Who needs postcoloniality?

A reply to Lindner

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In Marx’s articles for the New York Tribune on British colonialism in India and the events leading to the Second Anglo-Chinese War (Opium War), critics have caught sight of a double mission attributed by him to British imperialism and colonialism to tear down the structure of archaic societies and lay the foundations for a new social order that would eventually reflect the capitalist model. A much later variation of this double mission was promoted by modernization and convergence theory during the early days of the Cold War (before the USA discovered the technique of proxy wars against the Soviets), whereby colonialism, which this theory of development often ignored or overlooked, was credited with putting into place the proper infrastructure for the later, successful postcolonial modernization of states like India, and, especially, Taiwan and South Korea, both of which were said to have benefited from the Japanese imperial intervention. While the modernizing mission of colonialism can be found in Marx’s early articles, it was replaced by modernization theory dedicated to ‘endowing’ a world-historical narrative (Hegel) ‘with a civilizational grammar and direction’, as well the task of overseeing ‘a transnational experience’ by administering capitalism as ‘it ideologically captures historical time and deploys it as means’. During the Cold War, modernization theory and its knowledges aimed to ‘manage life’ in the so-called ‘Third World’ through the imperial instrumentality of a developmentalist policy, which was ‘perceived as a form of neocolonialism.’

But the accusations of Eurocentrism and Orientalism were particularly important for a postcolonial theory, which ‘dematerialized’ Said’s version of colonial discourse in the name of radicalizing it, and its campaign to ‘provincialize Europe’ and ‘unthink Eurocentrism’. Kolya Lindner’s recent essay ‘Marx’s Eurocentrism: Postcolonial Studies and Marxist Scholarship’ (RP 161) is a recent reminder of both the persistence of this question and its capacity to fuel discussion. In these discussions, what is interesting is the fascination, bordering on desire, that postcolonial discourse, especially, has continued to exert for Marxism, and the possibility of establishing some sort of rapprochement that might end the academic division of labour between two antagonistic intellectual strategies and put to rest the apparently embarrassing charges of Eurocentrism. It should be stated that this peacemaking mission began several years ago, with attempts to imagine a Marxian postcolonial approach that might open the path to a more productive partnership. In her introduction to Marx, Modernization and Postcolonial Studies (2002), Crystal Bartolovich observed the near-absence of ‘direct’ and ‘serious’ dialogue between Marxism and proponents of postcoloniality. Noting that too often postcolonial theory’s indebtedness to post-structural philosophy encouraged dismissal of Marxism or ignored it out of ‘neglect’ and even ignorance, Marxism, for its part, fell into discounting postcolonial studies frequently for overlooking the material dimensions of imperialism and colonial life, especially the intervening mediations posed by capitalism and colonial enterprise. Any reading of the novel The Singapore Grip by J.G. Farrell (a writer who was not a Marxist), with its narrative of how British businessmen were planning to sell their rubber to the Japanese, whose troops were already within the city, will reaffirm Bartolovich’s judgement. In this dispute, she correctly proposed that the existence of a large fund of misunderstanding linking the two discourses in mutual antagonism was often accompanied by caricature and misrecognition.

If Marxism was vulnerable to charges of an inaugural Eurocentrism, postcoloniality was answerable for its collaboration with imperialism in its most contemporary manifestation of globalization. This apparent complicity with forms of neocolonialism stemmed from its prior relationship with the Cold War and, in the aftermath, its affiliation with modernization...
theory. Despite competing claims, Bartolovich was convinced that ‘Marxism is the theoretical perspective suited to accomplishing’ the necessary critique of both the colonial violence of contemporary neocolonial residues, what the writer Kiran Desai (The Inheritance of Loss, 2006) described as the ‘shabbiest modernity’, and the more distant colonial past.\(^5\) Regardless of the distance separating these discourses, she is persuaded that they do have something to say to each other, if for no other reason than such an engagement would provide the opportunity to air their respective differences. But postcolonial discourse would hardly cede its own claim to theoretical privilege.

A few years later Neil Lazarus remarked that silence on class in postcolonial studies, especially beginning with the class location of the postcolonial theorist ‘relative to that of whom he or she is theorizing’, is precisely the problem – ‘the gap’ – that needs to be examined since it undoubtedly has played a principal role shaping the particular field of inquiry.\(^6\) Lazarus has also pointed to the preponderant culturalist bias informing postcolonial studies, its inordinate concerns with subaltern address and enunciative capability, the formation of subjectivity drawn from psychoanalytic theory yoked to unstated claims of cultural authenticity (and reductionism), and coupled, I would add, with declarations of neo-nativism, ironically echoing an understanding of the world outside of Euro-America founded on the assumption that Foucault was less Eurocentric than Marx.\(^7\)

Whatever the complex reasons prompting this Marxian attention to postcolonial studies, it has, I believe, much to do with the successful institutionalization of postcolonial studies and cultural studies in colleges and universities of the USA and UK, first in departments of English and then in semi-autonomous programmes of instruction and graduate training. For its part, Marxism, at least in US colleges and universities, has always been marginalized and never occupied a position to play the role commanded by postcolonial studies. In a way this was acknowledged by Fredric Jameson, when he proposed that cultural studies constituted a ‘desire’,\(^8\) which, among its many ambitions, was the yearning to succeed Marxism and replace it, a challenge that persisted in residing at the heart of the Marxian effort to win recognition by establishing a dialogue with postcolonial studies by situating itself in such a way as to refigure its critique in order to gain entry into the academic procession. Beyond this institutional detour there was also the politics of a reigning textualism in the literary fields and the insinuations of history and political economy into disciplines traditionally unreceptive to what they had to offer. It is often overlooked, in this connection, that a symmetrical relationship was forged between English literary studies and a postcoloniality preoccupied with England’s largest former colony, India – and especially the province of Bengal. (Ireland seems like a natural candidate, with a history of 500 years of continual occupation but the British always had a problem with seeing it as a colony.\(^9\)) Specifically, I am calling attention to the way English studies, armed with new textual strategies (Saidian colonial discourse and poststructural philosophy) turned towards colonies that had been intimately implicated in the metropolitan country once the discipline had exhausted the productivity of received practices. Inadvertently, the development of postcolonial studies made India (Bengal) the condensed substitute of choice – what Lindner describes as ‘projecting false universalism’ – for reshaping the colonial world according to the protocols of a local experience in such a way as to imply a commonality everywhere. In the vast literature on postcoloniality, it’s hard to find much emphasis on the French, Dutch, Portuguese, American and Japanese colonial possessions, and even less consideration of their significant experiential differences. The alliance between postcolonial studies and post-structural theory resulted in the emphasizing of subject formation (and thus culture) and thus led to a dematerializing of the subject by substituting subaltern agency – finding a voice – (itself a form of cultural identity) where identity is transferred to ethnicity. Marx considered ethnicity a ‘historical value’, as opposed to the roles played (and personified) by worker and capitalist, the subjects of ‘value-in-process’ – that is, ‘capital in every moment.’\(^10\) It is, I believe, this legacy that loosely accepted the Cold War caricature of Marxism as ‘Eurocentric’, which led to the subsequent postcolonial accusation that capitalism formed simply another Western narrative and that history was another name for Europe. In this vocation to distance itself from an imperial self by foregrounding the suppressed other, a dyad recently put into question by a number of thinkers, postcoloniality has run the risk of sliding into an unstated valorization of cultural authenticity and, perhaps, signalling the end of its productivity.

None of these considerations appears in Lindner’s informed essay, which often echoes the Cold War caricature. But it also gives a glimpse of the kind of cultural and political lag between the world of German scholarship and its preoccupation and those of the USA and the UK. On the one hand, Lindner aims to show through a reading of the New York Tribune articles
how Marx moved from a perspective that viewed England's colonization of India as accruing eventual benefits that would lead to the necessary transformation of the subcontinent (the conceit of the 'English jackasses', in Lindner, 27), and put it on the road to socialism to the abandonment of this expression of Eurocentrism and cultural superiority. On the other hand, this tack is accompanied by the recognition that Marx's substantive and theoretical writings relating to the critique of political economy, capitalism and the world market revealed, despite Orientalist hangovers, the existence of pre-capitalist communal organization throughout the ancient world and its importance for later history. Further, the expansion of capital would result in establishing conditions leading to changes in the received order according to differing circumstances in time and place. But the trouble with this twin positonal is that it is unnecessary in its desire to have it both ways: to show that Marx pulled back from an earlier Eurocentrism, for a show of sympathy for societies outside Euro-America might satisfy a postcolonial demand to be free from racism but it is outweighed by Marx's coextensive account of political economy and how it transforms every society it manages to touch. This recognition could not have been acceptable to postcolonialism's proponents since it would have required suborning its own theoretical aspirations to those of Marxism. It should be recalled that in some versions of postcolonial theory, Asia (i.e. India) was designated as the site of an 'alternative modernity'. With this dedication to an 'alternative modernity' (and all its names), we have already entered the precinct of the cultural dominant – the colonizing space of culture – which demands a parallel move away from considerations of time and its relationship to space to spatial primacy, whereby the possibility of temporal conjuncture loses its momentary and historical status to become a fixed and unmoving countenance. The Marxian critique of political economy was historical, always referred to the world at large, and joined colonial expropriation to the expansion of capitalism as it became the lever in forming the world market. Postcolonial studies has been less worldly and more local and reflects the moment when decolonization resulted in disappointment with what came after. In Lindner's reckoning, the disclosure of Marx's later ethnological notebooks concerning societies of Euro-America clinches the argument against charges of Eurocentrism, even though much of this material was published in Lawrence Krader's Introduction to Karl Marx's Ethnological Notebooks (1974) and found its way into the under-used The Asiatic Mode of Prod-

duction (1975) and was amplified recently in Kevin Anderson's important Marx at the Margins (2010). What therefore seems evident is that the more theoretical texts provide ways to circumvent the instances of Eurocentric sentiment that occasionally crept into the newspaper articles and supplied a prefiguration for the heterogeneous history Marx was demonstrating in his letters to Vera Zasulich and Russian progressives and in his ethnological notebooks.

Rather than pursue this narrative demonstrating Marx's ethnological consciousness in later life, detailed by both Lindner and Anderson, I'd like merely to follow through on some of the possibilities offered by Marx's conception of history (articulated in the Grundrisse) and the analysis of capital's logic and pre-capitalist formations, which both the Grundrisse and Capital provide. Such an accounting requires envisaging Capital not as an 'x-ray of national capitalism' transformed into an ideal type, but instead as the 'abstraction of a constitutive historical process'. It is less about a configuration of national economies which will establish relations between sovereign states than a network of international exchange and the crystallization of national markets. 'Genealogically, commercial and finance capital were constituted on the periphery of social formations', in the widening fulcrum of international exchanges. 'But the capitalist mode of production, properly called, implies the submission of production itself to the law of capital.' In other words, capital presumes the exchange of commodities in their function as value and is thus not preoccupied with the pre-capitalist exchange and production of goods. Hence, the historic genesis of capitalism, the existence of the world market, appears only in the 'tearing' of a coherent synchronic system, with other categories (representing practices) – like primitive accumulation, the incidence of the tendency of the falling rate of profit, and the formation of finance and commercial capital following successively throughout the volumes of Capital. There is no place in Marx's analysis for a separate accounting of the world market that will demand a degree of unification more advanced than what this market has already attained. It is not accidental, Daniel Bensaid has remarked, that the literature inspiring Marxist narratives on modern imperialism originated in the stage of colonial expansion and the formation of finance capital dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In fact, it was the contemporaneity of this synchronic system, a system in which the expansion of capital will result in value independently valorizing
itself, that commanded Marx’s analytic attention. This would explain why he appeared less concerned with the history of pre-capitalist formations, and somewhat ambiguous toward the possibility of knowing them, even though their putative historicity is considered in the Grundrisse. Yet it is also in this same text that he envisioned a new understanding of history departing from his reflections in the German Ideology precisely at the moment he was driven to construct a critique of the world of contemporary bourgeois political economy. It is because bourgeois economy is the ‘most developed historic organization of production’ that a new understanding of history is required, especially in view of the convention of political economy to posit the natural development of capitalism and ‘smudge over all differences’ to ‘see bourgeois relations in all forms of societies’.

Here, too, Marx introduced the observation of unevenness, when he noted that bourgeois society is itself a panoply of contradictory forms of development ‘derived from earlier forms’ found within it only in ‘stunted form, or even travestied’. The upshot is thus a mode of ‘historical presentation of development … founded … on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself’. This rejection of the ‘retrospective illusion’ led to imagining a ‘real history of the relations of production’ based on ‘observing and deducing its laws, as having themselves become in history … like the empirical numbers … in natural science – which point towards a past behind this system’. Such indications, he continued, accompanied by a correct grasp of the present, offers the key to understanding the past. Moreover, the suspension of the ‘present form of production relations’ will supply the signification of its ‘becoming – foreshadowings of the future’. In these passages and elsewhere, Marx clearly outlined what Bensaid has called a ‘new temporality of knowledge’. The societies of the past are never historical in their immediacy but only acquire this status through the present. There is no horizontal trajectory here, as supposed by a linear, chronological historical trajectory – the before and after – but rather verticality, the necessity of excavating the depths of the present, where the traces and residues of pasts coexist with and within it, often remaining hidden or unrecognized, like the purloined letter or appearing in ‘stunted’, and ‘caricatured form … but always with an essential difference’.

What Marx showed in the Grundrisse was the historic shape of pre-capitalist formations as communal and clan-based typifications that might have existed before the separation from land that marked the momentous beginnings of primitive accumulation and the installation of wage labour. Reflecting an uncertainty relating to the accessibility of knowledge on ancient societies, Marx, in one of his letters to the Russian Vera Zasulich, he confesses how little is known of these archaic communities and that what is known from available sources represents the formation in its ‘final term’. Implied in this new account was a division between history, which referred to the order that concepts and categories appeared historically, and capital logic, which arranged their relationships to each other differently according to a more formal principle.

But in both cases we have instances of the workings of contingency, not teleological destiny. Marx’s historic perspective was concerned with presuppositions, what he named ‘suspended presuppositions’, the ‘merely historical’, ‘past and gone’, that were no longer visible or evident but clearly important to later development but ‘in no way to its contemporary history, that is, not to the real system of the mode of production’. With Capital, moreover, Marx outlined capital’s immense conceptualization of the organization of time and with the establishment of the working day the successive permeation of value throughout everyday life. In this respect, the world of pre-capitalist social formations would always remain hostage to the capitalist present, always mediated by the unstated force of its temporal accountancy.

Since so much of the Grundrisse was concerned with showing how wage labour developed from the
separation of free workers from the land and their fall into a state of dependence based solely on the only thing they owned, the sale of their labour power, it is not surprising that Marx’s description of the prior moment would reflect the opposite of what had previously existed, namely the absence of working to create value. Here, the presupposition of capital was the free worker before being released from the land as his ‘natural workshop’, which meant the ‘dissolution of small, free landed property’ under clan-based communal ownership ‘resting on the oriental commune’. These communal organizations functioned like chronotopic variations of an earlier pre-capitalist mode of production, whereby a specific conception of space dissolved time. What seemed to characterize the ‘Asiatic’ forms (Marx earlier called them ‘Oriental despotism’) was the ‘commonality of labour’ and the extraction of surplus product. Anderson has proposed that Marx took a ‘more even handed position’ towards these communities from the views expressed in the 1853 articles on India. But it is important that in the Grundrisse, Marx includes areas outside of Asia, emphasizing the centrality of the ‘commonality of labour’ throughout diverse regions of the archaic world, implying a universal disposition, which stands in contrast to what replaced it after the great ‘separation’ from conditions of living labour and the means of existence. More importantly, Marx additionally saw the incidence of ‘free day labourers’ in all places where either the Oriental community (Gemeinwesen) or the western commune (Gemeinde) ‘dissolved into individual element’ through the loss of conditions of self-sustaining labour. Here, Marx asserted that a ‘presupposition of wage labour’ historically is ‘free labour’. The result of this inversion was the disappearance of free workers as proprietors – ‘members of the community’ ‘who at the same time work’. Here, it seems, Marx resorted to the tactic of inverting the inversion (recalling the negation of the negation), whereby the naturalness attributed to capitalism by political economy already constituted an inversion of the historical real, which he now tried to restore with a second inversion. Communal land owners, in any case, worked not to create value, but to maintain the individual proprietor and his family, not to forget the ‘total community’ itself. While Marx emphasized this form’s relationship to the ‘property of the community’, whereby each individual constitutes a link as a member and proprietor, he was convinced that the form could be realized in very different ways – in the Asiatic, Slavonic and Romanian communes, if not the Russian mir. The various forms present variations of a primary historic presupposition, not evolving in progressive sequences and stages in a unilinear chronology but rather moving according to different and uneven temporalities contingent on their historically different circumstances. The commune, wherever encountered, appeared as a ‘coming-together’ (Vereinigung) – a ‘unification made up of independent subjects, landed proprietors, not as a unity’. Their aim was survival through reproduction, and the collapse of these archaic communities followed a rhythm determined by their different circumstances. The Asiatic, Marx observed, held out longest, owing to its presuppositions that the individual does not become independent vis-à-vis the community – that is, their difference from a universalist norm of ‘communal labour’ and ‘naturally arisen, spontaneous communal property’. The temporal unevenness accompanying the dissolution of the ancient form was at the heart of Marx’s new view of history. By the same measure Capital makes clear that his ‘sketch’ derives from the English example, which represents the ‘classic form’. But the history of the expropriation of agricultural producers ‘assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs throughout various phases in different orders of succession, and different epochs’. To be sure, primitive accumulation referred only to countries already embarked on the capitalist route, but there is no reason to exclude those colonized regions like India and China in the late nineteenth century, where forms of wage labour were already established in certain enterprises devoted to the production of tea, if not opium. This suggests that differential temporal rates, if not histories, marked each society’s development along a capitalist itinerary that reflected the ‘uneven development of material production relative to, for example, artistic development’ and indeed between different spheres of social activity and among a diversity of societies. It is interesting to note that Japanese philosophers before World War II who were not Marxists had already recognized the different temporalities and histories lived by different societies and had identified the false universalism represented by the ‘European’ model. The new historical temporality did away with the image of a universal history and its ‘abstract notion of progress’, which was invariably based on the presumption of a linear and homogeneous history, ‘wherein the flow of time and meaning coincide’. In fact, logical order took precedence over genetic order, which, accordingly, was ‘confused with empirical history’. But this was precisely the conception of historical time promoted by the nation-state. When both nation form and the representation of history were
was more hopeful when Marx remarked to remain something … [it] has become, but in the historical development’, whereby mankind ‘strives not with no presupposition other than the previous his forces etc. created through universal exchange? … The absolute working out of … creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historical development’, whereby mankind ‘strives not to remain something … [it] has become, but in the absolute movement of becoming’? With this view, the question we must ask is, who needs postcoloniality? For Lindner, it is important for Marxism to enter into a cooperative discussion between a Marx stripped of charges of Eurocentrism and cultural superiority and postcolonial studies that will ‘deepen their analysis of contradictions by adopting a global perspective’. Yet what else was Marx’s critique and Marxism but an analysis devoted to dissembling capital’s contradictions on a global scale? Postcolonial studies provides a new perspective for understanding historical progress. But in the heterological history made possible by uneven flows and the prospect of untimeliness, ‘progress’ would, as I have suggested, have to be released from its unilinear mooring and rethought as a relative progress that considers missed opportunities and vanished, defeated possibilities. Marx must be open to the prospect of contingency. Here, Lindner quotes approvingly from Louis Althusser, who, at the last count, was a Marxist of long standing, and points to his reflections on the ‘materialist philosophy of the encounter’. But Althusser, following Marx and Lenin, saw this ‘encounter’ as identical with the idea of ‘conjuncture’, the optic through which to think the historical reality of those moments when a diversity of circumstances from different sectors confront each other to present ‘a world, torn between powers in collusion and the “crises” which unites them in a circle’. This historical reality referred to the conviction that while historical periods have their laws, ‘they can also change at the drop of a hat revealing the aleatory basis that sustains, … without reason … without intelligible end’. This is the history of capitalism, a series of contingent historical encounters producing practices, which subsequently were reordered as categories into a logic of relationships to become the mature form of capitalism. Well before Althusser, I should add, the Japanese economist Uno Kozo had already worked out this Marxian conception of contingency and recognized how it necessarily separated history from logic. Where the cleft remains between Marxism and postcoloniality, in the final analysis, is in the dematerialization of the latter as a condition of its own discursive possibility and opposition to the former. For its part, what Marxism needs to learn is how to shed its parochial ‘Western’ identity (in what has been named ‘Western Marxism’), since it has contributed to reinforcing the idea of a unified West. This modest task might hopefully be begun by ending the practice of referring to regions outside Euro-America in the negativity of ‘non-Western’. It might also learn to acquire a sensitivity towards postcolonialism’s concerns for memory and a
m melancholy provoked by the irretrievable loss inflicted by capitalism’s immeasurable destruction of what Fanon described as received ‘cultures of reference’.

Notes

Thanks, again, to Kristin Ross for critical commentary and editorial suggestions.


5. Ibid., p. 3.


7. Ibid., p. 9.


9. See J.G. Farrell, Troubles, Review Books Classics, New York, 2002, on the last days of the British imperial presence in Ireland, centred on the irreparable hotel of this fading glory, the Majestic, a sure inspiration for the later Fawlty Towers.


13. Ibid., p. 19.

14. Ibid.


17. Ibid., pp. 460–61.

18. Bensaid, Marx for Our Times, p. 27; Grundrisse, p. 106.


22. Ibid., p. 471; Anderson, Marx at the Margins, p. 156.

23. Ibid., p. 471.


27. Ibid., p. 465.

28. Ibid., p. 471.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., p. 472.

31. Ibid., p. 483.

32. Ibid., p. 493.


34. Capital, Volume 1, p. 876.


36. See Koyama Iwao, Sekai shi no tetsugaku (The Philosophy of World History), Tokyo, pp. 446ff. This text was actually written in 1941, by one of the leading philosophers of the Kyoto School, and represents the most thorough nationalist critique of European models of modernity.

37. Bensaid, Marx for Our Times, p. 21.


39. Ibid., p. 23.

40. Shanin, Late Marx, p. 106.

41. See Bensaid, Marx for Our Times, p. 32.

42. Grundrisse, p. 488.

43. Bensaid, Marx for Our Times, p. 32.


45. Ibid., p. 196.