

Marx at the Margins

Book Review by Colin Barker, July/August 2010

Kevin Anderson, University of Chicago Press, £14.50

Marxist scholar Kevin Anderson has undertaken an exhaustive reading of some of Marx's lesser-known writings. He explores how Marx developed and changed his ideas about societies that, in the 19th century, were still peripheral to capitalism.

Marx's writings on India have attracted accusations of "Eurocentrism". Certainly his earliest journalism, in 1853, is open to the charge of treating British rule as beneficial in its overall effects by undermining a stagnant and unchanging India that lacked a history of popular struggle.

But four years later his tone altered to much sharper criticism of the colonial powers and their brutalities. What changed his mind more than anything was the 1857-8 Sepoy Uprising, which led him to write that "India is now our best ally". The more he read, the more he modified his early views.

Marx, a lifetime supporter of Polish and Irish independence, transformed his ideas about how these also might be achieved. In 1847 Marx declared that Poland must be liberated "in England not in Poland". For many years he expressed similar views about Ireland, looking to the English workers' movement. In 1869, however, he told Engels he had changed his mind: anti-Irish prejudice had so corrupted the English workers' movement that "the lever must be applied in Ireland".

As for Poland, he came to see its liberation not as a consequence but as a necessary condition of proletarian revolution. Unless democratic and class struggles could be linked with those of oppressed nationalities, all would fail.

He applied similar ideas about white workers to the struggle against slavery and racism in the US. White labour could not advance while labour in a black skin was branded; Abraham Lincoln could not win unless the North conducted the civil war in a "revolutionary way", emancipating the slaves and recruiting them to the fight.

From the 1850s onwards Marx became increasingly interested in the nature of pre-capitalist societies, not simply as contrasts with capitalism, but also as sources of opposition to its development. By the 1870s he was considering whether elements of pre-capitalism, notably communal village property in the Russia mir communities, might be preserved and developed along with socialist forms.

For Marx that question remained open, though he was clear that the solution depended on socialist revolution in the advanced capitalist countries. As he explored these questions, Anderson suggests, Marx recast his thought from an initially "unilinear" view of world history to a more "multilinear" perspective.

Anderson ends his study by tracing in Marx's Ethnological Notebooks, half of which have never been published, the directions in which Marx's thought was moving in his last years. The whole book is fascinating.

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