

From The 'Grundrisse' to 'Capital': Multilinear Themes

12/09/2009

Kevin Anderson

In the *Grundrisse* (1857-58), Marx sketches a multilinear theory of history. This marks an important turn in his thought. These themes are taken up again and developed further in *Capital*, Vol. I (1872-75), but as a theorization of contemporary possibilities rather than past history.

Some Barriers to Marx within Radical Thought

When Marx's name comes up nowadays, it is often said in progressive and radical circles that while Marx had some good analysis of the economic structure of capitalism, his overall theorization of society is no model for radical thought today, because it was fundamentally Eurocentric, unilinear, and determinist. This attitude has played no small part in dissuading many 21st century thinkers and activists from a serious engagement in Marx's thought. This article offers arguments from within Marx's writings to challenge this attitude, in order to encourage both a deeper engagement with the whole of Marx's work and a critique of his critics, especially those on the left like Deleuze, Foucault, and Edward Said. In so doing, I will also challenge orthodox or post-Marx Marxism, both on its deterministic succession of historical stages and on its failure to acknowledge differences between Marx and Engels. Without peeling away some of these issues, it is hard to grasp Marx, let alone appreciate the fullness of his critique of capital or his notion of a new society.

At the outset, I want to mention two problematic views that I do not share. (1) Some orthodox Marxists, especially in India, have argued that Marx dabbled with the idea of an Asiatic mode of production in the *Grundrisse*, but in *Capital* returned to his earlier single model of development in which there was a progression from slavery to feudalism to capitalism. This view does not hold up when one looks at the whole of Marx's work. (2) Others, basing themselves on the Marx's last writings on Russian communal villages as a source of revolution, have argued that (what they consider to be) Marx's deterministic perspectives in *Capital* gave way in his last writings to a more open, multilinear approach.

I will, however, be adapting Bertell Ollman's notion in *Dialectical Investigations* (1993) that Marx reads history backwards, i. e., views premodern societies through the lens of modern capitalism. I will do this for Marx himself, reading the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* through the later writings of 1877-82, especially the *Ethnological Notebooks* and the letters on Russia. I will be doing so in order to grasp better the trajectory of Marx's theoretical enterprise.

Much ink has been spilled in recent decades concerning the issues of unilinearism (grand narrative) and ethnocentrism in social and political theory generally, and with regard to Marx in particular. With Marx, much of the debate has revolved around his articles on India during the early 1850s and the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Both of these sets of writings evidence an implicitly unilinear model of social development in which England was the most advanced

society of the day, with others necessarily following that society, willingly or unwillingly, into the capitalist future. Edward Said, Jean-François Lyotard, Robert Tucker, and other critics of Marx have made this case since the 1970s. Moreover, Marx's early descriptions of India (a society without history) or China (barbarian) evidenced a certain ethnocentrism. In Marx's less-discussed later writings on these issues -- and even to some extent in those of 1856-59 on China and India -- he is often seen to have overcome some of these problems. This change of position can be seen most clearly in his 1881 letter to Vera Zasulich or the 1882 preface to the Communist Manifesto, where he suggests a multilinear pathway of development for non-capitalist societies. Here I will look briefly at Marx's two most important critiques of political economy, the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, in light of these concerns.

The *Grundrisse* Offers a Multilinear Theory of History

We have recently celebrated the 150th anniversary of Marx's *Grundrisse*, not published until 1939, but generally acknowledged to be the closest thing we have to a rough draft of his entire critique of political economy. Considered in a separate section of the *Grundrisse*, but only intermittently in *Capital*, Vol. I, was the subject of precapitalist societies. In a lengthy analysis of how early clan and communal forms of social organization were transformed into class societies, Marx examined the different course that these developments had taken in Asia as opposed to Western Europe.

These issues were to generate much discussion by the twentieth-century Marxists under the rubric of the Asiatic mode of production. Soon after the *Grundrisse*, in the 1859 preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx wrote of "the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production," which "may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society." Since he characterized modern capitalism as "the last antagonistic form," part of "the prehistory of human society," a socialist future was also implied, as was some type of early stateless form preceding both the Asiatic and the ancient modes of production (MECW 29, pp. 263-64). Adding to these two implied forms would yield a sixfold list of modes of production: (1) early stateless, (2) Asiatic, (3) ancient Greco-Roman, (4) feudal, (5) bourgeois, (6) in the future, socialist.

Some sort of multilinearity was also implied through the insertion of an Asiatic form, in what otherwise would have been a unilinear model focusing on Western development, from early stateless clan societies, to the ancient Greco-Roman class societies based on slave labor, to the feudalism of the European Middle Ages, and on to bourgeois society and its successor, socialism. Thus, by 1857-58, Marx had developed a more complex account of historical development than the one he and Engels had elaborated a decade earlier in *The German Ideology* (1846). There, in the absence of the Asiatic forms, stood an implicitly unilinear model based solely on Western European history that ran chronologically from "clan or tribal," to "ancient" Greco-Roman, to "feudal," and then to modern bourgeois forms of society (MECW 5, pp. 32-35).

To this day, crude Marxists ignore the *Grundrisse*'s implicit critique of this unilinear and Eurocentric model, later made explicit in the 1879 notebooks on India. One current example

of the continued use of such a unilinear model is the Chinese state propaganda machine, when it dubs Tibetan culture as “feudal” and therefore backward.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx discussed what he calls the Asiatic social formations, in which communal social organizations related to the land “as the property of the community” (*Grundrisse*, p. 472). Eventually, however, a higher entity established itself as the landowner, who extracted a surplus product from the communal villagers. In terms of historical examples of this social formation, he cast his net far beyond Asia, here mentioning communal forms not only India, but also Romania, Mexico, Peru, and among the early Celts. As against his 1853 writings on India, where he mentioned only “Oriental despotism,” Marx now took a more open position, referring to the possibility of “a more despotic or a more *democratic* form of this communal system” (*Grundrisse*, p. 473, emphasis added). He did so during the 1857-58 Sepoy Uprising in India and the 1856-60 Second Opium War in China, which caused him to solidarize as never before with Indian and Chinese resistance to British imperialism.

After sketching the Asian and other precapitalist forms, Marx began in the *Grundrisse* to draw a sharp distinction between them and the modern bourgeois order. All of the precapitalist forms had as their “economic aim” the “production of use-values” (*Grundrisse*, p. 485). Moreover, none of them ever developed anything like “the dot-like isolation” of the modern “free worker.” Nor did they develop the modern bourgeois property owner.

Marx, Engels, and Their Various Editions of *Capital*, Vol. I, 1867-1890

In Marx’s masterwork, *Capital*, Vol. I, first published a decade after he wrote the *Grundrisse*, the abstract and impersonal power of capital was itself an historical actor, a self-developing subject. Marx’s extended treatment of the historical origins of capitalism was placed at the end of the book, under the category “Primitive Accumulation of Capital,” *after* the reader had been led through a conceptual and empirical study of modern capitalism itself. A question arose here, as in Marx’s earlier writings, especially from within agrarian Russia, where *Capital* was being widely discussed following its 1872 translation into Russian. Was the pathway through which modern capitalism had emerged from the precapitalist feudal system in Western Europe to be followed by all other societies in a unilinear manner, with the rest of the world simply a bit behind these technologically more advanced societies?

The argument I will put forward here hinges on the later stages of Marx’s reworking of the text of *Capital*, Vol. I, with some significant texts still untranslated and largely unknown. Few except specialist scholars are aware that Engels not only posthumously edited Vols. II and III of *Capital* from Marx’s rough drafts, but also created the standard edition of Vol. I after Marx’s death, a process in which he made significant editorial choices.

Let us list the various editions of Vol. I of *Capital* in which Marx or Engels had a hand in preparing for publication:

1867: First German edition. Prepared for publication by Marx with minimal input from Engels

1873: Second German edition, with considerable alterations, including the establishment of a first chapter with a section on commodity fetishism. Prepared for publication by Marx, again with minimal input from Engels.

1872-75: French edition, with considerable alterations including the establishment of a separate part on primitive accumulation; published initially in serial form. Translated by Joseph Roy from the second German edition, again with considerable alterations by Marx and with minimal input from Engels; last edition Marx prepared for publication.

1883: Third German edition. Prepared for publication by Engels shortly after Marx's death; based on second German edition; took into account some aspects of the French edition.

1886: First English edition, with some alterations. Translated from third German edition by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, with considerable input from Engels; Eleanor Marx checked and corrected the numerous citations from English sources.

1890: Fourth German edition, with some alterations. Standard edition to this day; prepared for publication by Engels, who took account of both English edition and further aspects of the French edition.

Unfortunately, Engels left aside considerable material from the 1872-75 French edition -- the last one that Marx prepared for publication in any language -- in order to create in 1890 what is now the standard edition of *Capital*, Vol. I, which is the basis for all English editions of that work. It is also worth noting here that Engels repeatedly expressed animus toward the French edition and even the French language, writing Marx at one point: "It is becoming increasingly impossible to think originally in the straitjacket of modern French.... I would think it a great mistake to take the French version as a model for the English translation" (letter to Marx of November 29, 1873). Marx had a different attitude, as seen both in his letters and in the postface to the French edition, where he wrote that "it possesses a scientific value independent of the original and should be consulted even by readers familiar with German" (*Capital* I, Fowkes trans., p. 105). Among the first to discuss the significance of these differences was Raya Dunayevskaya, in her *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (1982).

Marx's French Edition of *Capital* Offers Multilinear Perspectives for the Future

Some of these changes bear upon the themes of multilinear vs. unilinear pathways of development. The most prominent example occurs in the part on primitive accumulation at the end of *Capital*, in which Marx discussed the rise of capitalist forms -- "the transformation of feudal exploitation into capitalist exploitation" (*Capital* I, p. 875) -- through the expropriation of the English peasantry. He concluded:

"The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process. The history of this expropriation assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at

different historical epochs. *Only in England, which we therefore take as our example, has it the classic form*" (*Capital I*, p. 876, emphasis added).

The above passage has often been read as an example of Marx's unilinear determinism.

In the later but still largely unknown French edition, however, Marx extended and reworked this passage considerably, expressly limiting his analysis to "Western Europe" in a passage that has yet to make it into any of the English editions of *Capital*:

"But the basis of this whole development is the expropriation of the cultivators. *So far, it has been accomplished in a radical manner only in England: therefore this country will necessarily play the leading role in our sketch. But all the countries of Western Europe are going through the same development, although according to place it changes its local color, or confines itself to a narrower sphere, or shows a less pronounced character, or follows a different order of succession*" (emphasis added).

This altered text made clear, as far as Marx was concerned, that his dialectic of primitive accumulation was meant as a description of Western European development, nothing more. This was hardly a unilinear model, with an alternate pathway possible for many non-European and non-Western societies of the time. And unlike in the *Grundrisse*, the focus in the French edition of *Capital* was on the future rather than the past.

What is important about this today? First, this interpretation of Marx may help us better to confront his contemporary critics, while also making his work more contemporary. Second, it should be noted that by the 21st century the capital relation has penetrated far more widely than during Marx's time. Therefore, some of his discussion of alternate pathways of development has to be viewed more as an example of the dialectical method of investigation than as a roadmap for revolutionary praxis today. A third point worth noting, however, is that there are still a number of places where capitalist relations have not penetrated to the degree that they have in the technologically developed countries. Among them are some that are in revolutionary ferment today, like Chiapas, Mexico, or Bolivia, where the peasantry still retains a degree of communal social organization. If, as Marx wrote at the end of his life, these kinds of movements can link up with those in the developed world, creative revolutionary outcomes might be possible. For all of these reasons, the reconsideration of Marx as a multilinear, dialectical thinker needs to be on our agenda today.

This article is based on parts of chapter five of my book, [*Marx at the Margins: Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*](#) (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming, 2010).

Source: <http://usmarxisthumanists.org/node/27>