

COMMENT

# Is Marxism Eurocentric? “This reading of Marx is virtually hegemonic in some branches of academia”

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**One objection to Marxism is that it originated two centuries ago in Europe—so what could it have to say to the world’s oppressed today? Lance Selfa has an answer.**

MANY ACTIVISTS today first encounter Marxist ideas in and around college campuses, where certain interpretations of Karl Marx and Marxism have solidified into a sort of conventional wisdom. One of these is the idea that Marxism is “Eurocentric”—and therefore has little to say to the mass of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized world.

This reading of Marx is virtually hegemonic in some branches of academia. For example, post-colonial scholars María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan contend that Marx defended a “Eurocentric model of political emancipation that consistently ignores the experiences of colonized subjects in non-Western societies” and “failed to develop his studies of India and Africa into a fully elaborated analysis of imperialism.” [1] To them, Marx’s analysis neglects “disenfranchised groups such as colonized subjects.”

The great Palestinian scholar Edward Said contended that Marx’s earliest writings on the British role in India, written in 1853, represent a racist view of the colonized, despite Marx’s sympathy for the subjects of the British empire. Said contended that “in article after article, [Marx] returned with increasing conviction to the idea that even in destroying Asia, Britain was making possible there a real social revolution.”

Both Said and Shlomo Avineri, another interpreter of Marx read widely in the academy, argued that Marx never deviated from this position, but in fact propounded it even more vociferously later in his career.

But the truth is exactly the opposite: Marx re-evaluated and rejected his earliest views, which did have Eurocentric elements. As Marxist scholar Kevin B. Anderson, in his excellent book *Marx at the Margins* [2], has shown, Marx took a keen interest in pre-capitalist societies and championed the struggle of oppressed nations against colonialism and imperialism.

Crucially—and in contrast to the case made by Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan—Marx’s re-evaluation of his views was nearly entirely due to the influence of the struggles of “disenfranchised groups such as colonial subjects.”

**WHEN SOMEONE** says that Marx and Marxism are “Eurocentric,” what do they mean?

At the crudest level, some object to Marx and his lifelong collaborator Frederick Engels for who they

were, rather than what they were analyzing and what they wrote. After all, Marx and Engels were 19<sup>th</sup> century white European men who bore some of the prejudices of their era and their societies.

The more serious objection, based on a reading of Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* and on Marx's 1853 writings on India, is twofold.

First, Marxism is said to have a deterministic view of economic and social change, in which each country must through the same stages of economic development. The highest stage of capitalist development is industrial capitalism, which existed in just a few places in Europe at the time of Marx's writing. As the *Manifesto* puts it, capitalism "creates a world after its own image," making "barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West."

Since Marx and Engels believed that socialism should harness the productive capacity of industrial society, it followed that whatever hastened the development of capitalism and its "gravedigger," the modern working class, could be accepted, if not wholly justified.

In "The British Rule in India," Marx wrote, "England was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them," but it nevertheless might have been "the unconscious tool of history in bringing about [a] revolution" in Indian society. Likewise, Engels initially welcomed the 1847 U.S. invasion of Mexico because it would introduce an undeveloped rural society to the most dynamic economic and democratic political system then in existence.

Second, it's said that Marx focuses on the European working class to the exclusion of other social forces, particularly those in developing and/or colonized countries. In some ways, this is a different version of the old criticism that "Marxism reduces everything to class"—in this case, to the white European working class.

So while the *Manifesto* hails the modern working class as capitalism's "gravedigger," Marx's earliest writings on India and China suggest that the Chinese were "timid" in the face of British imperialism, and that Indians succumbed to imperialism because India "has no history at all, at least no known history...[it is] an unresisting and unchanging society."

If this was all that Marx had written about capitalism, imperialism and non-Western societies, it might be justifiable to label him a "Eurocentrist." However, this isn't the case.

Even in the most often criticized articles, Marx refers to the British as "barbarians" and "dogs." One can see his dialectical method at work: capitalism may deliver modern transportation and communication, but at a cost of great human suffering. And a later article, "The Future Results of British Rule in India," anticipates the development of an Indian national liberation movement to "[throw] off the British yoke." In the space of a few months in 1853, Marx moved from seeing India as a society without a history to one that would produce an anti-colonial revolt.

**THEN, FOUR** years later, Marx's perspective on the British role in India underwent a further transformation, and not because of what he read in a library.

It changed because of the 1857 Sepoy mutiny, an anti-colonial revolt rooted among Indian soldiers in the British colony. Marx exulted in the uprising, wanting to find out as much as he could about it.

Although the British ultimately suppressed the uprising, Marx pointed out the "historical retribution"—that opposition to colonization emerged among soldiers who the colonizers themselves had armed and trained. As capitalism in the industrial countries created its own gravedigger in the working class, the colonizers were also creating their gravedigger in the colonies. Marx went on to

assert, with respect to the working class in England, that “India is our best ally”—because the revolt in the colonies and the struggles of workers in England had the same enemy in the British ruling class [3].

This internationalist idea—that the European working class must stand in solidarity with just struggles for national liberation—animated Marx’s main political activity in the 1860s: organizing the First International of workers’ and socialist parties and groups. Although mostly based among organizations in Britain, France and Germany, the International developed largely through international solidarity campaigns with the struggle against slavery in the U.S. and fights for the national independence of Poland and Ireland.

In his inaugural address to the delegates that formed the international in 1864 [4], Marx cited all of those struggles in arguing that the [European] working class had to develop its own “foreign policy.” In other words, Marx was arguing that the European working class couldn’t be “Eurocentric”. It had to support struggles of the oppressed and exploited abroad because “such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes,” Marx said.

**THIS WAS** a live question at the time of the International because of the American Civil War. Large sections of the British ruling class, including many leading politicians, wanted to intervene in the war on the side of the Confederacy, because of Britain’s need for cotton. The mills of Lancashire and other industrial centers—and, as a result, industrial jobs—depended on imports of cotton from the South.

Yet from the start of the Civil War, Marx and Engels supported the North and called for revolutionary measures to abolish slavery. Supporters of the First International in the U.S., especially many German immigrants, enlisted as soldiers or served as officers in the Union army.

Marx welcomed the North’s tentative steps toward emancipation and urged the arming of ex-slaves to fight for their own liberation: “[T]hese emancipated Negroes may be militarily organized and sent into the field against the South,” he wrote. Marx also wrote of the psychological effect of Black regiments in breaking the South’s morale. And, by the way, in his writings on the Civil War, Marx also rejected Engels’ earlier position on Mexico. Instead of seeing the 1830s war for Texas as an advance for capitalist progress, he recognized it as part of the expansionist policy of the Southern slaveholders.

Leading English trade unionists—who later helped to form the International—organized demonstrations that pressured the government not to intervene on the side of the South. English unions supported the North despite the cost in jobs of their members after the North’s blockade of Southern cotton exports hit British industry. As Marx wrote:

*“The working class is...fully conscious that the government is only waiting for the intervention cry from below to put an end to the American blockade and the distress in England. Under these circumstances, the obstinacy with which the working class keeps silent, or breaks its silence only to raise its voice against intervention and for the United States, is admirable.”*

When President Abraham Lincoln won re-election in 1864, only months before the North defeated the South, the International issued a Marx-penned statement to the American people:

*“While the working men, the true 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 to support their European brethren in their*

*struggle for emancipation, war. The workingmen 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."*

Within these few sentences, Marx condemned racism and slavery, and showed how both had distorted the development of working-class consciousness in the U.S. And he looked forward to a period of class struggle inspired by the overthrow of slavery. For those who still think that Marx had little to say about the intersections of race and class, this is just one example of the analysis that typified his mature writings and political activities.

**TODAY, PEOPLE** of Irish and Polish descent are considered to be white and European. But in Marx's time, both nations were colonized, and their populations subject to racist contempt. For many European revolutionaries of the mid-1800s, the cause of Polish independence against its suppression by Germany and Russia was a litmus test of a commitment to the cause of freedom and democracy. Marx and Engels passed this test throughout their careers.

After both had relocated to England, the cause of the liberation of England's oldest colony in Ireland seized them. Marx and Engels spoke out in defense of the Irish struggle for freedom, both publicly and within the First International. They also developed a sophisticated understanding of the role of Ireland in supporting the landed aristocracy of England, while providing millions of cheap and criminalized laborers to the industrial centers of Britain and the U.S.

Finally, Marx, in particular, analyzed the role of the Irish working class as an oppressed subsection of the English working class. English working-class racism against the Irish, Marx wrote, "is the secret of the powerlessness of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret of the capitalist class's maintenance of its power." Many times, Marx made an analogy between the antagonism between English and Irish workers and that between Blacks and poor whites in the U.S.

This analysis reflected Marx's views, but unlike his positions on Poland and the American Civil War, they weren't necessarily accepted in the International, especially among some English trade union leaders. For many of them, it was apparently easier to denounce oppression in the U.S. and Poland than in their own country. Reflecting on this in 1869, Marx wrote to Engels:

*"For a long time, I believed it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy. I always took this viewpoint in the New York Tribune. Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. This is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general."*

This statement clearly refutes the idea that Marx conceived of social change emerging only from the working classes of advanced industrial countries. Marx didn't replace the idea of a working-class revolution with that of an anti-colonial agrarian revolution, but he recognized the dialectical links between the two. That insight has been demonstrated many times over the years—as, to take but one example, when national liberation movements in Portugal's African colonies provided the spark for a revolution in Portugal itself in 1974-75.

**WHAT OF** the other element of the case against Marx's Eurocentrism: The idea that Marx assumed all societies would pass through similar stages on their way to attaining the highest level of development, as represented by northwestern Europe in his time.

Actually, Marx's political work and study led him to different points of emphasis in discussions of economic and historical development. The *Communist Manifesto's* praise for the all-conquering

world market of the 1840s gave way to a much more critical understanding as capitalism continued to unfold over his lifetime.

Marx's activism and study convinced him that industrial capitalism was less the product of a "heroic" bourgeoisie than of an oppressive and exploitative system that was deeply entwined with slavery, colonialism and imperialism. This comes through clearly in his "mature" works of political economy, including the three volumes of *Capital* and his economic notebooks known as the *Grundrisse*. As Marx famously wrote in the first volume of *Capital*:

*"The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins, are all things which characterize the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production."*

And as Kevin Anderson points out, Marx's edits to the French edition of *Capital* indicate that he conceived of his explanation for the development of capitalism in Western Europe as restricted to that region—not as a general model applying to all societies at all times. Marx developed an increasingly "multi-linear" conception of how capitalism developed. The history of the system in countries as diverse as the U.S., China or Brazil should illustrate that Marx was onto something.

Near the end of his life, Marx embarked on an intensive study of peasant and rural societies—most of them non-European—to discover "communal structures" conducive to socialist transformation. Perhaps unbeknownst to many of his critics, Marx filled thousands of pages of notebooks with studies of Indonesia, India, Morocco, Mexico and Peru, as well as First Nations in North America.

In 1881, Marx corresponded with Russian socialists [5], speculating that a "Russian revolution" would be needed to save the communal organization of peasant society, which could then become an "element of regeneration in Russian society and an element of superiority over the countries enslaved by the capitalist system." But, Marx asserted, an agrarian-based Russian revolution could only survive with the assistance of more developed technology and support from the labor movement of Western Europe—anticipating by nearly four decades what would unfold in 1917 and after.

To Marx's critics, his "Eurocentrism" is most demonstrable in texts he and Engels wrote from, roughly, 1847 to 1853. But the problem for these critics is that Marx's political activity and research continued on for another three decades after 1853.

So which is the real Marxism? The small sample of writings on which critics of Marx's "Eurocentrism" build their case—or the much larger body of Marx's work that refutes it?

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\* <http://socialistworker.org/2015/01/22/is-marxism-eurocentric>

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**Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/marx's-eurocentrism>

- [2] <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo8612447.html>
- [3] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/09/16.htm>
- [4] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/10/27.htm>
- [5] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/zasulich/index.htm>