

Marx at the Margins, four ways

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Appearing shortly before the publication of the second edition of Kevin B. Anderson's *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies*, this *Dialectical Anthropology* forum features commentaries by Marxian scholars from four of the world regions that came in for extended discussion in the book. It concludes with a final response from Anderson. The forum was a long time in the making, and had been of great interest to Ananth Aiyar, the late editor of this journal, so it is particularly tragic that he did not live to see it in print.

One of the most exciting attributes of the book is its use of the previously unseen writings of Marx, most significantly his 1879–1882 notebooks concerning societies peripheral to the capitalist order of his day. Much of this work has not yet been published in any language, and is only slowly coming to light through the efforts of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA).¹ These notebooks disappeared from view upon Marx's death in 1883, following which Engels prioritized the editing and publication of the three volumes of *Capital*, but did not (or could not) make plans to bring out his other unpublished writings. Nor did the Second International do so after Engels' death. The task of publishing all of the writings of Marx and Engels finally began in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, when the first *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* was established under the direction of the noted Marx scholar David Riazanov. MEGA came to an abrupt halt in 1935 after Riazanov was arrested and eventually executed, having run afoul of Stalin. The second *Marx-Engels*

¹ The account that follows has been reconstructed from a detailed appendix to the book titled "The Vicissitudes of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* from the 1920s to Today" (Anderson 2010).

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Gesamtausgabe (MEGA 2) was begun in Moscow and East Berlin in 1975, and has continued with its program of publication despite a period of financial uncertainty following the 1989 watershed. MEGA 2 is engaged in the process of publishing, among other things, the excerpt notebooks that Anderson draws upon in *Marx at the Margins*.

These writings pertain to non-Western social forms on the one hand (in India, China, Russia, Algeria), and on the other, to national and ethnic struggles for emancipation (of the Irish, the Poles, slaves in the antebellum South) and their relationship to working class movements. It is Anderson's contention that Marx did not regard these concerns to be a separate matter from his far better-known analysis of capitalism. They together form a unified whole—a distinctive understanding of the global processes of his era. Thus, these notebooks can help refute the frequent accusations of determinisms and blind spots that are directed at Marx, but beyond that, they should cause us to radically rethink and redefine the Marxian canon. This is entirely good news for anthropologists who have had to make do thus far with having Engels' rather flawed *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* serve as the chief anthropological contribution of this tradition (Engels 1972). A new volume titled *Commune, Empire and Class: 1879–82 Notebooks on Non-Western and Precapitalist Societies* (Marx forthcoming) will finally place this hitherto eclipsed material in our hands.

In the meantime, we are fortunate that an authoritative grouping of international scholars has agreed to debate in these pages Anderson's interpretations of the notebooks in *Marx at the Margins*. Aijaz Ahmad addresses himself substantially (though not solely) to Anderson's treatment of Marx's writings on India, Michal Buchowski to the chapter on Russia and Poland, Eamonn Slater to the Ireland chapter, and David Norman Smith to Marx's writings on slavery in the American South. Some of the authors occupy divergent positions in key respects. For example, Buchowski comes close to echoing Edward Said's dismissal of Marx as a "romantic orientalist," while Ahmad usefully clarifies the case he has previously made against the presentism that informs such an understanding of Marx. Ahmad is probably correct in arguing that some of the positions taken by Marx on colonialism, nationalism and caste in India could be read as being in advance even of major figures in the Indian nationalist movement such as Gandhi and Rammohun Roy. We cannot, of course, wish away the less palatable aspects of Marx's commentaries, and I am inclined to agree with what Ahmad has regretfully noted in the past, viz "the writings of Marx and Engels are indeed contaminated in several places with the usual banalities of nineteenth-century Eurocentrism, and the general prognosis they offered about the social stagnation of our societies was often based on unexamined staples of conventional European histories" (Ahmad 1992: 229).

Smith, Slater and Anderson have shown that Marx was willing to accord primacy to the struggles for emancipation of African-American slaves and Irish Fenians, and also saw these struggles as inextricably linked to proletarian movements. While it is interesting to encounter a Marx who engages seriously with the categories of race, ethnicity and nation, there are new questions that are opened up by this expanded view of Marx. To begin with, there is the issue of the analytical consequences of this expanded view—e.g., should we now be reading the classic texts of Marxian

political economy differently, and is it useful to do so? Also, going beyond interpreting the world to changing it, this newly emerging picture will likely produce profound outcomes for Marxist praxis. Thus, these archival discoveries cannot be sidelined as an antiquarian concern; they may well necessitate a root and branch reassessment of Marxist theory and praxis.

We hope this forum is the start of a conversation about these matters that will grow increasingly animated as more of these writings come to light and that other scholars working on “the margins” will be inspired to contribute their analyses.

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