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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The Law of Uneven Development and the Transition to a New World System: On the Spatial Political Economy of Socialism

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ABSTRACT

In the early 21st century global capitalism has gradually been falling into a huge structural crisis, prompting people to rethink the issue of establishing a new world system. The spatial political economy of socialism seeks precisely to explore how to break out of the capitalist world system, to transform the old space of world history, and correspondingly, to create a new space. The spatial political economy of socialism shows that space is an intrinsically important proposition of communism and socialism. Communism logically must inherit the global space of capitalism, while socialism in practice is the product of the uneven spatial development of the capitalist world system. The capitalist world system constitutes the starting point of socialism in practice, while the new world system (communism) is the destination of socialism in practice. Both revolution and construction reflect the law of uneven development of the transition to the world communist system. In the dialectical movement of history, socialism creates the Socialist Regional Economic Union as its instrument of spatial production and expansion, as well as the intermediary to the new world system. The Socialist Regional Economic Union will become an important element in the study of the spatial political economy of socialism.

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Since the beginning of the 21st century, the contradictions of global capitalism have emerged in increasingly intense forms, including the outbreak of the world financial and economic crises; rampant trade protectionism; the strong counter-movement now opposing economic globalization; the acceleration of global economic recession, together with the political turmoil; intensified geopolitical conflicts and confrontations between the big powers; and so on. All these signs indicate that the capitalist world system has entered a “period of disruption.”¹ In the 1990s the end of the Soviet Union and the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe, along with the ending of the Cold War, resulted in the entire international community losing its vision of a new world system and its enthusiasm for building it. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, the growing structural crisis of capitalism has forced people once again to face the question of whether there is any way for the system to escape its dilemmas.

When we consider the future of global capitalism and examine its alternatives, such as “another kind of globalization” and “reconstruction of the world system,” the spatial

political economy of socialism inevitably enters the picture. In the author's view, the goal of the spatial political economy of socialism is precisely to explore how to break through the space of capitalism, to transform the old space of world history, i.e., the old world system, and to create a new space of world history, i.e., a new world system.² Meanwhile, this new world system is opening a path for itself through the law of uneven development. This is also an important historical law, operating from the beginning of private ownership until the present. In this article, an attempt will be made to clarify the basic issues related to the transition to communism, the future world system, through examining the processes of socialist revolution and socialist construction during the 20th century in the light of the law of uneven development. The aim will be to distill some rough principles from these processes, and ultimately to propose a new form of transitional intermediation that will provide new thinking on an alternative to capitalism. The perspectives of spatial political economy are undoubtedly an important element in analyzing how the law of uneven development unfolds in world history. Following from the spatial political economy of capitalism, and with increasing discussion of visions of the replacement of capitalism, the spatial political economy of socialism is bound to become a new and powerful tool for study of the future development of the world system.

1. Communism and Space

Capitalism is beyond question linked closely to space, and space is an important dimension for examining the essence of capitalism. The capitalist system is essentially a spatial socio-economic form that occupies and colonizes space. That is, it constructs hierarchies on various levels that include "workplace," "local," and "global." It creates a history of space, world history, and shapes new spatial formations, the world market and the world system. The continued existence of these formations depends on the constant renewal and reorganization of capital accumulation in and on space, as has been revealed by a voluminous literature that includes the theories of imperialism and of the world system; the space production of Lefebvre, Harvey and others; and the various theories of globalization. Space is also an essential element for communism, which is the product of the sublation of capitalism.³ The founders of Marxism from the very beginning elaborated communism in terms of space.

Marx and Engels pointed out that "the proletariat can . . . only exist world-historically, just as communism, its activity, can only have a 'world-historical' existence" (Marx and Engels [1845–1846] 2010, 49). This world-historical existence is universally connected, and eliminates geographical and national narrowness. Communism, like capitalism, is thus a world system with the form of a global space that is its geospatial reflection. At the same time, communism is also socialized mass production, in which socially shared collaboration and joint labor create mutual and total dependence between individual producers. In capitalist society, the realization of this dependence is mediated through the commodity-money relation, which leads to the idea of the "isolated individual." The atomistic, decentralized individual uses others merely as a means to serve his or her own ends, and forms social groups or interest groups that are separated from each other on the basis of unequal class status. Communism eliminates private ownership of the means of production, rejects the commodity-money relation, and eliminates class differences; meanwhile, individual labor becomes directly social labor, and total

dependence between people is manifested directly in joint social production, thus eliminating distinctions between people as well. This is the socio-spatial reflection of communism.

Marx and Engels also mention communism as presupposing “the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with them” (Marx and Engels [1845–1846] 2010, 49). The universal development both of the productive forces and of intercourse is linked intimately to the spatial formations pioneered by capitalism. The fervent motivation of capital to maximize surplus value drives it to promote the transformation of the productive forces, using the most advanced science and technology, while breaking down all spatial and temporal boundaries that limit expansion. Capital uses large-scale machine industry to destroy the backward natural economy. It ends the closed-minded state of various nationalities, drawing different nationalities into common worldwide production and exchange, and replaces the division of labor formed naturally between nationalities with the division of labor in the universal world market. Capitalism thus acts on a global scale to create more and more material wealth through worldwide production activities, while also creating worldwide relations between people. With the globalization of production and human intercourse, the inherent contradictions of the capitalist mode of production also unfold and are intensified on a world scale, with results that lead inevitably in the direction of communism. In this sense, the global spatiality of capitalism constitutes the premise of communism, and communism must inherit capitalism’s global space.

To emphasize the nature of communism as a “world-historical, globally spatial existence,” Marx and Engels also introduced the notion of “local communism” in a negative sense. This concept is taken from a classic passage in “The German Ideology”:

. . . a universal intercourse . . . making each nation dependent on the revolutions of the others, . . . finally puts *world-historical*, empirically universal individuals in place of local ones. Without this, 1) communism could only exist as a local phenomenon; 2) the *forces* of intercourse themselves could not have developed as *universal*, hence unendurable powers: they would have remained home-bred “conditions” surrounded by superstition; and 3) each extension of intercourse would abolish local communism. (Marx and Engels [1845–1846] 2010, 49; italics in the original)

However, the term “local communism” itself contains a literal contradiction. According to the definition of scientific socialism, communism cannot be local, and if it were, it would not be true communism; consequently, the mention of “local communism” has an ironic ring. Marx and Engels went on to state that “Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples ‘all at once’ and simultaneously” (Marx and Engels [1845–1846] 2010, 49).⁴ From the perspective of the communist political movement, the development of history as it has actually proceeded has not conformed completely to this theoretical presupposition. The proletarian revolution, pointing in the direction of communism, first broke out in the 20th century in a relatively backward country (Russia), later passing on to various more-or-less remote territories of the world system where following the revolution, socialist construction was carried out. Meanwhile, the “dominant peoples” have not so far produced a communist “act.” In a word, the socialist revolution and construction of the 20th century did not produce a global spatiality, but rather represented a “locality.” Perhaps for this reason, many researchers have

applied Marx and Engels's concept mechanically, and have described the actually existing socialism as "local communism." Given the negation by Marx and Engels of "local communism," this is tantamount to denying, to a large extent, the historically positive significance of the socialist revolutions of the 20th century. It is true that socialism in actuality can only be regarded as an embryonic form of the future communism, and as a transitional form on the way from capitalism to the first stage of communism. However, if the world-historical significance of socialism is not fully and correctly accounted for, an appropriate path cannot be found for creating a new form of world-historical space.

2. The Spatiality of Uneven Development: The Historical and Theoretical Rationality of Socialism in Practice

According to the theoretical logic of Marx and Engels, communism (along with socialism) is a product of the advanced development of capitalism. The emergence of the socialist countries that now exist, or that previously existed, nevertheless reflects a reverse movement: it has not been the result of the maturity of capitalism in the countries concerned, but on the contrary, has resulted from its immaturity. It is easy to question the rationality of the birth of socialism in practice by simply comparing the basic assertions of Marx and Engels with historical fragments, which is one of the key issues that have long been debated in academia. If, however, the question is examined in the context of a large span of time and space, it will be concluded that the birth of the 20th century socialism is historically and theoretically rational, and that it precisely reflects the spatiality of uneven development.

2.1. The Product of the Formation of World Markets and the Development of World Intercourse

From the holistic perspective of global capitalist development, socialism is also premised on what Marx and Engels called "the universal development of productive forces" and "the universal development of world intercourse."

From the point of view of the development of productive forces, the Industrial Revolution that originated in Britain in the mid-18th century continued to expand globally during the following hundred or so years, establishing large-scale capitalist mechanized industry, replacing handicraft workshops, and resulting in the development of the productive forces by leaps and bounds. The availability of raw materials and sales markets became the only limits on the expansion of output, and the bourgeoisie was obliged to "nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere" (Marx and Engels [1847–1848] 2010, 487). The development of transport and communications in the major capitalist countries (the building of railroads and ships, and the application of the telegraph) not only greatly enhanced the level of the productive forces and of communications at home, but also provided the material means for industrial capital to develop the world market. In Marx's words, large-scale capitalist mechanized industry truly established the means of communication and the modern world market (Marx and Engels [1845–1846] 2010, 73). The global expansion of capitalism also brought most of the backward countries and regions into the capitalist world economy and into contact with the world market, so that they were greatly influenced and dominated

by the economic relations of capitalism, and especially by the economic relations of imperialism. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries the international capitalist division of labor (including through colonial conquest) encompassed almost the entire area of the globe. This enabled the global economy, which included the backward non-capitalist regions, to form a division of labor that featured a “center–semi-marginal–peripheral” hierarchical structure, and accordingly, the capitalist world economic system was basically established.

However, the impacts of global capitalism created a more complex situation in the backward countries and regions. Compared with the capitalist countries at the center, the countries and regions on the periphery and semi-periphery developed multiple contradictions. It may have been that the capitalist economic relations were relatively backward, that the bourgeoisie was oppressed and dominated by the feudal or authoritarian forces and had not yet seized political hegemony, and that contradictions existed not only between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but also between the feudal or authoritarian forces and the small producers, as well as between the feudal or authoritarian forces and the bourgeoisie. Or else, the pre-capitalist system may have been in a steady state or undergoing gradual disintegration; in this case, as well as the contradiction between the indigenous feudal and authoritarian forces and the small producers, there may also have been a contradiction with the foreign colonial exploiters and oppressors, together with a contradiction between the compradors, as agents of imperialism, and other social strata. This rendered the social contradictions in the peripheral and semi-peripheral areas more prominent, and the class struggle more likely to become intensified and to erupt. Another consequence of the development of productive forces under the conditions of global capitalist expansion was the generation of crises in the world market, i.e., worldwide economic crises. Not only did these economic crises break out in the capitalist countries, but they also spread to the colonial and semi-colonial territories and caused even greater crises, mainly due to the outward transfer of the crisis situations by the capitalist powers. On the one hand, the central countries erected high tariff barriers to protect their own markets and accelerated the dumping of commodities in the backward countries. On the other, they increased their plundering of foreign resources and raiding of monetary wealth, so that the peripheral and semi-peripheral areas inevitably fell into the “flood discharge area” of the economic crisis of imperialism. As a result, commodity exports from the backward countries shrank, large quantities of precious metals flowed out, domestic currency depreciated and inflation were exacerbated, and the hard-hit national economies were plunged into still greater difficulties. The imperialist countries not only intensified their economic exploitation and plundering of the backward countries, but also stepped up their seizure of colonies and spheres of influence, while waging wars of aggression against the outside world. In this way, the national crises of the backward countries were aggravated still further.

From the end of the 19th century to the 1930s and 1940s, frequent crises emerged in the imperialist chain. World economic crises became combined with colonial rivalries and wars for imperialist supremacy (including the two world wars). Social contradictions grew increasingly intense, triggering fierce class struggles especially in the peripheral and semi-peripheral world, and creating the objective conditions for the outbreak of socialist revolutions in these regions. The argument of Russian Marxists concerning the “weak link in the chain of imperialism”⁵ is a classic illustration of this.

When analyzed in terms of the universal development of world intercourse, the above processes reflect first of all the development of the means of communication, and on this basis, the expansion and deepening of economic intercourse throughout the world. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed unprecedented global changes in the transportation, information and communications industries. Railroad systems spread apace, connecting ports with inland areas, while ships connected the world's railroad systems into a global transportation network. Road construction and the mass production of automobiles created increasingly dense land transportation networks. Submarine telegraph cables, telephones, radio broadcasts and other means of long-distance communication were also applied for the first time, so that the resonance of the global financial markets increased dramatically. In sum, the transportation and information communications networks on all continents came to transcend the boundaries of countries, nationalities and languages. Distances of both time and space were shortened and territorial shackles broken, so that people could reach all parts of the world more conveniently than ever before. The field of exchange was enlarged, allowing backward countries and regions to become important parts of the global chain of production, circulation and consumption, and as a result, also to constitute important links in the global crisis of capitalism.

The universal development of world intercourse had other aspects besides the growth of economic intercourse; ideological and cultural concepts with their origins in different countries and nationalities also came to be disseminated and exchanged on a global scale. In particular, the doctrines and ideologies of the developed capitalist countries were imported to the backward countries in tandem with the historical process through which industrial capital from the mid-19th century set out to conquer the world market. It was through this process that Marxism, as the advanced revolutionary theory of the proletariat, spread from the center countries to the vast peripheral and semi-peripheral regions. Without the globalization of capitalism and the development of world intercourse, Marxism could not have arisen spontaneously in the isolated and closed backward countries, and hence the emergence of a proletarian revolutionary theory, ahead of its time and on a soil that was extremely barren in terms of both the economy and culture of capitalism, could only have been the result of extensive external contacts. The fact that Marxism was grasped by the proletarian parties of the backward countries and molded into a powerful theoretical weapon for leading their own revolutions was also, to a certain extent, the result of the proletarian parties of the backward countries assimilating the theoretical positions of the proletarian parties of the comparatively advanced countries, while learning as well from their revolutionary practice.

Looking back at the history of the international communist movement and at the birth of socialism during the 20th century, it is clear that socialist revolutions are in no sense products of the isolated development of the class struggle in one country, but are rather the outcome of international class relations, of the interactions and struggles of domestic and international political forces. In the time of Marx and Engels, the German revolution was always closely connected with the broader European revolution. The founding of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party and the rise of Bolshevism were both expedited by alliances and mutual assistance, as well as by the involvement in mutual struggles of both Russian Marxists and the political forces of the Western European working class. The outbreak of the October Revolution cannot be understood without the historical

background of the First World War, and during the Great War era, the Russian Revolution was not an isolated case but was echoed by the German and Hungarian revolutions. The emergence of the socialist countries of Eastern Europe was also a direct result of the international political power struggle during the Second World War. Similarly, the Communist Party of China was founded with the help of the Comintern, and the training of cadres for the Chinese revolution, along with other material support, could not have occurred without the Comintern and the Soviet Union. In short, without the expansion of world intercourse and the international alliance of proletarian revolutionary forces, there would be no socialism in actuality.

The hierarchical structure of the world division of labor, the uneven distribution of contradictions within that structure, and the geographic mismatch between the spread of ideologies and the maturation of socialist revolutions all demonstrate that in spatial terms, the capitalist world system is distinguished by great imbalances of development.

2.2. The Products of the Historical Law of Uneven Development

The law of uneven development is an absolute law for all societies in which private ownership predominates. In the pre-capitalist period, a variety of economic and social forms (or modes of production) existed. Unlike the case with capitalism, these pre-capitalist social forms were decentralized, representing spatially isolated points that were not connected into a surface, and there was not always a clear and strict temporal succession between them.⁶ Even within the classical Marxist division of social formations—the primitive tribal-communal mode of production, the slave mode of production, the feudal mode of production, and the capitalist mode of production⁷—the different economic and social forms do not strictly follow this sequence in each particular society, but often coexist in the same space and time. During the period of primitive tribal ownership and ancient communal ownership, slavery existed in the form of a system in which slaves were jointly held by tribes or communes, and it can be said that collective slavery has always accompanied primitive tribal or communal ownership. In the era of the ancient Greek city-states, the economy of slavery existed alongside a large number of small peasant economies. Settler colonies like the United States and Australia entered capitalist society largely without passing through feudal society. Until the outbreak of the Civil War in the United States in the mid-19th century, a northern capitalist economy coexisted with a southern plantation-slavery economy. In short, the coexistence of various economic forms and modes of production at different levels of development at the same time and in the same space has been common in property-owning societies, and it has been even more common for the same mode of production to exist at distinct levels of development in different geographical spaces. This imbalance in development has also been manifested primarily by a spatial imbalance in the alteration of economic forms.

The slave mode of production did not originate in ancient Greece, but ancient Greece and later Rome brought this mode of production and the civilization of city-states based on it to an unprecedented height, becoming the model for slave societies. Although the slave mode of production also existed in various forms in other ancient societies (such as Egypt, Babylon, Assyria and China), it could not be said to have reached the same level of development. Further, the relative underdevelopment of slave civilization in the East meant that the Oriental slave societies existed for shorter periods than those in Western

Europe. For example, the Chinese slave economy, after continuing for more than 1,000 years, entered the era of natural economy dominated by small production earlier than its counterpart in Western Europe.

Following the decline of slavery, feudal separationist rule in the form of the manorial system became established in Western Europe. Both European feudalism and the centralized monarchical system in China, which suppressed the large landowning classes and relied on a huge bureaucracy, were modes of production dominated by a natural economy based on agricultural production, in which the accumulation of wealth was founded on the extraction of tribute from small producers who in the degree of their independence varied from serfs to sharecroppers and yeomen.⁸ In centralized monarchical societies such as China, where the land was fertile, the population was large and dense, irrigation was well-developed, and intensive methods of cultivation and management were able to arise, the natural economy created an agricultural civilization on a fairly high level. In contrast, the technical system of agricultural production and the rate of food production in Western Europe lagged behind its contemporaries in the ancient period and throughout much of the Middle Ages (Ma 1997). The relative underdevelopment of agricultural civilization in Western Europe, however, encouraged a greater development of handicrafts and commerce within the context of petty commodity production, and led to a transition from the family economy to the market economy at an earlier point.⁹ This contributed to the development and expansion of the urban bourgeoisie and favored the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, with the result that the natural economy of Western Europe was the first to be dismantled. Even so, Greece, Rome, Byzantium and medieval Europe (Italy and Flanders), where petty commodity production was most developed, were not the first to progress to the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, the development of commerce and the accumulation of money capital did not lead to the emergence of industrial capitalism in the East, or even in the Netherlands, where commercial capitalism flourished. On the contrary, England, the country in which the Industrial Revolution and the capitalist mode of production first emerged, was for a long time backward in commerce and handicrafts, and until the 17th century was far from being the richest country in Europe (Mandel 1964, 84, 119).

Historically, the less developed the productive forces of an old social formation are, the sooner that social formation tends to die out. Examples of this are not difficult to find. And it can be identified as a general law of historical development in which an old system begins to be replaced by a new at a point where the old system is notably weak, because

the more fully developed, mature and perfect a social system is in a given country, the more difficult it will be for the new social system to break through the shell of the old one, and the less likely it will be for historical change to materialize. (Zhao 2002, 8)

Conversely, the less mature an existing social formation is, the more easily it can be replaced by a new formation, since the productive forces at the disposal of the existing formation are far from being completely realized. The first country in which capitalism was overthrown was not Britain, the first to construct a capitalist society, or the United States, where capitalism was most developed, but Russia, whose capitalism remained backward and where the productive forces were obviously far from being fully utilized.

This is very much in line with the historical law of uneven development, which also applied to other actually existing socialist countries during the 20th century. The new, future round of world socialist revolution will, in all probability, also break out first in the peripheral or semi-peripheral regions.

3. Transitional Paths in Uneven Development: Carving Out a Socialist Space within the Capitalist World System

The conception that Marx and Engels advanced of the communist revolution as a simultaneous world revolution (Engels [1847] 2010) appears to assume that capitalism has already, in advance, created a global space for communism. However, the historical law of uneven development shows that the road to communism often begins in backward regions, and that socialism, as it is actually born in these regions, cannot automatically possess a global living space. Rather, it has to create this space for itself. Even if socialist revolution triumphs in the developed regions, it will likewise have to create a socialist space on a global scale, in a process that is coordinated with the socialist transformation and socialist construction within the nation-state. Thus, the inheriting by socialism (or communism) of the global space of capitalism is a logical development, not a de facto one. The long process that begins with the unfolding of socialism, which uses the capitalist world economic system as its base and culminates in the formation of the new world communist order, is called the “transition to the world communist system.”

3.1. The Logical Starting Point for the Transition: The World Market as a Whole

For Marx and Engels, the crucial importance for communism of the global space was unquestionable. The global space created by capitalism is the world market and the world economic system. When Marx formulated various plans and programs for the study and creation of political economy, including the “Five Structures” and “Six Plans,” he designated the “world market” as the highest category for analyzing bourgeois society. However, the “world market” is not merely an intuitive spatial concept. In essence, it is the “encroachment of bourgeois society on the State” (Marx [1857–1858] 2010, 195), and represents the totality of the economic relations of bourgeois society on a world scale. The concept of totality occupies an extremely important place in Marx’s political economy. For Marx, bourgeois society was an organic totality, and the economic base, class, law, the state, and so forth, constituted elements of this totality. Capital develops into a totality in the sense that the economic relations of the bourgeoisie become the dominant relations, which subjugate all other elements. These elements can only be comprehended on the basis of capitalist economic relations, through their interconnection with other elements, and the process through which bourgeois society develops into a totality also needs to be addressed through the examination of these elements.¹⁰

The expansion of capital throughout the world has led to the globalization and dominance of the mode of production that corresponds to capital, and capitalist production has thus developed into an all-encompassing system of world production, that has acquired a holistic existence, i.e., it has become a totality. The globalization of production has been accompanied by the globalization of consumption, and

industries . . . no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones . . . whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. (Marx and Engels [1847–1848] 2010, 488)

The development of the world market has transformed national production and consumption into production oriented towards the world market, and consumption that relies on the world market for its realization. The result is total dependence on the world market (Tang 1995, 502), which has thus become a comprehensive embodiment of the international relations of production and consumption. The formation of the world market means that exchange and circulation reach a global scale, and exchange relations thus express themselves as a whole. The international structure of production also creates a corresponding international structure of distribution. Within the structure of production, the division of labor between the developed industrial countries and the backward agricultural countries determines the economic exploitation and enslavement of the backward countries by the developed countries, and through unequal exchanges and through the world market dominated by the developed countries, the economic surplus of the backward countries is constantly transferred to the developed countries. Within the world market, which represents the widest possible space, the economic relations of capitalism are thus fully realized and universally developed, while the world market itself becomes the essential reflection and overall embodiment of these economic relations.

Using the world market as an intermediary mechanism, capital has constructed a world economic system dominated by a few center countries, and has continuously incorporated external regions into the process of its own accumulation and into the international division of labor. That is, capital has continuously transformed non-capitalist production into production for the world market, i.e., it has brought about the expansion of the world market. In the sense that “communism must inherit the global space of capitalism,” any analysis of the alternatives to capitalism must take the world market and the capitalist world system as its logical base.

3.2. The Capitalist World System as the Ultimate Obstacle to the Development of Socialism

Unlike all previous social forms, capitalism as a totality is able to absorb all alien modes of production such as slavery and petty production, and to incorporate them into its own accumulation. Capitalism produces and reproduces other economic relations as the economic relations of capital, thus completing the process of “spatial production” from the inside out. When the world market is fully formed, the laws of capitalist production become the economic laws that within that market, dominate each “producing nation.”¹¹ It is impossible to separate completely the domestic economic operation of each seemingly independent “producing nation” from the operation of the world market. The laws of the world market play a role in the economy of each country through foreign trade and the international division of labor, and in the case of dependent economies, even play a decisive role. In this way, the contradictions of the external world market are transformed into internal economic contradictions (foreign trade, foreign investment

and foreign exchange are important components of the country's economic mechanism). Similarly, internal economic contradictions are formed and reflected as external economic contradictions; for example, the economic crisis of the developed countries, when exported, develops into a global economic crisis, while the economic crises of different countries also merge to become a global economic crisis. In the capitalist world economic system, within which productive forces and world intercourse are universally developed, the exterior is interior, and the interior is also exterior.

The birth of socialism means at the same time its “decoupling” from the world market and from the capitalist world economic system. Transforming the domestic capitalist relations of production and confronting the international capitalist relations of production, socialism will carry out non-capitalist production, exchange, distribution, and consumption in accordance with new principles, and will naturally become relatively independent of the international capitalist division of labor. At the same time, the attacks and blockades directed at it by the world bourgeois forces will objectively result in a *passive* decoupling. However, it is impossible for socialism to be self-enclosed and completely isolated from the world market. Once the world market has been fully formed, socialism finds itself surrounded by an omnipresent and powerful structure; meanwhile, as a result of the backwardness of the productive forces, socialism has not yet been able to eliminate commodity production and money, and thus to eliminate completely the law of the commodity economy. Socialism is compelled to absorb and utilize the advanced results of the development of the world market, while transforming capitalism, introducing advanced technology, capital and commodities from the center countries, and maintaining a certain degree of openness to the world market. In these circumstances, socialism faces the challenge of avoiding being scorched by the “universal light” of capitalism, and of preventing a renewed fusion with it.

Engels vividly illustrated the dialectic of this interior and exterior in “Anti-Dühring,” where he satirized Dühring's fantasy of the “economic commune” (Engels [1876–1878] 2010). Dühring attempted to achieve “equal exchange” and “fair distribution” within the economic commune without changing the laws of the commodity economy, and while retaining money. Engels pointed out that so long as the law of the market in the outside world remained powerful, it would drive the commune back to capitalism:

Up to this point we have only considered the effects of a retention of metallic money within the field of operation of the Dühring economic commune. But outside this field the rest of the world, the profligate world, meanwhile carries on contentedly in the old accustomed way. On the world market gold and silver remain world money, a general means of purchase and payment, the absolute social embodiment of wealth. And this property of the precious metal gives the individual members of the economic communes a new motive to accumulate a hoard, get rich, exact usury; the motive to manoeuvre freely and independently with regard to the commune and beyond its borders, and to realise on the world market the private wealth which they have accumulated. The usurers are transformed into dealers in the medium of circulation, bankers, controllers of the medium of circulation and of world money, and thus into controllers of production, even though these may still for many years be registered nominally as the property of the economic and trading communes. And so that hoarders and usurers, transformed into bankers, become the masters also of the economic and trading communes themselves. (Engels [1876–1878] 2010, 290)

Socialism is able to use the state power to transform the internal relations of production. Nevertheless, if the world capitalist relations of production remain as they

are, and the domestic economy is forced to compromise to a certain extent with the laws of commodity production—i.e., if only the capitalist relations of production have been eliminated, and not the conditions for their regeneration—it is perfectly possible for “all the old filthy business” to “be restored.”¹²

The capitalist world system provided the conditions for the first outbreak of revolutions in the East, but not for the first arrival of the East at communism through revolutions, and the early Marxists were well aware of the historical dialectic embedded in this. There is thus no need to reiterate here Lenin’s distinction between the “first triumph of socialism in one country” and the “ultimate triumph of socialism,” since other first-generation Russian revolutionary leaders (including Stalin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin, etc.) also recognized that the ultimate triumph of socialism in one country is impossible without a proletarian revolution in the major advanced countries or an international proletarian revolution. This is also in line with the idea summed up by Marx and Engels as “leaping over the Caudine Forks.”¹³

After Lenin’s passing away in 1924, a major debate arose within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) on “the building of socialism in the USSR.” This reflected the dilemma of the Soviet leaders as, in the absence of a world revolution, they faced the necessity for the USSR to try to exist in isolation within the capitalist world system. The debate was not about whether the USSR should build socialism, or whether it was certain that Soviet socialism would be completely victorious, but about how the USSR should set about building socialism in a single country, and how this would lead to ultimate victory (Zheng 1986). The current led by Stalin and Bukharin believed that the USSR was capable of completing its socialist transformation independently within its own national borders, and of establishing an alliance between the workers and peasants that would allow the country to maintain itself under capitalist siege for a considerable period of time. Trotsky and others, by contrast, held that the closer the goal of socialism was approached, the greater the likelihood of conflict between the proletariat and the peasantry (i.e., the petty bourgeoisie). Hence, they contended, proletarian regimes in backward countries where peasants constituted the vast majority could not solve the contradiction with the petty bourgeoisie on their own; that contradiction, they argued, could only be resolved in the arena of the proletarian world revolution.¹⁴ The subsequent development of socialism in practice has demonstrated that proletarian regimes in backward countries are indeed capable of establishing the economic basis for socialism and of building an alliance between the workers and peasants, as exemplified by the successful completion of the New Democratic Revolution after the founding of New China in 1949. Even after the socialist transformation has basically eliminated the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie in formal terms, however, bourgeois and petty-bourgeois habits of thought have not been eradicated from people’s subjective consciousness, and socialist and capitalist concepts have continued to wrestle incessantly. When the domestic non-public economy is reintegrated into the world market and again participates in the global capitalist division of labor, there is a serious possibility that certain social strata will evolve in a bourgeois direction. This explains why in practice, the themes of restoration and anti-restoration run through the entire process of constructing socialism. Whether or not the public economy can dominate and manage the non-public economy is not only a question of domestic system-building, but also

an international issue. When Mao Zedong pondered the future of socialism in China in the 1960s, he repeatedly emphasized:

Socialist society is a rather long historical stage. During this socialist historical stage, classes still exist, and there are still class contradictions and class struggles, the struggle between the two roads of socialism and capitalism, and the danger of the restoration of capitalism.¹⁵

What he was referring to should not be understood solely as a domestic struggle between the two roads, but also as an international struggle between the two roads based on the position of the ultimate victory of socialism.

To sum up, from the point of view of the actual socialist path as it appears in the midst of the overall development process of capitalism, the limits of the socialist transformation in individual countries are determined ultimately by the economic and political situation on the world stage (Trotsky 1986, 307), i.e., by the development of the world market and the capitalist world system.

3.3. Opening Up New Spaces amid Encirclement by the Capitalist World System

To overcome the problem posed by the isolation of the revolution, there accordingly arose the demand for expansion. In fact, the driving forces of post-revolutionary socialist construction are themselves spatially expansive in nature. In terms of abstract principles, the transition from socialism to communism necessarily has its essential reflection in the gradual establishing of the dominance of socialist economic relations in the internal and external space, manifested in its formation as a new totality. In terms of real needs, if the spatial expansion of capitalism is rooted in its essential need for capital accumulation, the drive for spatial expansion in socialism has both economic and political dimensions. Since the ultimate triumph of socialism cannot be guaranteed within a single country, then after the triumph of the socialist revolution in a particular country, export of the revolution can alleviate the danger that the proletarian regime in that country will be subjected to intervention and even be overthrown by counter-revolutionary armed force; in this way, a certain guarantee can be had of its political security. Meanwhile, the greater the number and the wider the range of the countries in which the economic principles of socialism are implemented, and the more solid the economic links that are established between them, the more the socialist relations of production in a country can be consolidated, and the country's economic security safeguarded. This is precisely why the Soviet Union exported its revolution to the East and West, and vigorously assisted the construction of socialism in other countries.

The emergence of socialism as an actual form, not at a point when the world market was in decay but when it was continuing to develop, determines inherently that the socialist state has the dual historical task of catching up with capitalism and replacing it. Thus, "expansion" itself has two meanings: first, socialism is established on the basis of national boundaries, which establishes the dominance of socialist economic relations in social space; and second, socialist principles are introduced into the world system, which establishes the dominance of socialist economic relations in geographic space. In both areas, socialism is necessarily subject to uneven development.

Within their national boundaries, the proletarian regimes after their revolutions took over a variety of complex economic relations (e.g., small-peasant, slavery, comprador,

capitalist), and after the socialist economic transformation, had also to solve the problem of a high degree of imbalance in levels of development (e.g., between workers and peasants, between urban and rural areas, between regions, and between nationalities). The core challenge was to establish a national industrial system that was independent, autonomous, and socialist, and that would provide a basis for guaranteeing the domination of socialist over other economic relations. Within the actual construction of socialism in the 20th century, however, the quality of “self-reliance, independence and autonomy” itself reflected precisely the dialectic of the interior and exterior. No backward country has ever succeeded in building a modern economic system on an industrial wasteland while acting on a basis of complete independence and autonomy. This is not to mention the fact that at the time when the Soviet Union as the world’s only socialist country set up its own national industrial system, it was a major buyer of advanced technology on the world market, and the West (especially the United States) supplied it with the necessary technology, machinery, and equipment (see Yuan 2015, 69). It is especially difficult to imagine the establishment of national industry in other marginalized countries, which are even more economically backward, without any advanced technical support from outside. Independent industrialization in New China could not have been achieved without technological, financial, and human resources support from other socialist countries. For example, the Soviet Union’s near-free assistance to China in the 1950s, taking the form of the “156 key projects,” laid the foundation for China’s industrialization, while East Germany’s free assistance in the form of microchip technology helped to establish China’s integrated circuit industry. This kind of economic assistance among socialist countries (from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to Mongolia, Cuba, Vietnam, etc., and from China to Vietnam and North Korea, etc.) was a key factor in the establishing of socialism within the national boundaries, helping to shorten the backward countries’ process of development through different social and historical stages (from pre-capitalist or semi-capitalist agrarian societies to industrialized socialist societies). It also helped greatly to alleviate the contradiction between the workers and peasants in these countries, and to mitigate the contradictions of uneven development between workers and peasants, urban and rural areas, and different nationalities. At the same time, it represented a negation of the laws of the world market and of the laws of the capitalist world system, embodying as it did the expansion of socialist economic principles.

Self-reliance, independence and autonomy can thus be understood only in a relative sense, and mainly in relation to the capitalist world system, since an independent and autonomous national industrial system not only implies freedom from dependence on the capitalism of the central countries and from the unequal international division of labor, but at the same time helps to prevent infiltration and counter-control by capitalism’s economic laws when interacting with the world market and developed capitalism. However, if “complete independence and autonomy” is generalized to include all international economic relations, and is elevated to an absolute principle above all others, then especially when applied among socialist countries it can easily fall into a new paradox. The fact that industrialization cannot be confined to satisfying the domestic market or to obtaining support from the domestic market determines that to a certain extent, international trade and the division of labor are multi-directional, formed not only with the capitalism of the countries of the center but also with other countries.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the ultimate aim of socialism is not to build a system of nation-states constructed on the basis

of the socialist state; socialism must also go beyond the form of nation-states. This constitutes a fundamental contradiction in the transition from socialism as it now exists to the world communist system.

Externally, socialism is also confronted by the uneven structure of the world system. This, however, is an advantage that allows socialism to use the contradictions of the world system to build an international united front and to advance its own principles. During the era when industrial capitalism was experiencing its first great upsurge in the countries of the center, Marx and Engels in the “Manifesto of the Communist Party” put forward the revolutionary strategy summed up in the slogan “Working Men of All Countries, Unite!” (Marx and Engels [1847–1848] 2010, 519). In the age of imperialism, Lenin extended this slogan, based on the multiple contradictions of the capitalist world system, into “Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!” Then in the 1960s, China put forward the basic content of the general line to be followed by socialist countries in their foreign policy. This included three different levels of international relations: “friendly mutual assistance and cooperative relations among countries in the socialist camp,” “peaceful coexistence among countries with different social systems and opposition to imperialism’s policies of aggression and war,” and “support for the revolutionary struggles of the oppressed peoples” (People’s Publishing House 1965, 30). In the 1970s, Mao Zedong advanced the theory of “three worlds”; aiming at bipolar hegemony, this expanded the united front to the camp of the center countries. As the uneven development of the world system has evolved further, the content of “proletarian internationalism” has also been continuously enriched. The advancing of the principle of “proletarian internationalism” has also been aimed at driving the development of the Third World countries and nations, with the countries of the socialist camp as their nucleus, and at furthering the division of labor and expansion of trade relations not only among the socialist countries, but also between the socialist countries and the countries of the Third World, which are totally different from those of the existing capitalist world system. In another sense, if the confederation of the South (i.e., the alliance of developing countries) is to achieve “collective self-reliance,” independence, and autonomy, its ultimate future can only be socialism (Amin 1978).¹⁷

As explained by Lenin ([1915] 1974, 342), “Uneven economic and political development is an absolute law of capitalism.” This law determines that there will be cyclical changes of hegemony in the capitalist world system. A new international political and economic order, however, cannot be realized by a single country or a few countries; if that were the case, it would at best represent a new hegemonic cycle in the existing world system. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of countries joining different camps is by no means simply the artificial result of hegemonic and geopolitical struggles within the world system, but also an outcome of the natural development of different political and economic logics. Inevitably, therefore, the political structure of the world system has produced a clear spatial stratification, marked to varying degrees by the formation of camps. It is for this reason that the establishment and exportation of values becomes even more important for the spatial expansion of socialism, complementing and reinforcing the expansion of economic relations, since in order to win over the majority, as in the case of the establishment of hegemonic superiority, not only coercion but also identification is required.¹⁸ This identification not only stems from the construction of a perfect system of discourse, but also depends on the example provided by the camp

of the actually existing socialist countries. Unfortunately the Soviet Union, as the leader of the socialist camp, repeatedly committed the mistakes of hegemonism and great-power chauvinism in its foreign relations, and internally, serious faults appeared in the construction of the system of political democracy and economic development. As a result, the socialist road lost a great deal of its attractiveness for the Third World countries during the late Cold War period. China's reform and opening up from the late 1970s to the 1990s, meanwhile, is also perceived as a re-embracing of the world market and the capitalist world system. This has contributed in a certain degree to the growth of neoliberal forces globally since the end of the last century, and has indirectly dampened expectations of system substitution.¹⁹

4. Socialist Regional Economic Unions: Intermediaries to a New World System

The failure of the international communist movement in the 20th century, as well as the views denying the rationality of socialism in actual practice, appear to reflect a dilemma implicit in the thesis of Marx and Engels concerning the crucial importance of the capitalist global space for communism. If socialism is practiced in backward regions, it can only be "local communism" and thus cannot succeed at all; if it is not practiced, then there is only one option, namely, integration into the capitalist world system. The foregoing also shows that following the victory of the proletarian revolution and the realization of systemic changes on the domestic level, the ultimate core obstacle to the development of socialism is neither the domestic class relations and class struggle, nor the construction and improvement of the domestic system, but the need to find ways to manage the relationship with the capitalist world system (dominated by the advanced capitalist countries) and the world market. Even so, it would be another kind of utopia to imagine that the "world-historical connection" could be realized instantly without any process of "local" development. It is in this respect that the spatial political economy of socialism points to an important direction for research: how can socialism in actuality break through the structure of the capitalist world system, and not be swallowed once again by the world market, while at the same time avoiding the "trap of local communism," i.e., the situation in which the limitations of intercourse mean that everything is "restored." This undoubtedly requires socialism to possess new tools for the production of new space if it is to achieve its goal of creating a new world system.

4.1. The Necessity of Socialist Regional Economic Unions

Our proposal of the Socialist Regional Economic Union as an indispensable tool is based on historical references and the inherent requirements of reality.

The conquest and domination of the world by capitalism, as the first socio-economic form in human history to acquire a global space, has never been as smooth a process as its proponents would have wished. Instead, it has been accomplished in a circuitous way, and has been based on the prerequisite of territorial unification and specialization. Capitalism unifies the domestic market by eliminating the feudal pattern of segmentation in a narrow area, and thus gains a dominant position within the nation-state. Once capital has organized, coordinated and unified itself in the form of the state, it forms the "producing

nation,” and uses imperialist wars of conquest to open up fresh markets. Incorporating non-capitalist regions into its sphere of accumulation, it imposes monopoly control, splitting the world market into opposing imperial power blocs. In the fierce competition for the global market, each “producing nation” integrates regional markets based on the geopolitical demand for capital accumulation. From this arises the regional economic integration of capitalism, with the individual “producing” nations developing into supranational regional capital groups. Under the law of the uneven political and economic development of capitalism, the demand of the major powers to redistribute their spheres of influence according to their strength will also lead to the re-emergence of the tendency for the world economy to be divided into camps and blocs. In other words, regionalism is itself an intrinsic element in the overall development of the world market. This is how capitalism, through different forms of territorial occupation, incorporates fresh regions by merging with and assimilating them, gradually expanding its arena of operations.

Socialism, which achieves breakthroughs at the weak links of the capitalist world system and is compelled to develop in a context of encirclement by that system, can only gradually substitute its own structures for those of the capitalist world system by means of segmented spatial assimilation. This is also a manifestation of the law of uneven development, and at the same time implies that for an extended historical period, the Socialist Regional Economic Union will have to experience both coexistence and contestation with the capitalist world system. Meanwhile the actually existing socialist countries, which are relatively backward in terms of their productive forces and are like islands in a capitalist ocean, confront blockades and counter-attacks from the capitalist world. The socialist countries need to unite and cooperate politically and economically, and the Socialist Regional Economic Union is the advanced, developed form of this alliance.

Since the ultimate limits of a country’s transformation are determined by the economic and political situation on the world stage, and since the Socialist Regional Economic Union is a part of the world’s economic and political stage, its creation expands the space and scope for a country’s socialist transformation. The Socialist Regional Economic Union demonstrates that the economic principles and production processes of socialism have broken through the narrow confines of individual countries, and are organized and unified on a regional scale. Individual socialist countries expand their interactions with other socialist countries, and through the Socialist Regional Economic Union, participate in the division of labor in line with socialist principles. At the same time, the regional economic union allows the socialist camp to establish links with the world market, and acts as the core mechanism driving interactions with developing countries. This regional unity serves as an intermediate step towards unity on a global scale, and at the same time, as an intermediary between the socialist countries and the capitalist world system. Acting as a protective umbrella and buffer for individual socialist countries as they confront the pressures of the world market, it thus helps maintain the relative equilibrium and stability of socialism in its long transition to communism. In time, the economic union makes it possible to seek expansion through consolidation, and to reinforce consolidation through expansion. Through this historical movement of organization, the contradiction between the “national” and “global” nature of socialism will gradually be resolved.

4.2. Characteristics of the Socialist Regional Economic Union

The intermediary nature of the Socialist Regional Economic Union shows that it has many transitional features, which in their turn are determined by the transitional nature of the actually existing socialist countries. Just as “the relations of different nations among themselves depend upon the extent to which each has developed its productive forces, the division of labour and internal intercourse” (Marx and Engels [1845–1846] 2010, 32), the existing socialist countries have established the economic base of public ownership, and socialist relations of production have come to occupy dominant position within them. At the same time, the exchange of commodities and the law of value have not yet been completely eliminated. When a number of socialist countries form an economic union, the economic principles governing the functioning of this organization and the principles governing relations between the member countries mainly represent an extension of the duality of the countries’ domestic economic relations, while at the same time reflecting the historical tasks of the economic union itself.

First, production and the division of labor within the Socialist Regional Economic Union are not entirely governed by the law of value. This is consistent with the fact that the socialist countries, which have eliminated the dominance of private ownership, do not use the law of value as a basic economic determinant. Likewise, it is not the law of value but the law of monopoly profit that governs the capitalist world market. Because of the existence of nation-state barriers and the lack of unification of the world market, free competition, even in a relative sense, does not exist within this market. The unequal structure of the division of labor within the capitalist world system meanwhile leads to unequal international exchange, and an international average rate of profit between countries and regions has not come into existence.²⁰ Under socialism, by contrast, the unified economic mode of operation is the planned economy, albeit with varying degrees of implementation of the plans. Within the socialist economic union, production and the division of labor will be carried out through various degrees of “coordinated planning,” based either on local plans or on the plans of the member states. The development of information technology and the advent of the information society mean that it is perfectly conceivable to realize integration through a planned economy.²¹

Second, the Socialist Regional Economic Union does not practice fully monetized trade. When socialism undertakes the historic task of making the transition from a commodity economy to a product economy, exchange will gradually be demonetized within the Socialist Regional Economic Union, with the full development of the socialization of production and an increasing degree of labor unity. The capitalist world market is compelled to practice trade on the basis of currency settlement, and international trade is usually settled in the currency of the center countries. This allows the center countries to use their monopoly power over world currency issuance to seize surplus value, and within the capitalist world system, leads to the struggle for monetary hegemony. At the primary stage of the development of the Socialist Regional Economic Union, internal economic cooperation (including multilateral trade) will also require monetary and financial instruments, but the unified settlement currency will be used only as a book-measurement instrument for settlement, and will be withdrawn from circulation. Incomplete monetization of trade (including barter trade) could also be extended to encompass trade between socialist and developing countries. Demonetization of international trade

would also help to protect the socialist economy from the turbulence of the world market and from international capitalist monetary and financial crises.

Third, the norm governing relations between the member states of the Socialist Regional Economic Union is one of mutual assistance and cooperation. This is determined by the purpose of the union and by the nature of the production relations within it. Within the capitalist world system, the main form of inter-state relations is competition, in particular the fierce competition between the countries of the center in pursuing the maximization of their respective global or regional economic and political interests. This has led to imperialist wars, and in the final analysis, is a manifestation of the competition between the capital groupings of the various countries in the world market. In the primary form of the Socialist Regional Economic Union, individual nations retain a comparative independence, and there is thus bound to be a relatively strong tendency for them to pursue their own national interests. However, the joint cooperation of the member countries in production, along with their equality and reciprocity in exchange and the fundamental political goals they share, are able to reconcile the conflicts and contradictions. As the degree of internal integration within the economic union increases, mutual assistance and cooperation will continue to be strengthened.

Fourth, the Socialist Regional Economic Union gradually eliminates the unequal division of labor and the imbalance in economic development among its member countries. There is no doubt that at its primary stage the Socialist Regional Economic Union, like the capitalist world system, faces the problem of an unequal division of labor among its countries (e.g., between countries with different levels of manufacturing, and between countries that export industrial goods and those that export mainly resources), and of a consequent imbalance between countries in their levels of development. For the world market and the capitalist world system, the unequal division of labor and uneven economic development are both a prerequisite and a consequence; the more the world market develops, the wider the gap between poor and rich countries becomes. Within the Socialist Regional Economic Union, the differences in the division of labor and the development gaps between the member countries stem from the different economic bases previously formed in each country under the capitalist world system. As a result of coordinated cooperation in the shared process of socialist development, a tendency will emerge for the level of economic development among the member countries to be equalized. The various endogenous or exogenous “comparative advantages” that create inequalities in the division of labor are not natural or immutable, and provided that the monopolistic advantages of industry required by the competition of capital are eliminated, geographical differences and imbalances (the natural division of labor) will not be transformed into an unequal structure of the division of labor (the social division of labor). In a certain sense, the elimination by the Socialist Regional Economic Union of inequalities in the internal division of labor and imbalances in economic development is also closely intertwined with the historical process through which socialist countries eliminate the imbalances in their own regional development.

The most important characteristic of the Socialist Regional Economic Union, however, is the fact that if it operates in accordance with the above principles, it necessarily creates a demand for political centralization, i.e., the need for a supranational-state center of general coordination and management. This in turn requires a restructuring of the politics and economies of the member states, so that political and economic relations

within their boundaries are organized and made to operate on the basis of more extensive spatial interests. The greater the degree of integration within the economic union, the greater the powers ceded by the member states to the political center of the union will be, until finally the political center of the union concentrates the most important governing powers in itself, and the authority of the nation-state diminishes into a quasi-local power; that is, the nation-state undergoes its demise. The tendency for the powers of the nation-state to become concentrated in larger centers of spatial governance is also present in capitalist regional economic integration. For example, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), for which the United States has pushed, would restrict the sovereignty of member states in many ways (including the transfer of some judicial sovereignty to international commercial courts). Moreover, the European Union, currently the most integrated regional economic and political union, has established sovereign supranational mechanisms for decision-making, possesses supranationally sovereign currency-issuing powers, has formulated a series of common policies, and is committed to full economic and political integration.

Capitalism, however, will never be able to eliminate the state as the unit of competition and political domination in the world system, just as the unequal structure of the division of labor among the member states of the European Union is preventing the formation of a single, large European State, and is creating a tendency to intensified internal contradictions and renewed fragmentation. The “producing nations” have lost some of their autonomy in the world market, but capital still seeks to protect the privileges that arise from its status as national capital. Further, capital needs the power of the nation-state to stabilize class relations, to provide normal conditions for accumulation at home and abroad, and to triumph over competitors in the world market. The state is still the best instrument through which big capital can open up new territories. When Wallerstein describes the prospect of a socialist world government succeeding the capitalist world system, he does not indicate how this world government might originate (Wallerstein 1998, 462). The Socialist Regional Economic Union also points toward a socialist world government, but in addition prefigures the specific path that will lead to (political) nation-states gradually dying out in the course of socialist transformations, and communism finally being attained.²²

Raising the need for a Socialist Regional Economic Union is not the same thing as realizing this requirement through an actual revolutionary movement. Regional economic integration is based on common geopolitical interests, while geopolitics is often complex and relatively unstable, and even if a new round of successful socialist revolutions occurs, these revolutions may not lead to the creation of an economic union. Nevertheless, this may be the only way in which socialism can create a global space for itself, and advance toward a new world system. Whether or not the real conditions for constructing an economic union exist, and whether or not this process is successful, it requires first the achieving of theoretical self-awareness. History has already shown that this is not a utopian vision. The wave of socialist revolutions in the mid-20th century saw the birth of the first Socialist Regional Economic Union, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. Although this involved only a very low level of economic association between socialist countries, and ultimately failed, it represented a bold preliminary exploration in this area, one that left behind valuable historical experience and lessons for the construction of future Socialist Regional Economic Unions. The spatial political economy of socialism likewise continues to advocate exploring the construction of such forms of spatial organization.

Notes

1. Immanuel Wallerstein identifies two possibilities for the capitalist world system following the end of the Cold War: either it will continue to function according to its previous model, or else sustaining the old system will become increasingly difficult. “In such a situation, a systemic crisis or fragmentation would occur and would present itself as a period of systemic disruption, the outcome of which would be uncertain.” The period of systemic disruption is seen as occurring between 2000–2025 (see Hopkins and Wallerstein 2002, 246).
2. Analyzing “space” as an independent category cannot fully explain capitalism, and remaining at the empirical factual level of “space” means that revealing the essence of capitalism in any depth is still less possible. Space is not the essence of capitalism, but a dimension to be used in examining this essence. Meanwhile, space and time cannot be separated completely. For example, “world history” is itself a dialectical unity of time and space, and as a general development, the “world market” has not only a spatial but also a temporal logic. Therefore, the emphasis on “space” in this article does not mean that “time” is unimportant, and nor does the article use “space” to negate “time.”
3. The very term “sublation” suggests that communism is both the negation of capitalism and its inheritor.
4. It must be acknowledged that “The German Ideology” was written at a time when Marx and Engels’s conception of historical materialism had only just been established, and when their understanding and experience of the proletarian revolution was still immature. Consequently, their discourses on the “communist revolution” contained many ambiguities. In 1847, Engels in his work “Principles of Communism” divided the “communist revolution” into two steps: the “political revolution of the proletariat” and “social revolution” needed to occur simultaneously in at least the major capitalist countries, while the development and realization of the social revolution would not be synchronized from country to country (Engels [1847] 2010). By 1850, Marx had explicitly recognized that the political revolution of the proletariat could break out first in relatively backward countries (see Marx [1850] 2010).
5. The theoretical logic behind Lenin’s theory of the “triumph of socialism in one country” includes the concept of the “weak link in the chain of imperialism.” The uneven development of the imperialist countries made imperialist wars inevitable, along with the intensification, in the course of the world wars, of a range of further contradictions. The appearance of weak links in the chain of imperialism then enabled breakthroughs for socialist revolution, thus making it possible for socialism to emerge in a few countries or even in one country (see Lenin [1915] 1974, [1916] 1974). Bukharin (2015, 136, 138), on the other hand, explicitly mentioned Russia as the weakest link in the capitalist world system.
6. “We can think of human societies as beginning to develop in isolation from each other, at mutually discrete points,” Li notes, going on to add:

On a global scale, human societies in eastern China and on the European, African, American and Australian continents were still at this time isolated from each other, existing at mutually discrete points, even though these points were as large as millions of square kilometers. It was not until after the 17th century, when the development of the productive forces under the capitalist system enabled human beings to connect every point on the earth, that the space for human social activities completely lost the character of mutually discrete points. (Li 2005, 399–400; translated from Chinese)

7. Marx and Engels did not provide a uniform, definitive statement concerning the specific social forms of pre-capitalist society. At various points they referred to “tribal property,” “the ancient communal and state property,” and “feudal or estate property” (Marx and Engels [1845–1846] 2010, 32–34). Marx also spoke of “Asiatic, ancient, feudal” societies (Marx 1859). The textbook version of the phrase “primitive society, slave society, feudal society, capitalist society” has its origins in Stalin’s generalization based on the thesis of Marx and Engels.

8. In historiography, whether or not a slave society existed in ancient Chinese society is a matter of great debate, since in China the slave mode of production was combined with other systems of ownership, for example, with the tribal system during the Xia Dynasty and with the system of enfeoffment under the Shang and Zhou Dynasties. A school of researchers thus exists who believe that the predecessor of feudal society in China was a clan society rather than a slave society, and that the Yin-Zhou period saw a transition from a clan society to a feudal society. Whether the social form established in China after slavery and the system of enfeoffment under the Shang and Zhou can be regarded as typical “feudal society” is also a controversial issue. The more influential viewpoints regard the seignorial economy of Western Europe and the landlord economy of China as two different forms of the feudal mode of production. It is not the intention of this article to deal with this aspect of the controversy, since the viewpoints concerned, whatever they may be, do not affect the conclusions of this article. It should be noted that Marx used the term “Asiatic mode of production” to refer to the rural commune mode of production in Asia (mainly in India); he regarded this mode as the basis of “Oriental despotism,” and sought to show that Oriental societies were different from the social formations of Western Europe. It is certain that in Marx’s view the “Asiatic mode of production,” “Oriental despotism” and the later “absolute monarchy” in Western Europe were in fact somewhat different from “feudalism.”
9. Many researchers believe that the marketization of cottage industry and the formation of a simple form of “market economy” in Britain and other parts of Western Europe began in the 13th century, well before the 15th or 16th centuries that we usually think of as the point where the transition to a (capitalist) market economy began (see Brodeur 1992, 89; North and Thomas 1999, 72–73; Xu 2008, 164–177).
10. Marx pointed out,

In the fully developed bourgeois system each economic relationship presupposes the other in a bourgeois-economic form, and everything posited is thus also a premiss, that is the case with every organic system. This organic system itself has its premisses as a totality, and its development into a totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs it still lacks. This is historically how it becomes a totality. Its becoming this totality constitutes a moment of its process, of its development. (Marx [1857–1858] 2010, 208)
11. The concept of the “producing nation” is linked to the national economy, and signifies “the state as the epitome of bourgeois society.” It thus emphasizes the special nature of the state as the embodiment of a unified national economy (Marx [1857–1858] 2010, 45).
12. In the original text, Marx and Engels posited the development of the productive forces as “an absolutely necessary practical premise” for communism, since “with *want* the struggle for necessities would begin again” and “all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored” (Marx and Engels [1845–1846] 2010, 49; italics in the original).
13. In his reply to the Russian female revolutionary Zasulich in February–March of 1881, Marx first suggested that Russia’s development could be achieved without passing through “the Caudine Forks of the capitalist system” (Marx 1963, 436). The conditions on which he based his argument were: the preservation of common ownership of land in the Russian rural commune, the complementarity of the Russian and Western European revolutions, and the application by Russia of the positive results created by the capitalist system to the commune (Marx 1963). Later Engels further clarified the prerequisites for the possibility of Russia to leap over the Caudine Forks, i.e., the victory of the proletarian revolution in Western Europe as well as the example and the active assistance it provides the Russian commune (Engels [1893] 2010, [1894] 2010).
14. For relevant literature on this debate within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), see Bukharin (1988), Stalin (1963) and Zheng (1986).
15. See https://www.cntheory.com/tbzt/sjzlzqh/ljddhgb/202110/t20211029_37381.html.

16. Trade and the division of labor can exist between socialist countries, between countries of the capitalist center, between socialist countries and developing countries, and among developing countries.
17. In a series of articles in the 1960s and 1970s Samir Amin pointed out that the industrialization strategy of “import substitution,” implemented by developing countries and aimed at achieving self-reliance, had failed to achieve a break from the unequal division of labor in the capitalist world system, and remained no more than a third stage in the evolution of the form of dependent development.
18. As a representative of the Gramscian School of international relations theory, Arrighi has done an effective job of analyzing the two sides of “hegemony” (see Arrighi 2001, 33–35).
19. Such views are more typical of the Western Left. See Harvey (2010), Hart-Landsberg and Burkett (2004), and Westad (2007, 131–133).
20. Although the statement that an international average rate of profit has not been formed between countries and regions is in this case merely a theoretical abstraction, i.e., a qualitative conclusion, empirical studies support this judgment as well (see Feng 2016).
21. Although it is impossible to describe the planned economy of the future with any precision, both the discussion of “computer socialism” that began in the 1960s and the current discussion of “big data socialism” and “platform socialism” suggest strongly that the planned economy of the information society will bear little resemblance to the highly centralized planned economy that was once practiced in the 20th century.
22. In the classical Marxist view, the “demise of the state” means that the function of the state as an instrument of class domination withers away, and that the function of managing the society’s public affairs is carried out by the society itself without any special organ or bureaucracy. However, as long as nation-states (especially nation-states with different social systems) are divided by special interests, and the external functions of the state therefore cannot be abolished, the state as a political instrument cannot die out. The demise of the nation-state is thus a logical precondition for the demise of the state.

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