

## Chapter Three

### The Reality and Fallacy of Marx's 'Eurocentrism'

But let us dwell further on the two claims that serve as the basis for the commonplace belief that Marx's 'Eurocentrism' is a logical and sufficient explanation of his indifference towards Latin America.

The first claim begins from the recognition that in Europe there is a generalised ignorance of the Latin-American reality. But can we take this claim as a given? Is it true that, in the European consciousness of the nineteenth century, our countries formed part of a practically unknown world, or were a mere extension of the United States? Do we not here have one of those assertions that, through force of repetition, do not receive the necessary scrutiny? Of course, this is not the right place to reconstruct the discontinuous, complex and contradictory process of the successive 'rediscoveries of America' by European consciousness, a process that – as is clear – accompanied the transformation of capitalism into a worldwide system. But we can say that, from the very moment of the incorporation of America into the economic, political and social system, essentially that of Spain and Portugal, there began an unstoppable traffic of goods, people and ideas that cannot be silenced by the strict censorship by which one might attempt to deny European consciousness of a newly emerging reality. From this moment, as Robert Paris aptly comments, America provided 'a language and represented a reservoir of dreams, symbols and images for the European subconscious'.<sup>1</sup> From the mid-eighteenth century, reflection

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1. Paris and Rebérioux 1978, p. 166; Spanish translation in Paris and Rebérioux 1983.

on the character of the Indies, on the nature of its inhabitants and the reasons for its 'backwardness' were placed at the very heart of the establishment of a 'general science of man', a Eurocentric ideology of civilisation tied to the colonisation-process. But it is also within the framework of the 'contest over the New World' that there began to emerge a sense of difference, questioning the belief in the total unity of the human race. In Buffon, De Pauw and Abbé Raynal, the American world begins to exist, take on its own specific characteristics, a history living according to another rhythm and man acting according to different laws. It was precisely in searching the immensity of its horizons, the diversity of its inhabitants, the multiplicity of its languages, the difficulties of linking together its different societies, the weakness of American man and the hardships of nature, the antiquities of its settlements and its historical backwardness, that the essential facts for piecing together its singularity could be found.<sup>2</sup> Years later, Humboldt's work, in particular his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, provided Europe with a vast array of information that would be assimilated after the wars of independence by an army of diplomats, merchants, investors, and adventurers of all kinds (typically disguised as 'travellers'). With commercial traffic rapidly expanding, the ever-greater political influence of England on newly-liberated Spanish-speaking America, and the European countries' military intervention against the weaker nations of our continent, the region essentially became a reality that could not be ignored, at least for the European intelligentsia. If England was already, by the mid-nineteenth century, the country with the most developed capitalism, it is worth asking what this country really was: just the industrial centres of Manchester, Liverpool or London, or also its colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean and its crushing political and economic hegemony over the formally independent nations of Latin America. All this constituted what has been metaphorically defined as the 'English mode of production'.<sup>3</sup> The paradox lies in the fact that England was the very country where Marx decided to live after the defeat of the 1848 Revolution and his exile from Germany, and was precisely where he began to concern himself rather more substantially with the problems of the non-European world.

The coup d'état in France of 2 December 1851 marked the triumph of counter-revolution in Europe. According to Marx, the main bastions of the new European and world balance of forces, England and Russia, would find in the re-establishment of their traditional alliance the means of dominating all Europe and dividing the spoils of the Ottoman Empire amongst themselves. His analysis of the economic conditions of the era and his examination of the events that took place between 1848 and 1850 allowed him to reach the conclusion that there

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2. See Appendix Two below.

3. The expression is from Jaffe 1976, pp. 85–104.