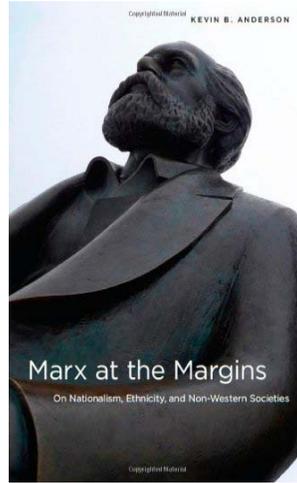


Was Karl Marx 'Eurocentric'?



[Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies](#)

By Kevin B. Anderson

University of Chicago Press, 2010, 336 pages

[Eurocentrism](#)

By Samir Amin

Monthly Review Press, 1988 (second edition 2009), 288 pages

Reviews by **Barry Healy**

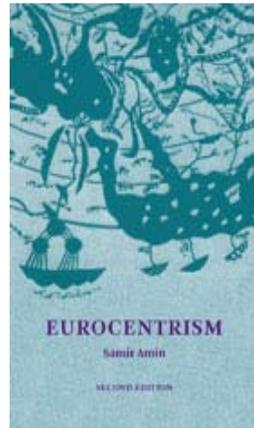
October 22, 2010 -- In the foundational text of the Marxist movement, the *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels paint a vivid word picture of the awesome, world-shaking advance of capitalism.

The East-Indian and Chinese markets, the colonisation of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development.

This “impulse” created the world market, “for which the discovery of America paved the way”, and which further revolutionised the means of production. Without consideration for human life or suffering, the bourgeoisie created a “world after its own image” in which “even the most barbarian, nations [are drawn] into civilisation”.

Bourgeois economic prowess “batters down all Chinese walls ... it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves.”

Barbarian nations becoming civilised? The 1839 British Opium War against China battering down a primitive, pigheaded dislike of outsiders?



Edward Said, author of *Orientalism*, pointed to these and other writings of Marx, such as his 1853 article "[The British Rule in India](#)" as examples of “the Romantic Orientalist vision”. In fact, Said argued, “in article after article he returned with increasing conviction to the idea that even in destroying Asia, Britain was making possible there a real social revolution”.

In other words, Marx was as guilty of a nostalgic, dewy-eyed admiration of European triumphalism as, say, James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* in which an aged Native American sage opines: “The pale-faces are masters of the earth.”

At the very least, was Marx “problematically unilinear”, as Kevin Anderson puts it, assuming that the history of every country was destined to be force-marched in one direction only, through the Hell of capitalist development into the socialist future?

Not only unilinear, Marx expressed opinions about supposedly peripheral societies being dependent on revolutionary action of workers in the metropolitan centres. In 1847 Marx thought that Poland must be liberated "in England not in Poland" and he considered Ireland to be equally reliant on English workers.

Reading such a catalogue it seems that Marx was guilty of a superiority towards Indians, Irish, black slaves, the Polish and the Chinese and other non-European civilisations. And he seemed to mechanically force all matters of race, ethnicity and nationalism into a one-size-fits-all class-based theory of history.

Both Samir Amin and Anderson produce answers to these challenges, in vastly different manners.

Amin has devised a new scheme of analysing the evolution of world history, criticising certain categories of Marx’s historical materialism.

Anderson, on the other hand defends Marx's thinking by delving deep into both the published and unpublished archives to bring to light hitherto unknown texts that show that Marx's ideas evolved markedly over time.

Anderson argues that both the *Communist Manifesto* and "The British Rule in India" should not be taken as Marx's last words on the subject.

Amin's project is quite radical. He takes Marx to task on his use of the term "Oriental Despotism" as a catch-all phrase for non-European, pre-capitalist societies. These societies did not fit within the pattern of European feudalism, displaying their own features.

The conventional Marxist description of history is that humanity passed through a series of pre-capitalist forms: pre-class society, class society, slavery, feudalism and then capitalism.

This is one of the great "intellectual deformations" of our times, says Amin.

'Tributary' societies

Amin's response is to question the use of the term "feudalism" to describe the European experience; in fact, he questions whether feudalism as a category existed at all. Instead, he uses the expression "tributary societies" to describe all pre-capitalist class societies.

Thus, ancient Rome was one form of tributary society, in which slaves paid tribute in the form of unpaid labour. Middle Ages Europe was just another form, in which peasants paid tribute in the form of levies and service.

Chinese and Arab civilisations were other forms, where highly centralised bureaucracies ruled over rather independent villages extracting tribute in the form of taxes and sometimes communal labour on major works.

The advantage for Amin in this scheme is that he can prove that the Arab, Chinese and other civilisations were more stable than what is commonly referred to as European feudalism. In fact, Amin says, Europe was more tumultuous precisely because it never achieved the higher level of development that the Arabs and the Chinese exhibited.

It was that very instability that drove Europeans out of their continental nest, opening up the world to trade and through that revolutionising their economic system into capitalism.

Thus, Amin turns the tables on European claims to authority, undermining Eurocentrism: it was European backwardness and weakness that created capitalism and global domination, not superiority.

Amin mounts a powerfully argued and passionate case, part of which is a very sophisticated analysis of the development of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which is welcome because it cuts to the heart of contemporary racism. It allows Amin to sweepingly reinterpret world history and raise the prominence in particular of Islamic civilisation in human advancement.

Far from being the incubator of human civilisation, in Amin's telling, Europe was a backwater, resting on the periphery of a classical, tributary civilisation centred in the eastern Mediterranean.

Amin has a double purpose: to show how pervasive Eurocentrism is in the construction of the modern world and to chart a revolutionary course out of it. He easily debunks the "genialities" of European history, starting with the "fabrication of Ancient Greece".

Such a myth is not just "the sum of Western preconceptions, mistakes and blunders with respect to other peoples", he says, it is a systematic misrepresentation of history.

Amin is no nostalgic idealist about contemporary Islamic fundamentalism, however. He is particularly sharp on condemning it and warns against Western, liberal underestimations of its shortcomings.

Amin opposes Third Worldist mirror images of Eurocentrism, which he rejects as mere provincial reflections of the dominant ideology. Instead, he calls on people in the imperialist periphery to "delink" from imperialism both ideologically and economically, and steer an independent course to liberation.

While hard-headed on Third Worldist pretensions and scathing of Eurocentrism, in calling on revolutionaries to voluntarily create autarky -- maintaining revolutionary purity in splendid, poverty-stricken isolation -- Amin is presenting an unsupportable idealism. Pol Pot organised on exactly that basis.

Flawed `catch-all'

Moreover, the schema upon which he builds his whole argument is fundamentally flawed.

The failings of Amin's construction of "tributary society" as a catch-all for pre-capitalism are these: if all historical forms of society can be swept together into one basket, then what are the differences in how economic systems and their attendant social forms reproduce, and what contradictions have driven history forward if everything was similar before capitalism?

Indeed, if all the forms of pre-capitalist social evolution and revolution simply produced variations on the theme of tributary society, then what of the *Communist Manifesto's* stirring, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles"? If no essential difference was ever created before capitalism, has there ever been a revolution in the history of humanity?

Certainly, in pre-capitalist class societies the only source of value (both use value and exchange value) anywhere in the world were peasants and slaves (slaves and peasants even existed in Europe until well into the capitalist era). Does that mean that all those societies were essentially similar?

Roman slave society and its legal forms not only were fundamentally different from the feudal structures that followed them, they replicated themselves (ensured their continuation) in vastly

different manners. Rome subsisted for an age on military conquest supplying a stream of slaves for its farms, mines and industries. Its professional armies existed to perpetually expand and protect the frontiers and facilitate the movement of slaves.

When large-scale slave farm production (*latifundia*) rotted out the army's social basis, the independent yeoman farmers, the state turned to hiring mercenaries. The problem was that when the German tribes, trained in Roman military methods as mercenaries, were pushed off their lands by invaders from the east, they swept over the Danube and conquered Rome.

Feudalism, in contrast, subsisted on stasis, the economic and ideological construction of the never-ending bond of the peasant to the land and the hierarchical structures above them. When peasants were drafted into foreign expeditions their pay-off was loot extracted from the lands they passed through and stolen from the bodies of their fallen adversaries.

The unceasing wars between the barons were precisely because land was the only source of wealth. There was no way in which to expand the value extracted from the labouring masses other than by stealing land (and the peasants tied to it).

If, as Amin says, feudalism was essentially the same as, though inferior to, the Arab empires and the Chinese economic system in the fact that "tribute" was the mainstay, then why isn't modern capitalism similarly "tributary"? Don't modern workers pay "tribute" in the form of unpaid labour to the boss?

It is a pity that Amin's book is based on this faulty premise, because in all other ways it is brilliant.

Marx's unpublished notebooks

Kevin Anderson's survey of a large swathe of Marx's writings illustrates the evolution of Marx's thinking and the breadth of vision. This is a major work. Drawing on his access to the Marx and Engels *Collected Works* (known by the German acronym MEGA) Anderson analyses a wealth of Marx's unpublished notebooks on ethnographical readings and compares them with the evolution of his published works.

For decades the MEGA was dominated by the Stalinist Soviet Union, and significant writings by Marx were suppressed. Only now is a new generation of translators and editors bringing valuable texts to light (the new projects is delineated as MEGA2 as opposed to the Stalinist MEGA1).

Anderson draws together the hundreds of pages of articles Marx wrote for the *New York Tribune*, the books published in his lifetime (a minor part of his output), comparing different editions and many fragments and unpublished manuscripts. Luckily, he is not just a diligent academic and translator, he writes in plain-enough English that the common reader can follow and be stimulated.

He details the *Communist Manifesto*'s "unilinear" concept of social progress and Marx's 1853 *New York Tribune* article on India. In "[The British Rule in India](#)", Marx spoke of progressive features in British colonialism.

India was caste-ridden, and the failure of the villages to revolt against foreign invasions showed that India had "no history" – no independent force driving its society forward, Marx believed. Importantly, however, Marx described British colonialism as a form of "barbarism", which was an advance on the language of the *Manifesto*.

The way forward for India would come from a revolutionary movement of the British workers, Marx wrote, or through the Indians organising their own liberation movement – the first time that a major European thinker supported Indian independence.

Within a few years, by 1856-57, Marx's anti-colonialism became sharper when, again in the *New York Tribune*, he supported China against Britain in the Second Opium War and the Indian Sepoy Uprising. Far from passively waiting for liberation by European workers, "India is now our best ally", he wrote.

The more he read about Indian history the more his thinking evolved. His developing thinking was reflected in the *Grundrisse*, which was not published until well into the 20th century.

The line of historical development in the *Grundrisse* was very nuanced, detailing the distinctions and similarities between early Roman society and ancient India. He showed how Asian societies had followed their own developmental path, dissimilar to Europe.

Whereas previously he had seen Indian villages as the basis of authoritarianism (oriental despotism), he now saw that they actually formed a spectrum from democratic to tyrannical.

For many years following, Marx turned his attention to writing *Capital*, but he also looked at the dialectics of class and race during the American Civil War. Marx critically supported Abraham Lincoln and the Union forces, arguing for a revolutionary war to free the slaves.

Analysis of racism's role

Marx articulated many important threads of thinking that have served the socialist movement ever since in the struggle against racism. He propounded that white racism had held back the labour movement as a whole and he believed that slaves and freed slaves should be mobilised in the battle for their freedom.

He worked hard to ensure that Manchester cotton workers held firm to their internationalist support for the Union, which derailed British government support to the Confederacy.

The 1863 Polish uprising also attracted Marx's attention. Poland and Russia had long occupied Marx's thinking. Russia was the bulwark of reaction in Europe, the very heartland of despotism, the deadly enemy of the European revolution.

Polish national liberation would not come as a consequence of proletarian revolution but was a necessary precondition for it, Marx came to believe. Unless democratic and class struggles could be linked with those of oppressed nationalities, Marx saw, all would be unsuccessful.

The working-class support that rallied to both the Union cause and the 1863 uprising were the twin bases for the foundation of the Working Men's Association (the First International), of which Marx was a leading figure.

“In this way”, Anderson writes, “Marx’s most sustained involvement with labour during his lifetime occurred under the backdrop of struggles against slavery, racism and national oppression.”

Shortly after its founding the International became embroiled in agitation in support of the insurgent Irish. It was through this work that Marx came to re-analyse his ideas about the liberation of Ireland, which he originally thought could only become independent through a workers’ revolution in Britain. In 1869 correspondence with Engels, however, he said that he had changed his mind: anti-Irish prejudice had so corrupted the English workers' movement that "the lever must be applied in Ireland".

Almost all of these thoughts found their way into *Capital* as sub-themes. Anderson, in particular, pays attention to the last edition of the book prepared under Marx’s direction, the French translation of 1875, which he completely revised from previous translations.

In direct and clear language Marx now stated that the transition outlined in the part on primitive accumulation applied only to Western Europe.

This completely undermines any “unilinear” interpretation of Marx’s thought.

Between 1879 and 1882 Marx kept a journal of readings he was doing on the histories of a wide range of societies: Indonesia, India, Russia, Algeria, Australia, Latin America, and Henry Morgan’s anthropological studies on the North American Iroquois peoples.

The notes on Morgan were found by Engels after Marx’s death and formed the background to Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. These anthropological notebooks show that Marx became very aware of the dynamics of these societies. He appreciated the manner in which their communal forms had resisted imperialism and any hint of respect for a civilising role of colonialism was replaced by an implacable condemnation.

Russia

All of this theorisation culminated in Marx’s writings on Russia in 1877-82, in which he emphatically denied that the argument of *Capital* could be taken as a prediction of Russia’s future. In fact, he said that if Russia could avoid absorption into capitalism then the Russian village could prove a locus for evolution into socialism. He was not arguing for autarky; he believed that such a Russian socialist state would have to link with revolutionary workers in the West for survival and development.

Anderson argues that Marx was aware of “the intersectionality of class with ethnicity, race and nationalism”. But he was not a “philosopher of difference in the postmodernist sense, for the critique of a single overarching entity, capital, was at the centre of his entire intellectual enterprise”.

Anderson’s assemblage of long-lost documents shows that Marx was far from a “Romantic Orientalist”. He was a consistent revolutionary, a proponent of human liberation, who was prepared to put his own ideas into the mortar and pestle and evolve new viewpoints as his understanding of the world widened.

Most importantly, he responded to all signs of the human desire for liberation and sought to foster all aspects of the struggle.

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Source: <http://links.org.au/node/1950>