

Theorising capitalist development, cooperation and working-class resistance on a global scale

Lucia Pradella

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Literature on capitalist development has tended to take the form of studies of underdevelopment in the global South, and studies of neoliberalism in the global North. Informed by her research conducted on the articles and writings of Marx and Engels on colonialism and pre-capitalist societies, published in Italian in this volume, *'The contemporary relevance of Capital: Accumulation and impoverishment in global capitalism'* (my translation), Lucia Pradella succeeds in providing a clear, systematic and elegant exposition of how to approach the global economy through a study of capitalist development rooted in Marxist fundamentals.

In Chapter 1, Pradella reminds us that the contradictory dynamic of capitalism develops from the social antagonism between capital and labour: the class struggle. Through an analysis of the latter, the limits of capital as a social relation become apparent to observation. The struggle of the working class can therefore be treated as an irreducible part of the object of study of contemporary social, political and economic inquiry (p. 23). Following Marx, Pradella discusses the impoverishment of the labourer as a direct consequence of the sale of labour-power – rendering an irreducible part of human species-being an external, objective entity confronting all workers.

According to Marx, 'as the number of the co-operating workers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital, and, necessarily, the pressure put on by capital to overcome this resistance' (1990: 448–449). An immediate result of this is that the capitalists' planning, command and surveillance of production becomes a necessary condition of the production process. Therefore, the 'unavoidable antagonism' inherent to the capitalist production process further develops. However, when brought together as labour-power purchased by capital, workers become increasingly unable to enjoy the fruits of their cooperative labour. This socially productive power of labour thus 'develops as a free gift to capital', and workers 'enter relations with the capitalist, but not with each other' (Marx 1990: 450–451). Furthermore, 'this "illusion" is almost as important a source of counter-revolutionary energy as commodity fetishism ... since it seems to give capital the credit for organising production and reproduction' (Caffentzis 2010: 29).

In Chapters 2 and 3, Pradella demonstrates a formidable grasp of Marx's method, and therefore of the particular textual and contextual purchase of the categories and concepts deployed in the whole of his works. Like Marx, she treats cooperation as the fundamental and permanent form of capitalist development – making advances in productivity appear to be external to workers' species-being (pp. 90–95). But by bringing the circuits, cycles and chains of global commodity production, consumption and exchange to the fore,

Pradella equips the reader with an account that is rid of relational strictness, and thus better placed to analyse the emergent properties of capitalist development.¹ In other words, the author reinvigorates Marx's discussion of the relation between cooperation and working-class organisation and resistance through an in-depth exploration grounded in the concrete historical developments of the capitalist mode of production.

Pradella therefore enables us to observe that on a grand scale, cooperation finds a concrete manifestation in the contradictory international expansion of the field of waged labour – whereby working-class autonomy is increasingly frustrated by workers' dependence on the money-form. As a result, a global analysis of the social conditions of the proletariat is possible, but requires more than just a focus on waged labour. With this in mind, through a careful process of abstraction Pradella acknowledges the differentiated and stratified conditions of the global working class – including peasants and independent producers – and renders the impoverishment of the proletariat as a structural consequence of capitalist accumulation and development² (p. 165).

More specifically, Pradella stresses that Marx established the range of investigation in *Capital* by operationalising the assumption that the 'field of action' of English capital coincided with that of the entirety of global commerce and in every branch of industry³ (p. 157). This abstraction then paves the way for an international outlook which supersedes the shifting 'fratricidal' antagonisms and violence enveloping capitalists, states and the working class that ensues in the development of capitalism. Evidence of Marx's focus on capitalist development gives us an insight into his methodology and, more specifically, the rationale supporting his abstractions: once we observe that 'expansionism is an immanent necessity for capital *at every stage of its development*' (Pradella 2013: 125), we can place ourselves in Marx's shoes and reason that to study this development necessitates that we grasp it as a process be projected into the future so as to extrapolate meaningful conclusions about the present.⁴ In this sense, therefore, the internationalist reading of *Capital* executed by Pradella reinvigorates the connection between cooperation and class organisation by situating it as a direct result of the fact that Marx's object of study is global capitalist development – as opposed to the development of national capital (cf. Pradella 2013).

By bringing contradiction and its concrete historical developments to bear on the issue of global inequality, in Chapters 4 and 5 Pradella presents a dialectically sophisticated and historically informed account of primitive accumulation to inaugurate her discussion of revolution. Focusing particularly on Marx's writings concerning pre-capitalist societies, colonialism, Ireland, China, India and the USA,⁵ Pradella presents evidence that colonial and anti-colonial struggles are an irreducible component of the entirety of Marx's works. Indeed, findings from Marx's research into these matters are argued to be integrated in his methodology. 'Even after their publication, however, [Marx's writings on the colonial question] have remained "peripheral" and have not been analysed in connection with the rest of his work' (Pradella 2013: 118).

Capital does not, therefore, want to dismiss the indigenous struggles which pre-existed capitalism and continue to fight its global expansion, but rather seeks to anticipate the dynamically changing forms of this struggle for human dignity, the end of alienation and exploitation, and a rational organisation of species-being:

With his stance on Ireland, Marx laid the foundations for conceptualising the revolutionary process on a global scale, as a unitary process of 'permanent revolution' in which the independence of the colonies does not constitute an element external to or dependent on the class struggle in the metropolis, but is instead an active agent in the very emancipation of the metropolitan proletariat. The class struggle at the 'centre' of the capitalist system is therefore interlinked to revolutions of a nationalistic and even peasant character, against the colonial domination of the 'peripheries' and vice versa. (p. 280, my translation)

Indeed, Pradella rejects the stadial temporality of revolution – according to which the coming of communism necessitates that every nation follow in the footsteps of industrial development akin to that of the West (p. 281). According to the author, the proletariat is always already an international movement whose emancipation depends on the successes of all of its sectors. The resolutions of the antagonisms between different sectors of the global working class, the acknowledgement of their differences, the reciprocal realisation and gratification of their diverse needs is therefore posited as a necessary condition of the revolution. In other words, it is made consonant with the very process of revolution on a global scale.

In Chapter 6, Pradella's excursus on the possibility of a comprehensive analysis of the social conditions of the proletariat is brought to bear on the contemporary impoverishment of the working class and the crisis of global capital. Neoliberalism is a consequence of the contradictory development of capitalist accumulation, which remains unresolved, was merely postponed after the crisis of profitability that struck capital in the mid-1970s, and has been thrust into disrepute by the struggles of movements projecting the practicality of global proletarian action against capital (p. 293). In turn, the recent attempts to restructure global capital, concludes Pradella, results in the expansion of the global cooperation of labour and a furthering of the possibilities of solidarity amongst workers of the world (p. 378).

Accessible and useful to both new and more experienced students of Marxism, Pradella's book demonstrates that Marxism must take into account global inequalities on the terms laid down by the struggles of the working poor across the world. But it also reinvigorates Marx's work as a valuable primary source for those seeking to develop a critical understanding of the global economy. Additionally, Pradella's political intervention within the Marxist milieu is both timely and welcome, as she demonstrates with strong empirical substantiation and documentary evidence that a return to Marxist fundamentals should point us directly towards the present importance and possibility of global solidarity amongst the proletariat. In so doing, Pradella's rigorous analysis sets a high standard for Marxian research to come – shedding light on the concrete possibility of an international alternative to capitalism and the coming of a harmonious human interchange with nature. However, Pradella does not discuss the implications of her findings on the debates amongst the more political strands of academic and independent Marxist research, such as Open Marxism, Autonomist Marxism, the work of the 'Negrist' and neo-Gramscian turns, as well as the 'new readings' of Marx recently proposed by the Monthly Review School. Although outside the scope of the book, such a discussion could bolster Pradella's analysis of neoliberalism, the present crisis and the prospect of international working-class organisation in years to come.

Endnotes

1. For Marx's discussion of this relation, see pp. 448–449 of *Capital, Volume I* (1990). In response to this discussion, Pradella has argued, 'The possibility for workers to cooperate even if they do not work side by side, but only in the same field of labour, denies, in my opinion, a "localistic" interpretation of cooperation, as it does not have to take place within a single factory but can take place in diverse but connected locations. The process of the global restructuring of industrial production of the last 30 years would not confute, therefore, the tendency of cooperation to increase, even when workers in different plants and firms, and those working from home, contribute to production in global chains without any sort of direct cooperation. *This argument, however, makes problematic the strict relationship, optimistically affirmed by Marx, between cooperation and organisation of the working class*' (2013: 128, n. 46; my emphasis).
2. Elsewhere, Pradella has argued that 'for Marx, capitalist development is synonymous with an overall impoverishment of the working class' – determining 'a complete inversion of the relationship between the workers and their vital power', and shaping 'the *totality* of social relations' – and that 'the law of impoverishment is for Marx the absolute, general law of capitalist development' (2011: 119).
3. Pradella provides us with a more detailed account of this by arguing that 'Volume I [concerns] the production and reproduction of the "*total social capital*", which is both the individual capital and the sum total of all existing capitals. The concept of total social capital – or, more simply, of "capital" – refers to all branches of a "given society" not confined by national boundaries ... [Indeed], Marx's notebooks and articles confirm that, from the 1840s onwards, he did not examine English capitalism as a national, but as a colonial system' (2013: 120).
4. This topic has been covered particularly well in Chapters 5 and 6 of Bertell Ollman's book, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* (2003).
5. See Marx (2007) for an English-language edition of some of these writings.

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