

## **When Marxism meets decolonial theory: it is a dialogue, not a confrontation**

Marx became a Marxist at the age of 26 around about 1844 but later on as Marx himself once said, if that is what they call Marxism then I am not one. Unlike Marx I was born a Marxist clutching the Communist manifesto, and still am one. What then is Marxism? At the very least it is a **metaphysical belief system**, a philosophical therapy, a diagnosis and treatment through practical exercise. You have got to believe in some core fundamentals, right? Some of Marx's most ardent critics are disenchanted ex-Marxists, those who have lost the faith, left the cause. Are you a half full or half empty Marxist? You may leave Marx but does Marx ever really leave you? I offer some faith-based considerations drawn from the Marxist Credo. A kind of self-assessment test. To set the mood, first the seductive Marx, and his clarion call to faith.

Marxist fundamentalism, its focus so passionately **practical**, surely has both the intellectual and emotional comfort of providing an all encompassing logically coherent, con-

sistent paradigm. Its rationale was and is to expose, depose and dispose of the evils of capitalism. it's a directional, purposeful hopeful movement of human consciousness. Paraphrasing those famous words by Marx, not just to interpret the world but to actually change it - **all for the Ethical Good. That is the point, the whole point and nothing but the point of Marxism.**

Marxism makes for a materialist dissection of historical human exploitation and oppression and then its applied overcoming. It is an ever upward dialectical movement, stage by stage as it were towards emancipation. Believers hold that Marxism reveals the hidden big Truth by exposing the mere appearance of things. Marxism identifies those underpinning structures of power and debunks the false claims by those who benefit. It exposes those false ideological laws which hold us downtrodden mind and body. Marxism in its practice is the analysing, cataloguing and overcoming of all those human made artefacts of domination in the interest of the few but at the expense of the so many.

It's a heady admixture of of so-called secular modernity. The English political economic theories of Smith, Ricardo and Mills and the evolutionism of Darwin; the German philosophical idealism of Hegel; the French Socialist tradition of Saint-Simon and Fourier; the French Jacobin political revolutionary tradition of Robespierre, all wrapped up in a package date-marked the European Enlightenment. Seeing the light through a distinctively European gaze.

### **A Marxian morality passion play**

Now a thought experiment in re-imagining Marx. Whatever else it may be, Marxism is I suggest a cosmic messianic morality passion play. Echoes then of the three great Abrahamic Books, the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an, a kind of pilgrims' progress. Marx the ever so evangelical crusading apocalyptic messenger. He invites us on a tricky righteous journey of redemption, of theory and praxis, through the growing pains of human self-consciousness. The human agency of the downtrodden, the oppressed and exploited, their resistance and recovery. The Marxian final day of judgment, that earthly Communist paradise. A journey from

alienated to actualised human essence. This surely is Marx at his best, a magnificent inspirational source of revelation and transcendence.

I introduce some critical beliefs from the Marxist Credo, a kind of stability standard or minimum Marxist threshold which I think decides if you are one or other Marxist or not, half empty half full. Each core belief also casts some light on what is called classical or orthodox, sometimes vulgar Marxism, the very Marxist Marx thought he was not. I will begin with some down to earth observations which challenge Marxist identity.

## **Marx and economics**

To be a Marxist you have simply got to believe in Marx's economic revelations. From these all else flows. Consider Marx's unilinear economic material determinism and its related 'theory of everything' story. I do not intend tonight to explain Marx's economic theoretical architecture - human labour power as the source of all value, surplus value as the source of exploitation, the subsequent declining rate of

profit as the source of endemic capitalist crises..... digging its own grave as the Communist Manifesto predicted of the bourgeoisie. Suffice to say, in spite of Marx's ticking doomsday clock, capitalism has proved remarkably adept at reinventing, reproducing itself, with of course increasingly deadly global consequences.

There are any number of revisionist books on the logical coherence internal consistency of Marx's economic axioms and his laws of capitalism, usually downgraded to tendencies, even by Marx himself, to avoid too much embarrassment. Applied Marxist economic science today is not just heavily empirical but highly technical, pages of algebraic calculations intended to bring to life Marx's original body of work, to actually make it work. On watch Marxicologists have been arguing among themselves ever since.

Endemic capitalist crises, especially so-called Long Waves are an essential bread and butter component of the Marxian dialectic discourse. In 1873, 30 years after he became a Marxist, Marx wrote that he still thinks that it is possible with enough tangible material to determine the main laws of

crises mathematically. Now of course surely today no one denies there are such catastrophic economic movements: the issue is whether Marx provided the irrefutable explanation from which all else follows.

## **Base versus superstructure**

A purist Marxist simply has to believe in the base v superstructure dichotomy where everything else in the world not marxist economic is dependent on the dominant, especially that capitalist, mode of production. This tautology generates Marx's teleological stageist view of history. It also of course closes down any authentic space for non-economic factors in history-making. This reified dualism makes for a flattened one-dimensional unilinear world denuded of all actual historical geographical diversity and particularity. A conceptual flatland erased of any contoured singularities/ imagination.

In 1890 seven years after Marx had died, Engels said that, I quote, 'According to the materialistic conception of history, the production and reproduction of real life constitutes *in the*

*last instance* the determining factor of history. He goes on: 'neither Marx nor I ever maintained more. Now when someone comes along and distorts this to mean that the economic factor is the sole determining factor, **he is converting the former proposition into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase**'.

A confession? Now seasoned Marxists will know of course that there is a game called Let's Blame Everything on Engels, he who co-wrote many publications with Marx, the last two volumes of Capital put together, interpreted, some say, misinterpreted by him from Marx's illegible notes. A 140 years or so after his death, a new German edition of Capital volume 1 has just been published claiming to include revisions which Marx really intended but Engels omitted. My general point is that with any good religion, there are endless doctrinal disputations, each school adamant in its certitudes; someone always an apostate. **So just who is the real Marxist that I may or may not be any more?**

The base/superstructure spacial metaphor surely has always been more trouble than it is worth. Although Marx

himself actually used it very rarely and only in the most aphoristic formulations, it has been made to bear a theoretical weight far beyond its limited capacities. More particularly, the economic sphere tended to be conceived as more or less synonymous with the technical forces of production, operating according to intrinsic laws of technological progress, so that **real-time history** became a more or less **mechanical process** of technological development. These simplifications have fixed the terms of Marxist debate ever since. All sides of the various disputes that have raged among Marxists have been effectively locked into this theoretical grid. Still a Marxist? This brings us on to the connected political dimension of Marx and the putative roles of the State and the Communist Party in the Marxist odyssey.

### **Marx's political state**

To be a Marxist you have to believe in some vision of an ideal Marxist state, at least in the making, never mind Marx's loathing of his Utopian Socialist contemporaries. 'Utopian Socialist' or 'Infantile Socialism' as opposed to 'Scientific Socialism', are Marxist swear words and ever since a lot of internal debate about the role of vanguard

parties leading the masses. One hundred and twenty years or so later after the 1867 publication of Capital volume 1, Francis Fukuyama triumphantly announced 'the end of history, and of man'. The context was the implosion of the Soviet Union and hence the final chapter in all human progress in the cosmic battle of the two modernistic paradigms of (Western) Democratic Liberalism and (Soviet) Marxism. Forget about the silliness of Fukuyama's triumphalism. So Marxist praxis in the guise of the short lived Soviet Union? Its well documented Stalinist terror, all those disastrous five year central planning cycles, catastrophic famines, enforced migrations, the rush to humungous industrialisation in order to play catch up with western capitalism itself, in some sort of cosmological death embrace. Tragically digging its own particular socialist grave in the process and the buried hopes of so many Marxists. No paradise on earth then but perhaps a living hell. Looking down from his celestial seat just what might Marx have thought about all this?

An easy apologia is to say that was never true Marxism, certainly not communism even socialism in Marx's intended sense, neither true actual spiritual nor even material human

progress, instead some sort of historicised degenerate deformed version, whatever the many mitigating contra-reasons adduced. Like revisionist Marxist economics, so too there are stacks of books on just what went wrong and why. State Socialism, Democratic Centralism, State-Capitalism .... As for the concept itself, Marx claimed that the political state always represents the revolutionary interest of the dominant class, so that one day that will /must be true too of the penultimate Dictatorship of the Proletariat before the proper end of history. Class warfare turned into proletarian lawfare but only a necessary transitional stage to a communist society before its withering away.

Marx opined about the 1848 uprisings sweeping across Europe, in which he invested so much discursive energy, including that call to arms, the Communist Manifesto. He agonised especially over the betrayal of the short-lived 1871 Paris Commune an embryonic socialist regime. However, Marx did not have very much else to say about the ideal socialist state, except much procrastinating on this score. Hardly a practical handbook on worker statecraft. How could it be otherwise since all hope for change was always in-

vested in the not quite ready future, the delayed necessary conditions not yet unfolded, as each post-mortem confirmed. Sometimes such silence can be just as revealing.

Apropos the Soviet union, I will briefly mention another sort of internal debate raging today, the one about Marxism's endorsement of what's called 'productivism'. Hence all that earthly bounty, and the brutalising expropriation not just of people but of Mother Nature all in pursuit of extractivist growth. This very idea of progress is enshrined in Marx's stageist technological framework, Yes Marx early on spoke about what he called an ecological metabolic rift a promising tilt at the time. Engels' Dialectic of Nature actually had a lot more to say on the subject even of continuing relevance today. Kohei Saito's 'Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism' claims to track this tectonic shift. Hidden in his private notebooks Marx began to question the environmental sustainability of industrialisation, formulating doubts over his techno-optimistic vision of a prospective prosperous communism. John Bellamy Foster's work flags up a Red and Green Marxist hybrid. Half red, half green? This leads me on to the next test of faith.

## **Marx's Eurocentricism and racialised framework of being**

Although implicit throughout my presentation, let me now turn finally to **the real crux of the matter** for any doubting Marxist. Now, the cosmological creation of humanity from clay is a common enough story found in many ancient human genesis accounts. Let's talk about a particular peculiar sort of toxic European clay from which Marx was moulded. That clay was his specialised Eurocentric heritage with its racialised sensibilities, all baked into his totalising schema.

The context here is of course the elision between the emergence of global capitalism, colonisation, imperialism and Marx's double-faced stance on all this. I shall not spend any time on what we would now call out as Marx's perturbing ethno-nationalist, white supremacist, racist stereotyping. The whole gamut of Western European sourced racialised discourse gratuitously, loudly, jumps out of Marxist text to insult the eye. All that chatter about those foreign backward 'barbarians' from 'orient afar,' sometimes

besieging the Gates of a mythical Europe and of course all that N-word stuff. The exposed Emperor Marx shorn of all his fancy clothes.

Marx was after all a certain man of a certain time and place but the substantive issue runs deeper than that all too casual apologetic suggests. Language aside, the real **Marxist Problem** is engrained in his very paradigm, his tool box so to speak. Not only does it make for what I have previously described as a flattened economic unilinear deterministic terrain, it is more fully articulated as ominously **very pale, very white terrain.**

It is easy to conclude that Marx has no option but to logically regard the evils of colonisation as an historical law of necessity in the course of dialectical progress. When Marx set out to systematically understand, expose and overthrow the new and rapidly expanding capitalist era he studiously concentrated on where he found it at the time in Britain, Northern Europe and the United States. His prescriptions and remedies emerge from but remain embedded in this geo-economic-political -social - cultural -historical location.

Irrespective of his semantic nuancing Marx was always committed to acknowledging the benefits of (White) European colonisation as a stageist historical movement. Such is the Marxist-Hegelian 'cunning of history' and its very own Smith-like 'hidden hand': Fanon's Wretched of the Earth its sacrificial victims.

Yes in the final chapter of Capital of volume 1 Marx asserts that the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of Bourgeois Civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes turning from its home where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies where it goes naked. ...He explains, in a much quoted paragraph that '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 characterise the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production'. Powerful damning sermonising words the ever so ethical evangelical Marx.

Yet Samir Amin credited with introducing the term Eurocentricism points out that an indubitably flawed Marxism inherited a certain evolutionary supremacist perspective that ultimately prevents it tearing down the Eurocentric veil of bourgeois mysticism. I Invoke Audre Lorde's famous disclaimer that the Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House. Quite a deep aphorism I think, one which to ponder. Is not Marx inescapably squeezed in the grip of his own Eurocentric Vice? Take Edward Said's scathing critique of Marx's Orientalism. Cedric Robinson's the Black Radical Tradition foregrounds and rewrites the real histories of authentic anti-colonial struggle and resistance outwith Marx. Julius Nyerere, anti-colonialist Christian in no need of any platitudinous Marxian conversion to socialism and democracy, speaks of an authentic African account, a socialist attitude of mind, already deeply rooted in an African past. Dipesh Chakrabarty's Provincialisation thesis knocks the European Gens from its lofty perch, along with Marxism then, retribalising it as the only clan that doesn't know its a clan. And so on and so forth.

The repeated point here is that the pre-capitalist European racialised mindset which an apprenticed Marx inherited, then reproduced and replicated in the name of scientific socialism, is not just a contingency attached to capitalism, colonialism and imperialism. It is an intrinsic driving component : **no less so than in its occluded sublimated counter Marxist version.** Put simply, Marx the evolutionist believed that there are historic races of people, even of nations, even indeed classes, who have inherited through adaptation defining hierarchical characteristics, some good some bad.

### **The born again Marx**

I will finish with Marx's own testimony In 1881 two years before he died. Marx comes clean at last, releasing himself from his one of his own theoretical deadweights. In a reply to Russian Marxist Vera Zasulich's inquiry asking if it were possible to move straight from the Russian peasant commune to socialism by-passing the capitalist stage, Marx's answer was unequivocally yes. The historic inevitability of the one blueprint course is expressly restricted to the

countries of Western Europe, where European capitalism first developed. It need not apply to the Russian context, which has its own unique dynamic, a position repeated in the 1882 second Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto. **A remarkable backtracking.** So the idea of a multi-linear world begins to reverse the the one track mind of Marxist orthodoxy. The privileged pathfinder role of the western working class proletariat, if not derailed then downgraded from mainline to one of several branch lines.

A quick scan of Marx's encyclopaedic research in his later years show perhaps why. Already immersed in tracking and supporting emerging anti-colonial national liberation struggles around the world - Ireland, Poland, Russia, India, China - Marx quietly relocates thus recenters those multitudinous terrains and archipelagos of revolutionary resistance. Some say all because of his growing frustration with the industrialised working classes of Western Europe stubbornly unable to prove his predictions. Marx's growing interest in actual living communist-style societies among First Nation indigenous peoples and their harmonious integration with, being a part of, Mother Nature makes for further di-

alectical movement. The realisation then that there is not just one Universal Blueprint for that Good but many such blueprints and not one Path but many paths.

The acknowledgement that ethical communities of solidarity compassion and mutuality (call that socialism in Marx-Eurospeak if you want) with their own unique material and spiritual histories long predate predatory colonialism, their descendants still fighting their struggles against the Hege-mon. Marxism arrived in the global south travelling on those railway systems the imperialists built to extract their plunder. The point here is that any doubting Marxist survivalist must desist from hanging onto the coat-tails of global capitalism as a missionary in search of surrogate proletarians to be converted. Not ersatz facsimile Marxism but a radical re-orientation, a new '**Marxism at the Margins**' to borrow Kevin Anderson's double-edged phrase.

So to whom it may concern, if the European mindset must first wean itself from its forensic gaze, the impulse to dominate and change the rest of the world in its own image, so too then marxist dogma. Many ex-Marxists, half full, half empty Marxists, indeed those who think they have com-

pletely left Marx, have picked up the threadbare carpet to weave different patterns to picture diverse world realities and their historical possibilities. I began tonight by suggesting that Marxism can be likened to a morality passion play, a series of earthly acts culminating in a grand spiritual finale. But of course, all civilisations, all religions, have some such stories girded by their own bodies of knowledge and ethical systems. I have suggested that, belatedly, Marx began to stretch his own Marxism in the right direction. I will finish with my final question: just how far can the Marxist strap-line be stretched before it finally listlessly loses all shape, even snaps: **or can it be somehow revitalised ?**