For a long time, explanations of the problem were based on an uncritical acceptance of the supposed ‘Eurocentrism’ of Marx’s thought, softened by recourse to Hegel’s maxim that no-one can transcend the era in which he lives. If we know that, in the European consciousness of the nineteenth century, ‘America’ was a word designating the United States or, even more so, a terra incognita that only certain events now and then helped throw light on, why demand of Marx what was not possible in his time? Although both Marx and Engels were truly exceptional thinkers with an almost encyclopaedic range of interests, it would be quite wrong to demand of them that they escape their historical period. The pair were, perhaps, the most outstanding product of a civilisation that ended up with the world at its feet, relentlessly sweeping away ancient cultures, enslaving entire peoples, and converting the greater part of the planet into a mere extension of European capitalism. And while admitting that both Marx and Engels were its most radical critics, it is nevertheless the case that they developed their thought within that civilisation, with its codes and perspectives, with its theoretical horizons, with its forms of life and culture, with its tastes. The doctrine they elaborated represents the point of rupture with and dissolution of that civilisation, but – as is only logical and understandable – still clinging to them, like skin on the body, was the theoretical and cultural sediment and hang-ons that so often prevented them from being able to understand the distant and mysterious world
of the ‘non-European’ countries. Moreover, no-one can deny that Marx’s reflections on pre-industrial, non-capitalist societies – dependent and colonial – did not attain a degree of systematisation and range sufficient to strike down the belief, today rather widespread, that his elaborations on the problem were merely circumstantial, contradictory and strongly Eurocentric.

This interpretative schema, whether consciously or not, tends to subsume an extremely complex and nuanced thinker under a category as ambiguous as ‘Eurocentric’, erases all difference, and denies any history of Marx’s development that recognises periodisation, turning points, new discoveries and varying perspectives. As such, its analysis leaves out the role played by great political events in transforming a thought that was only set out in hypothesis-form in the Communist Manifesto. If we admit the presence of a ‘Eurocentric’ thought-framework, the great political events that Marx felt compelled to reflect on could only have served to curb its worst excesses, lacking the theoretical potential to change a framework that remained unaltered until the end of his life. Not even the exhumation of Marx’s writings on the future development of the Russian communes could shift the foundations of this conception of society, which, finding shelter in the ‘Eurocentric’ reading of Marx’s legacy, assumed the opposite meaning, paradoxically turning into an ideology justifying capitalist expansion across the world. If, indeed, Marx’s growing distrust and opposition towards the horrors created around the world by bourgeois civilisation – something that obsessed him in his last years and explains his search for non-capitalist paths of social transformation – was recognised by some, then over time this matter was reduced to merely incidental importance. The theory held strong, unmoving in its characterisation of the progressive character of capitalism as the ‘natural’ pattern of social development. The triumph of the October Revolution and the traumatising process of building a socialist project in a ‘backward’ country had the rare virtue of confirming the beliefs of all sorts of rival tendencies. For the Communists, it was the irrefutable demonstration of the unity of the process of world history, explaining how their elaborations could claim to represent the ‘adaptation’ of Marxism to a new stage of human development. The possibility of a ‘non-Western’ form of social transformation, defended by Marx and the Narodniki in the 1880s, and questioned by Lenin in theory in the 1890s, was buried in practice in October 1917: the Bolshevik path became the only possible one, and, moreover, the only desirable one.

For the social democrats, conversely, the Bolshevik experience, with its marked features of Asiatic barbarism, confirmed their constantly-expressed theoretical and political rejection of the possibility of the democratic and socialist transformation of a ‘backward’ society. During these years, very few people noted with sufficient clarity the fact that the Russian Revolution really was a ‘revolution against Capital’ (to use Gramsci’s unfortunate phrase), that is to say, a process of