

REVIEW ARTICLE

Marx at the Margins

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KEVIN ANDERSON'S *"Marx at the Margins"* is a very good and very important book. But the book needs to be read; reading a review will not suffice to appreciate or understand its depth and breadth. The book is finely written and Anderson goes to considerable lengths to provide readers with background information to be able to make sense of what might be otherwise obscure matters.

Anderson's argument is based on a careful and comprehensive reading of the writings of Marx (and, to the extent necessary, Engels) on:

1. the history, economics and politics of societies and nations outside Western Europe (but including Ireland),
2. movements of national liberation, as in Ireland, Poland and India, and
3. the relationship between 'race' and class in countries such as England and the United States.

Anderson draws upon his extensive knowledge of the full body of Marx's writings, including those that have still not been published in any language. (In an Appendix, he provides an especially illuminating account of the publishing history of Marx's works, including the Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), the just over twenty-year-old international effort to collect, edit and publish all of Marx's writings in a manner undistorted by narrow political interests. The total number of planned volumes for MEGA is 114; just over fifty had been published as of the date of this book's publication).

Anderson convincingly demonstrates that few of the commonplace observations about the limitations of Marx's ideas when it comes to matters other than the exploitation of labor by capital or the accusations that Marx was guilty of Euro-centrism (as articulated by critics such as Edward Said) can withstand careful scrutiny. His core argument about the eventual subtlety, sophistication and universality of Marx's work, involving numerous historical periods and political situations, is built upon a fairly straightforward claim—that Marx changed his mind over the course of almost forty years of committed intellectual and practical work. He acknowledges that, in their early writings (including *The Communist Manifesto*), Marx and Engels emphasized the ways in which capitalist development battered down all ancient customs that stood in the way of progress—while, at the same time, they denounced the pain and suffering that such development inflicted on all who came in its way. Furthermore, and worse, they subscribed too easily to the common prejudices of their time when it came to matters such as the nature of the Slavic, Indian and Jewish peoples.

While Anderson always provides contexts within which to judge what the two revolutionaries wrote (such as the profoundly reactionary character of the Russian state and its domination of the Slavic peoples), he makes no attempt to obscure matters. He includes the following examples:

- * In 1849, writing about Eastern Europe, Engels said that, "except for the Germans, the Poles and the Magyars (Hungarians), all the other large and small nationalities] are destined to perish before long in the revolutionary world storm. For that reason they are now counter-revolutionary". He went on to predict, "the disappearance from the face of the earth not only of reactionary classes and dynasties, but also of entire reactionary peoples. And that too is a step forward". In the same article, Engels suggested that the Slavs had never really had a history of their own.
- * On a number of occasions, Marx made especially derogatory comments about the Jews—in both published and unpublished documents. In the 1845 "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx criticized Feuerbach for having a notion of praxis that was 'defined only in its dirty-Jewish [schmutzige-judischen] form of appearance'. Anderson also comments that, while "On the Jewish Question" provides valuable insights, it is marred by "extremely problematic comments on Jews".
- * In 1853, in an article published in the *New York Tribune*, Marx suggested that India had been more or less frozen in time. The traditional village system had 'transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature...'.

At the conclusion of the Tribune article, Marx managed to do something that would attract the ire of Edward Said a hundred and twenty-five years later; he quoted Goethe—specifically, a stanza from West-Eastern Divan, a poem about Timur, who conquered Delhi in 1398. The stanza reads:

Should this torture then torment us
Since it brings us greater pleasure?

Were not through the rule of Timur
Souls devoured without measure?

Said seized upon Marx's quoting of Goethe as proof positive that Marx shared all of the traditional condescending views of the Orient and that, 'in article after article he returned with increasing conviction to the idea that even in destroying Asia, Britain was making possible there a real social revolution'. Anderson methodically takes apart Said's claim by pointing out that the literary critic had failed to notice the ways in which Marx had used the same Goethe stanza to sarcastically highlight the self-satisfaction of various ruling classes in the crimes they perpetrated against the European working classes—including an 1855 newspaper article on the economic crisis in England, his 1861-63 economic manuscripts, and in volume I of *Capital* (17-20). In addition, Anderson argues that Said simply had either not read or not understood Marx's later writings on India (even as early as later that same summer of 1853) where he increasingly emphasized his disgust with British rule, his sympathies for Indian independence and his support for Indian revolts.

As Marx studied varied societies more intensively, he came to reconsider some of his earlier views on countries such as India, Russia and China. Four aspects of his evolving views are especially important—

1. the survival of communal forms in late 19th Century societies (societies as varied as the Indian, the Russian and the Native American) suggested that it might not be necessary for all countries to be dragged through the squandering of human life that capitalist development required in order to arrive at a higher stage of social organization;
2. there was no single path that the various countries of the world had been on prior to capitalist development—there were, of course, similarities but it was essential to appreciate the differences;
3. there is no single path that countries will follow even after their encounter with capitalist realities;
4. there is a complex, and reciprocal, relationship between the development of revolutionary possibilities in the advanced and "backward" countries.

Marx was increasingly interested in understanding the ways in which movements of opposition to colonialism might make a direct contribution to the renewal of revolutionary movements in the capitalist metropolises and the ways in which the workers' movements might advance the cause of freedom from national oppression.

Anderson eventually concludes that, in spite of the continued survival of indigenous communal forms in Africa, Asia and Latin America today, these survivals can probably no longer represent an alternative way forward:

... none of these are on the scale of the Russian or Indian communal forms during Marx's days. Nonetheless, vestiges of these communal forms sometimes follow peasants into the cities and in any case, important anticapitalist movements have developed recently in places like Mexico and Bolivia, based upon these indigenous communal forms. On the whole, however, even these areas have been penetrated by capital to a far greater degree than was true of the Russian or Indian village of the 1880s. Marx's multilinear approach toward Russia, India, and other noncapitalist lands is more relevant today at a general theoretical or methodological level, however.

At the heart of this methodology is an insistence on specific concrete analyses. In 1890, Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law, wrote about his memories of Marx. He commented directly on his manner of thinking and working:

He saw not only the surface, but what lay beneath it. He examined all the constituent parts in their mutual action and reaction; he isolated each of these parts and traced the history of its development. Then he went on from the thing to its surroundings and observed the reaction of one upon the other. He traced the origin of the object, the changes, evolutions and revolutions it went through, and proceeded finally to its remotest effects. He did not see a thing singly, in itself and for itself, separate from its surroundings; he saw a highly complicated world in continual motion.

Much of the writing Anderson examines was produced during the very years when Marx was formulating the most theoretically abstract elements of his critique of political economy (reflected in the *Grundrisse* and the three volumes of *Capital*), when he was also an active journalist (Anderson notes that Marx's journalism accounts for five full volumes in the Collected Works, MECW) and when he was a leading political thinker/activist, on issues such as Polish rebellions against foreign domination and the American Civil War, within the emerging First International.

Anderson provides what I thought were fascinating glimpses into Marx's daily life; he was not the only agitator in the family. Perhaps my favorite passage in the entire book is the following account of the Marx family's participation in a London demonstration on October 24, 1869 demanding amnesty for Irish prisoners, written by Marx's daughter Jenny:

In London the event of the week has been a Fenian demonstration got up for the purpose of praying the government for the release of the Irish prisoners. As Tussy [Eleanor/another daughter] has returned from Ireland a stauncher Irishman than ever, she did not rest until she had persuaded Moor [Marx], Mama and me to go with her to Hyde Park, the place appointed for the meeting. This Park, the biggest one in London, was one mass of men, women and children, even the trees up to their highest branches had their inhabitants. The number of persons present were by the papers estimated at somewhere about 70 thousand, but as these papers are English, this figure is no doubt too low. There were processionists carrying red, green, and white banners with all sorts of devices, such as "Keep your powder dry!", "Disobedience to tyrants is a duty to God!" And hoisted higher than the flags were a profusion of red Jacobin caps, the bearers of which sang the Marseillaise—sights and sounds that must have greatly interfered with the enjoyment of the portwine at the clubs.

If, one day, some film maker finally gets around to making a biopic about Marx, I sure hope that he or she finds a way to picture Marx and the family amidst those demonstrators—maybe even capturing Marx's unrecorded complaints about how bad the speakers were (even though he probably couldn't hear them). It appears that Marx was glad that he had gone and that he had, characteristically, noticed something important. Two days later, he spoke to the General Council about the demonstration and said, "The main feature of the demonstration had been ignored, it was that at least part of the English working class had lost their prejudice against the Irish".

Each dimension of Marx's life and work penetrated the others. In November of 1864, Marx had written about the origins of the International:

In September the Parisian workers sent a delegation to the London workers to demonstrate support for Poland. On that occasion, an International Workers' Committee was formed. The matter is not without importance because ... in London the same people are at the head who organized the gigantic reception for [Italian revolutionary Giuseppe] Garibaldi and, by their monster meeting with [British Liberal leader John] Bright in St. James's Hall, prevented war with the United States.

The English working class had been forthright in opposing any English intervention on the side of the Confederacy in the US Civil War—even though the Northern blockade of shipping of cotton from the South was leading to a collapse in the English textile industry, thereby resulting in the losses of many jobs—a solidarity that Marx celebrated. Hard as it is to imagine these days, those English workers were prepared to support the cause of abolition even though such support resulted in their own immiseration. A far cry from the sad spectacle of the 1980s when American anti-apartheid organizers insisted that their efforts to disinvest from the South African economy would not adversely affect the pensions of American workers—indeed, they insisted that they would be opposed to any disinvestment that adversely affected those pensions. It was a long climb down from the heights of the 19th Century.

In his "Inaugural Address" to the International, Marx argued that the callous hypocrisy and complicity of the ruling classes in the suppression of the Chechens (yes, they were being oppressed by Russia then too) and the Poles and their all but open support for the Confederate States in the Civil War 'have taught the working classes the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics. ...The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes'.

At times, the *International*, under Marx's clear influence, functioned as if it was the foreign affairs ministry of the global proletariat. In December of 1864, the General Council of the International wrote to Abraham Lincoln to congratulate him on his re-election. The address was delivered to Charles Francis Adams, the American minister to Britain. Anderson quotes the following extended excerpt:

We congratulate the American people upon your re-election by a large majority. If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant war cry of your re-election is, Death to Slavery. From the commencement of the Titanic-American strife the working men of Europe felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class. ...The working classes of Europe understood at once, even before the fanatic partisanship of the upper classes for the Confederate gentry had given its dismal warning, that the slave-holders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labor, and that for the men of labor, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic. Everywhere they bore therefore patiently the hardships imposed on them by the cotton crisis, opposed enthusiastically the pro-slavery intervention, importunities of their betters—and, political power of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic; while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master; they were unable to attain the true freedom of labor or support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation, but this barrier has been swept off by the red sea of civil war. The working men of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Anti-Slavery War will do for the working classes.

While the American minister declined to meet with a delegation from the International, he did transmit the letter to Lincoln. And Lincoln responded:

Nations do not exist for themselves alone, but to promote the welfare and happiness of mankind by benevolent intercourse and example. It is in this relation that the United States regard their cause in the present conflict with slave-maintaining insurgents as the cause of human nature, and they derive new encouragement to persevere from the testimony of the workmen of Europe that the national attitude is favored with their enlightened approval and earnest sympathies.

In the letter to Lincoln, Marx had highlighted the debasement of white American workers by their support for slavery and white supremacy and the key role that abolition would play in opening up the landscape for broader struggles. When it came to the relation of the English workers to Ireland and the Irish workers among them, he had the same approach:

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 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. ...Every movement in England itself is crippled by the dissension with the Irish, who form a very important section of the working class in England itself. Letter to Kugelmann, 1869.

But approval and support did not require the abandonment of enlightenment. Two years earlier, Marx had been sharply critical of a bombing outside a London jail holding Irish prisoners. The bomb had exploded in the wrong place and killed a dozen residents in a nearby neighborhood. Marx immediately wrote to Engels:

The latest Fenian exploit in Clerkenwell is a great folly. The London masses, which have shown much sympathy for Ireland, will be enraged by it, and driven into the arms of the government party. One cannot expect the London proletarians to let themselves be blown up for the sake of Fenian emissaries. Secret, melodramatic conspiracies of this kind are, in general, more or less doomed to failure.

Marx had indeed figured many things out and far too much of what he thought and wrote was never available soon enough to revolutionaries in the years since his death—whether we're talking about the early philosophic manuscripts, the break-through notes of the *Grundrisse*, the multiple editions of *Capital*, or the ethnological notebooks of his last years. Marx's vision and his dreams were, over the course of his life, increasingly universal ones. They need to be brought to life once again. □□□

[Source: *China Study Group* update 29.10.10]

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