

Marx and the non-Western World

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Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies

By: Kevin B. Anderson

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Reviewed by Michael Löwy

THIS TRULY PATH-BREAKING BOOK goes against the grain of the conventional wisdom which reduces Marx to an Eurocentric and economic thinker; as Douglas Kellner comments, Kevin Anderson shows that Marx “is the sophisticated and original theorist of history some might not have ever expected him to be.” Analyzing a variety of Marx’s writings, including his journalistic work written for the *New York Daily Tribune* as well as unpublished material on non-European societies, it brings to the fore a global theorist whose social critique was sensitive to the various forms of social oppression and struggle.

The concept of “margins” may be criticized as too vague and imprecise but it has the advantage of bringing together various aspects of historical development which are peripheral to the capital/labor contradiction and to the Western industrial capitalist world: colonialism, nationalism, race, ethnicity, and non-Western societies. What Anderson argues is that one can find in Marx’s writings from 1848 to 1882 a *movement*, an intellectual and political evolution, in the direction of an increasingly complex and multi-layered conception of development and revolution. In the *Communist Manifesto*, as well as in his first articles on India (1853), one can still find an “Orientalist” — according to Edward Said’s well known criticism — i.e., unilinear and Eurocentric approach, leading to a qualified support for colonialism. However, in his articles on the Opium Wars in China, or the Indian Sepoy rebellion (1857-1859), there is already a clear anti-colonialist stance, which will be later developed, in a very powerful way, in the chapter on “primitive accumulation” of *Capital*. Similarly, Marx’s writings on Poland and even more so on Ireland reveal an increasing awareness of the importance of movements for national liberation, while his comments on the Civil War in the United States, focusing of course on the struggle for the abolition of slavery, show also his concern for racial oppression: “In the USA ... labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin” (1866).

The most original contribution of this book is without doubt its discussion of Marx’s ethnological notebooks (1879-1882). Some of this material has been included by Lawrence Krader in his work, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx* (1972), but much of it is yet unpublished; thanks to his participation in the edition of a forthcoming volume of the new MEGA (the German edition of *Marx and Engels Complete Works*), Anderson had access to these manuscripts, and presents some of them here for the first time. The notebooks — which contain extracts from M. Kovalevsky, R. Sewell, K. Bücher, and several other anthropologists and historians, often followed by Marx comments — documents not only his anti-colonialism, but also his deep interest in the pre-capitalist and non-Western forms of communal property, particularly in India, Algeria, and Latin America. In a very interesting comment on the French

colonial policy in Algeria, Marx refers to official material of the French National Assembly in 1875 — quoted by Kovalevsky — where the same “Rurals” that suppressed the Paris Commune in 1871, denounce communal property in Algeria as a danger, since it is “a form that supports communist tendencies in people’s minds”; those representatives of the French bourgeoisie, adds Marx, “are unanimous on the goal : destruction of collective property.”

As Anderson points out, this concern with the persistence of communal forms, even into his own century, explains his embrace of Russia’s rural commune in the 1880’s. Marx had already explained, in a letter to a Russian journal in 1877, that his historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe (in *Capital*) was not to be considered as “a general course fatally imposed on all peoples.” A few years later, he came to the conclusion that Russia can follow a different path, and its rural communes could become, as he wrote in a letter from March 1881 to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zassoulitch, “the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia.” Finally, in the preface, co-authored with Engels, to the Russian translation of the *Communist Manifesto* (1882) — his last writing — he states : “If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russia’s peasant communal landownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development.”

As Anderson observes, important anti-capitalist movements have developed recently in places like Mexico and Bolivia, based upon indigenous communal forms, in an unexpected confirmation of Marx’s intuitions.

About Author

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