

Back To Marx

Ellen Meiksins Wood

[Ellen Meiksins Wood is co-editor of Monthly Review. The above article was originally presented at the 1997 Socialist Scholars Conference and is reprinted here from the Monthly Review of June 1997 with the kind permission of the Author and the Editor]

Let me start with a provocative claim, which is contrary to all the conventional wisdom. The claim I want to make is that this historical moment, the one we're living in now, is the best not the worst, the most not the least appropriate moment to bring back Marx. I'll even claim that this is the moment when Marx should and can come fully into his own *for the first time* — not excluding the historical moment when he actually lived. I'm making this claim for one simple reason: we're living in a moment when, for the first time, capitalism has become a truly universal system. It's universal not only in the sense that it's global, not only in the sense that just about every economic actor in the world today is operating according to the logic of capitalism, and even those on the outermost periphery of the capitalist economy are, in one way or another, subject to that logic. Capitalism is universal also in the sense that its logic — the logic of accumulation, commodification, profit-maximization, competition — has penetrated just about every aspect of human life and nature itself, in ways that weren't even true of so-called advanced capitalist countries as recently as two or three decades ago. So Marx is more relevant than ever, because he, more effectively than any other human being then or now, devoted his life to explaining the systemic logic of capitalism.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, there is a striking and prophetic image of capitalism spreading throughout the world, battering down all Chinese walls, as Marx and Engels put it. But when Marx wrote *Capital*, he — rightly — emphasized the *specificity* of capitalism, as a very particular and, for the moment, local phenomenon. He didn't mean, of course, that capitalism didn't already have global effects, through the international market, colonialism, and so on. But the system itself was very far from being universal. It would inevitably spread, but for the moment it was very localized — not just confined to Europe or North America but, at least in its mature industrial form, to one place in particular, England. He even felt compelled to explain to the Germans that some day they too would follow in the footsteps of England: *de te fabula narratur*, he warned them. You may think this is a story only about England, but whether you know it or not, this story is also about you.

So Marx's *Capital* derives its distinctive character from this simple fact: that it is about one capitalist system, as if

it were a self-enclosed system, and about the internal logic of that system. Now I'll come back to this in a minute, and to why, paradoxically, the localized quality of Marx's analysis makes it more, not less, relevant to our current condition, even though, or precisely because, capitalism is so universal. But first, I want to say some things about the development of Marxism after Marx, and also about the new forms of left anti-Marxism that have followed.

My main point is this: nearly every major development of Marxism in the 20th century has been less about capitalism than about what is *not* capitalist. (I'll explain what I mean in a second.) This is especially true of the first half of the 20th century, but I would argue that the tendency I'm talking about here has affected Marxism ever since. What I mean is that the major Marxist theories, like Marx, proceeded on the premise that capitalism was far from universal; but where Marx started with the most mature example and abstracted from it the systemic logic of capitalism, his major successors started, so to speak, from the other end. They were mainly interested — for very concrete historical and political reasons — with conditions that, on the whole, *were not* capitalist. And there was an even more basic difference: whatever Marx may have thought about the global expansion of capitalism, or the possible limits on its expansion, that wasn't his primary concern. He was mainly interested in the internal logic of the system and its specific capacity to totalize itself, to permeate every aspect of life wherever it did implant itself. Later Marxists, besides being concerned with less mature capitalisms, generally started from the premise that capitalism would dissolve before it matured, or certainly before it became universal and total; and their main concern was how to navigate within a largely non-capitalist world.

Just think about the major milestones in 20th century Marxist theory. For instance, the major theories of revolution were constructed in situations where capitalism scarcely existed or remained undeveloped and where there was no well developed proletariat, where the revolution had to depend on alliances between a minority of workers and, in particular, a mass of pre-capitalist peasants. Even more striking are the classic Marxist theories of imperialism. In fact, it's striking that the theory of imperialism in the early 20th century almost replaces or *becomes* the theory of capitalism. In other words, the object of Marxist economic theory becomes what you might call the *external* relations of capitalism, its interactions with *non-capitalism* and the interactions among capitalist states in relation to the non-capitalist world. For all the profound disagreements among the classical Marxist theorists of imperialism, they shared one fundamental premise: that impe-

rialism had to do with the location of capitalism in a world that wasn't — and never would be — fully, or even predominantly, capitalist. Take, for instance, the basic Leninist idea that imperialism represented “the highest stage of capitalism.” Underlying that definition was the assumption that capitalism had reached a stage where the main axis of international conflict and military confrontation would run between imperialist states. But that competition was, by definition, competition over division and redivision of the world, that is, a largely non-capitalist world. The more capitalism spread (at uneven rates), the more acute would be the rivalry among the main imperialist powers. At the same time, they would face increasing resistance. The whole point — and the reason imperialism was the highest stage of capitalism — was that it was the *final* stage, which meant that capitalism would end before the non-capitalist victims of imperialism were finally and completely swallowed up by capitalism.

The point is made most explicitly by Rosa Luxemburg. The essence of her classic work in political economy, *The Accumulation of Capital*, is to offer an alternative to Marx's own approach. It is meant ‘to be precisely an alternative to Marx's analysis of capitalism as a self-enclosed system. Her argument is that the capitalist system needs an outlet in non-capitalist formations — which is why capitalism inevitably means militarism and imperialism. Capitalist militarism, having gone through various stages beginning with the straightforward conquest of territory, has now reached its “final” stage, as “a weapon in the competitive struggle between capitalist countries for areas of non-capitalist civilization.” But one of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, she suggests, is that “Although it strives to become universal, and, indeed, on account of this tendency, it must break down—because it is immanently incapable of becoming a universal form of production.” It is the first mode of economy that tends to engulf the whole world, but it is also the first that *can't* exist by itself because it “needs other economic systems as a medium and soil.”¹ So in these theories of imperialism, capitalism by definition assumes a non-capitalist environment. In fact, capitalism depends for its survival not only on the existence of these non-capitalist formations but on essentially pre-capitalist instruments of “extra-economic” force, military and geo-political coercion, and on traditional forms of colonial war and territorial expansion.

And so it goes on, in other aspects of Marxist theory too. Trotsky's notion of combined and uneven development, with its corollary notion of permanent revolution, probably implies that the universalization of the capitalist system will be shortcircuited by capitalism's own demise. Gramsci was writing very consciously in the context of a less developed capitalism, with a pervasive pre-capitalist peasant culture. And this surely had a lot to do with the importance he attached to ideology and culture, and to intellectuals, because something was needed to push class struggle beyond its material limits, something was needed to make socialist revolution possible even in the absence of mature material conditions of a well developed capitalism and an advanced proletariat. In a different way, the same is true of Mao. And so on.

What I'm saying, then, is that non- or pre-capitalism permeates all these theories of capitalism. Now all of these Marxist theories are profoundly illuminating in various ways. But in one way, they seem to have been proved wrong. Capitalism *has* become universal. It has totalized itself both intensively and extensively. It's global in reach, and it penetrates to the heart and soul of social life and nature. This doesn't, by the way, necessarily mean the disappearance of the nationstate. It may just mean new roles for nation-states, as the logic of competition imposes itself not only on capitalist firms but on entire national economies, which, with the help of the state, conduct their competition less in the old “extra-economic” and military ways than in purely “economic” forms. Even imperialism now has a new form. People like to call it “globalization,” but that's really just a code-word, and a misleading one at that, for a system in which the logic of capitalism has become more or less universal and where imperialism achieves its ends not so much by the old forms of military expansion but by unleashing and manipulating the destructive impulses of the capitalist market. Anyway, though this universalization of capitalism has certainly exposed some fundamental contradictions in the system, we have to admit that there's no sign of its demise in the near future.

So what theoretical response has there been to this new reality? Well, to begin with, you could say that there's been a real paradox here: the more universal capitalism has become, the more people have moved away from classical Marxism and its main theoretical concerns. This is certainly true of postMarxist theories and their successors, but I suppose you could argue that it's true even of more recent forms of Marxism — say, the Frankfurt School, or the tradition of Western Marxism in general. For instance, the famous shift from the traditional Marxist concern with political economy to culture and philosophy in some of these cases seems to be related to the conviction that the totalizing effects of capitalism have penetrated every aspect of life and culture — and also that the working class has been thoroughly absorbed into that capitalist culture. (I happen to think, by the way, that there may be another explanation for this shift, which has to do not with the universalization of capitalism but, on the contrary, with the ways in which pre-capitalist forms still pervade the consciousness of thinkers like the Frankfurt School—but I don't have time to go into that here, and anyway, I'm far from being able to make a coherent argument about it.)²

The point I want to make is this: there are, I think, two possible ways of responding to the universalization of capitalism. One is to say that if, contrary to all expectations, capitalism has after all become universal instead of dissolving before it had a chance to totalize itself, this is truly the end. This can only be the system's final triumph. I'll come back to the other possible response, but this one, the defeatist one, the one that represents the other side of the coin of capitalist triumphalism, is the one that has generally taken hold of the left today.

This is where post-Marxist theories come in — and I think that to understand them, it's useful to consider them against

the background of the Marxist theories I've been talking about here. If you look at the history of so-called post-Marxism, you'll find that it started from the premise that capitalism has indeed become universal. In fact, for post-Marxists the universality of capitalism is precisely the reason for *abandoning* Marxism. You might think this is a bit odd, but the reasoning goes something like this: the universal capitalism of the postwar world is dominated by liberal democracy and a democratic consumerism, and both of these have opened up whole new arenas of democratic opposition and struggle, which are much more diverse than the old class struggles. The implicit — though sometimes more explicit — conclusion is that these struggles can't really be *against* capitalism, since it's now so total that there really is no alternative — and it's probably the best of all possible worlds anyway. So in this universal system of capitalism, there can be, can *only* be, lots of fragmented particular struggles within the interstices of capitalism.

Post-post-Marxist — or maybe postmodernist — theories have gone one step further. Now, it's not even just a question of a universal capitalism. Now, capitalism is *so* universal that it's basically invisible, as air is to us human beings, or as water is to fish. We can play around in this invisible medium, and maybe we can even carve out little enclaves, little sanctuaries, of privacy, seclusion, and freedom. But we can't escape — or even *see* — the universal medium itself.

So is this the right conclusion to draw from the universality of capitalism? I don't suppose I'll surprise anyone if I say that I'm convinced it's precisely the wrong conclusion. I happen to think that the disposition to reach that conclusion has something to do with the historical roots of the generation — admittedly my own generation — which has produced these varieties of post-Marxism and postmodernism. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that these people are still rooted in the golden age of the long postwar boom. I've been very impressed for some time with the degree to which the theorists of the so-called 60s generation, and even their students whose recent experience has been very different, have been shaped by the assumptions of the postwar boom. In other words, they haven't yet learned to dissociate the universality of capitalism from capitalist growth, prosperity, and success, or apparent success, and they take for granted its total hegemony.

But if these theories seem to have bought into capitalist triumphalism, it may also be partly because of the intellectual background of 20th century Marxism. Against that background and its assumptions about the limits of capitalism, maybe it's hard to imagine any other measure of success than its capacity to spread throughout the world. It's as if the limits of capitalism can be measured only by the limits of its geographic expansion. And if it proves itself capable of breaching those geographic limits — as it now apparently has — it must surely be judged an unchallengeable success. But suppose we go back to Marx and to his internal analysis of capitalism as a self-enclosed system — which I think the very totality of capitalism

actually entitles us to do. We really can begin to look at the world not as a relationship between what's inside and what's outside capitalism but as the working out of capitalism's own internal laws of motion. And that might make it easier to see the universalization of capitalism not just as a measure of success but as a source of weakness. Capitalism's impulse to universalize itself isn't just a show of strength. It's a disease, a cancerous growth. It destroys the social fabric just as it destroys nature. It's a contradictory process, just as Marx always said it was. The old theories of imperialism may not have been strictly right to suggest that capitalism can't become universal, but it's certainly true that it can't be universally successful and prosperous. It can only universalize its contradictions, its polarizations between rich and poor, exploiters and exploited. Its successes are also its failures.

Now, capitalism has no more escape routes, no more safety valves or corrective mechanisms outside its own internal logic. Even when it's not at war, even when it's not involved in the old forms of inter-imperialist rivalry, it's subject to the constant tensions and contradictions of capitalist competition. Now, having more or less reached its geographic limits and ended the spatial expansion that supported its earlier successes, it can only feed on itself; and the more successful it is on its own terms — in other words, the more it maximizes profit and so-called growth — the more it devours its own human and natural substance. So maybe it's time for the left to see the universalization of capitalism not just as a defeat for us but also as an opportunity — and that, of course, above all means a new opportunity for that unfashionable thing called class struggle.

Notes

1. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 467.
2. For those few readers who may be interested in this point, let me just give a very sketchy idea of what I have in mind. I think, for example, that the Frankfurt School was in a sense more preoccupied with bourgeois society than with capitalism (which to me are not the same thing, as I suggested, for instance, in "Modernity, Postmodernity, or Capitalism?," *Monthly Review* 48 no.3, July-August 1996). So the famous shift from political economy to culture and philosophy may have had to do not just with an intellectual shift of focus from the material to the ideological, but with a focus on a different material reality. It had at least a little to do with a view of society in which the main axis of division was not capital vs labour but non-capitalist bourgeoisie (especially, in the German model, a bourgeois of intellectuals and bureaucrats) vs the "masses." And the problem is further complicated by the fact that these critics of bourgeois society and culture themselves belonged to that very particular kind of bourgeoisie, were steeped in its culture, and (dare I say it?) sometimes shared its contempt for the masses. But leaving that complication aside, the point is that this form of theory may not only be seeing *capitalism* from a different angle but may have one eye fixed on a different, *pre-capitalist* social world.