

Chris Nineham reviews *Marx at the Margins*, which reveals Marx and Engels as pioneers in the struggle against colonialism and racism.



Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (University of Chicago Press 2010), xi, 319pp.

Marx at the Margins very successfully defends Marx and Engels against claims that their analysis of capitalism was economistic and Eurocentric. The charge that the founders of Marxism downplayed politics and reduced history to economic issues is common. It normally comes from the right wing, but has been taken up over the years by various figures on the left, including notably Edward Said. Said argued that Marx ignored the importance of colonialism, race and identity in the making of the modern world.

The connected accusation of Eurocentrism is partly based on a few instances of questionable language used by Marx and Engels. It is sustained however by the argument that Marx saw development through the prism of Western experience, that he predicted the rest of the world would pass through the same stages of development as Europe in what Anderson calls a 'unilinear' way. Anderson does not just deal convincingly with these charges, he establishes that the truth is the very opposite. He shows that Marx was a pioneer of anti-imperialism, and a champion of political causes that many on the left ignored. Both their writings and the political record show that Marx and Engels believed the struggle for democracy and national liberation were crucial components in the struggle for human emancipation.

The case for Marx's Eurocentrism rests partly on a reading of the *Communist Manifesto*. The first part of the manifesto famously describes some of the achievements of capitalism; the way it overcomes isolation, brings technological advance and generates an historically unparalleled surplus. In a condescending phrase Marx argues capitalism draws 'even the most barbarian nations in to civilisation' (p.9). Occasional slips like this show Marx did not always find the language to distance himself from the prejudices that surrounded him, but they tell us nothing of much use about his politics.

The *Manifesto* has a two-sided take on capitalism. As Anderson notes Marx leaves *all* his criticisms of capitalism to the second half of the book. It would be absurd to see the *Manifesto*, calling as it does for the system's overthrow, as an apology for any aspect of that system. If there is a weakness it is one of omission: Marx does not describe the specific degradations of colonialism.

The second source of criticism is Marx's early 1850s writing on India. Edward Said has particularly taken Marx to task for his apparent softness on the civilising tendencies of

British colonialism in Marx's essay *The British Rule in India*. Others like Aijaz Ahmed, however, have criticised Said's 'postmodern kind of anti-colonialism' (p.22), and argued that it ignored the need to challenge caste oppression, something that Marx and other progressive Indians supported. As Marx became more engaged with the question of development, his position quickly became more dialectical. In 1853, the same year he wrote *The British Rule in India*, Marx wrote in another essay the following:

The Indians will not reap the benefits of the new elements of society scattered amongst them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindoos themselves have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether (*The Future Results of British Rule in India*, cited p.23).

As Irfan Habib argues, these lines show Marx not just setting the emancipation of colonial peoples as an objective for British workers, remarkable enough for the time, but also suggests he thought Indian national liberation might come before the emancipation of the European working classes. 'Such insight and vision' argues Habib, 'could come from Marx and Marx alone' (p.23).

Marx's subsequent writing on India shows a growing indignation at the horrors of colonialism but also a sense of the interdependence of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles elsewhere. In 1858, after the great Sepoy Rebellion that shook the colonial administration, Marx wrote in a remarkable letter to Engels in the same year, that 'India is now our best ally' (p.41). Anderson documents in great detail the fact that Marx and Engels energetically supported the struggles of oppressed people all around the world. Such support was not just an add-on to an essentially class or economics-based worldview. The liberation of the Polish people and other oppressed nationalities in Russia, for example, was a central part of Marx's strategic thinking. He saw their defeat in 1864 as a historic blow: 'The suppression of the Polish insurrection and the annexation of the Caucasus, I regard as the two most important events to have taken place in Europe since 1815' (p.66).

Similarly, Marx was a fervent supporter of the struggle against slavery in the US and elsewhere, and was particularly excited by resistance amongst slaves themselves. In another letter to Engels he wrote: 'In my view, the most momentous thing happening in the world today is, on the one hand, the movement among the slaves in America, started by the death of Brown, and the movement among the slaves in Russia' (p.85). It was actually under the impact of the American Civil War, the movement in Europe in support of abolition, and the Polish insurrection that the First International was created. In the International's inaugural address Marx makes the point that it was protests against intervention by the working classes of England that stopped 'the West of Europe from plunging headlong in to an infamous crusade for the perpetuation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic' (p.108).

The charge that Marx imposed Western development models turns out to be a travesty as well. Examining in detail some of Marx's neglected journalism and notebooks, Anderson shows that Marx spent a huge amount of time and energy studying the specifics of social relations and the particular prospects for development in India and Russia and North Africa. Marx actually suggested the possibility of unique developmental paths from communal agricultural forms to socialism in Russia (in tandem with the struggles of the European working class). He

polemicised against other writers who believed feudal relations dominated in Asia. Marx argued for the existence of a different formation, an 'Asiatic mode' with no analogue in Western history.

There has been a lot of criticism of this notion, but Anderson explains that Marx's view of the Asiatic mode and communal relations in India were complex and changing. While in his early essays for example he judged communal forms in the Indian village as the basis for 'Oriental Despotism', by the time he wrote the *Grundrisse* in 1857 he viewed them more sympathetically as a counterpoint to the disempowered and atomized state of the modern working class. Later, he suggested the destruction of communal relations could become a flashpoint of resistance to encroaching capitalism.

Marx's support for national self-determination and his hopes for path-breaking leaps in the underdeveloped world were not accidental. They flowed from his hostility to capitalism as a whole. His tireless campaigning against the British occupation of Ireland, for example, was linked to the struggle for class unity in Britain. He argued the task of the General Council of the International in London was 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 of humanitarian sentiment, but the first condition of their own social emancipation' (p.150). It was precisely because he was a revolutionary dedicated to the root and branch overthrow of the system that he welcomed and supported any movement that challenged the power of its main protagonists.

Exactly the opposite of the caricature then, is true. Far from leading him to productivism or a mechanical theory of predetermined stages, Marx's analysis led him to a deep understanding of the contradictions and destabilising unevenness of capitalist development, and to welcome every rebellion more consistently and enthusiastically than any other western contemporary. Marx and Engels fought battles in the movement at the time for this kind of political, global approach, against those like Proudhon who wanted to reduce the movement to the spontaneous class struggle.

In his inaugural address to the International, Marx argued that the struggle against slavery, the Polish insurrection and the Russian occupation of the Caucasus have 'taught the working classes the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics... the fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes' (p.67).

Anderson's book is important not just as a refutation of views hostile to Marx on the right and left. His understanding of Marxism helps us counter economism on the Marxist left itself, and to chart our way forward in a complex global situation. To this day there is a tendency to downplay the importance of struggles against imperialism and struggles for democracy, and to focus on a narrowly defined class struggle. Our world is shaped by democratic revolution and imperialist war. Just as in Marx's day, for instance, racism and division at home are linked to overseas occupation. Our movement needs a 'foreign policy' as part of our own struggle for emancipation.