VI. FOR A TRULY UNIVERSAL CULTURE

1.

Substituting a new paradigm for the one on which Eurocentrism is based is a difficult, long-term task. It requires a theory of the political and a theory of culture, complementing the theory of economics, as well as a theory of their interaction. These theories are still sorely lacking, as much in bourgeois thought as in constructs of Marxist inspiration, paralyzed by a refusal to continue a task that Marx only began.

In this reconstruction, the importance of developing an analysis of culture and its function in historical development is equaled only by the difficulty of the task. Its importance derives from the fact that the dominant bourgeois mainstream in the social sciences was initially founded on an overtly culturalist philosophy of history, and then, when this philosophy gradually lost its strength of conviction, took refuge in agnosticism, refusing any search for the general beyond the specific and, thus, remaining under the spell of culturalism. Vulgar Marxist theories are not fundamentally different. The thesis of the so-called two roads tries unsuccessfully to reconcile the concepts of historical materialism with Eurocentric prejudice about the exceptional nature of European history; while the thesis of the "five stages" avoids the difficulty by minimizing specific traits to the point of artificially

reducing the diversity of different historical paths to the mechanical repetition of the European schema.

But what could replace culturalist theory? The entire difficulty lies here, in the blatantly obvious inadequacies of scientific knowledge of society. I do not intend to propose a complete and coherent construct capable of answering all the questions in this domain; I have only the more modest ambition of pointing out a few of the elements that such a construct must integrate into its problematic.

2.

The reconstruction of social theory along truly universalist lines must have as its base a theory of actually existing capitalism, centered on the principal contradiction generated by the worldwide expansion of this system.

This contradiction could be defined in the following way: the integration of all of the societies of our planet into the world capitalist system has created the objective conditions for universalization. However, the tendency toward homogenization, produced by the universalizing force of the ideology of commodities, that underlies capitalist development is hindered by the very conditions of unequal accumulation. The material base of the tendency toward homogenization is the continuous extension of markets, in breadth as well as in depth. The commodity and capital markets gradually extend to the entire world and progressively take hold of all aspects of social life. The labor force, at first limited in its migrations by different social, linguistic, and legal handicaps, tends to acquire international mobility.

Cultural life being the mode of organization for the utilization of use-values, the homogenization of these values by their submission to a generalized exchange-value tends to homogenize culture itself. The tendency toward homogenization is the necessary consequence not of the development of the forces of production, but of the capitalist content of this development. For the progress of the forces of production in pre-capitalist societies did not imply the submission of use-value to exchange-value and, hence, was accompanied by a diversity of

paths and methods of development. The capitalist mode implies the predominance of exchange-value and, hence, standardization. Capitalism's tendency to homogenize functions with an almost irresistible force at the levels of industrial techniques of production, trends in consumption, lifestyle, and so on, with an attenuated power in the domains of ideology and politics. It has much less influence over language usage.

What position should be taken toward this tendency toward standardization? The historically irreversible, like the Gallicization of Occitania or the adoption of Coca-Cola by the Cuban people, cannot be regretted forever. But the question arises with respect to the future. Should the tendency of capitalism toward standardization be welcomed, the way progress of the forces of production is welcomed? Should it be defended, or at least never actively opposed, keeping in mind the reactionary character of the nineteenth-century movements that sought to destroy machinery? Is the only cause for regret that this process operates through the prism of class and is, as a result, ineffective? Should we conclude that socialism will move in the same direction, only more quickly and less painfully?

There have always been two co-existing responses to this question. In the first half of his life, Marx adopted a laudatory tone when describing the progress of the forces of production, the achievements of the bourgeoisie, and the tendency toward standardization that liberates people from the limited horizons of the village. But gradually doubts crept in, and the tone of his later writings is more varied. The dominant wing of the labor movement eulogized the "universal civilization" under construction. A belief in the fusion of cultures (and even of languages) predominated in the Second International: think of Esperanto. This naïve cosmopolitanism, effectively disproven by World War I, reappeared after the Second World War, when Americanization came to be seen as synonymous with progress or, at the very least, modernization.

However, any fundamental critique of capitalism requires a reappraisal of this mode of consumption and life, a product of the capitalist mode of production. Such a critique is not, moreover, as utopian as

is often believed: the malaise from which Western civilization suffers is ample testimony. For in fact, the tendency toward standardization implies a reinforcement of the adjustment of the superstructure to the demands of the capitalist infrastructure. This tendency diminishes the contradictions that drive the system forward and is, therefore, reactionary. Spontaneous resistance to this standardization, thus, expresses a refusal to submit to the relationships of exploitation that underlie it.

Moreover, this tendency toward standardization collides with the limits imposed by unequal accumulation. This unequal accumulation accelerates tendencies toward homogenization at the center, while it practically destroys them for the great mass of people at the periphery, who are unable to gain access to the modern mode of consumption, reserved for a small minority. For these people, who are often deprived of the elementary means of basic survival, the result is not simply malaise, but tragedy. Actually existing capitalism has, therefore, become a handicap to the progress of the forces of production on the world scale. For the mode of accumulation that it imposes on the periphery excludes the possibility of the periphery catching-up. This is the major reason why capitalism has been objectively transcended on the world scale.

Nevertheless, whatever opinion one may have of this model of society and its internal contradictions, it retains great force. It has a powerful attraction in the West and Japan, not only for the ruling classes, but also for the workers, testifying to the hegemony of capitalist ideology over the society as a whole. The bourgeoisies of the Third World know no other goal; they imitate the Western model of consumption, while the schools in these countries reproduce the models of organization of labor that accompany Western technologies. But the peoples of the periphery have been victims of this expanding process of the homogenization of aspirations and values. The prodigious intensification of communication by the media, now global in scope, has both quantitatively and qualitatively modified the contradiction generated by the unequal expansion of capitalism. Yearning for access to Western models of consumption has come to penetrate large num-

bers of the popular masses. At the same time, capitalism has revealed itself to be ever more incapable of satisfying this yearning. Societies that have liberated themselves from submission to the demands of the global expansion of capitalism must deal with this new contradiction, which is only one expression of the conflict between the socialist and capitalist tendencies.

The impasse is, therefore not only ideological. It is real, the impasse of capitalism, and incapable of completing the work that it has placed on the agenda of history. The crisis of social thought, in its principal dimension, is above all a crisis of bourgeois thought, which refuses to recognize that capitalism is not the "end of history," the definitive and eternal expression of rationality. But this crisis is also an expression of the limits of Marxism, which, underestimating the dimensions of the inequality immanent in the worldwide expansion of capitalism, has devised a strategy of a socialist response to these contradictions that has proven to be impossible.

In order to truly understand this contradiction, the most explosive contradiction capitalism has engendered, the centers/peripheries polarization must be placed at the heart of the analysis and not at its margin.

But after a whole series of concessions, the forces of the Left and of socialism in the West have finally given up on giving the imperialist dimension of capitalist expansion the central place that it must occupy both in critical analysis and in the development of progressive strategies. In so doing, they have been won over to bourgeois ideology in its most essential aspects: Eurocentrism and economism.

The very term imperialism has been placed under prohibition, having been judged to be unscientific. Considerable contortions are required to replace it with a more "objective" term like "international capital" or "transnational capital." As if the world were fashioned purely by economic laws, expressions of the technical demands of the reproduction of capital. As if the state and politics, diplomacy and armies had disappeared from the scene! Imperialism is precisely an amalgamation of the requirements and laws for the reproduction of

capital; the social, national, and international alliances that underlie them; and the political strategies employed by these alliances.

It is therefore indispensable to center the analysis of the contemporary world on unequal development and imperialism. Then, and only then, does it become possible to devise a strategy for a transition beyond capitalism. The obstacle is disengaging oneself from the world system as it is in reality. This obstacle is even greater for the societies of the developed center than it is for those of the periphery. And therein lies the definitive implication of imperialism. The developed central societies, because both their social composition and the advantages they enjoy from access to the natural resources of the globe are based on imperialist surpluses, have difficulty seeing the need for an overall reorganization of the world. A popular, anti-imperialist alliance capable of reversing majority opinion is as a result more difficult to construct in the developed areas of the world. In the societies of the periphery, on the other hand, disengagement from the capitalist world system is the condition for a development of the forces of production sufficient to meet the needs and demands of the majority. This fundamental difference explains why all the breaches in the capitalist system have been made from the periphery of the system. The societies of the periphery, which are entering the period of "post-capitalism" through strategies that I prefer to qualify as popular and national rather than socialist, are constrained to tackle all of the difficulties that delinking implies.

3.

The principal contradiction of capitalism has, thus, placed an anti-capitalist revolution on the agenda—a revolution that is anti-capitalist because it is necessarily directed against capitalism as it is lived by those who endure its tragic consequences. But before that revolution can occur, it is necessary to finish the task that capitalism could not, and cannot, complete.

Some of these problems are not new, but rather have confronted the Russian and Chinese revolutions from the beginning. But these

problems must be discussed in the light of the lessons of history, which implies something quite different from the sweeping Eurocentric judgment that socialism is bankrupt and the only alternative is a return to capitalism.[12] The same may be said, *mutatis mutandis,* for any discussion of the lessons to be drawn from the radical movement of national liberation, which reached its apogee during the Bandung Era from 1955 until 1975.[13]

Without a doubt, the so-called socialist societies (which are better qualified as "popular national" societies) have not solved the problem. This is quite simply because the popular national transition will necessarily be considerably longer than anyone had imagined, since it is faced with the task of developing the forces of production in a permanent struggle with the logic of world capitalist expansion and on the basis of conflicting internal social relationships (what I have called the dialectic of three tendencies: socialist, local capitalist, and statist). In societies that have successfully made a popular national revolution (usually termed a "socialist revolution"), the dialectic of internal factors once again takes on a decisive role. Unquestionably, because the complexity of post-capitalist society had not been fully grasped, the Soviet experiment—such as it is—exercised a strong attraction over the peoples of the periphery for some forty years. The Maoist critique of this experiment also had considerable influence for approximately fifteen years.

Today, a better awareness of the real dimension of the challenge has already brought less naïve enthusiasm and more circumspection concerning definitive prescriptions for development. There has been, in fact, progress in both practice and in thought, a crisis in the positive sense of the term and not a failure that would prefigure capitulation and a return to normalcy, that is, a reinsertion into the logic of worldwide capitalist expansion. The discouragement that has overtaken the forces of socialism in the West, who find in the situation of the "socialist" countries an alibi for their own weaknesses, has its source elsewhere, in the depths of the Western societies themselves. As long as it does not have a lucid understanding of the ravages of Eurocentrism, Western socialism will remain at a standstill.

For the peoples of the periphery, there is no other choice than that which has been the key to these so-called socialist revolutions. Certainly, things have changed greatly since 1917 or 1949. The conditions for new popular national advances in the contemporary Third World do not allow the simple reproduction of earlier approaches, sketched out in advance by a few prescriptions. In this sense, the thought and practice inspired by Marxism retain their universal vocation and their Afro-Asiatic vocation even more. In this sense, the so-called socialist counter-model, despite its current limits, retains a growing force of attraction for the countries of the periphery. The revolts against the system, from the Philippines to Korea and Brazil, passing through Iran and the Arab world, despite ambiguities and even impasses in their expression at this first stage of their development, announce other national popular advances. The skeptics, prisoners of Eurocentrism, not only had not conceived of these explosions, but had also declared their impossibility.

4.

The current situation suggests an analogy with the long Hellenistic transition. In the conclusion of *Class and Nation,* we analyzed this latter transition in terms of "decadence" as opposed to "revolutionary consciousness" and suggested that the break-up of the tributary centralization of surplus and its replacement by the feudal dispersal of power, far from representing a negative step backwards, was the condition for the subsequent rapid maturation of capitalist centralization. Today, the liberation from the capitalist system by means of delinking constitutes in the same way the condition for the subsequent recomposition of a new universalism. On the cultural level, this three-phase dialectical movement from the false universalism of capitalist Eurocentrism to the affirmation of popular national development to the recomposition of a superior socialist universalism is accompanied by the need for delinking.

The analogy can be extended into the cultural domain. Hellenism created a universalism (regional, of course, and not global) at the level

of the ruling classes of the ancient Orient. This universalism, although truncated by its class content and, therefore, unacceptable to the popular masses (who, thus, took refuge in the Christian and Muslim religions and in peasant provincialisms), foreshadowed in certain aspects the universalism developed by capitalism. This is one of the reasons that the Renaissance turned to Hellenism for inspiration. Today, is not capitalist universalism, in spite of its Eurocentric limitations, the expression of the universal culture of the ruling classes? Does not its popular version, degraded for mass use—the more or less opulent consumerism of the West and its miserable counterpart in the Third World—simultaneously generate a strong attraction and an impasse, due to the frustration it provokes? While there has been a nationalist culturalist rejection of Eurocentric universalism, at the same time, elements of a future, superior socialist universalism are crystallizing. If this crystallization progresses rapidly enough, the empty phase of negative culturalist affirmation will be shortened.

5.

Because we are right in the middle of this barren phase, the stakes are considerable. The moral and political crisis of our time does not spare the opulent societies. Eurocentrism is in crisis, despite the robust, healthy appearance of the prejudices it nurtures. Anxiety in the face of a challenge recognized as insurmountable and the risk of catastrophe it brings with it have fostered a revival of the irrational, ranging from the renewed popularity of astrology to neo-fascist alignments. Thus, as is often the case, the reaction to a new challenge is, in its first phase, more negative than positive. The Eurocentric universalism of capitalism is not critiqued in order to allow the construction of a new universalism; all aspirations for universalism are rejected in favor of a right to difference (in this context, differences of cultures and forms of social organization) invoked as a means of evading the real problem.

Under these circumstances, two seemingly opposed, yet actually symmetrical, literatures have been developed. At one pole are the literatures of religious fundamentalisms of every kind—Islamic, Hindu,

Jewish (rarely mentioned, but it of course exists), Christian—and of provincialisms which extol the supposed superiority of folklore, all of them founded on the hypothesis of the incommensurability of different cultures. At the other pole is the insipid revival of bourgeois praise for capitalist society, completely unconscious of its fundamental Eurocentrism.

The cultural critique of Eurocentrism and the inverted Eurocentrisms must go beyond this dialogue of the deaf. Is it possible to envision political evolutions here and there that are likely to favor a better dialogue and the advancement beyond capitalism toward universal socialism? The responsibility of the Left and of socialism is precisely to conceive of this and to act to make it possible.

Eurocentrism is a powerful factor in the opposite sense. Prejudice against the Third World, very much in favor today, contributes to the general shift to the right. Certain elements of the socialist movement in the West reject this shift, of course. But they do so most often in order to take refuge in another, no less Eurocentric, discourse, the discourse of traditional trade unionism, according to which only the mature (read European) working classes can be the bearers of the socialist future. This is an impotent discourse, in contradiction with the most obvious teachings of history.

For the peoples of the periphery the inevitable choice is between a national popular democratic advance or a backward-looking culturalist impasse. Undoubtedly, if the West, instead of standing in the way of progressive social transformations at the periphery, were to support these transformations, the element of "nationalism" contained in the project of delinking would be reduced accordingly. But this hypothesis amounts to hardly more than a pious wish. The fact is that the West has been to date the bitter adversary of any advance in this direction.

To acknowledge this as realistic and factual is to recognize that the initiative for the transformation of the world falls to the peoples of the periphery. It is they who, by disengaging themselves from world development, can force the peoples of the West to become aware of the real challenge. This is an observation that, since 1917, nothing has come to invalidate. But it is also to admit that the long march of popular

national democracy will remain bumpy, filled with inevitable conflicts and unequal advances and setbacks.

The relatively negative judgment I have made concerning the West does not exclude the possibility of change here as well. By opening the debate on other forms of development in the West and the favorable consequences it could have for the evolution of the South, I have tried to insist on the responsibilities of the Western Left as well as the possibilities that are offered to it. A lucid awareness of the destructiveness of Eurocentrism is, in this case, a prerequisite for change.

On the other hand, the universalist ambition has nurtured left-wing ideologies, and from the outset the bourgeois left has forged the concepts of progress, reason, law, and justice. Moreover, the critique of Eurocentric capitalism is not without its echo at the center. No Great Wall separates the center from the periphery in the world system. Were not Mao, Che, and Fanon heroes of the progressive young people of the West at one time?

Obedience to the logic of the world economy demands in effect that a police force assume responsibility for repressing the revolts of the peoples of the periphery, who are victims of the system, and for averting the danger from new revolutionary advances that have the prospect of reconstructing a socialism for the twenty-first century. This function cannot be filled by any country other than the United States. The construction of a European neo-imperialism, relieving America from its guard duty, remains an impossible dream for the conceivable future. The Atlanticism that this pure capitalist logic thus implies inevitably reduces the European role to staying within the strict limits of commercial competition between Europe, Japan, and the United States, without aspiring for any kind of cultural, ideological, political, and military autonomy. In these circumstances, the European project is reduced to nothing more than the European wing of the Atlanticist project dominated by the United States.

In response to this poor outlook, in which a weakened European construction would remain threatened with collapse at any moment, can Europe contribute to the building of a truly polycentric world in every sense of the term, that is to say, a world respectful of different

social and economic paths of development? Such a new international order could open the way in Europe itself to social advances impossible to achieve within the strict logic of competitiveness alone. In other words, it could permit the beginning of breakthroughs in the direction of the extension of non-market social spaces, the only path for socialist progress in the West. Different relationships between the North and the South could, thus, be promoted in a context conducive to the objectively necessary popular national transition in the Third World. This option of "European nonalignment"—the form of delinking appropriate to this region of the world—is the only means for checking an otherwise almost inevitable decline.[13] Here, I mean by decline the renunciation of a mobilizing and credible progressive social project in favor of day-to-day adjustment to outside forces.

The choice remains: true universalism that is necessarily socialist or Eurocentric capitalist barbarism. Socialism is at the end of this long tunnel. Let us understand by this a society that has resolved the legacy of the unequal development inherent to capitalism and has simultaneously given all human beings on the planet a better mastery of their social development. This society will be superior to ours only if it is worldwide, and only if it establishes a genuine universalism, based on the contributions of everyone, Westerners as well as those whose historical course has been different. It is obvious that the long road which remains to be traveled in order to realize this goal prohibits the formulation of definitive judgments on strategies and stages to pass through. Political and ideological confrontations, like those that opposed "revolutionaries" and "social democrats" in their time, are nothing more than the vicissitudes of this long struggle. It is clear that the nature of this human society cannot be predicted.

The future is still open. It is still to be lived.