

## Chapter 2

# The European Legacy

This chapter will begin the discussion of the counter-discourses or dissident ideologies that were to come into being as a direct response to the experience of imperialism and colonialism. The discourses that will figure here are primarily those that challenge the political and military power of the imperialist rulers, as well as those that bring the whole economic and social basis of imperialism into question, although there will also be examples of aspects of more conciliatory types of thinking that attempted to find compromise solutions or even engage in outright collaboration.

Indeed, the term 'counter-discourse' has to be used with great circumspection, as it could be interpreted as a response to a dominant discourse and thus operative entirely within a presumed self-contained domain of discourse or ideology. This interpretation is not applicable to the kinds of ideas that were developed to articulate the historical challenge to dominant systems of economic and political power in the context of real political and ideological struggles. Thus, whilst it is necessary to analyse the way in which they challenge, subvert or destroy the premises of the dominant ideology and prepare a counter-statement to it, it also needs to be stressed that they have to be looked at in their wider context. After all, anti-imperialist and anticolonialist ideas did not come into being simply to counter the imperialist and racist ideologies that were brought into use to give credence to the various imperial enterprises. Although the discrediting and demolition of the dominant ideology might be accomplished as a secondary feature, the primary purpose was to legitimise and rationalise the challenge to the imperial structures of power, on the economic, social, political, military and cultural levels, as well as the ideological. This is ideology functioning as a mobilising tool for those social forces that could counter the dominant power at all these levels.

Resistance to imperialism and colonialism is at least as old as imperialism itself. From the first conquests, the military incursion into another people's territory tended to provoke military resistance on the part of the indigenous inhabitants, with a greater or lesser degree of success on their part. There had also been rejection of the other aspects of colonisation, including the ideological and the cultural, as well as the political and economic domination of France and the other imperialist powers,

throughout the colonised world. Anti-imperialism is therefore not a comparatively recent phenomenon, confined to a historical stage of ‘anticolonialism’, linked to the development of nationalist movements mostly dating from the early part of the twentieth century, but has been an integral part of the history of empire from the start. The anticolonial and national liberation struggles that were ultimately to lead to the end of formal political control, in the decolonisation process of the mid-twentieth century are clearly a crucial part of the fight back against imperialism. However, we shall also need to consider other important struggles and the ideological forms that the resistance assumed at earlier stages in the historical process. In this light, the successful revolt of the slaves of Saint-Domingue and the subsequent establishment of the state of Haiti will be seen as events of primary significance, which brought into relief, at an early stage and in stark fashion, some of the fundamental contradictions of Enlightenment discourse.

Although the catalyst for the revolt in Saint-Domingue was the radically new development constituted by the French Revolution, the ideological debates that it produced can also be situated as the culmination of the long-standing confrontation between those who accepted the basic humanity of those who were colonised or enslaved and those for whom the latter were not to be included within the human species. The Declaration of the Rights of Man in France in 1789, with its universalist pretensions to equality and proclaimed rejection of hierarchies within the human race, was to bring this issue to the point of crisis, at which it had to be faced head-on.

### **The Ambiguities of Enlightenment Discourse**

Some of the ambiguities of the discourses associated with the Enlightenment have already been suggested in Chapter 1 of this book. This chapter will explore further the issue of their subversive potential. In other words, what is at stake here is the extent to which these ideas have been used to challenge the dominant power relations of imperialism and the limits within which they may operate as counter-discourses.

The fact that the French bourgeoisie’s political challenge to feudalism and absolutism took such a radical form in the French Revolution, for specific historical reasons which we cannot dwell on here, was to have an impact that long outlived the particular historical events that took place at the cusp of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its significance was also to penetrate well beyond the boundaries of France itself and also beyond those parts of the globe that were already bound to France in privileged relations of power and domination at the time.

There has already been some discussion of the contradictions that were inherent from the outset within this ideological corpus, especially the contradiction between the universalism of the principles enunciated and the particular contingency of the circumstances of their birth and applicability, as well as the related contradiction between the ideal theory and the reality of its application in practice. This analysis will now be taken further and related to the use and, some would say, abuse of this ideology by those looking for instruments with which to challenge French imperial power.

The Saint-Domingue slave rebellion provides an obvious starting point for this discussion, given the wholehearted embrace of the universalist principles of the Rights of Man by its leaders, such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, whose objective was to claim, in the first instance, liberty, equality and full citizenship as part of the new political nation (James (1938)/1980; Césaire (1961)/1981; Geggus 1982; Bénot 1988). Yet, for many years, this successful revolt, which led eventually to the creation of the independent state of Haiti, was treated as marginal to the main accounts of the French Revolution, and it was largely due to the efforts of black Caribbeans that its importance began to be recognised. The groundbreaking study by C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins. Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), was crucial in giving it due recognition, as was the work of Aimé Césaire, with his *Toussaint Louverture. La Révolution française et le problème colonial* (1961) and his fictionalised and dramatic account, *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963).

The Saint-Domingue Revolution was, in fact, absolutely central to the whole Revolutionary process, on both the economic and the political levels, and crystallised the key issues and contradictions, some of which have still to be resolved. These will be dealt with in depth in a number of chapters in this book. For the moment, let it suffice to say that the issues raised by Saint-Domingue went beyond the questions of restriction and exclusion.

Of course, the slaves and the 'mulattos' were, to varying degrees, according to the lights of the different parties, excluded from the brotherhood of man, by virtue of their condition as blacks or part-blacks. In the case of the slaves, they were not considered as human beings at all, but as chattels to be bought and sold; the defence of slavery was intimately bound up with the defence of the inalienable right to private property. Indeed, plantation owners, slave masters and merchants, operating in the lucrative trade between France and its Caribbean colony, some of whom were grouped together in the influential Club Massiac, were amongst the most vociferous supporters of the early Revolutionary cause. Many of them had little interest in, or enthusiasm for, the abolition of slavery itself and, although there were some elements within the ranks of the French Revolutionary political ideologues and activists who accepted the slaves' case, there were others who did not. Even the Société des Amis des Noirs, founded in 1788, argued mainly for the abolition of the slave trade, rather than slavery itself, and then a staged emancipation for the slaves. Its founder, Brissot, argued for the Saint-Domingue revolt to be put down.

Nonetheless, on 24 March 1792, the Legislative Assembly had extended to free blacks the right to elect representatives to the Assembly in Paris, as it had earlier to whites and those of mixed race. Slavery was abolished in Saint-Domingue in August 1793 and then, on 4 February 1794, supported by the Abbé Grégoire and Danton, but with a large measure of indifference on the part of other members, the Convention decreed the abolition of slavery in all the French colonies (Spillmann 1981; Blackburn 1988). This was in spite of Robespierre's reservations (Césaire (1961)/1981: 186), which were shared by others and, according to Sala-Molins, were more because of rivalry with the British and the political wish to safeguard the colonies (Sala-Molins 1987). It is no surprise that many of those with reservations or

objections were to be found amongst the mercantile capitalist class, heavily involved with the colonial trade, who wanted freedom from feudal restrictions and an entry into power, but were also determined to defend and promote their own economic and financial interests, founded on the slave economy.

However, it would be inaccurate to restrict the material interest to the limited group of people who were directly involved in this trade. The colony of Saint-Domingue and the riches it generated were quite central to the burgeoning capitalist economy of France, which from the outset had extended beyond the borders of the Hexagon.<sup>1</sup> As C.L.R. James has pointed out (1938/1980: 47): ‘The slave-trade and slavery were the economic basis of the French Revolution. “Sad irony of human history,” comments Jaurès. “The fortunes created at Bordeaux, at Nantes, by the slave-trade, gave to the bourgeoisie the pride which needed liberty and contributed to human emancipation.”’

Yet, whilst the opposition to the demands of the Black Jacobins was founded primarily on economic, rather than political, grounds, the arguments through which it was articulated had to be credible in terms of the current Revolutionary political consensus of liberty, equality and fraternity. It was, then, a question of finding arguments that would support the denial of rights to the black slaves, while not calling into question the fundamentals of the Revolution.

The denial of the black slaves’ humanity, with the corollary of their exclusion from the human species, was the simple solution that had served in the past. However, more sophisticated arguments now needed to be sought. Some of these were ready to hand in the doctrine of private property rights, which had come into its own as one of the key strands of the discourse of the French Revolution. The slaves could not be freed, as this would impinge on the now sacred property rights of their owners. Moreover, although it is assumed that most of the philosophers of the Enlightenment had tended to view slavery as aberrant and abhorrent, there was no shortage of arguments, even amongst the *philosophes*, to justify slavery as a natural phenomenon, in terms that harked back to Aristotle’s notion of ‘natural slavery’. The novelty of these arguments related to their subtle adaptation in line with the burgeoning development of a worldwide imperialism, as their proponents took pains to hedge the validity of the notion with reservations about the types of people and the parts of the globe where it might be acceptable. As in many other cases, the ‘natural order of things’ gambit can be pressed into service to justify practically anything, even the excesses of Sadean libertarianism, though it is usually used to shore up the status quo, or those aspects of it that are most convenient.

The Enlightenment philosopher, Montesquieu, for instance, in *De l’esprit des lois*, blames the heat and torpor of certain climes for the existence of slavery, as a necessary means of coercing people to work. He is very clear that slavery is necessary in the Americas for economic reasons and to keep the price of sugar down. In such climates:

slavery is therefore less shocking to Reason ... However, as all men are born equal, it must be said that slavery is against nature, notwithstanding that in some countries, it is based on a natural Reason. (Montesquieu (1748)/1995 Book XV, Chapter VII: ‘Autre origine du droit de l’esclavage’)

It is thus necessary to restrict natural slavery to certain particular countries of the world. (Book XV, Chapter VIII: 'Inutilité de l'esclavage parmi nous')

Moreover, Montesquieu is quite explicit that it is because of the colour of their skin that it is inconceivable that the black slaves have a soul. 'It is impossible', he says, 'that we could suppose these people to be human; because, if we supposed them to be human, we would begin to believe that we ourselves are not Christians' (Book XV, Chapter V: 'De l'esclavage des nègres')

Even the assumptions about Rousseau's opposition to slavery should not be taken for granted. His tirades against tyranny and servitude were based on abuses directed against Europeans, and there is no reference to black slavery in the colonies in the *Contrat social* (Rousseau 1762; Sala-Molins 1987). Of the *philosophes*, it was the Abbé Raynal who came out with what was the clearest critique of 'black' slavery and the slave trade in his *Histoire philosophique et politique des deux Indes* (Raynal (1770)/1981).

Clearly, the debates about slavery were complex, if not convoluted, not least because those engaged in these debates were doubtless aware of the contradictions inherent in their reasoning. Furthermore, various aspects were highlighted and different arguments assumed the ascendancy, in line with the actual progress and regression made by the struggles themselves and the dominance of particular socio-economic interests at key moments in the process.

In Saint-Domingue, the struggle for full political rights was a bloody one, with many setbacks on the way. If it seemed, for a moment, that the demands for full equality by the Black Jacobins could be met, with the abolition of slavery a significant milestone on the way, the illusion was soon to be shattered. Under the regime of Napoleon, there was a clear step back. Napoleon could not envisage the former slaves in the colonies having the same rights as Frenchmen and made the colonies subject to special legal provisions. Not only were slavery and the slave trade re-established by the law of 20 May 1802, but he also attempted to prevent the entry into France of black people and to impose customs duties on products coming from the colonies (James (1938)/1980; Spillmann 1981; Blackburn 1988). Troops were sent to Saint-Domingue to ensure the implementation of these measures and put down the revolt. Toussaint L'Ouverture was captured and shipped to France, where he died in imprisonment at the Fortress of Joux in 1803. Although the question of slavery was settled, temporarily and only in part of the French-controlled Caribbean, as a result of its brutal reimposition by Napoleon, the fiction of the political nation was irredeemably fractured in the process of the struggle. The possibility of achieving liberation as part of the French nation was dealt a severe blow, though not, as we shall see, a death blow. What had begun as a struggle for inclusion in the French Republic was transformed into the triumphant national liberation struggle of a whole people against France, an emergent nation pitting itself against a colonial power and emerging, at least partially, victorious with the establishment of the independent state of Haiti in 1804, under the leadership of Dessalines, who promptly declared himself Emperor.

Not only were the universalist limitations of the Revolutionary ideology of the Rights of Man exposed in the process, but it also put on the agenda the Rights of Nations and laid bare the barrenness of the Revolution's capacity to respond to this fundamental issue. This was a founding event in the anti-imperialist struggle and marks the emergence of a historically new phenomenon, the national liberation struggle, which was to provide an inspirational beacon for freedom fighters, particularly in the Caribbean and the Americas. In Haiti itself, the doors were opened to the development of a new type of national culture, deriving from links with the African past of the former slaves, evolving into new forms peculiar to the island, not least in the form of its own brand of voodoo.

It was not, of course, the first struggle for freedom against a colonial power. The American colonies had already waged their war of independence from England and achieved victory. One might therefore be tempted to conclude that there is a clear parallel here and that the two struggles fall into the same category. However, the American anticolonial struggle was a phenomenon of a fundamentally different order, in which the colonial settlers themselves asserted their independence from the metropolitan homeland and their freedom to continue the colonial enterprise, free from the tutelary hand of the mother country. Imperialism as such was not challenged in its essence; it was more like a change of personnel in the boardroom, as a result of the subsidiary asserting its independence of the parent company. The basic operations thereafter remained the same. Imperialism continued to flourish; the territory continued to be appropriated and the indigenous population wiped out; the slaves who had been transported to the North American continent to work the plantations remained enslaved as before.

If the French settlers in Saint-Domingue shared similar concerns with their American counterparts, as a result of their frustrations with the French Government bureaucracy and the economic restrictions created by what was known as the Exclusive, giving the monopoly of trade to and from the colony to the French mercantile bourgeoisie, their economic and political power was to be measured on a different scale from that of the American settlers. In any event, French 'settlers' in the Caribbean often maintained a dual existence, or were absentee plantation-owners, based in France for much of the time (James (1938)/1980: 29), or with interests straddling the Atlantic. Moreover, the divisions in Saint-Domingue society, with the big white planters at odds with other whites occupying various positions in the social hierarchy, and both groups at odds with the 'mulattos' and freed black slaves, many of whom, like Toussaint L'Ouverture himself, had acquired considerable property themselves, and, of course, all the former against the slaves, meant that, when the French Revolution erupted, these differences were to come to the fore and assume even more importance than any movement on the part of the settlers to assert their independence (James (1938)/1980: 62–84). The revolt of the slaves was to take the colony down a different route, beginning with the demand for freedom and only ultimately leading to independence.

This is not, then, to downplay the impact of the ideas that developed in the course of the American Revolution, particularly as a source of inspiration for

subsequent anticolonial struggles in the South American continent and elsewhere. As Ali Mazrui puts it: 'Curiously enough, the Americans became the pioneers of modern anti-imperialism. The American Declaration of Independence remains one of the landmarks of the history of decolonization in the modern world' (Mazrui 1990: 45). Indeed, Marat was to use the example of the American Revolution to justify his support for the Saint-Domingue rebellion, asking: 'if the inhabitants of our colonies have declared themselves free, how could we have the gall to dare to condemn them for following the example of the English colonies?' (quoted by Césaire (1961)/1981: 189–190).

In many ways, an argument can be made that due importance has not been given to this impact on countries within the orbit of France and her empire. It is clear that the American Revolution had a profound impact on the thinking leading to the French Revolution itself and its success undoubtedly served as an inspirational model. In content, however, it was as a bourgeois democratic revolution, in which the colonists wished to sever themselves from a feudal-tributary relationship with the parent country, whilst maintaining the imperialist relations that operated within the colonies themselves.

From all of the above, it will be clear that the use of the term 'anticolonial' in relation to the American Revolution can lead to significant confusion. The mantle of anticolonialism has provided a convenient ideological cloak for America's own evolution into an imperialist power, with external as well as internal pretensions, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ironically, one of the countries to succumb to occupation by the USA was Haiti itself, which was taken over by the Americans from 1915 to 1934. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson had imposed a trade embargo on Haiti from the beginnings of its independence in 1806.

However, the force of this ideological perception of American anticolonialism can be demonstrated when even such a leader as Ho Chi Minh could, at least temporarily, be convinced of American anti-imperialist credentials. When he proclaimed Vietnam's independence from France in 1945, he borrowed the words of Thomas Jefferson and the American Declaration of Independence. Moreover, the French archives at Chandernagore show that when René Madec, the Breton soldier-adventurer, reported back to France in the 1770s on the possibilities of fomenting 'revolution' amongst the population of Bengal, so that they would rebel against the English (Barbé 1894; Meyer 1993), he was clearly inspired by the example of the American Revolution.

The attractions of the French Revolution to the colonised were also apparent at the time, as is clear in the case of Saint-Domingue. It was also the case that, when news of the French Revolution reached India in 1790 (*Annuaire des Etablissements français dans l'Inde* 1943: 22), it proved a powerful inspiration, not least to the Indian leader, Tipu Sultan, in his resistance to the British. Not only did he ally himself with the French from 1795, but he also took over many of the democratic features of the Revolution, calling himself 'Citizen Tipu', planting a tree of liberty, saluting the tricolour and attending the Jacobin Club that was set up in Seringapatam, before he was killed in battle in 1799. The impact of the French Revolution was, however, of a different order.

Although Revolutionary France did not promote anticolonialism as such, except as an incidental feature of its rivalry with Britain, the universal significance of the Revolution was assumed. If anything, this notion has not diminished over time, but has in fact become even more pronounced. Perhaps the most striking recent illustration of this was the choice of theme for the bicentennial celebrations of the Revolution in 1989, which focused on its role and universal significance for the world at large, whereas the centenary of 1889 had concentrated more on a celebration of the Republic, still fighting for survival in the face of challenges by counter-Revolutionary, anti-Republican forces in France at the time.

### **Republican Utopianism**

For many of the colonised elite, who had been educated in French schools to believe in the Republican ideals, the discourse of the universal Rights of Man could provide an attractive framework of reference. This is hardly surprising, for it remained a powerful expression of the desire for liberty, equality and fraternity, and an intellectual foundation of the case for universal justice.

The Senegalese poet and statesman, Léopold Sédar Senghor, for instance, was apt to take a particularly rosy view of the matter, as here in his reflections on the Revolution of 1848 and the abolition of slavery under the Second Republic:

It is in this way that men of colour, and Negroes in particular, have been able to attain not only the liberty of the citizen, but also and above all a personal life which is only made possible by culture; it is in this way that they have been able, in spite of the regression constituted by the Second Empire and the Third Republic, to bring their own contribution to modern-day French humanism, which is making itself truly universal, because it is fertilised by the sap of all races on the planet. (Senghor 1948: 1)

Even in more critical approaches, the challenge to the colonial power was often first articulated, not as a rejection of the official doctrine as such, but as a questioning of the gulf between the theory and its actual application in colonial practice. The confrontation between these ideas in the abstract and their utilitarian transformation into a particularist ideology justifying French colonial power, as well as the contradiction between the idealism of the discourse and the reality of the colonial experience as lived by the colonised, might be a source of alienation on the part of those who were educated in these values. For, when they took the universalist pretensions at face value, they were nonetheless excluded from full participation in a non-existent Republic of equal citizens. However, the position was often taken that things would be all right if the French authorities actually put into operation a political and administrative system that conformed to their proclaimed ideals. In a very direct way, then, the dominant discourse itself provided a frame of reference for a challenge to French power, in terms of the universal humanism that it proclaimed.

What is more, the key concept of the political, sovereign nation, so important in French Republican ideology, was also available for ready transformation into a weapon of the anti-imperialist struggle, providing the legitimacy for national liberation struggles. In both these cases, therefore, on the fronts of universal humanism and national sovereignty, the dominant discourse itself provided key concepts for its own subversion.

At the same time, it would be wrong to underestimate the input of ideas and concepts that owed their origins to non-European sources. Indeed, the concept of national liberation itself is not just a variant on the theme of nationalism, but an original development, which came into its own outside the European sphere.

In spite of this radically new development, the French Revolution remained a key source for the development of revolutionary thought throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was not solely a European phenomenon. Indeed, the French Revolution and its ideas were to provide some of the ideological armoury for the waging of the anticolonial struggles themselves, going right back to the Revolutionary period. Moreover, the brief interlude of the Second Republic was to add a further dimension to the inspirational capacity of Revolutionary Republican discourse, through its symbolic importance as a constitutional model for other societies (and indeed for French Republicans) and, with the institution of universal manhood suffrage and the abolition of slavery, as the incarnation of French egalitarian and libertarian principles.

Thus, in spite of the contradictions within the French Republican discourse, as well as those to which colonial practice gave rise, it remained remarkably resilient as a source of inspiration, particularly for the colonised. In the 1920s and 1930s, it proved a key source for the embryonic anticolonialist nationalisms developing in the French colonies. One of numerous examples of this can be found in the account of a Tunisian poet, M'hamed Férid Ghazi, writing about the anticolonial movement in Tunisia in 1938 and stressing the key reference of the French Revolution for that struggle: 'It was time to act: to live in freedom or die! A century and a half after the French Revolution, its immortal rallying cry also belonged to us' (Ghazi 1956: 1356). He was fully aware of the ambiguous relationship that existed with France:

The French Revolution took place a century and a half ago, but ours was still waiting to be carried out. We were determined to do it. For us, France was at one and the same time a tyranny that ruled us by force of bayonets, as well as the great ideals of liberty, human fraternity and social justice. Just like an open wound, we felt the pangs of the divorce between what we were taught and the reality to which we were subject and in which we had to live our lives – it was like a brazen challenge to the high ideals! Everything was so attractive in the books we read, but down on the street, nothing but horrors: the worst kind of atrocities, unprovoked harassment and abuse. Behind the gates of our school, the unforgettable Sadiki School, brotherhood and human kindness were the order of the day. Yet outside, there was nothing but the cold humiliation of systematic contempt. We were caught between the two. Torn

apart, but full of determination. One day, terrorism would bring about the liberation of us young people. Those who were ground down would rise up to face their torturers. They would respond to the humiliation with hatred. To oppression, with terror. And the infernal cycle would cast the shadow of the apocalypse to all four corners of the Maghreb. The tortured and tormented would see armed fellaghas coming to them in their dreams and spring back to life to the sound of their gunfire. They will haunt the plains and the villages. Dealing justice, they will cause the thieves and murderers with hands dripping with the blood of our martyrs to tremble. Nothing will be able to smash them. Should ten die, then soon one hundred will arise to replace them! Legions of fighters will spring up from the bruised earth to the cry of 'Freedom!' (Ghazi 1956: 1365)

However, history had not come to an end with the French Revolution. Not only did the fortunes of Republicanism wax and wane throughout the nineteenth century, but also the development of capitalism in Europe and the ensuing contradictions between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat had led to economic and political struggles that found their expression in the growth of socialist and communist ideas and movements, through which these struggles were articulated. These new ideas did not, of course, develop in a vacuum, but were built on the political aspects of Enlightenment ideology, adding an analysis and critique of the capitalist economy and class society. While this dissident ideology thus introduced fundamentally new notions, such as class difference and contradiction, as a necessary counterweight to the notions of abstract political equality, it nonetheless did not break utterly with the Enlightenment tradition.

This is particularly true in the retention and indeed further development of the idea of historical progress, in which humanity was moving to an ever higher stage of development. This was to lead to a complex position with regard to the nature of capitalism itself within this historical process, and, as a corollary, to that of capitalist imperialism.

These ambiguities are there implicitly in the whole range of anticapitalist ideology, which comes under the different headings of various types of socialism and communism. It is perhaps best discussed first in the very explicit form that it took in the work of Marx and Engels.

### **Marxism as Critique and Continuation of Enlightenment Discourse**

While Marx and Engels developed a global critique of capitalism, prioritising its economic mode of operation, founded on exploitation and oppression, it is, at the same time, a fundamental tenet of their thought that capitalism, with all its faults and negative features, represents a progressive force and stage in human history. As they state in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to

all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'

... It has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades.

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society ... Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Marx and Engels (1848)/1970: 37–38)

Bourgeois capitalism nonetheless carried the seeds of its own destruction, through the working out of the contradictions that were inherent within it, as Marx tells us in the Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy*:

In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society. The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. This social formation brings, therefore, the prehistory of human society to a close. (Marx (1859)/1970: 182)

Or again in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*:

The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.

But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians ...

The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of

Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. (Marx and Engels (1848)/1970: 41, 46)

The perception of capitalism as a progressive force, albeit beset with contradictions, also extended to capitalist imperialism, which was seen as both a negative and a positive force, bringing into the historical process, defined as a progress towards ever higher stages of civilisation, those societies that had hitherto been outside history. This involved bringing them into the orbit of the global capitalist economy. Referring to India, in an article for the *New York Daily Tribune* of 8 August 1853 ('The Future Results of the British Rule in India'), Marx writes the following:

The bourgeois period of modern history has to create the material basis of the new world – on the one hand the universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind, and the means of that intercourse; on the other hand the development of the productive powers of man and the transformation of material production into a scientific domination of natural agencies. Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth. When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain. (Marx and Engels (1959)/1975: 34–35)

As we see, Marx and Engels describe this process in ambivalent terms, stressing the negative aspects involved in the forcible disruption of the economies and societies of other countries at the same time as they interpret this process as one that will bring 'barbarians' into the realm of civilisation. This is explicitly stated in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

... Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised

ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West.  
(Marx and Engels (1848)/1970: 39)

Whilst the notion of civilisation is itself subject to their critique, there is no getting away from the fact that it is viewed as a higher stage in the historical process, in line with much of contemporary thinking on historical progress, such as that of Lewis H. Morgan, who built on evolutionary theory in his *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilisation* (1877), which was such an influence on Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Engels (1884)/1970).

It is clear that one of the main criteria that Marx uses to define the level a civilisation has reached is the distance a society has travelled away from purely natural processes and relations. The development of control over nature in the techniques of economic production and the degree of development of communications both figure as essential factors in determining the relative advance of some societies over others. He also considers that these more advanced peoples have a crucial, if unconscious, role in effecting progress as part of a universal, historical project for the entire human species, at the same time as he registers the inevitable downside of this project, in bringing destruction, violence and impoverishment in its wake.

Marx made this abundantly clear in his writings on India, as when he discusses the British role in bringing about a social revolution in India:

Now, sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness those myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organizations disorganized and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization and their hereditary means of subsistence, we must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of suspicion, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. We must not forget the barbarian egotism which, concentrating on some miserable patch of land, had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties, the massacre of the population of large towns, with no other consideration bestowed upon them than on natural events, itself the helpless prey of any aggressor who deigned to notice it at all. We must not forget that this undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction, and rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindustan. We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man to

be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Hanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow.

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about the revolution. (Marx and Engels, 1959/1975: 18–19)

The introduction of modern industry into India, via the railway system, will have the effect of ‘dissolving the hereditary divisions of labour’ and thus the caste system, which act as ‘decisive impediments to Indian progress and power’. In doing so, the English bourgeoisie is laying down the ‘material premises’ for economic and social progress in India, whilst causing immeasurable misery to millions. ‘Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and peoples through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?’ (Marx and Engels (1959)/1975: 33).

This is inherent in what Marx calls England’s ‘double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia,’ (Marx and Engels (1959)/1975: 30) through the political unification of the country, aided by telegraphy and other means of communication and travel, the building of the Indian army, the free press, the institution of private property in land, the development of education and science. The negative aspects to be eliminated included a social system that, reified as a natural destiny, served as a bulwark of despotism, caste and slavery; the passivity of a vegetative state, in which human beings were subjugated to external forces and not in charge of their destinies; superstition and traditional obscurantism, which put people in thrall to nature and restricted the development of the human mind.

The net effect of the British intervention in India, therefore, is seen as the positive one of bringing India into the orbit of universal human history, from its previous position as a society outside history: ‘Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society’ (Marx and Engels (1959)/1975: 29).

Writing about the opium trade, Marx puts China into the same category of societies without history, though again this does not put its British adversary into a morally superior position, but rather the contrary.

While the semi-barbarian stood on the principle of morality, the civilized opposed the principle of self. That a giant empire, containing almost one-

third of the human race, vegetating in the teeth of time, insulated by the forced exclusion of general intercourse, and thus contriving to dupe itself with illusions of Celestial perfection – that such an empire should at last be overtaken by fate on occasion of a deadly duel, in which the representative of the antiquated world appears prompted by ethical motives, while the representative of overwhelming modern society fights for the privilege of buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest markets – this, indeed, is a sort of tragical couplet, stranger than any poet would ever have dared to fancy. (Marx and Engels 1968: 211–12)

The notion of societies outside history comes to Marx and Engels, of course, from Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. Hegel is categorical about the status of Africa, in particular, as unhistorical:

We shall therefore leave Africa at this point, and it need not be mentioned again. For it is an unhistorical continent, with no movement or development of its own. And such events as have occurred in it – i.e. in its northern part – belong to the Asiatic and European Worlds. Carthage, while it lasted, represented an important phase; but as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered as a stage in the movement of the human spirit from east to west, but it has no part in the spirit of Africa. What we understand as Africa proper is that unhistorical and underdeveloped land which is still emmeshed in the natural spirit, and which had to be mentioned here before we cross the threshold of world history. (Hegel (1822–30)/1975: 190)

Marx and Engels allow greater scope than Hegel for the so-called non-historical societies to enter the world historical process, while, at the same time, not sharing the more positive view of Asia as part of the motor, indeed the origin, of universal development that appears in Hegel. The leading role of Europe is not in dispute. Moreover, if examples in Marx and Engels's writings relating to the progressive role of the French imperial endeavour are necessarily limited by its relatively undeveloped character at this stage, the capture of the Emir Abdelkader was nonetheless greeted with approval by Engels, who used the familiar justification of the necessity of imperialism for the global progress of civilisation, in an article in the English Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, in 1848.

Upon the whole it is, in our opinion, very fortunate that the Arabian chief has been taken. The struggle of the Bedouins was a hopeless one, and though the manner in which brutal soldiers, like Bugeaud, have carried on the war is highly blameable, the conquest of Algeria is an important and fortunate fact for the progress of civilisation. The piracies of the Barbaresque states ... could not be put down but by the conquest of one of these states. And the conquest of Algeria has already forced the Beys of Tunis and

Tripoli, and even the Emperor of Morocco, to enter upon the road of civilisation. They were obliged to find other employment for their people than piracy, and other means of filling their exchequer than tributes paid to them by the smaller states of Europe. And if we may regret that the liberty of the Bedouins of the desert has been destroyed, we must not forget that these same Bedouins were a nation of robbers, – whose principal means of living consisted of making excursions either upon each other, or upon the settled villagers, taking what they found, slaughtering all those who resisted, and selling the remaining prisoners as slaves. All these nations of free barbarians look very proud, noble and glorious at a distance, but only come near them and you will find that they, as well as the more civilised nations, are ruled by the lust of gain, and only employ ruder and more cruel means. And after all, the modern bourgeois, with civilisation, industry, order, and at least relative enlightenment following him, is preferable to the feudal lord or to the marauding robber, with the barbarian state of society to which they belong. (Engels (1848)/1976: 471)

Yet, ten years later, in his entry on 'Algeria' for the *New American Cyclopaedia*, Engels was to give greater prominence to the brutality and bloodshed of the French military conquest and occupation of Algeria, with none of the admiration that he had been wont to express for European organisation in his writing on the British army, particularly at the time of the Indian uprising of 1857 (Marx and Engels 1968: 156–61).

The considerable writings of both Marx and Engels on issues relating to imperialism and colonialism are varied in scope and present a more extensive range of positions, sometimes ostensibly contradictory ones, than it has been possible to go into here. Summing up, however, it can probably be said that the positive effects of capitalist imperialism have to be seen in the context of the global, universal progress of humankind, rather more than on particular colonised societies. Indeed, the advantages of capitalist imperialism to the subject peoples themselves are presented as double-edged and are quite likely to entail considerable suffering. Nonetheless, the movement towards a higher stage of history is not seen as a mere option, but a necessary step for all societies to take if humanity as a whole is to move forward.

The use of Marxist tools of analysis and critique to further the cause of anti-imperialist struggles has thus been beset by the tensions which this dual position has tended to provoke. These tensions have been exacerbated by the actual process of history, involving societies at very different levels of development and the real processes brought about by imperialism, which did not always or necessarily lead to the economic and social progress that Marx and Engels had envisaged on the general plane of human history. Indeed, in many cases, and this too is recognised by them, they led to real regression in concrete terms, with the destruction of economic resources, including particular industries, such as textiles in India, irrigation facilities and other public works, and a reversal of social progress, with, in some cases, the destruction of embryonic, home-grown capitalist developments that had already been taking place before the imperial conquests.

On the one hand, anti-imperialist movements have seized on the Marxist theorisation of the processes of social transformation and applied it as an aid in their revolutionary struggles. At the same time, elements of Marxist thought have also been used to shore up the position of European and other advanced capitalist societies at the supposed vanguard of historical development. When used in this way, it is not surprising that Marxism has often been the object of critique by those who see it contaminated by a fundamental Eurocentrism, in which the division between advanced, mainly European, societies and backward, mainly non-European, societies has been perpetuated.

It is certainly true that, when Marx talks about the social revolution in Asia, what he has in mind is the move to the bourgeois, capitalist stage of history. Nonetheless, there are also references to the possibility of socialism in Asia. Commenting in 1850 on the claims of a German missionary by the name of Gützlaff that the Chinese were on the verge of revolution and preaching ideas akin to socialism, Marx and Engels have this to say:

Chinese socialism may stand in the same relation to the European variety as Chinese philosophy stands to the Hegelian. Yet it is a gratifying fact that the bales of calico of the English bourgeoisie have in eight years brought the oldest and most imperturbable empire on earth to the threshold of a social upheaval, one which will in any case hold most significant consequences for civilization. When in their imminent flight across Asia our European reactionaries will ultimately arrive at the Wall of China, at the gates that lead to the stronghold of arch-reaction and arch-conservatism, who knows if they will not find there the inscription: République Chinoise, Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. (Marx and Engels, 'First International Review', *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 31 January 1850, in Marx and Engels 1968: 17–18)

This passage clearly envisages something more akin to a radical bourgeois revolution than a socialist one. What is more, there is a clear expectation that any such bourgeois nationalist revolution in China, as in India, would bring about the 'explosion of the long-prepared general crisis' in Britain and Europe (Marx, 'Revolution in China and in Europe', in Marx and Engels 1968: 21–23).

Some years later, in 1882, Engels makes this thinking explicit in a letter to Kautsky, where he spells out his view on colonial policy. Here he states that, while in his view the settler colonies will undoubtedly become independent, those colonies that are 'inhabited by a native population' and are 'simply subjugated' (into which category he includes Algeria) 'must be taken over for the time being by the [metropolitan] proletariat and led as rapidly as possible towards independence'. However, it is likely that at least some of the latter will have a revolution, by which he clearly means a bourgeois national revolution, which will be 'the best thing *for us*'. Although it is likely that they will proceed to follow the example of the by then successful European and North American proletariats, he declines to speculate on the processes by which they will proceed to a socialist transformation:

Once Europe is reorganised, and North America, that will furnish such colossal power and such an example that the semi-civilised countries will of themselves follow in their wake; economic needs, if anything, will see to that. But as to what social and political phases these countries will then have to pass through before they likewise arrive at socialist organisation, I think we today can advance only rather idle hypotheses. (Engels (1882)/1970: 678)

## Lenin's Theory of Imperialism

Lenin's contribution to the theory of imperialism was crucial in the working out of some of the tensions implicit in the thinking of Marx and Engels on imperialism. This may be due in no small measure to the fact that he was working out his theory in the context of Russia, which at the beginning of the twentieth century was positioned at the cusp of the divide between the advanced capitalist imperialist societies of Europe, especially Western Europe, and the non-metropolitan, non-European countries at the receiving end of imperialism.

Lenin played an important role in developing the theory of capitalism as a global process, in which imperialism, as he defined it, is but the latest stage in its development. This definition of imperialism was characterised by its link to fundamental changes in the economic nature of capitalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and into the early part of the twentieth, which led to political changes too. The changes that differentiated this stage of capitalism were summed up in the five key features that he enumerates as follows:

1) the concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life; 2) the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this 'finance capital', of a financial oligarchy; 3) the export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance; 4) the formation of international monopolist capitalist associations which share the world among themselves, and 5) the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed. (Lenin (1917b)/1970: 737)

This analytical part of his theory fits readily with earlier Marxist theories of capitalism as a global historical process, although it also marks a real departure, in restricting the definition of imperialism to a particular phase in global capitalism, linked exclusively to the export of capital.

However, there is a further aspect to Lenin's theory that we need to highlight here: the theory of unequal development (Lenin (1917b)/1970).<sup>2</sup> This theory was to play an important part in explaining the complexity of the development processes of capitalist imperialism and introducing important factors of differentiation into what had tended to be viewed as a unilinear progress through stages. In stressing that capitalism developed at different rates and in different forms, depending on the

specific concrete conditions that applied to different societies, Lenin set out the framework for a theory that could be more readily applicable to other societies that fell outside the parameters of Western European capitalism, as well as highlighting the divisions between the imperialist countries themselves. Not least, it was to provide a foundation for the analysis of the differentiation of the working class itself and the unequal incidence of exploitation and oppression to which different sectors were exposed, leading to the recognition of the existence of subproletarian groups, both within metropolitan societies and on the world plane. All of these considerations were to have profound implications for the future of both the theory and the practice of anti-imperialist struggles.

Moreover, the crucial new elements that he laid bare invalidated any previous historicist optimism that some Marxists might have had: that the development of capitalism would of itself tend to lead to a higher, more progressive type of society, socialist and then communist, through a progressive evolution, albeit worked out through contradiction and conflict. For, in Lenin's theory, imperialism represented capitalism in its regressive phase, in which the non-productive, parasitical elements had become dominant in the metropolitan heartlands themselves. The super-profits derived from imperialism had given the metropolitan economies at least a temporary respite from the innate tendencies to crisis. Moreover, the parasitical nature of the metropolitan imperialist economies was not simply a feature of the economy; it had also had a profound effect on the metropolitan working-class movements, corrupting them through economic benefits and ideological co-optation into the system and thus leading to a stagnation in their aptitude to bring about social change (Lenin (1917b)/1970: 745–52).

One of the corollaries of Lenin's theory was that the vanguard of social transformation was displaced from the most advanced sectors of the most advanced capitalist societies. Thereafter, he would argue that the socialist revolution would occur not at the point of highest development, but at the weakest link in the chain of the global capitalist system (Lenin (1923)/1970: 767–70).<sup>3</sup> This was not only to provide a theoretical foundation for the Bolshevik Revolution, but also to have a profound impact on the theory and practice of anti-imperialist struggles, through the legitimising of the struggles of the weakest, rather than the strongest.

It would, however, be wrong to conclude that this lesson was accepted by the whole of the socialist/communist movement. The belief in the inherent right to the leadership of the struggle by the most economically advanced continued to form part of the ideological baggage of socialists and communists both in Europe and beyond. Louis Althusser, for instance, stressed the leading role of the most advanced sector of 'productive' workers in his *Réponse à John Lewis* (Althusser 1973b: 25–26) and dismissed any role for the subproletariat as a force for change in his correspondence with Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi (Althusser 1973a: 27–28, 52, 297). This issue was to provoke tensions right into the modern period.

These tensions were aggravated by a further set of contradictions, which derived from the clash between, on the one hand, the development of new forms of nationalism, as with Lenin's own articulation of the right of nations to self-

determination (Lenin (1914)/1970: 595–647), and, on the other hand, the internationalism promoted by the socialist and communist movement. The impact of these movements created the basis for an internationalist approach to the struggle, which was viewed as a global struggle, in which identity of class interest and international class solidarity counted for more than national difference. Whilst there is no doubt that internationalism could provide welcome support for those fighting against imperialism, nonetheless, it could also prove to be at odds with their aims and objectives, especially when applied in a unilateralist way by the European Left. In this approach, the struggle against imperialism was, to a greater or lesser extent, subsumed into the international class struggle. Liberation would occur with the global transformation of capitalism into socialism, in which the colonised would play their role as part of the international proletariat. The implications were often that this would only happen in due course; the needs of the colonised were not prioritised.

### **The Ambiguities of the French Inheritance – Aimé Césaire**

This chapter will end with an initial discussion of some of the tensions provoked by this scenario in the career and thought of a politician and writer who was not only inspired by the attractions of the French Republican discourse and the international communist movement but also compelled to react against both. Aimé Césaire's critique of the false universalism of the Republican and communist discourse and, at best, the hypocrisy and, at worst, the cynicism of its application to the colonial sphere led to his espousal of the notion of *négritude* from the 1930s and ultimately to his departure from the Communist Party in 1956.

We have to look no further than the title page of Césaire's version of Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, published as *Une Tempête* in 1969, to encounter a glaring example of some of the contradictions at work.

In a sentence giving a short résumé of Césaire's biography, we read that he is a key figure in Caribbean political debates because of his position as Mayor and Parliamentary Deputy for Fort-de-France in Martinique – a position he had occupied 'since the Liberation'. The Liberation in question is, of course, the 1944 liberation of metropolitan France; Martinique remains an Overseas Department of France (DOM). Yet, this sentence is written, to all appearances, quite without irony. No one expects the reader to raise the question: whose liberation is referred to here? It is assumed that the particular liberation of France at the end of the Second World War is a universal reference point.

This is all the more remarkable, since not only does Martinique remain a colony of France, but the play in question has liberty as its major theme. It is all about the freedom that is still to be achieved, how that freedom is to be gained and how the very notion of freedom is inseparable from the founding event of modern French history, the French Revolution, and the modernist discourse associated with it.

We do not need to dwell at any greater length on the reference to the Liberation in this brief note on Césaire's life. However, it would be difficult to ignore the founding importance of the Revolution, as it underpins the discourse of liberty and

liberation, on the one hand, and the rationalisation of the colonial enterprise, on the other. As we have already seen, a key distinguishing feature of the *mission civilisatrice*, French-style, was the duty to spread the universal values of the Enlightenment to the benighted regions of the globe, including the Rights of Man and, in particular, the rights to knowledge and science. The true colonial hero was thus seen as the man of reason, shedding the light of civilisation on to the darkness and obscurantism of primitive barbarism, not so much converting the heathen to the one and only true faith, but assisting their passage into the modern world of rational thought and scientific progress.

There is no doubt that this type of rationalisation carried a considerable amount of conviction and ideological weight. Yet it was flawed by an inherent contradiction – between the universalism it sought to convey and the need to maintain the fundamental difference of the colonial Other. The justification of the civilising mission could only last as long as the basic opposition remained between the civilised parties, on the one hand, and the primitive barbarians, on the other. If the process of bringing civilisation to the natives was too successful, then the whole *raison d'être* of the empire would be gone.

This Machiavellian reasoning could provide the basis of a cynical explanation of the limitations of colonial educational policy, which, in practice, only permitted a small elite group to attain the highest level of educational qualifications and thus become assimilated to the ranks of the civilised. Césaire, however, does not leave it at that rather simplistic level of argument. The civilising mission is doomed to failure, but not through any lack of will on the colonisers' part to put it into effect or any reluctance to practise what they preach. The trouble with the processes involved in colonisation and imperial domination is that, far from bringing about the civilisation of the barbarian, their effect is rather to bring about the de-civilisation of the colonisers themselves, turning them into primitive brutes. For Césaire, there is a direct line between the brutality of imperialism in the colonies and the fruit that it bears on the European continent itself, with the emergence of fascism and Nazism and the transformation of some of the most 'civilised' nations in Europe into lands where the ideology of blood, brute force and racial power could hold sway. Hitler is differentiated from his imperialist precursors, not by the scale of his crimes, but by the fact that his victims are themselves Europeans (Césaire (1955)/1970: 10–11). From this perspective, the Liberation is likely to appear in a very different light.

Yet, as we have seen, the contradictions were already present at the time of the French Revolution and, as Césaire claimed in his *Discourse upon Colonialism* two centuries later, European (or Western) civilisation, as shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, has still not been able to solve the two main problems that were caused by its birth: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem (Césaire (1955)/1970: 5). Or, in other words:

Anyone who expected the abolition of slavery to occur as a spontaneous gesture on the part of the French bourgeoisie, on the grounds that this abolition was a logical consequence of the Revolution and more specifically

of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, was labouring under an illusion, since the bourgeoisie had only carried out their own historical purpose, i.e. the bourgeois revolution itself, when goaded and prodded into action by the armed revolt of the people. (Césaire (1961)/1981: 171)

Class conflict in France was not eliminated by the Revolution; it merely changed its form. Thus, the Revolution soon spawned its ideological progeny – socialism, then Marxism – to come to terms with the contradictions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Similarly, the Revolution failed to bring about even a formal end to the domination of men over women; the Declaration of the Rights of Man remained the Declaration of the Rights of Men.

This is not to say that these questions were not raised during the Revolutionary period. As we have seen, there were those prepared to fight, albeit unsuccessfully, on behalf of the proletariat, as there were fighters for women's equality with men. In the same way, the problem of the rights of the colonised, enslaved peoples was raised at the very outset of the Revolutionary process. As Césaire saw it, this issue went beyond the formal recognition, or denial, of the right of individuals to equality. It concerned the recognition of the rights of nations and the freedom of nations to decide their own destiny. In the universalising euphoria of the Revolution, the national question seems to have been almost totally neglected and the foundations were laid for the ongoing contradiction between the universal Rights of Man and the rights of particular nations.

This seemed to be the case even for the Americans, who had nonetheless just waged a war for their own national liberation. Césaire quotes from the speech of the leader of a delegation of 'free Americans', waxing lyrical in the Convention, in praise of the universal mission of the French nation to bring all the peoples of the world as one people under its single banner of liberty.<sup>4</sup>

Amongst the French Revolutionary leaders, only Marat is credited by Césaire with the insight to recognise the national implications of the colonial question, as it was raised at the time, and to declare the right of the colonies to secede.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, he quotes Marat writing in *L'Ami du Peuple* in 1791 that it would be 'absurd and senseless for a people to govern itself through laws emanating from a legislative body based 2,000 leagues away' and claiming that the only 'foolishness committed by the inhabitants of our colonies' was 'agreeing to send députés to the French National Assembly', although he claims that only the white colonists were guilty of such foolishness (Césaire (1961)/1981: 189–90).<sup>6</sup> Yet Césaire also acknowledged that one of the achievements of the Revolution was to be the formal declaration in 1795 of the inalienable sovereign rights of all nations to freedom and independence, whatever the size of their population or territory.<sup>7</sup> The problem was in its application, as well as in the interpretation of the declaration. Césaire remained profoundly unconvinced of its genuine universalism. In his view, it was inconceivable that the authors of the declaration were thinking of the rights of the colonised peoples and in particular the blacks; their universalism was, in fact, limited to the European peoples alone and, as such, was a 'false universalism'.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the intentions of the legislators at that time, it is with the later expansion of empire under the Third Republic at the end of the nineteenth century and the subjection of the colonial peoples in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity that the contradictions implicit in universalist ideology were to come to the fore in a manner that left no room for doubt. Moreover, neither the anticolonial struggles nor the subsequent wholesale decolonisation of the 1960s has managed to lay this problem to rest. The development of the universal ideology of the international socialist and communist movement likewise simply meant a change in the form of the contradiction. When the metropolitan socialists and communists were not simply reproducing the colonial logic of empire, their ideology and organisational structures either ignored the anticolonial struggles or made them subservient to the universal goals of the international working class: the replacement of world capitalism by a worldwide socialism or communism.

With the establishment of the Comintern in 1919 and particularly after the adoption of the twenty-one conditions of affiliation to the Third International in 1920 (Kriegel 1964; Fauvet 1965), the subordination of the interests of each national party to the wider international strategy was completed. This applied not only to the different parties in Europe and America, but also to the parties which were to establish themselves in the colonies. The latter came not only under the ultimate jurisdiction of the international communist movement, represented in the Comintern, but also under the direct control of the communist party of the relevant metropolis. Indeed, the European communist parties perpetuated colonial relations throughout the Stalinist period, through the insistence that all communist organisations set up in the colonies were regarded as offshoots of the metropolitan parties and thus under the control of the party in the relevant 'mother country'.

Thus, in the French colonies, the locally based communists were under the wing and authority of the French Communist Party (PCF), even if the latter was itself subservient to the Comintern and Moscow. This was to have particular consequences for the PCA (the Algerian Communist Party), for instance, and its relationship to the national struggle. Under these circumstances, the PCF was itself deeply marked by colonialist attitudes and ideology, even when it was engaging in anticolonialist activity, as Césaire was not slow to point out, in his open letter to Maurice Thorez, when he broke from the Party (Césaire 1957: 13).<sup>9</sup>

His own response was to develop the concept of *négritude* to highlight the specificity of the situation and struggle of black people within the context of a universal liberation movement. He would have no truck with what he describes as 'false universalism', in other words, an empty abstraction with no real content. What he would accept was a universalism made up of the sum of all existing particularisms, a universalism in which each particular culture is explored in all its depth and richness, abandoning nothing of its own character, but contributing to the overall richness and variety of the whole (Césaire 1957: 15). What he had in mind was not an abstract universalism but the universal concrete.

We may relate this to Marx and Engels's critique in *The Holy Family*, or Critique of *Critical Criticism*, of the neo-Hegelians' abstraction of the universal ideal fruit,

progenitor of all particular fruit. What interested Césaire was not any ideal common essence, or common denominator of ‘fruit-ness’, the ideal fruit, in abstraction from all apples, pears, oranges or whatever, existing in the real world, but the rich diversity of all these particular fruit, which together makes up the synthetic concept of ‘fruit’. Or, as Marx and Engels put it:

Thus ‘*the Fruit*’ is no longer an empty undifferentiated unity: it is oneness as allness, as ‘*totality*’ of fruits, which constitute an ‘*organically linked series of members*’. In every member of that series ‘the Fruit’ gives itself a more developed, more explicit existence, until finally, as the ‘*summary*’ of all fruits, it is at the same time the living *unity* which contains all those fruits dissolved in itself just as it produces them from within itself, just as, for instance, all the limbs of the body are constantly dissolved in and constantly produced out of the blood. (Marx and Engels (1844)/1975: 69–70)

The same with human beings: what made up the universality of the human race was not some ideal, abstract, monolithic essence which all have in common, but the real, concrete particularities of human beings in all their pluralistic diversity and specificity.

This was not an uncontroversial position, implying, as it did, the demystification of the classic rationalist universalism of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, revealing it for the real, historically situated particularism, which it actually was when imposed on others as the triumphant and triumphalist ideology of the French Republican state. Paradoxically, this fact was often recognised implicitly or explicitly by those who proclaimed the universal mission of France. Indeed, one of Césaire’s targets in the *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Yves Florenne of *Le Monde*, is quoted by him, writing: ‘It is not by losing herself, merging her blood and spirit in the universe of humanity that France will achieve universality; it is by remaining herself’ (Césaire (1955)/1970: 45).

The European intellectual legacy remains thus, in terms of its content, a source of paradox and mystification, as well as a source of inspiration for those attempting to struggle against imperial domination. We should not leave this theme behind before stressing that, where it was influential, it was not only because of or even, at times, in spite of its content, but also because of the theory and practice of a particular form of struggle, the notion of Revolution itself. Theorisations of the American and French Revolutions, not to mention the English Revolution that preceded them and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, provided the legitimacy for the total political and social upheavals that they produced, but also for the subsequent political systems that emerged. They also played an exemplary role, in both theoretical and practical terms, for those seeking to engage in appropriate forms of struggle against imperialism. Thus, irrespective of the precise economic, political and social content of the revolutionary manifestos, the overriding impact was to show to the oppressed that change – fundamental, totalising change – was possible.

## Notes

1. The French commonly refer to mainland, metropolitan France as the Hexagon.
2. See also Lenin (1915a)/1970: 664; (1919)/1977: 308.
3. On these issues, see Westoby 1989: 163–72.
4. '[II] rappelle aux représentants qu'ils ont été appelés pour faire le bonheur d'une grande nation, pour jeter les fondements de la liberté du monde et pour faire que de tous les peuples il n'y en ait plus qu'un', official record of the Convention session of 4 June 1793 (quoted by Césaire in (1961)/1981: 187).
5. je ne vois qu'un homme de l'époque à avoir assumé l'anticolonialisme dans toutes ses exigences, tenant sous un seul regard le double aspect du problème colonial, son aspect social comme son aspect national. Et c'est Marat. Un seul homme à avoir proclamé le droit des colonies à la sécession. Et c'est Marat.  
Plus exactement, ainsi qu'on peut le lire dans le numéro 624 de *L'Ami du Peuple, le droit qu'ont les colonies de secouer le joug tyrannique de la métropole*. (*L'Ami du Peuple*, 12 décembre 1791). (Césaire (1961)/1981: 188).  
Césaire also credits Marat with a recognition of the persistence of class inequality in the French Revolution.
6. Yet, ironically, Césaire himself had accepted this as the way forward for Martinique, most notably at the time of its *départementalisation* in 1946.
7. La déclaration des droits de 1795, toute thermidorienne pourtant, est formelle: les peuples sont respectivement indépendants et souverains, quel que soit le nombre des individus qui les composent et l'étendue du territoire qu'ils occupent; cette souveraineté est inaliénable. Chaque peuple a le droit d'organiser et de changer les formes de son gouvernement. Les entreprises contre la liberté d'un peuple sont un attentat contre les autres peuples. (Césaire (1961)/1981: 343).
8. Sans doute le droit était-il décrété; mais encore fallait-il l'appliquer aux peuples. Et à quels peuples? Aux peuples d'Europe? A tous les peuples? Aux peuples coloniaux? Le faux universalisme nous a habitués à tant de faux-fuyants, les droits de l'homme se sont si souvent rétrécis à n'être que les droits de l'homme européen, que la question n'est pas superflue. Il est hors d'apparence qu'en proclamant le droit de l'homme à la *nation*, le droit des peuples à la patrie, le législateur français ait pensé aux colonies. Sans apparence aucune qu'il ait pensé aux peuples noirs. On peut même assurer qu'il n'est pas un révolutionnaire français qui ait songé qu'un jour les nègres formeraient un état. (Césaire (1961)/1981: 343).
9. See also Joly 1991.