

# Marxism, Modernity and Marginality

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Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*. University Of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 2010; 336 pp.: 9780226019833, \$22.50 (pbk)

## Introduction

Since the October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent century of revolutions in the global South, Marxism has been more at home in the margins – in what Immanuel Wallerstein described as the periphery and semi-periphery – than anywhere else. In the core capitalist countries, Marxism continues to have a great impact among intellectuals, but also often finds itself challenged by social and cultural theory grounded in a rhetoric of marginality, usually identifiable by the prefix *post* – poststructuralism, postcolonial theory, and that bogeyman ‘postmodernism’ (see Chari and Verdery, 2009). One of the more unfortunate situations of left theory today is the mutual suspicion and even hostility sometimes found between the ‘posts’ and Marxists. Some have read poststructuralism – apparently ignorant of its political provenance – as inherently hostile to Marxism and some Marxists have mirrored this incorrect understanding, returning the unwarranted and unproductive enmity.<sup>1</sup> In *Marx at the Margins* Kevin B. Anderson makes it clear that Marx himself was a theorist of the margins and that his work on the margins fundamentally shaped his theoretical masterpiece, the three volumes of *Capital*. One of the important achievements of *Marx at the Margins* is to help connect Marxist theory with the poststructuralist, deconstructionist, subaltern-studies, and postcolonial approaches with which Marxism sometimes, incorrectly, appears at odds.

Anderson treats at least two types of margins. The first margin is the one indicated in the subtitle of the book, regions outside of England and north-west Europe, outside, that is, of those areas thought in modernization theory to represent the most advanced cases along a single track of development. Marx’s occasional and ephemeral writing – newspaper articles, notes, letters, and unpublished drafts – make up the second margin. The two margins are interrelated empirically, since many of Marx’s most extensive writings on the margins of capitalism occur in his marginal writings. Both of these margins can be studied now better than ever before because of the excellent work proceeding on the new *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (1972–). Anderson’s book is especially important because it not only analyzes these two marginal aspects of Marx, but because it also relates these two margins to the core of Marx’s achievement: a dialectical approach to history, and

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particularly to the history of capitalism, as it exceeds itself toward a variety of possible socialist futures.

Marx, as Anderson emphasizes, lived this dialectical connection between theory and practice in a broad community of international revolutionary exiles in London (see Lattek, 2006). Anderson emphasizes how Marx's writings were shaped by his position in London, not only the capital city of an international community of political exiles but also the hub of the international network of imperialism. Marx's journalism was not simply a way of earning money for his more theoretical work, but also his way of engaging with the world. Anderson reveals the connection of Marx's place at the 'margins' to the set of 'posts' to which this concept is so often tied by following Derrida in characterizing Marx as 'an immigrant among us, a glorious, sacred, accursed but still clandestine immigrant as he was all his life' (Derrida, 1994: 194), cited by Anderson (p. 1).

## Marx and the Stages of Economic Growth

Anderson traces the development in Marx's thought from a unilinear understanding of historical progress – where capitalism more or less as it developed in Britain would be a necessary stop for every society on the *via dolorosa* leading to a socialist future – toward a multilinear understanding of history that includes many alternate possible paths toward socialism.

Anderson uses the *Communist Manifesto* to mark a baseline from which Marx's movement beyond a stage theory of history can be measured. That document, composed on the eve of the 1848 revolutions (and having little influence on the revolutions themselves, which had already begun by the time the *Manifesto* appeared in print) is the closest that Marx and Engels ever came to modernization theory. Modernization theory, which assumes that all societies pass through a set of similar stages on the way to some social good, identified as modern, is the aspect of Marx that the Cold-War theorist W.W. Rostow (1960) took up in his self-described 'non-Communist Manifesto', *The Stages of Economic Growth*. That work parrots much of the text Marx and Engels composed for the Communist League in 1847 but dismisses communism as a 'disease of the transition' to capitalism' (a disease that neo-imperialist powers continue to treat with brutal interventions throughout the global South).

In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels – neither of whom had yet turned thirty – presented a kind dialectical celebration of capitalism, in which the bourgeoisie overthrew feudalism, constantly revolutionized relations of production, and then kindly produced its own 'grave diggers', who would build communism upon the achievements of capitalism. In this early period, before the hard experience of the 1848 revolutions and their close studies of the contemporary world, Marx and Engels seem to applaud capitalism both for destroying older forms of class oppression and also in anticipation of its self-destructive creation of a classless society.

While teleological and unilinear modernization theory still counts as legitimate knowledge among many mainstream academics, journalists, and policy-makers, Marx began moving beyond such teleological and at least implicitly ethnocentric and imperialist models more than a century and a half ago. Anderson shows how Marx had already developed this multilinear path in *Grundrisse* and in *Capital*, and that he further emphasized the multilinearity of *Capital* in the revised French edition published serially from 1872–1875, the last version on which Marx himself worked. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) has elucidated the anti-teleological import of Marx's *Capital* in his distinction of 'history 1' and 'history 2'. History 1 Chakrabarty defines as the preconditions of capitalism posited retroactively by capital itself. Capital thus appears the result of a teleology that capital itself has posited. If history 1 is one-sided and singular, history 2s, by contrast, are multiples, the concrete histories that both form the objects of primitive capitalist accumulation and the subjects resisting real subsumption into capital. While Anderson does not describe the multilinearity of

capital in terms resembling Chakrabarty's, the commensurability of the two understandings of capital does suggest the broad significance of Anderson – and Marx – to ongoing postcolonial discussions.

## Marx and European Imperialism

Anti-imperialism, which became perhaps the signal achievement of Marxism throughout the 20th century, sits awkwardly with Marx's seeming sympathy for British colonialism in his articles for the New York *Tribune*, beginning with 'The British Rule in India' in 1853. In these articles Marx seems to argue that the British, for all their exceptional brutality, also brought historical progress to the 'stagnatory, and vegetative life' of the Indian village (quoted by Anderson, p. 16). In fact, Marx does not make this argument as baldly as his critics often assert, and even in this article Marx hardly declares himself a friend of British imperialism. In a private letter to Engels, moreover, Marx explained that his presentation of the 'destruction of domestic industry by England' in India was meant primarily to be 'shocking' to American readers of the *Tribune*, where the article was published. The *Tribune* had strong socialist leanings, but, informed by the economist Henry Carey, sometimes advocated using tariffs to protect American domestic industry against British competition to achieve a kind of class peace within capitalism. In fact, Marx (1987 [1853]) noted to Engels 'the entire economic approach of the British in India was wretched [*säuisch*] and remains so to this day.' Here was another *de te fabula narratur* moment, but, whereas in *Capital* German readers were asked to see in England's present their own future, here American readers were asked to see themselves in India's present political economic situation.

Some of the most interesting attempts to grapple with Marx's apparent ethnocentrism in his writings on India and elsewhere came out of writers addressing the problem of orientalism. Edward W. Said's (1978) discussion of Marx on 'British Rule in India' is relatively well known and, Anderson shows, revolves around a misreading of Marx's view of the destructiveness of colonialism and of capitalism (pp. 17–20). The critique of orientalism by Bryan S. Turner (1978) is more relevant to Marxist scholars. Turner encourages scholars to follow Althusser in extracting the Hegelian core from Marx and replacing it with one based on Spinoza, apparently a more radically immanent, structuralist, and less teleological thinker than Hegel. Replacing this Hegelianism with Spinozism would, according to Turner, remove the teleological basis for Marx's ethnocentrism in his writings on India and elsewhere, specifically a unilinear narrative of progress. Turner is correct that, if we can trace Marx's alleged ethnocentrism to the Hegelian core of his writings then we should excise those elements of the core. Anderson, however, makes clear that Marx was never as ethnocentric as his critics claim and, in any case, that his theory quickly developed into a powerful critique of ethnocentrism in all its cultural, economic, and political forms. Hegelianism, furthermore, as I shall discuss below, supported Marx's anti-imperialist and anti-teleological project by offering a dialectical method that generated social theory from the margins without falling into a bad empiricism that has no critical purchase on the details it compiles.

Anderson's discussion of Marx at the margins, of Marx's engagement with the anti-imperialist struggles of the day, provides a more powerful critique of imperialism than either Turner or Said did. Both critics of orientalism share an assumption that at its core orientalism is a racist ideology about people of color, especially in the Middle East and Asia. Some anti-imperialist intellectuals in the Middle East have taken a less intellectualist approach to orientalism and critical theory, noting that the problem with orientalism is not so much racist discourse, or even incorrect theory, as it is expropriation, exploitation, and oppression of the global South. Anouar Abdel-Malek's (1963) 'Orientalism in crisis', a work that Said praises highly, goes beyond the observation that orientalism employs a cultural essentialism to attribute passivity and non-sovereignty to Arabs. The crux

of Abdel-Malek's argument was that anti-colonial struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America had already proven orientalism wrong by establishing in fact the passivity and non-sovereignty attributed to Arabs by orientalist theorists, and that orientalism would fall apart because the political, economic, and military domination on which it rested would collapse. To borrow a phrase from Marx that Abdel-Malek did not use, the 'criticism of arms' had succeeded where the 'arm of criticism' had failed. Syrian scholar Sadik al-'Azm (1981) also objected to Said's focus on ideology and suggested that such exclusively ideological criticisms implied a call to improve understanding of the Middle East in ways that would only make imperialism more effective, not defeat it. As Ahmad (1994) emphasizes in his similar criticism of Said, Marxist critics should write in solidarity with the anti-colonial nationalism of the author of *Orientalism* even while criticizing the limitations of its focus on a perhaps too broad and idealistic characterization of the West.

The real development for Marx was not correcting earlier ethnocentric misperceptions in himself and others, but rather engaging with the real anti-imperialist struggles of his day. This engagement with anti-imperialism and other struggles on the margins, Anderson shows, is what made Marx the Marx we know today. Anderson reads Marx's writings on China, India, Indonesia, Poland, Ireland, the USA, and Russia to show how Marx began with a unilinear – and thus ethnocentric – notion of historical development, how by the time he wrote *Capital* he had rejected this unilinear ethnocentrism, and how, by the end of his life he had fully embraced the kind of cultural and historical nuance that characterizes the writings of most Marxists today, who recognize modernization theory as an aspect of bourgeois imperialism rather than of socialist transformation.

### Tarrying with the Negative: Hegel and the Newspaper

Kevin Anderson shows not only that Marx developed his understanding of history from an early, unilinear and at least implicitly ethnocentric narrative into a multilinear set of possibilities, but also that Marx made this move through his study of the political struggles occurring throughout the world in his time. This engagement with the world emerged, like so much of Marx, from his own understanding of Hegelian dialectics. Hegel, like Marx, found in the newspaper a connection of philosophical thought with the historical present. Susan Buck-Morss (2000) has argued that Hegel formed his account of lordship and bondage in the *Phenomenology* in part through his reading about the Haitian revolution in the journal *Minerva*. Reading the news was, in fact, essential to Hegel's methodology, his dialectical relating of the abstract and the concrete, of theory and world. Hegel wrote: 'Reading the newspaper in early morning is a kind of realistic morning prayer. One orients one's attitude against the world and toward God [in one case], or toward that which the world is [in the other]. The former gives the same security as the latter, in that one knows where one stands' (quoted in Buck-Morss, 2000: 844). As Hegel makes clear in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1986 [1807]), his method – so different from that grim progression of ideas imputed to him by a whole tradition of hostile misreadings, beginning perhaps with Wilhelm Dilthey's *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Dilthey, 1989 [1883]: 153–154) – involves the study of the history of the dialectical relation between concept (*Begriff*) and object (*Gegenstand*). The dialectical unity of concept and object means that developing concepts transform objects and vice-versa. This was what Hegel called 'tarrying with the negative', a concept explicated brilliantly by Slavoj Žižek (1993). Reading the newspaper and writing philosophy were thus two sides of the same process. In his relation to newspapers, as with so much else, Marx managed to 'out-Hegel Hegel', to employ in a positive sense a phrase Lukács (1971 [1923]: xxiii) used in self-criticism. Philosophy for Marx also involved writing for the newspaper, not just reading it. The newspaper has long served as a central point bringing together theory and practice in Marxism. This began with Marx's own journalism, continued through Lenin's (1969 [1902]) emphasis on the importance

of newspapers in revolutionary struggles, and remains today in an excellent variety of revolutionary newspapers and electronic journalism.

Beginning in 1851, Marx began writing a mostly weekly column for the New York *Tribune*, contributing 487 articles over more than a decade to the most important newspaper in the USA at the time, one whose editors were committed to varieties of socialism (see Tuchinsky, 2009). It was for the *Tribune* that Marx wrote his now infamous articles on British imperialism in India, but it was also through his *Tribune* journalism that Marx went far beyond his own youthful ethnocentrism. Already in his writings for the *Tribune* on China and the Taiping Rebellion, Marx put forward the suggestion, more commonly associated with varieties of 20th-century Marxism, that a worldwide socialist revolution might begin outside of the core capitalist countries, and his writings on the 1857 Indian uprising made similar suggestions. Marx's discussions on the Polish national struggle against Russian domination and the Irish fight against British domination make clear not only that he supported such efforts, even though they might have appeared marginal to some final battle against capitalism, but also that he saw these national struggles as part of, and essential to, defeating capitalism and building socialism.

Marx's apparently marginal writings on seemingly marginal politics in the margins of the capitalist world system connect directly with the understanding of marginality articulated by Jacques Derrida in *Margins of Philosophy* (1982). In that text Derrida rejects the claim of philosophy to subsume all other particular discourses and practices, much as Marx rejected similar claims of Hegelian philosophy in order to create a dialectical and historical materialism. Derrida asks us:

to recall that beyond the philosophical text there is not a blank, virgin, empty margin, but another text, a weave of differences of forces without any present center of reference (everything – 'history', 'politics', 'economy', 'sexuality', etc. – said not to be written in books: the worn-out expression with which we appear not to have finished stepping backward, in the most regressive argumentations and in the most apparently unforeseeable places); and also to recall that the *written* text of philosophy (this time in books) overflows and cracks its meaning. (1982: xxiii)

While readers hostile to deconstruction might see the scare quotes with which Derrida surrounds the terms *history*, *politics*, *economy*, and *sexuality* as evidence of a nihilistic relativism, what he in fact suggests is that the texts of philosophy are necessarily connected to texts about these phenomena and that these phenomena are also not confined to the set of texts written about them. The philosophy that Derrida criticizes in *Margins of Philosophy* is much like the idealist philosophy that Marx rejected; the model of a philosophy inseparable from its margins is precisely what Marx offered, if we only read his journalism and his theory together. It is this project that Anderson carries out in *Marx at the Margins*.

## **From Class Struggle in the Core to Civil War in Russia and the USA**

Part of the background to Marx's turn to the margins, which Anderson notes but might have discussed further, is Marx's growing pessimism for the prospects of revolution in the core capitalist countries, especially after the rise to power of Louis-Napoleon in France, as well as Marx's disillusionment with capitalism as a modernizing force leading toward socialism. While France is not marginal in the capitalist world system, Marx's writings on France in 1848 and after are marginal in their focus on the negative, on the empirical and journalistic rather than on the abstract and theoretical. The revolutions of 1848–9 demonstrated that the bourgeoisie was not merely an economic antithesis of the proletariat, but also a formidable enemy, willing, in order to preserve its own class

power, to side with reactionary elites and undo the political and economic progress Marx once thought its natural tendency. Marx's (1985 [1852]) *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, so much more complex than the stage theory suggested by the *Communist Manifesto*, illustrates how far Marx had already traveled theoretically even before his writings on British imperialism.

Marx and Engels's writings on the American Civil War represent perhaps their most important engagements with an emancipation struggle arguably outside the capitalist core and not directly related to a socialist struggle against capitalism. Anderson emphasizes that for Marx the Civil War represented a decisive struggle against racism and a realization, as Marx put it in a private letter of 1866 and in *Capital*, that 'labor in the white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor in the black skin is branded' (quoted by Anderson, p. 114). This anti-racism is clearly essential to Marx's understanding of the Civil War and, indeed, fundamental to Marx's thinking at least since his famous 1849 discussion of the relationship between race and slavery in 'Wage Labor and Capital' (quoted by Anderson, p. 83).

Marx and Engels discussed the American struggle against slavery not only as part of a larger reorientation toward the 'margins' of capitalism but also, I would add, as they developed a new understanding of the relationship between war and social transformation. After the revolutions of 1848-49, many of Marx's closest associates had had to flee to the USA to escape political persecution in their home countries. These refugees soon found themselves embroiled in the greatest struggle for the emancipation of labor before the October Revolution, the long struggle against slavery, from John Brown's partisan warfare through Reconstruction and beyond. As Bruce Levine (1992) has shown, these exile radicals, and the socialist and democratic traditions they brought with them, played an important role in the development and strength of the American Republican Party as an anti-slavery party, in keeping Missouri in the Union, and in many other important moments in the war. For Marx, the set of struggles against unfree labor in the USA (slavery) and in Russia (serfdom) was, as he wrote to Engels in January, 1860, 'the most momentous thing happening in the world today' (quoted by Anderson, p. 85). As the inclusion of the Russian example made clear, although Marx was an uncompromising enemy of racism, the essential element in the Civil War was a fight against a form of constrained labor even more brutal than wage labor. The struggle against slavery posited a specific form of private property as a specific form of oppression and thus both prefigured and paved the way for further struggles against capital and wage labor. The discussion of wage slavery should not be taken as a facile use of abolitionist rhetoric for a socialist cause divorced from this anti-slavery struggle but rather as a sign of the real collaboration between struggles against slavery in the black Atlantic and struggles against wage labor in what might be called the red Atlantic.

## Late Marx

The discussion in *Marx on the Margins* allies Anderson with writers like Teodor Shanin (1983) and Franklin Rosemont in identifying a third, distinct 'late' period in the philosophical career of Karl Marx. Many writers have identified a humanist 'early' Marx in the writings before the *German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 1970 [1845-1846]), either to be celebrated or, as with Althusser, to be rejected in favor of the later scientific Marx. Anderson, like Shanin and Rosemont, identifies a 'late Marx,' especially in his 1881 letter (and its many drafts) to the Russian populist (and, after 1883, Marxist) Vera Zasulich (Marx, 1985 [1881]) and also in his ethnological notebooks of 1880-1882. The ethnological notebooks (Marx, 1972 [1880-1882]) explore non-capitalist societies by rejecting the Eurocentric view that they are simply primitive collectivities awaiting capitalism so that they might someday achieve socialism. Rather, for the late Marx, these non-capitalist societies suggest new possibilities for communist social organization in their own right and new possible trajectories of socialist development. The Chicago surrealist, Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizer, poet, and theoretician Franklin Rosemont has described the ethnological notebooks as coming with

‘question-marks blazing like sawed-off shotguns’ pointing to ‘the subjective factor as the decisive force in revolution’ and demonstrating that ‘revolutionary social transformation could proceed from different directions and in different (though not incompatible) ways.’ This ‘logical extension of his multi-linear view of history into the present and future,’ Rosemont continued, ‘turned out to be emphatically anti-reformist’ so that ‘sickeningly sentimental and fundamentally bourgeois aberrations will find no solace in Late Marx’ (Rosemont, 1989: 201–213).

In his letter to Vera Zasulich Marx similarly offered an anti-ethnocentric politics that is resolutely revolutionary and anti-reformist. In a letter to Marx, Zasulich had complained of self-styled Marxists in Russia who encouraged capitalist development and the destruction of the peasant commune as an inevitable step on the way to socialism. Zasulich and her populist comrades saw instead the commune as a possible basis for socialist development that diverged from the path that Marx seemed to outline in *Capital*. While Zasulich herself later abandoned this populist position, Marx in his 1881 letter sided with the populists in his response, writing that he did not mean in *Capital* to make the history of England a norm that the rest of the world must follow if it is to get to some socialist promised land.

Marx’s death in 1883 meant that many of the findings implicit in the ethnological notebooks and in his letter to Zasulich could not be formulated by Marx himself, and they have been left to subsequent Marxists to develop. It is interesting to speculate whether many of the errors of Soviet communism, which in its often doctrinaire drive to industrialize sometimes strayed close to the unilinear position of those self-styled Marxists whom Zasulich and Marx opposed, might have been avoided had there been a clearer published statement of multilinearity by Marx himself. Capitalist elites have clung to a modernization narrative far more ethnocentric and unilinear than even the worst moments in Marx’s articles on India, seeking to bomb a series of countries, including Vietnam in Rostow’s day and Iraq and Afghanistan in our own, into a liberal modernity. If a very young Marx once seemed at least not entirely opposed to such brutal ‘modernization’, it is clear from Anderson’s analysis that Marx soon developed the kind of non-linear, anti-imperialist and anti-ethnocentrist perspective that is virtually universal on the left today.

## Conclusion

Anderson is to be commended for making Marx’s marginal material available in a readable and concise account, connecting it to Marx’s core texts, especially *Capital*, and showing just how wrong those who accuse Marxists of ethnocentrism and teleological unilinearity are. That *Marx at the Margins* is published by a major academic press and addressed to a broad academic audience will, I hope, help to correct these widespread errors about Marx by scholars attentive to the margins of philosophy but hostile to historical materialism. For those already familiar with Marxist theory, the fact that Marx was no Rostow will not come as a surprise. However, for such readers, the real surprise and pleasure of Anderson’s book is his excellent account of Marx as a cosmopolitan global citizen, not just observing, but also engaging – through letters, newspaper writing, and close study – with a complex and diverse world from the perspective of a set of possible socialist futures. Anderson’s book brings together Marx and an approach to the margins that will hopefully allow both sides, the Marxists and the ‘posts’, to contribute to a common project of negating the capitalist present and imagining a set of possible socialist futures.

## Note

1. For an excellent and comprehensive account specifying the connection of many of these ‘posts’ to Marxism and anti-imperialism, see Young (2001). For a recent attempt to separate Marxism from the ‘posts’, see Chibber (2013).

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