

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

by Kevin B. Anderson

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by Chris O’Kane

The publication of a number of Marx’s manuscripts had an important and varied influence on the development of Marxist theory in the 20th century. For the sake of convenience this can be broken into two phases: (1) the reception of the publication of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which was of central importance to the growth of Marxist humanism and its conception of alienation as the core idea unifying Marx’s thought, and (2) the reception of the *Grundrisse* and other material from Marx’s research into the critique of political economy—now collected in The *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) project—which has led to the burgeoning of a type of study, often termed Marxology, in which painstaking philological research by a number of scholars has argued for a distinction between Marx’s critique of political economy and traditional interpretations of it. Whilst the first phase led to the dissemination of a philosophical worldview with widespread influence and a prolonged debate with anti-humanism, the second phase has so far mostly been a concern only of Marxist scholars.

The Marxist humanist scholar Kevin B. Anderson’s most recent work, *Marx at the Margins*, is a unique synthesis of aspects of these two phases. Anderson utilizes the philological approach favoured by Marxologists to offer a humanist interpretation of Marx’s conception of nationalism, ethnicity and non-western societies. In contrast to anti-humanist criticisms of Marx by leading figures in post-structuralism and post-colonial theory, Anderson aims to show that Marx’s thought evolved into a multi-linear theory of history with a complex global critique of political economy. To do so Anderson uses a host of sources from MEGA to call into question the popular perception that Marx was a deeply ethnocentric thinker who held a Eurocentric and uni-linear model of historical development.

To prove this thesis Anderson provides a diligent exegesis of Marx’s writings on nationalism, ethnicity and non-western societies from *The Communist Manifesto*, through his journalism to the as yet unpublished notes Marx made concerning non-western societies towards the end of his life. Anderson then tries to relate these varied sources to Marx’s theoretical writings on political economy—*The Grundrisse* and *Capital*. In the course of this exegesis Anderson covers some very interesting ground. He unpacks

Marx's writings on a host of non-western areas like India, China, Algeria, Poland, Ireland and Russia as well as Marx's article on the American Civil War, demonstrating that there was a development in Marx's thinking following the *Manifesto*.

Since the particular developments that Anderson traces in each of these topics are too detailed to give a short recap, I will focus on those I found most interesting. In the case of India, Anderson shows that – in contrast to Edward W. Said's portrayal of Marx in *Orientalism* – Marx's later writings on India, Algeria and Latin America possess a "harsh and unremitting condemnation of colonialism" (242) that appreciates how "communal forms of property were directly tied into anti-colonial resistance." (242) In the case of Marx's writings on The Civil War and Ireland Anderson also shows how Marx considered racism a divisive and retarding factor for the labour movement, and in regards to the USA this caused Marx to presciently claim that the failures of reconstruction would "drown the country in blood." (239) In Ireland, the English workers' nationalism caused them to side with the English ruling class, leading Marx to argue that revolution in Ireland was a necessary impetus for revolution in Britain.

Anderson relates these writings to Marx's theoretical works by arguing that they informed important changes in Marx's critique of political economy that break with the views put forward in *The Manifesto*. For instance, the linear history of *The Manifesto* is eclipsed by the multi-linear history that Marx provides in the *Grundrisse*. More importantly, Anderson also argues that "almost all of these considerations" (241) found their way in as what he terms "subthemes" (241) in the French edition of *Capital*, which he argues is Marx's (not Engels's) definitive edition of *Capital*. (This is because it was the last edition Marx edited from which Engels excised 70 printed pages worth of material for later editions of *Capital*.) Here Anderson argues these considerations can be seen in Marx's comparative account of non-capitalist societies in the section on the fetish character of commodities. The multi-linear model of history can be seen in Marx's statement that primitive accumulation only applies to Western Europe, and Marx's new found appreciation of capitalism's degradation of non-western societies can be seen in the use of India and Ireland as examples of the heinous affects of capitalist development. Finally, Anderson closes by emphasizing Marx's late interest in Russia, whose communal villages led Marx to argue that Russia might transform into a communist society provided it had technological assistance from the West.

Anderson concludes by arguing that what he has uncovered provides potential grounds for a diverse, truly universal critique of capital which realizes difference and can be used in three potentially fruitful ways: as (a)

a multi-linear dialectic of social development, (b) a heuristic example that offers indications about the theorization of today's indigenous movements given the fact of global capitalism, and (c) a theorization of class in relation to race, ethnicity and nationalism.

In all, through the diligent examination of these disparate sources, Anderson's work successfully refutes the popular conception of Marx as having an ethnocentric and uni-linear idea of historical development. There are, however, a number of criticisms of the work that might be raised. The first has to do with the status of sources that Anderson uses, particularly the later notebooks, which were written by Marx in his later years, which many Marxists discount as a time of intellectual decline. While Anderson acknowledges this belief, he dismisses it rather than refuting it. This may be because Anderson believes the notes will speak for themselves, but if this is the case he should use them to help refute this perception; since he does not they become problematic especially when Anderson speculates that these notes might form the basis of an even later and more open development of Marx's thought. The second has to do with Anderson's interpretation of Marx's explanation of his critique of political economy, which outside of Anderson's Marxist humanist reliance on alienation as the fundamental basis of Marx's theory, and a few paragraphs summarizing *Capital* in relation to this interpretation, is largely absent. Although Anderson designates Marx's critique of political economy a dialectical and universal critique of political economy that utilizes particular examples, this omission leaves open the question of how Anderson views the relationship between the theoretical object of *Capital* and empirical reality. This also means that many of the important issues developed by Marxologists, such as how the model of the ideal average Marx presents in *Capital* relates to empirically existing capitalist societies, and the relation between the idea of alienation and Marx's theory of value, are not substantiated. As a result the questions of: (a) how or why Marx's critique of political economy is universal and (b) how the development of Marx's particular views on history and non-western society fit into the theoretical endeavour of his critique of political economy, are left largely unanswered at this time.

Nevertheless, Anderson's work does much to refute many of the leading misconceptions about Marx's supposed ethnocentric uni-linear social theory. As Anderson states, it also provides a "vantage point" (245) and a potential foundation for fruitful theoretical work that answers these vital questions.

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