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**Marx at the Margins:  
On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies  
By Kevin B. Anderson**

*Author's Reply by Kevin B. Anderson*

I am most grateful for the thoughtful reviews of *Marx at the Margins* by Dave Eden, George Karavas, and Sandra Rein, and to the editors of *Global Discourse* for publishing them. Each of the three reviewers engaged important parts of the book. Karavas focused on the book's response to postcolonial, Eden focused on capital and the value form, and Rein on the philosophical and political implications of its core arguments. Below I will respond briefly to the issues raised by the three reviews.

Karavas points to two major themes of the book, Marx's trajectory toward a more multilinear view of non-Western societies like India and Russia, and his consideration of ethnicity and race alongside class. Here, Karavas has accurately rendered the book's major themes. As he also noted, the interpretations of Marx put forth in *Marx at the Margins* are at variance with currently dominant views of Marx in academic and intellectual circles.

In terms of changes in Marx's views on non-Western societies, Karavas writes that in his last years, "Communal forms of property relations in non-capitalist societies became a subject of interest as it became evident that other societies contained unique approaches to resisting bourgeois forms of property ownership and the possibility for a direct transition to communism." While this is a generally accurate rendition of my argument, it passes over some nuances that I think are important, not only for my book, but also for a clearer understanding of Marx's work. As I argue in *Marx at the Margins*, Marx was in fact concerned with Asian and Russian communal social relations from his earliest writings on these societies, in the 1850s, and not only during his last decade, 1872-83.

What changed between these two periods was Marx's interpretation of these communal social relations. At the time of his much-criticized 1853 writings on India, he portrayed communal social forms as the foundation of what he called "Oriental despotism." The more collectivist social relations found in these societies at the village level, he argued, created a very restrictive control by the village community – and above it, the state – over the individual. Already in the *Grundrisse* in 1857-58, however, he was beginning to see this differently, now characterizing communal forms as either despotic or democratic.

But in his last writings on communal social relations, Marx increasingly pointed to elements therein that might help to create a positive alternative to capitalism. Thus, in the 1880s, just before his death, he wrote that the Russian village, with its communal social organization, might be able to avoid the encroachments of capitalist modernity by (1) revolutionizing itself and overthrowing the landowner-based Tsarist autocracy and (2) linking up with leftist movements in the West. In this way, Russia might not have to undergo the brutal process of primitive accumulation of capital sketched in the last part of *Capital*, Vol. I in terms of the fate suffered by

the premodern Western European village. Marx was not defending communal social relations in their existing forms in an unqualified fashion, however. For he also argued that they needed to be revolutionized from within and linked to the technological achievements of modernity from without. In this way, these indigenous social forms, and the defense of them against capitalist encroachment, could form the starting point for a wider communist transformation that would involve both large agrarian societies like India or Russia, and the revolutionary labor movements of already industrializing ones like Britain, Germany, or France.

Karavas also raises the issue of the book's engagement with Marx's critics. Here too, he accurately portrays *Marx at the Margins* as an attempt to respond to critics of Marx's writings on Asia and on nationalism/ethnicity. Karavas is of course correct to argue that on the first issue, critiques of his writings on Asia and especially India, the book concentrates on Edward Said rather than numerous other postcolonial and postmodern thinkers. In this case, it was felt that Said's interpretation had by the 21st century become almost canonical, and thus his work could be taken as the exemplar for these traditions.

In the case of Marx on nationalism, there was no single critic who towered over the others in the manner of Said, but here, the resistance to the kind of argument *Marx at the Margins* was making has been even more determined and persistent. In textual terms, much of the critique of Marx on nationalism centers on his early -- and sometimes ethnocentric -- disparagement of some of the Slavic societies of Eastern Europe and the Balkans as "unhistoric" nations. A possible factor contributing to the persistence and nearly hegemonic character of the critique of Marx on nationalism in recent decades could be found in the fact that there has been no large constituency supportive of Marxism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans in recent decades, far from it. In contrast, consider the Saidian critique of Marx, which has been strongly contested from the beginning. Part of this difference in terms of the intellectual status of the critique of Marx in these two respective situations probably lies in the fact that a rather large and vocal Marxist constituency continues to exist in places like India, where prominent thinkers like Aijaz Ahmad strongly challenged Said's critiques of Marx.

A second factor in the persistence of the attacks on Marx on nationalism is a certain commonsense view that Marx would have had little of value to say about nationalism, given his focus on the class divisions within nations and on proletarian internationalism.

All of this has resulted in many cavalier dismissals of Marx's writings on nationalism and ethnicity as a whole. One prominent -- and somewhat embarrassing -- example, not mentioned in *Marx at the Margins*, could be found in Anthony Giddens's study of the nation state, in which he quickly dispatched Marx: "It is manifestly the case that Marx paid little attention to the nature and impact of nationalism, and the comments he does make are mostly neither instructive nor profound" (1987: 212). In a gesture that suggested a surprisingly careless use of scholarly sources, Giddens cited Solomon Bloom's important early work on the subject, *The World of Nations: A Study of the National Implications of the Thought of Karl Marx* (1941), as the sole source for his peremptory declaration about Marx. But Bloom's view of the significance of Marx's writings on nationalism ran exactly in the opposite direction of Giddens's declaration. For example, Bloom had concluded his work with the statement that despite some limitations, "Marx's contribution to the national question was more concrete than has been generally recognized. His positive

attitude toward nationality was in itself sufficient to set him apart from many another radical thinker and leader” (1941, p. 204). In his bibliography, Giddens cites Bloom, but none of Marx’s actual writings on nationalism or ethnicity.

A study of Marx’s writings on national emancipation, especially concerning Poland and Ireland, shows fairly easily that he was able to grasp the importance of the key revolutionary nationalist movements of his time and their relationship to the wider European and North American socialist and labor movements of his time. As I tried to demonstrate in *Marx at the Margins*, these national issues were not side points for Marx, but at the core of his debates and controversies with rival socialist tendencies (mainly Proudhonist and Bakuninist) during the early years of the First International. In *Marx at the Margins*, I did try to respond to serious scholarly critiques of Marx on nationalism and ethnicity such as those by Ephraim Nimni (1994), who carried out a textual analysis of Marx’s voluminous writings on nationalism. I generally eschewed reference to the kinds of peremptory (and textually unsupported) critiques of those like Giddens, who seem to get a free pass so long as their target is Marx.

Marx’s alleged failure to come to grips with nationalism and ethnicity is unfortunately a stubbornly held view, one that persists among many scholars trained in earlier generations. However, I think ground is shifting here, as seen in the appearance of a number of recent high-quality studies in this area that preceded *Marx at the Margins*, among them those by Erica Benner (1995), Michael Löwy (1998), and August Nimtz (2000; 2003). I am glad that Karavas raises these issues in his review, which will likely remain important in the debate over Marx’s theorizing for some time to come.

Dave Eden’s review concentrates on the chapter in *Marx at the Margins* on *Capital*, *Grundrisse*, and Marx’s other critiques of political economy. This chapter was especially important in the composition of the book, because it was central to the argument that the topics of nationalism, ethnicity, and non-Western societies were not confined to Marx’s journalism and his notebooks, but also found their way into what are usually recognized as his core writings. I am glad that Eden acknowledges the importance of the French edition of *Capital* and other evidence of Marx’s openness and of his moves toward a more multilinear perspective in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere in his critique of political economy.

At one point in his review, Eden criticizes the way in which “Anderson’s reconstruction of Marx’s comparison of capitalist and non-capitalist societies focuses” on the issue of “how labour is organised.” This is an accurate description of my approach, but I am puzzled as to why Eden sees it as problematic. Here and elsewhere in my writings -- and in this regard following in the tradition of those like Raya Dunayevskaya and C.L.R. James -- I have tried to focus on the nature of a given society’s production relations as the key determinant of whether it was capitalist or not. (Thus, I have considered the former Soviet Union and Maoist China to be state capitalist, given the nature of economic production in those societies and despite the fact that they lacked private property in the means of production, let alone stock exchanges.) In this sense, alienated or fetishized labor, where relations between human beings at the point of production are typically thingified or reified, as Marx discussed in the first chapter of *Capital*, are the hallmark of capitalism and only capitalism.

Precapitalist social relations, even when brutally oppressive, did not generally take on this particular form. Thus, in the same fetishism section of *Capital*, Marx

contrasts modern fetishized social relations with those of medieval Europe, which were both openly exploitative and marked by personal dependence. As noted in *Marx at the Margins*, this language contrasting capitalist modernity with the medieval village was added after the first German edition of 1867.

Eden's second critique concerns the role of money and its relationship to "fetishized relations in the form of value." Again, I think that Marx states pretty clearly in both *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* that the money form -- or the various forms and roles that money takes on -- are ultimately epiphenomenal as against the form of production relations of a given society.

Eden goes on to write: "What Marx argued is that money throughout the history of class society works to dissolve social relations. Capitalism is both the success of this dissolution and the reorganisation of society on the basis of the accumulation of value which appears as money." I agree, at least in part, especially with the first sentence. As Marx writes in numerous places, including his late notebooks on the Greco-Roman world, India, and other precapitalist societies, the money relation dissolves earlier social relations. These were societies where money and merchant's capital were extremely prominent. Yet at the same time, as Marx saw it, these were not societies where social relations based on money were dominant; instead, older social relationships based upon large-scale landed property, which could normally not be bought and sold for money, predominated even in those precapitalist societies like Rome that seemed to have gone the furthest toward capitalism.

For Marx, especially in his last years, these were terribly important questions, not so much in terms of the history of class society in any academic sense, but in terms of the contemporary relevance of these questions for the global project of communist revolution. First, there was the fact that at the end of his life, 1877-82, Marx's research notebooks and other writings suggest that he had become increasingly concerned with non-Western societies like Russia and India, the impact upon them of capitalist social relations, and their prospects for revolution. (After the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, he was evidently searching for revolutionary possibilities outside Western Europe, especially given the fact that the most widely discussed edition anywhere of *Capital*, Vol. I, was the Russian edition, first published in 1872.) During this same period, in addition to studying India closely and making voluminous notes on Russia (during which time he gained a working knowledge of the Russian language), he also made extensive notes on ancient Rome, still unpublished. This was also the period in which Russian revolutionaries were asking him whether Russia was destined inevitably to go through the process of brutal uprooting of the peasantry that Marx had outlined in his description of early modern Western Europe, primarily England, in the section of *Capital* on "primitive accumulation." At the time, the leading revolutionary movement in Russia was Populism, rooted in students and intellectuals who sought to make a Russian revolution in the villages of that still overwhelmingly rural country.

It was at this point that Marx wrote to his Russian supporters that he had not sought to develop in *Capital* a general theory of history for all times and places. To illustrate what he meant, he gave the example of ancient Rome, which, like Russia in the 1870s, had developed some of the features of a modern capitalist society:

At various points in *Capital*, I have alluded to the fate that befell the plebeians of ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants, each tilling his own plot

on his own behalf. In the course of Roman history they were expropriated. The same movement that divorced them from their means of production and subsistence involved the formation not only of large landed property but also of big money capitals. Thus one fine morning there were, on the one side, free men stripped of everything but their labor-power, and on the other, in order to exploit their labor, owners of all the acquired wealth. What happened? The Roman proletarians became, not wage-laborers, but an idle 'mob' more abject than those who used to be called *poor whites* of the southern United States; and what unfolded alongside them was not a capitalist but a slave mode of production. (Shanin 1983, p. 136)

Thus, for Marx, the differences between ancient Rome and modern capitalism outweighed the similarities. As to Russia and India in the 1870s, countries that had each -- in different ways -- experienced capitalist penetration but in each of which communal social relations (as Marx saw it) continued to dominate village life, the implication was that these societies might not go the way of modern capitalism, that their future was somewhat open on that score. Thus, while I certainly agree with Eden's notion -- as he puts it, following Marx's language in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere -- that the acidic character of money everywhere undermines ancient communities, I am concerned that too great an emphasis on such formulations by Marx runs the danger of, at least by implication, interpreting Marx as having developed a universal (and therefore ahistorical) theory of money and value.

A second key issue, raised directly by Eden, concerns the role of force in the global spread of capitalist domination: "But what is not present in Anderson's work is the understanding that the role that fetishized relations in the form of value, in the form of money, plays in the transformation from pre-capitalist to capitalist society. This is not to down play the role that violence takes in colonisation, but rather identifies a special quality of capitalism." Again, I would argue that the core transformation that makes a society capitalist is the transformation of labor into a specific form of labor power in which social relations at the point of production are reified or fetishized, not the domination of money capital. Clearly, while trade and money are not without importance for Marx, nor is the force used by capitalist countries to open up other societies as part of the creation of a world market.

Already in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels, in a passage tinged with an unfortunate ethnocentrism, wrote: "The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of the foreigners to capitulate" (1976, p. 488). Here the stress was on how the unparalleled productivity of capitalist industry overwhelmed less efficient, precapitalist forms. But by the time of *Capital*, Vol. I, Marx gave far greater stress to the role of violence and warfare in the establishment of capitalist relations. The immediate context was the primitive accumulation of capital in early modern Britain, as peasants saw their possessory landholdings expropriated, but the language Marx used suggests that he was considering developments beyond Britain's shores as a key component of this process: "In actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, place the greatest part" (1977, p. 874). Was this a change of position, or at least of emphasis, on Marx's part? I would tend toward the affirmative here, seeing this as an example of Marx's intensifying critique of capitalism as his work developed, whereby earlier language about the progressiveness of capitalism assumed a far less prominent place.

Of course, he never advocated a return to or a defense of precapitalist social relations, but the change of tone is evident in *Capital* when compared to the *Communist Manifesto*, or even the *Grundrisse*. Because of this, I would give somewhat greater weight to the role of force in the establishment and spread across the globe (and maintenance afterwards) of capitalist social relations.

Of course, once those relations are established, the value form kicks in with full force, but not until then. I believe that that is why Marx altered in the French edition a key sentence in *Capital* -- “the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future” (Marx 1977, p. 91) -- by adding the qualifier, “to those that follow it on the industrial path” (Marx 1985, p. 36). At the same time, I think that twentieth-century Marxism gave too much weight to the political dimension, and I therefore cannot disagree with Eden’s conclusion: “The critique of value needs to return to the centre stage of anticapitalist thought.”

Nonetheless, I think the political and social dimension, especially when it concerns oppressed people struggling for their emancipation, cannot be left aside in any Marxist analysis that would aspire to play a part in a real change in the human condition, especially when one considers the revolutionary year 2011, which is still unfolding at the time of this writing. This takes us to Sandra Rein’s review, which stressed both philosophical and political aspects of *Marx at the Margins*.

Rein concludes her review by asking about the book’s socio-political implications for today. She calls attention to the importance of “the intersectionality of race, class, ethnicity, and gender today” as a theme prominent in this work’s interpretation of Marx, and its relation to real problems like racialized prisonization inside the U.S. or the continued importance of national autonomy in global politics. Here, as I wrote in the book’s conclusion, there are some fairly clear connections between Marx’s writings in the nineteenth century and the racialized capitalism we continue to face today. Moreover, the ways in which the Arab revolutions of 2011 helped to touch off some very serious protest movements in a number of industrially more developed countries, helps to show how Marx’s insights into the relationship of the Irish or Polish independence movements to labor inside Britain, Germany, or the U.S. remain very actual even 150 years later. As *Marx at the Margins* stresses, Marx’s support for movements against racial, ethnic, and national oppression was never separated from the critique of capital, something that has been lacking in many radical social movements since the 1980s. This has changed somewhat since Seattle 1999 and especially the economic crisis of 2008, which is one reason why the relationship of Marx’s thought to nationalism, race, and ethnicity seems to be an issue worth discussing today.

Rein also notes -- in a tone that may indicate at least a slight disappointment -- the suggestion in the conclusion, as she puts it, “that the communal forms (of precapitalist Russia and India, in particular) have generally disappeared since Marx’s time” and that therefore these writings by Marx have today more of a heuristic importance in terms of his dialectical theory of social change and revolution than any concrete application. As also noted in that conclusion, in Marx’s time, agrarian societies with communal social relations in the villages formed a major part of the world’s population, perhaps even a majority. Today, communal social relations in forms similar to those discussed by Marx in nineteenth-century India and Russia can be found only in a few places: Bolivia, Chiapas, the highlands of Guatemala, and a few other areas in the Global South.

But Rein's concern -- and she is not the first to raise it since the book's publication -- also leads me to a series of questions not addressed explicitly in the conclusion to *Marx at the Margins*. I think I could now add the following: Despite their much diminished geographic sweep since Marx's time, vestiges of these earlier communal social relations continue to impact society, even once the peasants who had once lived under them migrate to urban areas, or even go abroad to Western Europe or North America. Moreover, memories of those social relations can continue long after even their vestiges have become very faint. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, size is not the only determinant of a social formation's political or social importance. To take one prominent example, we have already seen over the past two decades how the struggle in Chiapas, a tiny, impoverished part of Mexico, helped to touch off a very wide social movement across Mexico (and beyond) that challenged not only the established political parties, but also the Mexican and the international left, forcing it to rethink many of its basic premises.

Rein also alludes to the philosophical foundations of *Marx at the Margins* by discussing the writings of the Marxist humanist and feminist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya, my intellectual mentor and to whom I dedicated the book (along with another pioneering scholar of Marx on non-Western societies, Lawrence Krader). I would like to take the opportunity afforded by Rein's comments to address in more detail the relationship of *Marx at the Margins* to Dunayevskaya's work.

First, I would like to note that Dunayevskaya's concept of dialectic, while deeply Hegelian, avoided the trap of creating a grand totality into which all forms of difference and particularity would be collapsed. To the contrary, she stressed the ceaseless movement of the power of negativity, an issue I have explored elsewhere in the introductions to two different edited collections of her writings on dialectics (Dunayevskaya 2002; 2012). This was of course very different from the grand narrative style of much of Marxism, so often pilloried nowadays.

Second, while these kinds of methodological issues formed part of the background of *Marx at the Margins*, as Rein notes, Dunayevskaya also carried out some very specific, substantive work on the issues covered in my book in her *Rosa Luxemburg Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (1982, see also Dunayevskaya 1985). To be sure, Krader was the first to transcribe and discuss seriously a good many of Marx's 1879-82 notebooks on non-Western and precapitalist societies and gender (Marx 1972), something the Russian Stalinists never did. But it was Dunayevskaya's work that connected these late Marx writings to fundamental problems of Marxism in the late twentieth century. Among these were the relationship of technologically underdeveloped societies to the core capitalist ones, that of national liberation to working class emancipation, and that of gender to class. In developing these issues, Dunayevskaya did not shy away from criticizing Marx's most important colleague, Engels. While she shared much of Georg Lukács's earlier critique -- in *History and Class Consciousness* -- of Engels's somewhat mechanical materialism, a materialism that equated the dialectic to the experimental method of natural science, her own critique of Engels emphasized something else. It revolved around the novel argument that Marx's 1880-82 *Ethnological Notebooks* -- a major source for Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* -- showed a more nuanced view of the relationship of gender to class and to property than had Engels's rather deterministic and economically reductionist book.

In these ways, Dunayevskaya made the writings of the late Marx come alive for a new generation. I am proud of the fact that during this period, my early work on



the French edition of *Capital* (Anderson 1983), a project she suggested to me, was of at least some assistance to her in conceptualizing the contours of Marx's last decade, although my little project was assuredly of much greater importance for my own development as a student of Marx.

In sum, Rein's review has pushed me to consider some issues not addressed as directly or as fully in *Marx at the Margins*, whether on the contemporary relevance of Marx's discussions of the revolutionary potential of societies where communal social forms still predominated, or on issues of dialectical methodology and the relationship of the book to Dunayevskaya's work.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that I was most glad to read the three serious reviews of *Marx at the Margins* that are part of this symposium. It is to be hoped that the debate over the kinds of issues raised in the book -- and in this symposium -- will continue, as I think that it has not only a scholarly importance, but also some bearing on whether a new generation that is resisting capital in increasingly determined fashion will have a deep and lasting encounter with the writings of the greatest critic of capitalism, Karl Marx.

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