

Not Just Capital and Class: Marx on Non-Western Societies, Nationalism and Ethnicity

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Despite the revival of interest in Marx since the economic crisis hit, some important ideological and conceptual barriers continue to block what would be a very positive step, returning to Marx as the primary source of leftist critique of capitalist modernity as a whole, and as providing the theoretical ground for its overcoming [*Aufhebung*].

In recent decades, Marx's critics have fallen into two large groups, sometimes overlapping of course. In neoliberal ideology, Marx is considered a dead dog because he tried to take us beyond capitalism, to which there is supposedly no alternative. Along similar lines, it is also claimed the Soviet collapse invalidates empirically Marx's allegedly impractical and utopian schemes.

In left and progressive academic circles, however, the critique of Marx has usually taken a different direction. In these quarters it is often said that the problem with Marx is not that he was too radical, as the neoliberals say, but that he was not radical enough. Some add that the truly radical thinkers are people like Foucault, Deleuze, even Nietzsche. These critics – most famously Edward Said – attack Marx for adopting what they see as a unilinear model of development in the modernist mode. (Postmodernists term this a grand narrative.) Here, much of the debate has revolved around Marx's 1853 articles on India and a passage in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) on China. At a more general level, it is said even more often among progressives that Marx informs us on class and economic structures but that his theoretical model does not incorporate race, ethnicity, gender, or nationalism at all, or at least not very much.

I think responding to these critiques – especially the ones from the progressive left – is as important as the earlier effort to separate Marx's original vision from Stalinism and totalitarianism, an effort that still remains necessary today. That link of Marx to Stalinism – although in my view invalid – is part of what has fostered the growth anarchism among so many younger radicals today.

In this article, I will respond to the kinds of criticisms of Marx that have been coming from parts of the progressive left and which center on charges of unilinearism and grand narrative, ethnocentrism, and lack of concern with race, ethnicity, gender, and nationalism^[1]. At the outset, it should be noted that Marx himself lived at the margins, where his thought is still relegated to this day. The deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida captures well Marx's marginality as a political refugee in Victorian London, linking it to his equally marginal position within the Western intellectual tradition: "Marx remains an immigrant among us, a glorious, sacred, accursed but still clandestine immigrant as he was all his life" (1994: 174).

I. The Non-Western "Other": India, China, Russia

Some of Marx's critics have a point in terms of his early writings on India and China. Marx begins with a somewhat modernist and unilinear perspective toward those countries, but moves gradually toward a more multilinear and multicultural approach toward India and other non-Western societies.

As noted by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) and by other critics, Marx's 1848-53 writings on India and China exhibit Orientalist notions of modernity, occasionally accompanied by ethnocentric ones, in which European colonialism is portrayed as a necessary stage on the road toward social development for societies trapped in an unchanging traditionalism. He begins to alter this perspective in the late 1850s, particularly in the *Grundrisse* and in his writings on anti-colonial resistance in India and China. By the time of his late writings of 1879-82 (some of which are still unpublished), Marx has moved toward a more anti-colonialist position and a more multilinear approach to social development in which certain premodern social forms, especially communal property, are seen as building blocks for an alternative form of modernity. Let us trace some of this evolution in his thought.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels write famously in praise of Western capital's penetration of Asia, of its "battering down of all Chinese walls" and of its drawing "even the most barbarian nations into civilization" (MECW 6: 488). Here they seem (1) to view Western colonial incursions into Asia, including England's notorious First Opium War against China of 1839-42, as on the whole a progressive and beneficial undermining of Oriental "barbarism" and (2) to assume that the rest of the world would sooner or later follow in the footsteps of the more technologically advanced Western European nations. Marx and Engels' praise for this early stage of capitalist globalization can be seen as part of their overall sketch of the achievements of capitalism in Western

Europe and North America, a sketch that is followed by a withering critique of capitalist exploitation. However, they do not follow their praise of Western colonialism in Asia with a similar critique. Instead, Marx held in 1848 to an implicitly unilinear model of development in which India and China would, as they were swept more deeply into the world capitalist system, over time develop similar contradictions to those of the already industrializing countries of Western Europe and North America.

These themes are developed further in Marx's 1853 writings on India for the *New York Tribune*. It is true that in one passage Marx evokes notions of an independent India shaking off the chains of British colonialism, something not mentioned by Said. But it should be noted that even in his evocation of an independent India, he implies that this is to be an India that has first modernized along Western European lines.

Moreover, Marx's portrait of Indian culture and society in 1853 is often condescending. Here following Hegel, he describes India as a static society that lacks any real historical development, except that introduced by its conquerors, from the Arabs and the Mughals to the British (MECW 12: 217). The British represent a "superior" civilization, he concludes (218). In the face of these conquerors over the centuries, he writes, India proved to be "an unresisting and unchanging society" (217). The roots of this are said to lie in India's economically self-contained villages, which stifled individual development and social progress. In fact, Marx portrays the communal structures of these villages, which he erroneously sees as precluding the development of private property in land, as "the solid foundation of Oriental despotism" (MECW 12: 132). While he also begins to attack the "barbarism" of British colonialism, he still views that colonialism, in a rather unilinear fashion, as bringing about necessary if painful progress through modernization (MECW 12: 221).

Four years later, Marx begins to shift his position on India. In 1857, the anti-British Sepoy Uprising broke out, which led to two years of conflict in which the British almost lost control of the Indian Subcontinent. Marx enthusiastically supports the uprising, noting in dialectical fashion that the rebellious sepoy troops (British-trained Indian soldiers) were themselves a product of British colonialism: "There is something in human history like retribution; and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself" (MECW 15: 353). For the next two years, also in the *New York Tribune*, he and Engels describe the Sepoy Uprising and its brutal suppression by the British. Contrasting the uprising in India to the relative quiescence of European labor at that time, Marx declares tellingly in an 1858 letter to Engels: "India is

now our best ally” (MECW 40: 249). By now, he has assumed a more anti-colonialist position.

By the late 1850s, Marx also shifts his attitude toward China, now strongly supporting the Chinese during the Second Opium War (1856-60). Referring to the shelling of Canton [Guangzhou] harbor, he writes:

The unoffending citizens and peaceful tradesmen of Canton have been slaughtered, their habitations battered to the ground, and the claims of humanity violated, on the flimsy pretence that ‘English life and property are endangered by the aggressive acts of the Chinese!’ ... These sweeping assertions are baseless. The Chinese have at least ninety-nine injuries to complain of to one on the part of the English. (MECW 15: 234)

As with India, Marx has moved toward a more anti-colonialist position.

In 1857-59, during the period of the Sepoy Uprising, Marx also elaborates a multilinear theory of history in the *Grundrisse* and the *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*. This constituted a revision of his earlier conceptualization of three successive modes of production: (1) the Greco-Roman slave-based “ancient” mode of production, (2) the medieval European serf-based “feudal” mode of production, and (3) the modern “bourgeois” mode of production, based on formally free wage labor. Referring mainly to India, Marx inserts alongside this Europe-based model an “Asiatic” mode of production, suggesting that precapitalist Asian societies had been on a different historical trajectory. Moreover, although the “Asiatic” mode of production was said to be based on a rather static form of communal property, Marx now no longer saw it as necessarily despotic, referring also to “democratic” forms of communal governance in precolonial societies [2] (1973: 473).

Marx picks up and develops these multilinear threads of argument in new ways during his last decade, 1872-83. Three strands of his writings are important here. The first of these strands is found in the changes he introduced to the 1872-75 French edition of *Capital*. I confine myself here to one passage that bears on the issue of multilinearism and which cannot be found in standard English or German editions, this one from the section on primitive accumulation, where he discussed the origin of capitalism in the expropriation of the peasantry. In the standard English and German editions, Marx writes: “The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process.... *Only in England, which we therefore take as our example, has it the classic form*” (Marx 1976: 876; emphasis added). However, in the later French edition, this passage reads: “But the basis of this whole development is the expropriation of the

peasants. *So far, it has been carried out in a radical manner only in England.... But all the countries of Western Europe are going through the same development*" (Marx 1963: 1170-71; emphasis added). Here, he left room for an alternative development for societies outside Western Europe, including India, China, and Russia.^[3]

The second strand in Marx's late writings on non-Western and precapitalist societies concerns Russia. In several texts, Marx examined anew the issue of whether Russia and the other agrarian empires of Asia were inevitably destined to modernize in the Western capitalist manner. In an 1877 letter responding to a discussion of *Capital* by the Russian writer N.K. Mikhailovsky, Marx defended himself from the charge of unilinearism, in part by citing the French edition of *Capital*. He denied strongly that he had developed "a historicico-philosophical theory of the general course fatally imposed on all peoples" (Shanin 1983: 136). In his well-known 1881 letter to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich, the topic was again whether Russia was destined to be swept into the pathway of capitalist development that was already taking place in Western Europe. Again, he concluded that alternate pathways of development might be possible. He based his judgment in large part upon the marked differences between the social structure of the Russian village, with its communal property, and the village under Western European feudalism's somewhat more individualized property relations. He added that his recent studies of Russian society "convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for a social regeneration in Russia" (Shanin 1983: 124). In his far lengthier drafts for the letter to Zasulich, Marx indicated that versions of the communal social relations he was discussing in Russia could also be found in other non-Western societies such as India, but were not common in precapitalist Western Europe. In the 1882 preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels suggested that these communal social formations in Russia could form the starting point for a communist revolution, if they could link up with the revolutionary labor movement in the Western capitalist lands.

The third strand in Marx's late writings on non-Western societies lies in his 1879-82 notebooks on colonialism, indigenous communal property, and gender in India, Indonesia, Algeria, Latin America, Egypt, and other non-Western and precapitalist societies, some of which have yet to be published but which I am helping to edit for the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* [Complete Writings]. Marx took extensive notes on the young Russian anthropologist Maxim Kovalevsky's *Communal Landownership*, published in Russian in 1879, most of which is devoted to India. He also annotated the young British historian Robert Sewell's *Analytical History of India* (1870). Marx's notes on the Indian subcontinent from this period comprise nearly 90,000 words.

In his 1879 notes on Kovalevsky, Marx examines social relations, especially in terms of changes in the forms of communal property, across the entirety of Indian history, from (1) the period before the Muslim conquests, to (2) that of Muslim domination, and (3) that of British colonialism. Marx closely follows Kovalevsky's historical typology of communal forms in rural India, which consisted of several stages, moving from clan or kin-based communities to village communities not organized around kinship that periodically redivided the common land on an equal basis. Marx also writes of social antagonisms, especially within the non-kinship based rural commune. Given this focus on broad changes in India's communal forms, it would appear that precolonial India was for Marx no longer an "unchanging" society without any real history, as in 1853. The second part of Marx's notes on Kovalevsky on India, which deals with the impact of Muslim rule on these earlier social relationships, calls forth a strong attack on the notion that precolonial India was feudal: Not only was he keeping away from such unilinear notions, as he had in the *Grundrisse* two decades earlier, but he was also explicitly attacking those like Kovalevsky who maintained the "feudal" interpretation.

On the other hand, Kovalevsky shared much of Marx's hostility to colonialism, which became clear in the third section of Marx's notes on Kovalevsky on India, where Marx focused on the rise of British colonial domination, up through the 1857-58 Sepoy Uprising. Marx strenuously attacks the "scoundrel" Cornwallis's "permanent settlement" of 1793, which created capitalist-style landed property in Indian villages, at tremendous cost to the peasants (Marx in Krader 1975: 385). Calling the British colonialists "dogs," "asses," "oxen," "blockheads," and the like, Marx alludes to a "general hatred of the English government" (390-92, *passim*). Marx also celebrates the Sepoy Uprising once again. Finally, here following Kovalevsky's data, Marx discerns the continuation of communal forms in the villages, underneath the more atomized capitalist structures introduced by the British: "Nevertheless *between these atoms certain connections continue to exist*, distantly reminiscent of the earlier communal village landowning groups" (388; emphasis in original). This suggests a link between Marx's notes on India and his late writings on Russia, discussed above. If these communal relationships endured in India, might they not also, as in Russia, serve as points of resistance to capital? Marx answers this implicit query by indicating that it was not so much the preservation of these forms as their forceful dissolution in the name of "economic progress" that could unleash new social forces dangerous to British rule. The older communal forms may not have been revolutionary in and of themselves, but they could become a "danger" to the social order as they collided with capitalist modernity (394).

Marx supplements these anthropological studies with one on Indian political and military history in his notes on Sewell's *Analytical History of India*. If the Kovalevsky notes suggest that Marx no longer saw India as a society without a history, those on Sewell suggest that a second problematic feature of the 1853 India writings was falling aside: the notion that India had responded passively to outside conquest. Again and again, Marx's notes emphasize the contingent character of the Muslim and British conquests, rather than, as in 1853, the ineluctable march of large historical forces. At every stage, he now highlights indigenous Indian resistance to foreign conquest. For example, Marx records passages such as the following from Sewell, emphasizing how in 1704 the Hindu Maratha forces – based near present-day Mumbai (Bombay) – had put Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb on the defensive, this before the British had gained much of a foothold in India:

1704.... In the last 4 years of his life whole government disorganized; *Marathas* began to recover their forts and gather strength; a terrible famine exhausted the provisions for troops and drained the treasury; soldiers mutinous over want of pay; hard pressed by the Marathas [Mughal Emperor] *Aurangzeb* retreated in great confusion to *Ahmadnagar*.
(Marx 1960: 43; emphasis in original; see also Sewell 1870: 66)

In another reference to the Marathas, Marx uses the word “clan ancestor [*Stammvater*]” in describing the Maratha leadership, thus highlighting the notion that the Marathas, who formed the most important locus of Indian resistance to both the Mughals and the British, were organized on a clan basis. None of the above is meant to suggest that Marx's notes on India are anti-Muslim, for on numerous occasions, he notes the considerable contributions of Muslims to Indian culture and society. At one point, he writes that Mughal Emperor Akbar “made *Delhi* into the greatest and finest city then existing in the world” (Marx 1960: 33; emphasis in original). Marx portrays Akbar in a relatively secular light, characterizing him as “indifferent in religious matters, therefore tolerant” (32).

Marx devotes the bulk of the notes on Sewell to the period of British ascendancy, where he stresses the contingent character of Britain's conquests, and the many instances in which its power in India hung by a thread. He frequently terms the British “blockheads” or “dogs,” whom he sometimes describes as terribly frightened in the face of Indian resistance. Throughout these notes, Marx shows a pronounced sympathy for the Marathas, while occasionally expressing disdain for their warlordism. The notes on Sewell suggest that Marx's sympathy for the Sepoy Uprising had only increased since his *New York Tribune* articles on these same events during the late 1850s.

II. Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism: Poland, the US, and Ireland

In another set of writings spanning four decades, Marx examined the relationship of race, ethnicity, and nationalism to revolution, particularly in Poland, the US during the Civil War, and Ireland. These writings belie the notion that Marx's conceptualization of capitalist modernity constitutes a "totalizing" grand narrative under which the particulars of race, ethnicity, and nation are subsumed.

Marx and Engels were always concerned with Polish national liberation, a cause warmly adopted by most of their generation of revolutionaries, who were outraged at the eighteenth-century partition of Poland by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, and who stood for Poland's restoration as an independent nation. In the programmatic conclusion to the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels specifically supported the left wing of the Polish national movement: "In Poland [the communists] support the party that insists on an agrarian revolution as the prime condition for national emancipation, that party which fomented the insurrection in Cracow in 1846" (MECW 6: 518). In February 1848, when revolution broke out in France once again, "Vive la Pologne" was a prominent slogan of the revolutionary movement, which saw Tsarist Russia as the most reactionary force in European politics, and Poland as a key ally.

Eight years later, in a letter to Engels of December 2, 1856, Marx calls support for Poland the "'external' thermometer" by which one could measure "the intensity and viability of all revolutions since 1789." He adds: "This is demonstrable in detail from French history. It is conspicuous in our brief German revolutionary period, likewise in the Hungarian" (MECW 40: 85). Marx considered Poland to be a major positive factor in the international revolutionary movement, as seen in an 1875 speech, where he stressed the "cosmopolitan" character of Polish revolutionaries, by now including a reference to the Paris Commune. The Poles, he declared, are

the only European people that has fought and is fighting as the *cosmopolitan soldier of the revolution*. Poland shed its blood during the American War of Independence; its legions fought under the banner of the first French Republic; by its revolution of 1830 it prevented the invasion of France that had been decided by the partitioners of Poland; in 1846 in Cracow it was the first in Europe to plant the banner of social revolution; in 1848 it played an outstanding part in the revolutionary struggle in Hungary, Germany, and Italy; finally, in 1871 it supplied the Paris Commune with its best generals and most heroic soldiers. (MECW 24: 57-58; emphasis in original)

The above passages suggest that support for Poland was one of the political passions of Marx's life.

Poland was also a major factor in the establishment of the First International in 1864. European labor networks supporting the 1863 Polish uprising against Russian occupation often intersected with those defending the U.S. against the threat of a British intervention on the side of the South during the Civil War. Marx summed this up in a letter to a family member of November 29, 1864 recounting the founding of the International:

In September the Parisian workers sent a delegation to the London workers to demonstrate support for Poland. On that occasion, an international Workers' Committee was formed. The matter is not without importance because... in London the same people... by their monster meeting... *prevented war with the United States.* (MECW 42: 47; emphasis in original)

Despite this, debates over Poland soon broke out in the First International between Marx and the Proudhonists – a minority tendency in the socialist movement that sided with Russia and that opposed taking up Polish national emancipation inside the working class and socialist movement.

Marx's discussions of Poland inside the International also addressed larger issues concerning the relationship of national liberation to social revolution. He argued that in three key periods – the French Revolution of 1789-94, the Napoleonic era, and the Revolution of 1830 – France had betrayed Poland. This was connected to a broader point, one aimed at future revolutionary movements in Europe. He argued that in betraying Poland, the French revolutionaries constricted or even destroyed themselves, leading to defeat by external enemies or to a too limited revolution at home, one that did not really uproot the old system. In short, he was suggesting that unless democratic and class struggles could link up with those of oppressed nationalities, both would fail to realize fully their aims, if not go down to defeat.

Marx's writings on Poland are little known today, in no small part because the Stalinist apparatus never produced popular editions of these writings, as they did with those on the US Civil War and on Ireland.

Although widely available in English through the collection *The Civil War in the United States* (1937),^[4] Marx's Civil War writings have not received much discussion recently, despite his treatment in them of a hotly debated topic, the intersections of class and race. One the one hand, earlier Marxist thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Raya Dunayevskaya stressed these writings' originality and their pertinence in intertwining the issues of race and class in American society. On the other hand, some like the erstwhile Marxist historian Eugene Genovese chided "the retreat of Marx, Engels, and too many

Marxists into liberalism” when it came to the Civil War (1971: 327). In Genovese’s view, Marx’s “burning hatred of slavery and commitment to the Union cause interfered with his judgment” (1971: 321). In short, the Civil War writings did not conform to Genovese’s reductionist notions of Marxism and therefore were not Marxist!

Looking at these writings directly, one finds a wealth of insights into the dialectics of race and class. As early as a letter of December 28, 1846, Marx writes of the intimate connection between slavery and capitalism:

Direct slavery is as much the pivot upon which our present-day industrialism turns as are machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry. It is slavery which has given value to the colonies, it is the colonies which have created world trade, and world trade is the necessary condition for large-scale machine industry.... Slavery is therefore an economic category of paramount importance. (MECW 38: 101-2)

Marx also saw African Americans as important revolutionary subjects. On January 11, 1860, in the aftermath of John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, he writes to Engels concerning this and the emancipation of the Russian serfs:

In my view, the most momentous thing happening in the world today is, on the one hand, the movement among the slaves in America, started by the death of Brown, and the movement among the slaves in Russia, on the other.... I have just seen in the *Tribune* that there was a new slave uprising in Missouri, naturally suppressed. But the signal has now been given. (MECW 41: 4) [\[5\]](#)

The following year, he begins to cover the US Civil War, which he sees as carrying the potential of a continuation of these slave insurrections.

Overall, Marx held to the view that poor and working-class whites had their class consciousness distorted by slavery and racism. After the war ended, Marx argued that the abolition of slavery had destroyed a major barrier to the development of class consciousness within the US working class, reporting in *Capital*, Vol. I:

In the United States of America, every independent workers’ movement was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin. However, a new life immediately arose from the death of slavery. (1976: 414)

Less known is the September 1865 Address of the First International to the notoriously racist President Andrew Johnson, which contained this prescient warning: “Let your citizens of to-day be declared free and equal, without reserve. If you fail to give them citizens’ rights, while you demand citizens’ duties, there will yet remain a struggle for the future which may again stain your country with your people’s blood” (*General Council of the First International. Minutes. 1864-1866*: 311-12).

Inside Britain, a fierce debate raged during the early years of the Civil War, 1861-62, over whether to side with the South in the name of “freedom of the seas” in response to the Union blockade of southern ports. Sometimes the issue was posed less ideologically and more openly as the need to maintain a supply of cheap cotton for British capital. In 1861-62, the British Establishment also charged that the war was not really about slavery, noting that Lincoln had not yet proclaimed abolition as a goal. In response, Marx noted repeatedly that the South had made slavery into a core principle of its constitution.

As Marx reported at great length, large meetings organized by British workers passionately opposed intervention, siding with the North despite the enormous economic hardships inflicted upon them by the layoffs resulting from curtailment of the cotton trade. Such sentiments were echoed throughout Western Europe because, he wrote, the emergent working class saw the US as the most democratic society of the time, virtually the only country where even white male workers enjoyed full suffrage:

The true people of England, of France, of Germany, of Europe, consider the cause of the United States as their own cause, as the cause of liberty, and ... despite all paid sophistry, they consider the soil of the United States as the free soil of the landless millions of Europe, as their land of promise, [6] now to be defended sword in hand, from the sordid grasp of the slaveholder.... In this contest the highest form of popular self-government till now realized is giving battle to the meanest and most shameless form of man’s enslaving recorded in the annals of history. (MECW 19: 29-30)

In evoking this as a key example of proletarian internationalism, Marx at the same time strongly criticized Lincoln for his slowness to act against slavery and his early failure to allow Black troops to fight in the war.^[7] At the same time, Marx disagreed with those on the left who saw no real difference between a capitalist North with its exploitation of labor and the slave plantations of the South.

As with their writings on the Civil War, the writings of Marx and Engels on Ireland have long been easily available through the volume *Ireland and the Irish Question*, published in 1972 as a successor to previous less comprehensive editions. As early as *The Condition of*

the Working Class in England (1845), Engels singled out the special oppression of Irish immigrant labor in Britain.

During the 1850s, Marx wrote occasionally on Ireland, but it was soon after the founding of the International that the rise of the insurrectionary Fenian movement brought the issue of Ireland to the fore. In a letter to Engels of December 10, 1869, Marx wrote famously that he had changed his position on Ireland, revising his earlier view that British labor would form the vanguard of social revolution in Britain and Ireland:

For a long time, I believed it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy.... Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. This is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general. (MECW 43: 398)

Here, Marx's reversal of his earlier positions is made quite explicit, but as I have been arguing, a similar evolution of his thinking was taking place concerning India and other non-Western societies.

During this period, he had been immersing himself in Irish history, writing voluminous notes on Irish-British relations, on the Irish peasantry, and on prehistoric Irish society and its communal social forms. These notebooks will eventually be published in the MEGA. An indication of their content with respect to early Irish communal forms can be found in a letter to Engels of May 11, 1870, where Marx quoted the German historian Ernst Wachsmuth:

The community of goods was accompanied by Celtic laxity in the marriage tie, already known in antiquity, at the same time, however, [as] *voting rights for women in the tribal assembly*.... The first chapter of the book on common law deals with women: "If his wife lay with another man and *he beats her*, he sacrifices his claim to indemnification.... *Sufficient grounds for divorce for a wife were* the man's impotence, scabies, and bad breath." (MECW 43: 515; emphasis in original)

Marx adds humorously: "Such gallant youngsters, these Celts!" (MECW 43: 516).

Marx's writings on Ireland, especially those around 1870, constitute his most theoretically developed discussion of the interweaving of class with nationalism, race, and ethnicity – a discussion that began with his writings on Poland and on the American Civil War. Inside the International, Ireland was a major reason behind his break with the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who did not want the International to get involved in non-class issues like

defense of Irish political prisoners. For his part, Marx thought that this issue was intimately connected to the class struggle in Britain. All of this led him to some important theoretical reflections.

Marx now saw the Irish independence struggle as deeply linked to the struggles of British workers against capital, as he wrote in a letter of November 29, 1869 to the German socialist Ludwig Kugelmann: “I have become more and more convinced – and the thing now is to drum this conviction into the English working class – that they will never do anything decisive here in England before they separate their attitude towards Ireland quite definitely from that of the ruling classes, and... make common cause with the Irish.... Every movement in England itself is crippled by the dissension with the Irish, who form a very important section of the working class in England itself” (MECW 43: 390).

Marx returned to these issues in the “Confidential Communication” of March 1870, a statement against Bakunin he drafted on behalf of the General Council of the International. English working-class consciousness, he wrote, was attenuated by anti-Irish prejudice, in a dynamic similar to that of white racism in the US: “The common English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the *standard of life*.... He views him similarly to how the poor whites of the Southern states of North America viewed black slaves. This antagonism among the proletarians of England is artificially nourished and kept up by the bourgeoisie. It knows that this split is the true secret of the preservation of its power” (MECW 21: 120; emphasis in original).

Moreover, the Irish independence struggle could be, he wrote in this polemic with Bakunin, the “lever” that could pry apart British and thus global capitalism as part of an international revolutionary struggle:

Although revolutionary initiative will probably come from France, England alone can serve as the lever for a serious economic Revolution.... It is the only country where *the capitalist form*, that is to say, combined labor on a large scale under the authority of capitalists, has seized hold of almost the whole of production.... The English have all the *material* conditions for social revolution. What they lack is *a sense of generalization and revolutionary passion*. It is only the General Council [of the International] that can provide them with this, that can thus accelerate the truly revolutionary movement in this country, and consequently *everywhere*.... If England is the bulwark of landlordism and European capitalism, the only point where official England can be struck a great blow is *Ireland*. (MECW 21: 118-19; emphasis in original).

The above referred to Ireland's peasantry, whose opposition to the system was enhanced by a national factor, that the landlord class in Ireland was to a great extent British, not Irish. Ireland was also where the landed aristocracy, part of the British ruling class alongside the industrial capitalists, had important holdings.

III. Implications for Today

I have argued that Marx's critique of capital was far broader than is usually supposed. To be sure, he concentrated on the labor-capital relation within Western Europe and North America. But at the same time, he expended considerable time and energy on the analysis of non-Western societies, as well as on race, ethnicity, and nationalism in Western Europe and North America. These are problems of our time and it behooves us to stop attacking Marx for allegedly ignoring them. Moreover, it also behooves us to see what we can learn from the ways in which Marx never separated these questions from the critique of capital and at the same time, took each of them seriously as social factors.

Let us conclude with a few general comments on how the writings under consideration here illuminate more general issues in Marx's work. One could say that he began with a somewhat one-sided appreciation of capitalist modernity, of its progressiveness. His writings on non-Western societies, particularly India and China, help us to problematize this aspect of his work. At the same time, these writings help us to discern a larger issue, his growing hostility to capitalist modernity, as he moved from the fulsome praise of capitalist modernity in the opening pages of the *Communist Manifesto*, to an appreciation in the *Grundrisse* of capital's role in building up the productive forces of society, to the much harsher critique of modernity elaborated in *Capital*. This is especially true of the discussion of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, where human relations are seen as relations between things because that is "what they really are" under capitalism (Marx 1976: 166). It is also true of the chapter on machinery, where he argues that the most modern forms of technology (as of the 1870s) only served to deepen the exploitation and alienation of the worker.

Several more specific implications for today of Marx's writings discussed here should also be considered: (1) Marx's general dialectic is not one of abstract universalism but has plenty of room for the specificities of nation, ethnicity, and race, issues on which he makes important and original contributions. (2) Especially in his later writings, Marx theorizes indigenous forms of resistance to capital and their need to connect to the working classes of more technologically developed sectors (and vice versa). The persistence of these issues can be seen most prominently in parts of Latin America today. (3) Marx's theorization of race, ethnicity and nationalism in relation to class and to

revolution remains very relevant today, as seen in the struggles inside the urban ghettos and prisons of the US and Western Europe.

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Notes:

[1] For reasons of space, I have largely eschewed references to the wide-ranging commentaries on Marx on the issues under discussion here. These and other related issues are discussed in my *Marx at the Margins* (2010).

[2] Although this was a multilinear theory of history, it said nothing about contemporary societies like India and China under the impact of capitalism and colonialism.

[3] Few editions of *Capital* – and none in English — take these textual variants seriously.

One exception is the recent Persian translation, which carries the alternate texts from the French edition as marginal notes (Marx 2008). Primary translator Hassan Mortazavi’s introduction is available in English: <http://iranianvoicesintranslation.blogspot.com/2009/07/translators-preface-to-new-persian.html>

[4] See also the non-Marxist Saul Padover’s collection, often translated with greater fluidity (Marx 1972).

[5] Although I refer to the standard edition of this letter in MECW, I have altered the translation after consulting the German original. I will do so occasionally below with respect to texts originally written in German or French.

[6] Elsewhere, especially in *Capital*, he took up the brutal massacre of the indigenous population by the American colonists, an issue not addressed here.

[7] In a letter to Engels of August 7, 1862 that was marred by the use of the n-word (in English in the midst of a German sentence), Marx hit out strongly on this point: “A single nigger-regiment would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves” (MECW 41: 400). This is an instance of Marx using a racist phrase to make an anti-racist point. This use of the n-word was revealed to readers of English in Padover’s edition (Marx 1972) and was subsequently included in MECW; it had been rendered as “Negro” in Marx and Engels (1937).

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