

# Beyond the western world

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**Ben Selwyn**

*Kevin B Anderson, **Marx at the Margins** (University of Chicago Press, 2010), £15.00*

Frederick Engels used to remark that the struggle for socialism occurs on the political, economic and ideological plains. *Marx at the Margins* is a valuable contribution to the latter. Ever since Marx began his ruthless critique of capitalism and advocacy of a socialist alternative, he has been attacked and distorted in almost equal measure by opponents and so-called supporters of socialism. Those coming across him for the first time are subjected to a bewildering array of claims about him—that he supported European colonisation of the non-capitalist world as a means of bringing “development” to it, that his historical materialist method represented an economic determinism, where law-like economic processes determined social and historical development, that he singled out the European proletariat as the only possible leaders of the struggle for worldwide socialism, and that he ignored other forms of oppression such as racism. Such conceptions of Marx’s historical materialism were already being made by many of his followers during his lifetime, so much so that he once quipped that “all I know is that I am not a Marxist”. An example of the ways in which Marx’s historical materialism has been distorted is gleaned from an official (1963) Soviet text, *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism*, which stated that “all peoples travel what is basically the same path... The development of society proceeds through the consecutive replacement, according to definite laws, of one socio-economic function by another.”

More recently academics relatively friendly to Marxism have also criticised Marx along these lines. In his *Orientalism* the late Edward Said criticised Marx’s early writings on India, arguing that “every writer on the Orient [including Marx] saw [it] as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction and even redemption”. Said’s critique is important because he has influenced the popular school of “post-colonial studies”, which emphasises the recovery, past and present, of the voices and agency of populations of the Global South, as part of an emancipatory project to combat Western racism and imperialism. Many post-colonial studies adopt a rather caricatured version of Marx, in the vein of Said’s critique.

Socialists should be the natural allies of the this emancipatory project. However, if Marx is deemed to be part of the problem, such alliances will be weakened: Socialists would be excluded, and struggles against imperialism and racism will be denied a firm class analysis. They will often be led by actors who do not conceive of capitalism as their main enemy, and seek to make alliance with “progressive” capitalists. There is a long history of such anti-imperialist movements and their disappointing outcomes, in the second half of the 20th century. The last notable one was the South African case, where, junking their prior anti-capitalist principles in favour of alliances with domestic and international capital, the leading sections of the anti-apartheid movement now preside over a hierarchical, deeply unequal nation. That is why this book is so important.

In a wide-ranging survey Anderson reveals a fundamentally different Marx to the caricature described above. His main thesis is that the young Marx, of the *Communist Manifesto* and other early journalistic writings, was sometimes guilty of the accusations levelled at him by writers such as Said. However, as Marx matured, his views on non-Western societies changed, and, contrary to Said's claims, he became an active supporter and champion of their struggles against Western domination. Anderson argues that whilst in the 1840s Marx held "to an implicitly unilinear perspective, sometimes tinged with ethnocentrism...over time, his perspective evolved towards one that was more multilinear, leaving the future development of these societies as an open question" (p2). Perhaps most importantly, and certainly controversially, Anderson argues that while Marx is often understood as privileging the Western working class as agents of socialist transformation, his writings on non-Western societies demonstrate that he viewed the latter as partners, as catalysts, and eventually as potential leaders of the struggle for worldwide socialist transformation. Moreover, Anderson reveals a Marx who was concerned with and drew analytical and political connections between race, class and national liberation.

In his chapter on "Colonial Encounters in the 1850s" Anderson addresses head-on criticism from writers like Said, who claim that Marx adopted a Eurocentric understanding of "The Orient". Said's argument rests on Marx's statements, in newspaper articles such as "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" (1853) to the effect that "England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating." If this was all Marx wrote on India, Said's criticism would be well founded. But Anderson shows, with painstaking detail, how Marx's views on India changed rapidly. By 1857 Marx was exposing the divide and rule techniques of British rule in India where "the vital principle of British supremacy" was playing off "the antagonism of the various races, tribes, castes, creeds and sovereignties". A year later, during the huge Sepoy uprising which threatened British rule, Marx propounded a thoroughgoing anti-imperialism, noting in a letter to Engels that "India is now our best ally".

In the chapter on "Race, Class and Slavery". Anderson shows how Marx's analysis of capitalism, while focusing on English industrialisation, was located in a global context, exposing the particular racial and ethnic dimensions of capital accumulation. Marx describes how:

"English modern industry, in general, relied upon two pivots equally monstrous. The one was the potato as the only means of feeding Ireland and a great part of the English working class... The second...was the slave-grown cotton of the United States... As long as the English cotton manufacturers depended on slave-grown cotton, it could be truthfully asserted that they rested on a twofold slavery, the indirect slavery of the white man in England and the direct slavery of the black man on the other side of the Atlantic".<sup>1</sup>

Marx then describes how where workers are divided they help cement the rule of capital, but how when united they are able to change the course of world history. For example, in his discussion of working class politics Marx noted how the division of the working class in England into ethnically English and Irish sections represented a significant block on the development of a more radical and militant politics. So "every movement in England itself is crippled by the dissension with the Irish, who form a very important section of the working class in England itself". In a similar vein, in his analysis of the utility of racism for capital in the US, he noted that "labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin".

Marx also argued, however, that the First International in Britain could potentially play a central role in fostering unity within the working class: “The special task of the [First International’s] council in London is to awaken the consciousness of the English working class to the notion that, for them, the national emancipation of Ireland is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment, but the first condition of their own social emancipation.” He also understood the potential of an Irish revolution and its impacts upon the working class of England. In 1869 he wrote:

“For a long time, I believed it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy... Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland.”

For Anderson this and other writings reveal a “broader shift in his thinking, toward the notion that struggles on the periphery of capitalism could become sparks that might very well go off in advance of workers’ revolutions in the industrially developed societies” (p151).

In his analysis of the American Civil War, Anderson highlights Marx’s drawing together of the fight against slavery in North America to European class struggles. Marx was merciless in his criticism of the European heads of state that supported the Confederates and the maintenance of slavery. In his inaugural address to the First International in 1864, however, Marx stated: “It was not the wisdom of the ruling classes, but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic.” Marx conceptualised international solidarity, between European industrial workers and North American slaves, as representing a foreign policy of the nascent working class.

In the final chapter Anderson documents how, after the 1872 publication of a Russian edition of *Capital*, volume I, and its popular reception in Russia, Marx took a particularly close interest in the country’s system of agrarian village communes. While many of Marx’s followers in Russia were already adhering to an economic determinist and linear conception of history, where Russian development was supposedly destined to follow England’s, other non-Marxists in Russia (the agrarian “populists”) argued that the commune potentially represented a basis for an alternative path of human development. Marx learned Russian and studied the Russian commune in great depth. He concluded, against his orthodox followers, that the commune potentially provided the basis for a non-capitalist development path. However, against the populists, he also argued that if such a path could occur, it would have to do so based on a twin revolution, in Russia against state and capital and internationally as part of a worldwide socialist revolution. Here Marx viewed the agricultural Russian commune as the potential vanguard of the □world revolution.

Anderson’s study is meticulous, written in a clear and accessible language, and provides readers with a valuable account of the evolution of Marx’s thought. It counters the lazy caricatures of Marx put about by his enemies and supporters alike and undercuts arguments that he held to a Eurocentric, unilinear and economic determinist conception of human development.

While *Marx at the Margins* is a necessary and important book, it could, arguably, be even better. The main reason for this is that it resembles a text in the tradition of Marxology, which is concerned to establish what Marx said, when, how and why. Such issues are important, in particular when engaging in

ideological struggles over Marx's legacy, but focusing almost exclusively upon them runs the risk of sidelining broader theoretical issues. For example, what stands out in the above mentioned discussion of Marx's writings on the Russian commune is that his argument, that the commune could act as the catalyst for and beginning of a worldwide socialist revolution, resembles in some respects the case made by Leon Trotsky some two and a half decades later, during the 1905 Russian Revolution. Trotsky formulated his theory of permanent revolution to explain how economically backward Russia, which had still not experienced a bourgeois revolution, could skip economic and political stages, through a socialist revolution, without waiting for further economic development or following the path already established by advanced European states.

Whilst Lenin and much of the Bolshevik Party embraced the theory of permanent revolution in 1917, with the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy from the mid-1920s, the theory became heretical within the Marxist mainstream. Rather the "orthodox" conceptions of stagist/unilinear development, and the possibilities of socialism in one country became the official doctrine of Marxism, as reflected in the quote at the start of this review. In many respects then, Marx's writings on the Russian agrarian commune predated Trotsky's conception of permanent revolution. Of course, there was a major difference between the two. Where Marx viewed the Russian peasantry as potential revolutionary subjects, Trotsky identified the burgeoning industrial working class as the revolutionary vanguard. This is an important difference, explained in part at least by the transformations in Russia between the 1880s and the early 20th century—during which Russia underwent a massive industrialisation drive in order to attempt to "catch-up" with the advanced Western powers, and in the process created a new, militant industrial working class.

A second area where Anderson could have expanded his discussion is in his analysis of Marx's 1864 Inaugural Address to the First International. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/10/14.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/10/14.htm)  
[www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/10/27.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/10/27.htm)