

## Reviews

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*Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, by Kevin B. Anderson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

### **David Norman Smith**

*Marx's perspective on the multicultural world in which capital achieves systemic ascendancy has not yet been fully mapped either culturally or geopolitically. Capital's "metabolism" with the enviroing social world has been affirmed in principle and, anthropologically, in terms of the articulation of modes of production. But Marx at the Margins is the first book to delve deeply into this problem on two key levels: with respect to Marx's views on premodern and non-Western cultures and, second, with respect to the national independence struggles of Marx's day (most notably in Poland and Ireland). The author also probes Marx's thinking on the proslavery movement that precipitated the American Civil War of 1861–4.*

**Key Words:** Capitalism, Globalization, Marxism, Historical Materialism

It has gone almost unnoticed that Egypt's entanglement with Anglo-European capital was the focus of Karl Marx's very last set of manuscript notes, which he wrote in late 1882, just months before his death in early 1883. Yet this fact is significant, and symptomatic, in several ways.

Marx strongly opposed the British occupation of Egypt, which began in 1882. But his final notes explored not the occupation per se but the two decades of Anglo-European financial chicanery which, he felt, had prepared the ground for military intervention. Egypt under Ismail Pasha had been ensnared in the spider's web of imperial interests by accepting a series of ruinous loans from Anglo-French and Anglo-German bankers. When it became clear that Ismail's government was in danger of defaulting, Britain exerted strenuous pressure to force payment. The consequences, especially for Egypt's brutally squeezed peasantry, were appalling. Yet Ismail was unable to avert default and Britain took military action to secure its interests.

Capital, in this exemplary fashion, proved yet again its international reach. Egyptian industry, which had been cultivated by Ismail's empire-building forerunner,

Mehmet Ali, had been strangled in the cradle by Anglo-French forces in 1840. Ismail, seeking to sustain Egypt's imperial pretensions, turned to finance capital for support. That spurred a vicious cycle of what would now be called "neoliberal" and "austerity" measures. Egypt suffered, and capital prospered.<sup>1</sup>

If this story sounds familiar—it should. Contemporary writers have often assumed that "globalization" is a late development, but Marx saw capitalism and globalization as synonymous. One of the great merits of Kevin Anderson's fine new book is that he explains the indelibly global character of Marx's vision of capitalism. Anderson shows, further, that Marx's global sensibilities, which were hedged with provincialism in his early years, became far more radical and nuanced over time.

## 1

Anderson situates Marx in London, "at the center of the world's only truly industrial capitalist economy," which was also, uncoincidentally, "the center of the world's largest empire" (1). Capital radiated from London to the four corners of the globe, and Marx's vision was correspondingly global.

Marx's theory of capitalism, which remains the only systematic theory of capitalism in toto, was always tacitly if not expressly global in its inmost premises. This was clear, for example, in Marx's first sustained exposition of his theory, *Zur kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, which appeared in 1859, not long after he had sketched his overall project in the unpublished manuscript known as the *Grundrisse*: "The busiest streets of London are crowded with shops whose showcases display all the riches of the world, Indian shawls, American revolvers, Chinese porcelain, Parisian corsets, furs from Russia and spices from the tropics, but all of these worldly things bear odious white paper labels with Arabic numerals and then laconic symbols *£ s. d.* This is how commodities are presented in circulation."<sup>2</sup>

Commodities share a common identity in exchange, which differs only quantitatively and effaces their qualitative differences, cultural as well as material. Anderson illustrates this with a citation from an 1857 article in which Marx laments that the buying public does not see, in the tea they find on their grocer's shelves, the infamy of British mistreatment of China and Chinese labor (33). Commodities are valuable in proportion to the "abstract," "average" labor they contain, in which their concrete differences—including the specific circumstances of their production and circulation—are "forcibly" suppressed. "From the taste of wheat it is not possible to tell who produced it, a Russian serf, a French peasant or an English capitalist."

The examples Marx gives in his paradigmatic discussion of commodity exchange came from all over the globe. Besides wheat, Marx cites Brazil timber, mocha coffee

1. Marx's notes on Egypt will appear for the first time in a forthcoming volume of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, Abt. 4.

2. All citations from Marx are from S. Ryazanskaya's translation of *Zur kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, which is available under the title *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/>). Keyword searches will find the cited lines.

(from Yemen and Ethiopia), and potash (from Canada and Ethiopia). He adds a further, decisive point, under the heading “World Money”: “Commodities as such are indifferent to all religious, political, national and linguistic barriers. Their universal language is price.” This inspires a “commodity-owner’s cosmopolitanism,” which entails opposition to any cultural, ethnic, or religious traditions that impede the global metabolism of capital. For the commodity owner, he adds, “the sublime idea in which the whole world merges . . . is that of a market, the world market.”

Capital “collides” with the world’s cultures, Marx wrote in the *Grundrisse*. Money acts as a “universal solvent,” liquidating every obstacle in the path of the world-conquering market.

## 2

*Marx at the Margins* addresses several of these key theoretical themes, especially in the outstanding penultimate chapter, “From the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*.” But Anderson focuses primarily on meso-level expositions of Marx’s views on history and politics. This leads him to explore several themes with unprecedented lucidity:

- (1) Marx’s progress beyond the shallow, almost celebratory stance on colonialism that marked his early 1850s writings on India, Indonesia, and China;
- (2) Marx’s views on the interpenetration of working class and national self-emancipation in Poland and Ireland;
- (3) Marx’s views on the clash and interpenetration of social systems in the American Civil War; and
- (4) Marx’s transition from the unilinear analysis of the *Manifesto*, in which the worldwide triumph of capitalism seems almost preordained, to the more complex and multilinear analysis in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, in Marx’s ethnological notes, and in his critical encounters with such Russian thinkers as Vera Zasulich and Nikolai Mikhailovsky.

Anderson significantly advances discussion in each of these realms. In some instances, he extends or amends well-known arguments—for example, with respect to India, Indonesia, China, Ireland, and Marx’s exchange with Zasulich. In other cases, he breaks decisively new ground. That is most obviously true with respect to Poland, Marx’s ethnological notes, and the Civil War. But even when the subject is familiar, Anderson invariably adds depth and subtlety. He offers unexpected nuggets of insight, new interpretive wrinkles, and a literary flair that brings even the most obscure themes to life.

I would have liked to see Anderson delve more intensively into *Capital*, especially volume 2, where Marx relaxes the steady-state assumptions of volume 1 to probe capital’s “extended reproduction” at its systemic and (implicitly) geographic frontiers. I would have enjoyed seeing Anderson more carefully link the “ethnology” of the late notes (on Morgan et al.) with Marx’s contemporaneous drafts of volume 2 of *Capital*. But what Anderson does offer with respect to *Capital* is rich indeed. Nothing I have seen better illumines the multicultural world in which capital achieved

systemic ascendancy. In some spheres (e.g., the hermeneutics of the French edition of *Capital*), Anderson's work is unexcelled.

### 3

I'll close with a few passing remarks on chapter 3, "Race, Class, and Slavery: The Civil War as a Second American Revolution." I've studied Marx's thinking on this subject for years, but much that appears here is entirely new to me or more fully contextualized than I've seen before.

Anderson starts with Marx's absolutely vital early letter to Pavel Annenkov, written over a year before *The Communist Manifesto* appeared. Here, writing about African American slavery in Suriname, Brazil, and the southern United States, Marx is unambiguous about the centrality of slavery to 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" (83, quoting Marx, 28 December 1846).

Affirming the dialectical unity of early capitalism and slavery in this way is important, an early instance of Marx's multidimensional thinking about capitalism. Slave society was far from identical with capitalism, but it was among the principal *Voraussetzungen* (presuppositions) of early modern capitalism, of the kind listed in the *Grundrisse*. And Marx took slavery seriously in its own right, both as an integral part of the world economy and as a rival social system, which had not yet ceded the stage to capitalism and formally free labor. This part of Marx's thinking is drawn to the fore when Anderson calls our attention to Marx's crucial article on "The Civil War in the United States," which appeared in the Viennese press on 7 November 1861. Marx argues forcefully here that Confederate "secessionism" was, in fact, anything but a struggle for national self-determination—that it was, rather, a disguised and disingenuous war of conquest, a bold attempt to claim over 75 percent of the territorial United States for the slave system, including a ring of contested "border states" (Kentucky, Maryland, etc.) that had not previously been recognized as "slave states." States where slavery and formally free labor had coexisted would be annexed to the slave system, and other states and territories, economically dependent on the Mississippi river, would be forced to submit as well.

Anderson's passing remark that the result of a Southern victory would have been "a new form of capitalism, openly structured upon racial and ethnic lines" (90), exceeds the letter of Marx's argument here. But Anderson is unquestionably right to stress the fact that, for Marx, "the slave system would infect the whole Union" if the Confederacy were to triumph. African American slaves would remain enslaved "in accord with the loudly proclaimed principle that only certain races are capable of freedom," and immigrant white wage workers (of German and Irish ancestry, especially) would be reduced to "helotry" (90, quoting Marx, 7 November 1869).

Marx wrote that the best way to resist Confederate conquest was to turn the civil war into a revolutionary war for slave emancipation. He wanted the Union under Lincoln to assist the slave rebellion that had begun to emerge, he wrote to Engels in early 1860, in the wake of John Brown's occupation of Harper's Ferry in October 1859. He faulted Lincoln for "faintheartedly" revoking the Missouri Proclamation, issued by John Frémont, who had thus become the first Union general "to have threatened the slaveholders with the emancipation of the slaves" (90).

Marx held fast to this outlook through the course of the war, as Anderson shows in detail. His opinion of Lincoln became decidedly more favorable when the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect in January 1863—and it can hardly be a coincidence that, less than two years later, Marx wrote, in the provisional rules of the International Workingmen's Association, "That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves."<sup>3</sup>

Anderson provides abundant insight into the whole arc of Marx's thinking on this vital topic. Here, and throughout *Marx at the Margins*, he offers a sophisticated and multifaceted account of Marx's thinking on the interpenetration of capitalism and global society. In a world where "globalization" has become a byword and capitalism has grown so all-encompassing that even local crises now entail "systemic risks," this is a major achievement. Marx's theory of capitalism and capitalist crisis has often been pronounced dead. Independent readers will want to judge for themselves. They will find much of value in this book.

*The Task of Cultural Critique*, by Teresa L. Ebert. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

## **Stephen Tumino**

*Teresa L. Ebert's new book, The Task of Cultural Critique, makes a distinction between the Kantian critique that aims at the cognitive validity of knowledge and the Marxist critique that gives a materialist explanation of the existing social relations in order to change them. She argues that the task of cultural critique, contrary to such contemporary critics as Fredric Jameson, is to engage abstract social relations such as class and reject the focus on the concrete which since Nietzsche has become the object of desire in the humanities. "The concrete," she quotes Marx, "is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations." The Task of Cultural Critique is a brilliant theoretical analysis of these determinations in feminism, capitalist ideology, women's romances, globalization, love, and the university in ruins, and also of the way these determinations underlie the writings of Derrida, de Man, Deleuze, Žižek, Negri, and other contemporary concretists.*

**Key Words:** Concrete, Abstract, Marx, Derrida, Globalization, Cynical Reason

3. The provisional rules were adopted in October 1864. See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1864/rules.htm>.