

Theodore Roosevelt, Karl Marx and the Global Frontier

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Abstract

The present essay considers the idea of a Global Frontier in the work of Theodore Roosevelt and Karl Marx. The Global Frontier is a set of assumptions about the imminent conquest of the world by industrial capitalism, which Marx and Roosevelt saw respectively from the perspective of the first and second Industrial Revolutions. The essay revolves around Roosevelt's *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* (1914), while Marx's ideas are extracted mainly but not only from *Capital*, Vol. 1. (1867). The essay follows Roosevelt's footsteps in South America, which serves a double purpose. Firstly, an attempt is made to compare and contrast two very different, yet overlapping, views of globalization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Secondly, the essay takes a closer look at specific questions such as the role played by political culture in both Roosevelt's and Marx's or Marxist thought; nature plays a particularly important part in the Global Frontier according to both Marx and Roosevelt.

In line with a recent crop of studies exploring historical frontiers from a transnational perspective (Wrobel; Orsterhammel; Joseph; Hopkins), this essay considers the idea of a global frontier in the work of Karl Marx and "Teddy" Roosevelt. Marx and Roosevelt are not often mentioned in the same breath, but there are good reasons to compare the two. Above all, they championed two very different visions of internationalization – communism and imperialism – whose ideological foundations rested on two distinct versions of the same set of circumstances – the first and second Industrial Revolutions. Marx and Roosevelt had a lot in common. Marx theorized capitalism far more than he did communism, while Roosevelt went on to embrace socialist ideas. Take this quote, from Roosevelt's autobiography: "What the miner had to sell – his labor – was a perishable commodity; the labor of to-day – if not sold to-day –

was lost forever. Moreover, his labor was not like most commodities – a mere thing; it was part of a living, breathing human being.” (511)

Roosevelt was a social-democrat in matters of governance (“a strong believer in labor unions” [221]) and he was a social-democrat at heart: “*we are all about the same size,*” he wrote emphatically (512) in the same book. On the other hand, his worldview was informed by Darwinism, which he extrapolated from the natural world to society, and his foreign policy was characteristically aggressive. Marx’s ideas were equally drenched in paradox. The German philosopher had little time for utopian socialists (whose ideas were not, in the grand scheme of things, too different from his own) and he could never hide his fascination with the all-conquering genius of industrial capitalism. Roosevelt was one of the last nineteenth-century types (big and masculine and driven by sheer stamina) which Marx exemplified as few others did.

Let us just say that Roosevelt and Marx were polar opposites, within the spectrum of progressive politics.¹ This essay explores the common ground between the two, with an emphasis on the question of transnational mobility. The first and second Industrial Revolutions opened up the world, and rearranged it, like nothing else before in human history. Both Marx and Roosevelt understood internationalization (we would call it globalization) as a process of frontier making. What follows is a discussion of two different yet overlapping ideologies of frontier making.

This is not, however, a thorough study of Roosevelt’s or Marx’s work. Emphasis is on two books: Roosevelt’s *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*, published in 1914, and Marx’s first volume of *Capital*, published in 1867. It seems to me that these two texts represent Marx and Roosevelt at the peak of their intellectual powers. They contain many of the ideas mentioned above, and they reveal as much about the men who wrote them as they do about their public or political ideas. Comparing the two inevitably involves reading them in each other’s key. And since Roosevelt was the traveler, I will follow Roosevelt’s footsteps in South America and imagine what Marx would have made of it.²

Three common themes stand out: culture and history as an obstacle to progress, the expansive qualities of international trade, and the role played by Nature in the rise of an industrial, therefore artificial society. Apart from making no claims of expertise in the field of Roosevelt studies, this essay suffers from various weaknesses, including an indulgence in the habit of confusing Marx with Engels. In my defence, more often than

not this seems to be a case of two voices singing the same note – or a lifelong commitment to an identical agenda.

Roosevelt left for South America in late 1913, after losing to William Taft a third-party bid for what would have been his third presidential term. He was accompanied by his twenty-three-year-old son, Kermit, and by a number of colorful American naturalists. He gave a string of guest lectures in the Southern Cone – to his slight annoyance, he was received with pageantry wherever he went – and then his party joined a Brazilian faction led by Colonel Cândido Rondon, famous for laying down the telegraph line across the Mato Grosso, in the *Cerrado* or savanna. Rondon had also journeyed into the Amazon basin, where he claimed discovery of the headwaters of the Rio da Dúvida (River of Doubt). Roosevelt was invited to take part in the exploration and mapping of that same river.

After successfully making it to its terminus, at the confluence with the Aripuanã, the Dúvida was renamed Rio Roosevelt or Rio Teodoro. There is both film and photographic evidence of the journey, although only the book tells the whole story. It opens with a rather lengthy dissertation on poisonous snakes and closes with the gripping account of an ordeal that killed three and nearly killed Roosevelt too. Whatever happened in the forest, the text rings true: apparently he returned to New York a changed man and never recovered his celebrated vigor. For someone who spent his life looking for adventure, and preaching it, this must have been the adventure of a lifetime.

As for Marx, it is hard not to picture him indoors, lost in theory in the Reading Room of the British Museum. His ill health kept him from finalizing manuscripts. Roosevelt was a sickly young boy and a prolific writer of books, a trait that he admired in himself and others because “the keenest appreciation of what is seen in nature is to be found in those who have also profited by the hoarded and recorded wisdom of their fellow-men” (*Autobiography* 342). Marx did not travel the world, but for much of his adult life he was an exile. Unlike Roosevelt, Marx was not a patriot. Roosevelt’s narrative is always a projection of American muscle, geopolitical between the lines. Marx shot from a distance, like the outsider he was, but always in the direction of capital’s heart.

Both men had their own preferences and prejudices (see below) and each demonstrated a selective involvement in international affairs. Roosevelt chased the Last Great Frontiers: as a politician he wanted Panama, and he got it, and as a man he sought to “reassert a globalizing virility” (Wrobel 101) by rediscovering himself in Nature and by re-enacting the Wild West overseas. From at least the publication of *The Communist*

Manifesto, in early 1849, Marx identified a Global Frontier – the “clearing of whole continents for cultivation...” (Part 1) – but he always remained vague when it came to the analysis of non-industrialized regions. In the next section, I will discuss Roosevelt’s take on the political culture of South America, and I will attempt to situate Marx in the same line of thought.

The “revolutionary habit”

Marx barely mentioned Latin America in his writings, although he did correspond with Raymond Wilmart, the head of the First International in Argentina, in 1873. The materials available have led scholars to suggest that Marx “did not achieve in regard to Latin America the break from evolutionism and Eurocentrism he made in relation to Ireland and Russia in later writings” (Munck 154). This is a fair assessment. Marx made passing commentary on the pre-Columbian societies of North, Central and South America, particularly toward the end of his life, in the so-called *Ethnological Notebooks*. But he seems to have shown little interest in the region’s political economy. There is one instance, however, in which Marx was asked to write an informed piece on Latin America. It was an entry on Simón Bolívar for an encyclopedia, and what he wrote leaves no doubt that he did not like the man: “the most cowardly, mean and wretched scoundrel” (quoted in Draper Part 3).

Various commentators have tried to contextualize Marx’s views on the Venezuelan hero. His words, though, seem consistent with the general tone of his work. Not only was Marx unimpressed with Bonapartism, but he was also quite famously acerbic with his wit. Writing on the outcome of the war of 1846-48, as the quote below shows, Engels depicted Mexico as a preindustrial anachronism. The same goes for Latin America as a whole: it had no place in early Marxist thought because it was assumed to exist outside “history,” understood here in the sense of “development”. If anything, Engels subscribed to some version of the Monroe Doctrine (*America for the Americans*) and firmly advocated US “tutelage” over Mexico:

In America we have witnessed the conquest of Mexico and have rejoiced at it. It is also an advance when a country that has hitherto been wrapped up in its own affairs, perpetually rent with civil wars, and completely hindered in its development, a country whose best prospect had been to become industrially subject to Britain – when such a country is forcibly drawn into the historical process. It is to the interest

of its own development that Mexico will in the future be placed under the tutelage of the United States. (*United States* 527).

Roosevelt would have agreed with Engels. He certainly despised decay in all its different forms (although, as we shall see, conjuring up the frontier myth in a South American setting demanded suspension of disbelief). Born and raised in New York, he was never keen on urban life. His philanthropic campaigns targeted the “seething evils of the slum” (*Strenuous Life* 87), a turn of phrase that could have been lifted from Engels’ own study of the English working class. Marx’s concept of the lumpenproletariat (“the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society” [*Manifesto* Part1]), a term he later also applied to the finance aristocracy (“the rebirth of the lumpenproletariat on the heights of bourgeois society” [*Class Struggles* Part 1]) evidences the depth and breadth of his feelings toward corruption. Roosevelt’s socialist reputation was in part based on his “bold defiance of the army of corrupt finance entrenched behind the ramparts of Wall Street” (Morris 16). So, again, in some respects Marx and Roosevelt walked the same path.

Moral integrity as a precondition of freedom, a sort of Kantian adulthood, is easy to discern in the writings of both Marx and Roosevelt. Marx, it should be remembered, held the view that to free oneself from capital one must first be rid of “the old society”. Roosevelt believed in progress in the classic liberal sense: standing on the wrong side of history condemned humanity to perpetual servitude, or childhood. Roosevelt was a kind observer of Latin American society (*Through the Brazilian Wilderness* was never meant to be a private document) but he was adamantly critical of the region’s political culture, a dire state of affairs that he blamed on Portugal and above all Spain (324). Roosevelt had led the Rough Riders in the Cuban War of Independence, and he liked to use Spain as an example of how not to run an empire. Of Paraguay he wrote “there is a great development ahead... as soon as they can definitely shake off the revolutionary habit and establish an orderly permanence of government” (45). The same expression reappears a few pages later. On his interpreter in Concepción, Roosevelt wrote:

He was able to render into Spanish my ideas – on such subjects as orderly liberty and the far-reaching mischief done by the revolutionary habit – with clearness and vigor, because he thoroughly understood not only how I felt but also the American way of looking at such things. (47)

On the whole, contemporary policy makers in Latin America shared “the American way of looking at such things”. That explains the many projects of internal colonization, carried out across the region in the long nineteenth century, that involved northern European settlers. Much like the rest of the Americas, around 1860 the United States had a revolutionary reputation. In contrast with Latin America, though, where a revolution was thought of as little more than a military coup, in the United States the connotations of the term were by and large positive. In the context of the Civil War, Marx supported the Union against the archaic tendencies of the Southern “Slaveocracy”. In his letter to Abraham Lincoln, writing on behalf of the First International, he noted: “The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes” (*United States* 169). But Marx’s sympathy for social revolution had a limit: he was all for it, so long as it seemed *scientifically* entangled with the development of a capitalist society. The extent to which this was not also due to cultural or at the very least geographical bias is open for debate.³ Further evidence of Marx’s disdain for non-capitalist revolution is provided by his comments on the guerrilla movement – Mao Tse-Tung and Ernesto “Che” Guevara *avant la lettre* – that fought Napoleon in Spain:

[I]t is evident that, having for some years figured upon the theater of sanguinary contests, taken to roving habits, freely indulged all their passions of hatred, revenge, and love of plunder, they must, in times of peace, form a most dangerous mob, always ready at a nod, in the name of any party or principle, to step forward for him who is able to give them good pay or to afford them a pretext for plundering excursions. (“Spain” Part V)

Roosevelt’s political life coincided with that of the Second International (1889-1914), a period when important additions were made to the original formula. These included a reformist movement that sought to temper the confrontational spirit of the early days by winning the popular vote in mainstream elections. Roosevelt’s brand of socialism, based on the observable fact that industrial economies were robust enough to share a larger slice of the cake with the laboring masses, stems from this revisionist moment. The second Marxist wave also took part in the turn-of-the-century experiment

with identity politics. Class continued to be the main category of analysis among Marxists of all stripes, but there is in some of the writings of the period a sense of cultural and/or racial pride that Marx evidently did not recognize. Roosevelt too was blind to the possibility of alternative forms of historical development. However tentative, the shift is relevant because, seen through a cultural lens, Latin America's "revolutionary habit" takes on a positive connotation.

An early proponent of identity-based Marxism was Marx's own mixed-race son-in-law, the Cuban-born Paul Lafargue. In *The Right to be Lazy* (1880), Lafargue disputed the bourgeois idea of labor. Since 1848 liberals and conservatives (and most socialists) had been embroiled in a debate over the "right to work." Lafargue took a different route and set out to demonstrate the superior nature of ancient, tribal and so-called backward societies, where labor was of equal or lesser value than leisure. Lafargue's argument (in essence, the moral superiority of what came to be known as the developing world) was also made by a number of Latin American intellectuals.

After the Cuban War of Independence, U.S. meddling in the region reached ever new heights, in no small part due to Roosevelt's appetite for gunboat diplomacy. Anti-imperialist sentiment, following Spain's retreat, took the form of cultural re-evaluation. In 1900 the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó published the neo-Romantic essay, *Ariel*, in which he extolled the *Latin* roots of Latin America against the "Holy Empire of Utilitarianism" (61). In 1903, in response to the Washington-backed separation of Panama from Colombia, the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío wrote the poem, *To Roosevelt*: "You think life is fire, that progress is eruption; where you put your bullet you put the future" (Verses 15-18). Though not Marxists *per se*, these writers fit well within the canon of Latin American Marxism, and they are often cited as precursors to José Mariátegui, Fidel Castro and other well-known critics of neo-imperialism.

Roosevelt, Marx... and Turner

Roosevelt trusted the individual more than he trusted any form of collective enterprise, including culture and politics. "These," Roosevelt wrote of the colonists venturing into the South American interior, "are real pioneer settlers... a nameless multitude of small men of whom the most important are, of course, the home-makers" (323). The parallelisms between Roosevelt's South America and Frederick Turner's frontier are numerous, starting with the exaltation of the penniless farmer. Roosevelt read Turner's pamphlet, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, shortly after its

publication in 1893; he even wrote the author a congratulatory letter. Like Marx, Turner was careful not to romanticize lawlessness (“The gambler and desperado... the vigilantes... are... scum” [footnote 48]) and painted a picture of steady, if Darwinian, societal development.

All three writers identified land (“free land” in Turner’s view) as a crucial factor in the making of the modern world. Turner and Roosevelt were celebratory; Marx was not. His critique of compulsive geographical expansion (*Manifesto*), expropriation, and inequality rooted in the colonial past (*Capital, Vol. 1*) was to be expanded in the work of late twentieth-century Marxists, such as David Harvey and Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The commonplace idea was that, in sharp contrast with the European case,⁴ Americans had been gifted with vast open spaces, ripe for conquest and colonization. Or, in Marx’s terms: “the superabundance of humus made up for the lack of historical tradition” (*United States* 62). As Turner indicated, the closing of the frontier was officially declared in the 1890s. Roosevelt saw in Brazil a mere temporal delay relative to the United States:

[T]hese men, and those like them everywhere on the frontier between civilization and savagery in Brazil, are now playing the part played by our backwoodsmen when over a century and a quarter ago they began the conquest of the great basin of the Mississippi; the part played by the Boer farmers for over a century in South Africa, and by the Canadians when less than half a century ago they began to take possession of their Northwest. Every now and then some one says that the “last frontier” is now to be found in Canada or Africa, and that it has almost vanished. On a far larger scale this frontier is to be found in Brazil—a country as big as Europe or the United States—and decades will pass before it vanishes. (324)

Engels was intrigued by the “communist” characteristics he was able to identify in some of the early North American communities (*United States* 33-41). Marx, however, was instinctively wary of any idyllic interpretation of settler colonialism. In the final lines of the first volume of *Capital* (542), he repeats an old idea of his: the United States would never be populated by a class of free and prosperous farmers, regardless of the amount of land available, because the “stationary sediment” of migrants in the eastern cities increased more rapidly than the number of souls moving westward, and because the Civil War had brought about huge amounts of debt, engendering speculation, land-grabbing,

and oligopolies. In other words, for Marx, no surprises there: capitalism, always one step ahead of the hopeful masses, had already performed its trick.

Equally revealing was Marx's attack on fellow German communist Hermann Kriege, in 1846. Based in New York, Kriege had dared to suggest a plan that involved the nationalization *and* leasing of the surplus land – a reflection of the popular mood in America, leading up to the Homestead Act of 1862, the legal foundation of the Turner thesis. Marx made his own calculations and estimated that, should America follow Kriege's model, the open frontier “will not last out 40 years” (*United States* 45). So, where Roosevelt saw the glass half full in Brazil, Marx had seen it half empty in America.

During the many years he spent researching and writing *Capital*, Marx developed an eye for the minutiae of capitalism. Making the case against capitalism after 1848, when working and living conditions among the English proletariat were clearly improving year by year, required an unprecedented (and indeed detailed in the extreme) take on industrial society. Marx stressed the importance of efficiency, which in *Capital Vol. I* (425) seems to be a byword for capital itself. The “arch-Philistine, Jeremy Bentham,” and other classical economists endowed the laborer with a “fixed degree of efficiency” directly proportional to investment; Marx distinguished “different” or “variable” degrees, that is to say, plenty of room for exploitation.

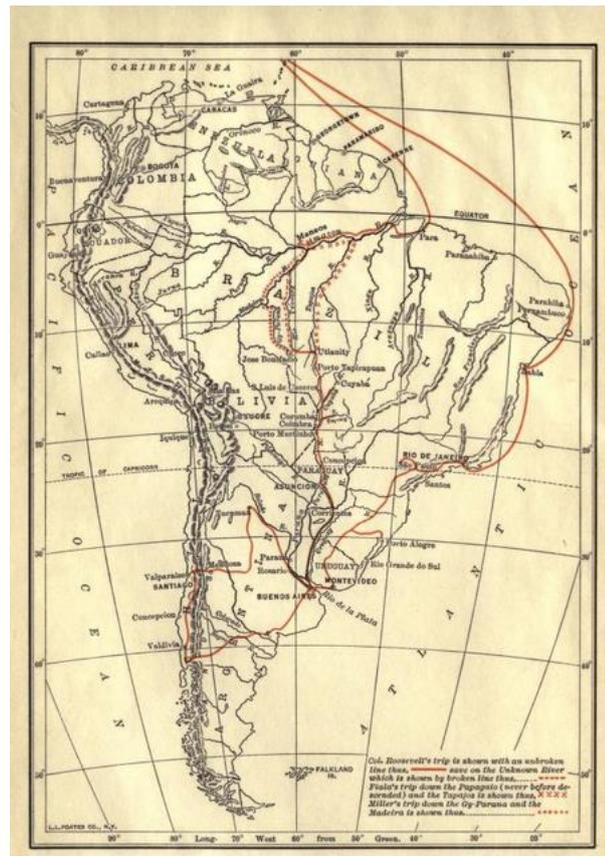
In making these remarks, Marx was effectively forecasting the Second Industrial Revolution. Roosevelt lived in the midst of it. For him, as for many other American progressives, flawless efficiency was a given. The notion was embedded in the new science of management: Frederick Taylor published his *Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911, and the moment the theory was applied at the Ford Plant, in 1913, it became a palpably successful business practice. In 1845, Engels had already identified the American talent for outperforming Europe (*United States* 42). The U.S. model, he insisted in 1881, was about to grab hold of the Global Frontier:

This American revolution in farming, together with the revolutionised means of transport as invented by the Americans, sends over to Europe wheat at such low prices that no European farmer can compete with it... With the present state of science and the rapid progress made in its application, we may be sure that in a very few years —at the very least — Australia and South American beef and mutton will

be brought over in a perfect state of preservation and in enormous quantities. (“American Food” Paragraph 3)

For Roosevelt, the “gospel of efficiency” was not only pertinent to the exploitation of natural resources, but also to their protection. In his “Conservation as a National Duty” speech of 1908 he summarized the question with remarkable clarity: “more space has been actually covered during the century and a quarter occupied by our national life than during the preceding six thousand years” (Paragraph 12). No further progress could be made, he warned, “without foresight” (Paragraph 8).⁵ By then the trans-Mississippi frontier had long been settled. The Brazilian interior was up for grabs, and Roosevelt saw no need to pull back. In *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*, he does make a call for the “reasonable protection” (91) of the mammals and birds of South America – Roosevelt the Hunter will be discussed below – but the landscape at large required no urgent conservation (let alone preservation, as his critics at home would have put it).

Roosevelt’s circular musings on the Tropical Sublime and its imminent development gave way to a no-nonsense tale of survival when he found himself fearing for his life, and that of Kermit, on the River of Doubt. Before that unexpected, and all too real, turn of events, Roosevelt dreamed a familiar dream: a bountiful landscape teeming with activity and seamlessly plugged into the world industrial economy.



[Map showing the journey of Theodore Roosevelt in South America, extracted from *Brazilian Wilderness*, vii]

But like all dreams, Roosevelt's has missing parts. "Money is of no value as one leaves the settlements," we read in an Appendix (367), as a reminder that here the rules of industrial society do not apply. Cities are a distant memory and the last ranch has been spotted many miles away. The only colonists are rubber tappers (*seringueiros*), remains of a very recent golden age. The sudden burst of the rubber boom predated the former president's visit by merely a year. In the book, rubber is mentioned dozens of times, yet Roosevelt omits the horror stories hailing from the remote rubber regions, in the Putumayo Valley and beyond. These had been widely advertised in the Western press. And anyhow, regardless of what he knew beforehand, in the Amazonian crucible he must have heard the tales. There is only one passing reference to the "exploited and maltreated" natives in the hands of rubber gatherers, and the purpose of it seems to be to praise Rondon and the Brazilian government for stepping up their efforts to protect the Indians (188). Everywhere else, the tappers are described as archetypal frontier heroes: "adventurous wanderers," (206) and "a reckless set of brown daredevils" who, "small wonder... sometimes have difficulties with the tribes" (327).

Roosevelt does not make social commentary on the sheer misery of the livelihoods he is describing in the backwoods. He does not seem bothered by societal decay and he does not recognize the need for any kind of socialist program in the Amazon basin. He also fails to list the many applications of the rubber sap in the industrialized North, automobile tires among them.⁶ The *seringueiros* were the first line of contact in the global assembly line, at the dawn of the American Century, but they float in a mythic haze over the pages of the book.

Marx was well-versed in the division of labor, but he too proved elusive when it came to dissecting primordial capitalism: neither “primitive” society nor “primitive accumulation” but the actual seed of capitalist value. In the Amazon rainforest, that role was taken up by rubber; and also gold, whose mystery Marx and Engels did tackle a handful of times. In 1842, Marx introduced the notion of commodity fetishism by retelling the myth of El Dorado: “The savages of Cuba regarded gold as a fetish of the Spaniards. They celebrated a feast in its honour, sang in a circle around it, and then threw it into the sea” (*Rheinische Zeitung*, Last paragraph). In the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859) he admitted that “[t]he question why gold and silver, and not other commodities, are used as the material of money lies outside the confines of the bourgeois system” (Part 4).

Comprehending that which “lies outside” required abandoning all pretense of scientific socialism. In a letter to Marx dated August 1852, in relation to the gold fever in California and Australia, Engels wrote that the *Communist Manifesto* had not considered the “creation of large new markets out of nothing” (Last paragraph). To overcome this obstacle — how to explain the creation of capitalist value “out of nothing” — Marx relied on a wealth of magical, mystical and otherwise impossible metaphors: “cabalistic signs” (66), “transubstantiation” (68), “metamorphosis” (69), “*salto mortale*” (70), and “transmutation” (75), to mention but a few from the third chapter of the first volume of *Capital*.

African Game Trails, Roosevelt’s safari journal from 1909, also excluded any mention of the atrocities committed at the rubber-rich fringes of European imperialism. In his silence (again, he must have been fully aware of this very public scandal, a cause embraced by the likes of Mark Twain) there is diplomacy but also denial, a refusal to ruin the romance by admitting friction into a non-negotiable, boyish worldview. Brazil only confirmed what Roosevelt already knew. In the River of Doubt, he got to experience

first-hand the stages of frontier advance as outlined in the Turner thesis – in historical sequence, not in reverse as it was often the case. First his party encounters signs of “wild [Nambikwara] peoples” (252), then they meet the rubber tappers, next the farming and fishing colonists, and finally the wary survivors enter the city.

Roosevelt does make a connection between the rubber trade and Manaus’ impressive architecture. After all, the money came entirely from the tapping of the *Heveabrasiliensis* tree. In May 1914, when the party finally reached “civilization,” the city’s bourgeois lustre – including high-class hotels, an opera house, and tramways, but no roads out of the rainforest – was only beginning to fade. Roosevelt does not lecture the reader on the perils of economic speculation, as he was used to do in America. He does not see a troubling mess left behind by a boom-and-bust cycle of greed. His prognosis is a straightforward highway to recovery: this, he says with the same diplomatic and patronizing flair displayed throughout the book, is a temporary slump in the inevitable rise of Brazil to full-fledged capitalist status (333-334).

But there are chinks in the armor of Roosevelt’s vision of the Amazon. Of Manaus, he writes, “it will undoubtedly *in some degree* recover” (334 my italics). Earlier in the narrative, upon reaching the first store, he says: “in this land of plenty the camaradas [“fellows” i.e. porters] overate, and sickness was as rife among them as ever” (325). One gets the feeling that Roosevelt, evangelist of progress, does not actually have the faith. Brazil might have been an eye opener. Or perhaps it simply offered confirmation, to his racist mindset, that biology and culture do not mix well as one approaches the Tropics. In the Brazilian interior, then, Roosevelt would have witnessed social Darwinism at its most evident, at any rate something other than the Wild West – the foundations of structural poverty in the Global South and not yesterday’s America.

Marx did not write an extensive analysis of uneven international development either – and the full Marxist critique of capitalist “modes of extraction” (see Bunker for the Amazonian case) would not be formulated until many decades later – but he did see it coming. Roosevelt puts his highest hopes in the “home-maker,” whom he tends to conflate with the rubber pioneer, or what he calls the “wilderness wanderer”. In doing so, he confuses conquest with colonization, thus erasing violence from the narrative. Marx viewed capitalism as an extremely sophisticated system. At the same same time, though, raw violence, as it happened in the frontier, answered some his most pressing questions: primitive accumulation, he wrote, “depend[s] in part on brute force, e.g., the colonial system” (*Capital* 525).

In *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*, the river peasant is introduced as a lone wolf in the forest “with no strong desire for social life” (324), and also as a family man: “When they wish to get married they have to spend several months getting down to and from Manaus” (323). As one would expect, Roosevelt’s notion of development is necessarily Christian: “no community can make much headway if it does not contain a church and a school” (57). The breaking of the soil in Amazonia is not a simple act of pillage, as any Marxist would contend, but one of heroism and self-sacrifice, akin to Jesus’ breaking of the bread in the course of the Last Supper. At all events, the rubber stations Roosevelt came across upriver (“three of the men were literally and entirely naked” [264]) must have resembled anything but the promise of a good Christian home.

Nature and human nature

Yet another contrast between Marx and Roosevelt is found in their respective opinions on nature, both external and internal. Roosevelt wrote extensively about the wilderness; Marx, almost nothing by comparison. Roosevelt may have been a socialist, but he was also a social Darwinist. Marx and Engels certainly enjoyed their share of prejudiced moments. At least it looks that way from our vantage point. But they made a conscientious effort to extricate themselves from Darwin’s concept of survival of the fittest. Engels wrote in 1875: “The whole Darwinian theory of the struggle for existence is simply the transference from society to animate nature of Hobbes’ theory of the war of every man against every man and the bourgeois economic theory of competition ... The childishness of this procedure is obvious” (Fifth paragraph).

For Roosevelt, life was all about “strife”. In *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*, he comes across as a vitalist, a believer in will, alongside Nietzsche and others. In Roosevelt, though, will is a candid disposition for living in democracy, synonym with stamina, virility, and patriotic zeal. He judged, and his writing shows, that the most genuine test of a man’s will is in the way he conducts himself in Nature. In Brazil, insects turned out to be particularly testing. With the only exception of his frightful descent down the River of Doubt, bites and stings demoralized Roosevelt more than anything else he experienced in South America, including the “revolutionary habit”. Swarms of insects led him to write the following:

The very pathetic myth of “beneficent nature” could not deceive even the least wise being if he once saw for himself the iron cruelty of life in the tropics. Of course “nature” – in common parlance a wholly inaccurate term, by the way, especially when used as if to

express a single entity – is entirely ruthless, no less so as regards types than as regards individuals, and entirely indifferent to good or evil, and works out her ends or no ends with utter disregard of pain and woe. (147)

Trained as he was in the methods of the Young Hegelians, Marx spent his life trying to educate his readers in the difference between myth and fact. “We will not join in the sentimental tears wept over this by romanticism,” he wrote regarding the collapse of the feudal system of land ownership (quoted in Saito 36). Scholars have noticed theoretical disparities between the writings of young Marx, when he was still based in Paris, struggling to digest Feuerbach, and those produced later in London, more in the matter-of-fact style of British empiricism. Young Marx, in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, concluded that capitalism is the cause of an existential sort of estrangement – that of humans from Nature. This line or argument is revisited toward the end of his life, when Marx makes a preliminary reading of the incipient science of anthropology.

In the *Manuscripts*, though, Marx does ridicule the Romantics for their idealization of the pre-modern past. And yet, as Kohei Saito (2017) has convincingly shown, Marx too approved of the medieval socioeconomic structures that linked humans to the soil through a personal (i.e. human) bond. While this seems true, it is also true that in *Capital*, Marx’s magnum opus, Nature is something of an afterthought. Marx’s environmental history starts and ends with the capitalist’s discovery of value in second-hand nature, leading up to the enclosure of common land in Britain. The same could be said of classical Marxism as a whole. By “classical Marxism” I mean Marxist orthodoxy (communism) as it was theorized until at least the rise of cultural anthropology in the 1920s, which convinced many a communist across continental Europe of the virtues of “primitive” livelihoods. Until this moment, Marxism was unquestionably techno-centric, in essence a social take on modern machinery. Classical Marxism, in sum, started where Nature ended: it was a vision of modernity and as such it negated the very existence of Nature. We could take this argument further. By placing mystical metaphors at the core of his theory, and thus by linking up capital directly with the supernatural, Marx went as far as bypassing Nature altogether.

On the other hand, Marx could not have possibly ignored the web of life as a meaningful object of study. He was never unaware of America’s “superabundance of humus” (*United States* 62), for instance. In the seventh chapter of *Capital Vol. 1* there are important, if tentative, reflections on soil, raw materials, and the extractive industries. If a

technology is a method to systematically defeat and free oneself from Nature, in Marx that goal has been mostly achieved and triumphant technology points upwards, in the direction of what he refers to as the social relations of production.

Reaching society involves dealing with the foibles of human nature. The “crippling” of the laborer by the factory system (304) is addressed throughout *Capital Vol. I*, particularly in Chapter 15. Capital, Marx declares, is “dead labor” (292). It follows that capitalism is an advanced mode of bodily (and mental) zombification, an upgrade on the older practice of slavery: “The place of the slave-driver’s lash is taken by the overlooker’s book of penalties” (293). Michel Foucault could not have said it better. Roosevelt too adopted a sensuous and humanitarian tone, as the above quote from his autobiography demonstrates. In the South American laborer, though, Roosevelt only sees traces of himself and his will to power, lesser versions of his cowboy persona.⁷ His refusal to see victims (precisely what Marxism sees, for better or worse) is at odds with the socially conscious message of his autobiography.

Marx shares with Roosevelt’s rules of manliness a complete and utter lack of sentimentalism. In this regard, too, both men were at times contradictory. For one, despite their commitment to realism, they were dreamers. Roosevelt dreamed backwards, Marx forwards. Roosevelt was a vitalist but, like Marx, behind the white capitalist curtain he only saw shapes and shadows. In 1897, writing as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Roosevelt reviewed a book called, *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (1895). The author, Brooks Adams, put forward the idea that decadence was inevitable in content societies, numbed by the spell of “the economic man” – the capitalist and the usurer – and lacking the “energy” and imagination of an earlier warrior age.

Roosevelt was impressed with Adams’ theory (he seemed to make the case for vigorous imperialist conquest) but disagreed with his conclusions: the modern age is full of promise, Roosevelt pointed out, and is all thanks to the *Homo economicus* not the soldier or the artist (587-588). Marx, one guesses, would have been appalled by Adams’ proto-fascist critique of capitalism. But then again Rodó wrote his *gringo*-bashing classic, *Ariel* (1900), in the same anti-economic and essentialist vein. How intensely would have Marx hated *Ariel*, and identity politics in full bloom, is a matter of provocative speculation.

One final but perhaps minor point of discussion is Roosevelt’s fondness for the hunt. To a degree, the frontier in Roosevelt is defined by its beasts. The former president returned to the US from Brazil with three thousand dead animals – not all of them shot by

him personally, or just for sport, and nowhere near the eleven thousand he brought from Africa, but still a considerable tally. In his own time, though he presented himself as a benefactor of natural science museums, Roosevelt's favorite hobby was subject to intense scrutiny. Did Marx care about animal welfare? The answer is we do not know, but probably not much. The fundamental idea of species-being (*Gattungswesen*, incidentally conceived whilst still in Paris) is balanced on the presupposition that animals are and should be inferior to humans, on account of their lack of "conscious life activity". In *Capital Vol. 1*, however, there are hints of a theory of anthropogenic nature, which in a hypothetical full-blown critique would necessitate the inclusion of industrial non-human animals:

Animals and plants, which we are accustomed to consider products of Nature, are in their present form, not only the product of, say last year's labour, but the result of a gradual transformation, continued through many generations, under man's superintendence, and by means of his labour. (123).

But that is too much of a what-if. To prepare his attack on private property, Marx drew from Thomas Münzer, the sixteenth-century peasant leader whose prophetic call for animal liberation ("the creatures, too, must become free") was quoted in *On the Jewish Question* (see Wilde). That is as far as he went. A different issue is Marx's sardonic sense of humor, his contrarian personality, and his penchant for identifying "philistinism" and hypocrisy in the ranks of the bourgeoisie. "You may be a model citizen," he wrote, "perhaps a member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and in the odor of sanctity to boot; but the thing that you represent face to face with me has no heart in its breast" (163).

Conclusion

This essay has compared two different yet overlapping ideologies of internationalization, understood in terms of transnational mobility: capital moving across borders, connecting the world in the process. As they imagined capital expansion across national boundaries, both Marx and Roosevelt theorized frontiers and frontier-making. Roosevelt found in Frederick Turner a kindred spirit. Turner's justification of US expansionism beyond the Mississippi River is, in Roosevelt's text, a justification of imperialism. By the mid-nineteenth century both Marx and Engels regarded the US as an

unstoppable force vis-a-vis Europe. Roosevelt was critical with, even depressed by, the political culture he encountered in South America. Marx did not share Roosevelt's social Darwinism, but he too was impatient with pre-industrial peoples and places. Only in his youth toward the end of his life, did Marx take an interest in precapitalist societies, whether feudal or "primitive", thus embracing Nature as a valuable category of analysis. Nature was, by contrast, central to Roosevelt's worldview.

Notes:

¹During the campaign for the presidency of 1912, the conservative newspaper, *Los Angeles Times*, accused Roosevelt of being "a student and follower of Proudhomme and Karl Marx [who had] drifted into the ranks of socialism" (quoted in Lincoln 237).

²A few years ago I translated Roosevelt's book into Spanish. See Theodore Roosevelt, *El Río de la Duda*, trans. Jaime Moreno Tejada, Ediciones del Viento, 2011.

³The fact that both Marx and Engels made use of hyperbole and dramatization to get their points across may also serve as an explanation. When praising the "energetic" Americans, for example, the English ("phlegmatic dawdlers") were put down with the same emphatic force used elsewhere to dismiss other nationalities (*United States* 42).

⁴"In Western Europe... the process of primitive accumulation is more or less accomplished" (*Capital Vol. I* 535).

⁵"The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together." (Marx, *Manifesto* Chapter 1).

⁶Much of the rubber used to produce tires for the Ford company came from India, but some did come from the Amazon. Fordlândia, Henry Ford's failed city and rubber plantation in the Amazon, was established decades later.

⁷As regards bodies, Roosevelt was aligned with his Christian contemporaries in that he demonstrated a pseudo-ethnographic fascination with tropical nudity - which in *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* he points out at every opportunity.

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