

Marx at the Margins: Response to Reviewers

[Author's last version of my response to a symposium in *Dialectical Anthropology* (published online spring 2015) on *Marx at the Margins: Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*. The symposium featured these essays: Aijaz Ahmad (India), "Karl Marx, Global Theorist," David Norman Smith (USA), "Prometheus Unchained, Marx's Abolitionism," Michal Buchowski (Poland), "Marx for Poles," and Eamonn Slater (Ireland), "Marx on Ireland and Its Dialectical Moments." In keeping with University of California's open access policy, I am putting this online now. The other essays may not yet be accessible by open access, but they have appeared in the online version of the journal are available through some libraries.]

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It is extremely gratifying to read four reviews of *Marx at the Margins* by noted Marx scholars who are also specialists in several of the major geographic areas taken up in the book, from India, to Ireland, to Poland and Russia, and lastly, to the U.S.

Let me begin with David Norman Smith's response, which links in a new way Marx's conceptualization of the struggle against slavery and racism to that for the abolition of the wage system, and therefore of capitalism. As Smith writes, Marx was "an abolitionist in a dual sense. He called equally for the abolition of slavery and capitalism -- and in nearly identical terms." From today's vantage point, the first form of abolition sounds almost like a given and the second one visionary in the extreme. As Smith reminds us, however, in the nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery was also a deeply radical position. Both of these forms of abolition or emancipation seemed utopian in 1861, as the Civil War in the U.S. began around narrow questions of preserving or shattering the Union, and whether slavery would be maintained as is or allowed to expand into new territories that would become states. But as Marx argued as early as 1861, and Smith notes, the total abolition of slavery would be pushed to the forefront by the logic of events. It certainly was, as was the incorporation of Black volunteers into the armies of the North, and the granting of full

citizenship rights to the former slaves. To be sure, the abolition of slavery in early 1865 without compensation to the slaveowners constituted a vast expropriation of capitalist private property, here in contrast to the British emancipation, which richly compensated the slaveowning class at public expense. But an equally momentous change at the economic level was only posed rather than enacted, one that would have gone much further, the breakup of the old slave plantations and the ceding of substantial plots of land (forty acres and a mule) to the newly emancipated and enfranchised former slaves.

As Smith also shows, the very language of abolition also permeated the way in which Marx formulated the ultimate goal of the workers' movement, whether as abolition of class rule, of the wage system, or of the rule of capital itself. Similarly to the struggle against slavery, the workers' struggle for a better life would, as Marx saw it, be forced by the logic of events not to stop at the raising of wages or the shortening of the workweek, and to move on to the abolition of class rule, of the wage system, and of capitalism itself. Thus, as Smith notes, Marx's 1871 pamphlet about the Paris Commune, written in English, alludes to the U.S. Civil War in its very title, "The Civil War in France." There, Marx intoned that the Paris Commune, with its decentralized form of government and with its abolition – that word again – of the standing army and the police in favor of an armed and self-organized citizenry, had approached the horizon of communism. It was nothing short of – again that word "emancipation" – "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour" ([1871] 1986, p. 334).

Michal Buchowski's response treats of another type of emancipation, national emancipation. Opposition to nationalism has come to the fore of late within progressive and critical thought, whether as opposition to U.S. or other imperialist forms of nationalism, or as a critique of the limitations of national liberation movements once in power, especially in the wake of the revolutionary promise that anti-colonial national liberation movements carried with them in the 1960s, and that was so often betrayed. But it behooves us to remember that certain national causes, certain struggles for national emancipation, remain with us and could become more widespread again. For example, those all over the world who demonstrated against yet another Israeli war on Gaza in summer 2014 were for the most part also supporting the

Palestinian national liberation movement, a cause that has become almost universally supported on the left. Something similar took place in the nineteenth century, when hardly a revolutionary movement broke out anywhere that did not support the restoration of Polish national independence from under Russian-Prussian-Austrian rule, and that did not, as Marx wrote concerning the Paris Commune, number Polish exiles among its participants.

As Buchowski notes, Marx's Polish enthusiasms were accompanied by fierce denunciations of Russia as Europe's most reactionary power, an implacable enemy of democracy and revolution. In the 1850s, Marx added to this a sometimes-stereotypical portrait of Russian society itself, including its working people, the peasantry, whom he regarded, in Buchowski's words, as "incapable of self-emancipation." As Buchowski also notes, Marx changed his attitude toward the Russian people – but not its government – beginning in 1858 with the rural unrest that accompanied the Tsar's plan to emancipate the peasants from serfdom. This led by the 1880s to an embrace of the Russian communal village as a possible starting point for a global communist revolution, should it be able to link up with the workers movement in Western Europe.

From Marx's writings of the 1840s onward, Poland was seen as a thorn in the side of Russia, as an obstacle to the counter-revolutionary schemes of its rulers. Many of Marx's writings on Poland were linked to his attacks on Russia, while others chided Western European revolutionaries, let alone heads of state, for having betrayed Poland again and again. As Buchowski also points out, none of these writings went into much detail concerning Poland's internal social structure, let alone explored the different effects of more modern Prussian rule from that of Russia or Austria. I certainly agree with Buchowski that it is a sad irony that Marx, one of Poland's greatest supporters of the nineteenth century, is today so widely rejected there today because of the horrors that those who operated in his name visited upon Poland in the twentieth century. But as these memories recede and Poland continues to experience capitalism in its contemporary form, some are sure to take issue with that mode of production and in doing so they will be bound to come into contact with Marx's work.

Aijaz Ahmad's response takes us still further from the Western European "center" to the "periphery," India. While Marx's writings on Poland have been

ignored or dismissed, those on India have inspired fierce controversies that persist to this day, as exemplified in Edward Said's attack on Marx's *Tribune* writings on India as "Orientalist" in a pejorative sense, and by Aijaz Ahmad's own implacable and usually on target rebuttal not only of Said on Marx on India, but also of Said's overall theoretical orientation (Ahmad 1992). Moreover, dozens and dozens of other Indian intellectuals have engaged with Marx's India writings, usually in their defense.

I particularly appreciated Ahmad's careful parsing of the argument of *Marx at the Margins*, including in a number of areas somewhat removed from India as such. Let me mention two examples. First, I was extremely gratified to read that Ahmad supports the argument – still controversial in some quarters – that the 1872-75 French edition of *Capital*, Vol. I contains important formulations that still need to be consulted by scholars. This edition was the last one that Marx personally prepared for publication. For the purposes of *Marx at the Margins*, the French edition featured two important passages where Marx explicitly limited to Western Europe his prognostication about other societies necessarily following the general contours of British development, including the expropriation of the peasantry, their reduction to wage laborers, and the founding of commercial agricultural units on a large scale. He never did so explicitly in other editions of *Capital*, most prominent among them the "standard" version prepared by Engels after Marx's death, mostly on the basis of the earlier German editions. That Engels edition of 1890 is the basis even today for most editions of *Capital* I, including all present English ones.

Second, I applaud Ahmad's discussion of Marx's late writings on communal social forms in Russia and elsewhere in terms of the prospects for world revolution. Here, he takes a balanced position, appreciating the fact that while Marx saw a peasant revolution based upon the Russian communal village as a possible starting point for a Russian revolution, this formulation was conditional, not straightforward. For Marx also, as mentioned above, argued that such a revolution could reach toward communism in the positive sense only if these struggles of Russian peasants could link up with the socialist labor movement in more technologically advanced Western Europe. If this could happen, then Russia could conceivably serve as the starting point for a global communist revolution. Moreover, as Ahmad also notes, Marx by the 1870s was

concerned not only with these semi-archaic communal forms in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as Russia, but he was also in the same period extolling a more modern communal form based upon a working-class revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871.

Ahmad is certainly correct when he writes that much of what is said in *Marx at the Margins*, especially on India, would be “rather familiar in India and among Asian Marxists more generally.” I think this is largely true with respect to my first chapter, which is principally concerned with Marx’s 1850s writings on India. As Ahmad notes, these writings were recently reprinted in India under the title *Karl Marx on India*, with important introductions and notes by Irfan Habib and other noted scholars (Husain 2006). Overall, this is a very important volume, one that I fervently wish were widely available outside India, which it is not. Unlike the two most prominent short collections of Marx’s writings (Tucker 1978 and McLellan 2000), which in terms of India feature only Marx’s 1853 writings, *Karl Marx on India* is much more comprehensive. It contains as well Marx’s decidedly anti-colonial writings on India during the period of the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857-59, also written for the *Tribune* and themselves three times the length of the 1853 writings.

I am less sure about Indian Marxists and the material on India covered in my last chapter, where the discussion on India is built around Marx’s *Ethnological Notebooks* and other notes from the period 1879-82. While I make no claim to have been exhaustive in my consultations of the writings of contemporary Indian Marxists in the writing of *Marx at the Margins*, in what I did consult I was surprised to find so little discussion of Marx’s 1879-82 notes on non-Western and precapitalist societies and gender, where the treatment of India alone comprises nearly 100,000 words. (Here the work of Paresh Chattopadhyay – see particularly his 1999 essay -- is a notable exception, and undoubtedly there are others as well.) To be sure, these are research notes rather than drafts of manuscripts, let alone published writings by Marx, but still, by 2006 one might have expected to see at least an excerpt of them in *Karl Marx on India*. For example, the editors might have included something from the notes on Kovalevsky, which Lawrence Krader transcribed and then translated into English some 40 years ago (Marx [1879] 1975).

More substantively, it is in these notes of 1879-82 that Marx moves furthest away from what I see as the limitations of his 1853 writings on India, as well as other of his earlier formulations concerning the historical trajectories of countries and peoples. First, he takes up again and again what he views as important change and evolutions inside the precolonial Indian village. Second, he takes up Indian resistance to its various conquerors from outside, from the earliest times to the Sepoy Rebellion of his own time, this versus his description in 1853 of India as the passive victim of outside conquest. Third, he makes more explicit what was implied in the *Grundrisse* and related writings about a somewhat different historical trajectory for premodern Asia, as against Europe, which he sometimes had referred to as the Asiatic mode of production. (And I agree with Ahmad that the Asiatic mode of production was not a fully developed theoretical concept, but one better viewed as a heuristic device.) In the Kovalevsky notes, Marx explicitly rejects the notion that precolonial India was feudal, for example. Some of this is alluded to in Habib's excellent annotated bibliography to *Karl Marx on India*, but this does not fully alleviate the problem of not having included any of the 1879-82-notebook material in this volume.

I also appreciated very much the careful manner in which Ahmad posed his criticism of my having made "too much of a concession" to the views of Said and other postcolonialist critics of Marx's 1853 India writings for the *Tribune*. I agree completely with another Ahmad's criticisms in a related area, where he states that I did not "engage sufficiently... with the central issue of caste" in India. I certainly am in accord with him at a general level that the caste system is one of the world's most dehumanizing social institutions, and with his comparison of it to apartheid. Concerning my lack of discussion of the issue, I plead guilty to a lack of deep knowledge of the Marxist debates around caste. Also, my goal was to focus directly on Marx's own writings throughout the book, where the discussion of caste trails off sharply after 1853.

As to the question of too many concessions to Said and his co-thinkers on my part, I certainly agree with Ahmad that Said's account of Marx was extremely problematic, which is why – as Ahmad notes – I went on at some length in critiquing his critique of Marx. At the same time, however, I remain more critical of Marx's 1853 writings than do Ahmad and a number of other

Marxists. I agree with Ahmad – and Habib – that Marx’s positions on India even in 1853 were far superior to those of his contemporaries, especially in his statement, which Ahmad quotes, applauding the prospect of Indians “grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether.”

But in my view these 1853 writings, as I wrote and still maintain, here relying in part on Löwy (1996), are simply too Hegelian in the bad sense, that of Hegel’s rather conservative *Philosophy of History*, written long after the more revolutionary *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In 1853, Marx is still buying into a number of Eurocentric characterizations, such as India as a static and passive rather than an active civilization, as a society without history where change had to be imposed from without by its conquerors, as a society so weakened by caste and other divisions that it could not effectively resist any of these outside conquerors, the last of which, the English, were bringing all kinds of progress to India, albeit with many barbaric actions alongside this progress. This conceptual framework undermines Marx’s 1853 writings on India, even if it is true that he had a better position than his contemporaries or even many Indian nationalists of the twentieth century. For I simply think we need to hold Marx to a higher standard, that of a thinker who speaks directly to us today, not only on capital and class, but also on race, gender, colonialism, ecology, and globalization. When he falls short of his best, most dialectical work, we should feel free to say so, especially when, as in the case of the 1853 writings, he moved beyond every one of the weaknesses I alluded to above in his later writings.

Eamonn Slater’s review takes us back to Western Europe, but to its far western colonial periphery, Ireland. Here I appreciated Slater’s evocation of Marx’s Ireland writings as generalizable, not only in terms of colonialism, but also in terms of race/ethnicity and class inside more developed capitalist societies. In both of these cases, as Slater also points out, I was viewing Marx as a dialectical thinker. First, on colonialism, the Ireland writings show us a Marx who thought that the Irish revolutionary movement constituted an important contradiction within the British Empire. As he repeatedly noted, and argued forcefully in his polemic against Ferdinand Lassalle in *Critique of the Goth Program* (1875), the dominant classes of his day comprised not only capitalists, but also landowners. In the case of Britain this meant that many important

landowners held vast estates in Ireland as well as Britain. Should an Irish social revolution undermine those aristocrats in Ireland, such an occurrence would also weaken their power in Britain as well, thus strengthening the hand of British labor in its struggle against the dominant classes.

Second, in terms of the antagonism between Irish immigrant workers inside Britain and native-born workers, Marx compared this situation, as Slater notes as well, to the role of racism in undermining the labor movement in the U.S. Thus, British prejudice toward the Irish disunited labor and bound British workers to the ruling classes. Here too, there was a dialectical contradiction brewing. Should Ireland regain its independence, this would have a salutary effect on British labor's class-consciousness as well. An independent Ireland, especially if its independence were to be won by a movement with the type of progressive social agenda found in the Fenian movement of the 1860s and 1870s, would change utterly the British view of Irish labor. For this reason, as he wrote in an 1869 letter to Engels, acknowledging as well a change from his earlier position:

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. This is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general. (Marx [1869] 1988, p. 398)

In this sense too, Marx's analysis of Ireland was dialectical.

Slater highlights at the end of his comments the need to explore for today Marx's "dialectical analysis," drawn from Hegel. This is an issue that has preoccupied me as well. My own interpretation of the dialectic in Hegel, in Marx, and after, is strongly influenced, as Ahmad notes, by the Marxist-Humanist dialectic of Raya Dunayevskaya, which itself developed through a series of deep but sometimes contentious dialogues, first with C.L.R. James, and later, with Herbert Marcuse. Peter Hudis and I have discussed the former in our introduction to Dunayevskaya (2002) and Russell Rockwell and I have taken up the latter in our introduction to Anderson and Rockwell (2012).

A current criticism of Hegel and the dialectic suggests that it is a form of totalizing reason in which the particular is swallowed up by the universal. In terms of Marx, this line of argument suggests that Marx saw the world in terms of an overarching dialectic of capital and labor that made little room for the particularities of gender, nation, ethnicity, or race. The writings cited throughout *Marx at the Margins* undermine such an interpretation of Marx. Was this because Marx was flexible enough a thinker to divest himself of the leaden weight of dialectics when it suited him? To be sure, as I have argued, Marx over time divested himself of a Eurocentric and ethnocentric perspective, strongly influenced by Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, which was evident in his 1853 *Tribune* articles on India. But he never divested himself of Hegel. As late as the 1870s, he referred to Hegel as his master and repeatedly mentioned his dialectical method as "the source of all dialectics," as he intoned in *Capital*, Vol. 1 (Marx [1890] 1976, p. 744). Engels attempted to resolve this problem by separating Hegel's dialectical method from his overall philosophical system, but this formulation cannot be found in Marx, nor is it tenable in my view.

Instead, I think we need to consider Dunayevskaya's more recent formulation concerning what is revolutionary and what is not in Hegel's thought: "Precisely where Hegel sounds most abstract, seems to close the shutters tight against the whole movement of history, there he lets the lifeblood of the dialectic – absolute negativity – pour in" (Dunayevskaya, [1973] 1989, pp. 31-32). This is germane to the distinction I made earlier between Hegel's more conservative works like *Philosophy of History*, with its very problematic statements on India (and even more so on Africa!) and those more abstract and earlier ones like the *Phenomenology* or the *Logic*. Moreover, Hegel's concept of absolute negativity or negation of the negation involves not only a tearing down but also the formation of a positive within the negative that points toward the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the given situation in favor of one that contains some sort of progress, even if of a most contradictory sort. The real question is whether one is dealing with such an absolute negativity or instead a bare negativity that does not go beyond the given world and may even constitute a form of retrogression. I think these kinds of concerns were at the center of Marx's concept of dialectic as well, and that such a dialectic grounded the writings by him taken up in

Marx at the Margins. It is, as Slater suggests, something we need to grapple with anew today.

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