

Marx and history: the Russian road and the myth of historical determinism

Marx e a história: a via russa e o mito do determinismo histórico

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Abstract

This paper aims to point out the limits of the historical determinism thesis in Marx's thought by analyzing his writings on the Russian issue and the possibility of a "Russian road" to socialism. The perspective of historical determinism implies that Marx's thought is supported by a unilinear view of social evolution, i.e. history is understood as a succession of modes of production and their internal relations inexorably leading to a classless society. We argue that in letters and drafts on the Russian issue, Marx opposes to any attempt associate his thought with a deterministic conception of history. It is pointed out that Marx's contact with the Russian populists in the 1880s provides textual elements allowing to impose limits on the idea of historical determinism and the unilinear perspective in the historical process.

Keywords: Marx. Historical Determinism. Unilinearity. Russian Road.

Resumo

Objetivo do presente artigo é apontar os limites da tese do determinismo histórico no pensamento de Marx, através da análise dos escritos sobre a questão russa e a possibilidade da "via russa" para o socialismo. A perspectiva do determinismo histórico compreende que o pensamento de Marx estaria amparado por uma visão unilinear da evolução social, ou seja, a história seria compreendida por uma sucessão de modos de produção e suas relações internas que inexoravelmente rumaria a uma sociedade sem classes sociais. Argumentamos que, em cartas e esboços sobre a questão russa, Marx se opõe a qualquer tentativa de imputar uma concepção determinista da história em seu pensamento. Aponta-se que o contato de Marx com os populistas russos na década de 1880 fornece elementos textuais para impor limites à ideia de determinismo histórico e a perspectiva unilinear no processo histórico.

Palavras-chaves: Marx. Determinismo Histórico. Unilinearidade. Via Russa.

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Introduction

Even after the bicentenary of Karl Marx's birth, his work, which impacts so many fields of knowledge, is still subject to many different interpretations and generates much debate. One of these interpretations is related to a supposed historical determinism in his conception of history. Under this perspective, Marx understands history as a necessary and fixed process of evolution: a unilinear view of historical evolution. Although this thesis is often used by Marx's critics, we can find this perspective in some Marxists (BUNGE, 2012; VUJACIC, 1988; LARRAIN, 1991; PALMA, 1978; KIERNAN, 1974).

From the point of view of society in general, teleology is at work in history and social development: there is an inexorable passage from different modes of production in direction of a known end, socialism (communism). This implies a *unilinear* view of social formations in historical evolution. Besides, this view sees capitalist society as a necessary and inevitable phase of social development. This establishes the following unilinear scheme for historical development: primitive society → slavery → feudalism → capitalism → communism (DE PAULA, 2015). According to Vujacic (1988, p. 473), in Marx's thought history, therefore "develops from a primitive state to socialism and communism by dint of historical inevitability".

This view of Marx's materialist conception of history is widespread and common-place in any Economics and Sociology textbook. And although some Marxists endorse this thesis, direct contact with Marx's writings would be sufficient to avoid this simplification, but that is not the case. Under the influence of some positivist traits, thinkers of the Second International (1889 - 1916) contributed to this view of Marx's thought. This phenomenon spread out by the beginning of the 20th century and reached its peak in the official Marxism of the Soviet Union (CLAUDÍN, 1985; NETTO, 2011).

Although the *unilinear* thesis can be easily refuted by direct contact with Marx's work, it is important to point out its flaws, given the prominent position and great popularity it enjoys. An example from outside Marxist circles is Mario Bunge's book *Evaluating Philosophies* (2012), where he utilizes exactly this thesis to criticize Marx. However, Bunge is not alone. Virtually all attempts to show the limits of Marx's thought resort to this view and this is why it is important to dispute it even today.

To do this, a singular case is used in this paper: Marx's contact with Russian populists and the possibility of a Russian road to socialism in 1870-1880. In this period, a communal form of property was exalted in Russia, the *obshtchina* (rural commune). Russian populists believed that this could be a starting point to develop a socialist society and contacted Marx to know if his view of history was compatible with this idea or if the commune would perish because of a supposed *unilinear* scheme

of human history. Marx replied with fierce opposition to any universal theory of history with supra-historical elements and a unilinear view of human history. His materialist conception of history was directed against universal schemes and determinism in historical development (MARX, 1983A [1881]; 1983B [1881]; 1983C [1881]; 1983D [1877]; MARX; ENGELS, 1983 [1882]).

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to point out the limits of the historical determinism thesis in Marx's thought from his contact with the Russian populists and the possibility of a Russian Road to socialism. This paper is divided into two sections, besides the introduction and conclusions. In the first section, we expose the historical determinism's thesis based on a *unilinear* view of social formations in Marx's thought. In the second section, we present Marx's contact with the Russian case and his opposition to any determinist and *unilinear* view of history.

Historical determinism: the *unilinearity* thesis

In this first section, we will present the thesis of historical determinism and its unilinear path in Marx's thought. On the level of abstraction of history in general, a teleological is implied in Marx's view of history. This idea contained a unilinear perspective of social development based on a universal theory of history with Hegelian elements (Bianchi, 2010).

The thesis of historical determinism claims that Marx understood history as a teleological and unilinear process. According to De Paula (2015), humanity is inserted in a great evolutionary line, inexorably going through the different modes of production and their internal relations towards a more evolved form of society: socialism/communism. This implies a philosophy of history or a universal theory of history based on a *unilinear* view of social formations. Following this perspective, the scheme of historical evolution inevitably is: primitive society → slavery → feudalism → capitalism → communism. And all societies must pass through these phases.

In other words, history contains in it the seed of a certain end. That is, Marx's conception of history "would be compromised by evolutionary teleology - that is, for Marx any dynamics (economic, technologic, etc.) would necessarily and compulsorily direct history to an anticipated end"² (NETTO, 2011, p. 15). From the philosophical point of view, this implies a reductionist analysis of the historical process.

This view can be traced to the influence of Lewis Morgan's evolutionism in Engels' late ideas of historical evolution. Also, in Lenin: "it is evident that Marx deduces the inevitability of the transformation of capitalist society into a socialist society and wholly and exclusively from the economic law of the development of contemporary society" (LENIN, 1970, p. 35). In 1938, Sta-

² Free translation from Portuguese: "estaria comprometida por uma teleologia evolucionista - ou seja, para Marx, uma dinâmica qualquer (econômica, tecnológica etc.) dirigiria necessária e compulsoriamente a história para um fim de antemão previsto (o socialismo)".

lin argued that "history knows five fundamental types of relations of production: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. [...] "Proletarian class struggle is a perfectly natural and inevitable phenomenon" (STALIN, 1945, p. s/n).

In short, "the development of society has been conceived as based on deterministic natural laws so that human practice could be considered as unimportant (...) because (...) socialism would, as a natural law, have to follow after capitalism" (FUCHS, 2008, p. 21). From this official view, Marx's critics used this perspective to delegitimize his work as determinist, such as Karl Popper, Anthony Giddens, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Thorstein Veblen, and Mario Bunge just to name a few of them.

The necessity to deal with this issue today is due that relevant thinkers continue to propagate it. Beyond Marxist circles, we can find this thesis in Marx's critics. Giddens argued that "Marx never abandoned the idea that a progressive evolutionary process can be traced out from the initial dissolution of tribal society to the developments which bring humankind to the threshold of socialism" (GIDDENS, 1981, p. 76). Or, according to Boaventura, "Marx (...) formulated (...) a new theory of history, historical materialism, in terms of which societies evolve necessarily and deterministically over various phases, according to laws" (SOUSA SANTOS, 1999, p. 36).

In recent years, Mario Bunge's book *Evaluating Philosophies* is a great example of how this simplification is widespread. This book deals critically with different currents of thought, including Marx. Bunge pointed out in the introduction of the chapter *Marxist Philosophy: Promise and Reality* that "[h]ere I will confine myself to criticizing what I take to be the main ideas of the philosophy of Marx and Engels, without regard to the uncounted emendations and embellishments added by their followers" (BUNGE, 2012, p. 83). In short, the thesis is attributed exclusively to Marx and Engels.

Bunge argued that Marx's view of history is based on a historical determinism in which humanity automatically achieve socialism: "In agreement with their historical determinism, they believed that the proletarian revolution would be an automatic consequence of the economic "contradiction" of capitalism" (BUNGE, 2012, p. 91). In this statement, Bunge suggests that humanity follows a *unilinear* process towards a classless society due to a supposed historical determinism.

However, we can see this view in Marxist circles. De Paula (2015) made an interesting critical exposition of this. We will follow his systematization³. In general, societies are distinct from each other insofar as they are inserted in the great evolutionary line, so the backwardness of any society can only be conceived as *relative* in the *unilinearity* in history (DE PAULA, 2015). In this sense, Larrain argued that Marx, therefore, understood the evolution of history "as a necessary and natural process, regulated by universal laws, which imposes itself on human beings and which inexorably leads to a known end" (LARRAIN, 1991, p. 230).

In terms of capitalist development, for example, Palma (1978, p. 885) argued for a tendency of capital to expand homogeneously: "As a result of this process a series of new capitalist societies would arise, whose development would be similar". More than this, this process "would be followed by the development of the series of contradictions inherent to the capitalist system, which would tend to lead to a higher system of development" (PALMA, 1978, p. 885).

In this view, according to De Paula (2015), capitalist relations function the same way, the logic of capital accumulation level the capitalist development worldwide. If that did not occur, the explanation is the negative role of pre-capitalist relations in the process of development.

According to this perspective, De Paula (2015) argued that underdevelopment and backwardness are conceived as synonymous. Any non-capitalist relation is an obstacle for the future (communism). For any transition to a classless society is necessary an intense previous capitalist development. Palma (1978, p. 887) therefore suggested this process as inevitable: "the necessity of capitalist development, Marx states very clearly (...) that socialism can only be attained through capitalist development".

De Paula (2015) still argued that there are some tensions between Marx's unilinear conception of history and his analysis of non-Western societies. However, these tensions do not compromise the idea of a unilinear scheme of social evolution. For example, Vujacic claimed that even with the elaboration of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production in 1853 Marx still understood history as a unilinear scheme and capitalism a necessary and inevitable phase. The new scheme is now the following: pre-capitalism capitalism communism.

According to Vujacic:

In my view, unilinearity in the work of Marx and Engels (...) [stem] from their conceptualization of the necessity and uniqueness of capitalism, i.e., its historical mission. In other words, the five-stage scheme: primitive society - slavery - feudalism - capitalism - socialism (communism) is of secondary importance in comparison to the three-stage scheme: pre-capitalist modes of production - capitalism - socialism (communism). I think that only the acceptance of the latter scheme can enable us to understand certain crude evolutionary positions taken by Marx (VUJACIC, 1988, p. 481).

To support this unilinear scheme in Marx's works, as De Paula (2015) pointed out, the most cited texts are the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* of 1848 and a series of articles on British colonialism in India, published in 1853 in the *New York Daily Tribune*, such as *The British Rule in India* and *The Future Results of British Rule in India*.

In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels suggested that the role of the bourgeoisie is to bring "progress" to the rest of the world. The civilizing role of the capitalist mode of production

³ We will expose only the general lines of this discussion. To understand the peculiarities of each individual author, see De Paula (2015, p. 584-586).

appears to Marx and Engels as a superior socio-economic epoch concerning the "barbarians" previous time. In the same sense, they present the progressive character of capitalism to incorporate the less developed regions through the world market. From that, Vujacic (1988, p. 473) understands in this way: according to Marx and Engels, "the bourgeoisie is the real economic and political force which transforms the world and brings about general progress".

As an example, according to Marx and Engels (1976a [1848], p. 488): "The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country". Or:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image (MARX; ENGELS, 1976a [1848], p. 488).

In these passages, the authors derive the historical necessity of capitalism to civilizational progress. However, it is not conceived that by force and extra-economic violence the capitalist society, with more developed productive forces, destroys the egalitarian societies. On the contrary, they understood that capitalism is a necessary and inevitable historical epoch, based on a historical-philosophical conception of history.

In the same sense, one can derive similar conclusions in the articles on colonialism. In *The Future Results of British Rule in India* Marx suggested that British domination in India could inevitably build an industrial capitalist economy. Marx also argued that the people who tried to invade India (Arabs, Turkish, etc.) were "*Hindooized*" by the "eternal law of history". Thus, British domination had a double mission in India: "one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia." (MARX, 1979a [1853], p. 217-218).

In this perspective, Marx seems to defend that the capitalist mode of production had the destruction role to overcome the pre-capitalist social formations through the unconscious impulse of "History". Even with all the destructive aspects of this process, capitalism was as a progressist force to build the necessary material conditions for the future. Simultaneously, capitalism is an inevitable phase of social development.

In *The British Rule in India*, Marx (1979b [1853]) seems to argue in direction of a teleological conception of history by analyzing colonial invasion:

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her man-

ner of enforcing them. But that is not ' the question. The question is, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that Revolution (MARX, 1979b [1853], p. 132).

In *The Future Results of British Rule in India*, Marx (1979a [1853]) indicated a similar view of teleology in history and the role of capitalism to bring about progress and modern industry to India:

[W]hen you have once introduced machinery into the locomotion of a country, which possesses iron and coals, you are unable to withhold it from its fabrication. You cannot maintain a net of railways over an immense country without introducing all those industrial processes necessary to meet the immediate and current wants of railway locomotion, and out of which there must grow the application of machinery to those branches of industry not immediately connected with railways. The railway system will therefore become, in India, truly the forerunner of modern industry (MARX, 1979a, p. 220). (...) Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth. When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous, pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain (MARX, 1979a [1853], p. 222).

Excerptions like these favored the determinist and *unilinear* perspective in Marx's conception of history. The consequence of this is that the development of capitalism would be similar in any region. According to Kiernan (1974, p. 198), Marx's idea, therefore, "was not a further spread of Western imperialism but a proliferation of autonomous capitalism, such as he expected in India and did witness in North America". In general, this view favored a series of wrong decisions in the workers' movements across the 20th Century, but our aim in the next section is to present Marx's opposition of this view in the light of his contact with the Russian issue at the end of 1870 and the beginning of 1880. This contact deal directly with the idea of historical determinism and the *unilinear* scheme of historical development and gives us a good example of how Marx was against historical determinism and a philosophy of history with supra-historical elements.

The Russian Road and the myth of historical determinism

Although some authors try to identify the historical determinism based on the *unilinear* scheme in some excerpts of Marx's works, a brief analysis of his contact with the Russian populists allows us to identify his opposition to it⁴. We will ana-

lyze Marx's controversies in his late writings on the possibility of Russia to transit to socialism without passing through the capitalist phase. In these controversies, the Russian revolutionaries contacted Marx to know if the rural commune could be a starting point to a socialist transition without passing through the capitalist phase. In other words, the idea of a Russian road to socialism in contrast to a unilinear scheme of historical evolution⁵.

According to Dussel (1990, p. 250-251), Marx's contact with the Russian issue is from the end of 1870 and the beginning of 1880. In the writings of this contact Marx deal with some controversies with the incipient Marxism in Russia. More specifically, with the so-called *Narodniks* ("people" or "nation") or Russian populists. The revolutionaries of this organization tried to disseminate Marx's ideas in that country.

At that time in Russia, a form of property was exalted, known as *obshtchina* (rural commune). According to Shanin (1983), it's easy to understand the tendency to exalt the rural property: almost the totality of the Russian empire was based on agrarian production. These rural properties were collectively organized and worked by peasants. Its economic and political decisions were communitarian in the form of assemblies, known as *mir*. However, some segments of the organization supported a modernization process in Russia. Some of them argued that only with the incorporation of Western Europe social relations, more specifically, the capitalist relations of production, Russia could, then, transit to socialism (DUSSEL, 1990, p. 250-251). This view, as we will see, tried to extract from Marx's writings a unilinear scheme of social evolution.

On the other hand, the critique of this modernization view was based on the writings of Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828 – 1889)⁶. Chernyshevsky was one of the founding fathers of the *Narodnik* movement and argued in favor of the possibility of Russian *obshtchina* be the starting point to a socialist transition, without passing through the capitalist phase. The transition could be possible, according to him, with the approximation with Western Europe, modernizing the productive structure, and incorporating the most advanced methods of production. In other words, the possibility of absorbing the most advanced science and technics in the rural commune (DUSSEL, 1990; ANDERSON, 2010, p. 196-197).

This process, then, could be a Russian road to socialism in contrast to a unilinear scheme of historical evolution. One part of the revolutionary group argued in favor of the acceleration of the revolutionary process to avoid the incorporation of capitalist relations of production in Russian and the destruction of *obshtchina*. Then the revolutionary horizon was the ending of czarism and the construction of the basis to allow the incorporation of Western Europe's advanced productive technics in the commune.

At the beginning of the 1870s, Marx was already aware of Chernyshevsky's works. After that, as Dussel (1990, p. 256) argued, "in 1875 Marx was already fully aware of the "Russian question". Thus, in Manuscript VII of book II, of July 1878, he shows the difficulty of the implantation of capitalism in Russia – thus granting reason to the 'populists'". Besides, we need to have in mind that the difficulty can be traced to the political form of czarism and its predominance of the agrarian productive structure.

Marx was aware and studied many forms of ancient societies in this period. Before the contact with the Russian populists, Marx already had read an important work on the Russian rural commune in 1879 and the most important work of the great anthropologist Lewis Morgan (1818 – 1881). Dussel (1990, p. 256) reminds us of these two important events: "Marx read in 1879 Maksim Maksimovich Kovalevsky's (1851-1916) work on the "Russian rural commune" (...) and, especially, between December 1880 and March 1881, L. H. Morgan's book, *Ancient Society, 1877*".

It is in this period that *Narodnik* leader Vera Zasulich (1851 – 1919) contacted Marx. This period also marks a rupture in the *Narodnik* movement. According to Dussel (1990, p. 251) and Shanin (1983, p. 10), the organization split into two great groups. On one hand, People's Will (*Narodnaya Vol'ya*) advocated direct actions against czarism and the State. On the other hand, Black Repartition (*Chernyi Peredel*) – Zasulich and Georgi Plekhanov (1856 – 1918) group – defended the idea of the possibility of a Russian road to socialism based on Chernyshevsky's works.

The question of the Black Repartition group was if Marx's theory authorized the possibility of a Russian road to socialism from the rural commune. Zasulich was in charge to contact Marx and trying an answer to this question. On February 16, 1881, Vera Zasulich sent a letter to Marx to understand his position about the rural commune. In the letter is possible to see the influence of Marx's *Capital* in the populists' discussions on the agrarian question in Russia:

Honored Citizen,

You are not unaware that your Capital enjoys great popularity in Russia. Although the edition has been confiscated, the few remaining copies are read and re-read by the mass of more or less educated people in our country; serious men are studying it. What you probably do not realize is the role which your Capital plays in our discussions on the agrarian question in Russia and our rural commune. You know better than anyone how urgent this question is in Russia. You know what Chernyshevskii thought of it. Our progressive literature (...) continues to develop his ideas (ZASULICH, 1983 [1881], p. 98).

⁴ However, as Pires (2019) already identified, Marx's opposition to historical determinism was already present in 1845-6 in *The German Ideology*.

⁵ We will expose only the general elements of this controversy to show Marx's opposition to any historical determinism and unilinear schemes. To understand Marx's controversies with the Russian populists in greater detail, see Shanin (1983), Dussel (1990) and Anderson (2010).

⁶ Chernyshevsky was a great reference of Lenin's works. Lenin used the same title of Chernyshevsky's novel to write the political pamphlet "What is to be done?" (LENIN, 1969 [1902]).

The urgency of the letter was so profound that Zasluch (1983 [1881], p. 98) argued that in her view "it is a life-and-death question above all for our socialist party. In one way or another, even the personal fate of our revolutionary socialists depends upon your answer to the question". She continued and affirmed that the Russian issue had only two possibilities: on one hand, the commune could be a transition to a classless society or, on the other, could perish to the capitalist private property. In her words:

Either the rural commune (...) is capable of developing in a socialist direction, that is, gradually organizing its production and distribution on a collectivist basis. If, however, the commune is destined to perish, all that remains for the socialist, as such, is more or less ill-founded calculations as to how many decades it will take for the Russian peasant's land to pass into the hands of the bourgeoisie, and how many centuries it will take for capitalism in Russia to reach something like the level of development already attained in Western Europe (ZASULICH, 1983 [1881], p. 98).

The question made by Zasluch is directly linked to the idea of historical determinism and the *unilinearity* in history. Astonishingly, Marx's ideas were already interpreted in this way only fourteen years after the publication of volume one of *Capital* in 1867. Zasluch's argument is based on the idea of a fixed historical evolution of humanity and capitalism as a necessary and inevitable phase in this great evolutionary line.

In the same letter, Zasluch exposed that the Russian Marxists argued that, following Marx's theory, the rural commune should inevitably perish in the historical process. She contested this argument in the letter:

Nowadays, we often hear it said that the rural commune is an archaic form condemned to perish by history, scientific socialism, and, in short, everything above debate. Those who preach such a view call themselves your disciples par excellence: 'Marksists'. Their strongest argument is often: 'Marx said so.' 'But how do you derive that from Capital?' others object. 'He does not discuss the agrarian question and says nothing about Russia.' 'He would have said as much if he had discussed our country,' your disciples retort with perhaps a little too much temerity. (ZASULICH, 1983 [1881], pp. 98-99).

It is clear now, as the letter indicates, that this interpretation of Marx's ideas had historical determinism and *unilinearity* as the background. Zasluch was also clear of the urgency of Marx's response: "So you will understand, Citizen, how interested we are in Your opinion" (ZASULICH, 1983 [1881], p. 99). Zasluch wanted to know if the ideas of Marx's *Capital* allowed a historical inevitability: the idea that any country must "pass through all the phases of capitalist production" (ZASULICH, 1983 [1881], p. 99).

Marx answer the letter on March 8. Besides the official letter sent, some drafts have been preserved and contain important arguments against any historical determinism and a unilin-

ear scheme of historical evolution. Initially, just to have in mind, Marx argued in the letter sent that: "The analysis in *Capital*, therefore, provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian commune" (MARX, 1983a [1881], p. 124).

In the second draft of the letter, Marx argued that the problem with the rural commune was not a deterministic view of history not even a fixed perspective of historical evolution, but the real threat was the capacity of capitalist social relations to penetrate the Russian territory. According to Marx (1983b [1881], p. 105), "[w]hat threatens the life of the Russian commune is neither a historical inevitability nor a theory; it is state oppression and exploitation by capitalist intruders". Marx's theoretical efforts were always opposed to a determinist and schematic view of reality, especially when dealing with the historical process.

According to Dussel (1990, p. 255-256) and Musto (2018), in the letter and drafts to Zasluch, Marx cited passages from the French edition of *Capital* in which he made some "corrections", arguing about the difficulty of the rise of capitalism in Russia and the restriction of his analysis to Western Europe.

We can see this restriction in the letter sent to Zasluch, where Marx affirmed that "[i]n the Western case, then, one form of private property is transformed into another form of private property. In the case of the Russian peasants, however, their communal property would have to be transformed into private property" (MARX, 1983a [1881], p. 124). Marx continued in the letter sent affirming the inexistence of any historical inevitability and the possibility of the rural commune to be a starting point to Russian regeneration:

The 'historical inevitability' of this course is therefore expressly restricted to the countries of Western Europe. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. But in order that it might function as such, the harmful influences assailing it on all sides must first be eliminated, and it must then be assured the normal conditions for spontaneous development (MARX, 1983a [1881], p. 124, original emphasis).

In this passage, however, Marx seemed to mock the idea of "inevitability". As he always stated, a similar path of capitalist development of Western Europe was based on the tendencies of capital accumulation by the degree of similarity of the region. The possibility of a Russian road to socialism was possible to Marx if the revolution took place in the country. In the first draft of the letter to Zasluch, Marx argued that:

To save the Russian commune, there must be a Russian Revolution. For their part, the Russian government and the 'new pillars of society' are doing their best to prepare the masses for such a catastrophe. If the Revolution takes place in time (...) to ensure the unfettered rise of the rural commune, the latter will soon develop as a regenerating element of Russian Society and an element of superiority over the countries enslaved by the capitalist regime (MARX, 1983c [1881], pp. 116-117).

The possibility of the regeneration of Russia and the possible transition to socialism by a non-capitalist road could eventually be a way to transit to a classless society. However, only with the Western proletarian revolution and the incorporation in the rural commune of the most advanced technics of production. In the first draft to Zasulich Marx argued that incorporating "the *contemporaneity* of Western [capitalist] production, which dominates the world Market, enables Russia to build into the commune all the positive achievements of the capitalist system without having to pass under its harsh tribute" (MARX, 1983c [1881], p. 110, original emphasis).

Here we can see Marx's opposition to the idea of the *unilinear* scheme in history, i.e. the inevitable unilinear course of social formations. Even before Marx's contact with Zasulich he already demystified this mistaken view of his conception of history. In 1877, Marx wrote a letter to demystified the position of the Russian editor of *Otietchestvienne Zapiski* magazine⁷. The editor argued that the chapter about the primitive accumulation process in Volume I of *Capital* represented a deterministic view of the transit from feudalism to capitalism. In this view, other countries inevitably will become capitalist and should pass by a similar process. The editor's critique and opposition of this supposed perspective in *Capital* had in mind precisely the idea of a Russian road to socialism (ANDERSON, 2010, p. 227-228).

Marx answered give him an example of how very similar processes in history result in different results:

At various points in Capital I allude to the fate that befell the plebeians of ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants, each tilling his own plot on his own behalf. In the course of Roman history, they were expropriated. The same movement that divorced them from their means of production and subsistence involved the formation not only of large landed property but also of big money capitals. Thus, on fine morning there were, on the one side, free men stripped of everything but their labour-power, and on the other, ready to exploit their labour, owners of all the acquired wealth. What happened? The Roman proletarians became, not wage-labourers, but an idle mob more abject than those who used to be called 'poor whites' in the United States; and what opened up alongside them was not a capitalist but a slave mode of production (MARX, 1983d [1877], p. 136).

Marx argued that, although he had analyzed the transition process from feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe, it is impossible to understand it as a universal scheme applicable to the Russian case. The opposition to any historical determinism and a universal theory of history with supra-historical elements appears in the letter. There is no possibility to understand history with schemes, applicable in any case. In Marx's words:

Thus, events of striking similarity, taking place in different historical contexts, led to totally disparate results. By studying

each of these developments separately, and then comparing them, one may easily discover the key to this phenomenon. But success will never come with the master key of a general historical-philosophical theory, whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical (MARX, 1983d [1877], p. 136).

Marx's opposition to any deterministic view in his conception of history is clear. On one hand, there is no possibility to attribute to Marx the idea of a *unilinear* view of social formations in historical evolution. On the other hand, it is also impossible to understand Marx's materialist conception of history as a universal theory, i.e. a supra-historical perspective applied to any period.

However, this opposition is not conjectural. A year after this contact, Marx and Engels wrote the new preface of the Russian edition of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In the second preface of this edition they argued in favor of the rural commune:

Can the Russian obshchina, a form, albeit heavily eroded, of primitive communal ownership of the land, pass directly into the higher, communist form of communal ownership? Or must it first go through the same process of dissolution which marks the West's historical development?

Today there is only one possible answer. If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russia's peasant communal Land-ownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development (MARX; ENGELS, 1983 [1882], p. 139).

Now the question that remains is: what about the articles on colonialism? They are used to support a deterministic view of history in Marx. First, in these articles, Marx argued based on the conjectural speculations of the future results of the British invasion of India. Different from theoretical controversies found in *The German Ideology* and *Poverty of Philosophy* or *Capital*, these articles must be understood in their motivation of redaction (MIRANDA, 2018).

Marx agreed with his materialist conception of history as found in *The German Ideology*, for example (AUGUSTO; CARCANHOLO, 2014), and review his conjectural and speculative positions *post festum*. In a letter to the Russian economist Nikolai Danielson in 1881, Marx exposed the real results of the British domination in India:

In India, serious complications, if not a general outbreak, is in store for the British government. What the English take from them annually in the form of rent, dividends for railways useless to the Hindoos, pensions for military and civil servicemen, for Afghanistan and other wars, etc., etc.— what they take from them without any equivalent and quite apart from what they appropriate to themselves annually within India, speaking only of the value of the commodities the Indians have gratuitously

⁷ Musto (2018, p. 68), however, argued that this letter was never sent.

and annually to send over to England, it amounts to more than the total sum of income of the 60 millions of agricultural and industrial laborers of India). This is a bleeding process, with a vengeance! (MARX, 1992 [1881], p. 63, original emphasis).

The analysis of these articles can show us the true nature of colonialism: not an inevitable process for progress in history, but a brutal and destructive period of capitalist domination. Mohri (1979, p. 41, original emphasis) understood in this sense and stated that instead of a double historical mission of the British domination - to destroy the old archaic society and to build the foundations for civilizational progress - Marx understood a twofold destructive mission of colonialism: "[...] 'the destruction of the old society' and the destruction of some of the essential conditions for 'regeneration of a new society'".

Marx's controversy with the Russian issue is a great concrete example of his opposition to any historical determinism. In these letters and drafts, we were able to understand that Marx does not give space to misinterpretation of his works. An accurate direct read of Marx's writings can be a powerful antidote to avoid oversimplifications of his theory.

On the other hand, a question may arise if the idea of a philosophy of history with Hegelian features is still attempted to be inserted in Marx's works: if Marx has a universal theory of history with supra-historical elements, why is there not a single book or article on the universal and unilinear theory of history? The only answer is that Marx has no universal theory of history or schemes to understand the historical process. That is why Marx focused his analysis on modern capitalist society and tried to understand pre-capitalist societies to understand the specificities that characterized the modern economy.

The contact with the Russian question only reaffirms Marx's notion that history is not determined and cannot be reducible to a deterministic approach and a universal scheme applied in any period. This non-deterministic view of history was already developed in the decade of 1840, mainly in *The German Ideology* and *Poverty of Philosophy*. As Pires (2019) identified, in these works Marx precisely fought against the idea of the general scheme and supra-historical perspectives of history⁸.

Concluding remarks

From the different interpretations of Marx's social theory, the idea of historical determinism and the *unilinear* perspective of social formations is the most widespread and used to criticize his theoretical framework. As we saw before, this problematic perspective was already established in Russia and Europe only fourteen years after the publication of Volume I of *Capital*. However, we saw that Marx vehemently rejected this interpreta-

tion and his contact with the Russian populists gave us a concrete example of his opposition to any historical determinism. The idea of the possibility of a Russian road to socialism makes clear that Marx has no universal theory of history with supra-historical elements nor a unilinear view of historical evolution.

Important to note, however, that Marx was not in agreement with an isolated transition from a semi-feudal society to socialism. The productive capacity to produce abundance is a prerequisite and that's why Marx argued in defense of the Western revolution and the incorporation of the modern technics of production in the *obshchina*. Without abundance, only scarcity is generalized putting barriers to transit to a classless society.

Already in 1845-6 Marx and Engels knew that and wrote in *The German Ideology* that without the capacity to produce the necessary material conditions "without it privation, *want* is merely made general, and with *want* the struggle for necessities would begin again, and all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored" (MARX; ENGELS, 1976b [1845-6], p. 49, original emphasis). Marx was not defending the Russian transition alone, but only demonstrating that his conception of history is not based on a historical determinism with supra-historical elements or an inevitable *unilinear* scheme for social evolution.

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⁸ This view imposes limits even to some Marxists who tried to understand Marx conception of history in two great moments: Marx had some elements of historical determinism until the 1850's and, from a series of causes, he abandoned this perspective. Enrique Dussel, Nestor Kohan, Kevin Anderson, Pedro Scaron, Teodor Shanin, Michael Lowy, etc. share this position. To understand it critically, see De Paula (2015) and Pires (2019).

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