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Thoughts on Kevin Anderson's Marx at the Margins

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by HiFi

Marx at the Margins is an important summary of Marx's thought concerning the relationship between the capitalist and non-capitalist world, colonialism and social development, as well as nationalism and internationalism. The book provides a general overview of Marx's thinking about these issues, especially as Anderson draws together and gives some narrative form to an extremely wide-ranging number of Marx's writings. However, Anderson doesn't always step back to consider this material from a more conceptual standpoint. Therefore these notes try and synthesize Anderson's reading in order to lay the groundwork for a more schematic understanding of the issues raised in the book.

The overall argument of Marx at the Margins is that Marx develops from a position relatively uncritical of colonialism to one that is far more complex and oppositional. Specifically, Anderson shows how Marx's early work on the non-western world and the peasantry tended to be undialectical, reflecting a unilinear conception of history. Marx was inclined, Anderson argues, to conceive of historical development in non-western societies as inevitably mirroring that of Western Europe. Furthermore, the peasantry was to gradually wither away into the proletariat. The problem with such thinking is that it lends itself to a stagist understanding of the historical process, one that has had profound political consequences. Anderson contends that it was not until the Grundrisse that Marx began to arrive at an alternative view, one that was more dialectical and global perspective. Anderson characterizes Marx's developing theory of history as multilinear, rather than unilinear. These ideas are outlined in chapters one, five and six in the book. Chapters 2-4 focus on Marx's understanding of nationalism and capitalist development. Those issues are not covered here.

A "never changing natural destiny"

Anderson notes that Marx's early writing on non-western societies was "clearly influenced by Hegel." For instance, examining his "harsh critique" of Indian society, Anderson quotes Hegel's racist disregard of "India as a society that 'has remained stationary and fixed'." Therefore, "as a society where no real change or development had occurred, India had no real history," Anderson concludes. Hegel accepted "colonialism as the product of historical necessity"; that is, the inevitable outcome of the absence of historical dynamism. India, like most of the non-Western world, was for Hegel characterized by a fundamental inertia, a lack of antagonism which "undergirded internal despotism." Nevertheless, citing anthropologist Lawrence Krader, Anderson holds that, all things considered, Hegel could be distinguished from his contemporaries by his "concrete and historical" approach—something Marx was to later develop in more liberating directions (14).

Anderson highlights The Communist Manifesto as the most representative example of the tendency in Marx's early writing on non-western societies to view colonialism uncritically. The Manifesto marveled at how the revolutionary power of capitalism "has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together" and "by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian,

nations into civilisation.” However, it has done so by “pitilessly [tearing] asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors”, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment,” replacing it with nothing but “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.” Anderson notes that the Manifesto indicates the dialectical opposition between the expanding productive powers of social labor, its impoverishment and the subject in the form of the proletariat that is its negation. And yet, as Anderson comments, this dialectic seems limited to the Western context. In terms of the colonial world, the emphasis remains only on the incorporation of “even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation.” The Manifesto, Anderson seems to be saying, lends itself to a stagist reading, one where we await the creation of a proletariat at which point the struggle for communism can really begin in such non-Western societies.

Such views found their way into his first articles on India of 1853. Marx could write that British colonialism created “the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia.” Marx pointed to how British trade and eventual political subordination of South Asia destroyed the foundations of its textile industry through the flooding of its market with goods manufactured in England (15). For British capitalism, through the auspices of the powerful corporate syndicate the British East India Company, India was to become another cotton exporting country providing raw material for the English textile industry and a captive market for British trade. Part of the social revolution introduced by British colonialism, according to Marx, was the seizure of nominally public land and its distribution to a new class of landowners. The zemindars, “a semihereditary class of local officials” who collected taxes from the peasantry, thereby gained private hold of the means of subsistence of the peasantry. Such primitive accumulation meant that the reciprocal rights of Indian feudalism were therefore displaced by the potentially unlimited exploitation of a newly created class of landlords (21). Losing any traditional right to the land for their own sustenance, many Indian peasants experienced a qualitative decline of social life and deepening poverty with devastating consequences—including the periodic cholera outbreaks that devastated 19th century India resulting in tens of millions of lost lives.

While Marx was clearly aware of the real qualitative regression involved in these social developments and catastrophes, Anderson contends there remained unresolved contradictions in his thought, in particular in his concept of “Oriental despotism.” For example, Marx contended that the immense geographic spaces of Asia gave rise to the “centralizing power of Government,” which was the only effective means to successfully establish large-scale irrigation and other public works. This was in contrast to Europe where such needs instead “drove private enterprise to voluntary association” (16).

Setting aside for now the historical accuracy of such an assessment it is the structure of Marx's argument that is of immediate concern. Marx at the Margins is interested in the reproduction of the trope of “Asiatic despotism” in Marx's thought and how his views, according to Anderson, subsequently change. As Anderson suggests, Marx still considered in a one-sided fashion the relationship between peasant struggles to retain the communal character of the land and the development of private property relations. Maintaining that in India the “idyllic village-communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism,” because such spaces contained no internally generated antagonisms, rendering human beings “transformed” from “a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny” and fundamentally reflecting a “stagnatory, and vegetative life” (16). An enclosed and self-sufficient village world propelled by simple craft and agricultural production corresponded to a changeless mode of social existence that gave rise to, or underpinned unchanging “despotic” societies of Asia. Despite drawing attention to the regressions set in motion by colonialism, Marx continued to situate the development of private property as the negation of the so-called “Asiatic mode of production.”

Not only did the possibilities of historical change in India remain located in the antagonisms introduced by British colonialism. Those very antagonisms seemed to abstractly lead to the duplication of a particular historical development as a universal expression of all historical change: “England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (22). Thus the incorporation of Britain and India into an expanding world capitalism continued to be conceived one-sidedly. If Marx remained

embedded within a racist European historiographic tradition concerning non-Western societies that traversed the likes of Adam Smith and Hegel among others, Marx's ability to make any empirical advances in the concrete study of non-Western societies was limited by inaccurate histories written by colonial officials.

It “supports communist tendencies in people's minds”

According to Anderson, Marx's somewhat deterministic views of historical change in non-Western societies were significantly modified beginning with the *Grundrisse*, remained an important theme in *Capital*, which culminated in his *Ethnological Notebooks* and late writings on the Russian peasant commune. Anderson devotes chapters five and six to the conceptual changes in Marx's thinking about the possibilities of historical development within communal, “precapitalist” forms of labor and land, and their relationship to the struggle of the proletariat. Anderson argues that instead of treating non-Western societies as an undifferentiated whole conditioned by a few key features, Marx begins to consider more seriously how these societies change through internal contradiction, develop various permutations, and in the process become sites of potential communist revolution. Such changes in Marx's thinking have profound implications for his theory of history.

Typical of this change, Anderson tells us, is the growing realization by Marx that communal land need not necessarily be expropriated as private property in order to develop its productive power. As an example Anderson contrasts Marx's extensive notes on Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* and Engel's *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. The comparison is significant because Engels based much of his own book on Marx's notes. As Anderson writes, “Engels, who concentrated on the rise of private property, missed the possibility that collectivist forms of domination that minimized private property could also create very pronounced social hierarchies” (204, his emphasis). If such forms of social organization could develop within communal societies, for instance caste-type systems of social hierarchy, then so too could their alternatives. There was therefore the potential for what Marx called “a more despotic or a more democratic form” of communally based society (157). Marx no longer saw communal societies as an undifferentiated and unchanging whole—as he had with India in the early 1850s—and began to give attention, writes Anderson, to the “broad changes in India's communal forms,” suggesting that he no longer saw it as an “‘unchanging’ society without any real history, as in 1853” (209).

No longer seeing the capitalist privatization and modernization of communal land and labor as a necessary step toward the conditions for communist revolution, Anderson argues that Marx now saw in a positive sense that “communal social forms in Russia and Asia represented an obstacle and a challenge to bourgeois property relations” (205). With this in mind, Marx approvingly quotes from Russian sociologist Maskim Kovalevsky on the policy of the French National Assembly towards Algeria in the early 1870s. As representatives of the bourgeoisie, their goal was “[t]he formation of private landownership [] as the necessary condition of all progress in the political and social sphere. The further maintenance of communal property, ‘as a form that supports communist tendencies in people's minds’ is dangerous both for the colony and for the homeland” (219-220).

In previous moments Marx's stagist conception of historical development would put his theory—at least nominally—on the side of the French bourgeoisie and colonialists. After all, both saw the conversion of communal forms of land holding and labor as “progress.” Now Marx suggested the opposite. While the French capitalists and colonialists called their plans “progress,” in fact the bourgeoisie wanted to separate, as Marx again quotes Kovalevsky, “the Arabs from their natural bond to the soil to break the last strength of the clan unions thus being dissolved, and thereby, any danger of rebellion.” The breaking of the social basis of Algerian society was key to the transfer of land to the colonists and the creation of a labor force to work those landholdings. In the Algerian fight against French colonialism Marx saw a corresponding struggle to that of the Paris Commune. Anderson comments that Marx was making “a connection between those who suppressed a modern ‘commune’ set up by the workers of Paris and those who were seizing indigenous communal landholdings in Algeria” (220).

At the same time, Marx continued to contrast communally based societies, which remained “confined” to

a “restricted level of economic and social development,” to capitalist society. Marx continues with the idea that the social relations and productive power of capitalism established the conditions to realize a “universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces” that was not possible in previous modes of production. As Anderson writes, quoting the Grundrisse, the revolutionary potential unleashed by capitalist society “stood in contrast to the ‘predetermined yardstick’ of precapitalist societies, with their fixed absolutes focused upon the past. Instead, the future-oriented modern human being, he writes, is engaged in ‘the absolute movement of becoming’” (159). Precapitalist modes of production and social relations, Marx says, inevitably produce local and closed societies that repeatedly reproduce themselves with little change. Universality, in terms of the potential of individual and social development, is not possible.

Marx does not abandon the idea that capitalist social relations lay the foundation for a communist society. He continued to compare capitalist to non-capitalist social relations in order to present a picture of what Anderson calls the former’s “perverse uniqueness” (181). Capitalism created a new class that was radically separated from the means of labor. Because of their closed off condition, isolated individual workers compete to sell their ability to labor to capitalists. Only through this act of exchange in the receipt of wages can these workers meet their needs. The proletariat is, then, alienated from all needs. It cannot realize any need except through reproducing its alienation as a means to obtain money in search of those needs.

Conversely, as Anderson reminds us, Marx writes that in precapitalist society “the individual does not become independent vis à vis the commune” (159). Here the individual is not completely shut off from the means of production and, as a consequence, Marx holds, “direct relations of dominance and servitude” prevail (183). What is the connection? The person is not separated from the means of labor and therefore the product of labor is not alienated from their activity. Further, because the means of production are considered communal property, a direct relationship to the means of production, for example a peasant to the land, means that the person’s existence is self-identical to a social role—such as caste, guild or any clearly defined community such as a clan. In these circumstances, according to Marx, there is no standpoint from which the person experiences this role external to oneself. Exploitation appears directly in the form of a “natural” domination.

In capitalism, exploitation is experienced indirectly because, while nominally free, the working class is profoundly dispossessed of the means of labor. The working class is “free” to sell its ability to labor, or die, clearly no choice at all. However, the appearance of freedom underlies these relations because they are mediated indirectly through things, i.e. commodities, the most important, “universal” commodity being money. Unlike in precapitalist societies, according to Marx, here the means of production and the product of labor appear as external and dominate the person. There can be no self-identification on the part of the proletariat with the means of production and the product of labor, which conditions her struggle for freedom in unique ways.

Dispossessed of all direct ties, the proletariat is radically individual and, nevertheless, interdependent and conditioned by cooperative labor. Therefore, given its state of complete separation from the object of labor, the proletariat as individual and as a class conducts a relentless struggle to appropriate the means of production. While for Marx communal labor served as a basis for communistic struggle it was also true that there remained certain limitations in the development of these social relations. Communal forms of labor provided an obstacle to “the labor of an individual from becoming private labor and his product a private product, it causes individual labor to appear rather as the unmediated function of a member of the social organism” (161).

The revolutionary character of capitalism overturns all social bonds and anything fixed. It frees the individual only to reduce her to an automaton. Capitalism frees the means of production only to turn it into an apparatus of virtually unlimited domination. Such a condition is a terrible prospect, which for Marx makes capitalism the most exploitative and socially devastating society ever known. In precapitalist societies the extraction of surplus by the ruling class was consumed as a use-value. Despite their exploitation and oppressiveness, these societies continued to have the human being as the purpose of

production. Conversely, the capitalist above all seeks unlimited surplus as its own end. The reproduction of human beings is incidental to his logic. For Marx, there is a universality and expansiveness about capitalism that precapitalist societies lack.

Yet such universality also contains tremendous potential. The proletariat struggles to appropriate this potential by realizing it in new social forms through the establishment of new society. The productive power unleashed by capitalism potentially frees human beings from the problems of scarcity, but, equally important, lays the foundation for the means to collectively and individual expand, develop and realize human powers and needs in a way not seen in history.

“A higher form of an ‘archaic’ type”

Anderson speaks of a multi-linear theory of history emerging in Marx's work, which gradually displaces the unilinear concept that had characterized his earlier thinking. Anderson argues that this new line of thought begins to fully take shape in the *Grundrisse*. He quotes Raya Dunayevskaya, who notes that the “historic sweep” of the *Grundrisse* “allows Marx, during the discussion of the relationship of ‘free’ labor as alienated labor to capital, to pose the question of, and excursion into, pre-capitalist societies” (155). Similarly, Anderson contends, the “subtext” of *Capital* implicitly suggested “how the very existence of these noncapitalist societies implied the possibility of alternative ways of organizing social and economic life,” allowing Marx “to elaborate modern, progressive alternatives to capitalism” (181).

By raising the idea of a multi-linear theory of history, Anderson infers that Marx's “excursion” is about far more than distinguishing the particular form of labor in capitalist society. Instead, as Dunayevskaya's insight suggests, Marx was searching for a total conception of human history, where the successive alienated forms of social existence made up a single arc from so-called primitive communism, an original egalitarian society with little social division of labor, to communism in its “higher phase”—a post-capitalist society.

Placing capitalism in relation to other modes of life that exist contemporaneously and in the past allowed Marx to historicize capitalism. Bourgeois thought naturalizes capitalist social relations, making their existence given, pre-determined and eternal. For this reason bourgeois thought has a unilinear conception of history that sees the destruction of other types of society as progressive development. By historicizing capitalism, Marx is able to show how it is a transitional society, subject to historical development, generating the subjects whose activity constantly revolts against it and thereby brings it to an end. Humanity exists and has existed, Marx argues, in other social forms besides capitalist relations. Those modes of life serve as “alternatives to capitalism,” as Anderson puts it, precisely because they are social forms in which the relation between the creation of uses and their appropriation is not severed. There is a direct link between labor and the means of production. In many ways, therefore, for Marx this represents a qualitatively higher moment of realization of human existence than capitalist society, which destroys the connection to the production of uses and their direct appropriation by the producers.

For this reason Marx often drew attention to the retrogression of capitalism, nowhere more emphatically than the course of primitive accumulation. Anderson contends that when looking at colonialism in India in the early 1860s there is no longer any sense in Marx, as he was to note of the condition of Ireland, that “truly capitalist relations were beginning to develop in India, or that however painfully, some sort of progressive modernization was taking place; rather, there is a sense of reaching an historical impasse, as the old forms disintegrated without progressive new ones being able to form and develop” (165). This impasse is not limited to primitive accumulation. Capital not only periodically destroys the conditions of labor, ever increasing the level of exploitation of existing workers, but creates a massive surplus of laborers, separated from the land or other means of production yet who can never be regularly employed.

As an example of the relationship different forms of labor, Anderson cites a passage from *Capital* where Marx examines the kinds of expression found in the work of an Indian artisan as compared to that of the English proletarian. Anderson comments:

Thus, the Indian village system was on one level extremely conservative and restrictive, but on another

level, it offered a type of freedom lost to workers under capitalism: autonomy in the actual conduct of their work. This existed because there was as yet no separation of the workers from the objective conditions of production. In this sense, the Indian craft workers—and their medieval European counterparts—exercised an important right indeed, one at the heart of the notion of what is lost when labor becomes alienated. (186)

The village artisan experiences modes of life and, therefore, freedoms unknown to the proletarian. At the same time, of course, the proletariat exists in certain ways far more free than the artisan or the peasant. Although the proletarian is cut off from any means of labor, she is also more free from constraints upon her social personality. Given capitalism's constant revolutionizing character the proletarian realizes any number of newly created needs and, potentially, appropriate many new uses thereby significantly expanding the personality. As a result, for Marx proletarian existence is potentially far more many-sided than that of previous classes. As Marx suggested, the proletariat is the first truly global class, neither tied to a particular locality nor bound by particular traditions.

There is a dialectical movement between the complete separation of labor from the means of labor, the increasing social wealth of society and, therefore, the appropriation of that wealth as the realization of an expanding human personality. In contrast, the village craftsman creates a limited number of uses in a mode of production that produces for immediate use. However, in capitalism, capital deploys labor in order to produce surplus and not uses. There are no limits to the exploitation of the proletariat by capital in its necessary quest to achieve ever more surplus. This is the meaning of socially necessary labor time. There is an inverse relation between the separation of the proletariat from the means of production and its necessary struggle to appropriate the social wealth of humanity.

Again, Marx does not have a unilinear conception of the uniqueness of capitalist society. Its social relations are one form in historical succession of many others, which also exists along side these forms contemporaneously. It is capitalism that universalizes itself by looking back to precapitalist social relations as well as their continuing presence and finding there its own shadow. Therefore the connection between living labor in the value form and in the precapitalist forms is continually erased and obscured by capital and its interlocutor political economy.

Precapitalist societies are centered around the creation of use-values, which capital interrupts. Communism is the return of the production of use-values. Marx wrote that capital was “in conflict with the working masses, with science, and with the very productive forces it engenders—in short, in a crisis that will end through its own elimination, through the return of modern societies to a higher form of an ‘archaic’ type of collective ownership and production” (234). Thus for Marx the arc of human history is not a straight line but a spiral, which involves a return to the past, but at a qualitatively higher level where the variant historical and contemporary social permutations in the forms of labor that express specific sides of the human personality are now grasped as a totality and, finally, pregnant with the potential for expanded powers. Communism is a return of the past but without the limitations of that past.

In the last chapter of *Marx at the Margins*, Anderson primarily focuses on Marx's “ethnological notebooks,” written from 1880-1882 toward the end of his life. What is significant about these writings, Anderson argues, is that they are “concerned not so much with the origins of social hierarchy in the distant past, as with the social relations within contemporary societies under the impact of capitalist globalization” (201).

A central part of these late writings by Marx was the careful study of the Russian peasant commune. Anderson shows how for Marx in concert with a proletarian revolution in Western Europe it was possible that “communal villages could be a starting point for a socialist transformation, one that might avoid the brutal process of the primitive accumulation of capital.” However, “to achieve a successful socialism, Russia would need connections to Western technology and above all, reciprocal relations with the Western labor movement” (196-197). Nevertheless, as the preface to the Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto* put it, a revolution in Russia may not only serve as “the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other,” echoing his writings on Poland and

Ireland, so “Russia’s peasant communal landownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development” (235). As Anderson concludes, Marx asserts the “possibility that noncapitalist societies might move directly to socialism on the basis of their indigenous communal forms, without first passing through the stage of capitalism” (224).

In response to the Russian communists who, in the name of Marx, interpreted *Capital* in abstract ways, Marx complained that they insisted on transforming his “historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of the general course fatally imposed on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves placed” (228). The Russian marxists held that Russia had to pass through distinct stages of social develop along the lines of England, which was the central “case study” in *Capital*. The root of the notion of a deterministic historical development in Marx is summarized in the well-known line in *Capital*—which Anderson cites—that “The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future” (177). Anderson argues it was exactly because of these kind of readings that Marx chose to alter this line. In the French edition of *Capital* from 1872, Marx alters the sentence in question to read: “The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to those that follow it on the industrial path, the image of its own future” (178). Although, given the extent of primitive accumulation, the countries of Western Europe were following the general path of England, this was not so for other regions, still relatively untouched by the violent introduction of capitalist social relations.

The abstract reading of *Capital* ironically turns historical materialism into a speculative science, creating a theory of history that unfolded deterministically as form empty of any content. As Anderson implies, in contrast Marx is far more historically concrete here, placing a specific kind of labor as developing on its own foundations. Marx argues that it is capitalism that lays the foundations for the peasant commune to leap into communism and, therefore, the commune need not be replaced by capitalist social relations as the precondition of communism.

In the case of the Russian peasant commune, Marx posits the emergence of communism as a synthesis between the Western proletariat and the rural commune. Anderson writes that for Marx “it might be possible to combine Russia’s ancient communal forms with modern technology, this in a less exploitative manner than under capitalism...a new synthesis of the archaic and the modern, one that took advantage of the highest achievements of capitalist modernity” (230). In Marx’s words it is “Precisely because it is contemporaneous with capitalist production, the rural commune may appropriate for itself all the positive achievements and this without undergoing its frightful vicissitudes” (230). In short, the negation of the value-form at the center of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism is not the realization of a universal simply derived from the proletarian experience, but one arrived at by a qualitative leap of all the forms of labor, past and present.

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Eric Beck • a year ago

I like this review, as it presents the Marx I was hoping to get from Anderson's book but didn't, as I get into a little bit [here](#).

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Eve, here's a partial answer. I'm not sure if this is helpful but one other example that comes to mind is some of the language used in the ongoing struggle at Wal-Mart. The character of the...

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JC and JF, great post. As someone who is new to Marx, the idea that the source of value lies in the worker has always been something i've seen and felt (as a worker) but never understood on a...

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