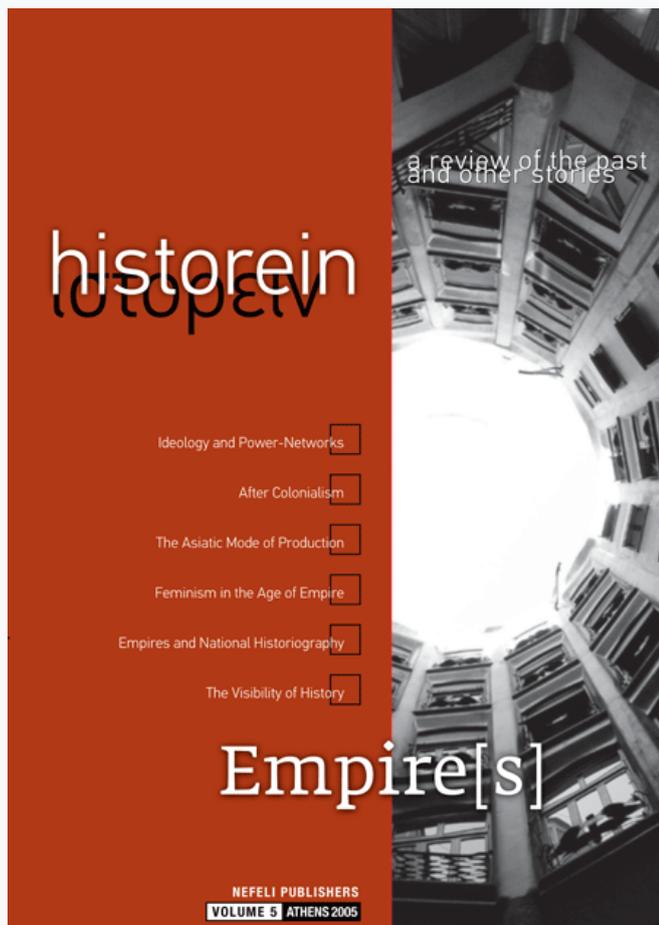


Historein

Vol 5 (2005)

Empire(s)



The Asiatic Mode of Production: National and Imperial Formations

Rebecca E. Karl

doi: [10.12681/historein.73](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.73)

Copyright © 2012, Rebecca E. Karl



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Karl, R. E. (2006). The Asiatic Mode of Production: National and Imperial Formations. *Historein*, 5, 58–75. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.73>

of duration, as if it had any advantage as compared with transience: the imperishable mountains are not superior to the quickly dismantled rose exhaling its life in fragrance.

G. W. F. Hegel¹

Historical transition is a conceptual topos necessarily linked, dialectically or linearly,

cal problems; rather, and more importantly, they were problems tied to a critique of the present. Indeed, while he seems to validate transience over duration in the “Oriental World” section of his *Lectures on the Philoso*

for the Western/German world, Hegel effectively smuggled atemporality back into his philosophical method. To the extent, then, that ‘continuity’ and ‘transition’ have subse-

quently become popular concepts of historical analysis – and they have been subjects of a great revival in the past decade or so – they have become so by being transformed into what Hegel called “bad infinities”: that is, they have expanded to unmanageable levels of abstraction by representing ostensibly depoliticized truth-claims on historical and present reality.

Following a Weberianized version of Hegel in China studies – a version that was simplified through the Parsonian appropriation of Weber as a theorist of capitalist modernization – an old answer to the ostensible conundrum presented by transition and continuity in Chinese history was to deny that there was one. That is, historical questions were posed so as to preclude contradiction, and China’s long-lived imperial political, economic and cultural formations were accordingly seen as enduringly stable as well as impervious to a transition to the modern. This, after all, is the central message of Weber’s nineteen-twenties study, *Religion of China*, and, differently, in Hegel’s vision, where perdurable historicity – transience or transition – was simply not within the purview of the empire’s durational expanse. In recent decades, however, while the old stagnation theory of Chinese history originally derived from Hegel and Weber has been thoroughly rejected, historical questions continue to be framed within the paradigm of continuity and transition, albeit now posed so as to encompass the possibility of change. Thus, solutions to the question of China’s imperial longevity have been found in such formulations as: for the economy, “involutionary change”,³ “change without development”,⁴ or, the oscillating ascendance of two primary modes of production with no one mode dominant;⁵ for the apparent persistence of gender formations from the Song through the Qing dynasty, “resilience”;⁶ or, for metacultural continuity, a congenial reformulation of the stagnant “Confucian civilization” thesis into a theory of dynamic Confucian capitalism; and so on. What distinguishes all of these recent attempts at exploring the old problem from new angles and evidence is their renewed reliance upon reified concepts of “culture”, albeit now valued positively rather than negatively.

In this light and at a minimum level, it can be said that all of these formulations grapple with genuine issues; that is, the issues are genuine in the sense of being seen as problems requiring historical explication. Yet, by the same token, such problems can only be seen as genuine if transformed into historical problematics, understood in the sense of the Lukácsian ideological real: that is, as an historically necessary reification that corresponds to and articulates a particular historical moment. The ideologically real, on this view, is a category of modern social life internal to the constitution of that social life, and not a function of an extrinsic imposition.⁷ In this sense, one can view the Hegelian philosophical problematic of transience/duration, or transition/continuity, as well as the importance accorded to “culture” in Hegel and today, as significant in the China field today.⁸ Thus, rather than a timeless and enduring problem of Chinese history (as Weber and Hegel both presented it), transience/duration is a fundamental political problem of modern and contemporary social life and thought; its renewed currency in China studies today must be viewed in that light.

This is quite evident in the strong resurgence staged by the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) in nineteen-eighties Chinese historical analysis after more than a half-century in eclipse. Surely one of the most reified of all historical concepts, the AMP’s comeback emerged not as part of a general rethinking of Marxist modes of production, but rather as part of a re-interpretation of *Chinese* history and a re-orientation of Chinese historiography in the post-Mao period. This

resurgence – anachronistic as it may seem in both national Chinese and global terms – presents a good opportunity to explore some of the ways in which historiography in China dovetails with and reinforces some prominent strands of American academic production in the China field and in general; it helps point to the global process of what Timothy Bewes calls the “ideological corrosion of the possibility of anything other than what exists”.⁹ It is the investigation of this process of reification that concerns this essay.

*Good-bye to Revolution*¹⁰

Ever since the late nineteen-twenties/early nineteen-thirties debates over the AMP in the Soviet Union and China, among other locations, the stigmatized multilinearity inherent in this theory of divergent historical paths had been rejected for a unilinear historicist dogmatism. Now, multilinearity has become quite attractive, not only in China but in postcolonial theory as well as among economic historians of China in the United States. In the nineteen thirties, moreover, the AMP’s basic coordinates – despotic state dominating and appropriating surplus from self-sufficient, classless village communities – did not answer the needs of the past as it appeared in China’s revolutionary present. While the AMP resurfaced from time to time in China and, implicitly or explicitly, in Cold War histories in the US – particularly in the nineteen fifties and early nineteen sixties to claim that Asiatic despotism was alive and well in Soviet and Chinese bureaucratism – nevertheless, in serious analyses in and of China, the AMP was abandoned as an impossible historical and historiographical obstacle to understanding the violent transformations of modern Chinese society and the world, even as some of its legacies remained untouched. Now, all over the world, the present is decidedly post- or even anti-revolutionary; stability has become the positive watchword for all cheerleaders of foreign investment and economic growth and development. Consequently, in most scholarship, social conflict in the guise of class analysis and struggle has become anathema. Finally, skepticism about the AMP in the nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties was also powerfully informed by the observed correlation between AMP theory and imperialism, both as a chronological coincident (the theory rose just as modern imperialism waxed strong) and as an apologetic. In the latter idiom, China’s supposed AMP-induced stagnation became an apology for the Japanese invasion of and modernizing mission in China;¹¹ more generally, the AMP’s emphasis on socio-economic stasis was seen as but an imperialist rationale, not only in relation to China, but in relation to Egypt, India, and other colonies as well.¹² However, now that economic modernization is all the rage, parading under the guise of globalization as a positive good, imperialism, however deplored politically and culturally in China and elsewhere, is often favorably associated with examples of successful post-War economic progress: in East Asia, particularly with the progress shown by the ex-Japanese colonies, Taiwan and South Korea. Thus, the waning of revolutionary historical paradigms; the rise of more nationalistic modernizationist ones after Mao Zedong’s death (1976); and the re-orientation of Chinese socio-economics in the nineteen eighties curiously facilitated the return of the AMP to historiographical attention.

In this general light, the global realignments of the nineteen nineties and the consequent recent resurgence of what might be called ‘transitology’ in contemporary Chinese (and Russian) socio-economic and political commentary has pulled attention back to the problem of transience/

continuity, albeit in a decidedly unrevolutionary idiom. Clearly, this problem was never totally absent from scholarship, as the concepts of “convergence,” “belatedness,” or “take-off” central to modernization theory might remind us. However, the problem has been reborn theoretically in a slightly different form and register: as a debate over the problem of the multilinearity of historical paths, or, in the language of postcolonial theory, as a problem of “alternative modernities”. In this perspective, many of the older articulations of this problem – the problem of the AMP for example – can be said to be hackneyed or out-of-date. Yet, from another perspective, many of the issues foregrounded in those older controversies remain at the center of intellectual, policy, and historiographical contention precisely because they reflect and respond to, while simultaneously articulating, the problematics of global capitalism at various moments of its local instantiations. The recent controversy in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (2002), which pits economic historians of China, Philip Huang and Kenneth Pomeranz, against one another, underlines the AMP’s continued spectral presence in the China field – a spectrality that derives from the continuing centrality of Weberian problem-consciousness; this continuity demonstrates, in fact, how inadequate the questions posed continue to be for the transformation of the dominant historical problematics (none of the recent debaters in the China field acknowledge either their own historicity or the ghostly presence of the AMP or Weber in their work).¹³

It is, then, in the sense of the ideological real – reification – as a particular form of historicity that the “missing link” as a fundamental historical and ideological gap – or, to give it a philosophical name, *aporia* – becomes interesting. The “missing link” could refer in a very specific sense to the theory, initially popularized in 1931 by the Soviet economic theorist, Mikhail Ia. Godes, that Marx, in his inclusion of the AMP in the sequence of universal historical stages in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), was merely providing, in the absence of adequate research, a “missing link” to the development of private property in pre-capitalist societies.¹⁴ Godes’ “missing link” theory further held that, once empirical research had demonstrated the invalidity of the AMP (by the eighteen seventies), Marx, but mostly Engels, abandoned the category; this led Godes to conclude that the AMP was not legitimate as a fully mature Marxist historical category. As is well known, the late nineteen-twenties/early nineteen-thirties debates surrounding the AMP, of which Godes’ theory was a major part, soon led to its elimination from the Stalinist codification of the five-stage theory of universal historical progression and a consequent insistence on the unilinearity of all histories.¹⁵

Not being under the same strictures as Godes and his mostly unfortunate comrades in the Soviet debates, we can note that, in a more general sense, the “missing link” concept articulates an unstated but implicit centrality of an a priori temporally conceived spatial boundedness, most easily captured in the ideology of the nation-state, an entity *extrinsically* and ahistorically linked to a pre-existing global universal time-space (whether of competing nation-states, in the classical theories of international relations; or of capital, in Marxian and non-Marxian theories of development; or, yet again, of Weberian modernization and Hegelian *Geist*). Here, the point is to note the peculiarly and particularly unmarked and yet crucial missed historiographical linking of “modes of production” to nation-time (diachronic chronology) and nation-spaces (geographic unity) by the nineteen twenties. Indeed, as Anne Bailey and Josep R. Llobera wrote some years ago: “The ‘nationalization’ of revolution [with 1917] had its parallel in the ‘nationalization’ of evolu-

tion, whereby the history of nations was interpreted as a succession of modes of production."¹⁶ And, they add, "The merging of world history and national histories as a sequence of universal stages is perhaps partly a product of the nationalization of revolution."¹⁷

It is in the realm of this merging, or conflation, that the peculiar contemporary appeal of multilinearity appears as a reified meta-historical truism and even compensatory gesture in this era of global capital. As with the missing link between evolutionary modes of production and the nation-state for previous Marxist revolutions, the resurgence of the AMP in relation to China's contemporary modernization and re-nationalization of history is thus perhaps less anachronistic than might seem apparent. That is, the re-nationalization of history in China through a culturalist re-appropriation after the revolutionary moment – in which the revolution was national, to be sure, but also and importantly, part of a moment that (unsuccessfully, to be sure) attempted to demystify capitalism at a global level¹⁸ – is less difficult to apprehend. The remainder of this essay seeks to explain not only the Chinese recuperation of AMP, but to trace the symptomatic rise of the AMP as an explanatory schema in Euro-America at just the moment – from the nineteen sixties onwards – when capitalism both fell into one of its deepest crises and then seemed to pull itself out of that crisis to become the foundation of the globalized capitalism of our contemporary moment. This is linked to empire theory, both implicitly and explicitly, as AMP was clearly a theory of imperial formations in decline – Chinese, Ottoman, Incan, Russian, among others – before it became one element in a theory of national evolution; as intimated, it was also a theory that, in its twentieth-century internalization and re-articulation *as method* by Max Weber, was intimately linked to Weberian-inflected modernization theory. It is thus not surprising that the return today of what can be called transhistorical theories of empire and of modernization under the guise of both critical and celebratory 'globalization' theory tend to rely upon attenuated AMP categories for their explanatory power. The linkages between such theories and certain versions of postcolonial theory will be indicated at the end of the essay.

AMP, Modernization, and Capitalist Convergence

For years now, the post-war modernizationist conceit of global "convergence" has not only been disproved in practice, it appeared to have been discarded as theory. We can recall, briefly, the core claim of that conceit from the nineteen fifties through the nineteen seventies: stated in its strongest terms, modernization theory posited that the convergence of the undeveloped and developed nations was both desirable and possible through the correct deployment of national and bilateral economic, cultural, and social development policy. One primary arena through which such convergence was to be effected was in the realm of 'values', or, in what Max Weber and many after him strove to understand as the substructure that provided societies with whatever coherence they possessed. While numerous prescriptions for achieving such convergence were proffered, the manifest failures of the practices of modernization and the full-scale assault on the premises of the theory beginning in the nineteen seventies seemed to render the issue obsolete. Yet, 'convergence' has been reborn, in altered form, as 'globalization theory'. This latter no longer calls for *national* development, but rather posits the fulfillment of a decentered global empire composed of semi-autonomous states in a regime of convergent commerce and free trade, into

which all are coerced or, more importantly, subsumed. As Justin Rosenberg has recently pointed out, in the process of positing such claims, globalization theorists have renaturalized precisely those fetishized categories that previous theorists – Marx and Weber, primarily – had worked to problematize: primary among them, “values” (Weber) and “value” (Marx) as cultural and economic categories of analysis.¹⁹ As for subsumption, most philosophically-informed theories of globalization proceed from the assumption that real subsumption has been achieved globally. Taking a cue from Deleuze and Guattari, they explicitly or implicitly rework Marx’s distinction between formal and real subsumption into settled historical fact. In particular, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s, *Empire*,²⁰ whose argument is further clarified in an article by Antonio Negri and Danilo Zolo written in response to some of their critics.²¹

Even as ‘convergence’ theory was being subjected to assault by skeptics and critics, the path to its rebirth as globalization theory was augured from the left in the early nineteen seventies in the guise of critique. This articulation emerged out of the debacles of nineteen-sixties French and Italian radicalism, as well as from the challenges that decolonization and the failures of modernization in much of the world posed to Marxist theory and practice. Succinctly articulated by Jacques Camatte, a French Marxist, in his 1973 essay “Against Domestication”, this ostensibly critical theory posited that capitalism was now converging with its essential self.²² Unlike some Marxian theories of the time, such as Latin American dependency theory, which emphasized the underdevelopment and consequent local and global unevennesses reproduced by the capitalist world system, theories of the self-convergence of capital – of real subsumption, in short, where “values” and “value” seem to be conflated – while laying bare the capitalist claims of benefit to all, nevertheless began to take capitalism’s own self-definition and self-representation as their premise.

Thus, the self-convergence of capitalism was understood as a geographically and temporally homogenizing mode of production, that, rather than being historicist – that is, diachronic or historically stagist – was globally synchronic. This formulation of temporal-spatial convergence links this type of critique to some versions of contemporary ‘empire’ and ‘globalization’ theory, a link revealed in a telling passage of Camatte’s essay, where he defines his nineteen seventies moment as the moment of capitalism’s convergence with the AMP. He notes that in Marx’s theory of the AMP, revolts in the system effectively regenerated it, spawning the constant imperial reconsolidation that accounts for the AMP’s durability and imperviousness to transition. In the light of non-transition, he notes that, what was being witnessed in the nineteen seventies was the convergence between the AMP – where classes could never become autonomous but rather were constantly reinscribed into the imperial order – and the capitalist mode of production (CMP) – where classes were being absorbed, thus yielding the regeneration of capitalism and its imperviousness to transition.²³ In a later essay (1976), Camatte further specified that the convergence of which he wrote was between the despotism of the CMP’s bourgeois democracy and that of the AMP’s generalized slavery.²⁴

In part an attempt to explain the resilience of capitalism through what had looked like its death throes, Camatte’s explanation of a convergence between the AMP and the CMP can be said to operate within what Simmel called, following Hegel, an *eternal present*. That is, it operates as a symptom of a particular historical situation understood to be a defining moment of the historical itself, much in the way

that Lukács explained Hegel's concept of *Geist* in the nineteen thirties. According to Lukács, *Geist* was Hegel's attempt to resolve an impossible historical contradiction in the twin contexts of the failure of the Napoleonic revolution and of what to Hegel appeared as the end of revolutionary history.²⁵ As both historical symptom, and then, as what Lutz Niethammer calls *post-histoire* prescription,²⁶ Hegel's account of the cumulative perennial traces of time congealed in an eternal present allowed him to construct a totalizing history of an unfolding and a return, thus joining in identity philosophical immanentism and temporality as History, even while displacing Time unto the other. As Hegel summarized in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, "While we are thus concerned exclusively with the Idea of Spirit, and in the History of the World regard everything as only its manifestation, we have, in traversing the past ... only to do with what is *present*; ... Spirit is immortal; with it there is no past, no future, but an essential *now*."²⁷ It could be said this articulation is echoed, much more crudely, in what Slavoj Žižek recently called the Bush doctrine's "paranoiac logic of total control over some *future* threat" in which "the loop between the present and the future is closed".²⁸ Given that current American neo-conservatism is linked, philosophically, to a Francis Fukuyama-type of *post-histoire*, itself a version of right-Hegelianism, this linkage is not arbitrarily invoked.

In this light, we can note that, since the nineteen seventies, there has been an increase in theories – from the left and the right – that configure the older conceit of convergence into an *eternal present* of capital, now renamed either "globalization" or Empire (here, Negri and Hardt's *Empire* is paradigmatic).²⁹ And, similarly to modernization theory, albeit in a different register, these theories of an *eternal present* of capital/empire present themselves as an opening to politics – in Hardt/Negri's terms, a politics of the "multitude"; in Hegelian or Weberian terms, a politics of a class-specific civil society. Yet, as Camatte reminds us with his postulated AMP/CMP convergence, these are really only a politics of systemic regeneration. For, as Peter Osborne has pointed out with regard to Hegelian temporality, "the constitutive role of the past in the speculative pre-determination of the future ... might be seen as part of a politics of the present; at another level, it crowds out politics ... by prematurely imposing the perspective of a future which absolutizes existing relations to the past."³⁰ I would suggest that it is precisely in this absolutizing gesture that Camatte's theory of capitalist convergence into general slavery can be linked to Hardt/Negri's Empire, with their hypostasized concept of a global imperial formation and absorption of classes into an undifferentiated multitude. As I will explain in a moment, it is also precisely in this gesture that the AMP can be joined to national modernization programs.

First, however, this conjoining can perhaps most easily be seen in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's articulation of the theory of contemporary capitalism as a regime of real subsumption. In the middle of their *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari have a sub-chapter entitled "The Barbarian Despotic Machine". It begins:

*The founding of the despotic machine or the barbarian socius can be summarized in the following way: a new alliance and direct filiation. The despot challenges the lateral alliances and the extended filiations of the old community. He imposes a new alliance system and places himself in direct filiation with the deity: the people must follow ... The despot is the paranoiac: there is no longer any reason to forego such a statement ... provided one sees in paranoia a type of investment of a social formation.*³¹

Later in the section, Deleuze and Guattari clarify that their conceptualization of this “despotic machine” derives from Marx’s brief comments in the *Grundrisse* on the AMP. As they put it:

It remains to be said that, in order to understand the barbarian formation, it is necessary to relate it not to other formations in competition with it temporally and spiritually, ... but to the savage primitive formation that it supplants by imposing its own rule of law, but that continues to haunt it. It is exactly in this way that Marx defines Asiatic production ...³²

In this haunting and haunted formation, the State appears “as the cause of the collective conditions of appropriation,” where the socius “has ceased to be the earth” and “becomes the body of the despot”, a body identified as the “megamachine” of the State, or that “body without organs” that fully encodes all residents, precisely *not* territorially but through deterritorialization: that is, through a common subjection to an imperial inscription rather than through filiation to community and soil.³³ Taking a cue from what Marx calls the real subsumption of labor under capital, which ostensibly follows upon the formal subsumption that marks capital’s early period,³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari posit the AMP as the universalized real subjection of “residents” to the State as despot. This real subjection is then linked to the current (nineteen-seventies/nineteen-eighties) moment of deterritorialized capitalism by transposing the historical tension between formal and real subsumption – that is, their historically coextensive relationship that produces global unevenness – into the despotically subjected imperial global formation of the present. In short, then, for Deleuze and Guattari, the reduction of the sources of socio-political power to the body of the despot – as in classical AMP theory – and the real subsumption/subjection of “residents” into the universalized machine/regime yields a convergence of State and capital in a deterritorializing move towards despotism/general slavery.

Clearly, Deleuze and Guattari, along with Negri and Hardt, and Camatte, among others, intend this theory of global capital as a critique rather than a celebration; it is also intended as a way to theorize new forms of subjectivity and new forms of resistance to this all-encompassing system. Yet, helpful as this theorization might be for an analysis of the production of subjectivities under capitalism as a mode of production rather than merely an economy, as Jason Read has recently argued,³⁵ such a theorization nevertheless cannot account for the historical unevennesses produced in and by capitalism as a global formation. Indeed, they precisely erase the historicity of the coextensive relationship between formal and real subsumption that forms the core of the historical movement of capital globally.

Taking up the latter problem concurrently with the emergence of these versions of AMP/CMP convergence, other nineteen-sixties/nineteen-seventies theories posited the AMP not as a theory of convergent *identity* at the level of global despotism/empire of capital, but rather as a theory of colonial difference and historical unevenness. Pointing equally to the failures of modernization in theory and practice, while reintroducing specific historicities into the problem of global analysis, from the nineteen sixties onwards, and particularly with Africanist anthropologists in France (such as Claude Meillassoux³⁶ and, differently, Samir Amin³⁷), these quasi-recuperations of AMP, or of interest in pre- or non-capitalist modes of production more generally, led to an exploration of the historical relationship of expansive capitalism to local dependence on the domestic community for the supply of labor-power. That is, AMP and investigations into pre- or non-capitalist societies inspired theori-

zations not of empire/despotism but of historical imperialism, with particular focus on community-family relations as restructured sites for the reproduction of labor-power. These theories at one and the same time re-articulated AMP as a synchronic social formation within imperialist capitalism – as a coextensive relationship – while also distancing themselves from classical anthropology’s reliance upon kinship theory. Most important for our purposes here is how these anthropological revivals differ from the versions just mentioned: that is, in their understanding of local social relations as basic structuring elements through which capitalism simultaneously is constituted as a lived everyday experience of the historical, while becoming globalized as abstract historicity. Thus, rather than posit a universalized common mode of subjection or real subsumption in some global despotic “body without organs” in an *eternal present* of capital (or of pre-/non-capitalist kinship community), these theories enter the problematic through the intimate historical investigation of the reproduction of labor-power and primitive accumulation at many scales simultaneously.

The AMP and Nineteen-Eighties China

Another version of AMP recuperation is premised upon neither *identity* nor colonial difference, but rather upon *national difference*. This version, rather than collapsing historical imperialisms into abstracted “empire” instead collapses “empire” into nation. Circling back, then, to the AMP in nineteen-eighties China: the AMP came to be seen by many Chinese historians in the early and mid-nineteen eighties as a way of rescuing China from Maoist revolutionism and attendant historicist unilinearity, as well as a way to support reformist projects in the post-Mao period. For, the post-Mao rise of new social and political tasks and demands led to the exhuming of old historical and historiographical issues, many of which long had been suppressed by a dogmatized Maoism. In this process, Chinese historians rediscovered in the AMP a *national* and thus a *comparative imperial* historical paradigm that could explain China’s “distorted” pre-modern and modern historical trajectory (where distortion is understood as the failure of China to develop capitalism out of a commercialized past, as well as the modern historical “wrong turn” or aberration of socialism itself). The rediscovery of conceiving China in *extrinsic* relation to the modern world – that is, as an *a priori* and ahistorical national unit and cultural unity – led historians to reopen the question of China’s social formation in comparison to imperial formations considered to have faced similar conditions from the premise of analogous foundations – primarily Mughal India and the Ottoman Empire. This comparative impulse was engaged initially through the retrospective optic of comparing the economic and global fate of nations (India, Turkey) that emerged from modern imperialism. More recently, in both China and the United States, the comparative focus has been transformed by converting these national units into the incommensurable units of the historical empires from which they ostensibly emerged, thus yielding the deracinated perspective of comparative empires.³⁸ The comparative object of choice in economic history recently has been not India but the Ottoman Empire. A series of conferences on the Qing and Ottoman Empires – one at New York University in 1999 and a follow-up in Istanbul in 2001 – has given rise to a small cottage industry in such comparative research. As such, by the late nineteen eighties, the AMP came to be incipiently articulated as both a nationalized theory of historical difference – multilinearity – and a comparative theory of (nationally-inflected) imperial formations.

It is in this dual form that AMP seemed to answer the needs of the modernizing Chinese present, even as the old AMP stagnation stigma was turned to positive account through the statist-culturalist claim to “five thousand years” of Chinese historical continuity. Operating as a marker of a posited Chinese national-culture *difference* as *post-histoire* modernization prescription at the end of revolutionary history, *and* as a comparative imperial method to substantiate ostensibly commensurate historical trajectories globally, these recuperations by and large recast the AMP in terms of a national historically continuous dialectic between the so-called Asiatic state and the rural order, a dialectic in which China was still deeply enmeshed.

The first of the major recuperative essays emanated from a reading of Italian Marxist Umberto Melotti’s 1972 work, *Marx and the Third World*. The author, political economist Wu Dakun, agreed with Melotti that the technological stimulation of *productive forces* was the only key to and relevant measure of development (as against Mao’s emphasis on transforming the relations of production) and that Soviet bureaucratism – named “semi-Asiatic” – and historically continuous Chinese statism – full-fledged “Asiatic” – were to blame for stifling these forces.³⁹ Wu Dakun’s basic redefinition of the AMP emphasized, in a version of Karl Wittfogel’s long-despised caricature, the Oriental despotic nature of bureaucratism particular to China, the transformation of which would lead to the long-suppressed flourishing of rural production and the re-orientation of the primordial dialectic onto a new path.

Not surprisingly, this rendition of Marxism as a theory of technologized modernization was soon to find its echo (conjuncturally not causally) in official policy, with the 1987 unveiling of Deng Xiaoping’s theory of the “primary stage of socialism”. This latter theory basically holds that Maoist over-emphasis on transforming relations of production – that is, class struggle – was premature and had to be discarded for the prior task of the building of productive forces – that is, capitalist-style modernization. One key component to the early practice of this “primary stage” socialism was precisely the retreat of the State from agricultural production, which temporarily boosted productivity and rural income. As numerous Chinese intellectuals have pointed out, however, these gains were at most temporary – lasting until 1986/87, when pressures for urban reforms vitiated the rural gains.⁴⁰ In ideological terms, then, the choice was made in the Deng era to ‘catch up’ with the West at the expense of a socialist agenda, thus recuperating in explicit form the modernizationist trope of the time-lag and reproducing the displacement of temporality so effectively suggested by Hegel and internalized as comparative method by Weber.

In a different vein, historian Ke Changji proclaimed that Maoist-inspired communes in fact represented the resurrection of primitive AMP communal society, long deemed to have hampered agrarian productivity and hindered the primitive accumulation of capital and thus the transition of China from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist order. In a definitive departure from Marxism, Ke identified “Asiatic” as an enduring rather than historically transcended economic category of rural communal production held in place through the “general slavery” imposed by the despotic state. As such, for Ke, the disbanding of communes and the retreat of the Asiatic state – here, the Communist state – from the rural order were required for the transformation of China’s enduring Asiatic pre-capitalist communal society – that is, Chinese socialist society – into a modernized one.⁴¹ Curiously, however, the stagnation in the gains obtained by ostensibly unblocking the AMP/socialist state’s dialectic of

state/agricultural production led not to a critique of capitalism and capitalist techniques, but to a further exploration and refinement of the theoretical purview of the AMP.

However, in the initial moments of the AMP's resurrection, as these and many similar essays indicate, those most critical of Maoism in the early nineteen eighties were initially most forceful in arguing for the revival of the AMP as a legitimate but negative category of historical and contemporary analysis. Collapsing all of Chinese history into an *eternal standstill* of Asiatic statism, the AMP became an anti-Party proscription and prescription simultaneously. That is, these analyses combined the *eternal standstill* of a proscribed Asiatic statism with the *eternal present* of a proscribed – or inevitably destined – global capitalism. In this way, these analyses echo precisely those anti-Communist theories and sterile analyses of Chinese society long familiar to China scholars, fusing together the worst of Parsonian-inflected Weberianism with the most enduring of Cold War stereotypes (where Chinese Communists were deemed either completely alien to the supposed natural course of Chinese history, or, alternately, completely continuous with Oriental despots of old). Most startlingly, perhaps, these theories not only repudiated China's socialist period, but they circumvented what had long been a central point in Chinese historical studies: the problem of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism as an historical and historiographical challenge. Here, the tension produced by the ambiguity introduced into a purely 'Chinese' history by the incorporation of the Qing empire into global capitalism (nineteenth century) disappeared from theoretical view.

This moves directly, then, into the next strand of AMP recuperations, which pointed to the multilinear historical *difference* of China, both as genesis for the urgency of contemporary China's necessary convergence with global capitalism, and as origin of world history in general. Unlike the nineteen-sixties and seventies Africanist scholars mentioned above, who turned to everyday life and the social reproduction of labor-power in relation to both the persistence and restructuring of local social formations, the Chinese analyses of absolute *difference* are roughly similar in trajectory to Perry Anderson's genetic approach to European history in his *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. That is, they attempt to articulate "uniqueness" as exceptionalism in Weberianized Marxist terms by drawing on a culturalist-statist conceit of origins – in Anderson's case, Europe's genesis in Roman classical antiquity and the Roman empire; in the Chinese case, Confucianism and the imperial state-form. Here, China's exceptionalist past becomes a basis for a reconceptualization of Chinese history as the origin of all world history, thus, among other things, restoring the AMP to its position at the beginning of the global historicist sequence. Meanwhile, these theories also proclaim the cultural *difference* of China as adequate explanation not only for China's past but also for the necessity of "socialism with Chinese characteristics".

Such an approach not only obscures the restructurings of China's modern social relations under capitalist imperialism, socialism, and post-Mao capitalism, it also forms the basis for a comparative historical method. This method concludes that, because all preceding imperial formations weakened and fell (Indian, Ottoman, etc.) while the Chinese one remained stable for thousands of years, the AMP can be seen as a positive descriptor of cultural strength, not a shameful deviation from normality. It is with this culturalist appropriation of AMP in the late nineteen eighties that the theory itself disappeared as an explicit point of reference to reappear

as the implicit cultural ascription that permits China to claim both continuity and transition in one breath. This rejoins China to some vulgarized version of the Hegelian dialectic by ostensibly substantiating the ideological real of our current global historical moment.

Conclusion: The AMP and Postcolonial Theory

The above account has necessarily reduced divergent theoretical concerns to some basic common denominators. What is significant about the general import of these new analyses is how they dovetail with certain strands of China studies in the United States, past and present, as well as with some concerns of postcolonial theory. Briefly, China studies in the US, as already indicated in the beginning of the essay, was never as influenced by the revolutionary paradigm; nevertheless, the repudiation of revolution in China – the very end of revolutionary history that inspired Hegel's theorization of the *eternal present* and its re-emergence as the "end of history" in such theorists as Francis Fukuyama – has facilitated the rise in the US of particularistic theories of Chinese empire, particularly the Qing, as a critique of Eurocentric capitalism. Thus, in some mainstream US scholarship, China's non-transition to capitalism is no longer seen as a "failure" but as a sign of China's imperial strength and resilience. At the same time, the Manchu Qing are busily being equated with the Western imperialism powers – that is, they were all colonizers – thereby erasing differences between types of empires, modern and ancient, and facilitating the empire/nation connotations mentioned above. Meanwhile, reversing decades of emphasis on the rupture of imperialism, not only is the nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialist moment now denigrated as unacceptable "impact of the West" theory and thus demoted to an epiphenomenal interlude in the continuous march of China's history, but China's commercialized non-capitalist past is held up as a form of alternative modernity – sometimes said to reach back as far as the Song Dynasty (twelfth century) – an alternative that is not only particularly Chinese but also, miraculously, particularly suited to the contemporary demands of globalization and convergence.⁴²

Finally, then, the affinities of these analyses with postcolonial theory should be indicated. In one of its more recent incarnations, Gayatri Spivak has exhumed Deleuze and Guattari's notion of despotism and their re-articulation of the AMP as the perfect and perfectible despotic imperial/global mode of domination; she combines this with Samir Amin's renaming of AMP as the "Tributary mode" to argue for the AMP as a "de-constructive lever" against totalizing theories of capitalism.⁴³ While appearing to decouple AMP/CMP convergence, Spivak at the same time argues for the contemporary co-temporality of AMP/CMP, where the AMP functions to disprove Marxist projections of historical sublation (that is, the dialectical overcoming that leaves residues of the past). She writes: "The Asiatic Mode of Production ... is the name and imaginary fleshing out of a difference in terms that are consonant with the development of capitalism and the resistance *appropriate* to it as 'the same'."⁴⁴ In thus replacing one totalism for another, Spivak can at best be seen as replacing history with fantasy.

While she could be correct in her specification of the AMP as co-temporal with the CMP, this can only be in the sense that the AMP, just as feudalism and any other non- or pre-capitalist mode

The Asiatic Mode of Production

of production or social formation, was only *visible* to Marx from the vantage of his present. That is, it was visible – to the extent it was extant at all – as one among other forms of pre- or non-capitalist formation then being restructured by and unevenly subsumed into capitalism through imperialism and formal subsumption. Whether this co-temporality is, in Spivak’s sense, a way of what she calls “returning history” to these non-capitalist formations is a different question altogether. Indeed, Spivak may be working from a recognition of global crisis superficially similar to that of Marx’s, and this moment can best be understood as a crisis of capital over-accumulation and consequent devalorization of labor – another moment of primitive accumulation – rather than merely, as in Spivak, a crisis in textual values.⁴⁵ That is, as is well known, Marx set out to understand his moment of global crisis via the labor theory of value and a theory of primitive accumulation that could link capitalist to pre- or non-capitalist formations historically; Samir Amin developed this project, particularly with regard to global accumulation. The co-temporality that Marx or Amin assigns to AMP/CMP is thus a matter of an ongoing materialist historical process, a process that has perhaps changed in the contemporary moment, but is nonetheless quite material. That is, it is a crisis in *value*. With Spivak, however, this co-temporality is re-articulated through Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “codes” and “coding”: that is, in terms of textual *values*. For Spivak, the utility of AMP as a concept thus becomes a textual utility: a way to restore a textually understood cultural/national *difference* to supposed AMP countries, primarily India. As she states: “the Asiatic Mode of Production in this new and globalized politics of reading makes visible the fault lines within the account of history as (European) modes of production.”⁴⁶

Ultimately, then, what we get with Spivak is a collapsing of history back into textualized “representation”, as Neil Larsen has pointed in a different context.⁴⁷ Thus, at the same time as she rejects labor as an ideological (i.e. historicist) notion⁴⁸ that points to a trans-historical locus of value,⁴⁹ she nevertheless also affirms the contemporary moment as a moment of devaluation that “provides the alibi for new imperialism”.⁵⁰ Value provides this alibi, not because it is a universal relational category – of alienation, of commodification – but because the realization of textual values requires only species-life: that is, desire and/or nature. This returns ‘value’ to a Parsonian abstraction, as *values*, rather than a material productivity or effectivity. In is here that Spivak’s project dovetails with, while also departing from, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the AMP as the despotic specter haunting contemporary CMP. For Spivak, as for Deleuze and Guattari, the AMP is a “place of constant connections rather than an unbridged and unbridgeable gulf”,⁵¹ yet, for Spivak, it also appears as an alternative system of values, an unassimilable text or desire, a system or code which becomes the perfect agent for “decoding” capitalism.⁵² *This* version of co-temporality is assimilable to deconstructive arguments against the *narrative* linearity of capitalism, and thence mobilized for an argument about unassimilable historical *difference*, which ends up as a non-place and a pure heuristic convenience. In short, it ends up as a politics without a politics, founded upon a notion of a decentered globalized textuality infused with particularistic *a priori* values.

The affinity to the contemporary China scholarship referred to above resides in the shared revaluations of national/cultural *difference* as a strategy of global cultural inclusion and the essential anti-historicity encoded in such a move. Curiously, then, we see the AMP recuperated not only as a handmaiden to a non-political, non-antagonistic politics of State-led modernization at

whatever social cost; but also as a form of global neoliberal or postcolonial multicultural modernization theory that reinforces rather than confronts empire in all its historical and contemporary manifestations. Finally, AMP becomes as an all-purpose theory of the Asian or imperial capitalist state *as such*. In the end, the AMP turns out to be precisely the ideologically real symptom of a global analytical turn that takes the State, not political economy, as the determinant of history and the arbiter of the present/future. We thus get Hegel's transience and endurance re-combined into a reified ahistorical fantasy of global capitalism with no material limits.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the organizers of the conference in Greece for inviting me to present an earlier version of this paper. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the brilliant and intrepid graduate students at New York University – Maggie Clinton, Osamu Nakano, Wei-chi Chen, and George Tomlinson – who took my AMP class in Spring 2003 and helped me work out, in the course of that seminar, many of the ideas in this essay. They bear no responsibility for any of it.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree, New York: Dover, 1956, p. 221.
- 2 Peter Osborne, *Politics of Time*, London: Verso, 1995, chap. 3.
- 3 Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1973; Philip Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1985.
- 4 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.
- 5 Hill Gates, *China's Motor: A Thousand Years of Petty Capitalism*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996.
- 6 Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1994; Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1997.
- 7 See Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat", in *History and Class Consciousness*, transl. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971. For an illuminating discussion, see Moishe Postone, "Lukács and the Dialectical Critique of Capitalism", paper delivered at the NYU Social Theory Workshop, 5 April 2002. The emphasis on the historically *necessary* reification is somewhat different from Slavoj Žižek's explanation of the merely homological, not necessary relationship between ideology and history, in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 2001, pp. 11–84, *passim*.

The Asiatic Mode of Production

- 8 Of course, it was also in this sense that Lukács himself rediscovered Hegel in the 1930s; see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- 9 Timothy Bewes, *Reification: or, the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 68.
- 10 This is the title of one of the most celebrated Chinese rethinkings of 20th-century Chinese history in the post-Mao period, by two of China's leading philosophers. Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu, *Gaobie geming*, Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 1995.
- 11 The Japanese Marxist Oriental scholar, Akizawa Shuji, among others, argued this position forcefully. I thank Osamu Nakano for this reference.
- 12 For general indications of this connection, see D. Thorner, "Marx on India and the Asiatic Mode of Production", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 9 (1966), pp. 33–66; H. Lubasz, "Marx's Concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production: a Genetic Analysis", *Economy and Society* 13:4 (1984), pp. 456–483.
- 13 See my extended critique of this controversy in "From Postwar to Postcolonial: A Critique of Pure Ideology", paper delivered at "Rethinking China Studies Conference", Taipei, Taiwan; 30 June–2 July 2005. Forthcoming in a conference volume.
- 14 Mikhail Ia. Godes, *Diskussia ob aziatskom sposobe proizvodstva* [A discussion of the Asiatic Mode of Production], Leningrad: GSEI, 1931. For discussion of Godes' views in the context of the 1930s debates in the Soviet Union on the AMP, see Stephen P. Dunn, *The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, chap. 1.
- 15 At the same time, these debates also provided some crucial politico-intellectual justifications for the final routing of the Trostkyists in the USSR, as well as for the renewed specification, after the 1927 counter-revolutionary debacle in China, of the nature of the Chinese Revolution as a bourgeois-democratic revolution led by the proletariat and peasant classes in cooperation with the national bourgeoisie. This specificity will be important in what follows.
- 16 Anne M. Bailey and Josep R. Llobera (eds.), *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Science and Politics*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 51.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 18 As Bewes points out, capitalist demystification is more properly understood as radically secularizing, "the effect of which, paradoxically, is a deistic as much as an atheistic conception of a God who is absent from human experience. Thus is reiterated a conception of a world abandoned to a set of already existing ontological and epistemological categories. Reification is a process of radical secularization in this sense ..." Thomas Bewes, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
- 19 Justin Rosenberg, *The Follies of Globalisation Theory*, London: Verso, 2002. He adds that this renaturalization results in a *reduction* of the explanatory claims of theory, *ibid.*, pp. 14–15.
- 20 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.

- 21 "Empire and the Multitude: A dialogue on the new order of globalization", *Radical Philosophy* 120 (2003), pp. 23–37. Also see Jason Read's *The Micro-Politics of Capital. Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2003.
- 22 Jacques Camatte, "Against Domestication", transl. David Lonergan, *Invariance*, series two, no. 3 (1973). Also in *This World We Must Leave And Other Essays*, New York: Autonomedia/Semiotexte, 1998, and available at <http://www.geocities.com/~johngray/agdom01.htm> (last accessed 21 September 2005).
- 23 See idem, "Against Domestication", *op. cit.*, part IV, n. 20. Also see, idem, *This World We Must Leave*, *op. cit.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- 25 Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel*, London: Merlin Press, 1975.
- 26 Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* transl. Patrick Camiller, London: Verso, 1992.
- 27 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree, New York: Dover Publications, 1956, p. 79.
- 28 Slavoj Žižek, "Catastrophes Real and Imagined", *In These Times*, 31 March 2003.
- 29 The joining of Camatte's conceptualization to Hardt/Negri is not arbitrary. Camatte's Marxism derives from the 1960s French upheavals as well as from his adherence to and post-1960s break from the Italian Marxism of Amadeo Bordiga, founder of the Communist Party of Italy. By the 1950s, Bordiga was maintaining that the workers' movements of the 19th and 20th centuries were, objectively, a movement of capital; Camatte follows Bordiga in his own formulation of the "community of capital" but breaks from Bordiga in the latter's party-centered "vanguardism". (For more on this, see David Black, "Has Capital Autonomized Itself from Humanity?" *Hobgoblin. Journal of Marxist-Humanism* 1 (1999), available at <http://www.thehobgoblin.co.uk/journal/H1.htm> (last accessed 20 September 2005). This traces a similar trajectory to that of the Italian *operaismo* and *autonomia* movements, to whose theories Negri has been central, and from which the theorization of *Empire* derives. For this, see John Kraniuskas, "Empire, or Multitude: Transnational Negri", *Radical Philosophy* 103 (2000), pp. 29–39; also see, for a slightly different account of this trajectory that links it to certain strands of break-away American Trotskyism, Jon Beasley-Murray, "Against Parochialism", *Radical Philosophy* 123 (2004), pp. 41–43. For an account of French Marxists/radicals after 1968, see Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- 30 Peter Osborne, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- 31 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, pp. 191–192.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 194–195.
- 34 See Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. III.
- 35 Jason Read, *The Micro-Politics of Capital*.

The Asiatic Mode of Production

- 36 Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981 [originally published in French in 1975]. I thank Ken Kawashima for bringing this work to my attention.
- 37 Samir Amin, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977.
- 38 There was a huge upsurge in comparative histories of India and China in the late 1980s and early 1990s that were ostensibly about the modern period, but often were more about comparative empire than anything else. See, for example, Peng Shuzhi, *Dongfang minzu zhuyi sichao* [Trends of the Oriental Nationalism (sic)], Xi'an: Xibei daxue chubanshe, 1992; Tang Wenquan, *Dongfang de juexing: jindai zhong yin minzu yundong dingwei guanzhao* [Oriental awakening: Exploration of the position of modern Chinese and Indian nationalist movements], Changsha: Hunan chubanshe, 1991; He Xin, *Dongfang de fuxing* [Oriental Renaissance], Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe/Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe, vol. I, 1989 and in particular vol. II, 1992, and so on. One is tempted to say that Prasenjit Duara's China/India comparative impulse in his *Rescuing History from the Nation. Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) was an extension of this trend into US academia.
- 39 Wu Dakun, "Some Questions Concerning Research on the Asiatic Mode of Production", *Xueshu yanjiu* (Academic Research) 1 (1980), pp. 11–18.
- 40 See Wang Hui, "The Year 1989 and the Historical Origins of Neo-Liberalism in China", transl. Rebecca E. Karl, *positions* 12:1 (2004), pp. 7–69.
- 41 Ke Changji, "Ancient Chinese Society and the Asiatic Mode of Production", *Lanzhou daxue xuebao* 3 (1983), pp. 16–25.
- 42 One doesn't need to look far for these types of studies. For a typical example, see Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- 43 Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999, p. 92.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 45 For this reading of the shared crisis in Marx's mid-19th century and our late 20th/early 21st century, see indications in David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, London: Verso, 1999, as well as in his essay, "Accumulation by Dispossession", included in his new book, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- 46 Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, *op. cit.*, p. 96. As intimated, what this misses, among other things, is the AMP's invention in terms of a supposed European mode of production, that is capitalism.
- 47 Neil Larsen, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative, and Nation in the Americas*, London: Verso, 2001, p. 68.
- 48 See Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 101, where she states: "we must unmoor the march of the forms of value from a historically evolutionary storyline ..."

- 49 For more on Spivak's reconceptualization of value, see her essay, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value", *In Other Worlds. Essays in Cultural Politics*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988, pp. 154–175.
- 50 Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 104.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 52 This conceptualization is linked to Spivak's specification of the "economic migrant/native informant" as the current incarnation of the "subaltern": that unrepresentable, incommensurable, and unassimilable point of pure resistance and pure value. Spivak, *ibid.*, part I.