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**Marx at the Margins:
On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies
By Kevin B. Anderson**

*Review by Sandra Rein*¹

Kevin Anderson's latest book has been called "path-breaking" and praised for its academic scope and intellectual engagement with elements of Marx that have been treated as marginal at best. Without a doubt, these praises are highly deserved as Anderson has produced a work that not only connects mostly ignored elements of Marx's oeuvre to his major published works, but challenges us to forget the Marx we think we know. Given the world-wide demand for alternatives and change and the current levels of activism that have been virtually unknown over the past 20 years, Anderson's return to Marx in the context of non-Western peoples and the construction of national and ethnic identities is particularly timely.

For those who are unfamiliar with Anderson's previous work, it may be helpful to provide some context for his latest book. In terms of intellectual "heritage", Anderson identifies his reading of Marx from within a philosophical school of thought encompassed under the notion of Marxist humanism and closely associated with the works of Raya Dunayevskaya.² Marxist humanism, as articulated by Dunayevskaya and carried on by individuals influenced by her thinking, approaches Marx's works as strongly influenced by the Hegelian dialectic and deeply grounded in the human content of value production in capitalist society. In other words, Marxist humanism begins from a premise that Marx's analysis of capitalism is revolutionary because the very emancipation of human beings requires the transcendence of labour as the source of value production. In the late 1950s when Dunayevskaya was developing her philosophy of Marxist humanism, it was not particularly popular to challenge the notion that statified property and central planning were sufficient to realize a communist society – or, as Dunayevskaya did-- to suggest that the newly emerging communist block was merely a form of state capitalism that continued to extract value from labour, alienating the worker from production even as property was consolidated in the state itself. Dunayevskaya's interpretive framework drew from a close reading of Hegel's dialectics, in-depth studies of *Capital*, and a broad engagement with Marx's writings with careful attention to their humanistic and dialectical quality. Arguably, the precursor to Anderson's most recent work can be traced to Dunayevskaya's final book, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, which provocatively suggested that Marx had much more to say on gender and communal relations toward the end of his life than was generally understood or appreciated in the context of his so-called "economic" and "scientific

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² Dunayevskaya's most notable works include: *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).

writing”. In her work, Dunayevskaya turned to the “Ethnographic” notebooks of Marx to argue against the notion that the “old” Marx was no longer a creative thinker and to highlight that his anthropological studies were undertaken with the intent of understanding the history of human development in contexts that included race and gender. In her concluding paragraph, Dunayevskaya urged readers toward a new engagement with Marx:

What is needed is a new unifying principle, on Marx’s ground of humanism, that truly alters both human thought and human experience. Marx’s *Ethnological Notebooks* are a historic happening that proves, one hundred years after he wrote them, that Marx’s legacy is no mere heirloom, but a live body of ideas and perspectives that is in need of concretization. Every moment of Marx’s development, as well as the totality of his works, spells out the need for ‘revolution in permanence’. This is the absolute challenge to our age.³

Nearly 30 years after Dunayevskaya first published *Rosa Luxemburg*, Anderson has answered her call for a fresh look at Marx’s take on questions of ethnicity and race, in particular.

Anderson’s study brings together Marx’s writings on non-Western societies, specifically focused on India, China, Russia, Indonesia, Algeria; and his writings on Poland, Ireland and Black labor during the US civil war. Importantly, Anderson draws from Marx’s lesser known works: journalistic articles mostly published for the *New York Tribune*, his extensive notebooks, and letters and correspondence. Anderson justifies his turn to these texts noting “[Marx] emphasized that those [societies] like Russia, India, China, Algeria, and Indonesia possessed social structures markedly different from those of Western Europe. Throughout his writings, he grappled with the question of the future development of these non-Western societies. More specifically, he examined their prospects for revolution and as sites of resistance to capital” (p. 2). Anderson goes on to make an apparently audacious claim, that is, that Marx’s perspectives on these societies changed overtime, beginning with a Eurocentric and linear view of development but ending with a more multilinear and complex view of non-Western societies, the role of race in development and the possibility of realizing more equitable gender relations. And, according to Anderson’s argument, it is in this Marx, one often ignored, where we find a refreshed possibility for a revolutionary outcome quite different from the path dependency model of most post-Marx Marxism. Moreover, Anderson rejects any notion that “this Marx” is distinct from his work on capitalism, but is “...part of a complex analysis of the global social order of his time. Marx’s proletariat was not only white and European, but also encompassed Black labor in America, as well as, the Irish... Moreover, as capitalist modernity penetrated into Russia and Asia, undermining the precapitalist social orders of these societies, new possibilities for revolutionary change would ... emerge from these new locations... Marx kept searching for new allies of the Western working class in its struggle against capital” (p. 3).

Anderson meticulously lays out his argument by following Marx’s development in chronological order, demonstrating significant changes in his

³ Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution*, 2nd edition. University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1991, p. 195.

treatment of non-Western peoples between the 1853 and 1883. Over six chapters, Anderson engages colonialism, slavery and racism, nationalism and class movements, and advanced ethnographic studies of precapitalist societies. Not only is Anderson extremely attentive to changes in nuance and language in Marx's writings, he provides the reader with extensive textual proof of the emerging themes he has identified in Marx's writings. For those who are unfamiliar with the *Tribune* articles or who have had little engagement with Marx's notebooks and personal correspondence, the book serves as an excellent introduction and guide to documents that literally span several volumes of the *MEGA*. In addition to the main body of work, Anderson has also included an Appendix that helpfully explains to the reader the various "treatments" of Marx's works since the 1920s and gives a general guide to the Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe. Overall, the Marx that emerges from these texts is a theoretician who was not blindly Eurocentric or exclusively focused on Western Europe as the locus for revolutionary change. Anderson's re-reading (and often "first time reading") of Marx also demonstrates that a post-Marx Marxism that relies only on the now "orthodox" interpretations of Marx's work is missing the real emancipatory potential Marx identified in movements other than the traditional working class of Western Europe. Further, Marx's study of precapitalist social formations allowed him (and us) to envision the possibility of social forms that were not dominated by the logic of value production that underwrites the capitalistic form. As Anderson so nicely articulates, it is not that Marx sought to "return" to communal social forms (which he dialectically engaged) but that in the survival of elements of these forms there was embedded other types of social relationships that give hope to the idea that we might live differently.

If I have one critique of Anderson's book, however, it lies in wanting more. Anderson is completely convincing in his reading of Marx's works and the notion that there is more to the mature social theory of Marx than has generally been acknowledged by orthodox post-Marx Marxism. However, Anderson closes with the most provocative question of all: "What does Marx's multicultural, multilinear social dialectic reveal about today's globalized capitalism?" (p. 244). And his all-too brief answer is that the communal forms (of precapitalist Russia and India, in particular) have generally disappeared since Marx's time; however, at the theoretical level, Marx's analysis "...can serve an important heuristic purpose, as a major example of his dialectical theory of society" (p. 245). Anderson highlights the increased importance of the intersectionality of race, class, ethnicity, nationalism, and gender today. He tells the reader that Marx can help to critique issues like "...the toxic mix of racism and prisonization in the United States" or emerging demands for national autonomy (p. 245). Importantly, Anderson's work allows us to see how Marx's works have been misconstrued and applied to social theory with little respect for the totality of his analysis over time; he also provokes us to revisit Marx in the context of the global reach of capital today. Unfortunately, this is where Anderson ends this work ... but leaving the hope that he will take up this "new Marx" in a subsequent book, dialectically engaging these same themes in the context of identifying the new loci of resistance to globalized capitalism. I can hardly wait for Anderson's next work in this regard.