

Is Marxism Eurocentric?

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A common charge heard against Marxism in recent decades is that it is a Eurocentric theory, one with arguably colonial assumptions and underpinned by Western values. If so, then Marxism cannot claim to be a universal theory of human emancipation; it might even simply rationalise the domination of a few powerful states over the rest of the world.

In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said wrote that Marx was guilty of “the Romantic Orientalist vision”. He cited passages in *The Communist Manifesto* that praise bourgeois economic forces, lauding the bourgeoisie which “batters down all Chinese walls” and “compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves”. Said also criticised Marx's article, *The British Rule in India* (10 June 1853) for emphasising the positive, constructive side of colonialism. Combined with pronouncements about “non-historic peoples” other peoples as “robbers”, “lazy” or “vegetating in the teeth of time” with some plainly racist language in correspondence, the case against Marxism looks pretty damning.

Kevin Anderson's book *Marx at the Margins* (2010) discusses Marx's view on nationalism, ethnicity and non-Western societies. He tackles the question of Eurocentrism in a subtle and nuanced fashion. Instead of facile retrospective condemnation - found for example in Ian Cummins, *Marx, Engels and National Movements* (1980) and in Ephraim Nimni, *Marxism and Nationalism* (1991) - Anderson puts the troublesome passages into context and provides a more rounded assessment of Marx's views as they evolved throughout his life. The result is a valuable book that shows how Marxism can integrate ethnicity, nationality and other identities into a progressive, class-based universal world outlook.

Marx wrote hundreds of articles for the *New York Daily Tribune* newspaper in the 1850s and it is here that his first writings on the wider world beyond Europe are found. Much of his early research (which would continue to the end of his life) concerned India. Marx wrote in 1853 that Britain's colonisation of India had fulfilled a double mission: “the annihilation of old Asiatic society and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (*The Future Results of British Rule in India*, 22 July 1853). But far from

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justifying colonialism, Marx actually provided the basis for resisting it. He wrote that “the misery inflicted by the British on Hindostan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindostan had to suffer before” and that British rule in India unveiled the “profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation”.

Beyond denouncing British imperialism, Marx also pointed out that “a fresh class is springing up, endowed with the requirements for government”. He looked forward to the time when “the Hindoos themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether”. In *Investigation of Tortures in India* (17 September 1857), Marx asked readers to consider “whether a people are not justified in attempting to expel the foreign conquerors who have so abused their subjects”. In the late 1850s, Marx supported the Sepoy Uprising in India as well as Chinese resistance to the British during the Second Opium War.

Marx’s 1853 writings on India constitute the first instance of a major European thinker supporting India’s independence. This has been acknowledged by Indian historian Irfan Habib, who argued: “In 1853 to set colonial emancipation, not just colonial reform, as an objective of the European socialist movement; and still more, to look forward to a national liberation movement (‘throwing off the English yoke’) attained through their struggle by the Indian people, as an event that might even precede the emancipation of the European working class – such an insight and vision could belong to Marx alone” (Anderson 2010 p.23).

Marx was also politically clear and explicit about the greatest anti-racist cause of his day, namely the abolition of slavery in the United States. Marx was public and vocal in his support for the anti-slavery dynamic of the US civil war, lauding the support given by British cotton workers to the North (despite personal hardship) and demanding that the North make “the emancipation of the slaves” its motto. Marx did not ignore the issue of racism in *Capital*, when he wrote that “labour is the white skin cannot emancipate itself where in the black skin it is branded”.

Anderson also discusses Marx’s attitude toward national oppression, highlighting the evolution of his views on Poland and Ireland. Marx and Engels both spoke at the London meeting in November 1847 to mark the seventeenth anniversary of the Polish uprising, where Engels stated that “a nation cannot become free and at the same time continue to oppress other nations”. Marx wrote to Engels (2 December 1856) that the attitude towards Polish independence was the “‘external’ thermometer” of the credentials of revolutionaries. Anderson draws out particularly well Marx’s support for Chechen rebels

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against Russia, which was visible in over a dozen articles written during the Crimean war (2010 p.51).

Marx used his inaugural address to the International Working Men's Association, to draw attention to the national oppression of Poland and the Chechen. Their treatment had "taught the working classes the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all means in their power; when unable to prevent, to combine in simultaneous denunciations, and to vindicate the simple laws or morals and justice, which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount of the intercourse of nations. The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes" (27 October 1864). The London Conference of the First International (25-29 September 1865) passed a resolution which stated: "That it is imperative to annihilate the invading influence of Russia in Europe by applying to Poland 'the right of every people to dispose of itself' and re-establishing that country on a social and democratic basis" (Cummins 1980 p.94).

Anderson does not discuss Engels' conception of "non-historic peoples" in great detail, since his focus is on Marx (It was also dealt with exhaustively by Rosdolsky). However it is clear from the book that dividing peoples into "historic" and "non-historic" is no part of the Marxist approach to national questions. Anderson is also forthright about Marx's "extremely problematic comments on Jews in his published work". He states: "None, not even Marx's strongest defenders on this issue, however, have suggested that Marx made a significant positive contribution on the issue of Jews and anti-Semitism" (2010 p.52). Later Marxists, including Engels, Bebel, Kautsky and Trotsky did however develop more coherent Marxist interpretations.

Marx's most developed treatment of the national question was his stance on Ireland. Cummins criticised the early Engels for holding to "an Anglocentric approach to the liberation of Ireland" (1980 p.108). Yet it was Engels who highlighted the plight of Irish migrant workers in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* (1845) and who played a major role in informing Marx of the realities of Ireland. He wrote to Marx that "Ireland may be regarded as the earliest English colony and one which, by reason of proximity, is still governed in exactly the same old way; here one cannot fail to notice that the English citizen's so-called freedom is based on the oppression of the colonies" (23 May 1856). Engels also wrote that "Irish history shows what a misfortune it is for one nation to subjugate another. All English abominations have their origin in the Irish pale" (24 October 1869).

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After nearly 25 years as a revolutionary, Marx came out for Irish independence. He wrote to Engels: “I once believed the separation of Ireland from England to be impossible. I now regard it as inevitable, although federation may follow upon separation” (2 November 1867). In his Speech on the Irish Question, Marx wrote that “The English should demand separation and leave it to the Irish themselves to decide the question of landownership. Everything else would be useless” (16 December 1867).

Marx emphasised Irish oppression and the benefits of separation for English workers. He wrote to 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 be able to do anything decisive here in England before they separate their attitude towards Ireland quite definitely from that of the ruling classes, and not only make common cause with the Irish, but even take the initiative in dissolving the Union established in 1801, and substituting a free federal relationship for it”. He argued that “this must be done not out of sympathy for Ireland, but as a demand based on the interests of the English proletariat”, otherwise “the English people will remain bound to the leading-strings of the ruling classes”. For Marx, “every movement of the working class in England itself is crippled by the dissension with the Irish, who form a very important section of the working class in England itself”. However in Ireland itself, “once affairs have been laid in the hands of the Irish people themselves, as soon as they have made themselves their own legislators and rulers, as soon as they have become autonomous, it will be infinitely easier there than here to abolish the landed aristocracy” (29 November 1869).

On the one hand, England was “the metropolis of capital”, the dominant power on the world market and “the only country in which the material conditions for this revolution have reached a certain degree of maturity”. Marx argued that the sole means of hastening the social revolution was to make Ireland independent. The task of the International was “to make the English workers realise that for them the national emancipation of Ireland is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but the first condition of their own social emancipation” (Letter to Meyer and Vogt, 9 April 1870).

Anderson does not discuss the gaps and omissions in Marx’s understanding of Ireland. Nor does he analyse the limitations of Marx’s view of the national question. However he quotes a comment by Erica Benner that, “It would be wrong to infer that his support for Irish independence brought him [Marx] closer to endorsing a supra-historical principle of national self-determination” (Anderson 2010 p.151). This seems to miss the point. The essence of self-determination is the subjective sense that peoples themselves determine their identity (“dispose of itself”) and form of self-government (“affairs in their own

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hands”). Marx and Engels did not start by applying this principle to every people, but by the end of their lives there they had substantially widened its application, including to the non-European world. There are sufficient grounds to suggest their view is consistent with later Marxists who explicitly supported the “right” to national self-determination. What Marx rightly avoided was to assume that the right to self-determination automatically meant “advocating independence” in every case. The solution proffered depended on the impact on the working class and on international relations.

One of the most important arguments Anderson makes is that Marx’s views on race, nationality and non-European societies developed over his lifetime and that the mature Marx had a more sophisticated assessment in his political economy and later studies. He decisively rejects the view, which was promulgated by the Stalinists, of a unilinear succession of stage in history, with capitalism preceded only by “feudalism”. It is clear from Marx’s political economy, particularly the first draft (the Grundrisse) and second draft (1861-63 manuscripts) of what he called the Asiatic mode of production that pre-capitalist economic societies took a variety of forms. Recent Marxist writing on the “tributary mode of production” has advanced the multilinearity of class societies in history.

Anderson successfully nails one of the great myths against Marxism, namely that it assumes all societies will follow the same path through capitalism. In the preface to the first German edition of Capital volume 1, Marx is usually translated as believing that “the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future”. However the later French edition can be translated slightly differently as “the country that is more developed industrially only shows to those that follow it on the industrial path, the image of its own future”. Anderson believes that the altered text made clear, as far as Marx was concerned, that “his narrative of primitive accumulation was meant as a description of Western European development, nothing more, and hardly a global grand narrative” (2010 p.179).

A further notable contribution is Anderson’s discussion of Marx’s last studies. In 1879-82, Marx made excerpt notebooks on non-Western and precapitalist societies, which extend to over 300,000 words. They were not published even in the heyday of the Bolsheviks: Riazanov characterised them as examples of “inexcusable pedantry”. Some of the material was published by Lawrence Krader in *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* (1972). Krader pointed to the possibility that these notebooks were 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 globalisation” (2010 p.201).

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In these last writings, Marx was not simply carrying over concepts of social structure drawn from the Western European model into Asian social relations. Marx wrote to editors of *Otechestvennye Zapiski* that “by studying each of these evolutions separately, and then comparing them, one will easily find the key to these phenomena, but one will never succeed with the master-key of a historico-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical” (November 1877). The Marxist method meant starting from the “specific economic form in which surplus labour was pumped out of the direct producers”. This conception of exploitation and from it a distinctive conception of class relations, allowed for wide variation in societies and states, not only in the past but in the modern world. This insight is absolutely central to understanding the evolution of capitalism (and indeed of Stalinist societies) since Marx’s death.

Anderson’s book is a valuable addition to Marxist literature. He is right that Marx “kept searching for new allies for the Western working class in its struggle against capital”. Marx was a theorist who “took account of nationalism and ethnicity as well as class”. In his mature works, Marx was not occupied solely with the capital relation and the class struggle, to the exclusion of nationalism, race and ethnicity (2010 p.238-39). Much underlabouring is still needed to integrate these vectors into a coherent Marxist view of current reality. The insights which Anderson extracts from Marx’s work will help us with that task.