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

Review by Dave Eden

One of the peculiarities of our period is that despite the continual declarations of the death of Marxism Marx remains our contemporary. If Marxism has become heavily saturated under the weight and tragedies of the 20th Century, fresh readings of Marx prove to be invaluable to those who wish to understand and transform the world we live within.

Kevin B. Anderson's *Marx at the Margins* is an excellent example of such a fresh reading. Anderson's stated objective is to look at a series of Marx's writings that is largely ignored: his journalistic work, the French edition of *Capital*, and unpublished writings from the end of his life, to unearth a Marx that thinks of the global human experience very differently from the Eurocentric determinist that he is so often cast as being (pp. 5-6). The Marx Anderson claims to find is 'a much more multilinear theorist of history and society than is generally supposed, as some-one immersed (sic) the study of the concrete reality of Asian societies as well as Western capitalist ones, as a theorist who took account of nationalism and ethnicity as well as class' (pp. 6-7). Here I wish look specifically at 'Chapter 5' where Anderson focuses on the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*.

The *Grundrisse* and *Capital* are the core works in which we can discover what Postone calls Marx's 'mature critical social theory' (1993: 3). Anderson does effectively demonstrate the openness of *Capital* and *Grundrisse*. He argues that they are unfinished and they were constantly in a process of revision. It is only Engels' decision that the 4th German edition of *Capital* was the 'final' one which gives *Capital* an appearance of finality (pp. 175-176). Anderson reminds us that these unfinished works need to be read more openly, and that Marx of the French edition seems to focusing his analysis of the specificities of European capitalist society and thus moving away from a universalist and deterministic position (p. 178).

Anderson argues that 'discussion of non-Western societies, nationalism and race and ethnicity' play a crucial role in Marx's formulation of his understanding of capitalist society (p. 154). Anderson's close readings of this text ably demonstrate this claim. Anderson establishes how the *Grundrisse* doesn't present a singular teleology of human society but rather is 'multilinear'; it examines the conditions of property and labour in both European pre-capitalist societies and non-Western non-capitalists societies. Marx formulates his understanding of capitalism by comparing it to these societies, which for him remain bounded to production of use-values, rather than surplus-value (pp. 158-159). Anderson notes that Marx's thinking of these non-capitalist societies did not reduce them to either a singular formation nor a simple stage on the way to capitalism, but rather was sensitive to their 'differences and contradictions' (p. 162). Anderson's makes it clear that at this stage in his writing Marx did not think that capitalism is simply an advanced form of all other societies to

which the latter would eventually move – but rather between capitalism and non-capitalisms is a complex series of interactions.

Whilst this is all admirably done, the problem with Anderson's work is what he presents as the content of Marx's critique of political economy. His presentation of Marx's critique of capital stumbles to effectively portray the interrelationship between value and the money-form and capitalist organisation of labour. Anderson does acknowledge that in 'Capital, Volume 1, the abstract and impersonal power of capital is itself an historical actor, a self-developing subject' (p. 171). Later Anderson does point out how important the commodity-form is for Marx's understanding of capital, and that one of the profound differences between capitalism and pre-capitalist class societies is that 'noncapitalist societies, however oppressive they might be, had not perfected this veiling of social relations' (p. 181). Yet Anderson's reconstruction of Marx's comparison of capitalist and non-capitalist societies focuses on how labour is organised. For example when looking at Marx's comparison between capitalism and the 'Indian Village System' Anderson notes how whilst it 'was on one level extremely conservative and restrictive... [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' (p. 186). This is contrasted to the conditions under capitalism. Drawing on the 15th chapter of Capital 'Machinery and Large-Scale Industry' Anderson argues that the depiction of labour under capital was one of 'increased alienation by making work into a repetitive drudgery' but more importantly a domination of the worker by capital as an autonomous force (p. 186). The essential difference is that in the 'Indian Village System' (here playing the role of non-capitalist forms of domination) oppression takes on a direct personal or social form as there is no split between the labourer, their labour and the product of their work. Exploitation has to then be direct. Yet under capitalism labour is dominated by machinery at the point of production, machinery being the embodiment of the autonomous power of capital (p. 186).

Anderson then considers the importance of primitive accumulation and its global dimensions in the transformation of labour by which 'formally unfree but factually free peasants were transformed into formally free but factually unfree wage laborers' (p. 187). But what is not present in Anderson's work is the understanding that the role that fetishized relations in the form of value, in the form of money, plays in the transformation from pre-capitalist to capitalist society. This is not to downplay the role that violence takes in colonisation, but rather identifies a special quality of capitalism. Value is the central critical category of Marx's critique of capital. It explains how the vast diversity of human creativity is, due to the organisation of society for and by exchange, abstracted and regulated through reified forms. Wealth under capitalism is commodified; 'definite social relations' become 'the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx 1990: 165) Value functions as both the regulator of the relations of commodities (that is the reified relations between people) and stands alone and atop capitalist society in the form of money.

What Marx argued is that money throughout the history of class society works to dissolve social relations. Capitalism is both the success of this dissolution and the reorganisation of society on the basis of the accumulation of value which appears as money. In the Grundrisse Marx argued how the acidic nature of money, in that it dissolves relations between people and becomes fetishized embodied of wealth in general, is the 'antithesis' of 'ancient communities' (Marx 1993: 223). Yet in non-capitalist societies exchange existed on in the interstices between productive activity

proper 'like the gods of Epicurus in the intermundia, or like the Jews in the pores of Polish society' (Marx 1991: 447). Thus money despite its power could only achieve the status of hoard or exist as 'usurer's capital' and its 'twin brother, merchant's capital' (Marx 1991: 728). In capitalism proper money, that is value, takes centre stage and leads to the reorganisation of society and production. Of course Marx's critique is not simply a moralistic rejection of money, but a critique of the kinds of social relations that lead to the proliferation of the money-form, the same kind of social relations the proliferation of the money-form is part of creating.

It is the pursuit of value that compels the revolutionisation of production, the reduction of labour to seeming appendage of production and the deep dynamism of capitalist society. This is not simply an academic point but crucial to understanding capital's history and present. Primitive accumulation whether in Europe or in areas colonised by Europe (which continues today) is always a mixture of force and the transformation of social relations through the ascendancy of money. On one hand it is a process that 'is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire' through the violent separation of peasants and artisans from their land and tools (Marx 1990: 875). On other hand it is the molecular dissolution and reorganisation of daily life through the proliferation of exchange, the monetisation of being and the reorganisation of production (cf. Midnight Notes Collective 1992)

This interrelationship between force and the commodity, between state and market, as aspects of capitalist social relations, is key to a full critique of capital (cf. Holloway and Picciotto 1978; Clark 1991). It is one of the crucial tools that can help us understand, and hopefully change, the social organisation that produces the accumulation of wealth and misery, potential and unfreedom, crisis and dispossession that we see embodied in underwater hotels in Dubai and empty houses in Detroit, in refugee camps, slums and gated communities. Whilst Anderson helps us read Marx afresh his presentation of Marx's gifts to us is less than it could be. The critique of value needs to return to the centre stage of anticapitalist thought.

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