But even when we reject as insufficient or simplistic the given explanations with regard to Marx’s supposed theoretical and political blindness, which we regard as ‘paradoxical’ given that we have found that already in the mid-1850s he was in possession of the fundamental components of a methodology whose application allowed him to analyse the most difficult problems of certain ‘dependent’ or ‘backward’ social formations with surprising sharpness, in our view the initial question can only be answered if we abandon the abstract terrain in which certain of these notions are situated in order to relocate them in a thematic sphere within which the spectre of irrationality or certainty in history revolves. The same failed explanations emerge again, but as residues, ideological aromas that seep through the pores of Marxian political discourse. As such, we will attempt a response that denies that which is always in front of our eyes, that will allow us to explain the known by that which is still not known, the existing but still hidden, that which is habitually described as ‘Eurocentric’, and, as such, only appears as a historical paradox. Recognising that Marx’s investigation in this sphere was very much devoted to the search for a law of history – derived less from Hegel than from a whole tradition of thought that was caught up in the dominant trajectory of Western thinking – we will attempt to identify what motives might have prevented Marx from a focus on Latin America beginning from a reasoning similar to that which allowed him to
achieve a stunning degree of ‘modernity’ in his consideration of national situations, as compared to his contemporaries.

Here, we will allow ourselves to begin a more specific elucidation of the problem, accepting a commonplace idea that Marx was unaware of our continent’s reality because he did not ‘see’ the concrete historical process of the constitution of the Latin-American nations, and thus was ever more given to recognise in Ireland, China, India, Spain, Russia and even Turkey what he did not seem disposed to recognise in countries like Mexico, Argentina and Brazil, for example. Not because he explicitly denied it in theory, but because of his inability to recognise it in the concrete struggles of these peoples. Having questioned the idea strongly rooted in European culture – with Hegel as its totalising philosophical expression – as to a process of historical repetition, the stragglers following the lead of the more advanced nations, the task incumbent on Marx was to analyse the political, economic and social characteristics of the present that made it possible to foresee the future national realisation of the countries subjected by capitalism. A return to the histories of these peoples and a study of the integrity and solidity of their social structures were the path that Marx necessarily had to follow if he was to anchor the ‘material’ foundation of their capacity to become nations in social relations. A people could become ‘historic’ only on the condition that it had a socio-economic structure that would allow for this, and a social force capable of hegemonising the whole process. Marx affirmed the presence of these characteristics in each of the cases that he analysed.¹

But where in Latin America can the real foundations for the struggle for national realisation be found? If, in the time of Marx’s reflection, America appeared as a vast empty territory,² able to absorb the population-surplus of Europe resulting from capitalist development, its scarce indigenous population considered as tribes still steeped in an original state of savagery and lack of culture; if the South-American republics’ social structures were based exclusively on the ordering, despotic presence of a military power; if America had not made a forward step in the development of its basic constitutive elements in this period; then America was set in a historical time whose essential, autonomous, proper determinations would have to be carried out in the future. In this sense, Marx could identify with the words of his teacher Hegel, whose Lectures on the Philosophy of History stated that what happened in the New World was nothing but the echo of the Old World and, therefore, the reflection of a life foreign to it. America

¹. A relevant example of what we are raising, here, can be found in Marx’s analysis of the Spanish Revolution – see Appendix Six.

². On the relationship between the ‘empty’ territory and the possibility of state-building in America, it is always useful to return to Hegel’s considerations in the Lectures on the Philosophy of History, discussed in our Appendix Two.