predicted by anyone thirty years ago. No
task is more urgent for racial justice adva-
cates today than ensuring that America’s
current racial caste system is its last.

When Marx
looked outside
Europe

Kevin B. Anderson

*Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*
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Review by Nagesh Rao

The conclusion of Kevin Anderson’s *Marx at the Margins* sums up the main lines of his argument: “Marx... created a multilinear and non-reductionist theory of history... analyzed the complexities and differences of non-
Western societies... and... refused to bind himself to a single model of development or revolution.”

Those familiar with cultural and critical theory, particularly within poststructuralist studies, will see right away that Anderson’s claim runs counter to many of the assumptions about Marxism prevalent in academia. Marxism, we
are told, is a peculiarly nineteenth-century phenomenon; as such, not only are these ideas outdated, but they are internally inconsistent and contradictory, if not reactionary, since they are founded on deterministic and Eurocentric notions of historical change.

These charges are typically substantiated by recycling a handful of selectively chosen quotations from Marx’s early writings on India, where Marx asserts that British colonialism in India has both a destructive and regenerative role to play. Sparked by Edward Said’s infamous bracketing of Marx as merely a loft-wing manifestation of nineteenth-century Orientalism, and buttressed by poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques of Marx’s allegedly teleological and “progressivist” notions of history, this version of Marxism is handwound down to successive generations of scholars as authoritative. On the basis of a handful of quotations, studied at several removes from their source material, Marxism continues to be shoved into the trash bin of history.

However, the claims that Marxism is Eurocentric, Orientalist, deterministic, and teleological have not gone unanswered; nor has there been a paucity of scholarship devoted to recuperating Marx from his critics. Even within postcolonial studies, where such dismissals of Marxism are legion, a vocal minority has periodically asserted itself in defense of Marx’s theoretical methods and insights. Leftist scholars like Sumit Sarkar, Irfan Habib, Aijaz Ahmad, Neil Lazarus, August Nimtz, and others have contributed usefully to this growing archive of critical material.

*Marx at the Margins* might not be the first to take on this task, but will doubtless be considered a touchstone of discussions on this subject, if not the definitive defense of Marxism, for years to come. In lucid, well-
paced prose, Anderson patiently walks us through an incredible wealth of research, all of which leads fittingly to the conclusion with which this review began. Accessible to the novice, fascinating and eye-opening to the specialist, Anderson’s meticulous research offers up a Marxism whose internationalism (globalism, if you will) is no mere accidental afterthought. Marx and Engels emerge, in Anderson’s reading, not only as the most progressive thinkers of their time, but as the most prescient and relevant theorists for our age of ongoing global and planetary crises.

The brief against Marx

For several years after its publication in 1969, Shlomo Avineri’s tendentious selection of Marx and Engels’s writings on colonialism set the tone for discussions about Marxism’s attitude toward European colonialism, the culture and political economy of the colonies themselves, and toward questions of nationalism and national liberation. But it was the renowned scholar Edward Said’s critique of Marx in his pathbreaking book, *Orientalism*, that almost singlehandedly made commonplace the notion that Marxism was (is) hopelessly Eurocentric.

Said’s argument, as is now well known, rested on a few decontextualized quotations, particularly from Marx’s early article “The British Rule in India.” Written in 1853, this was, writes Anderson, “Marx’s first substantial publication on a non-Western society.” While lambasting British colonialism for inflicting an “infinitely more intensive kind” of misery on the people of India than they had ever “had to suffer before,” it is in this article that Marx begins to outline a concept of “Oriental despotism,” which he used to describe the political economy of non-Western European societies.

This notion of “Oriental despotism,” coupled with the related notion of an “Asiatic mode of production” seems to present the East as the West’s “Other”; an Other, moreover, that is forever locked in a static, stagnant, and backward position relative to the West, and that will simply be swept along by the forces of European “progress,” with all its attendant contradicitions. For Said, this Eurocentric view of history is not an accident in Marx; rather, it is of a piece with the Orientalist tradition of scholarship that Marx was drawing on. After all, it was none other than Hegel who infamously viewed India as a nation that “has remained stationary and fixed” through history, whose people “lack self-consciousness,” rendering them “incapable of writing history.” Thus Indians (and Africans) were for Hegel peoples who not only had no history, but were *fated* to be “subjected to Europeans.”

As Anderson notes, according to Said, for all of Marx’s “humanity” and “his sympathy for the misery of the people... in the end, it is the romantic Orientalist vision that wins out.” In this vision, British colonialism, while destructive in the first instance, would in the final analysis play a regenerative role in India. It is this view of Marxism that has become hegemonic in academic circles, particularly in those fields that were most impacted by Said’s influential book.

The actual archive

Anderson, following the lead of Ahmad, Jani, Nimtz, and others argues that this view of Marx is a spurious one. *Marx at the Margins* shows us that this attenuated version of Marx can only be sustained by ignoring the actual archive of Marx and Engels’s writings on non-Western societies, which is much more extensive than has been acknowledged by his critics. Anderson tells us, for instance, that in 1853 alone, as Marx embarked on his first round of research on India and Indonesia, he produced notes, “none of which have been published in any form, [which] would comprise around a hundred printed pages” (emphasis added).

And this was only the beginning. As Anderson shows, by the 1860s and 1870s, Marx was reading voraciously and writing extensively on the subject of British rule in India, teaching himself Russian so as to study the anthropologist Maxim Kovel’sky’s writings on communal landownership in India; and producing voluminous notes (16,000 words in length, writes Anderson) on John Budd Pheur’s *The Aryan Village in India and Ceylon*.

Anderson’s reading of this vast archive shows us first of all that non-
Western societies came to play an increasingly central role in Marx and Engels’s reckoning of the dialectic of capitalist expansion and the struggle for working-class self-emancipation. As a consequence, they constantly revised their earlier views of these regions of the world as new events unfolded, and as new research became available.

Anderson cites, for instance, Pranav Jani’s argument that there is a discernible shift in Marx’s writings on India starting in 1857, when the first major revolt against British rule erupted in the region. Anderson rightly argues that “the absence of a nontraditionalist and progressive nationalist movement in India” prior to 1857 meant that Marx was left with few viable political alternatives to offer in 1853. He thus saw colonial emancipation in India as predicated on the overthrow of capitalism in Britain; the prospect of successful anticolonial revolutions had not yet entered into the picture.

Nevertheless, Marx anticipated in 1853 the post-1857 recasting of the East India Company’s charter and the establishment of Crown rule, relating this to the “rising dominance of the manufacturing class at home.” Even in 1853, Marx had begun to point to
the possibility of an Indian national liberation movement,” writes Anderson.

By 1853, Marx has begun to overcome the one-sidedness of the treatment of non-Western societies in the [Communist] Manifesto. Although Chinese (and Indian) walls continue to be battered down by what Marx still evidently considered to be the progressive effects of world trade and even colonial conquest, people from within non-Western societies are now credited with the potential of “throwing off the English yoke altogether” and self-starting the “regeneration” of their societies and cultures. This regeneration would...retain the achievement of capitalist modernity.

In the wake of the 1857 Revolt, Marx begins to write of India as “our best ally,” and his writings become increasingly tilted toward exposing British atrocities rather than lamenting Indians’ supposed torpor and stagnation. In response to reports of atrocities against the British committed by the Indian sepoys (soldiers), Marx, rather than labeling them as just so much Indian barbarism, instead relates them to the long history of similar atrocities carried out by Europeans, from Caesar to Napoleon and later. Moreover, in the form of the Sepoy Uprising, as Anderson writes,

Marx was finding in colonial India something similar to capitalism’s forging of the working class. Thus, the very progress of colonialism was producing its grave-diggers. Such a dialectical turn had been missing with respect to Asia in the Manifesto and in much of the 1853 writings on India.

A dynamic method

In similar fashion, Anderson analyzes Marx and Engels’s writings on Poland and Russia, on American slavery and the Civil War, Ireland and Algeria, illustrating again the dynamism of their method, and the sensitivity and nuance with which they analyzed non-Western societies. He thus traces the evolution from Engels’s infamous early characterization of the Slavs (and others) as “non-historic peoples” to Marx’s writings in the 1880s, where he “was considering the possibility that a communist revolution in Russia could serve as the starting point for a wider European socialist transformation.” As theorists who sought to transform social relations the world over, Marx and Engels developed an increasingly sympathetic view of national liberation struggles, giving anticolonialism and antiracism a centrality in their revolutionary perspectives that their detractors would have us ignore.

Marx at the Margins is a valuable contribution to the ongoing challenge of recuperating Marxism from its many academic distortions. Although Anderson sometimes refrains from drawing the robust conclusions that his analyses point to, preferring instead to let the evidence speak for itself, Marx at the Margins is essential reading for anyone seeking to explore the sophistication and complexity of Marx and Engels’s writings on race, nationalism, ethnicity, and the historical development of non-Western societies.