



**Samir Amin**

**Global History:  
A View from the South**

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# Global History

## A View from the South



Samir Amin



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## Introduction

This book brings together various contributions I have written for the elaboration of a global history. They have been published in French and English in different periodicals and on different dates, some of them a while ago.<sup>1</sup> Their collection into one volume highlights their originality. First, because this enables the reader to identify precisely the theses that I put forward in my early critique of 'Eurocentric' history (see my book *Eurocentrism*, 1989), which still predominates the 'modern' capitalist ideology that shapes contemporary social thought. And, second, because I propose to treat these 'questions of the past' not as separate from the challenges of the present or from the alternatives for possible futures, including, indeed, the question of a 'socialism for the 21st century'.

I was an early reader of Marx. I very carefully read *Capital* and the other works by Marx and Engels that were available in French during my university studies between 1948 and 1955. I also decided to read the authors who were criticised by Marx (including Smith, Ricardo, Bastiat and Say). All this certainly gave me the utmost intellectual pleasure and convinced me of the power of Marx's thought. But at the same time, I remained unsatisfied. For I had posed one central question, that of the 'under-development' (a new term beginning to be widely used) of the societies of contemporary Asia and Africa, for which I had found no answers in Marx. The texts that were published for the first time in French in 1960, the *Grundrisse*, also left me unsatisfied.

Far from 'abandoning' Marx, and judging that he had been supplanted, I simply concluded that his work had remained unfinished. Marx never completed the work he had intended to do, including, among other things, integrating the 'world dimension' of capitalism into his analysis and systematically articulating the question of power (politics) and the economy (capitalist and pre-capitalist). All we have are some brilliant observations on these subjects in his treatment of the French revolutions (from the Great Revolution to the Paris Commune of 1871 and not forgetting 1848).



The question of the (unequal) 'development' that is characteristic of globalised capitalism thus led me, since my university studies, to concentrate on the first of these dimensions, as testified by my doctoral thesis ('L'accumulation à l'échelle mondiale') in 1957. For me this was a starting point, a first stage in the work that I pursued over the following 50 years. I will not retrace the successive stages of this development. But I think it is useful to call attention to the whole question of 'unequal development' that I proposed in 1973, in a book with this title, and to two other works written in the same period, *The Law of Value and Historical Materialism* (1978) and 'L'échange inégal et la loi de la valeur' (1973[1977]).

To arrive at this formulation I decided to do further study in these two fields, inspired by the wonderful lesson on them that Marx himself had given us. First, I delved into a careful reading of the great works of vulgar<sup>2</sup> economics after Marx, in response to Marx, as Marx had taught us we should do by his criticism of 'classic' economics and its first vulgar derivations. This involved a direct reading of the work of Böhm-Bawerk, Walras and the other producers of the fundamentals of the new 'subjective' economics, up to the formulations of Keynes and Sraffa. I already proposed such a critical reading in the first French edition of *L'Accumulation à l'échelle mondiale* (1957), then took it up again in 'L'échange inégal'. To read Marx today – that is, after Marx – entails this critical reading which convinced me of the vulgar and ideological (in the functional sense of the word) character of the new bourgeois economics, post and anti-Marxist.

Marx did not limit himself to the theoretical criticism of his precursors. At the same time he opposed them by an orderly presentation of an immense amount of empirical facts. So I thought that it was not enough to criticise post-Marx bourgeois economics: the task also had to be completed by an orderly presentation of the 'facts' that illustrate how globalised capitalism really works. I made a first collection of this mass of empirical data in *L'Accumulation*; I then updated it for my publications in the 1970s. I continued this work, looking more closely at what was going on at the time. The first – 'Awakening of the South' (2008) – was represented by the Bandung period (1955–1981). Those who read my writings carefully – mainly the British and the Japanese – took note of these 'empirical studies'.

What followed was related to two sets of issues: first, the so-called development economics and second, markets (and the role of expectations), which I intended to analyse in depth.

The first of these seemed to me rather poor on the whole, incapable of moving forward from the obligatory vision of the 'unavoidable stages of development'. I had already formulated a radical critique of this mechanistic and vulgar vision three years before Rostow himself presented it in his 1960 book (*The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*). But since then 'development economics', preached by the main institutions responsible for development interventions (the World Bank, cooperation programmes, universities), have never gone beyond this nonsense.

As for the second, I felt it was continuing the vulgar drift, taking it to its logical extreme: the construction of an 'imaginary economy' – that of generalised markets – which had no relationship whatever with actually existing capitalism. The centrality of the empty and unreal concept of 'expectations' that was necessary for this construction, completed the drift. Economic theory became a scholastic text dedicated to discussing something like the 'sex of angels' with the idea, like that of their predecessors in the Middle Ages, that the answer to this question was the best way of understanding the world. At the same time, this drift, which claimed to be empirical, aimed at integrating into its theses an increasing, but disorderly, mass of empirical data. The mathematical method that this treatment involves is certainly not to be rejected in itself. But the continual sophistication of its method does not eliminate the absurd – unreal – character of the questions that its users pose: the 'anticipations' (the sex of angels).

Nevertheless, neither my criticism of vulgar theory and its pseudo-empirical applications, nor my counter proposals suggesting that the mass of orderly data be integrated into a theory of actually existing capitalism, seemed enough to understand the whole reality of unequal development. Articulating the political/ideological/cultural dimensions with that of the economic management of society: this was, I thought, the main theme of a historical materialist interpretation that could not be avoided. And in this field, my reading of Marx had already convinced me that my first propositions should be taken further. This I tried to do by

putting forward both a general concept of the tributary mode of production based on the great family of the organisations of pre-capitalist advanced class societies, contrasting their articulation of the dominant power and the dominated economy, to its opposite, which was particular to capitalism. From this I drew some important conclusions concerning the forms of alienation particular to ancient societies as well as to modern capitalist society. I also sought to identify, in the various tributary forms, the concrete contradictions at work that could accelerate or delay the capitalist advance. Then I tried to integrate the questions posed in terms of historical materialism and those that concerned the economic dimension, as could be seen by the readers of *Unequal Development* and *The Law of Value and Historical Materialism*.

My work has never been that of a Marxologue.<sup>3</sup> I have repeated many times that, for me, to be a Marxist is to start from Marx and not to stop with him, or with his main successors (Lenin, Mao), the builders of historical Marxism.

The most important of my conclusions was the formulation of a 'law of globalised value' which is consistent with the essentials of the law of value particular to capitalism and discovered by Marx on the one hand, and with the realities of an unequal globalised development on the other. My main contribution concerns the study of the passing from the law of value to the law of globalised value, based on the hierarchisation – itself globalised – of the price of labour around its value. Together with the management practices concerning the access to natural resources, this globalisation of value is the basis of the 'imperialist rent'.<sup>4</sup> It is my view that this was responsible for the major contradictions of actually existing capitalism/imperialism and the conflicts associated with them, so that classes and nations are interlinked in their struggles and conflicts, in all the complexity of their specific and concrete articulations. I believe that a study of the 20th and 21st centuries must necessarily lead to the emergence – or the awakening – of the peoples and nations of the peripheries of the globalised capitalist/imperialist system.

I have therefore refused the two versions of the main concept proposed by historical Marxisms concerning global history, both of them based on what is claimed to be a definitive formulation of historical materialism: the version that constricted this history

in the straitjacket of the 'five universal stages' (primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism) and the one that contrasted the two paths (European and Asian). Instead of this I proposed, as from 1970, considering a succession of three great stages (communitarian, tributary – a term widely adopted since then – and capitalist), the forms of each of the first two stages having been multiple (thus relativising the form of European feudalism in the great tributary family).

Similar contradictions riddled all the societies of the tributary age, for which a positive solution involved the invention of the principles of a more advanced stage of universal civilisation (that of capitalist modernity). These responses to the challenge were expressed in successive waves that gradually invented modernity, moving from the East to the West, from China of the Sōng to the Arab-Persian Abbassid Caliphate, then to the Italian towns, before finding its European form that took shape during the 16th century in the London–Amsterdam–Paris triangle. This last form produced historical capitalism, which has imposed itself through its conquest of the world, annihilating the previous variants which could have been possible and were both similar and different from the one we know. This conquest of the world by European capitalism is at the origin of Eurocentric interpretations of global history and, among others, the two versions of historical materialism of the historical Marxisms that I have criticised. My analysis emphasises the qualitative transformation that mainly defined each of the three great stages. It particularly stresses the reversal of the relationships between the economic instance (always determinant 'in the last resort') and the politico-ideological instance that was directly dominant in the family of tributary systems (European feudalism included), which is now subordinated to the direct domination of the economic instance in capitalism.

This, at all events, is how I read Marx and the fundamental critique that he developed in *Capital*. This is the reason why I consider that it is the 'economistic' alienation particular to capitalism that gives modern civilisation its essential character. In contrast, all the societies of the tributary era were characterised by another form of alienation, necessary to affirm the direct dominance by the political instance. The religious or para-religious variants of this alienation, which were different from the economistic

alienation, were especially appropriate for the requirements of the tributary era civilisations.

In my view, capitalism did not achieve its completed form until after its double revolution. It was, on the one hand, a political revolution that affirmed the decisive power of the bourgeoisie (in successive forms, from the not very glorious English revolution in 1688, the war of independence of the United States, but above all the French revolution that inaugurated modern politics) and, on the other hand, an industrial revolution that, through the activities of 'great industry' (at the beginning of the 19th century) led to the domination of economics and the capitalist economic alienation through which it is expressed.

Most North American authors of global history have doubted the importance, even the reality, of the Industrial Revolution and have reduced it to the level of 'industrious' revolutions which, from China of ancient times to the early Middle Ages in Europe, as well as in the Middle East and Italian towns, shaped the cycles of advances (often followed by retreats) of the civilisations of the tributary epoch. Calling these industrious revolutions, which were almost always associated with expansion of wage labour, commercial relationships and even free thought, the 'beginnings of capitalism' does not upset me. Conflating these with capitalism itself results in obfuscating the complete rupture that capitalism represents with previous forms of industrialisation.

For Europe between 1500 to 1800, I consider that the Ancien Régime and mercantilism kept their character of a 'transition to capitalism', as shown by the dispute for power between the old tributary governing class (the 'feudal' aristocracy) and the budding bourgeoisie (almost exclusively commercial, sometimes financial, often supported by part of the peasantry and the landed aristocracy that was transforming itself into a class of capitalist farmers). It was also characterised by the conflict between the domination of the political instance (marked by the absolute monarchy, when it was the instrument of an enlightened despotism) and that of the new economic instance.

The global history that I have proposed has led me to conclusions that I feel are important. Most of the authors of global history remain ignorant of them. Capitalism is, in this interpretation, a system that is qualitatively new (and 'superior', I dare to say), the

incubation of which stretched over a long period of time, at least seven centuries, from the Chinese epoch of the Sōng to European Atlantic mercantilism. The difference between the Eurocentric viewpoint and my rejection of it is to be found precisely in the analysis of this long incubation. For the Eurocentrics, the incubation concerns only Europe (between 1500 and 1800) and capitalism then appears as the result of the European exception: the European 'miracle' (see my critique in *Eurocentrism* (1989) of this modern ideology, which only took form after the triumph of completed capitalism in the 19th century, but still endures today).

I believe that this incubation is expressed through waves of successive advances that occurred over centuries in different regions of the eastern hemisphere – Eurasia and Africa. From them arose the same fundamental contradictions typical of tributary systems, as I have already pointed out. That capitalism could have been 'born' elsewhere than in Europe, and for this reason have both similar and different characteristics than that of completed historical capitalism ('European'), so be it. But the task of history analysts is not to imagine possible different evolutions that did not occur, but to explain those that did. I explained the late success (but rapid maturation) of the Euro-Atlantic form, by the peripheral character of the feudal mode and its coincidence with another major fact in history: the conquest of the Americas.

My book, *The Law of Value and Historical Materialism* (1978) – which is in the process of being revised and republished – stresses the unavoidable detour through the value (and the economic alienation motivating it) that is ignored by the empirical approach in terms of 'observed prices' (very few of the writers of global history go beyond this empirical horizon). I put as much emphasis on the centre/periphery contrast in the typical forms of historical capitalism (European by origin). There was a qualitatively different contrast from that which characterised the relationships between the centres and peripheries of the old times. The use of the same terms for analysing the systems of different epochs obviously runs the risk of a shift toward an affirmation of the analogy, which is superficial, if not false in my opinion. I therefore found myself almost alone, with Giovanni Arrighi, having analysed the contrast in terms of a globalisation of the law of value based on accumulation by dispossession which produced a growing and

insuperable conflict in the framework of the workings of capitalist logic between the dominant imperialist centres and the dominated peripheries.

It is therefore not by chance that it is precisely on this question that my analysis – that I claim to make within the fundamental critical analysis of society started by Marx – departs from those put forward by most of the contemporary schools of global history.

Some – Wallerstein in particular – admit, like myself, that capitalist modernity has created a civilisation that is qualitatively different from that which preceded it. But the definition that Wallerstein gives to capitalism ignores economic alienation, which is central for me, as it was, I think, for Marx. Other schools of global history deny outright all validity of the emphasis on the qualitative transformation, replacing it by a continuous vision of a permanent, quantitatively growing accumulation. Many of these works – which are in fact remarkable – thus stress the commercial exchanges and transfers of technological and institutional knowledge, like religious beliefs and cultural habits, and underline, in this respect, the previous contributions of the Easterners to the late invention of European capitalism. André Gunder Frank joined this current of thinking in his book *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age*. My thesis concerning the successive waves of inventions of capitalist modernity integrates the contribution of the work of these schools of global history but, I believe, enriches them by stressing the qualitative leap that took place.

The North American schools of global history do not distinguish between commercial relationships and capitalist commercial relationships. The equation for commercial exchanges ( $M + E = M1$ ) reminds us that the gain (then improperly described as accumulation) is the result of a trade in goods, which have been produced in the framework of non-capitalist production relationships, by peasants or by artisans, even if they have been, in certain circumstances, subordinated and dominated by commercial capital and even when the organisation of production used waged workers. In the equation  $M + P = M1$ , P stands for the production organised in the framework of social relationships specific to capitalism: ownership of the means of production (modern: the factory), separated from the producers (wage labourers, sellers of their labour power). Without these relationships there is neither capi-

tal (which is constituted by social relationships, not reducible to the 'thing' which represents them: the equipment), nor surplus value shared between wages and profits nor, strictly speaking, capitalist commercial alienation (wages seem to constitute the price of labour when it is the price of the workforce and, logically, capital itself seems to be productive), nor the accumulation of capital. This confusion makes it difficult to do justice to the qualitative transformation of society that took place with the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. Of course, these transformations did not spring out of nowhere, but were the result of a long incubation prepared by some ten centuries of expansion of the spheres of commercial exchanges (which were often followed by contractions). These certainly led to proto-capitalist relationships here and there (but not always) and they certainly led to the invention of an advanced range of the tools essential to the birth of capitalism: credit, particularly, homogenising globalisation (or rather regionalisation, in fact), monetary instruments, trade. But these beginnings by themselves alone did not constitute a system of capitalist social relationships.

Wallerstein still accepts the validity of considering the qualitative transformation represented by capitalist modernity, even if his definition of capitalism remains descriptive and incomplete. It is not therefore surprising that other theoreticians of global history and the economic world (for example, André Gunder Frank in his later works) have renounced outright giving any significance to the concept of the mode of production and have spoken of 'capitalism' that existed since the birth of humankind.

In contrast, all these – considerable – contributions of the schools of global history are perfectly consistent with their 'Marxist' interpretation, formulated in terms of the expression of the internal contradictions which were typical of what I have described as the family of tributary formations producing the 'inventions' associated with the commercial expansions that prepared their coming together into the new capitalist mode of production.

The theses that I have developed on global history never seemed to me to require the abandonment of Marxism. On the contrary, it was by starting from Marx that it has been possible for me to get out of the empirical rut in which a good number of writers about



global history have remained bogged down. I even dare to claim that this attitude, which starts from Marx and does not hesitate to develop and enrich the historical materialism method begun – but only begun – by Marx, is the only way of advancing the analyses of global history.

It is understandable that serious historians have tired of Church Marxisms and their exegeses of the sacred texts of the Master, such as the Marxisms of the apparatchiks, concerned to justify by any means (honest or less honest) the daily requirements of their stand when faced with the challenge described above (but which is never recognised as such). But these historians have thrown the baby (Marx) out with the bathwater (historical Marxisms). By refusing to yield to this mood of the times, I think I have chosen the most fertile ground for analysis and action. It is for the reader to judge this from my contributions here to the debates concerning global history.

Right from the beginning (my doctoral thesis) I had adopted a twofold viewpoint that was deliberately globalist (as in today's jargon of global history) and a radical critique of Eurocentrism. I tried to put forward Marxist analyses forming part of this line of thinking and which were therefore critical of those of historical Marxisms (particularly those of the 'five stages' and those of the 'two paths, European and Asian'). Towards the end of the 1960s we therefore naturally met together – André Gunder Frank, Giovanni Arrighi, Immanuel Wallerstein and myself – as we shared this general viewpoint. It was thus not by chance that this 'gang of four', as we were later to be called, produced some works together which I believe were in advance of their time. We proposed an analysis of the long crisis which began in the 1970s (and from which the world has not yet extricated itself!), seen as a crisis of capitalist globalisation. This basic convergence did not of course exclude the diversity of our approaches, which were more complementary than contradictory. Some of these divergences became more marked, as can be seen from my criticism of *ReORIENT*, which appears in Chapter 4 of this book.

For this collection I have chosen articles that emphasised the unequalled power of Marx's method (not necessarily that of the historical Marxisms) in the analysis of global history. The viewpoint is that of an Afro-Asian observer. My publications in Arabic,

the translation of my works in numerous languages, particularly into Chinese and Arabic, have facilitated the widening of the debate so that it has left the US academic world behind, as well as the belated efforts of their European imitators.

### Note

1. Chapter 1 was first published in 1991 as 'The ancient world systems versus the modern capitalist world system', *Review*, vol. XIV, no. 3, pp. 349–85; Chapter 2 in 1996 as 'Le rôle de l'Asie centrale dans le système tributaire de l'ancien monde' in *Les défis de la mondialisation*, Paris, Harmattan; Chapter 3 in 1996 as 'The challenge of globalisation', *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 216–59; Chapter 4 in 1999 as 'History conceived as an eternal cycle', *Review*, vol. XXII, no. 3, pp. 291–326; and Chapter 6 in 1998 as 'La Russie dans le système mondial', in *Review*, vol. XXI, no. 2, pp. 207–219.
2. In this book the word 'vulgar' is used in its Marxist sense of banal, populist or lacking in intellectual rigour.
3. A 'Marxalogue' is one who writes 'marxology', i.e. the critical interpretation of Marx's writings.
4. 'Monopoly rent' was defined by Marx as the difference between the price of production and market price where market price is set not by the average profit that results from equalisation of the rate of profits over time; instead the price is set by a few cartels or corporations. In the current imperialist epoch, a small number of oligopolies sets the world prices in various sectors of production (e.g. oil, medicines, biotechnology, agricultural inputs), and thus monopoly rent is often referred to as imperialist rent or rent of oligopolies. Where finance capital exercises the same control over prices, the term financialised monopoly rent is sometimes used.

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## **The ancient world systems versus the modern capitalist world system**

The modern world has produced a general image of universal history founded on the proposition that (European) capitalism is the first social system to unify the world. The least that can be said in that respect is that this statement seriously distorts reality and – I submit – is basically an expression of the dominant Eurocentric ideology. In fact, societies prior to the 16th century were in no way isolated from one another but were competitive partners within at least regional systems (and perhaps even a world system). Overlooking their interaction, one can hardly understand the dynamics of their evolution.

Simultaneously, I maintain that capitalism is a qualitatively new age in universal history which started around 1500. Therefore I insist upon distinguishing the modern capitalist overall structure from protocapitalist elements which indeed appeared in previous societies, sometimes since quite ancient times; I also insist upon the specificity of the capitalist centre/periphery dichotomy *vis-à-vis* previous forms of polarisation.

### **The specificity of capitalism *vis-à-vis* previous social formations**

The theoretical contribution of the Marxist concept of the capitalist mode of production is crucial to this discussion. Its eventual dilution (fashionable nowadays of course) does not help clarify the issues. The capitalist mode of production entails private ownership of the means of production which are themselves the product of labour, namely machinery. This in turn presumes a higher level of development of the forces of production (compared

to the artisan and his instruments) and, on this basis, the division of society into two fundamental classes. Correspondingly, socially necessary labour takes the form of free wage labour. The generalised capitalist market thus constitutes the framework in which economic laws ('competition') operate as forces independent of subjective will. Economistic alienation and the dominance of economics are its expression.

No society prior to modern times was based on such principles. All advanced societies from 300 BC to 1500 AD were, from one end of the period to the other, of a profoundly similar nature, which I call tributary in order to show this essential *qualitative* fact: namely, that the surplus is directly tapped from peasant activity through some transparent devices associated with the organisation of the power hierarchy (power is the source of wealth, while in capitalism the opposite is the rule). The reproduction of the system therefore requires the dominance of an ideology – a state religion – which renders opaque the power organisation and legitimises it (in contrast to the economist ideology of capitalism which makes economic exploitation opaque and justifies it through this means, counterbalancing the relative openness of political relations, itself a condition for the emergence of modern democracy).

Having taken a stand on some of the debates of historical materialism, I believe it helpful to recall my essential conclusions. They affect my suggestions on the nature of the one (or more) pre-modern system(s). I have rejected the supposedly Marxist version of five stages. More precisely I refuse: (1) to regard slavery as a necessary stage through which all societies that are more 'advanced' have passed; (2) to regard feudalism as the necessary stage succeeding slavery. I have also rejected the supposedly Marxist version of the two roads. More precisely, I refuse to consider that only the European road (slavery-to-feudalism) would pave the way to the invention of capitalism, while the Asiatic road (the supposed Asiatic mode of production) would constitute an impasse, incapable of evolving by itself. I have described these two interpretations of historical materialism as products of Eurocentrism. I refer to my alternative suggestions in *Class and Nation*. I suggested the necessary succession of two families of modes of production: the communal family and the tributary family. This suggestion comes from highlighting two qualitative

breaks in the general evolution: (1) later in date: the qualitative break from the dominance of the political and ideological instance (state plus metaphysical ideology) in the tributary phase into the dominance of the economic instance (generalised market and economic ideology) in the capitalist phase; (2) previously: the qualitative break from the absence of a state and the dominance of the ideology of kinship in the communal phase into the crystallisation of social power in the statist-ideological-metaphysical form in the tributary phase, with precisely the description of feudalism as a peripheral tributary form.

To some, the forms I call 'tributary' would not constitute a single mode of production in the sense that they believe Marxism attaches to the concept of the mode of production. I shall not indulge in this kind of Marxology. If it is a nuisance I am ready to replace the term 'tributary mode of production' with the broader expression 'tributary society'. Of course my suggestions remain within a framework dominated by the search for general laws. Include in this, on the basis of these conceptualisations I have suggested, their transition towards capitalism, marked by the development of the protocapitalist elements which appeared earlier in history. There is of course a strong current nowadays rejecting any search for general laws and insisting on the irreducible specificity of various evolutionary paths. I take this epistemological orientation to be a product of a Eurocentrism concerned above all with legitimatising the superiority of the West.

### **The specificity of the capitalist world system**

The first question the debate on this subject encounters concerns the character of worldwide capitalist expansion. For my part, along with others (including A.G. Frank), I hold that the processes governing the system as a whole determine the framework in which local adjustments operate. In other words, this systemic approach makes the distinction between external factors and internal factors relative, since all the factors are internal at the level of the world system. Is there any need to stress that this methodological approach is distinct from prevailing (bourgeois and even current Marxist) approaches? According to the latter, internal factors are decisive in the sense that the specificities of

each ('developed' or 'undeveloped') national formation are mainly due to internal factors, whether favourable or unfavourable to capitalist development.

My analysis remains broadly based on a qualitative distinction (decisive in my view) between the societies of capitalism, dominated by economics (the law of value), and previous societies dominated by the political and ideological. There is, as I see it, a fundamental difference between the contemporary (capitalist) world system and all the preceding (regional and tributary) systems. This calls for comment on the law of value governing capitalism.

On that ground, I have expressed my point of view in terms of what I have called 'the worldwide expansion of the capitalist law of value'. Generally speaking, the law of value supposes an integrated market for the products of social labour (that then become commodities), capital and labour. Within its area of operation it brings a tendency to uniformity in the price of identical commodities and returns on capital and labour (in the form of wages or returns to the petty commodity producer). This is a close approximation to the empirical reality in central capitalist formations. But on the scale of the world capitalist system, the worldwide law of value operates on the basis of a truncated market that integrates trade in goods and the movement of capital but excludes the labour force. The worldwide law of value tends to make the cost of commodities uniform but not the rewards for labour. The discrepancies in world pay rates are considerably broader than in productivities. It follows from this thesis that the polarising effect of the worldwide law of value has nothing in common in terms of its quality, quantity and planetary scope with the limited tendencies to polarisation within the former (regional) tributary systems.

In this context the qualitative break represented by capitalism remains totally valid; it manifests itself in a fundamental reversal: the dominance of the economic replaces that of the political and ideological. That is why the world capitalist system is qualitatively different from all previous systems. The latter were of necessity regional, no matter how intensive the relations they were able to maintain among each other. Until the reversal has occurred it is impossible to speak of anything but protocapitalist elements,

where they exist, subject to the prevailing tributary logic. That is why I am not convinced of the usefulness of a theoretical view that suppresses this qualitative break and sees a supposedly eternal world system in a continuum whose origin is lost in the distant past of history.

The significance of the qualitative break of capitalism cannot, therefore, be underestimated. But an acknowledgement of it reveals its limited historical application, as it is stripped of the sacred vestments in which bourgeois ideology has dressed it. The simple and reassuring equations can no longer be written, such as capitalism (nowadays market) equals freedom and democracy, etc. For my part, along with Karl Polanyi, I give a central place to the Marxist theory of economic alienation. With Polanyi, I draw the conclusion that capitalism is by its nature synonymous not with freedom, but with oppression. The socialist ideal of bringing freedom from alienation is thus reinvested with all the force of which some sought to deprive it.

The critique of Eurocentrism in no way implies refusal to recognise the qualitative break capitalism represents and, to use a word no longer fashionable, the progress (albeit relative and historically limited progress) it ushers in. Nor does it propose an act of contrition by which westerners renounce describing this invention as European. The critique is of another kind and centred on the contradictions the capitalist era opens up. The system conquers the world but does not make it homogenous. Quite the reverse, it effects the most phenomenal polarisation possible. If the requirement of universalism the system ushers in is renounced, the system cannot be superseded. To sum up in a phrase, the critique I suggested in *Eurocentrism*: the truncated universalism of capitalist economism, necessarily Eurocentric, must be replaced by the authentic universalism of a necessary and possible socialism. In other words, the critique of Eurocentrism must not be backward-looking, making 'a virtue of the difference' as the saying goes.

## **The mercantilist transition in Europe, 1500–1800**

The world system is not reducible to the relatively recent form of capitalism dating back only to the final third of the 19th century, with the onset of imperialism (in the sense that Lenin attached to this term) and the accompanying colonial division of the world. On the contrary, we say that this world dimension of capitalism found expression right from the outset and remained a constant of the system through the successive phases of its development. The recognition that the essential elements of capitalism crystallised in Europe during the Renaissance suggests 1492 – the beginning of the conquest of America – as the date of the simultaneous birth of both capitalism and the world capitalist system, the two phenomena being inseparable.

How should we qualify the nature of the transition from 1500 to 1800? Various qualifications have been suggested, based on the political norms prevailing at the time (Ancien Régime or the Age of Absolute Monarchy) or character of its economy (mercantilism). Indeed, the old mercantilist societies of Europe and the Atlantic and their extension towards central and eastern Europe are problematic. Let us simply note that these societies witnessed the conjunction of certain key preliminary elements of the crystallisation of the capitalist mode of production. These key elements are a marked extension of the field of commodity exchanges affecting a high proportion of agricultural production; an affirmation of modern forms of private ownership and the protection of these forms by the law; a marked extension of free wage labour (in agriculture and craftsmanship). However, the economy of these societies was more mercantile (dominated by trade and exchange) than capitalist by virtue of the fact that the development of the forces of production had not yet imposed the factory as the principal form of production.

As this is a fairly obvious case of a transitional form, I shall make two further comments on this conclusion. First, the elements in question – that some have called protocapitalist (and why not?) – did not miraculously emerge in 1492. They can be found long before in the region, in the Mediterranean precinct particularly, in the Italian cities and across the sea in the Arab-



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