

Chapter Four

De Te Fabula Narratur?

It was no chance-thing that Marx began to concern himself more substantially with the phenomenon of world capitalist expansion in the decade that he resumed his economic studies and elaborated the first draft of his book *Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, better-known as the *Grundrisse*.¹ It was, moreover, the decade that followed the defeat of the revolutions in Europe and that saw a profound change in Marx and Engels's conception of the characteristics, level and rhythm of world capitalist development. The hypothesis advanced in the *Communist Manifesto* as to the full maturity of market expansion was revealed to be false, or at least too hasty, in the light of the extraordinary economic transformation and gigantic growth that took place in Europe and worldwide after 1848. The hopes placed in a new flowering of revolution, this time burying bourgeois society for good, were abandoned in favour of an obsessive search among the material conditions of capitalist development for the causes that had led to this new phase characterised by the 'triumph of the bourgeoisie'.² The articles published from 1851 to 1862 in the *New York Herald Tribune* demonstrated Marx and Engels's concern to uncover in their concrete analysis of capitalist development and in the formation of the world market the elements necessary for developing the theory of

1. See Marx 1973.

2. This was the title given by the Italian editors of Eric J. Hobsbawm's work *The Age of Capital* (Hobsbawm 1975), to which we must refer the reader for an excellent overview of the whole period.

Capital and verifying the existence within bourgeois society of the material basis for socialist revolution. It was from precisely this analysis, and from the study of the particular cases of India and China, that Marx deduced that the development of colonialism represented resounding proof of the bourgeoisie's potential for economic and political development. As such in 1858 he allowed himself reason to doubt the triumph of a socialist revolution in Europe while the development of bourgeois society continued its ascent on the incomparably larger terrain of the dependent and colonial countries.³ The widening of the world market, a powerful catalyst for the centralisation of capital and simultaneously for economic development, led to a generalised extension of capitalist relations across the oppressed countries. The result was a growing economic and political interdependence between Europe and the rest of the world, which would then lay the basis for the development of imperialism. But the process of socialisation necessarily tied to the capitalist mode of production could not remain limited to the economic market, but also, and especially, weighed on the development of political struggle. After England's policy provoked a revolution in China, Marx asked what reaction the Chinese transformations would in turn provoke in England, and thus throughout all of Europe.⁴ From his analysis of the consequences of English rule in India, and of its economic penetration in China, Marx deduced the possibility, created by colonisation, of a revolution in the colonial world that, unlike the one that he had hypothesised before 1848, would not now depend on the revolutionary political action of the popular classes of

3. See Marx's letter to Engels of 8 October 1858, where he writes "There is no denying that bourgeois society has for the second time experienced its 16th century, a 16th century which, I hope, will sound its death knell just as the first ushered it into the world. The proper task of bourgeois society is the creation of the world market, at least in outline, and of the production based on that market. Since the world is round, the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan would seem to have completed this process. For us, the difficult question is this: on the Continent revolution is imminent and will, moreover, instantly assume a socialist character. Will it not necessarily be crushed in this little corner of the earth, since the movement of bourgeois society is still, in the ascendant over a far greater area?" (Marx 1975–2004f).

4. See Marx's article 'Revolution in China and Europe' from the 14 June 1853 *New York Herald Tribune*: Marx 1975–2004g. Recalling Hegel and his exaltation of 'the law of the contact of extremes' as one of the secret laws governing nature, Marx curiously projected this law onto the revolutionary events in China: 'Whether the "contact of extremes" be such a universal principle or not, a striking illustration of it may be seen in the effect the Chinese revolution seems likely to exercise upon the civilized world. It may seem a very strange, and a very paradoxical assertion that the next uprising of the people of Europe, and their next movement for republican freedom and economy of Government, may depend more probably on what is now passing in the Celestial Empire – the very opposite of Europe – than on any other political cause that now exists – more even than on the menaces of Russia and the consequent likelihood of a general European war. But yet it is no paradox, as all may understand by attentively considering the circumstances of the case.'