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## Marx, 1917, and Asiatic Societies

**Abstract:** This article asks whether the 1917 Russian revolution was a revolution against Marx's *Das Kapital*, as Gramsci claimed. The answer is that Marx changed his approach to historical development and, from the late 1850s onwards, adopted a multilinear rather than a unilinear theory of history. This put in question the idea that capitalism was a necessary prelude to a fully communist society. The article finishes by asking what a fully communist society – one, according to Marx, based on needs rather than wants – might look like and the role of technology therein.

**Keywords:** Marx, Asiatic Societies, Capitalism, Communism

We are now, very nearly to the day, marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution of 1917. It is also 150 years since the publication of the Volume One of *Capital*. This article is devoted to reflecting on the historical significance of these two events.

In January 1918 Gramsci published a now famous article entitled “The Revolution Against Capital”. I want to suggest that Gramsci can here be misleading. His target is a very determinist reading of historical materialism in general and of *Capital* in particular – one that decrees that societies most ineluctably pass through certain states in their path to communism.

I consider Gramsci to be the most original and fruitful of all Western Marxist philosophers. His point in his 1918 article was that “They [the Bolsheviks] are living Marxist thought; which is eternal, which represents the continuation of Italian and German idealism, which in Marx was contaminated by positivist and naturalist incrustations” (Gramsci, 1977, p. 34). Here, however, Gramsci is not entirely fair to Marx. I aim to show that – even in *Capital* – Marx was not as unilinearly determinist as Gramsci might suggest. I ask, therefore, the following questions: Did Marx think that capitalism was a necessary prelude to socialism/communism? Finding an answer to this question inevitably touches on two further ones: is economic growth necessarily a good thing –

given ecological considerations? And: what are the defining characteristics of a communist society?

The core question here is how to interpret the classical summary – the “guiding thread” of his studies – in Marx’s 1859 *Preface* to his *Critique of Political Economy* (2000, p. 425 f.). Is his account of the progress of humanity through various stages on the road to communism merely descriptive (telling us how things were) or also normative (saying that this – and future – development is a good thing)? The apparent praise of capitalism as a globalizing economic force might seem to suggest the latter.

However, recent scholarship concerning Marx’s views on pre-capitalist societies casts doubt on this.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that Marx substantially changed his views here – from those expressed in the late 1840s and early 1850s to those expressed from the late 1850s onwards. In the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, Marx writes that “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 [...]” (2000, p. 249). Thus Marx seems to think that Britain’s First Opium War against China of 1839–1842 was, in some sense, progressive. The same approach is found in Marx’s articles for the *New York Daily Tribune* in the early 1850s. Here the view was that colonialism was, on the whole, a progressive force. And, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx backs up this view more theoretically with the statement that socialism will only really be on the agenda when the world market has been established and capitalism has reached some ultimate limit to its expansion.<sup>2</sup>

But Marx’s approach alters noticeably in the late 1850s. This is in large part due to the Indian Mutiny of 1857 which threatened British control of India. Marx enthusiastically supported the mutiny and so it was natural that he would take the same attitude to Britain’s Second Opium War against China in 1856–1860 where he strongly supported the Chinese.

These geo-political events led Marx to a modification in his theory of historical progress. In his *Preface* to the *Critique of Political Economy* he mentions, in addition to the ancient, feudal, and bourgeois modes of production, one that he terms “Asiatic”. Here, it may be argued, Marx outlines a more multilineal view of world economic development than the linear view of, say, the *German Ideology*. As Lichtheim has noted, by the time Marx came to publish *Capital*, “the ‘Asiatic mode’ comes in for favourable comment, at any rate as far as the village

<sup>1</sup> See in particular Anderson, 2010 and Anderson, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Marx, 2000, p. 405 ff.

community is concerned: it is valued as a bulwark against social disintegration” (Lichtheim, 1963, p. 98).

Marx’s revision of his previous opinion is further illustrated by the changes he made to subsequent editions of *Capital*, particularly the French edition of 1872–1875.<sup>3</sup> A good example would be where Marx modifies the original German which reads “the country which is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future” (Marx, 2000, p. 453). The French version has an additional clause which substantially modifies the meaning. The sentence now reads: “The country which is more developed industrially only shows *to those who follow it up the industrial ladder* the image of its own future” (Marx, 1965, p. 549).<sup>4</sup>

This change of emphasis clearly comes to the fore in Marx’s better known writings on Russia. Apart from the Preface to the Russian translation of the *Communist Manifesto*, these were unpublished in his lifetime. Concerning the Russian communes, in his 1877 letter to Mikhailovsky, Marx takes issue with him on the grounds that “he feels he absolutely must metamorphose my sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophic theory of the general path every people is fated to tread, whatever the historical circumstances in which it finds itself” (2000, p. 618). And in his 1881 letter to Vera Sasoulitch, Marx writes similarly that

[...] *the analysis given in Capital assigns no reason for or against the vitality of the vital community [...]. This community is the mainspring of Russia’s social regeneration, but in order that it might function as such one would first have to eliminate the deleterious influences which assail it from every quarter and then to ensure the conditions normal for spontaneous development* (Marx, 2000, p. 624).

This interpretation can be challenged on the grounds that the main thrust of Marx’s historical materialism is that the emergence of bourgeois society and its capitalist economic underpinning is indeed a necessary precondition for the establishment of socialism/communism. In this view, only capitalist expansion can provide the abundance essential for a communist society. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx writes: “the different states of different civilised countries, in spite of their various differences in form, all have something in common, namely that they are based on modern bourgeois society, just that it is more or less capitalistically developed” (2000, p. 611). In other words, economic growth is essential and this can only be provided, at present, by Capitalism. As Matthew Johnson says in his critical review of Anderson’s book:

<sup>3</sup> On this subject, see further Anderson, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> There is further information about Marx’s later additions to *Capital* in vol. 2 of the new MEGA.

*Marx remains committed to the view that the productive capacities of industrial capitalism provide the greatest potential for the satisfaction of human needs and the development of human capabilities. His problem with bourgeois society is that it fails, hideously, to realise that potential as a result of its obsession with the accumulation of capital* (Johnson, 2012, p. 205).

From this perspective, Marx is talking about the achievement of a society which is based on the material affluence of bourgeois society but free of the barbarity employed in its initial realisation. In a famous passage in the same *Critical* Marx tells us that “the higher phase of communist society” can only come about “after the productive forces have [...] increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly” (Marx, 2000, p. 615). But there is, nevertheless, another side to the story. In the same text, Marx notes, equally famously, that the slogan that communist society inscribes on its banners is “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” (Marx, 2000, p. 615). And clearly a society based on need is a very different society from one based on wants. Needs are limited – wants are not.

From a broader and more philosophical perspective, we might consider Frederic Jameson’s view that the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the marginalisation of pre-capitalist economic and social formations in the so-called Third World sets the stage for Marxism to come into its own. In an impressive dialectical sweep, Jameson takes as his starting point “the conviction that the World-wide triumph of capitalism at one and the same time secures the priority of Marxism as the ultimate horizon of thought in our time” (Jameson, 2010, p. 607).<sup>5</sup>

One final thought. The above discussion needs to be seen in the light of the current, and growing, ecological crisis. That this crisis is the result, in large part, of industrialisation in general and of the capitalist mode of production in particular, is clear to all but the most obstinate climate-change deniers. Capitalism has an inbuilt drive to economic growth. As Marx and Engels explained in the *Communist Manifesto*, Capitalism not only produces ever new objects in wave after wave of technical innovation; it also produces new wants and desires in seemingly infinitive measure. The resulting imperative is: expand or die. But the world’s resources are limited and more likely to be able to sustain a society based on needs rather than wants.

Thus the current ecological crisis may persuade us to re-evaluate the historical position of pre-capitalist social and economic formations. What of its polit-

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<sup>5</sup> See further, the comments of Benjamin Kunkel (2014, p. 64 ff.).

ical form? A co-operative socialism would obviously be the best, but some form of fascism could probably cope. The one political arrangement that will not cope is the one dominant at the moment in the West – interest-group based liberal democracy in which typical solutions to environmental problems are proposed via market mechanisms such as carbon trading. Such approaches are hopelessly ineffective as they lack the social cohesion and long-term planning which alone can confront the crisis. To quote Jameson again:

*What needs to be affirmed here is the dependence of ecological political aims on the existence of socialist governments: it is a logical argument and has nothing to do with the abuse of nature and ecology by communist governments in the East who were ruthless and desperate in their pursuit of rapid modernization. Rather, it can be determined a priori that ecological modifications are so expensive, require such massive technology, and also such thorough going enforcement and policing, that they could only be achieved by a strong and determined government (and probably a world-wide government at that) (Jameson, 2010, p. 381).*

To return to my starting point. I believe I have shown that Marx, at least in his later writings, argues that pre-capitalist social and economic formations contained valuable elements that capitalism was increasingly destroying. It is clear that, for Marx, the solution to current crises does not consist solely in the redistribution of wealth. It lies rather in forming a society in which people can live fulfilled and non-alienated lives. And it is here that both the romantic element in Marx's thought and his reflections on the values inherent in pre-capitalist social formations plays a role. Marx's whole view of human nature indicated that, even before politics and economics, our focus should be on the social possibilities of a new society. This may well include an increase in the use of technology, but as a servant to social progress and not its master.

Allow me to finish with a quotation from the excellent journal *International Critical Thought* published in Beijing by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences:

*Marxian analysis is important, because Marx was aware that science and technology are not neutral. The choice of where to look for the solutions to practical problems is socially determined. Much of the technology developed under capitalism has been devised for such purposes as maximizing capitalist control over the work-process (e.g. through the assembly line) and over nature (e.g. through genetic engineering) and maximizing the number of commodities that could be sold. Seemingly benign inventions, as in the field of communications, may have unknown negative health-effects, may have disruptive impacts on human interaction, and may consume inordinate amounts*

of energy. The point here is that technology is a double-edged weapon. Marx recognised this and his approach alerts us to the ways in which society could collectively decide which technologies can be used to advantage (or developed further) and which should be rejected (Wallis, Mingliang, 2017).

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