

# From Progression to Explosion

## Historical Time and Revolutionary Change in Marx, Gramsci, Benjamin, and Fanon

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*Abstract:* Inspired by contemporary criticism(s) levelled against evolutionist conceptions of history present within much classical social theory, this article seeks to discuss alternative conceptions of historical time, modernity, and coloniality within the works of Marxist-inspired thinkers who have sought to tackle the problematic aspects of evolutionism and ‘historical progress’ head on – namely, Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, and Frantz Fanon. After discussing orthodox Marxism’s ambivalent relation to notions of historical necessity and human agency, the article turns to discussing Gramsci’s anti-economistic conception of hegemony and Benjamin’s and Fanon’s respective conceptions of the ‘dialectics of rupture’ in order to present alternative conceptions of historical time which partly or fully depart from orthodox Marxism’s tendencies towards evolutionism, albeit whilst retaining a focus on dialectics, power struggle, and revolutionary transformation.

*Keywords:* colonialism, historical time, history, Marxism, modernity, revolution, social theory, sociology

In much discourse on the relationship between classical social theory and colonialism, notions of *historical progress* are often discussed and criticised. Mainly, this critique is either aimed at the explicit social evolutionism of August Comte or Herbert Spencer, or at what is perceived as traces of evolutionist modes of thought in more universally canonised classics, such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, and their respective theories of modernisation (cf.



Bowler 2009; Connell 1997; Sydie 2004; Witz and Marshall 2004a, 2004b). With regard to the latter two, it is often stressed that while they exhibit ambivalent stances towards the supposed merits of modernity, they simultaneously seem to subscribe to a perception of it as a prevailing logic which unfolds gradually through history, and that this unfolding can be seen as a form of *progression* from previously ‘primitive’ society. Through a decolonial lens, this can be criticised as a universalisation of the modernisation process, viewing it not as a trajectory specific to Europe, but rather as a universally prevailing logic, the ‘highest stage of history’ which the ‘primitive’ Others of the colonies are yet to reach (cf. Dussel 1993; Mignolo 1999; Seidman 2016). The presumption that historical time is essentially *progressive* also has implications for how social change is to be imagined: if we perceive of history as proceeding in a linear, progressive fashion, constantly producing more ‘advanced’ social forms to which all societies will eventually reach, is there any possibility for halting or changing the direction of such a process?

In this article, I will build from this reasoning, arguing that the theoretical logics assigned to historical change, modernity, and coloniality imply each other in a *triangular fashion*. Analyses of modernity as an emergent social formation are necessarily built upon theories of historical emergence, change, and time. This, in turn, builds on an implicit or explicit image of the supposedly *non-modern* – that is, the colonised – placed within an imagined historical trajectory. This triangular relationship is often a problematic one; if historical development diverges from the predicted route, or if the colonised Other revolts against its imposed position of ‘non-modernity’, the total theory of modernity – on its key characteristics, driving forces, and main problems – is at risk of becoming destabilised (cf. Connell 1997).

While this problem has notably been posed in relation to the aforementioned ‘standard’ constellation of classical sociologists, this article argues that this triangular relation between modernity, coloniality, and history has birthed particularly important theoretical responses within *an alternative socio-theoretical canon* which has worked in close dialogue with Marxist theory – namely, for this article, Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, and Frantz Fanon.

This builds from the realisation that the aforementioned triangular relationship has proven a particular challenge for the Marxist

tradition. Marxists work from the explicit vantage point of imagining and inducing social transformation via collective agency, both within and outside Europe. Within classical and ‘orthodox’ readings of Marx, this focus has, however, often been combined with a ‘stagist’ theory of progressive historical development, which places theoretical limitations upon the contingency of social struggle, whilst also assigning the colonised to a subdued role within the overarching trajectory of historical development from capitalism to socialism. In moments where this predicted trajectory has been interrupted – either through changing circumstances in areas of production or ideology, or from the emergence of social struggles positioned ‘outside’ of orthodox Marxism’s theoretical categories – this has led to considerable theoretical re-thinking on issues surrounding, precisely, history, modernity and coloniality.

The body of thought which has contributed considerably to the theoretical re-thinking of this aforementioned triangular relationship is what I dub *an alternative socio-theoretical canon*. As stated, I locate this canon primarily within the works of Gramsci, Benjamin, and Fanon. Illuminating these views is important, as they elucidate an alternative discourse within the sociological tradition, one which has not necessarily made the *description* and *schematisation* of modernity its *leitmotif*, but rather engages head-on with the problematic assumptions of both ‘classical’ sociological theory and orthodox Marxism, out of an ambition to critique and dismantle those power structures which underpin modernity as such. How has this alternative canon imagined and discussed historical time and collective agency? How is this implied in differing views of modernity and coloniality?

In this article, I discuss these questions through readings of the aforementioned theorists, viewing how they articulate theoretical innovations as responses to the problematic triangular relationship between history, modernity, and coloniality, and discussing the challenges, tensions, and problems which might result from such innovations in turn. First, I briefly discuss the tension between historical necessity and collective agency in classical and orthodox readings of Marx’s works, arguing why the triangular relationship has proven a particular predicament for the future development of Marxism. After this, I move on to view how Gramsci’s concept of hegemony moves (partially) beyond this tension. Lastly, I view

how both Benjamin and Fanon depart wholly from a progressivist historiography by articulating a ‘dialectics of rupture’.

### **Historical Necessity and Hegemony in Classical Marxism and Gramsci**

Marx ([1859] 1999; see also Marx and Engels [1848] 1948; Marx and Engels [1845] 1998: 36–71) centralises the power dynamic of class conflict in his historical account of capitalism and modernity. The establishment of modernity is not a logical development through which one positively defined ‘social fact’ replaces another in a slow, grand historical process. Rather, historical development needs to be thought of as a process of conflict *within* any and all social ‘facts’ (cf. Marx [1859] 1999; Marx and Engels [1848] 1948: 9–21; Marx and Engels [1845] 1998: 61–62, 83). One cannot merely rely on the positive definition of a fact but must also account for the negation(s) of the given fact. New social forms should namely be understood through the ways in which they inhabit internal contradictions, which might become apparent and realised through historical struggle and change. The conjuncture of modernity, the central characteristic of which is the capitalist mode of production, is thus viewed as resultant upon a *dialectical* development of conflict between differently classed actors, upon the dialectical interplay between its *internal contradictions*, thus deriving the development of society from *tensions* inherent to previous and developing modes of production. There is thus an element of politics in Marx’s dialectical thought which is lacking in, for instance, Durkheim and Weber. Where they look with defeat upon the seemingly unstoppable forces of modernisation, either as impersonal, emergent social ‘fact’ or as increasingly prevailing ‘spirit’, Marx maintains that the emergence of capitalism is the result of politicised struggles between different social classes, and thus a consequence of power and resistance. As such, Marx maintains not only the possibility of transcending and transforming modern capitalism, but the *necessity* of doing so: the values and relations of this emergent system will not, and cannot, continue to subsume more and more aspects of social life without facing a resistance which will eventually lead to the toppling of the system itself. The system itself inhabits tensions and contradictions which will develop towards change.

The centralisation of power, struggle, and change in Marx's thought should not, however, be interpreted as a *voluntarist* view of society, in which struggling groups of social actors can shape social relations according to their own will, causing history to move in a decidedly haphazard fashion. For Marx, the centralisation of struggle precisely means the centralisation of *class* struggle, of economic aspects of society and the tensions emanating from therein. The meaning of Marx's historical materialism is precisely that society is not shaped by struggle between ideas or wills, but rather between classes as interest groups inhabiting certain roles within the mode of production (Marx [1859] 1999; Marx and Engels [1845] 1998: 61). Whilst any social formation is thus inherently contradictory, inhabiting the conditions necessary for its own sublimation (*Aufhebung*), the terrain of such contradictions can, according to Marx ([1859] 1999), be determined with 'the precision of natural science', insofar as they take place within a material or economic sphere.

Whether or not – or to what extent – this leads Marx to endorse an arguably Eurocentric 'stagist' view of history has been heavily debated in later studies. Surely, there are aspects of Marx's different texts to both support and contradict such claims; Marx's body of work is large, diverse, highly dynamic, and often reflects critically on previous analyses. Scholars such as Harry Harootunian (2015) and Kevin Anderson ([2010] 2016), for instance, focus on the *Grundrisse* (Marx [1938] 1993) and Marx's analyses of colonised and peripheral societies in other texts, to state that he here brings forth a conception of history as essentially formed through various local and unstable processes of struggle and production. According to Harootunian and Anderson, this can be regarded as groundbreaking, as it allows for a complex, 'deprovincialised' conception of historical temporalities as contingent and variegated.

The theoretical thrust of Harootunian and Anderson is, however, explicitly articulated *against* earlier, Western readings of Marx – primarily ones associated with classical, orthodox Marxism and/or the Second International, which became canonised as the 'mainstream' of Marxism throughout the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> For such readings, a politically articulated desire to describe and outline social development as rule-bound leads to a certain overcommunication of aspects relating to historical regularity and progression in Marx's thought. This overcommunication leads to what is

often discussed as a *base/superstructure divide* and has profoundly shaped the reception of Marx ever since – according to some, unfairly so. This divide states that the primary domain of historical development resides within purely economic relations (the ‘base’), from which the relations and contents of cultural, political, and ideological spheres (the ‘superstructures’) tend to follow (Marx [1859] 1999; cf. Engels [1895] 1999; Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001: 8–42; Williams 1973). In other words: according to this popular reading of Marx, the struggles of the economic sphere proceed with a certain regularity, which *then* function to affect or shape the realities of other spheres.

In classical, orthodox, or Second International-era Marxism, this conceptualisation of regularity often emerges in the form of a *stage theory*, according to which the overarching patterns of economic struggle in past, present, and future forms of society can be schematised into a generalised trajectory. This is often based on readings of the short *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels [1848] 1948) and Marx’s preface to *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (Marx [1859] 1999), in which it is stated that ‘in broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs *marking progress in the economic development of society*’ (Marx [1859] 1999; cf. Marx and Engels [1848] 1948: 9–21; emphasis added).

In these texts, and this specific reading of Marx, which has been influential for the later development of Marxism, we gain a semblance of a *progressive view of historical time*. While others of Marx’ texts, as stated, contain more complex statements on the historicity of capitalism and class struggle (and the position of non-capitalist and colonised societies therein), it is largely this view that has gained influence in many later Marxist circles. Here, capitalism is of course criticised ruthlessly. It is also maintained, however, that this system *supersedes* previous modes of production both historically and conceptually – in terms of economic innovation, technological progress, and the advancement of social relations. In this sense, Western modernity is – albeit critically – articulated as the ‘most advanced’ mode of production, insofar as it represents the logical end point of historical class struggle. The manner in which orthodox Marxists derive this description of historical regularity from a European experience, yet articulate it in universal

terms, mirrors the above established decolonial criticisms of ‘classical’ discourses on modernity, for example, those of Durkheim and Weber (cf. Seidman 2016).

According to decolonial thinkers, such as Enrique Dussel (1993) and Walter D Mignolo (1999), the origins of this universalising move, characteristic of both orthodox Marxism and much early sociological thought on modernity, arise from the very moment of colonisation, the moment in which the European great powers instantiated a global structure of coloniality. Key for this global structure was precisely the adjectives *modern*, *advanced*, and *developed*, and the manner through which such adjectives position the local history of European modernity as a normative centre, as the highest stage of a universal development against which Other societies are to be contrasted and judged. Colonial conceptions of the world and society are thus not *secondary* to modernity, not merely one of its many features, but rather its most fundamental principle: modernity, as discourse and process, arises when Europe, through the project of colonialism, enters a position of power in which it can propagate a view of itself as embodying the highest stage of history. Even though Marx demonstrably brought forth complex and context-sensitive analyses of non-capitalist and colonised societies – albeit in relatively neglected texts – the readings of ‘canonised’ classical and orthodox Marxism arguably reproduce this colonial discourse and power structure by presenting an account of European history as a universal trajectory of historical development.

The spaces and possibilities for actual projects of social transformation later became a heavily debated topic within the theoretical tradition of Marxism, for which orthodox and Second International-era readings of Marx became part of a recognized canon (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 8–42). This is precisely due to tensions arising between political and evolutionist aspects of orthodox Marxist thought. If society progresses according to the scientifically determinable development of ‘material relations’ in the economic sphere (the base), which precedes consciousness and political activity (the superstructure), why should the working class put active efforts into organising itself politically to change society, that is, in the domain of the superstructure? And is there any space at all for political projects which fall outside of the Western European conceptual schema of bourgeoisie-proletariat?

These tensions became particularly actualised during different phases of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first was during the economic crises of the 1890s and 1930s, as heightened economic tensions within Western European capitalism seemed to imply the imminence of worker's revolution. As we know, however, this did not occur, thus falsifying the optimistic analyses of 'historical necessity' made by several Marxists of the Second International. The second was during the Russian and Chinese revolutions, as well as during the decolonisation waves of the post-War era, as revolutionary parties operating largely outside the social terrain of 'developed' Western European capitalism started to adopt Marxist revolutionary programs. When doing so, they often found themselves at least partially alienated from orthodox Marxism's Eurocentric descriptions of class relations, having to supplement fundamental aspects of such theories with the articulation of additional or alternative theoretical categories and political subjectivities, often derived from conceptions of nationalism, populism, pan-Africanism, or pan-Arabism. In each of these situations, political and cultural developments did not seem to follow logically from the 'basic' economic conflicts described by orthodox Marxism – either due to a lack of correspondence between basic conflicts and supposedly resultant superstructural change, or simply due to a lack of directly identifiable class categories corresponding to those of Marx's canonised and most well-disseminated texts. Here the predicament of the aforementioned triangular relationship makes itself known: if modernity/capitalism does not evolve according to the established image of historical time, insofar as its universalisation of European history is questioned or destabilised, the fundamentals of the theory are suddenly rendered weak and questionable.

The problem of reconciling the necessary evolutions of the base with the apparent contingency of the superstructure has been stressed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001), addressing this as a central challenge for contemporary Marxism. They allege that this is a 'problem of economism' (Mouffe 1985: 168): when the development of capitalism does not follow its 'necessary laws' towards proletarianisation and crisis, the notion of historical necessity imposes itself as a 'double void' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 11–14). While historical 'laws' can no longer fully structure a theoretical conceptualisation of the social, as the ordinary functioning of



its central categories has been disrupted, it still functions as a limit to fully realised theoretical understandings of increasingly contingent political situations.

In order to arrive at a historical account of modernity which fully theorises its contradictions and struggles both inside and outside of Europe, whilst maintaining the possibilities and unpredictability of collective action and social change, there is thus a need to recover Marx's centralisation of power and struggle in the theorisation of modernity from the theoretical limitations of historical determinism. This is, according to Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 65–71; Mouffe 1985), most adequately done through the works of Antonio Gramsci, whose major contribution to Marxist theory consists of a 'complete and radical critique of economism' (Mouffe 1985: 170) in his theory of hegemony, which fully theorises the contingency of political conflict by accentuating its central *articulatory* principle. This, in turn, allows for a conception of historical time which moves beyond the progressivist strand of much classical sociological thinking and Marxist theory, whilst still enabling an astute view on the particularities and power structures of modernity/coloniality. In a sense, this can thus be construed as an attempt to address and question the triangularity of modernity/coloniality/history head-on: it is an attempt to *divorce* the theoretical question of power and resistance throughout modernity/coloniality from the shackles of evolutionist historical time.

In order to illustrate the concept of hegemony, I wish to turn to a quote from Marx which Gramsci (1971: 162, 365–366) makes frequent use of. This, then, not only illustrates the concept as such, but also how it can be arrived at by concentrating upon certain *specific features* of Marx's thought, legible through a reading which accentuates the category of the political. The quote is as follows:

In studying [revolutionary] transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. (Marx [1859] 1999)

For Gramsci (1971: 365–366, 375–377, 407–409; cf. Mouffe 1985), this quote seems to describe how tensions within the economic

base alone cannot bring about socio-political change in the form of revolution. The terrain or possibility for historical change might be brought about or actualised by movements in the economic base, but the economic base cannot alone create change. The element of consciousness, constructed through political, intellectual, and moral ideas in the superstructure, is required to make subjects conscious of their positions and make them ‘move’ in particular directions (Gramsci 1971: 158–168, 182–185, 375–377). The superstructural elements of law, politics, religion, art, and philosophy thus seem to have a constitutive role in building a form of collective consciousness, which in turn is what can bring about a revolutionary project. Ideology is thus not merely a reflection of the economic base but has a material force: it serves to mobilise and can ultimately change relations in the economic base.

For political change to occur, there thus needs to be in place a decisive superstructural program – a set of ideas, principles, and philosophies – of political change which mobilises, interprets, and directs the energies of the economic base. This superstructural political project, of articulating and directing certain economic conflicts and relations into a project of concrete political demands and change, is then what Gramsci (1971: 12, 125–133, 144–155, 180–185, 210, 229–243, 245–246: cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Mouffe 1985) dubs the quest for *hegemony*. It consists in the structuring, the *articulation*, of worldviews and political subjects capable of social change. The values, morals, and ideals constitutive of such worldviews and subjects can subsequently become the basis of a ‘collective will’ which binds together and directs a hegemonic project (Gramsci 1971: 125–133, 364–365). This whole procedure is, as stated, then done on a purely political terrain, partially separate from the economic base. For historical and political subjects to act collectively in certain directions, to instantiate new relations and structures, they thus need to be constructed, *articulated*, as such subjects through common political perceptions and goals in a hegemonic project.

While modernity is thus still definable as dialectical struggle here, such struggle is no longer conceived as solely unfolding within a scientifically determinable economic terrain: the links appearing between economic objects of analysis and acting political subjectivities are ultimately relative and co-constitutive, thereby turning

the notion of dialectical struggle from a schema of cumulative syntheses between already fixed subjects to a multilinear process of shifting articulations, struggles, alliances, and antagonisms.

As put by Judith Butler (1997), the category of hegemony introduces a complex element of temporality into the question of power and modernity. The centrality of the logic of *articulation* within hegemonic projects enables a move beyond the causal linearity of evolutionism, instead hinging the thinking of structure upon it being ‘subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation’ (Butler 1997: 13). The conjuncture of modernity is not to be viewed as dependent on the linear, stable, and gradual instantiation of a particular foundational logic upon society, nor upon a readily determined trajectory of dialectics – processes which, so to speak, are assumed to lie *beneath* readily apparent social or political processes. It is rather continually asserted *on the level of such readily apparent social or political processes*, in the instance of hegemonic articulations – through the discursive and institutional instances in which a power makes itself known and paves the way for its own legitimation. Modernity is therefore not an impersonal, pre-determined, fixed structural totality which continually asserts itself upon ‘real’ subjects or social relations; it is rather contingent upon a nebulous and shifting confluence of power relations which must continually be asserted, adjusted, and re-articulated in a ‘war of positions’ throughout and within the constitution of subjects and relations, the temporality of which escapes conventional notions of linearity or progress. To ensure its survival, hegemonic projects are required to invoke, transform, and repeat the past into the present, constantly transforming and adjusting itself in relation to new relations of force and oppositions. It is not the continual *growth* of a powerful social *logic*, but rather the constant, fractured, and unstable readjustment and repetition of power relations in relation to contingent social and political terrains.

Through the notion of hegemony, we are thus able to retain Marx’s characterisation of power struggle as central to modernity without subjecting such a view to a notion of determinism or progressivism. The triangularity of modernity/coloniality/history is thus substantially *reconfigured*. The notion of hegemony can be said to allow for a thinking of modernity through categories, subjects, and relations beyond those typically brought up within

‘classical sociology’. As it does not conceptualise political struggle and political subjects by connecting them to a universalised, historical trajectory, derived from a particular European experience, but rather through the contingent temporality of hegemonic practices, it should allow us to map *actual* relations of political struggle through which modernity was constructed from European colonial hegemony, and the manners in which this multifaceted historical project has enabled or disabled certain political articulatory practices or subjects within and outside of Europe.

It should be noted, however, that Gramsci can be criticised for only imagining and advocating social transformation from the outlook of a decidedly European experience of civil society: one in which there are channels for deliberation and recognition of those political discourses and social movements which can become constitutive of a hegemonic project, one in which rule is ultimately built on the construction of consent throughout civil society rather than brute force. Gramsci (1971: 11–14, 229–238) explicitly states that the project of building hegemony is primarily designed for Western societies in which civil society is more or less ‘fully’ developed.

Ranajit Guha (1998) has notably built upon the inverse of this statement, studying the colonial subjugation of India as ‘dominance without hegemony’. As the United Kingdom established and stabilised authority over colonial India, coercion and violent suppression of resistance took pre-eminence over forming cultural and moral consensus (that is, ‘hegemony’) throughout civil arenas, which in turn resulted in the failure of the post-colonial native bourgeoisie to ground and disseminate their nationalist projects as hegemonic and consensual. Positioned against these two nonhegemonic forms of dominance were always, according to Guha, the spontaneous and reoccurring resistance(s) of India’s subaltern classes. According to Guha, these resistances can be viewed as a form of civil society in the making – but one which, *in lieu* of viable structures of recognition and democratic contestation, had to be carried forth painstakingly outside of established state or civil domains, often facing violent suppression as a result. As he puts it, ‘since [colonial rule] was nonhegemonic, it was not possible for that state to assimilate the civil society of the colonized to itself’ (Guha 1998. xii).

This, then, disrupts the narrative according to which capitalism is viewed as only ever sustained and nurtured by hegemonic

relations within a ‘fully developed’ civil society. How, then, should one imagine these resistances (and others like them), as well as the general prospect of genuine social transformation from the outlook of the colony, in which the development of structures of recognition and civil society was ultimately refused by the colonial powers? How should one look at modernity and historical change from the position of its constitutive outside, namely that of the colony?

### **Dialectics, Modernity, and Colonialism from the Vantage Point of the Other in Benjamin and Fanon**

Let us discuss the aforementioned questions by considering a conceptualisation of modernity and historical time which *explicitly* attempts to counteract Eurocentrism and evolutionism: namely, the ‘dialectics of rupture’ of Walter Benjamin and Frantz Fanon, respectively. The ‘dialectics of rupture’ can be said to view modernity from the outlooks of its constitutive Others, and the ways in which this positionality *is confronted* with notions of ‘progress’ or ‘development’, as they become embedded in patterns of domination and rule. We thus arrive at a conception of dialectics, historical time, and modernity which not only *readjusts* certain perspectives to *include* the notion of the Other, from the outside and in, but one which grounds its theoretical construction as a whole from the Other position: this, then, not only serves to strategically divorce modernity/coloniality from evolutionist historical time within an otherwise unaltered socio-theoretical terrain, as in Gramsci, but thoroughly reconsiders the issues of power, resistance, and dialectics altogether, from the outlook of the colonised Other.

Anisha Sankar (2019) discusses a radical conception of dialectics as appearing in the works of both Benjamin and Fanon. Here she maintains that both Benjamin and Fanon view dialectical movement as at a ‘standstill’ throughout modernity and colonialism, respectively, insofar as the power structures underpinning modernity/colonialism as social formations remain unchanged: any notion of ‘progress’ or ‘recognition’ within this standstill is a mere illusion of ‘bad faith’ (Sankar 2019: 121, 127). What we have here is thus a conception quite different from that of Gramsci, even though a common opposition to Marxian determinism can be noted. Gramsci

imagines that civil society *can* be a possible arena for change – he presupposes that some spaces *within* the power structure of modernity, within this supposed ‘dialectical standstill’, can be utilised for the gradual construction of a hegemonic project. For Benjamin and Fanon, nothing could be less true: the structures of civil society only serve to construct a false sense of recognition and progress. What is required for ‘recognition in good faith’ or for genuine social change to occur is rather a point of *rupture*, a radical, rather than gradual, break with the dialectical standstill itself, which can introduce a new sense of temporality beyond that of modernity’s progressivist self-conception.

For Benjamin ([1968] 2011), the notion of ‘progress’ within modernity and capitalism is akin to a *myth* that serves to legitimise the ruling system. The notion of progress endows the fundamentally oppressive power structures of modernity with a sense of cumulative movement and improvement in a linear trajectory through a form of ‘empty time’. It assumes the future as an empty historical space upon which the continual technological advancement and economic growth of the current system can be projected, thus not only disabling any visualisation of actual social change, but also ‘closing off’ contemporary socio-political agents from lessons, memories, and struggles ‘locked’ in the annals of the past (Benjamin [1968] 2011: 245–249, 252–253). For any true social transformation to take place, a sense of *rupture* from this dialectical standstill needs to take place; one needs to construct a historical space which breaks entirely with the social and conceptual frameworks of the present state. This notion of rupture is diametrically opposed to conventional notions of progress: from this stance, revolution does not mean the fulfilment of a gradually apparent social logic, a projection of structural logics or political goals into an ‘empty’ horizon of future historical time, but rather the *arrest* and *interruption* of the temporal order of capitalist modernity, its progressivist notion of ‘empty time’, and the manner in which this closes off memories of past struggle (ibid. [1968] 2011: 250–255). As the rupture appears, a historical opportunity is seized, a radical sense of immediacy and openness is produced, and the present is removed, ‘blasted’, from its insertion into a progressive trajectory, instead becoming filled with what Benjamin ([1968] 2011: 252–253, 255) dubs ‘now-time’: the entirety of the past and the present understood as a radically

immediate ‘now’. This ‘messianic cessation of time’ can reinvigorate and redeem memories and lessons from past struggles and catastrophes, simultaneously laying the groundwork for a ‘dialectical leap’ into new futures.

Benjamin (2003: 402) conceptualises this rupture in the following manner: ‘Marx said that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps things are very different. It may be that revolutions are the act by which the human race travelling in the train applies the emergency brake’. True social transformation can therefore never be viewed as the culmination of an underlying process of historical progress, but rather as a rupture which appears as a ‘marker of weakness within the linear thread of material history, providing the vantage point from which transformation may be pushed forth’ (Sankar 2019: 127). The metaphor makes it clear that the sense of empty time and false ‘progress’ which rules the ‘business of usual’ of modernity needs to be arrested and broken with for any change to occur – the emergency brake of the locomotive of history needs to be pulled. The notion of rupture thus reveals a sense of historical time radically different from both Marx’s *progressive* dialectics and Gramsci’s *gradual* building of hegemony throughout a civil arena. According to Benjamin, a revolutionary moment exists in a ‘now-time’ which, in a non-linear fashion, convenes aspects of the past into a historically heightened present which has been exploded out of any and all linearly articulated historical continuums.

According to Sankar (2019), a similar view of historical time informs Fanon. In fact, she argues that Benjamin’s messianic time can only stay relevant if it is placed within the context of decolonisation: ‘While Benjamin has exposed the contradiction of the myth of progress, using Fanon to pull him into postcolonial analysis further strengthens the politicised, secularised nature of messianity. To subject Benjamin to the scrutiny of anti-colonial thought shows the strength of the active potential of messianity within an anti-colonial project’ (Sankar 2019: 131). According to this line of reasoning, ‘postcolonial analysis’ elucidates a position of Otherness from which the faults of European notions of serial historical progression can most adequately be grasped. It is additionally in the context of decolonisation that Benjamin’s call to redeem past struggles and unlock the vaults of history becomes the most relevant: in the context of the colony, a central method of subjugation

and repression was the eradication of pre-colonial histories and subjectivities (Sankar 2019: 131–132).

Fanon's ([1952] 2008: 168–173) notion of rupture appears most clearly in how he resituates Hegel's master/slave dialectic in relation to colonialism. Whereas the subjects in Hegel's dialectic strive towards mutual and reciprocal recognition, Fanon maintains that such co-dependency is impossible within the power matrix constructed by the colonial situation. It is inscribed within the very material constitution of colonial power that the master (as in the coloniser) keeps the slave (as in the colonised) within a position of 'less-than-being' whose value is beneath that of 'ordinary' self-consciousness, thus denying him/her any 'true' recognition. The master only sees the colonised as a source of cheap, exploitable labour and imposes doctrines of essentialised, racial alterity upon him/her to maintain this. From this, the colonised subjects will become far 'less independent than the Hegelian slave' (Fanon [1952] 2008: 172n8) – they will internalise the doctrines of racial difference and think in terms of a white/black dichotomy established by the coloniser, subsequently only desiring to become white, to 'be like the master', which they, conclusively, cannot. Within this situation, the colonised lacks 'ontological resistance' (ibid. [1952] 2008: 83) – the very 'site of being becomes a site of contradiction and struggle' (Sankar 2019: 122). The very constitution of reality in this situation thus occludes any space for civil deliberation or political discourse; here, Gramsci's (1971: 11–14, 57, 160–161) project of building a counter-hegemony is therefore ultimately unfeasible, as there are no structures for establishing 'rule through consent' through a 'compromise equilibrium' insofar as this implies a certain *recognition* of the ruled on behalf of the ruler. Any notion of 'recognition' arising from this 'Manichaeic colonial reality' will inevitably be in 'bad faith', reinforcing the colonial power structure insofar as it does not adequately realise that a rupture needs to take place (cf. Fanon [1961] 1963: 35–105, 309–316). Fanon thus reinterprets Hegel's master/slave-dialectic to signify the oppressive dialectical standstill of the colonial situation. From within the colonial situation, no 'progress' can arise, no counter-hegemonic project can be built, only the oppressive equilibrium of slavery and racism, unless the material situation *as such* is broken with entirety: 'Comrades,



let us flee from this motionless movement where gradually dialectic is changing to the logic of equilibrium' (Fanon [1961] 1963: 314).

Here we thus get a thorough refutation of any notions of 'progress', a refutation which ultimately gives way to a conception of historical time radically different from both 'classical' sociology and orthodox Marxism. Fanon views the notion of modernity from the outside, so to speak, specifically from the assigned position of Other in relation to European modernity – as a colonised, non-white, non-European, supposedly non-modern subject. From this position, Europe and modernity never represent a notion of genuine progress, only the conquest and subsequent standstill which constitutes colonial oppression: the fundamental condition for Europe's self-conception as modern, as well as its economic self-realisation as developed, has ultimately been the continual subjugation and exploitation of colonised peoples. An account of modernity as the historical culmination of a universal trajectory of development thus primarily serves as a legitimisation for its systems of oppression: the status of the native as a constitutive 'mirror image' of modernity is not a question of naturalised racial or cultural difference illuminated through the comparative lens of 'grand ethnography', but rather appears as the ideological body through which the power structure of colonial oppression realises itself. True transformation must envision a thorough break with the present, radically moving beyond this historical and structural condition.

The notion of rupture thus elucidates a conception *explicitly* opposed to any notion of modernity as akin to 'progress' and establishes a radically different conception of historical time: neither the instantiation, reproduction, nor gradual transformation of modernity can be viewed as a form of dialectical progress in which the internal contradictions of the system create new syntheses and social forms. Instead, modernity/colonialism incessantly reproduces its own central power structures in an endless iteration which in no way can be construed as a form of 'advancement' or 'development'. The very *notion* of progress or development does nothing but to promote 'recognition in bad faith', which ultimately serves to legitimise these power structures. According to Benjamin and Fanon, change or revolution should thus not be envisioned as a progressive, gradual sublimation of the terms involved in this dialectical standstill;

rather, it should be viewed as a rupture with, or a leap from, these terms, in a ‘messianic cessation of time’.

While Benjamin’s and Fanon’s reconsiderations of historical time can be viewed as fundamental leaps from the limitations of orthodox Marxism, they nonetheless spur further questions and predicaments. With Benjamin in particular, there is a lack of concrete tools to imagine how a rupture might take place *in actuality*. Whilst Benjamin is set on establishing a secularised and political notion of messianity, conceived of as an instance of revolutionary rupture, his language remains shrouded in mysticism, which might be viewed as a slight disconnect from the ebbs and flows of actual social and political struggle. Even when brought to its most concrete point, the question remains as to how to initiate and sustain a revolutionary project which wholly refuses to take part in existing political culture: how does one break with the historical temporality of modernity from an institutional and political framework wholly conditioned by such a temporality?

Fanon, of course, wrestled with similar issues, but did so whilst enveloped in actual, concrete struggles for decolonisation, primarily in Algeria. He thus devised his notion of rupture in conjunction with actual revolutionary struggle. He recognised, however, that while a logic of violent rupture constitutes the only way forward towards genuine decolonisation, the realisation of it as an actual social and political project is fraught with considerable difficulty. For him the question of rupture was thus less about the theoretical nature of messianity, and more about how to *strengthen* and *sustain* the radicality of decolonial struggles – that is, how to prevent the decolonial struggle from devolving into a mere struggle for independence, in which the colonial bourgeoisie is replaced with a native one, without any fundamental break with the social and political structures of exploitation, domination, and racism. The exploration and discussion of such difficulties constitute the bulk of *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon [1961] 1963), in which political violence along with the building of struggle-centred national cultures are posed as potential ways forward.

Additionally, one might pose the problem of *post-coloniality* to Benjamin and Fanon, as well as to Gramsci: how should one approach the dialectics of rupture in a historical situation in which formal decolonisation processes have taken place, but with

considerable portions of ‘old’ colonial world-structures remaining intact? Here we enter a historical state of ‘in-betweenness’ in which the conventional binaries of colonialism have been frustrated considerably, yet without the necessary ‘dialectical leap’ to fully dismantle the relations of non-recognition and exploitation characteristic of coloniality as a social matrix. Do the now-existing civil structures within former colonies allow for hegemonic projects towards ‘genuine’ transformation, or should one maintain an attitude of hesitance, insisting upon a fundamental radical ‘rupture’ with this ‘new’ conjuncture as well? If so, how should this project be envisioned?

Considering the manner in which our current post-colonial condition significantly impacts the conditions of contemporary struggles surrounding, for instance, climate change, race, gender, and the global division of labour, I believe that it will only become more and more crucial to perform that theoretical work which updates the ‘traditional’ concepts of the Marxist and anti-colonial traditions – worker/capitalist, coloniser/colonised, dialectics, history, hegemony, revolution – in relation to similar states of ‘in-betweenness’, in order to be able to properly name, understand, and further contemporary struggles. As discussed above, conceptions of history are incessantly tied to notions of modernity and coloniality within much established social theory – therefore conceptions of post-modernity and post-coloniality necessitate an updated view of historical time and the role of collective human agency therein. Insofar as the triangular relationship between history, modernity, and coloniality constituted a predicament for Marxist-inspired theorists throughout the twentieth century, a similar triangular predicament between history, post-modernity, and post-coloniality thus remains a fundamental predicament for the development of Marxism throughout the twenty-first century.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this article, I have attempted to address the interrelated questions of historical time, social change, modernity and coloniality within an alternative socio-theoretical canon, namely one which works in dialogue with Marxism. I have done this to discuss how this

tradition, often working from the explicit vantage point of generating social transformation, has addressed the problem of historical progressivism. Concretely, I have examined the works of Gramsci, Benjamin, and Fanon, finding in them differing conceptions of historical time as well as adjacent visions for future upheaval against prevailing social structures. First, I have discussed how Gramsci resolves the issue of historical necessity by insisting upon the building of hegemony within civil society as imperative for generating social change, thus departing from orthodox Marxist progressivism towards a less schematised conception of historical time which centralises the articulation, repetition, and gradual building of political discourse. Second, I have discussed how Benjamin and Fanon approach the question of modernity and coloniality by accentuating a dialectics of rupture, insisting upon a radical break with the contemporary matrix of power towards the instantiation of a radical ‘now-ness’ in which past, present, and future convene, thereby explicitly arguing against the progressivism of both Marxism and classical theories of modernity in general.

My discussions on these authors are neither authoritative nor final. There are certainly aspects of their respective theories which have gone unnoticed in my readings. For instance, the discussion of Marx’s complicated and ambivalent analyses of colonialism in relation to Western capitalism can certainly be expanded on. The same is true of Gramsci’s relationship to colonialism, post-colonialism, and theorisations thereof: while he can arguably be accused of building his theory of hegemony upon a largely Western experience of civil society, as described above, his notion of subalternity and his discussions of the ‘Southern question’ have been of huge importance for the subsequent development of subaltern studies, post-colonialism and decolonial thought.

Nevertheless, I have arrived at two tentative conclusions: 1) orthodox Marxism is characterised by a tension between Eurocentric, modernist tendencies towards a universalised historical progressivism (as expressed in the assertion that history develops through dialectical movements from feudalism to capitalism to socialism/communism) and an insistence upon the power of collective agency in generating social transformation; and 2) this tension has caused a central predicament for the future development of Marxism: that of conceptualising collective efforts towards social

change in conjunctures where the prevailing notion of historical necessity no longer seems valid. The basis for these two conclusions is the realisation that theories of history, modernity, and coloniality seem to imply each other in a triangular fashion; the discussion of historical time and/or progress in classical and orthodox Marxist social theory builds upon analyses and conceptions of the nature and specificity of modern development, that is, what modernity is and how it has emerged as a novel historical development. This, in turn, builds upon implicit or explicit conceptions of the colonised in relation to the notion of European modernity – the image of the colonised functions as the Other to the Self of European modernity. This image is, however, constantly unstable; the Other often returns to haunt the universalised model of seemingly logical and self-contained historical progression presumed to follow from the local history of Europe, as in the case of non-Western anti-colonial movements adopting and altering the political discourse and program of Marxism in relation to local, political specificities, thereby disrupting its notion of historically necessary actors and agency.

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## Note

1. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe trace the lineage of such orthodox, 'traditional' or 'economistic' readings of Marx from the writings of Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Georgi Plekhanov, Eduard Bernstein, and Vladimir Lenin.

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