

Marx at the margins: on nationalism, ethnicity, and non-western societies, by Kevin B. Anderson, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2010, 319 pp., £14.50, ISBN 978 0 2260 1983 3

Socialist critics in the field of postcolonial studies routinely lament the field's relative inattention to the unrelenting and possibly even intensifying reality of colonial power, exploitation and imperialist war. One reason why more attention is not given to the unarguable facts of war and exploitation is that, for a variety of theoretical and political reasons, Marxism is out of fashion. For wasn't Marx Eurocentric? Wedded to the idea that world history reveals a unilinear model of economic development whereby all societies travel in the same direction and obey the same impersonal laws? Don't Marx's notorious writings on India show him to be, as Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, a typical nabob who attributed progress and historical agency to European power and mere backwardness and passivity to the wretched natives festering until the Britishers arrived in an everlasting, caste-ridden "Oriental despotism"? Kevin Anderson's engrossing and exhaustive study shows indisputably that this is not even close to the truth.

Anderson shows conclusively that by 1853 Marx saw the British colonization of India as a form of "barbarism" that deserved to be overthrown by an Indian independence movement. Communal property relations in India were seen, dialectically, not just as a prop of despotism but as a potentially democratic social form. Marx's late ethnographic studies of Russia, Algeria, Java and Latin America stress the possibility that communal forms in relatively under-developed parts of the globe constituted sites of anti-colonial resistance and might even form the starting points of independent, non-capitalist paths to social and economic development. But radical transformation on the basis of, say, Russia's social communes would also require the aid and solidarity of revolutionary movements in Western Europe. Marx's internationalism also manifested itself in his fervent support for the North in the American Civil War. This incident proves, furthermore, that the intersections of class and race did not fall outside his main concerns or core concepts. The political consciousness of enslaved black labourers was a crucial factor in the North's victory, Marx argued. And British workers' unstinting support for the cause, despite the considerable hardship brought about by the North's blockade on Southern cotton, was an early example of the labour movement's potentially international dimensions, something also attested by the International Working Men's Association itself, of which Marx was the chief organizer and theorist. Moreover, the Civil War showed that white racism was dividing and therefore holding back the whole working-class movement, a theme that crops up repeatedly in his and Engels's writings on Ireland. Marx also warned, very presciently, of the consequences of the failure to grant full social and political rights to emancipated slaves. In relation to Ireland, Marx

worried that resentment at Irish immigrant labour was exacerbating divisions within the British labour movement. In addition, Ireland's exported agricultural surplus and the use of its people as a kind of reserve labour pool were powering and sustaining British capitalism. Irish independence was the solution: a nationalist project allied to an internationalist goal.

Anderson shows meticulously how all of these themes – fierce hostility to capitalism and its inseparability from colonialism, internationalism, sensitivity to the relationship between class and race, a faith in multi-linear paths to development, and the conviction that “every acquisition of a nation by a nation is injurious to the liberty of both” (Marx, qtd 143) – found their way into *Capital*, particularly the 1872–75 French edition, the last one Marx prepared for publication. Of course, as Anderson acknowledges, Marx was not a postmodern philosopher of difference. The totality of capitalism was his target, along with the suffering it brings in train. Alas, we inhabit a system that expropriates our labour, distorts our thoughts and bodies, and which for the sake of profit spreads its net ever more widely across the face of the earth. Anderson's exceptional book makes its case for Marxism's relevance with patience, clarity and rigour as well as decisiveness. He leaves us convinced that a politics determined to ally class with race, nationality and ethnicity in the struggle against imperialism would do well to look again at the work of the founder of this immensely rich intellectual and political tradition. Read this; and then read *Capital*.

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