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Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies

Kevin B. Anderson

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Reviewed by Tom Barnes

Kevin B. Anderson's book offers an interesting historical account of Marx's writings on non-Western societies. Anderson, a Professor of Sociology and Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara, analyses Marx's writings on countries considered 'peripheral' to industrial capitalism during his lifetime: India, Russia, Algeria, China and Indonesia. He also looks at Marx's commentary on the Polish and Irish nationalist movements and on the American Civil War. Anderson focuses on Marx's lesser-known writings, many of which are yet to be published in any language. Most of his research delves into the monumental—and unfinished—*Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), a collection of German-language publications, letters, manuscripts and drafts.

Anderson's main argument is that Marx's views about capitalist development, and its relationship to colonialism and nationalism, evolved during his lifetime. As a young man in the 1840s, Marx held an 'implicitly unilinear perspective, sometimes tinged with ethnocentrism, according to which non-Western societies would necessarily be absorbed into capitalism and then modernized via colonialism and the world market' (p. 2). By the time he reached his sixties, Marx had adopted a

'more multilinear' perspective. According to Anderson, he had become more open-minded about alternative development paths for non-capitalist regions. For example, he suggested that Russia may be able to modernize in a 'progressive non-capitalist manner' (p. 2). The strength of Anderson's portrayal is his ability to trace the evolution of Marx's thinking from the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) through to his journalistic writings in the early 1850s, the drafting of the *Grundrisse* (1857-58), the French edition of *Capital* (1872-75) and, finally, his late writings between 1879 and 1882.

The book contains eight chapters. After providing an introductory chapter, Anderson discusses the complexity of Marx's writings on colonialism in India, China and Indonesia during the 1850s (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 looks at Marx's writings on Russia and Poland during the 1850s and 60s. Chapter 3 discusses Marx's writings on the American Civil War. Chapter 4 looks at Marx's belief in Irish independence. Anderson argues that Marx's opinion changed from one in which a socialist state in England was necessary to liberate Ireland to one in which Irish independence was a prerequisite for revolutionary change among English workers. In Chapter 5, Anderson analyses Marx's changing perspectives as he drafted the *Grundrisse* and the first volume of *Capital*. In Chapter 6, he looks at Marx's rich collection of papers on non-Western societies penned between the late 1870s and his death in 1883. During this period, Marx drafted detailed notes on the communal village in pre-colonial India, its similarities with village life in Java and Bali, as well as papers written about various societies in North Africa and the Americas.

In part, Anderson is responding to the view that Marx expressed ethnocentric views in his analysis of colonialism and capitalist development. Marx's 1853 writings on India for the *New York Tribune* are arguably the main exhibits used to support this claim. Here Marx began to sketch his idea of an 'Oriental despotism', a descriptive category which he applied to a variety of different regions and countries, such as China, Egypt, Persia and Mesopotamia. This class structure was based on the demands of large-scale irrigation works. Marx characterized village-dwellers as passive in response to this structure. In the case of India, he wrote that the Indian village had been stagnant and unchanging for centuries. The British ended this system and halted the old public works programs. This view has met with some scathing criticism,

notably from Said (1994). While Marx established a baseline sympathy for the colonized, according to Said, it was his ethnocentrism that won out in the final analysis. In other words, Britain, whatever its motivations, was doing India a favour by undermining the basis of despotic rule and providing the means for ending the backwardness of village life.

While there is no question that Marx's original writing contains elements of this view, Anderson shows how Marx also believed that the transformation of Indians into waged workers would undermine colonial rule as well as the old despotic system. If anything, his mistake was his belief in the progressive nature of capitalism. According to Anderson, the shift in his writing that comes later is about his changing attitude on this point rather than a move away from a racist attitude towards the colonized. In Chapter 1, Anderson makes a similar point about Marx's writings on China. Marx's anti-imperialist position is also stated clearly in his writings on the 1857 Sepoy uprising in India. Marx's 21 articles on the subject (and a further 10 articles by Engels) clearly and consistently condemned the British.

Overall, Anderson's argument is convincing. In part, this is because he is careful to put Marx's commentary in its historical context. For instance, Marx's polemics against the British crackdown in India (1857-59) were written during a wave of establishment-driven jingoism and a time of relative political conservatism. Anderson's argument is also bolstered by the retrieval of several neglected or ignored works from the MEGA. Any weaknesses in the book relate to omissions that stem, possibly, from his eagerness to defend Marx from unfair accusations. For example, Anderson does not really criticise Marx's views on pre-colonial India. Marx's argument that Indian villages were essentially unchanging has been questioned by several of his followers, partly because of its reliance upon distorted British accounts of the revenue-system in colonial India and because of its association with the maligned 'Asiatic mode of production'. This concept was a highly problematic 'default category' because of its historical and geographical scope. This 'non-Europe' was supposed to cover a vast stretch of geography: Russia, the Middle East, Central, South and East Asia (Banaji, 2010, p. 349).

Nor does Anderson mention the developments in Russian Marxism that followed Marx's 'ringing endorsement of the possibility of a peasant-

based non-capitalist order' (p. 234). Written during an 1881 exchange of letters with Vera Zasulich, Marx speculated that Russia's village communes might acquire the positive aspects of capitalist production without 'undergoing its frightful vicissitudes' (cited p. 230). The condition for this, Marx emphasised, was a successful transformation of Western societies through workers' revolutions. Quite similar views were outlined by Trotsky over 20 years later. A key difference is that Trotsky placed his hopes in the working class communities that emerged in Russia's metropolises following Marx's death (Trotsky, 1962). Some mention of this would have strengthened one of Anderson's points: that Marxist theory is capable of evolving to incorporate novel ideas about development. It would also have shown how some of Marx's disciples were able to develop and systematically outline points that he had only begun to describe.

Nonetheless, Anderson is successful in getting his point across. He demonstrates the mistake in judging the totality of Marx's ideas on development, colonialism and nationalism based on a handful of errors penned early in his career. Furthermore, he suggests that Marx was able to establish a class-based framework capable of incorporating unexpected development paths and addressing non-class phenomena, such as movements against imperialism or racism. For Anderson, this gives Marx's framework contemporary relevance. While there are few modern societies untouched by capitalist social relations, he argues that there are numerous intersections of race, ethnicity and class that Marxism can address, such as the LA riots of 1992 or the 2005 uprising in the Parisian *banlieues* (p. 245). One could, for example, draw parallels between these outbursts and Marx's sympathy for Irish workers in industrial England. As elsewhere, some elaboration would probably have added interest to Anderson's point. Nevertheless, his book is clearly and consistently argued. It is well worth a look.

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