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Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies

Kevin B. Anderson

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Paths to Revolution

Barbara Foley and Kanishka Chowdhury

Kevin Anderson's *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* is one of the most important works of Marxist theory to appear in the past decade or more. Drawing upon his encyclopedic acquaintance with the range of Marx's works, both published and yet unpublished, Anderson — one of the editors of the MEGA2 project — persuasively demonstrates that Marx was far more flexible in his thinking about possible paths to a socialist/communist future than has often been proposed. Anderson disproves the repeated claims made by a legion of scholars that Marx believed in a singular view of history, and that his appraisal of non-Western societies was tinged with a deep Eurocentric bias that made him assume that these societies had to go through the ravages of colonialism and capitalism in order to arrive at socialism. Instead, Anderson argues, Marx created a multilinear and nonreductionist theory of history, studied the nuances and intricacies of a variety of non-Western societies, and moved further and further away from his earlier assumptions about the path of development and the possibility for revolution in these societies. *Marx at the Margins* disproves decisively the notion that Marxism is a Eurocentric doctrine, perhaps applicable to the situation of the Western proletariat, but smacking of racism and possessing limited worth in either assessing the past or guiding the present struggles of the world's peoples of color.

Anderson's analysis recapitulates Marx's developing assessment of the potential for revolutionary social movements in a range of non-Western / non-industrial societies. Chapter 1 traces shifts in Marx's views on India, Indonesia, and China from the early 1850s onward. Chapters 2 and 4 address Marx's thinking about the relationship between class struggles and movements for national independence, with particular

emphasis on Poland and Ireland. In Chapter 3, Anderson discusses Marx's writings on the U.S. Civil War, highlighting the connections between the fight against American slavery and the class struggles in England. Chapter 5 traces the impact of Marx's study of non-Western societies and the U.S. conflict on his changing theorization of the struggle between labor and capital as a "civil war"; he stresses Marx's insistence, in the final French edition of *Capital*, that England supplied not a template but one among several possible paths of historical development. The final chapter, dealing with Marx's extensive ethnological notebooks, proposes that in his last decade Marx's immersion in the study of Latin America, Algeria, Islamic civilizations, and American native peoples led him largely to abandon a stageist approach to revolution — and even to consider the possibility that the Russian peasant commune might supply the basis for an immediate transition to socialism.

Anderson's careful analysis of Marx's writings on India exemplifies the methodology deployed throughout *Marx at the Margins*. Anderson focuses on the charge of Eurocentrism that became enshrined in postcolonial studies largely through Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Basing his analysis on Marx's early 1853 article, "The British Rule in India," Said argued that Marx was merely parroting existing views of the East as despotic, unchanging, and barbaric (charges that have been considered and addressed with great insight by Indian historians such as Aijaz Ahmad, Irfan Habib, and Sumit Sarkar). For Said, despite Marx's humanity and "sympathy for the misery of the people...in the end, it is the romantic orientalist vision that wins out" (qtd. in Anderson 154). Although he condemned the brutalities perpetrated by colonialism, Said argued, Marx continued to insist "that even in destroying Asia, Britain was making possible there a real social revolution" (qtd. in Anderson 153). It is true that Marx referred to the village communities as having "always been the solid foundation of oriental despotism" and described these communities as "undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative...a passive sort of existence" (qtd. in Anderson 16), but even in the midst of these reductive proclamations, Marx asked a question, one for which he did not have a definitive answer and one that continued to occupy him for the next thirty years: instead of focusing on the obvious, that England was fulfilling in India only its "vilest interest," Marx asked, "can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia?"¹ Beginning with the *Grundrisse* (1857), and right up to the later editions of *Capital* (1875), Marx analyzed the social and economic practices of a range of precapitalist societies and attempted to answer this question. As for Said's charge that Marx tacitly endorsed the process of colonialism because it accelerated the hope for social revolution, Anderson points out that Marx became fervently anticolonial by the time of the 1857 Sepoy Uprising, asking in a September 17 piece on the British use of torture in India "whether a people are not justified in attempting to expel the foreign conquerors who have so abused their subjects?" (qtd. in Anderson 40). Arguably, Marx's writings on India were a lot more varied than the selected passages that Said focuses on. Likewise, in 1856, as Anderson reminds us,

Marx had also written in support of the Chinese resistance to the British during the Second Opium War. In short, a key contribution of Anderson's book is to highlight that over the years Marx became more and more critical of colonialism and any notion that he would support colonialism in his writings because of its so-called progressive tendencies becomes untenable if one reads his works from the mid-1850s onwards.

Anderson also points out that Marx's opposition to colonialism was part and parcel of his commitment to antiracism. Students of Marx are generally familiar with Marx's famous statement about U.S. slavery — "Labor in the white skin cannot be emancipated so long as in the black skin it is branded" — but little else. Anderson emphasizes the antiracist core of Marx's praise of England's working class for supporting the Union during the Civil War, even though their jobs in the textile mills hinged upon a steady supply of cotton from the South. Referring to the Africans enslaved in the United States as "our negro brothers," he proclaimed that "we would rather perish than band ourselves in unholy alliance with the South and slavery" (qtd. in Anderson 40). Dubbing the Emancipation Proclamation "the most significant document in American history since the founding of the Union," Marx warned President Andrew Johnson that, should he fail to "let your citizens of to-day be declared free and equal, without reserve...there will yet remain a struggle for the future which may again stain your country with your people's blood" (qtd. in Anderson 113). Indeed, argues Anderson, Marx took aim at not only racist policies but also racist language. When during the Civil War Marx wrote to Engels that "a single nigger-regiment would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves," he wrote the offensive term in English in the midst of a letter composed in German, thereby subjecting the term to ironic critique. The Marx who emerges from Anderson's account clearly repudiates not only Eurocentrism and colonialism but also the racism by which they are underpinned.

Another of Anderson's contributions in this text is to connect Marx's increasing criticism of colonialism to his development of a more complex understanding of economic "progress" itself. As early as the *Grundrisse*, a few years after his 1853 article on India, he began to formulate a multilinear theory of history, where he explained how Asian societies had developed along a different pathway from the successive modes of production he had outlined for Western Europe (162). Around this historical moment, as the Second Opium War raged, Marx also penned these memorable lines: "All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force" (qtd. in Anderson 36). Indeed, for Marx, in the 1850s, the Chinese revolutionaries represented the forces of progress rather than "rationalist" Europe.² Anderson does not attempt to negate the criticism that in Marx's early writings on India or even in "The Communist Manifesto," where Marx and Engels posit a progressive view of social revolution, and Marx was inclined to categorize non-Western societies in a reductive manner, often placing them within a Western paradigm of social development. However, what remains crucial to Anderson's thesis is that these views were radically revised through the

course of Marx's life, and that if there is any kind of reductive reading of Marx, it is to limit an understanding of Marx's views of non-Western societies to his early writings on India or to the "Manifesto."

These ongoing social struggles at the "margins" of Europe, Anderson argues, played a significant role in Marx's formulation of a more dialectical view of social development and revolution; crucially, according to Anderson, Marx began to see that the village communal system had potential social forms that could lead directly to revolution; these forms, then, did not have to go the route of primitive accumulation via capitalist progress, leading ultimately to socialism, a stageist view of historical progress that he had presented in the "Manifesto" (224). Other social arrangements and communal forms of property relations became increasingly important for Marx in his analysis of social development. A direct transition to communism was a possibility, and he developed the view that not all precapitalist forms were necessarily feudal (211). It's worthwhile to add that Marx did not fetishize these forms; he was critical of tribalism, obscurantism, and retrograde gender relations when he saw them in traditional communal forms, and, as Anderson points out, Marx also recognized that there was no single path that countries had been on prior to capitalist development and no single path that they would follow once they encountered capitalist realities (244). How, he wonders, can the Russian communal village — the mir — be linked up to the proletarian struggle in the West? In his preface to the Russian translation to the "Manifesto" — one of his last writings (1882), he hazards the possibility that "if the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russia's peasant communal landownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development" (qtd. in Anderson 235). The reversal here is significant: the Western working classes are no longer privileged as the motor for revolutionary change.

Anderson's rejection of the view of Marx as Eurocentrist is tied to his argument that Marx was, above all, an internationalist, and that his works and ideas had a global range: Marx was as interested in the movements for independence in Poland, Ireland, and India as he was in the struggles of the Western European working classes. In his inaugural address to the International, for instance, Marx argued against slavery and referred to the Polish insurrection and the Russian occupation of the Caucasus. The workers had a "duty to master for themselves the mysteries of international policies....The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes" (qtd. in Anderson 67). Anderson reminds us, moreover, that Marx's exhortation of the Polish cause for national emancipation occurred within the context of the internationalist character of the Polish revolutionaries: "Poland...is the only European people that has fought and is fighting as the cosmopolitan soldier of the revolution" (qtd. in Anderson 76). Marx came to support the movement for Irish independence, likewise, only when it ceased to be a group primarily led by pro-landlord forces close to the Catholic Church and when

the emergent Fenian movement of the 1860s targeted not just British landowners but Irish ones as well. And he viewed the slaveholder-led American Confederacy, which announced itself as a movement for self-determination, as reactionary to its core. Marx's understanding of the national question, Anderson points out, was always in the context of his central critique of capital; he did not support national strivings that kept structural inequities in place.

While Anderson's rereading of Marx requires us to recast our understanding of Marx's relevance to historical development — past, present, and future — it bears noting that Anderson himself is not always consistent regarding the full political implications of his own account. His discussion of Marx's comments on the relationship between a revolution in Russia and one in the West, for instance, is contradictory. As we have seen, he quotes Marx to the effect that a Russian revolution "becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other....Russia's peasant communal landownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development" (qtd. in Anderson 235). Yet Anderson concludes on the basis of this statement that Marx believed that "only [a revolution on the part of the Western working classes] would allow the achievements of capitalist modernity to be shared with autocratic and technologically backward Russia, rather than employed to exploit it" (235). While Marx clearly envisioned a "complementary" relationship between the two revolutionary processes, Anderson here reads Marx retrospectively as a proto-Trotskyist predicting the inevitable bureaucratic deformation of the Soviet socialist project with the failure of the Western working classes to spread the proletarian revolution.

Perhaps more crucially, Anderson's occasional conflation of Marx's views on national independence with the broader rubric of "nationalism" — signaled in the title of the book and at various points in the argument — blurs the implications of Marx's analysis for insurgent political movements in our own time. For although Anderson notes Marx's careful distinction between movements of "national independence" with a peasant or proletarian core and nationalist movements led by segments of the owning classes, he nonetheless concludes that "[a]t the level of the intersectionality of class with race, ethnicity, and nationalism, many of Marx's theoretical conclusions are...directly relevant to us today" (245). Not only does Anderson's invocation of the fashionable model of "intersectionality" — which impedes rather than facilitates careful structural and historical analysis — detract from Marx's rigorous materialism. In addition, this formulation invites the conclusion that any movement describing itself as a project of national liberation can lay claim to an emancipatory role — a proposition that Marx, by Anderson's own account, would evidently have rejected.

What are some of the implications of Anderson's rereading of Marx — in both its tremendous discoveries as well as its occasional blind spots — for an understanding of the challenges currently facing the dispossessed and laboring masses of the world? How does this rereading relate to the problems posed by the changing contours of

a global economy, the increasing dominance of finance capital, the fragmentation of the production process across different locations, and the rise of informal labor? Capital has successfully split up the labor movement, creating working conditions that actively undermine worker solidarity, and yet despite all of these efforts workers are still organizing in masses and more and more alliances are emerging (Greece, Spain, Montreal) where people from different social positions are redrawing the conventional boundaries of struggle. Anderson's reading of Marx's careful parsing out of the different meanings of views on nationalism has continuing — indeed, arguably, increased — relevance now, especially given the many existing articulations of nation. On one hand, despite the range of their specific demands, it is difficult to deny that the Greeks facing brutal austerity cuts, the many Palestinians unemployed, the students and the larger public in Montreal, the Indignados in Spain, or the garment workers in Bangladesh who shut down 350 factories in June 2012 are not inspired by alternative ideas of social space, alternative visions of wealth distribution; ultimately, alternative ideas of the nation. On the other, the challenge that remains is to forge these struggles along the lines of the internationalist solidarity that Marx knew was vital for the success of individual movements. An important lesson from Anderson's text is to trace Marx's gradual efforts to dissolve the political and economic boundaries between the margin and the center, always framing national struggles within an international context that stresses the commonality of working-class interests.

Marx at the Margins also offers cautionary lessons for Left parliamentary forces, particularly in the global South. We offer the example of the rise and fall of the Communist Party in West Bengal. As one of the most successful and longstanding communist ruling parties in the world (1977-2010), perhaps their fate is apposite in our moment and exposes the limits of social democratic experiments conducted within the framework of parliamentary democracy. In their initial moments in power, the party had created an effective coalition between class forces across the urban middle classes and the rural population. As neoliberalism became the ruling dogma in South Asia, they alienated the peasantry, seizing land for "development" projects. In their place, the Maoist movement took shape, addressing the grievances of the dispossessed. Meanwhile, the Left, in attempting to appease the urban middle classes and to marginalize their rural constituencies, effectively failed to resolve the myriad contradictions of their own positions. After thirty years in power, the party was defeated in the elections by an emergent populist party.

Similarly, even as the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia, the *Frente Amplio* (FA) in Uruguay, and Left leaders in Peru, Ecuador, Chile, and Venezuela negotiate the treacherous waters of global capitalism, it is imperative that they consider "progress" via a diverse range of economic models rather than drag their people through the reigning fundamentalist model of development. Indeed, it is from within the indigenous communities, which have very different ideas of development, that leaders such as Rafael Correa (Ecuador), Ollanta Humala (Peru), and Evo Morales

(Bolivia) are facing resistance as they attempt to “develop” their resources, in many cases benefiting primarily private corporations. It remains an open question whether these leaders have the ability or will to relinquish their ties with their national bourgeoisies — as well as international capital — and enact policies benefiting the great majorities of their populations.

Indeed, the critique of stageism embedded in Anderson’s book supplies us with useful tools for analyzing the failures of a significant range of movements that have purported to move toward the construction of egalitarian societies. While the *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) was, to be sure, subjected to extreme state violence, its inability to muster widespread support among Peru’s indigenous population can to no small degree be traced to its insistence that the peasantry relinquish their commonly held lands and embrace a system of private land ownership. Envisioned as a first step toward re-collectivization on a higher level, this strategy — flying in the face of Marx’s evolving view of the socialist potential of the mir — exemplifies the tragic price paid by a rigid adherence to the notion that all societies must endure the inequalities of capitalism before moving toward the needed goal. Still more tragic — and consequential — has been the insistence of the (so-called) Communist Party of China that the nation’s workers and peasants must be subjected to the regimes of wage labor and market pricing for hundreds (perhaps, by some of the elite’s estimates, even thousands) of years before egalitarian relations of production can presumably emerge. Cherry-picking statements from the young Marx about the need for the new society to develop fully within the womb of the old, China’s ruling politicians and businessmen have feathered their own nests — and produced a country with one of the world’s highest Gini coefficients for measuring inequality — by espousing a caricature of “Marxist” stageism.

As Anderson shows, Marx’s analysis of precapitalist societies offers us ways to analyze the potential in existing indigenous communal collectives, be they in the Andes or on the plains of central India. To be sure, Marx was writing about a world where the logic of capital was not universal, as it is now: are his insights about precapitalist societies therefore invalid? Anderson argues that most of the world has been penetrated by capital, despite the presence of a few remaining communal forms in Latin America, Africa, and Asia; Marx’s multilinear approach to “noncapitalist lands” is, he concludes, “more relevant for today at a general theoretical or methodological level....It can serve an important heuristic purpose, as a major example of his dialectical theory of society” (245). While Anderson is correct to point out that there exist in today’s world far fewer instances of “actually existing” communal forms than was the case in Marx’s time, he underestimates the importance of many of his own findings by proposing that Marx’s multilinear approach has relevance today principally in “serving an important heuristic purpose” as an instance of a “dialectical theory of society.” As the planet is confronted with a serious agrarian crisis and as millions of people are forcibly evicted from their lands,

Marx's serious reconsideration of communal societies as sites from which the Left has much to learn remains. Socialism — let alone communism — cannot replace capitalism while replicating its destructive methods of development and progress. We must look once again at the emancipatory potential that is latent in indigenous, communal structures of organization where they continue to exist, even if in latent forms. In a letter written to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich in 1881, Marx suggested that “Precisely because it is contemporaneous with capitalist production, the rural commune may appropriate for itself all the positive achievements and this without undergoing its frightful vicissitudes” (qtd. in Anderson 230). As Anderson notes, what Marx was proposing here was not “autarky but a new synthesis of the archaic and the modern, one that took the advantage of the highest achievements of capitalist modernity” (230). Capitalists may have taken the rhetoric of modernity and claimed it as the most advanced form of productivity and innovation, but as we know, Marx applied himself to demonstrate that socialism was both more modern than capitalism and more productive. This modernism, Marx came to believe, may combine emancipatory elements of the communal both in its revolutionary potential and as well as in its ability to provide genuine alternatives to capitalism, a need that is becoming increasingly urgent.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Dispatches for the New York Tribune: Selected Journalism of Karl Marx*, ed. James Ledbetter (New York: Penguin, 2008) 218.
2. Marx, *Dispatches* 36.