

Review of *Marx at the Margins* – by Belfast Plebian

Sráid Marx: An Irish Marxist Blog

April-May 2013

<http://irishmarxism.net/>

Marx on pre-capitalist societies: review of ‘Marx at the Margins’ part IV

Posted on **May 27, 2013**

By Belfast Plebian

Marx published very little in the last ten years of his life and did not even manage to finish volumes two and three of Capital. Some historians have said that he ran out of mental capacity. There were only two important documents published, small in size: the Critique of the Gotha Programme of 1875 is a schematic appraisal of the muddled socialism of Germany Social Democracy and the other a revised version of the Communist Manifesto for mainly Russian readers published just a month before Marx died in March 1883

It is the second document that offers a clue to what Marx was researching in his later years. Marx and Engels state in the preface that they had neglected to say much concerning social developments in the United States of America and also in Russia in the original Manifesto. They then present a brief synopsis of the condition of the small independent farmers in the United States under the duress of expanding capital while turning to conditions in Russia they note the rise of a new revolutionary movement. They then attempt to take stock of the revolutionary potential contained within the primeval communal relations of the Russian society:

‘Can the Russian obshchina, a form , albeit heavily eroded, of the primeval communal ownership of land, pass directly into the higher form of communal ownership? Or must it first go through the same process of dissolution that marks the West’s historical development? Today there is only one possible answer: 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 land ownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development.’(T.Shanin p139)

In 1983 Teodor Shanin published a ground breaking book called ‘Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the peripheries of capitalism’, a collection of Marx’s draft sketches and letters dealing with questions posed by the development of embryonic capitalism in Russia.

In a letter addressed to the Russian populist writer Nikolai Mikhailovsky Marx explained his research: *‘In order to reach an informed judgement on Russia’s economic development, I learned Russian and then for many years studied official and other publications relating to the question’.*(Shanin p135) Marx also says that *‘I have come to the conclusion that if Russia continues along the pathway she has followed since 1861, she will lose the finest chance ever*

offered by history to a people and undergo all the fateful vicissitudes of the capitalist regime.' Marx stated his thesis tentatively referring to the now hectic undermining by both Russian and foreign capital of the customs of the usually isolated communal villages.

What Marx seemed most eager to banish in the mind of his Russian populist reader was the idea that he had arrived at a general philosophical account of modern historical developments. Marx's letter was a response to a sympathetic review by Mikhailovsky of *Capital* Volume One, an appraisal that had ascribed to Marx a unilinear account of necessary historical development.

The Russian populist had said in the review that Marx: *'In the sixth chapter of Capital, the section called So called Primitive Accumulation, here, Marx has in view a historical sketch of the first steps of the capitalist process of production, but he gives us something much bigger, a whole philosophical-historical theory. This theory is of great interest in general and especially great interest for us Russians.'*

In his reply Marx is determined to say that he has no such general theory of historical development *'The chapter on primitive accumulation claims no more than to trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist economic order emerged from the womb of the feudal economic order....Thus events of striking similarity, taking place in different historical contexts, led to totally disparate results. By studying each of these developments separately, one may easily discover the key to this phenomenon, but this will never be attained with the master key of a general historical-philosophical theory, whose supreme virtue consists in being suprahistorical.'*(Shanin 136)

The above is important for it distances the late Marx from some of his own more rigid conceptions as articulated in the German Ideology and from the common 'historic Marxism' thesis that what Marx was about was revising the Hegelian philosophy of History in a materialist direction. The idea that Marxism is a failed Universal Theory of History is still the predominant one in social science.

The other equally important point was that Russia and other pre-capitalist societies ought not to be conflated with Western feudalism. Marx was in fact researching various pre-capitalist societies that were not feudal in the European sense. When he spoke of an Asiatic mode of production he was not using the construction in a geographical sense, for it included most of South America and even parts of North Africa, especially Algeria. Marx was not even trying to describe the pre-capitalist societies in any historical-anthropological way. What he was really interested in was how capitalist expansion was penetrating and transforming pre-capitalist societies that had no feudal past, in short the disruption being wrought by the advancing capitalist-colonialism of his own lifetime. (We do not say imperialism for this terminology was not used by Marx.)

Marx conducted his research using his normal method of reading the leading bourgeois authors and compiling excerpts from them with his own added comments. He made extensive excerpts and notes drawn from authors such as: the pioneering anthropologists Henry Morgan's 'Ancient Society' 1877; the evolutionist John Lubbock's 'The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Conditions of Man' 1870; Maxim Kovalevsky's study of India 'Communal Landownership, the Causes, Course and Consequences of its Decline' published in Russian in 1879; the political historian Henry Sumner Maine's 'Early History of Institutions' (1885); notes of sixteen thousand words on John Phear's 'The Aryan Village of India and Ceylon' 1 1880 and Robert Sewell's 'Analytical History of India' 1870.

Much of this material had to do with the communal and clan structures of the still prevailing pre-capitalist societies. Marx appropriated, albeit critically, these works. He portrays Maine as an ideologue defending capitalism and empire rather than a genuine historical scholar. He agrees with Kovalevsky's arguments covering changes to the communal property forms in India but criticises him for sometimes conflating India with European feudalism.

Marx declares one maxim of his method as '*One has to be on guard when reading the histories of primitive communities written by bourgeois authors. They do not even shrink from falsehoods. Sir Henry Maine, for example, who was an enthusiastic collaborator of the English government in carrying out its violent destruction of the Indian communes, hypocritically assures us that all of the government's noble efforts to maintain the communes succumbed to the spontaneous power of economic laws!*' (Shanin 107)

Anderson, basing himself on notes by Kovalevsky, argues that, Marx created a typology of communal forms across many societies and made differing assessments of their durability. The second theme in the notes and drafts is a comparison between Russia and other 'Asiatic communes'. To be sure he had not worked out a theory of revolution for Russia or for the others he had studied; moreover he was careful to take note of the political independence of Russia as an important difference.

In respect of the potential for social resistance Anderson argues that of the several communal forms that he had studied, Marx thought they were not as resistant to elimination as those that were rooted in Russia. This was due more to the fact that most of the others had already been conquered by colonial capitalism. Marx's guess on Russia is best stated in this from a letter quoted in the Shanin collection: '*What threatens the life of the Russian commune is neither an historical inevitability nor a theory; it is oppression by the State and exploitation by capitalist intruders made powerful, at the expense of the peasants, by this same State.*'

Anderson concludes by saying that he hopes that his journey into Marx's writings on nationalism, race, ethnicity and non-Western societies has revealed the multidimensional character of his overall intellectual projects, especially in his later years. Marx's critique of capitalism was far broader than is usually supposed.

Anderson has done this, though he may have talked more about gender relation. He mentions differences between Marx and Engels on how they each made use of the findings of Morgan's study of the origins of patriarchy but he does not develop it much.

There are just a few other points I would like to make that Anderson in his restraint refrains from making.

One point about historical materialism that springs to mind after reading Anderson's book is that it is not a finished theory and has no pretension to be a finished one. It must be open to new evidence and new experiences. If it is taken up as a closed system it would only become a sort of repository of past societies, like a great city museum stuffed full of abandoned knowledge and artefacts.

Another point concerns the assessment of the idea of progress that inheres within historical materialism. The bourgeois ideology of progress is rampant and without qualification: capitalism always improves the world through its free production of commodities, its new technologies, its science and its legal and political forms.

In so far as there is an opposition to this bourgeois credo of progress it can take on more than one mask. In our time the most forceful originates from the mind of the German philosopher F. Nietzsche, who declares in his 'The Anti-Christ' of 1888 that 'Progress is merely a modern idea, that is to say a false one.' Nietzsche was much more impressed by the knowledge and art of the ancient world than he was with the modern one, as are his most intelligent followers.

This is not the kind of opposition, said Marx, that the workers and oppressed of the modern world need, the opposition of reactionary modernism. Yet the socialist movement in the broad sense has been damaged by the full embrace of the capitalist ideology of progress. In the first instance, with the progressive Germany ideology of Social Democracy and the Second International, revolution was no longer necessary as steady progress was already happening under capitalist conditions. This steady progress must we remind ourselves included an acceptance of progressive colonialism.

Then there was the progress of actually existing socialism, supervised by the Stalinist bureaucracy and its ideology of State controlled economic progress. Soviet society was reputed to be one without social contractions

Yet Marx assesses capitalism and its progress under the auspicious of dialectical contradiction; all progress within capitalism is torn by irony, even the breakthroughs of science are bundled with contradiction. Medicines are withheld by patents and the Internet technologies are distorted by corporations, to cite just a few examples.

When we speak about the dialectic we are in fact using irony rather than a special kind of logic. The use of dialectic was spoken about by Plato in his dialogues. Socrates was the master of subjective irony. When Hegel revived the use of the dialectic he tell us that he learned it by studying the dialogue by Plato called the Meno.

Marx is the master of something more than subjective irony, he is the master of objective irony, he found it especially in the capitalism-colonialism of his own time and the quotes I have picked out from Anderson's study are replete with this objective irony.

Finally something should be said about the controversy over Marx's occasional referrals to the Asiatic and feudal modes of production. Marx in fact wrote more words about Asiatic society than he did about Ancient or Feudal society, yet in the official Stalinist literature it went unmentioned. The Communists spoke of the slave owning, feudal and then capitalist modes of production but not the Asiatic. Why was all talk of Asiatic society covered up by the Stalinist ideologues?

The best known book on this is a tendentious one by Karl Wittfogel called Oriental Despotism published in 1957. The book is tendentious because Marx stopped speaking about pre-capitalism societies in terms of Oriental Despotism at an early stage, and because it is doubtful Marx had developed an account of such societies to the point that he was confident in naming them as belonging to a separate mode of production; the societies were too various for him to make that mistake.

Finally the Stalinists did not censure the terminology primarily because it sounded more like a description of the despotic Soviet Union under Stalin but because referring to the feudalism of China or India or Vietnam facilitated an international politics of anti-capitalist revolution that conceded revolutionary leadership to a class of supposed 'progressive capitalists' who were an integral part of common national and democratic revolution directed against the colonists and a class of reactionary feudal landowners. It hardly mattered that Marx thought these Asiatic societies were not feudal in the European sense.

Kevin Anderson has produced an admiral book.

concluded

Marx on Ireland and the American Civil War: review of 'Marx at the Margins' Part III
Posted on [May 19, 2013](#)

Reply

By Belfast Plebian

After the publication of Capital volume I in 1867 Marx's perspective on Ireland underwent a transformation. During these years the Fenian movement was gaining support in Ireland, in the United States and in England with the more political minded Irish migrant workers. Anderson explains that 'From its beginning, the International seems to have had some links to the Fenians, although, given the fact that the latter were part of a movement that was illegal in the British Empire, these were not always made public.'

In 1867 the Irish struggle really came to a boil and in March troops crushed a Fenian led uprising by poorly armed Irish peasants. On September 11 in Manchester, the police caught and charged two leading Fenians, Thomas Kelly and Timothy Deasy. Then, on Sept 18, some Fenians ambushed the prison van escorting the arrested men and an English police sergeant died of his wounds.

These events transpired during the same week that Marx was visiting Engels in Manchester to confer about publicising Capital volume I. Kelly and Deasy managed to escape to America but the police swooped down on the Irish community of Manchester arresting dozens and putting five men on trial for murder. Three of them were hanged on November 23 as a drunken mob celebrated outside. Queen Victoria articulated the ruling class opinion of the time '*These Irish are really shocking, abominable people-not like any other civilised nation.*'

In the days before the executions the International launched a solidarity campaign on behalf of the condemned prisoners. Marx wrote a letter to Engels saying '*I have sought by every means at my disposal to incite the English workers to demonstrate in favour of Fenianism.*' Marx prepared a speech on Ireland for the November 26 meeting of the General Council but did not speak it aloud and an English worker presented it on his behalf.

The speech begins '*Since our last meeting the object of our discussion, Fenianism, has entered a new phase. It has been baptised in blood by the English Government. The Political Executions at Manchester remind us of the fate of John Brown at Harpers Ferry. They open a new period in the struggle between Ireland and England.*' There began a hectic period of solidarity work on behalf of the Fenian prisoners, with the daughters of Marx heavily involved.

Marx's daughter Jenny then twenty five years of age sought to break the silence about the plight of Fenian prisoners in the European press. In February through April 1870 she published an eight-part series of articles on Ireland in 'La Marseillaise', a left of centre Paris newspaper. The articles of concern for, and plight of, the prisoners was then picked up and distributed by popular newspapers across Europe and the United States. The international embarrassment caused by the articles sparked a debate in the British Parliament, resulting in a formal inquiry. Finally in December 1870 Gladstone released the prisoners on condition that they leave the country. In their letters Marx and Engels expressed a considerable pride in Jenny's role in the affair and Engels and Elizabeth Burns sent her a twig of shamrock on Saint Patrick's Day.

Marx's own engagement with Ireland came to a rise in the International when a battle with the followers of Bakunin's group became public in January 1870, after publication of the General Council's Confidential Communication, written by Marx in French and responding to the accusation of authoritarian leadership. What usually goes unmentioned in this dispute with the anarchists is the fact that the attack on Karl Marx was two-pronged, the second targeting Marx's support for revolution in Ireland. A pro-Bakunin newspaper published a strong attack on the General Council Resolution on Ireland in December 11 1886, characterising it as a diversion from true revolutionary politics. Marx drafted a response to criticism and about a quarter of his 12 page document dealt with Ireland.

Marx states that 'Ireland is the bulwark of English landlordism. If it fell in Ireland it would fall in England too. In Ireland this is a hundred times easier because the economic struggle is concentrated exclusively on landed property, because this struggle is at the same time national and because the people are more revolutionary and angry than in England...In the second place, the English bourgeoisie has divided the proletariat into two hostile camps...The common English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the standard of life. He feels national and religious antipathies for him. He views him similarly to how the poor whites of the Southern states of America viewed black slaves...Thus the position of the International Association with regard to the Irish question is very clear. Its first concern is to advance the social revolution in England. To this end the great blow must be struck in Ireland.'

This public statement had been prepared after a great deal of study of Irish history undertaken during October and November of 1869 and concentrating on the periods of the American and French revolutions up to the abolition of the Act of Union of 1801. Marx's research notes comprise some 70 printed pages, following his usual method of taking excerpts from books he had been reading and then lacing them with his own comments.

Marx tracked the career and writings of John Curran, a radical Irish parliamentarian who became the defence attorney of the United Irishmen; he writes to Engels: 'you must get hold of Curran's speeches...I meant to give it to you when you were in London. For the period of 1779-1800 it is of decisive importance, not only because of Curran's speeches in court(I regard Curran as the sole great people's advocate of the 18th century and the noblest personality, while Grattan was a parliamentary rogue) but because you find all the sources about the United Irishmen. This period is of greatest interest, scientifically and dramatically. First the dirty infamies of the English in 1588-89 repeated perhaps even intensified in 1788-89. Second, class movement is easily shown in the Irish movement itself. Third the infamous policy of Pitt. Fourth which very much irks the English gentlemen, the proof that Ireland came to grief because in fact, from a revolutionary standpoint, the Irish were far too advanced for the English King and church mob, while English reaction in England as in Cromwell's time has its roots in the subjugation of Ireland..'

Two letters, one to Engels and the other to Kugelmann dated November 29, 1869 and December 10 spelled out his mature position on Ireland, which became the basis of a refutation of his critics in the International a year later: *'For a long time I believed it would be possible to overthrow the*

Irish regime by English working class ascendancy. I always took this viewpoint in the New York Tribune. 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.'

The life of the International coincided with the revolutionary war against slavery in America. It is a travesty of historical understanding that the great conflict between capitalist-slavery and free labour in America has featured so little in the making of 'historic Marxism', for the historical record shows that Marx regarded it as the most important political drama in his own time.

In several key places in Capital, Marx addressed the Civil War, the relationship between capital, labour and race; the first in the very preface where he refers implicitly to the impact the Civil War made on the very founding of the First International: *'Just as the in the eighteenth century the American War of Independence sounded the tocsin for the European middle class, so in the nineteenth century the American Civil War did the same for the European working class.'*

Marx takes up the story in a chapter called 'The Working Day'. In comparing the finished book to the draft version, Dunayevskaya had argued that the Civil War and its impact on European labour was so great that the first edition was drafted to fit around it, rearranging his composition to remove the theoretical criticism of the economists and relegating that material to a fourth volume. She held that Marx's activity in the International alongside the workers who had championed the Union cause was crucial to his decision to add the chapter on the working day: *'He is breaking with the whole concept of theory as something intellectual, a dispute between theoreticians. Instead of keeping up a running argument with theorists, he goes directly into the labour process and thence to the Working Day...It wasn't he; however who decided that the Civil War in the United States was A HOLY WAR OF LABOUR. It was the working class of England, the very ones who suffered the most, who decided that.'* (1958)

The above reference to the working class of England is to the fact that they sacrificed jobs and income and fought their own national ruling class to side with the Union Cause. The context was explained by Marx *'Direct slavery is as much the pivot upon which our present day industrialism turns as are machinery, credit. Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry. It is slavery which has given value to the colonies, it is the colonies which created world trade, and world trade is the necessary condition for large-scale machine industry...Slavery is therefore an economic category of paramount importance.'*

Marx wrote many articles charting the unfolding of events in America and intervening in the common struggle in England, it might well be argued that his theoretical proposition that the working class is the only universal emancipating class was vindicated by this single struggle. Anderson quotes the historian Padover: *'The beginning of the conflict found British opinion divided. On the pro-Confederacy side were the aristocracy, which sympathised with the southern plantation owners, and commercial interests which hoped for cheaper raw materials, particularly cotton, from an independent South. On the pro-Northern side were British liberal*

who saw in the civil war a struggle to preserve democracy and the working class which felt that the fate of free labour was at stake. Much of the London press spearheaded by the influential Times, which Marx read assiduously was pro-South. The British government led by Lord Palmerston as Prime Minister and Lord John Russell as Foreign Minister, leaned toward the Confederacy. Marx's first Tribune article *The American Question in England* published on October 11 1861 dealt with this political battle on the home front.

I will not try to cover the entire story, there is way too much of it to summarise. In fact Anderson's account of it is a vital part of his study. When the Civil War started, Lancashire was the workshop of the world; the cotton industry employed at least 440,000 workers in 2,400 factories. The main source of raw material came by way of the Confederate states, over a billion tons a year. Disaster struck when the Union side imposed a naval blockade on the South, mills in Lancashire were closed or put on reduced working hours, half of the cotton workers went without wages, became unemployed and were evicted from their factory build homes.

The shipping and factory owners openly sided with the Confederacy; they called for the British navy to be used to break the Union blockade. The cotton workers response was to organise a campaign of public meetings to maintain the blockade and stand firm with the Union. The most remarkable testimony of the social setting has come down to us in the words of one Henry Hotze a Southern agitator for the Confederacy in England: *'The Lancashire operatives are the only class which as a class continues actively inimical to us. With them the unreasoning aversion to our institutions is as firmly rooted as in any part of New England.'* In the year of 1863 English workers held at least 50 pro-union public meetings.

The Karl Marx archive gives us the drama of the story on both sides of the Atlantic, the differences of opinion over strategy, plus the role of the International. Marx said that it was *'the English working class that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic.'*

Anderson offers us a short political history of the assessment made by various threads of 'historic Marxism' and how Marx has been often criticised for not being critical enough of the Union cause and of Lincoln's role in particular. Finally he shows how Marx analysed its overall impact and quotes a passage from the section of Capital on the working day: *'In the United States of America, every independent workers' movement was paralysed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin. However a new life immediately arose from the death of slavery. The first fruit of the American Civil War was the eight hours agitation, which ran from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California with the seven-league boots of a locomotive. The General Congress of Labour held at Baltimore in August 1866 declared " THE FIRST AND GREAT NECESSITY OF THE PRESENT, TO FREE THE LABOUR OF THIS COUNTRY FROM CAPITALIST SLAVERY, IS THE PASSING OF A LAW BY WHICH EIGHT HOURS SHALL BE THE NORMAL WORKING DAY IN ALL THE STATES OF THE AMERICAN UNION. WE ARE RESOLVED TO PUT FORTH ALL OUR STRENGTH UNTIL THIS GLORIOUS RESULT IS ATTAINEDTH."*

to be continued

Posted in [Book Review](#), [Karl Marx](#), [Marxism](#) | [Leave a reply](#)
Marx on Poland and Ireland: review of ‘Marx at the Margins’ part II
 Posted on [May 9, 2013](#)
 by Belfast Plebian

Marx served as the chief European correspondent of the New York Tribune, the most important newspaper in the United States in the nineteenth century. Anderson believes these articles *‘constitute a far more serious and sustained affair than is generally realised. They fill most of the contents of volumes 12 through 17 of the MECW, each of which runs to over five hundred pages.’* All too often these articles have been seen as mere digressions from the more important economic works Marx was preparing roughly at the same time.

Their relative neglect is due in part to what Marx himself said about them in a letter disparaging his own involvement with political journalism. One letter Marx sent to a German comrade residing in the United States said he found the *‘perpetual scribbling for the newspapers tiresome’* and expressed a wish *‘to withdraw into solitude for a few months and work at my economy.’*

The articles were also ignored because in the beginning the principal students of the works of Marx were non English speaking Europeans who thought of him primarily as a writer of German prose and even as a strictly European intellectual. In more recent times the journalism has been downgraded due to a sarcastic criticism at the hands of some influential post colonial writers who have uncovered in them a so called Marxist justification for progressive colonialism.

Marx’s 1853 articles on India, especially his *‘The British rule in India’*, are believed to espouse a doctrine of an enlightened colonialism. Edward Said’s book *‘Orientalism’* avers that in *‘article after article he [Marx] returned with increasing conviction to the idea that even in destroying Asia, Britain was making possible a real social revolution.’* Anderson accepts that some of the early Tribune articles contain Eurocentric generalisations. In about the time of the communist manifesto Marx tended to extol the benefits of an inventive British capitalism over the cost of massive social dislocation. A dialectic relationship of both is present but not always so, and the neutral idea that all pre-modern societies like in India and China are destined to make an adjustment to a foreign induced capitalist modernisation is powerfully present.

Anderson presents the case that the Tribune articles on pre-modern and *‘barbarous Asian despotism’* register a steady shift in emphasis, becoming more dialectical and if anything the negative side of capitalist progress is emphasised and a critical support for political resistance to colonialism becomes more the norm.

What can be said with Said and others is that their criticism of Marx rests only on a few early Tribune opinion pieces and extrapolations from the general drift of the unrevised versions of the communist Manifesto, without appreciation of Marx's constant revisions to his own analysis. What changed between 1853 and 1872-83 was his greater understanding and assessments of the various communal relations still dominant at that time.

Marx actually went on to identify at least three types of early communal relationships; the Greco-Roman, Germanic and the Asiatic. In the argument of 1853 the communal social relations present in these societies at the village level created a very repressive control by the village community over the non-free individual and made the basis for a despotic State, hence they were taken to be 'barbarous.' Marx then began to assess them differently and in the Grundrisse he states that the *'The Asiatic form necessarily hangs on most tenaciously and for the longest time.'*

Already in the Grundrisse of 1857-58 he was beginning to characterise the communal relations as containing both despotic and democratic potential. He also began to think that it was not the supposed common ownership of land that differentiated these pre capitalist social formations but the use of collective labour in working the land that really marked them out. Thus in the 1880s he wrote that the Russian village with its communal social organisation might be able to avoid all of the exploitation typical of capitalist progress by revolutionising itself and overthrowing the landed class and by linking up with the workers movements in the West. Marx in fact refers to such an alternative in the preface to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto, although it should be borne in mind that he was not proposing a unique Russian road to socialism.

Marx was not defending communal social relations in their existing forms in any unqualified fashion, for he also argued they needed to be revolutionised from within and linked to technological achievements from without. In this way, these indigenous social forms, and the defence of them against capitalist encroachment, could form the starting point for a wider communist transformation that would involve both large agrarian societies like India or Russia and the revolutionary labour movements of already industrialising ones like England, France and Germany.

In the occasional scribbling on the British colonialists and their actions in India and China Marx became ever more contemptuous of what the British colonial-capitalists were actually achieving: *'More than that of any other nation, the history of English economic management in India is a history of futile and actually stupid (in practice, infamous) experiments. In Bengal they created a caricature of English large scale landed property; in the south east they created a caricature of peasant smallholdings. In the north-west they did all they could to transform the Indian economic community with communal ownership of the soil into a caricature of itself.'* (Grundrisse p. 451)

The developing journalism of Marx also refutes the widely held idea that he took no interest in the national movements of his own time. It has been widely trumpeted that Marx raised up the idea of trans-national social class to such a height in his dialectic that the idea of 'national right' was completely suppressed altogether in his mind. In textual terms, much of the critique of Marx and Engels on nationalism centres on their early ethnocentric disparagement of some of the Slavic societies of Eastern Europe and the Balkans as "unhistorical" nations.

This thesis is challenged in the examples of Poland and Ireland, both primarily rural societies with no organised communist movement. Anderson shows that Marx's support for Polish independence was one of the great political passions of his life. One source of our confusion stems from the fact that some influential post Marx socialists developed a pronounced opposition to Polish independence and an explicit critique of Marx, especially Rosa Luxemburg and even Karl Kautsky. Also with Stalin, who partitioned Poland in 1939-41, everything to do with Polish independence was labelled a counterrevolutionary deviation, while most of Marx's writings on Poland were expunged from the official collections.

The historian of ideas Isiah Berlin is just one of many influential liberals who have charged Marx with a political blindness in respect of the great national movements of the nineteenth century. A study of Marx's writings on various national struggles, especially those covering Poland and Ireland, showed that he in fact related the workers struggles to the key national struggles without compromising the higher cause of communist revolution.

Anderson shows that the themes of nation and race were intertwined with class analysis and were not relegated to minor matters in his own active political life. In fact they took up most of his Marx's time as a leader of the First International and were at the core of his clashes and controversies with rival socialist tendencies (mainly Proudhonist and Bakuninist), covering the entire duration of the First International.

Anderson writes that: *'In Marx at the Margins, I did try to respond to serious scholarly critiques of Marx on nationalism and ethnicity such as those by Ephraim Nimmi (1994), who carried out a textual analysis of Marx's voluminous writings on nationalism. I generally eschewed reference to the kinds of peremptory (and textually unsupported critiques of those like Giddens who seem to get a free pass so long as their target is Marx.'*

In the document of 1864, the 'Inaugural Address' of the International, which in effect became its programme, the main theme was of course the international battle between capital and labour, however even here Marx referred to Ireland, Poland and the American civil war.

The period of the First International was also the period of the first drafts of Capital and all three political struggles feature heavily in the historical side of the economic critique. The importance of the American civil war for International Labour is cited in the very preface of the first edition of volume 1 of 1867. The ideological divisions that caused an eventual split in the First

International were over Marx's insistence that the workers movement should not restrict its own outlook to reductive class questions. At the time of Pierre Joseph Proudhon's death in 1865, Marx wrote a long article in German in which he repeated his earlier critiques of the French utopian socialist's economic theories. He also added a stinging rebuke directed against Proudhon's thoughts on Poland: *'his last work, written against Poland, in which for the greater glory of the tsar he expresses moronic cynicism, must be described as...not merely bad but base.'*

A year later, opposition to Marx emerged within the International among some of its French-speaking members, most of them influenced by Proudhon. In keeping with the viewpoint that labour should not involve itself in wider political issues, but stick to social and economic ones, they opposed singling out Poland for specific advocacy. In a letter Marx send to Engels dated January 5, 1886 Marx says that Poland is the basis of the dispute *'A plot has been hatched...it is tied up with that pack of Proudhonists in Brussels. The real crux of the controversy is the political question.'*

Marx opened the year 1867 in the midst of his finishing the final draft of Capital with a lengthy, well researched speech to a London meeting commemorating the 1863 Polish uprising sponsored by the International and a Polish exiles group. Marx avers that Poland remains the key to a revolution on Continental Europe because it would undermine the reactionary grip of Russia: *'There is only one alternative left for Europe, Asiatic barbarism under Muscovite leadership will burst over her head like a lawine (avalanche), or she must restore Poland.'*

After Marx set about constituting the International he became heavily involved with Irish affairs and this was underpinned by a substantial amount of private study. His first interest was following the struggle for land reform and he went more deeply into the class structure of rural Ireland, summarising his findings in a July 11th Tribune article 'The Indian Question-Irish Tenant Right:

'A class of absentee landlords has been enabled to pocket, not merely the labour, but also the capital of whole generations, each generation of Irish peasant sinking a grade lower in the social scale, exactly in proportion to the exertions and sacrifices made for the raising of their condition and that of their families. If a tenant was industrious and enterprising he became taxed in consequence of his industry and enterprise. If on the contrary he grew inert and negligent he was reproached with the "aboriginal faults of the Celtic race". He had accordingly no other alternative left but to become a pauper-to pauperise himself by industry or to pauperise by negligence. In order to oppose this state of things "Tenant Right" was proclaimed in Ireland....England has subverted the conditions of Irish society. At first it confiscated the land, then it suppressed the industry by Parliamentary enactments and lastly it broke the active energy by armed force. And thus England created those abominable conditions of society which enable a small caste of rapacious lordlings to hold the land and to live upon it. Too weak yet for revolutionising those social conditions the people appeal to Parliament, demanding at least their mitigation and regulation.' Marx then detailed the vociferous opposition from the land-owning classes to the tenants' rights law proposed to Parliament in June 1853.

After a break of two years Marx returned to the subject of Ireland with an article called *Ireland's Revenge* written for the *Neue Order-Zeitung* on March 16, 1855 and another eulogising the deceased Irish Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor: '*he died as a pauper in the true sense of the word, the burial expenses were met by the working class of London.*' Three years later he wrote another article for the *Tribune* in January 1859 speaking of the '*excitement in Ireland about a witch hunt directed against Irish conspirators.*'

Kevin Anderson summarises the result of the first phase of the study of social conditions in Ireland covering the 1850s in three propositions:

1. While they (Marx and Engels) enunciated clear support for the struggles of the Irish they always counselled Irish revolutionaries to devote more attention to the internal class dynamics of Irish society. In this they were especially critical of the upper class Catholic nationalism of O'Connell.
2. They urged Irish revolutionaries to develop the firmest unity with British workers particularly the mass-based Chartist movement, pointing out that the Chartists supported the repeal of the Union of Ireland and England.
3. They singled out Irish immigrant labour in Britain, both as an index of Irish oppression at home and as a factor holding down the wages of English workers. Moreover they argued that British rule in Ireland proved that the British State could be just as repressive as continental regimes like Bonapartist France or Prussia.

to be continued.

So you think you know about Karl Marx? A review of 'Marx at the Margins', Kevin B Anderson.

Posted on [May 2, 2013](#)

By Belfast Plebian

To date, no comprehensive intellectual biography has been published in any language. Kevin Anderson.

Every new class consciousness generation is forced by contemporary events to return to the philosophy of Karl Marx, not in a mood of revival but to learn something important that has become forgotten or carelessly overlooked by previous students.

In the past the known side of Karl Marx was represented by the Communist Manifesto, a handful of works by Engels and the first volume of an unfinished study of the capitalist-bourgeois model of the good society, Capital volume 1. The later volumes of Capital economic studies were inaccessible to most readers because they followed a difficult logic and even Engels, the life long friend and editor of at least three of the economic volumes, is frequently accused by contemporary devotees of seriously misunderstanding the logic of value as expounded across its many pages. In fact the leading lights of the ‘intellectual academy’ seem to have reached a sort of consensus that Engels got the economic critique wrong in his introductions and prefaces of the numerous editions, though it has not yet reached a consensus as to the linking arguments of the exposition, the relationship – to give one central example – of the tendency for the average rate of profit to fall to the sudden outbreak of an economic crisis, which is still hotly disputed.

There is another part of the Karl Marx legacy that has yet to be appreciated. I will call this, for want of a better expression, the esoteric part: that part of the intellectual legacy that got buried and then neglected by the custodians of the early workers’ parties. Many documents concerning what Karl Marx did and thought during his own lifetime were left unpublished until after the formation of an ‘historic Marxism.’

Marx had frequent disputes with other communists in his own lifetime and they were certainly able to understand him, maybe because the fundamentals of political existence then were stated in common speech in contrast to the specialised language of later social science. Marx in fact is famous less for his critique of classical economic science than for his preparation of the communist manifesto in 1848, one of the most accomplished of common language documents ever recorded and distributed. The manifesto was composed as a blend of just rhetoric and historical knowledge, and espoused in the name of a living revolutionary movement, the Communist League.

The act of rendering the dialectical thought of Karl Marx into fluent and accessible pamphlets and journalism is not without a certain risk of vulgar distortion. Even sections of books approved by Karl Marx himself, like the ‘Anti Duhring’ of Engels, to this day provoke criticism from some ‘Marxists’.

One reason we may well surmise why Karl Marx kept his partnership with Engels strong for so long was that he felt a need for an intellectual accomplice who could speak to the workers about political economy in a less convoluted style than he thought he could do. Marx always maintained that an attack on bourgeois economics as first expressed by Engels was not only his first introduction to the subject matter but a life-long inspiration.

Marx for sure could write in the style of a campaigning journalist but he certainly preferred to delegate the role of first publicist to his partner in revolution. When Engels committed intellectual blunders Marx usually refrained from excommunicating him. Engels held frustrations of his own, especially over the esoteric intellectual habits of Marx, complaining in a letter: “as long as you still have an unread book that you think important, you do not get down to

writing.”

With the benefit of historical hindsight Marx and Engels may have even ‘over-succeeded’ with their exoteric publications like the Communist Manifesto and the Anti-Duhring because these publications became by the turn of the century the core of what became known as ‘Second International Marxism’. They published the first version of the great manifesto in February 1848 and then went on to publish several revised versions.

With the very first one they faced a pressure familiar to all those who write for a public purpose: their friends’ impatience (from their comrades in the Communist League of whom we have records from the time). A month before publication the secretary of the Communist League wrote saying ‘The central committee charges its leading circle in Brussels to communicate with Citizen Marx and to tell him if the manifesto of the C. Party, the writing of which he undertook to do at the recent congress, does not reach London by February 1st of the current year, further measures will have to be taken against him.’

The manifesto was the declaration of a hard fought battle of ideas within the Communist League, an early example of a revolutionary united front, so the ideas expressed in the first edition can’t be ascribed without some reservation to Karl Marx alone.

Marx and Engels wrote several prefaces to the later editions that seem to edge closer to something like a genuine historical Marxism. In the 1872 German edition they say that in view of the gigantic strides taken by modern industry in the preceding twenty-five years, and in view of the political experience gained through workers participation in the Paris Commune of 1870/71, the communist programme of the first edition has in some respect become antiquated.

In point of fact friendly critics of the manifesto like Leon Trotsky and Ernest Mandel point out some serious flaws even in the revised versions from the perspective of a later Marxism. Trotsky says that in showing how capitalism draws along in its wake the backward and barbaric countries the manifesto does not say anything about the struggle of the colonial and semi-colonial peoples for their independence. He also says that the most obsolete part of the manifesto is Marx’s criticism of the socialist literature prevalent at that time.

Ernest Mandel says that the manifesto established the unfortunate myth of the driving down of workers wages to a subsistence level, the iron law of wages, as one of the main tenets of orthodox Marxist thought, something he in fact refuted in his scientific account.

What we learn from this worry over the communist manifesto is that we must be conscious of shifts and developments in the thought of Karl Marx. We must not even assume that the later books, essays and pamphlets are always an improvement on the earlier ones. After all we all decline with age.

Marx is unusual in that he has often suffered greater distortion in the hands of his supporters than from his intellectual enemies although these have often stood on common ground. To give just one example, both past friends and enemies typically selected out points 5, 6 and 7 of the Communist Manifesto as the only guide to what Marx argued for by way of an alternative to capitalist arrangements. Point 5 states that communists are in favour of the centralisation of all credit in the hands of the State by means of a national bank with an exclusive monopoly. Point 6 states that communists are in favour of a monopoly of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State and point 7 calls for an extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State. Nowadays we would call this a programme for state organised capitalism.

It is to the credit of the author of this book about the thought of Karl Marx that he scrupulously tries to avoid a stereotyping of Marx by not resorting to the usual interpretative device of selecting just a handful of well known 'key passages' from the better known publications and then referring to this selection as definitive of Marxism. The chief virtue of the book is that it presents to the contemporary militant a serious reading of essays, documents and letters by Karl Marx that are not well known or are seldom thought to be worthy of comparison to the key passages approach. The good thing is that we are offered a more 'historical' account than we are usually given. We might legitimately call this a dialectical account of the development of the mind of Marx.

Anderson's method is to split the collected works into a kind of core and a periphery and show how the works of the periphery if studied carefully offer us a more concrete understanding of the abstract core. The core for Anderson consists not so much of a privileged statement or single book but of the concepts of social capital and the exploitation of labour, the theory of alienation and fetishism and finally the notion of dialectics. These ideas are the core because they appear as a seam that is more or less present in all of the primary works.

Anderson does not make an assessment of Marx's intellectual development on the basis of a definite epistemological break between a young, humanist Marx and a mature, scientific Marx like the French professor Louis Althusser tried to do.

Anderson is one of those historians participating in the publication of MEGA2 which began in Moscow and Berlin in 1975, came to a standstill in 1989 with the implosion of the Soviet regimes, and was taken up again mainly by Western funded institutes. What we now have before us is a much expanded version of the works of Marx and Engels than was previously available. It is hard to think of another modern thinker with so small a ratio of published writings during their own lifetime to those actually written. Works now considered central to the canon such as the 1844 manuscripts, the German Ideology, the Grundrisse and the Theories of Surplus Value were largely unknown to the "orthodox Marxists" of 1905. For the purpose of this review it is useful to be reminded of what new material is included in the complete works, for Anderson makes use of some of them in his study.

The updated complete works are divided into four sections:

Section One: early works, articles and drafts.

Of thirty two volumes now planned, seventeen have appeared. Especially notable is the inclusion of a rougher but larger version of the influential 1844 manuscripts. Marx appears to be writing two versions at the same time.

Section Two: Capital and Preliminary Studies.

Consisting in 15 volumes, of which as of 2010, 13 have been published. What has been included are all the editions of volume one of Capital. Important here is a print of Engels's 1890 German edition, but with an important addition from a French edition prepared by Marx himself in 1872-1875 with an extra 60 pages not included in the English translation of the standard German edition. This, it turns out, was the edition most favoured by Marx though not by Engels. Anderson presents some extracts of letters concerning their difference of opinion over what version of Capital volume 1 should be prioritised. Other volumes offer draft manuscripts for what became Volumes 2 and 3 of Capital, which can now be studied to see how Engels edited and arranged them.

Section Three: Correspondence.

Of 35 volumes planned, 12 volumes covering the years up to 1865 have been published. In the previous complete works most letters from Marx to people other than Engels were usually omitted.

Section Four: Excerpt notebooks.

Of 32 volumes planned, eleven have so far been published. Here we have many drafts and notes never published before in any language. These include notebooks from 1844-1847 on political economists such as Jean -Baptiste Say, Jean-Charles Sismondi, Charles Babbage, Andrew Ure and Nassau Senior. Excerpt notebooks from Marx slated for publication include (1) notes from 1853 and 1880 on Indonesia, (2) notes from 1852 on the history of women and gender relations, (3) notes on the history of agriculture in Russia plus some on prairie farming in the United States, (4) substantial notes on Ireland from the 1860s, (5) notes on agriculture in Roman times, and finally (6) a massive chronology of world history composed during the 1880s.

Kevin Anderson situates his presentation of the development of Marx close to a mode of interpretation associated with the books of Raya Dunayevskaya (his own book is dedicated to her) whose most notable books are *Marxism and Freedom* (1958,) *Philosophy and Revolution*:

from Hegel to Sartre, and from Marx to Mao (1973) and Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution (1981).

In her own work Dunayevskaya turned to the unpublished 'Ethnographic' notebooks of Marx to argue against the thesis that the old Marx (the last ten years) was an unproductive thinker, pointing to some of the different conclusions Marx reached in contrast to Engels in the study of the role of women and class in early societies. This she believed was important owing to the undisputed spell Engel's 'Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State' held over all later communists. It was taken on trust that Marx had no thoughts of his own relevant to what was later to be called women's liberation.

Some of the less well know documents that Anderson mines concern the political journalism, especially those relating to race and class in the United States, the national struggles in Ireland and Poland, and others covering the colonial expansion in India, China and Java. He then relates some of this material to editions of Capital especially the generally ignored French edition, the one Marx himself preferred.

He also takes us on an excursion through Marx's late studies of pre-capitalist societies with particular reference to Russia and India and asks what his reasoning was in spending so much time on them, all the while jeopardising the completion of Volumes 2 and 3 of Capital.

What we end up with is a much more energetic and interesting 'late Marx.' It should be noted that David Riazanov and his colleagues at the Moscow institute neglected to publish some of these later documents stating that Marx by 1880 *'had lost his ability for intensive, independent, intellectual creation..... Sometimes, in reconsidering these notebooks, the question arises; why did he waste so much time on this....that is inexcusable pedantry.'*

In the next post we will look at some of what Anderson reveals about these writings, including those on Ireland.