

# Decentering and Refocusing Marx

*Peter Amato*

---

*Under Review:*

---

Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Pp. 336. Paperback, \$22.50. ISBN: 0226019837; 9780226019833

---

In this valuable book, Kevin Anderson seeks to establish “a notion of Marx as a global theorist whose social critique included notions of capital and class that were open and broad enough to encompass the particularities of nationalism, race, and ethnicity, as well as the varieties of human social and historical development, from Europe to Asia and from the Americas to Africa”(6). Although Anderson does not succeed in accomplishing these aims here, *Marx at the Margins* is a worthwhile contribution to Marx scholarship in providing an overview and encouragement toward often-overlooked and some still unpublished writings. It also connects selected themes in a few of these writings to Marx’s activism and to the developing and evolving perspective of his later political economy. It is, at the very least, a helpful if speculative annotated bibliography covering less-travelled paths in Marx’s writings with a worthwhile appendix illuminating their tortuous editing and publishing history.

In the main part of the book, Anderson gathers evidence from Marx’s journalism, political writings, speeches, and some letters to argue that broad and significant changes in Marx’s attitudes about colonialism, nationalism, race, ethnicity, and revolution occurred roughly between the late 1840s and the 1870s. In the first two chapters, based on comparing passages and quotations from early writings including the *Manifesto* with later comments pertaining to India, China, Russia and Poland, Anderson concludes that a “major theoretical shift” (38) in Marx’s thinking about colonialism and a significant

“turn” (77–78) in his views on Russia and Poland occurred. The fragmentary and decontextualized nature of most of this evidence makes Anderson’s conclusions seem much less solid than he takes them to be. This manner of argument is also a main problem of chapters 3 and 4, where Anderson shifts the focus to Marx’s and Engels’s views on the American Civil War and English rule in Ireland in order to shed light upon their supposedly changing views and differences on issues of racial and ethnic liberation. In chapter 5, Anderson connects these ideas with Marx’s developing critique of political economy in order to show how they made a difference in the way he formulated some of its key concepts and arguments. In the final chapter, Anderson takes the reader through major themes that emerge from a reading of Marx’s ethnological notes and excerpts, again using comments and remarks in these writings as evidence of shifts and changes in Marx’s views on non-Western and pre-capitalist societies, the significance of ancient communal forms, and the possibilities for revolution.

Several individual passages and chapters in Anderson’s book are illuminating and valuable even when the relationships they are thought to bear in regard to his overall argument are weak. For example, the chapters on Ireland and America are full of vividly detailed depictions of Marx’s and Engels’s lives as thinkers and activists engaged in the political struggles and social issues of their times. But a major point Anderson makes in this discussion is that Marx’s views on the relationship of English and Irish workers changed from regarding Irish liberation as an afterthought of English proletarian revolt, to thinking of it instead as a “lever” that would be necessary to pull if ever the English working class was to be moved. This is an interesting change that Anderson shows us in Marx’s views on the relationship of English and Irish workers’ struggles. But, characteristically, Anderson seems here to both overestimate and underinterpret Marx’s writing. In the first place, it seems more sensible to regard Marx as reasoning *tactically* here in making the change from one position to the other regarding the Irish revolt. The evidence Anderson offers concerning seeing Irish liberation as a “lever” is fully consistent with maintaining that class oppression is fundamental and primary, but also seeing that colonialism and racism defend, deepen, and entrench it. No evidence Anderson offers suggests that Marx’s theories actually changed in light of his changing estimation of the value or importance of different forms of struggle to accomplish the overall goal, which was still international working class revolution.

Further, Anderson seems completely unaware of the extent to which Marx’s less deterministic or seemingly less “classist” thinking here would remain problematic to most of those for whom the Irish struggle was actually of paramount concern because of their national and ethnic sympathies. In other words, it is worth noting that elevating the Irish national struggle to the status of a *mechanical instrument* by the manipulation of which Ireland’s oppressors might one day liberate themselves could be interpreted as less than a really

• • •

powerful statement of Marx's newfound commitment to the concerns of Irish nationalism. While an improvement of some sort, I'm not sure this is a sure sign of Marx coming to have great insight into the meaning of nationalism or ethnic identity, at least in terms of the kinds of concerns most of us have in mind when we think of struggles that are really about forms of identity, whether they be about gender, sexual, national, racial, or ethnic identity.

As generally sympathetic as I am with Anderson's overall views on Marx, there are two larger issues I see as arising for the approach he has taken in this book. First, the main argument often appears to be aimed at a strawman. The idea that a careful, good faith reading of Marx's texts in any languages or editions yields a unilinear, deterministic picture of national, or international, or general human development has been steadily challenged and successfully undermined for many decades. The view of Marxism as too reductivistic or deterministic to be an important liberatory philosophy has been identified by various names over the century and a half during which Marxism has been widely debated and discussed. Many generations of Marxists have confronted similar charges, albeit dressed up in somewhat different clothing, that Marx's theory of history and social change is too rigidly "empiricist," or "scientistic," or it is too "Hegelian," (take your pick), to take into account the complexity of personal, moral, and political motivations and struggles with forms of power and oppression that are not strictly capitalist. There are lots of serious issues about how Marxism relates to national, ethnic, racial, gender, and other forms liberatory struggles take. But the reason why Marxists cannot simply look to Marx for solutions to these issues that suit our own horizons is that they are our horizons and not Marx's, not because of some ideological caricature of Marxism as essentially "deterministic," or "economistic," or "evolutionist," or "structuralist," or what have you.

The notion that Marx simply ignored or rejected the significance of human struggles other than those directly related to the proletarian revolution as such—and, more importantly, that the *meaning* of Marx's theories about history and social change taken together as some kind of coherent whole must be interpreted in this way by those who espouse them, have been under broad attack within Marxism since at least the early days of the Frankfurt School. Although Anderson seems aware that Marxists have broadly put reductivistic and deterministic interpretations of Marxism into perspective for some time, he often nevertheless appears in this book to be arguing precisely with those kinds of interpreters.<sup>1</sup> As noted above, this makes the more obvious argument of the book appear to be an argument with a strawman. But it also gives the impression that there is a less obvious case that Anderson is pursuing here

---

1. See his treatment of the flaws and gaps in the earlier Soviet editions of Marx's and Engels's writings, for example in the Appendix, 247–52.

too, involving a debate among the readers of Marx who are *not at all* committed to seeing Marx as a determinist or a reductivist.<sup>2</sup>

The second larger issue I will raise for Anderson's argument here has to do with the basic way he interprets his evidence. Throughout the book, Anderson tends to interpret differences of tone, focus, and emphasis in Marx's treatment of relevant themes as signs that radical shifts or "turns" in his thinking have occurred, always in the predictable direction. I would suggest to him that a better interpretation in almost all of these cases would be to see them as resulting from the natural interplay of ideas and the circumstances to which they apply. This alternative approach would have the added benefit of reflecting what is widely acknowledged as Marx's own approach to his own research and how he thought social scientific and historical research should be carried out. Marx's research aimed at providing careful, nuanced, layered, historical analyses of concrete circumstances. He pursued the kind of research in which the contradictions and complexities of historical circumstances revealed themselves over time to concrete analysis. How could Marx possibly carry out this kind of research and *not* find his views taking on greater nuance and a more complex sense of the contradictions, prospects, and subtleties involved in actual revolutionary circumstances? Anderson sees surprising changes of direction and shifts in Marx's thinking where it just might make more sense to see that Marx is engaged in the historical materialist project in which ideas and theories will usually be expected to change and develop in relation to their engagement with concrete events and unfolding historical circumstances. In this sense, from the standpoint of historical materialism, it should not really be surprising to find that Marx seems to hold more realistic, complex, and nuanced views of actual liberation struggles when he is writing about them and writing in their midst, than he might have been seen to hold when writing more general, theoretical, and programmatic writings at earlier stages of his career like the *Manifesto*.

This last point, finally, suggests that the most important message I take

---

2. For example, Anderson flatly characterizes Marx as "ever the revolutionary humanist" early on (21) in a manner that is puzzling given how much stress he lays on Marx's "shifting" and "changing" his attitudes and theories regarding other humans throughout the book. Worse, it makes Anderson seem to be either equivocal on the meaning of "humanist," or tendentious in promoting Marxism-Humanist views on Marx. The latter notion is bolstered by Anderson's exaggerated reliance on interpretations of Marx provided by prominent figures associated with Marxism-Humanism. This is not to say those interpretations are bad or wrong, but Anderson gives the reader no rationale by which to defend his references to such sources out of the many philosophers and scholars of Marx he might have otherwise consulted in a scholarly work on these particular subjects.

• • •

from Anderson's book (245) actually holds up very well: Marx's writings are an extremely valuable *point of departure* that can offer insights that are relevant for liberatory thought and struggle today across a very wide range of particular forms of struggle and circumstance. Marx could not have completely anticipated or theorized how these various inter-objective and subjective circumstances will come together for us, but that is for us to do. — • —