" (*Essays* 206-208), Goethe describes the situation of national literatures in terms of the emergent system of inter-state politics and commerce:

[We] do have hope that unavoidable controversies will gradually become less acrimonious, wars less cruel and victory less arrogant. What points and works toward this goal in the literatures of nations, is what all nations have to recognize. We must get to know the particular characteristics of nations in order to understand them, to be able to have dealings with them. For these idiosyncrasies are like language and currency: they not only facilitate dealings among nations, they make them possible. (207)

Literature functions here as the embodiment of the character of individual nations, as the essential difference which must be understood for an amiable inter-state system to function effi-

ciently. Like language for inter-state political exchange and currency for inter-state economic exchange, literature serves Goethe as a medium of exchange for national idiosyncrasies, as the common intellectual medium through which the characteristics and temperament of nations might be gauged.

For Goethe "world literature" represents neither the effacement of difference between nations, nor the exchange of literatures between various nations, but rather the intellectual community which is being created via the medium of literature.³

If we have dared to proclaim the beginning of a European, indeed a world literature, this does not merely mean that the various nations will take note of one another and their creative efforts, for in that sense a world literature has been in existence for some time, and is to some extent continuing and developing. We mean, rather, that contemporary writers and all participants in the literary scene are becoming acquainted and feel the need to take action as a group because of inclination and public-spiritedness. (225)

Goethe's argument here, which he himself refers to as "the free exchange of ideas," coincides with the development of inter-state economic exchange at an unparalleled rate, with the emergence of the liberalized free-exchange of goods and services under the direction of Britain. The "silent, almost secret congregation" of writers, publishers and distributors thus forms the equivalent, in the realm of literature, to the free trade espoused by British liberal ideologues.

An interesting marginal note to Goethe's program is Hegel's philosophy of the state, outlined in the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), wherein the state as an object of knowledge appears only after it has been historically superseded. When Hegel writes that "the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk" (13), he intends not only to show that philosophical systems become comprehensible only after the period they represent has entered its decline, but more specifically that the concept of the state has become a possible object of knowledge only after the age of the absolute state has entered its twilight. As with Goethe's dialectic between the socio-historical facticity of national literatures and the "public-spiritedness" of world literature, Hegel shows how the outlines of the state appear only after the thorough development

of an inter-state system. The state is revealed against a backdrop of inter-state interactions, for it is only with the emergence of this greater economic logic that the operations of the lesser social unit come into relief.

It is precisely this same shift, from the limited sphere of the nation to the ever-expanding domain of capitalism, that motivates the discussion of world literature in *The Communist Manifesto*. Here, Marx and Engels take for granted the rapid expansion of the capitalist system, to the extent that communism as they understand it must function as the political embodiment of the capitalist world-system. Proletarian interventions into national politics are only so many paving stones on the long march from the Congress of Vienna to proletarian control of the global economic system.

The problem of national identity is a crucial element of this historical movement, for while the proletariat is seen to be contained by states, their identity is not constituted by the state. Proletarian identity in practice is purely material, relating each proletarian on a purely individual level to the local forces of industrial production; Marx and Engels aspire to making proletarian identity international by forging a unified consciousness based on each proletarian's insertion into capitalist production. The intermediate stage, between these two distinct levels of consciousness, is that of the nationalized proletariat. While, to quote from the *Manifesto*, "modern industrial labour, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped [the proletarian] of every trace of national character" (30), it is only through the development of national proletarian political structures that Marx and Engels foresee the eventual development of an international proletarian order. "While not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle" (31). Thus the proletarians must first think of themselves as belonging to a particular nation, as being political subjects of their respective nations, in order to surpass the concept of the nation in the greater economic struggle for world dominance.

The year of the *Communist Manifesto*, 1848, marks an important moment in the intensification of capitalist expansion, for in this year the intensive commodification of labor under the market system finally erupted into a series of dramatic revolutions. This is the year of the great national revolutions, yet for Marx and Engels

this year also marks the transitional period between the constraints of national politics and the unfettered development of an international proletarian order.

The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word. National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world-market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto. (40)

While the nation still exists as the basis for bourgeois identity, for the proletariat the nation is merely a political expedience through which to achieve greater economic power.

Goethe had envisaged the development of a world literature through a communion of "public-spirited" literary figures, essentially through the internationalization of bourgeois intellectuals. For Marx and Engels, the conditions which allowed Goethe to imagine this sort of world literature, especially freedom of commerce and the world-market, will lead not to the enhancement of national literatures through international cooperation, but rather to the dissolution of national culture itself. The technologies that would allow for Goethe's world literature, the newspaper in particular and transportation more generally, serve Marx and Engels as the means whereby the proletariat will be united. "This union [of the workers] is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another" (28). The expansive logic of capital, according to Marx and Engels, produces the technical means through which the bourgeoisie will be destroyed, for the expansion of the market unites not just the bourgeoisie but also the proletariat, a proletariat theoretically lacking in national sympathies.

The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous na-

tional and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (*Manifesto* 22)

Returning to this section from the *Manifesto*, we can see the way in which Marx and Engels constitute "world literature" in a manner very different from that of Goethe. This later version of world literature is still based on the expansion of the market system, but the individuality of national literatures has been surpassed by a global unification of culture.

With the development of a single proletarian culture, emerging from "uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto" (40), comes the development of a single literature, a world literature reflecting the conditions of life under capitalism rather than the idiosyncrasies of any given national bourgeoisie. Whether Marx and Engels would see such a world literature persisting after the abolition of private property is hard to determine, for the bourgeois character of literature as it has been constituted would make such a transition difficult indeed. If literature is understood to be the deformation of social reality through language, as would seem to be the case with Marx's analysis of the "purely literary aspect" (48) of German idealist philosophy, then the absolute triumph of the proletariat would seem to instantly outmode literature in favor of a more representational form of linguistic communication. The problem of what exactly constitutes literature as a category, or, more properly, the extent to which literature as a cultural form is inextricably manacled to the capitalist world-system, will recur in the final section of this discussion.

We must first look at another position on the concept of "world literature," from the distinctly different hegemonic scenario following the transition from British free-trade imperialism to US free-world capitalism. This third position, given by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, is one which articulates the difficulties faced by a linguistically and economically peripheral nation when confronted with the systemic imperative for a world literature. Gramsci was writing in the early post World War I period, when the US was restructuring the world-system through an imposition of both the dollar-standard and the concept of national self-determination. Woodrow Wilson's establishment of the Federal Reserve System in 1913 allowed for the easy distribution of a world currency

during the restructuring of the post War global economy, while the League of Nations attempted to insure US control over the political fortunes of all sovereign states. Nationalist movements were encouraged as a means of producing a set of standardized diplomatic units, local political structures committed to the perpetuation of capitalist production, which could be used to control the movement of capital from the core states into peripheral zones. While Gramsci appreciates the U.S. hegemonic imperative for multilateral exchange, which in cultural terms corresponds to the development of a world literature, he is simultaneously faced with the imperative for national development, for the linguistic unification of Italy which would permit entry into multilateral cultural exchange.

Gramsci's debts to Marx are many, particularly with respect to his development of a "philosophy of praxis" (*Prison Notebooks* 332), or the cultural expression emerging from the conditions of the industrial worker. Such a philosophy must, however, address itself to the particular cultural formations allied against it, and in this Gramsci's focus is more consistently on the national level than was Marx's. It must be remembered that between the *Manifesto* and the *Prison Notebooks*, the workers of Europe had been efficiently nationalized by means of increased suffrage, higher wages, and the establishment of social welfare. Gramsci's situation is thus one in which the workers need deliverance from their belief that the state and other cultural institutions (specifically the Catholic Church) represented their particular interests, and that the gains of the entire system will eventually enhance their well-being.

Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis" works primarily at the level of the individual, or the small social group, and accords perfectly with Wilsonian demands for local self-determination within a totalizing world-system. The height of individual development is the nation, for this is the culmination of local power as it exists given the current constraints of US hegemony. The closest Gramsci comes to the definition of a world literature is the concept of a network of nations connected through translation. In this formulation the question of a national language becomes crucial. Since he is writing from the position of a peripheral nation attempting to compete in the free-market system, local dialects must be eliminated in order to produce a coherent understanding of the situation of Italy in terms of this larger entity. As with the ideologues of

the French Revolution, who vowed to annihilate the local *patois* of France in order to produce a unified nation, Gramsci argues that the only means of producing a local understanding of Italy's situation vis-à-vis the world-market is to engender a national language.

Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilised and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history.... While it is not always possible to learn a number of foreign languages in order to put oneself in contact with other cultural lives, it is at the least necessary to learn the national language properly. A great culture can be translated into the language of another great culture, that is to say a great national language with historical richness and complexity, and it can translate any other great culture and can be a world-wide means of expression. But a dialect cannot do this. (325)

The systemic limits of Italian national culture are thoroughly inscribed in this demand for an Italian "national language," in this national development through which Italy will be granted entry into the conceptual sphere of world literature. While the completely cosmopolitan Marinetti called for an end to Italian provincialism with his attack on spaghetti, Gramsci desires to produce only a less limited form of provincialism, allowing for the perpetuation of the free-market system while better defining Italy's position as a nation among nations. Written from a peripheral nation at the onset of US hegemony, Gramsci's position requires the development of a national culture as the means of access to a world literature as either Goethe or Marx described it.

During the decades after Gramsci's death, and the height of US hegemonic power, world literature was a particularly powerful concept for the legitimation of US hegemony, if not in name then at least in theory. Successive waves of writers from peripheral nations, particularly the Boom writers of Latin America and the African novelists of the decolonization era, gave credence to US claims that the expansion of the world-system was indeed encouraging a concomitant global expansion of culture. During the collapse of US hegemony, a progressive collapse beginning sometime around 1970, the unified surface of this conception of world

literature developed a number of fissures and rifts, which were then tactfully paved over by the need for a post-hegemonic cultural legitimation of continued economic expansion.

The concept of world literature has been, and remains, a stabilizing element for national bourgeoisies, a means of producing and maintaining national loyalty through the situation of national writers within a global framework. Contemporary debates regarding the canon focus on the issue of localized identity production, and demands for multicultural curricula represent an implosion, rather than an explosion, of the meaning and use of literature in the production of identity. Such an implosion continues to occur, but it takes place within the context of a cosmopolitan cultural agenda, as it did during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "Whole populations conjured out of the ground" (*Manifesto* 23) may be a trick of history that cannot be repeated, but once they have been conjured, once they have recognized the forces involved in their transmogrification from mud to mass, it is perhaps best to remind them that local cultural production partakes of a global logic. The current, post-hegemonic concept of world literature retains its ideological significance only insofar as the development of local culture can be linked explicitly to the continuing expansion of transnational finance, and then only through the careful planning of marketing agencies and international publishers.

Notes

¹ In between these two moments comes that of critical theory, particularly post-structuralism, which corresponds to the dissolution of US hegemonic dominance and attendant fears (or hopes) that the global economy would collapse as a result of the dissolution.

² *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. John Gearey, trans. Ellen von Nardroff and Ernest H. von Nardroff (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1986) 189-192.

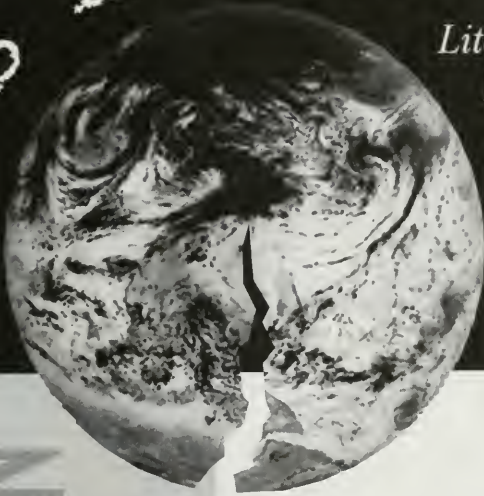
³ Habermas derives his theory of the "bourgeois public sphere" from this particular understanding of "world literature," as the intellectual union of like-minded citizens across state boundaries.

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rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

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