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**“The Expropriators are expropriated”**

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This is one of Marx’s most celebrated sentences, which is to be found towards the end of Chapter 24 of section 7 in *Capital*, Volume One (first published in 1867). It is also one of the most enigmatic. I want to subject it to an exegesis at the same time literary, philological, philosophical, political and even theological: not for the sake of pure erudition (which would concern only “Marxologists”), but to revisit some of the problems which, today, any idea of an *alternative to capitalism* is confronted with, when it may appear that historical capitalism (the category proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein) has entered a transition towards something like an “absolute capitalism”, with some apocalyptic features.<sup>2</sup> I am pursuing simultaneously two objectives: first, to clarify the sense of this formula, through an elucidation of where it comes from and what it does express at this specific place in Marx’s text, written in a certain conjuncture; and second, to reflect on which problems that Marx addressed in his *magnum opus*, but left without a solution, it may indicate. And my underlying question will be: do we have, today, a clearer view of these problems? Or is it the case, on the contrary, that they have become even more enigmatic? Of course, it could be the case that all these questions belong, in fact, to a past that is foreclosed, only worth “the gnawing **criticism** of the **mice**”; but even in that case, it would be worthwhile to undertake a rigorous scrutiny of a formulation and a thinker whose influence has been so great on our history and whose name remains a point of attraction for revolutionary expectations and the critique of dominant ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this text was published in the collective volume (in German): Matthias Greffrath (hsg.), *Das Kapital: Politische Ökonomie im 21. Jahrhundert*, Verlag Kunstmann Berlin 2017.

<sup>2</sup> I prefer to speak hypothetically of « absolute capitalism », rather than simply « neo-liberalism », because I don’t want to just address the dominant ideology, but the social structure itself.

Let me resume from the immediate context in which the formula is introduced, concluding a long syllogism. For lack of room, I only quote the final sentence in the indicated paragraph: "... The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated."<sup>3</sup> The original "German" has : "Die Expropriateurs werden expropriert", which any German reader will immediately identify as a "Fremdwort", an *alien word*, among several others that pepper this eloquent development, in which dialectical form is combined with economic, historical and juridical content (a typically "Marxist" combination). Several others are to be found: "exploitieren", "expropriieren", "Usupatoren", etc., where Marx of course could have used more idiomatic German equivalents. This cannot be a loose stylistic improvisation, since Marx's writing in *Capital Volume One*, is characterized by permanent accuracy in the use of the German language. We know that Marx wanted to be considered a writer as much as a scientist and a political essayist. This should be especially prevalent in a passage that formed the *political conclusion* of the whole book (and, to be sure, were continuously read as such in the Socialist tradition).

Here we face a first difficulty. I speak of a « conclusion », but in which sense and to what extent is that the case? No doubt, the "dialectical" idea of the expropriation of expropriators (also presented by Marx as a "negation of the negation") names the "end" of what Marx described in the book as violent process of transformation of the social relations, which is accomplished historically by capitalism and leads to a "socialization" of the economy. Communism should be able to build on that result, provided it abolished private property and the corresponding power exercised upon labour. We are not surprised, therefore, that Marx immediately adds a *footnote* in which a passage from the *Communist Manifesto*, written (but hardly distributed) 20 years earlier, where the Communist revolution is announced, as the historical achievement of the Proletariat: "The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable (...) Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product. The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their

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<sup>3</sup> English translation from Marx, *Capital Volume One*,

existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history”<sup>4</sup> In other terms, what Marx wants to indicate is the following: what could appear as a prophecy, to which the bloody suppression of the 1848 Revolutions had put an irreversible end, was in fact a very realistic anticipation. Through the analysis of the “historical tendency of capitalist accumulation” proposed by *Capital* on the basis of its “critique of political economy”, it now receives an irrefutable scientific foundation. A knowledge of the “laws” of development of capitalism and a forecast of the proletarian revolution meet precisely on this point. “Marxism”, often conceived as a “fusion” of the revolutionary class struggle and the scientific theory of history, was built precisely on this certainty, for better or worse...

Yes indeed. But. Something is missing in this reading, calling for a “symptomatic reading”, which leads to one of the great puzzles in the history of modern socialism. It is simply the fact that the “revolutionary conclusion” marking the “achievement” of Marx’s argument *is not at the end of the book!* It forms only the last paragraph in the penultimate chapter of the section on “The so-called Primitive Accumulation” (*die sogenannte ursprüngliche Akkumulation*), where Marx describes the origins of capitalism in the violent expropriation of small producers, which mainly took place in England (the “*locus classicus*” of modern capitalism), in the centuries before the industrial revolution. After this chapter comes still another one, on “The Modern Theory of Colonization”, which very few readers really take into account.<sup>5</sup> How can we explain this *decalage*, which prevents the “end” to be located “in the end place”? Given, once again, the careful composition of the book, we can’t just see this as a mistake. We need an explanation matching the content.

One possibility would be simply that the end of Volume One is not the end of the attempted book. Marx’s project evolved continuously, but in his “last” plans, at the time of the publication of Volume One, he projected one or two more volumes, which remained as sketches after his death (later reconstructed and edited by Engels in his own way). Probably Marx believed that these would follow shortly, which would make it possible *then* to draw the practical lessons of the whole demonstration. But this suggestion can be reversed, leading to a reading that is more coherent with the text: after years of intense study of his material (economy, history, factory reports, etc.), Marx was convinced that he could *anticipate* the coming conclusions regarding the *overcoming of capitalism* and the consequences of its *internal contradictions*, at least in a general manner. This was even more necessary since the volume was

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<sup>4</sup> This « quotation » is in reality a *collage* in *inverted order* of two passages at the end of Chapter One of the *Communist Manifesto*.

<sup>5</sup> This is probably a mistake, since this chapter also deserves a « symptomatic reading », e.g. in the following manner: by including this chapter at the end, Marx would suggest that *colonization* is an alternative to *revolution*, or at least is a way to *postpone the revolution*, perhaps indefinitely, perhaps only to prepare a revolution on a *broader* (i.e. a world) scale.

published less than three years after the foundation (1864) of the *international Workingmen's Association* (today known as « First International »), whose General Council Marx coordinated. Through this organization, Marx wanted to interpellate the new generation of activists of the proletarian cause, which he saw as entering a new phase of development.

But if that is the case, why “hide” the announcement of the “expropriation” of capital, as it were, *inside* the text? Here another hypothesis comes to mind. I must admit that, for a long time, I thought it was the most convincing. Quite simply, it refers to *ensorship*. As many other revolutionaries, or subversive writers, Marx had to struggle against this institution all his life. Occasionally he practiced what Leo Strauss famously called the “art of writing” in times of “persecution”.<sup>6</sup> When *Capital Volume One* was published in 1867 with a Hamburg publisher, it needed to pass through the censor’s authorization in the first place. Perhaps Marx reflected that the not so intelligent police officials would look at the table of contents, plus the beginning and end of the book, would see there mere erudition, a “scientific” treatise out of the grasp of the ordinary people, and wouldn’t object. But, Marx, was hoping, real activists would have a closer look: they would find the “expropriation of expropriators” in its place, and this would directly connect with their hopes and political objectives... I am still including Marx’s litigations with censorship in the understanding of his writing, but I am no longer certain that such an explanation is sufficient, because there is an *intrinsic difficulty* about the “conclusions” of the argument in *Capital* that even the “dialectics” of negation of the negation doesn’t entirely resolve. Here, the *decalage* affecting the formulation of the revolutionary outcome of the “historical tendencies” of capitalism must be considered a *symptom*. It had huge consequences in the subsequent history of uses and abuses of Marxism, which are still there with us, because *Capital* hasn’t become a “cold” text, but remains a “hot” text: even today projects and plans of social transformation are made either “with” *Capital* or “against *Capital*” (according to the famous Gramscian motto), but never “apart” from *Capital* with its analyses and prophecies.<sup>7</sup> Therefore we must go to the roots of the difficulties and enigmas harbored by the “expropriation of expropriators” and, following Althusser’s injunction, reveal its internal vacillation through a symptomatic reading.

*Capital* is not only a book left unfinished by its author, essentially it *could not be finished*. Why that? The thesis I want to defend now is: because its principal argument was leading to *several*

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<sup>6</sup> Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (The University of Chicago Press, 1952).

<sup>7</sup> In his *magnum opus*, *The Principle of Hope (Das Prinzip Hoffnung)*, Ernst Bloch contrasted the “hot stream” of Marxism involved in the social struggles and the “cold stream” of institutionalized Marxism. Gramsci, a young theorist and leader of Italian socialism, strongly influenced by the “voluntarism” of Georges Sorel, would greet the October 1917 Revolution in Russia in a piece with the title: “Revolution against Capital”, an extraordinary pun.

*incompatible conclusions*. I will even submit that, becoming aware that there existed this logical uncertainty, did not content himself with a *passive* attitude, a “victim” of his own writing as it were; but he decided *actively* to let some of the latent alternatives within his thought *become manifest* in the text, leaving it to us to draw the consequences – which leads me to suggesting that he “unfinished” *Capital*, in the active sense. Let me show it by returning, first, to the complex references involved in the formula “expropriation of expropriators”, when we read it literally, trying to decrypt the multiple *traces* that overdetermine its meaning.

I just alluded to the strange accumulation of “French” wording, more or less “Germanized”, in the surrounding paragraphs. Marx was born in Trier, a city of Rhineland full of French history and influences, where the memory of Revolution and Napoleonic Empire was very much alive. He was fluent in French and even wrote directly in this language one of his best known early works: *Misère de la philosophie*, against Proudhon (1847). Like some of his closest friends (Heinrich Heine, Moses Hess), he was convinced that France was “the land of politics” (as England was the “land of economy”, and Germany “the land of philosophy”). This accounts for a cultural tradition or a national myth, but there is more: in these passages from *Capital* we may read the insistence and continuity of egalitarian and “proto-communist” movements during the French Revolution, particularly the “Babouvistes” and “Enragés” who thunder against “expropriateurs”, “exploiteurs”, “usurpateurs” and “accapareurs” (neighboring terms with which they defended the peasant uprisings and stigmatized the “new class” of bourgeois owing their properties to the buying of Church estates, the military supplies and surrounding corruption, the privatization of “commons”). Marx, who had wanted to write a history of the *Convention nationale* during the Jacobin period, had received this tradition through direct and indirect sources, the discourse of Utopian Socialism in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century (Saint-Simonian, Fourierist, Blanquist), not least the pioneering book by Lorenz von Stein from which so many passages of the *Communist Manifesto* actually derive.<sup>8</sup> The *quotation* from the *Manifesto* becomes clearer: even without using the word, it brings with it the idea of a “revolutionary dictatorship”, or a politics of *salut public* that counteracts a historical violence with another one of opposite intention. This marks at the same time a *continuity* from the “radical” tendencies of the past “bourgeois” revolution to the future “proletarian” revolution, and a *progress* accomplished (rather: *to be accomplished*) by the latter over the former: in the meantime, the capitalist development will have transformed a utopian objective (equality among the producers) into historical necessity, reflecting the social form of the economy and the “centralization” of the means of production imposed by capital.

I believe that this first layer of interpretation, that is suggested by the hybrid language invented by Marx, is rather indisputable. In a sense, this was not unexpected, because it concords with the use that

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<sup>8</sup> Lorenz von Stein: *Sozialismus und Kommunismus im heutigen Frankreich*, 1841 (?).

Socialist parties, and particularly of course the Bolsheviks, made of the whole passage during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, underpinning the great myth of the *new revolution to come* (the proletarian revolution, after the bourgeois revolution).<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, however, it doesn't exhaust the rhetorical dynamic involved in this figure: "the expropriation of expropriators", or the *redress* of violence turned against itself. At this moment, we must invoke another register of meaning, which is not contained in "pure" politics, but arises from the "impolitical" element, in Roberto Esposito's sense<sup>10</sup>: a religious element that belongs to the treasure of eschatological hopes of liberation, periodically reactivated by apocalyptic and millenarist movements retrieving the tradition of Jewish and Christian Messianism. As I already indicated several times in the past<sup>11</sup>, the formula is a transposition of a key motto in the Book of Isaiah in the Bible : the great Book announcing the liberation of Israel from its enslavement in Babylon, from which then arise the great Christian theme of the "remainder of Israel" – the ancestor of the "Proletariat" – and the messianic name of the Redeemer, called *Emmanuel* or "God with us". In *Isaiah 14, 1-4*, and again *27, 7-9* (King James Version), you can read the prophecy: "*And the people shall take them, and bring them to their place: and the house of Israel shall possess them in the land of the LORD for servants and handmaids: and they shall take them captives, whose captives they were; and they shall rule over their oppressors*", which is clearly a prototype of the formula in *Capital*.<sup>12</sup> Messianism of course is frequent in Marx, especially when it is a question of the revolutionary mission of the Proletariat, a radically disposed class whose rebellion will simultaneously put an end to capitalism and every historical form of a class domination.<sup>13</sup> However, the return of messianicism is especially remarkable in the "conclusion" of *Capital*, because it comes at the end of the long development on the "so-called primitive accumulation", where the expropriation of produces was described as an effect of the *State violence* that paved the way for the accumulation of capital. In this development, we find another messianic formula, which asserts that

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<sup>9</sup> See Reinhard Koselleck: *Vergangene Zukunft Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Suhrkamp 1979 („historische Kriterien des neuzeitlichen revolutionsbegriff“).

<sup>10</sup> Esposito himself borrowed the notion of the *impolitical* (*l'impolitico*) from a long tradition, carried over by Thomas Mann: *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1919). See Roberto Esposito: *Categorie dell'Impolitico*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> See Etienne Balibar: *Violence and Civility* (Columbia University Press) and *Equaliberty* (Duke University Press).

<sup>12</sup> Marx, the son of a Jewish lawyer who converted to Protestantism when he was still a child, did not know Hebrew (although coming from a rabbinic family). He was indeed familiar as any German with the Luther version which reads: „Denn der HERR wird sich über Jakob erbarmen und Israel noch fürder erwählen und sie in ihr Land setzen. Und Fremdlinge werden sich zu ihnen tun und dem Hause Jakob anhangen. Und die Völker werden sie nehmen und bringen an ihren Ort, daß sie das Haus Israel besitzen wird im Lande des HERRN zu Knechten und Mägden, und sie werden gefangen halten die, von welchen sie gefangen waren, und werden herrschen über ihre Dränger“; „Es wird dennoch dazu kommen, daß Jakob wurzeln und Israel blühen und grünen wird, daß sie den Erdboden mit Früchten erfüllen. Wird er doch nicht geschlagen, wie seine Feinde geschlagen werden, und wird nicht erwürgt, wie seine Feinde erwürgt werden; sondern mit Maßen richtest du sie und lässest sie los, wenn du sie betrübt hast mit deinem rauhen Sturm am Tage des Ostwinds.“ The Hebrew writes: ..... (I owe this quotation to my student Lea Spector).

<sup>13</sup> See my essay: « The Messianic Moment in Marx », in E.B. *Citizen Subject. Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, Fordham University Press 2016. I am greatly indebted to the various studies by Michael Löwy on the intersections of Marxism and Jewish Messianicism.

“Violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power.”<sup>14</sup> In the Marxist tradition, this will be used to set up the comparison between the *violence of origins* and the *violence of end*. If you take the two formulas together, you can understand why the “negation of the negation” doesn’t simply have a *logical* meaning: it must evoke a decomposition of the institutional forms of law and politics followed by the “birth” of a New Humanity in the midst of pain (what I called a moment ago the *impolitical*), it is the very symbol of radical historical transformations.<sup>15</sup>

The reading I just proposed pushes the idea of “historical tendency” to the representation of an apocalyptic end. But it is not the only possible one, far from, since it has a reformist *double*, more precisely an *evolutionist double*, in which the forms of capitalist expropriation appear not only as *preparations* but virtual *instruments* of the collective appropriation called *association*, the very social form of future communism. We discover this possibility if we dig out from Volume III a development which, in a sense, is just a twin deduction of the “expropriation of expropriators”, but make a completely different use of the dialectical transformation of private property. As we know, Volume III is made of texts written *before* the completion of Volume One, but published posthumously in a disposition chosen by Engels (much discussed today, but I leave this aside). The passage from chapter 27 on “The Role of Credit in Capitalist Production” has acquired a special interest these days, because of its direct link to the analysis of “financialization of capital”, where Marx’s category of “fictitious capital” is at the same time referred to and criticized.<sup>16</sup> Here is the relevant passage:

“This is the abolition of the capitalist mode of production within the capitalist mode of production itself, and hence a self-abolishing contradiction, which presents itself *prima facie* as a mere point of transition to a new form of production. It presents itself as such a contradiction even in appearance. It gives rise to monopoly in certain spheres and hence provokes state intervention. It reproduces a new financial aristocracy, a new kind of parasite in the guise of company promoters, speculators and merely nominal

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<sup>14</sup> « Die Gewalt ist der Geburtshelfer jeder alten Gesellschaft, die mit einer neuen schwanger geht » (*das Kapital*, erster Band, M.E.W. 23, s. 779).

<sup>15</sup> The potential of extra-institutional violence is involved in the idea of a revolution marking the absolute end of exploitation, and the beginning of an era of perfect freedom (entering the “Kingdom of Liberty” – what the theological tradition called the “Glory” – as indicated in *Capital*, Volume Three ((Marx, *Das Kapital*, Dritter Band, 48. Kapitel, « Die trinitarische Formel », Dietz Verlag, M.E.W. 25, s. 828). This was commented by various authors who, from opposite points of view, saw it as the key to the political uses of the dialectical idea: on one side Engels (*Anti-Dühring*, « The Role of Violence in History »), followed by Lenin (« *What are the Friends of the People, and How they fight the Social-democrats* », 1894); on the other side Hannah Arendt in *Violence and Power* (« Macht und Gewalt », 1970 - München, Zürich 14. Auflage 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Dritter Band, 27. Kapitel, „Die Rolle des Kredits in der kapitalistischen Produktion“ (Marx-Engels Werke, Dietz Verlag Berlin, 2003, Band 25, s. 454-457). See the discussion by David Harvey: *A Companion to Capital*, Volume II, Verso 2013.

directors; an entire system of swindling and cheating with respect to the promotion of companies, issue of shares and share dealings. It is private production unchecked by private ownership (...) Expropriation now extends from the immediate producers to the small and medium capitalists themselves. Expropriation is the starting-point of the capitalist mode of production, whose goal is to carry it through to completion, and even in the last instance to expropriate all individuals from the means of production - which, with the development of social production, cease to be means and products of private production, and can only remain means of production in the hands of the associated producers, as their social property, just as they are their social product. But within the capitalist system itself, this expropriation takes the antithetical form of the appropriation of social property by a few; and credit gives these few ever more the character of simple adventurers (...) The cooperative factories run by workers themselves are, within the old form, the first examples of the emergence of a new form, even though they naturally reproduce in all cases, in their present organization, all the defects of the existing system, and must reproduce them. But the opposition between capital and labour is abolished here, even if at first only in the form that the workers in association become their own capitalist, i.e. they use the means of production to valorize their own labour (...) Capitalist joint-stock companies as much as cooperative factories should be viewed as transition forms from the capitalist mode of production to the associated one, simply that in the one case the opposition is abolished in a negative way, and in the other in a positive way (...) The credit system has a dual character immanent in it: on the one hand it develops the motive of capitalist production, enrichment by the exploitation of others' labour, into the purest and most colossal system of gambling and swindling, and restricts ever more the already small number of the exploiters of social wealth; on the other hand however it constitutes the form of transition towards a new mode of production. It is this dual character that gives the principal spokesmen for credit, from Law through to Isaac Pereire, their nicely mixed character of swindler and prophet."

I gave a long quotation because this is less well-known than the passage in Volume One. It was never considered a "conclusion", at most a side remark. But the formulas are very close, almost identical on crucial points. We find here the same hybrid French-German terminology of "expropriation", to which is added "association", one of the classical names of communism in Marx, and the same problematic of the "dialectical reversal" which expresses the necessity of an overcoming of capitalism as consequence of its own internal contradictions. Above all we find the same idea that the essence of revolutionary change is a conversion of *expropriation* into *appropriation* (*Aneignung*) by the individuals of their own means of existence and their productive capacity, which had been "estranged" from them (*entfremdet*). Following another eschatological formula, capitalism thus becomes "its own gravedigger". However there are two essential differences with Volume One: first, by invoking the financial mechanisms of banking and credit, Marx goes much further in looking into the very institutions of capitalism for a "prefiguration" of



communism forms “within the capitalist mode of production”; and second, the strategy of communism appears here as horizon of a combination or “reconciliation” of two completely *heterogeneous* historical inventions, which however could be considered forms of “socialization” or an overcoming of “private property”, albeit for opposite reasons: *socialization through money*, and *socialization through labour*, as it were. Summarizing all this, we see that the overcoming of capitalism depends on the emergence of a “force” (whose exact identity remains to be found, or constructed) that can *join the opposites* : what is furthest from the classless society (the financial institutions), and what comes closest to making it alive in the present (the worker’s cooperatives). Marx unfortunately says nothing about that force and the means it will have to make use of (including the State, excluding the State)...

This is a variant of the “expropriation of expropriators” that becomes today very relevant, not only because it forms an alternative to the messianic discourse, but because it finds echoes in some recent or current socialist projects. Still, we must concede that the “opposite forms” that Marx wanted to unite remain, most of the time, separated terms. The idea of cooperatives (or, in the wake of Antonio Negri’s theories, the analogous idea of the “new commons”) is very much alive.<sup>17</sup> But, in a seeming paradox, the idea of using the financial structures of capitalism in a “revolutionary” way is no less popular: not long ago, when big pension funds started to play a decisive role in financing shadow banking and the development of *hedge funds*, it was proposed by some European socialist theorists to “redeem” capitalism through pension funds whose owners would be the workers themselves, or their unions;<sup>18</sup> more recently, we see Marxist (or Post-Marxist) analysts of “liquidity” invent strategies for citizens to “take power” within the financial speculative operations.<sup>19</sup> This is a minor mode with respect to the great revolutionary tradition, but still a way of interpreting the dialectical scheme of transformation invented by Marx. I am convinced that we have to do here, not simply to a vacillation in the writing of the theory, but a genuine *alternative* rooted in the antithesis of “private property” and “collective property”. Before I draw some conclusions from this objective indetermination, however, I must make the picture even more complicated, invoking still another concept of the “capitalist historical tendency” that can be read in *Capital*.

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<sup>17</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Aglietta, « Le capitalisme de demain ». Note de la Fondation Saint-Simon, novembre 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Meissner: « Liquidity », in *Derivatives and the Wealth of Society*, edited by Benjamin Lee and Randy Martin, The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

With much simplification, one could say that the central theme that is continuously redefined and complexified in *Capital*, as successive “moments” of the dialectical relationship of capital and labour are succeeding one another, is an articulation of *contradiction(s)* and *antagonism* (or more generally *conflict*). A contradiction takes place between *tendencies* which are simultaneously unfolding, and periodically produce crises in the mechanism of the economy (e.g. the intensification of exploitation and the decreasing rate of profit, which Marx considers both consequences of the technological changes in a capitalist frame). Conflict essentially arises between “classes” – in the first place the capitalist bourgeois class and the proletarianized working class – or also “class fractions”, which come to oppose each other because of their antagonistic interests in production, or the distribution of the product of labour, or in other correlative domains of social life. However, for a “historical tendency” to exist that leads to transformations and mutations in the social relations, contradictions and crises must produce an intensification of conflict, and conflict must generate either a deepening or a displacement of the contradiction. This is the *object* of Marx’s *political* theory of history (or theory of history from a *political viewpoint*), and there is no other. No doubt, in the passages that I commented, it is just this articulation, with conditions and effects, that was discussed. But alternative or even diverging possibilities emerge if we broaden our scope.

Take the long chapter on “The Working Day”: it is not only about illustrating the concept of “absolute surplus-value” (*absoluter Mehrwert*), which had been defined as an *excess* of the value of the “product” compared to the value of the “labour power” (or “labour force”) consumed in the production, also “measurable” as an excess of the amount of social labour time necessary to produce the commodities compared to the amount necessary to *reproduce* the labour power itself, or in “equivalent” terms, to produce the means of consumption for the workers – what today would be called their “real wages”. It illustrates that there is permanent antagonism determining the *rate* of surplus-value (or rate of exploitation) that in turn leads to a contradiction, because it implies chronic underconsumption of the working class and a tendency towards the exhaustion of the labour power. In this conflict, the *interest of capital* is to continuously increase surplus-labour (*Mehrarbeit*), hence expanding daily (or weekly, or annual, in the end lifelong) labour time for the worker beyond any given limit. Whereas the interest of the working class is to *limit* labour time, which means a decreasing proportion of “unpaid labour” (labour that is not compensated by worker’s consumption) and a better protection of the living labour force (including individual organisms, the family, etc.) against exhaustion. This conflict is called by Marx “a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled, between the capitalist class and the working-class”.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England; following the worker’s demand of a “normal labour day”, the

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<sup>20</sup> *Das Kapital*, Dietz, s. 316.

relationship of forces was evolving, with the intervention of numerous factors: the degree of organization of the workers themselves (who first had to impose, against violent repression, their right to form unions), the counter-effects of the political revolutions on the continent, the attitude of the public opinion influenced by the “factory reports” and the nascent “sociology of labour”, the *common interests* of the capitalist class, which are not the same as the interests of individual entrepreneurs in this or that branch, and above all the position of the *State* which seeks to “regulate” the class struggle and keep the contradictions of capitalism within sustainable limits. What is fascinating, of course, is the fact that such description, provided some historical data are updated, remains completely relevant today, in particular because the “wild” forms of exploitation of the labour power, which have been more or less completely, more or less provisionally eliminated from the “central” region of capitalism through labour legislation, trade unionism, and the more general democratic evolution of society, have been massively transplanted into the “periphery” (before partially returning to the center as global competition and the “neo-liberal turn” of the State eliminates the social rights and weakens the unions).

Which concept of “historical tendency” can we associate with such a pattern? Here again we could be tempted to speak of reformism, but it seems more adequate, if we consider the long-term fluctuations in the relationship of forces, to use the same category as Marx himself: it is a *civil war*, or a *social war*, more or less “declared” and “regulated”, which sometimes rises to the extremes, sometimes remains within the limits of a “social contract” (that, in Europe, was the aim of the Social-democracy, largely inspired by Keynes). Contrary to the representation of the “expropriation of expropriators”, in either of its interpretations, this civil war doesn’t have a predetermined *end*. We observe here in Marx’s thought what could be called a “Machiavellian” concept of the class struggle and its result, where the social reforms and the labour legislation in modern capitalist societies play a role analogous to that of the “tribune of the plebs” in Ancient Rome.<sup>21</sup>

Strikingly, Marx also developed an antithetic view on this point. Once again, we must look for it in the unpublished material, although very well-known today: the “Unpublished Sixth Chapter of Capital Volume One”, also known as “Results of the immediate production process”, a fragment from the 1863-1864 manuscript that, eventually, Marx decided not to rework and include in the final version of Book One. Readers of this chapter are not at one to decide why Marx did not include it (or a revised version) in the final version of 1867, which was responsible for the reception and understanding of Marxism for more

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<sup>21</sup> The reference is of course not to *The Prince* (which inspired Marxist theories of the revolutionary party, especially in Gramsci and after him), but to the *Discourses on Livy* (Book 1, chapters 1-5), a main source of the “republican” tradition in political philosophy. To my knowledge, it was French political theorist Georges Lavau (in his book *A quoi sert le parti communiste français?* 1981), who first proposed this analogy. On the transformations of Marx’s concept of “civil war”, see the appendix in the revised edition of my book *The Philosophy of Marx*, Verso 2017:

than one century.<sup>22</sup> Not discarding other elements, I tend to believe that a decisive reason lies in the potentially *nihilistic picture* (therefore also politically disheartening) of the “historical tendency” of capitalism that can be derived from this chapter, for what concerns the articulation of “contradiction” and “conflict”, the transformations of capitalism and the possibilities of class struggle. Why? Because the chapter develops and pushes to the extreme an indication only quickly sketched in Volume One, this time regarding the mechanism of “*relative surplus-value*”: capitalism evolves from a mere “formal subsumption” (*formale Subsumption*) of labour forces under capital (in which, individually, workers maintain a relative autonomy and capacity of resistance, based on their professional skills, which also fosters their collective projects of emancipation) to a “real subsumption” (*reale Subsumption*), in which the labour powers are completely incorporated into the technological system and subjected to its norms, which makes them useless, unless they are subjected to the capitalist relationship of production, through machinery and “scientific” organization of labour.<sup>23</sup> At the edge of the description, there is even the idea that capitalism not only *organizes the production process*, but also organizes the *process of reproduction* of life and everyday life, subjecting it entirely to the law of profit and the commodity form and making it the object of a new industry: an idea that was retrieved by theorists of the “mass consumption” and the “alienation of social needs” that it generates. At this point, admittedly extrapolating Marx, we could speak not only of “real” but of something like a “total subsumption”, which produces a new form of “voluntary servitude”, an absolute control exercised by capital on the life of citizens (workers and non-workers alike). We may hypothesize that Marx – with despair – perceived that his analysis of capitalism’s development lead to the possibility of a “totalitarian” system, where class struggle is *neutralized*, reduced to impotency, because it is anticipated, instrumentalized or controlled by capitalism, if necessary through violence, but above all through the complete incorporation of the labour power in its own reproduction process. This is the absolute opposite of the “Machiavellian” civil war that could be read in the chapter on “The Working Day”, and *a fortiori* of the revolutionary outcome for the contradictions of capitalism: a quasi-totalitarian biopolitics of capital becoming the social norm.

If this possibility did exist, it becomes understandable (or it can be imagined) that Marx decided rather to “repress” the argument, or postpone its examination. This may have also led to substituting, in

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<sup>22</sup> According to some « plans », it should have become the *final section* of Volume One. For the same reasons as mentioned above, this development was therefore written *before* the development on the “expropriation of expropriators” commented above, it is in fact *intermediary* between the *Grundrisse* and the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* on the one hand, and *Capital Volume One* on the other. The chapter can be found here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/> It is also included as an appendix in the Penguin translation.

<sup>23</sup> This means that, just as the scheme of the « civil war », which invokes the labour movement, was based on the analysis of « absolute surplus-value », the scheme of « real/total subsumption », which makes its traditional forms inefficient, is based on the analysis of « relative surplus value ». This is a crucial symmetry for the understanding of Marx’s articulation of the critique of political economy and the political in *Capital*.

the last minute, the conclusion in which the tendency of evolution of property relations *validates* the “optimistic” scenario of a “political revolution” that expresses (or “accelerates”) the economic tendency itself, in a more “secular” or a more “messianic” formulation. At the end, however, if we consider *all the alternative scenarios*, which no doubt were not granted in Marx’s writing the same validation, but really existed in his thought, we are faced with a *bundle of strategic possibilities*, where – on either side of the “standard” idea of the “expropriation of expropriators” (itself presented in two opposite manners) – we also have the political scenario of “indefinite social war”, and the nihilistic scenario of “total subjection”.<sup>24</sup> And *for us, today*, Marx the *theorist*, the author of the theory of *Capital*, must be identified with this bundle of possibilities itself. Less determined, but also more productive than in the “Marxist” tradition.

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Now I am aware that the reader/listener, who was hoping a resolution of the dilemmas, leading to a definition of the *good interpretation* Marx’s « conclusions » in *Capital*, is very unsatisfied (probably also bored by pedantic philological considerations). If not, what to conclude? In my opinion this all means that *Capital*, as history revealed its structure, is unfinished in a *positive way*: it is, to borrow the category from Umberto Eco, an “open work”, therefore a work that *problematizes* different theoretical and practical issues.<sup>25</sup> What we observe is that Marx, analyzing capitalism, as he was *progressing* in the analysis, also never ceased to *bifurcate* in the interpretation of the “tendencies” and the political outcomes that they anticipated. These bifurcations are more or less completely explored, but in any case they don’t have a purely *subjective* meaning, they correspond to *real tendencies* in the development of capitalism, which are more or less actualized, depending on conditions, counter-tendencies, and the historical transformations themselves.

Today’s capitalism is more than ever subjected to the “logic” of endless accumulation and the maximization of profit, whose concept was derived by Marx from the critique of political economy. The sarcastic motto: “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!” has lost nothing of its validity.<sup>26</sup> But capitalism’s institutions and social forms have considerably changed, particularly because it has been *globalized* (something Marx, despite his views on colonization as alternative to revolution, did not perfectly reflect, reason why it should be invoked *against him* by some continuators)<sup>27</sup>, and at the end

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<sup>24</sup> I must admit that the idea of organizing in this manner the *alternative possibilities* that are present in Marx, as explained here, owes much to the description of Stanley Moore, in his remarkable little book: *Three Tactics. The Background in Marx* (Monthly Review Press, 1963), almost (but unjustly) forgotten today.

<sup>25</sup> Umberto Eco: *Opera aperta* (1962, rev. 1976) – English translation: *The Open Work* (1989).

<sup>26</sup> *Capital*, Volume One, chapter 24, section 3: « The Abstinence Theory »

<sup>27</sup> We think of theorists of imperialism, above all Rosa Luxemburg in her *Accumulation of Capital* (1913), and later such theorists of the capitalist “world-economy” as Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi.

of the globalization process it has been *financialized*, thus radically modifying the mechanism of crises, although not suppressing them, and even has proved able to draw a benefit from *socialist experiences* for its own modernization.<sup>28</sup> This capitalism that is “post-historical” because it is post-colonial and post-socialist, may appear as unsurpassable and invincible, because it has dissolved the forms and classical representations of the class struggle around which such themes as “expropriation of expropriators” were built and which served to imagine a revolutionary social transformation. This doesn’t mean that it is stable or peaceful. Rather, it is ultra-violent, involving organically endemic wars, brutal segregations of humans divided into educated and non-educated, sedentary and migrant, efficient and non-adapted, useful and disposable humans, etc., in other terms a generalized “Hobbesian” competition among individuals and peoples. For us, “post-Marxists”, the great question is how to define and construct the possible bifurcations, the immanent alternatives in this capitalism. This is a political and intellectual labour, for which a meditation on the various ways that Marx had tried to explore doesn’t suffice, but remain indispensable. We must *rethink* entirely his theory, but embarking on this journey we find him continuously walking on our side, as a good companion.

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<sup>28</sup> I am increasingly inclined towards this hypothesis of a *post-socialist “absolute” capitalism*, which seems to me necessary to understand the discourse and the aims of so-called “neo-liberalism”.