

No, Karl Marx Was Not Eurocentric

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Critics of Marx have accused him of imposing a European model of historical development on the rest of the world. But the real Marx rejected Eurocentric thinking and developed a sophisticated view of world history in all its diversity and complexity.

Contents

- [Edward Said's Critique](#)
- [Marx's Trajectory](#)
- [A Theory, Not a Master Key](#)
- [The Russian Road](#)
- [A Marx for Our Time](#)

Despite a revival of interest in his critique of capitalism, attacks on Karl Marx continue from multiple directions. Despite their diversity, these critiques share the implication that Marxism is dead, outmoded, surpassed by newer theories and by events. But if Marxism is in fact dead, why do its critics feel the need to belabor the point, to “prove” their point over and over again?

The real answer is obvious. Marxism has never really died, although it has declined, been pronounced dead, and then been revived several times over the last hundred fifty years. Hence the need for Marx's critics to keep trying to bury him, so far without success.

Edward Said's Critique

The standard liberal perspective holds that Marxist socialism leads to totalitarianism and eventually economic collapse. In short, Marxist “experiments” — witness the Soviet Union! — are dangerous and we should stick to the more viable alternative, liberal capitalism. However, in the wake of the Great Recession and the growth of strong fascist tendencies in the Donald Trump era, growing doubts about the future of capitalism and of liberal democracy have weakened the foundations of such arguments.

A more widely disseminated charge leveled at Marx, especially among progressive intellectuals and academics, has centered on the notion that Marx was a Eurocentrist — a nineteenth-century thinker out of tune with twenty-first-century multiracial and anti-colonial sensibilities. This line of critique gained wide currency in the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

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Said found two major flaws in Marx. First, he was said to have adhered to a grand narrative or unilinear series of stages of social and economic development. According to this perspective, Marx used this unilinear model, based upon Western European history, without real justification to analyze and measure noncapitalist societies outside that region. Second, Said charged Marx with ethnocentrism, even racism, in his portrayals of non-Western societies.

As part of the first critique, Said wrote that for Marx, European imperialism was part of the onward march of “historical necessity” that would result in future progress for all of humanity. As Said noted, Marx’s 1853 writings on India in the *New York Tribune* show a surprising degree of support for British colonialism.

Marx described the British as being “superior, and therefore inaccessible to, Indian civilization,” while depicting India as a static society unable even to mount much of a resistance to imperialism. As Said characterized Marx’s position: “Even in destroying Asia, Britain was making possible there a real social revolution.”

Perhaps the most blatant example of the kind of problem Said is highlighting occurs not in the 1853 writings on India, but five years earlier, in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Here, Marx and Friedrich Engels seemed to laud imperialist penetration of China:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of the foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves.

Here in the *Manifesto*, Marx not only appeared to celebrate the “progress” brought about by colonialism, but he also condescended to the Chinese as “barbarians.” This kind of language connects to Said’s second critique, the charge of ethnocentrism.

Said placed Marx in the company of Western European thinkers “from [Ernest] Renan to Marx” who developed a “system of truths, truths in Nietzsche’s sense of the word”:

It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.

Marx’s Trajectory

Are these arguments valid? Was Marx really a Eurocentrist in this double sense of the term: both a theorist who constructed an abstract grand narrative that subsumed the history and culture of the world under that of Western Europe, and an ethnocentrist with a condescending (or worse) attitude toward societies outside Western Europe?

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The answer is by no means simple. In contrast with some Marxists, I think that, while these claims are overdrawn, we need to acknowledge their partial validity, at least when it comes to Marx's early writings on non-Western societies, from 1848 to 1853. At the same time, the notion of a Eurocentric Marx does not hold up when one examines the whole of his writings across the period from 1841 to 1883, for he was above all a thinker who continued to rework and develop his conceptual apparatus.

First of all, what we today call Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism are hardly the only notes Marx sounded, even in his early writings on India and China. For example, the problematic 1853 writings on India also contained passages like this:

The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindoos themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether. At all events, we may safely expect to see, at a more or less remote period, the regeneration of that great and interesting country, whose gentle natives . . . have astonished the British officers by their bravery, whose country has been the source of our languages, our religions.

Here, Marx not only expressed great appreciation for Indian culture and civilization, but also stood as a rare European advocate of Indian independence in this period.

Second, Marx's perspectives on India and China underwent a considerable change by 1856-58, in response to the massive resistance these societies were putting up against British imperialism. In articles for the *Tribune* that are rarely discussed, Marx focused not on Asian "backwardness," but on colonial brutality of Britain's Second Opium War against China — a view expressed here in an 1856 *Tribune* article:

The unoffending citizens and peaceful tradesmen of Canton have been slaughtered, their habitations battered to the ground, and the claims of humanity violated . . . the Chinese have at least ninety-nine injuries to complain of to one on the part of the English.

In response to the sepoy uprising in India that broke out in 1857, Marx again supported the Indian insurrectionists against the British in the *Tribune*. In an 1858 letter to Engels, he also termed them "our best allies" at a time when the European working class had gone into a period of quiescence.

Third, Marx's notion of stages of historical development also went through an important change in the late 1850s. In *The German Ideology* of 1846, he and Engels put forth a theory of socioeconomic stages, what they later called modes of production: stateless clan societies, the slave-based societies of Greece and Rome, and the serf-based feudalism of medieval Western Europe, followed by capitalism with its regime of formally free wage labor, and finally, projecting into the future, a

modern communism based upon “free and associated labor.” In short, these are the “primitive”-slave-feudal-bourgeois-socialist modes of production.

Marx was not trying to shoehorn all of human history into the slavery-feudalism-capitalism trajectory of Europe.

By 1857-58, however, writing in the *Grundrisse*, Marx had expanded this framework, introducing alongside the Greco-Roman and feudal systems of Europe an Asian mode of production (AMP) that he connected especially to the precolonial agrarian empires of India, China, and the Middle East. Marx also mentioned this expanded framework in *Capital*, where he wrote of the “Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production.”

We can see the AMP as a counterpart to the Greco-Roman and feudal societies. Never developed in detail, the concept of the AMP is important mainly as an indication that Marx was not trying to shoehorn all of human history into the slavery-feudalism-capitalism trajectory. Unfortunately, most of Marx’s followers — especially in the Soviet Union — insisted on fitting precapitalist class societies outside Western Europe, including fairly centralized agrarian empires with important urban centers, into the straitjacket of feudalism.

A Theory, Not a Master Key

These kinds of issues became central to Marx’s late writings of 1877-82, a period when he read works in anthropology and social history on a wide variety of agrarian and pastoral societies outside Western Europe, from India to Latin America, and from Russia to North Africa. By this time, he had learned Russian in order to probe the social structure of that country, where to his great surprise the first full translation of *Capital* appeared in 1872.

Major parts of Marx’s research notes from this period, mainly on India, have been published, and other texts are in preparation. Marx also wrote two conceptually significant letters on one of these agrarian societies, Russia.

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At that time, Russia was still marked by an overwhelmingly agrarian social structure based at the local level on village communes. These communes, though under the control of a despotic monarchy rooted in the landowning classes, possessed a degree of collective property and work arrangements

that were inconsistent with the more individualized social arrangements of Western European feudalism.

Marx took up two significant questions in these letters. First, was Russia destined to follow the pathway of development of Western Europe? Second, did its communal villages have any revolutionary, anti-capitalist potential, or would their inhabitants first have to be dispossessed of their land in order to form an industrial proletariat composed of wageworkers in a process Marx called the “primitive accumulation of capital”?

Many scholars have also concluded that he saw these ruminations about Russia as being connected to other agrarian societies that he was studying in his last years across the Global South. In an 1877 letter addressed to Russian radical intellectuals, Marx strongly denied that he had created a general, transhistorical theory of social development:

Thus, events of striking similarity, taking place in different historical contexts, led to totally disparate results. By studying each of these developments separately, one may easily discover the key to this phenomenon, but this will never be attained with the master key of a general historico-philosophical theory, whose supreme virtue consists in being suprahistorical.

Here, Marx seemed to deny, *avant la lettre*, the charge that he held to a Eurocentric “grand narrative.”

The Russian Road

The immediate context of these discussions was the question of whether, as Russian intellectuals were asking themselves, their society was “inevitably” destined to follow the pathway of Western Europe if it were to progress. On this point, Marx writes in an 1881 letter to Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich:

In analyzing the genesis of capitalist production, I say: “At the core of the capitalist system, therefore, lies the complete separation of the producer from the means of production . . . the basis of this whole development is the *expropriation of the cultivators*. So far, it has been carried out in a radical manner only in England . . . but *all the other countries of Western Europe* are going through the same development” (*Capital*, French ed., p. 315). Hence, the “historical inevitability” of this process is *expressly limited to the countries of Western Europe*.

Again, Marx was denying that he had created a unilinear model of social development based upon the trajectory of Western Europe. In this context, we should also note that in his research notes on India in this period, he explicitly attacked the view that precolonial India was a feudal society.

In this period, Marx also took up social contradictions within Russian society, where an important revolutionary movement had by now developed. Not only did he deny to his Russian interlocutors that his theories showed that their communal villages must “inevitably” be destroyed in a Western-style process of primitive accumulation. He also saw these villages as the social base for a new type of revolutionary movement.

This movement would parallel, but not follow, that of the European working class, as he and Engels wrote in the preface to an 1882 Russian edition of the *Manifesto*:

If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.

Far from evincing a condescending attitude toward societies at capitalism's periphery, Marx's late writings exhibited a theorization of their revolutionary potential.

Here, Marx was putting forward a multi-linear concept of revolution, wherein Russia's peasant communes could become an important ally of the industrial working classes of Western Europe. But he went still further, arguing that a peasant uprising of this kind at the periphery of capitalism might come first, as the "starting point" that could spark a Europe-wide revolutionary movement.

At the same time, Marx never advocated an agrarian socialist autarky. Without links to more developed countries, he believed, a peasant revolution in Russia could not on its own lead to a viable form of modern communism. He was instead advocating a global revolution against a global system of domination and exploitation, capitalism.

A Marx for Our Time

In these ways, the Late Marx moved away from any kind of unilinear theory of development based upon Western Europe and into which the rest of the world had to be conceptually straitjacketed. Far from evincing a condescending attitude toward societies at capitalism's periphery, these late writings exhibited the very opposite: a theorization of their revolutionary potential.

Arguments of the kind made in this essay were already being put forward in the era when Edward Said's critique of Marx was taking wing. In my mentor Raya Dunayevskaya's *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (1981) and in Teodor Shanin's *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (1983), the notion of a Late Marx who developed a multi-linear, truly global perspective on society and revolution, including on gender, came to the fore.

These interpretations of Marx did not receive very much attention in a period of neoliberalism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, and pronouncements of the "death" of Marxism. But in the years since then, Marxist responses to Edward Said's argument in *Orientalism* have emerged, most notably in the late Aijaz Ahmad's work [In Theory](#) (1992) and Gilbert Achcar's [Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism](#) (2013). Discussions of the late Marx have also built up slowly, from authors such as [Heather Brown](#), [Marcello Musto](#), and [David Norman Smith](#), as well as my own book [Marx at the Margins](#). With the return to Marx in recent years, I hope that such perspectives may have found their moment.

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 07.19.2022:

<https://jacobin.com/2022/07/karl-marx-eurocentrism-western-capitalism-colonialism>

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