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Marx's Eurocentrism: Postcolonial Studies and Marx Scholarship

Kolja Lindner

The English jackasses need an enormous amount of time to arrive at an even approximate understanding of the real conditions of... conquered groups.

Karl Marx, 1879

A great deal of ink has already been spilled on the question of Marx's Eurocentrism. The debate turns on his relationship to colonialism, the conception of Asian societies which informs it, and his theory of social formations and social progress. Special attention has been paid to Marx's 1853 article on British colonialism in India. In the field of Marxian studies *per se* (MS), approaches to the subject have been either apologetic or strictly philological. A few exceptions aside, comprehensive treatments of the theme written from an anti-authoritarian (*herrschaftskritisch*)¹ standpoint are non-existent, and there also exists no systematic examination of Eurocentrism in Marx's work as a whole. The chief contribution of Marx scholarship here resides in the ongoing publication of the scholarly edition of his writings, which provides a basis for a balanced discussion of the subject.

The question has also been addressed in postcolonial studies (PS). Here, critical voices dominate. Marx is said to have defended a 'Eurocentric model of political emancipation that consistently ignores the experiences of colonised subjects in non-Western societies' and to have 'failed to develop his studies of India and Africa into a fully elaborated analysis of imperialism'; his analyses neglect 'disenfranchised groups such as colonised subjects'.² Edward Said, whose study of Orientalism has become a classic in the field, goes so far as to accuse Marx of a racist Orientalisation of the non-Western world.³ There accordingly exists a powerful tendency in PS to dismiss Marx as a Eurocentric or even Orientalist thinker, the author of a philosophy of history.

Against this backdrop, I attempt, in the pages that follow,⁴ to contribute to a dialogue between these two strands of Marxian studies on the one hand and postcolonial studies on the

¹ *Herrschaftskritisch*: a concept popularised by the Frankfurt school which means, literally, critical of all forms of domination, based on class, race, gender, etc. [*Trans.*]

² María do Mar Castro Varela/Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*, Transcript, Bielefeld, 2005, p. 64.

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage, New York, 1978, p. 155.

⁴ I thank Lotte Arndt and Urs Lindner, among others, for helpful suggestions and comments.

other. I begin by considering the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism (Part 1), concretising it in an analysis of one of Marx's sources, François Bernier's Indian travelogue (Part 3). My aim is to show, among other things, what MS can learn from PS. I also trace (Parts 2, 4, 5, and 6) Marx's treatment 'of non-Western' societies through his life's work, insofar as it is available to us. (In Marx, and, therefore, in the present essay as well, 'non-Western' is used as a synonym for 'pre-colonial' or 'pre-capitalist'.) It will appear that Marx's work evolves in this respect. In sum, he gradually comes to reject Eurocentric assumptions. Thus my essay also constitutes an objection to the often hasty dismissal of Marx in PS.

Marx's abiding theoretical preoccupation with various (non-European) forms of (pre-capitalist) land ownership plays a particularly important role in his progressive abandonment of Eurocentrism. Since Marx himself never journeyed to the regions of the non-Western world he wrote about, and never carried out systematic empirical research on them, his knowledge derives in part from massively Eurocentric sources, above all British, such as travel writing, parliamentary reports, and theoretical treatises. On the view prevailing in this literature, there was no private land ownership in Asia.⁵ This is a false, Orientalist notion that has since been thoroughly discredited by historians. Charting Marx's gradual turn from Eurocentrism therefore also involves determining the degree to which he freed himself from these notions, the stock-in-trade of 'the English jackasses'.

1. The Concept of Eurocentrism

It makes sense, given our objectives here, to define Eurocentrism. It has four dimensions:

a) A form of ethnocentrism distinguished not only by the presumption that Western societies are superior, but also by the attempt to justify this presumption in rational, scientific terms. This worldview goes hand-in-hand with the aspiration to subject the whole world to such rationality.⁶ The discourse in question treats Western Europe as the political, economic, theoretical and, sometimes, *racial* centre of the world.⁷

b) An 'Orientalist' way of looking at the non-Western world which has less to do with the real conditions prevailing there than with what Said calls the 'European Western Experi-

⁵ In the present context (contrast the market for real estate in advanced capitalism), the decisive criterion for private ownership of land is its alienability. Crucial here is the economic aspect of ownership (disposability/appropriation), not the juridical elaboration of it.

⁶ See Gerhard Hauck, *Die Gesellschaftstheorie und ihr Anderes. Wider den Eurozentrismus der Sozialwissenschaften*, Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster, 2003, p. 14.

⁷ See Jani Pranav, 'Marx, Eurocentrism, and the 1857 Revolt in British India', in Crystal Bartolovich/Neil Lazarus (Eds.), *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*, CUP, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 81-97, here p. 94.

ence'. The world as whole is imagined from a regional standpoint. The measure used in compiling impressions of the extra-European world conveyed by diverse genres of writing is furnished, not by reality, but by a Western European conceptual system. There emerges, as an expression of economic, political, cultural, and military domination, an institutionally sanctioned geopolitical discourse which creates these 'other' regions of the world in the first place ('the Orient' in Said's analysis; in Marx's, 'Asia') by means of homogenisation, co-optation, and so forth. Their inhabitants are transformed into distorted mirror images of the European self-image.

c) A conception of development which, by means of a 'false universalism... uncritically makes the cultural and historical patterns of capitalist Western Europe the established standards for all human history and culture'.⁸ With this in mind, it is sometimes taken for granted, or even demanded, that the whole world should develop, or be developed, on the Western European model.

d) Effacement of non-European history, or, more precisely, of its influence on European development. What is known as 'global history' seeks to counteract this by focussing on the interaction between different regions of the world. It thus denies Europe an exclusive position, transforming or 'provincialising' its universalistic conceptions with the help of particularistic history. The premise here is that 'ideological and political conflict had... achieved a global scale, *before* economic uniformities were established across much of the world'.⁹ Thus the suppression of the 'interweaving of the European with the extra-European world', that is, of the 'history of [their] intertwining', can be regarded as Eurocentric.¹⁰

A thin line separates the first two dimensions of Eurocentrism from racism. The border is crossed when the ethnocentric assumptions are articulated in a discourse about essential differences. The other two dimensions generally culminate in an authoritarian universalisation of the particular.

2. Marx's 1853 Essays on India

Marx produced his famous essays on India in the framework of a series of articles that he

⁸ Gunter Willing, 'Eurozentrismus', in Wolfgang F. Haug (Ed.), *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Vol. 3, Argument, Hamburg/Berlin, 1997, pp. 1023-1032, here p. 1023.

⁹ Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914. Global Connections and Comparisons*, Blackwell, Malden/Oxford/Carlton, 2004, p. 7.

¹⁰ Sebastian Conrad/Shalini Randeria, 'Einleitung. Geteilte Geschichten – Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt', in Sebastian Conrad/Shalini Randeria (Eds.), *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Campus, Frankfurt/Main/New York, pp. 9-49, here p. 42.

wrote in the early 1850s for the *New York Daily Tribune (NYDT)*. One hallmark of these essays is Marx's perception of India's social structure as static. India's climatic conditions, on his analysis, necessitated an artificial irrigation system, which, as a result of the low level of social development and the sheer size of the country, could be created and maintained only by a central state authority. It was characterised by unity between agriculture and manufactures (handicrafts) that limited the development of productivity. Such a system discouraged the emergence of urban centres. Marx regards the structure and isolation of India's village communities as 'the solid foundation of oriental despotism' and of the country's 'stagnation'.¹¹ Finally, he proceeds on the assumption that the state, in this 'Asiatic society' is 'the real landlord' thanks to complicated tax and property laws.¹²

Marx's condemnation of British colonialism is based on this conception of the structure of Indian society. It is ambivalent: England, he says, has 'has to fulfill [sic] a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia'.¹³ Manifestly, he sets out from the premise that colonialism has promoted India's development. The consolidation of the Indian railway system¹⁴ on his analysis, could facilitate further development of the overtaxed irrigation system.¹⁵

He further assumes that the introduction of steam-driven machinery or scientific methods of production would induce the separation of agriculture and manufactures in the country.¹⁶ Moreover, India's integration into the world market, Marx says, would rescue it from its isolation. Finally, British rule, in his estimation, has led to the emergence of a system based on private land ownership.¹⁷ In short, the economic bases of the Indian village system are disintegrating, and colonial intervention has led to the 'the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia'.¹⁸

To be sure, Marx's ambivalent picture of colonialism includes the idea that India can profit from technological transfer only on condition that it cast off the colonial yoke, or that

¹¹ Marx, 'The British Rule in India', *NYDT*, 25 June 1853, *MECW*, Vol. 12, p. 132.

¹² Marx, 'The War Question', *NYDT*, 19 July 1853, *MECW*, vol. 12, p. 215.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁴ See Marx, 'The Western Powers and Turkey', *NYDT*, 4 October 1853, *MECW*, vol. 12, p. 316.

¹⁵ See Marx, 'The Future Results of British Rule in India', *NYDT*, 8 August 1853, *MECW*, vol. 12, p. 217-222.

¹⁶ See Marx, 'The British Rule in India'.

¹⁷ See Marx See Marx, 'The Future Results of British Rule in India', p. 218.

¹⁸ Marx, 'The British Rule in India', p. 132.

‘in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat’¹⁹ Furthermore, Marx by no means ignores the colonial power’s selfish approach to the development of productive forces in India or the destructive aspects of colonialism it remains the case, on his view, that ‘whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution’²⁰; in other words, in creating ‘the material basis of the new world’.²¹

Marx’s articles on India are Eurocentric in all of the senses defined a moment ago. *In the first place*, they one-sidedly treat Europe as a society with a superior technology, infrastructure, legal system, and so on. In this connection, Marx attaches special importance to private land ownership. His assumption is that European property relations make social progress possible in consequence of class divisions and, thus, the class conflicts that go hand-in-hand with them. The situation in India, in contrast, is marked, on his view, by despotism and stagnation. This description of Indian village communities is deceptive, insofar as it presents them as stagnant, self-enclosed entities which, isolated and lacking all communication with the outside world, stood over against a king who was sole owner of all land; it masks the fact that these communities were themselves traversed by class divisions. There was, moreover, unmistakable development of the productive forces as well as commodity production in pre-colonial India, whose social structure must therefore be regarded as conflictual and dynamic.²² In line with the *third dimension* of Eurocentrism, Marx elevates a particularistic development to the rank of the universal: the creation of a ‘Western social order in Asia’ is, he assumes, a necessary station on the path to the creation of a classless society, a path he conceives as human ‘destiny’.²³ This is problematic not only because India’s indigenous potential for development is not taken into account, but also because its social structure is perceived exclusively as a barrier to progress or, at any rate, as standing in need of radical transformation. Moreover, the overestimation of the development of Western Europe is predicated on the highly speculative assumption that European conditions could be transferred intact to India and would thus serve as the point of departure for a revolutionary movement there. Marx fails

¹⁹ Marx, ‘The Future Results of British Rule in India’, p. 221.

²⁰ Marx, ‘The British Rule in India’, p. 132.

²¹ Marx, ‘The Future Results of British Rule in India’, p. 222.

²² See Hassan Gardezi, ‘South Asia and the Asiatic Mode of Production: Some Conceptual and Empirical Problems’, in *Bulletin of concerned Asian scholars*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 1979, pp. 40-44, here pp. 40ff and Brendan O’Leary, *The Asiatic Mode of Production. Oriental Despotism, Historical Materialism and Indian History*, Blackwell, Oxford/Cambridge, 1989, pp. 299ff.

to see that, in international capitalism, the different regions of the world are integrated into the world market asymmetrically, or are confronted with different possibilities and perspectives for development.²⁴ It is less a question of ‘an inevitable transformation’ of precapitalist modes and their transformation by capitalist relations’ than of ‘an articulation between different modes of production, structured in some relation of dominance’.²⁵

With respect to the *fourth* dimension of Eurocentrism, Marx’s articles on India must be regarded as Eurocentric in the sense brought out by students of global history. While it is true that Marx emphasises the interaction between different regions of the world, his analyses are confined to the economic sphere. Moreover, they are, with rare exceptions, one-sided, since, as a rule, he is interested only in the effects that integration into the world market has on non-European countries, not on the European countries themselves. Intertwined histories outside the economic sphere, as elaborated in the Indian case by, say, Chakrabarty are quite simply nowhere to be found Marx.²⁶

3. Marx’s Eurocentric Sources: François Bernier

In what follows, I pay particular attention to the *second* dimension of Eurocentrism, ‘Orientalizing the Oriental’.²⁷ Marx takes over the Eurocentrism of his sources without reflection. Critical examination of those sources is a task that Marx scholarship has, generally speaking, neglected, a deficiency particularly conspicuous when it comes to travel writing, about which Said says: ‘From travelers’ tales, and not only from great institutions like the various India companies, colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured’.²⁸ Discussion of Marx’s source material, even by writers concerned with his Eurocentrism, has hitherto focussed on his use of classical political philosophy and political economy.²⁹ This is puzzling, not only because of the significance of travel writing for the development of the ~~Western imagination, but also because Marx writes, in a 2 June 1853 letter to Engels (three~~

²³ Marx, ‘The British Rule in India’, p. 132.

²⁴ See Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory. Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Verso, London/New York, 1994, pp. 226 and 241. See also Bipan Chandra, ‘Marx, his theories of Asian societies and colonial rule’, in UNESCO, *Sociological theories: race and colonialism*, Paris, 1980, pp. 383-451, here pp. 399ff, pp. 428ff.

²⁵ Stuart Hall, ‘Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance’ (1980), in Houston Backer/Manthia A. Diawara/Ruth H. Lindeborg (Eds.), *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, University of Chicago, Chicago/London, 1996, pp. 16-60, here p. 33.

²⁶ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, p. 180ff.

²⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 49.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²⁹ See Amady A. Dieng, *Le marxisme et l’Afrique noire. Bilan d’un débat sur l’universalité du marxisme*, Nubia,

nation, but also because Marx writes, in a 2 June 1853 letter to Engels (three weeks before the *NYDT* published the first of his articles on India), that ‘on the subject of the growth of eastern cities one could hardly find anything more brilliant, comprehensive or striking than *Voyages contenant la description des états du Grand Mogol*, etc. by old François Bernier (for 9 years Aurangzeb’s physician)’.³⁰ It is, moreover, this source which Marx takes as justification for his conclusion that the non-existence of private property in Asia is ‘the real *clef*, even to the eastern heaven’.³¹ Finally, Engels, in his response to Marx four days later, himself cites Bernier in defence of the thesis that the non-existence of private ownership of land is due to the climate and to soil conditions³² a thesis that Marx adopts, in part verbatim, in his first article on India. I shall consider Bernier’s travelogue in some detail, not only because it has so far been neglected by Marx scholars, but also because such analysis offers, in my view, an example of the way that MS could apply insights gleaned from PS to a comprehensive study of Marx’s Eurocentrism partially based on a critical examination of his sources.

François Bernier (1620-1688) was a French doctor and physicist who spent a total of twelve years in India. After returning to France in 1670, he wrote an influential travel narrative that was translated into several European languages and saw several editions.³³ It comprised one of the main sources for a widespread belief, shared by Western thinkers such as Montesquieu and Hegel, in the existence of something known as ‘Oriental despotism’.³⁴ Bernier contended that, in India, only the monarchs owned the land, deriving the revenues they lived on from it.

The king is sole proprietor of all the land in his kingdom. Whence, by a certain necessity, the fact that capital cities such as Delhi or Agra derive their income almost entirely from the militia and are accordingly obliged to follow the king when he leaves for the countryside for a certain period.³⁵

This thesis is an Orientalist projection *par excellence*. It is rooted in a subjective impression of the superiority of the European social and legal order and has nothing to do with real conditions in India. The ‘jackass’, even if he is French rather than English in the case to hand,

Paris, 1985; Brendan O’Leary, *The Asiatic Mode of Production*, pp. 47-81.

³⁰ Marx to Engels, 2 June, 1853, *MECW*, vol. 39, p. 332.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 332 and 334.

³² See Engels to Marx, 6 June, 1853, *MECW*, vol. 39, p. 341.

³³ See Lucette Valensi, ‘BERNIER François’, in François Pouillon (Ed.), *Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française*, Karthala, Paris, 2008, pp. 98-99.

³⁴ See Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, Verso, London 1979, pp. 464ff; Brendan O’Leary, *The Asiatic Mode of Production*, pp. 43-73.

³⁵ François Bernier, *Voyages dans les États du Grand Mogol* (1724), Fayard, Paris, 1981, p. 73. Marx cites this passage in his June 1853 letter to Engels, underscoring the words ‘sole proprietor of the land’ and ‘capital city’.

has not arrived at even an ‘approximate’ understanding of ‘real conditions’: numerous historical analyses have established that, in pre-colonial India, land ownership was not centralised and landed property could be alienated, i.e., that that private land ownership existed.³⁶ The denial of private land ownership is only one aspect of the Orientalist discourse that traverses Bernier’s travel account from one end to the other. His description of superstition in India is another. Bernier depicts it as a determining feature of Indian society: Indians consult astrologers, he says, ‘in all their undertakings’.³⁷ Stuurmann argues that this is not a ‘straightforward affirmation of European superiority’, inasmuch as Bernier also rails against European superstition and makes fun of Western missionaries.³⁸ I would counter that that Bernier’s Orientalism makes itself felt nonetheless. In the passage just cited, for example, he does not attribute superstition to certain social circles alone, inevitably leaving European readers with the impression that Indian society in general is characterised by a mental darkness distinguishing it from its European counterpart. Marx’s depiction of India as a stagnant country incapable of progress, whose modernity does not stem from internal factors, has one of its sources here.

Bernier’s text displays other Orientalist features. I agree with Stuurman that, although *race* is not a structuring category in his travelogue, whiteness is an omnipresent subtext in it. Bernier’s descriptions often spill over into manifest essentialisation. Thus we read that Indian craftsmen are ‘extremely lazy by nature’³⁹, that a majority of Indians are ‘of a slow, indolent disposition’.⁴⁰ and so on. Such essentialisation goes hand-in-hand with typically Orientalist outbursts of enthusiasm about ‘this little earthly paradise, the Indies’.⁴¹ Bernier does not, however, merely acquit himself of these mandatory Orientalist exercises; he sets himself apart from the Orientalist crowd by announcing that he knows no Sanskrit.⁴² The grounds for his broad generalisations about India thus remains rather obscure; they are not, in any case, based on native sources. In the context of the nascent European colonisation of India, the objective of which was to bend the colonised regions to European interests, this is hardly surprising.

³⁶ See Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, pp. 487ff and pp. 496ff; Chandra, ‘Marx, his theories of Asian societies and colonial rule’, pp. 419ff; Brendan O’Leary, *The Asiatic Mode of Production*, pp. 290ff.

³⁷ Bernier, *Voyages dans les États du Grand Mogol*, p. 120.

³⁸ Siep Stuurman, ‘François Bernier and the Invention of Racial Classification’, in *History Workshop Journal*, No. 50, 2000, pp. 1-21, here p. 7.

³⁹ Bernier, *Voyages dans les États du Grand Mogol*, p. 145.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁴¹ Bernier, *Voyages. Contenant la Description des États du Grand Mogol, De L’Hindoustan, du Royaume de Kachemire, & c.*, 2 Vol., Paul Marret, Amsterdam 1699, Vol. 1, p. 250.

⁴² See Bernier, *Voyages dans les États du Grand Mogol*, p. 247.

We must here take into account the tendency, established by PS, to treat classical autochthonous texts with suspicion as sources of knowledge, relying instead on one's own observations, on the assumption that 'the Orient' is incapable of speaking for itself.⁴³ It is an integral part of the comprehensive colonialist undertaking.

Another point in Bernier's narrative that has received some attention in PS should be mentioned here: Western discourses about the burning alive of widows in India. Without trying to justify this custom, Gayatri C. Spivak has shown how these discourses limit subaltern women's capacity to speak and act.⁴⁴ One can indeed see, in Bernier's travelogue, how his intervention in favour of a widow menaced with immolation is not only of a piece with the depiction of her as hysterical or pathological, thereby constricting subaltern female agency, but is also bound up with a denunciation of the 'barbaric customs' of this 'idolatrous people'.⁴⁵ Thus the rescue of an Indian widow becomes, for the Frenchman, a 'signifier for the establishment of a good society'⁴⁶ – a discourse which, in the final analysis, imposes still heavier ideological constraints on these women than the colonial situation itself already has.⁴⁷

Thus Bernier's narrative can be summarily described as an 'imaginative examination of things Oriental'.⁴⁸ Like any other Orientalist discourse, his descriptions not only project a picture of the 'other', but also help construct the European self-image. Thus 'superstitious', 'stagnant' India stands over against the 'disenchanted' Western societies of the day, marked by dramatic social upheavals. The fantasy of Indian 'indolence' and the Indian 'paradise' transforms the country into a foil for early capitalist Western Europe, characterised by diligence, dynamism, and self-denial. The ultimate effect is to contrast 'Asian despotism' with the 'enlightened Absolutism' of Europe and 'barbaric customs' with the 'good society'.⁴⁹

In short, Marx would have done well to subject his source to a critical examination rather than distilling a central element of his own assessment of India's social structure from it. Despite this failing, however, his differences from Bernier leap to the eye. He never engages

⁴³ See Said, *Orientalism*, p. 20f.

⁴⁴ See Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Can The Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson/Lawrence Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, Macmillan, Houndsmills/Basingstoke, 1988, pp. 271-313, here pp. 294ff.

⁴⁵ Bernier, *Voyages dans les États du Grand Mogol*, p. 232.

⁴⁶ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', p. 298.

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 305.

⁴⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 8.

⁴⁹ See R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, 'The Analysis of pre-colonial social Formations in Asia in the Writings of Marx', in *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, January 1976, pp. 365-388, here p. 367f.; Brendan O'Leary, *The Asiatic Mode of Production*, pp. 61ff.; Marian Sawer, *Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic*

in essentialisation. He does not cross the thin line between Orientalism and racism. While it is true that, as in his treatment of colonialism, he takes certain ‘facts’ from Orientalist or racist sources and incorporates them into a discourse on progress that is in many respects Eurocentric⁵⁰, the fact remains that he does not reproduce the essentialisation informing such sources. This problematic procedure, which is certainly quite naive, shows that Marx’s discussion of colonialism and slavery by no means unfolds in a generally anti-authoritarian context; an approach of that sort would attribute a place of its own to the extremely complex question of racism, which can by no stretch of the imagination be reduced to the question of the division of labour.⁵¹ Nevertheless, in the light of the foregoing, the affirmation that Marx himself is a racist⁵² seems to me unwarranted.

At any event, there can be no doubt that the Marx of the early 1850s had at his disposition neither a discriminating, non-Eurocentric perspective on colonialism nor sources that might have helped him to develop an accurate understanding of pre-colonial societies (one capable of realistically focussing attention on the social upheavals precipitated by colonialism). In the 1860s and beyond, he produced a more finely shaded account of these societies. In what follows, I shall accordingly try to indicate how he went about elaborating a more carefully drawn picture of colonial expansion, especially in his journalism of the 1860s, thereby breaking with at least two dimensions of Eurocentrism (Part 4). I shall then (Part 5) look briefly at certain Orientalist themes in the critique of political economy.

4. India vs. Ireland: The Beginnings of Marx’s Turn from Eurocentrism

There is disagreement as to whether Marx’s study of British colonialism in India or, rather, Ireland first led him to take a more carefully balanced position on the question. Pranav Jani contends that Marx overcame his Eurocentrism in studying the 1857-1859 Indian upris-

Mode of Production, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1977, p. 24f.

⁵⁰ See Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory. Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Verso, London/New York, 1994, pp. 226, 230 and 235.

⁵¹ A comprehensive anti-authoritarian approach to colonialism would bring out not only its economic, but also its epistemic dimension. Such a perspective must take into account the fact that the subjection and exploitation of a large part of the world by the West constituted a decisive intellectual, moral, and epistemological project with respect not only to its motives, but also its effects (notions of cultural superiority that paved the way for, grounded, and legitimised colonialism, the idea of a ‘civilising mission’, the construction of a colonised ‘Other’, and so on). (See Nicolas Bancel/Pascal Blanchard, ‘Les origines républicaines de la fracture coloniale’, in Nicolas Bancel/Pascal Blanchard/Sandrine Lemaire (Eds.), *La fracture coloniale. La société française au prisme de l’héritage colonial*, La Découverte, Paris, 2006, pp. 35-45). Marx is far from conceiving of colonialism as a complex project with moral, economic, intellectual, social, and cultural implications – notwithstanding the fact that analysing the connection between knowledge and power is one important objective of his critique of political economy.

ing. It is true that he acknowledges that the rebellion was partially justified⁵³ and mentions the difficulty of grasping Indian conditions using ‘Western concepts’. There is, however, little basis for Jani’s claim⁵⁴ that Marx’s initial acceptance of British assumptions about the passivity of the colonised gradually gives way, in his articles on the revolt, to the insight that the subaltern Indians were capable of taking independent action, the more so as these 1857/1858 articles are, unlike those of 1853, primarily intended to convey information, and do not contain nearly as much theoretisation, speculation, and pointed political analysis. Marx’s viewpoint in the late 1850s is basically military and strategic⁵⁵ – a perspective buttressed by the stereotypical portrayal of the Indian rebels and the evocation of a general Western superiority in Engels’s texts on the subject. *Pace* Jani, the commentaries on the British colonial power’s military logistics and battle plans are hardly marked by a critical attitude, let alone a shift in perspective towards anti-Eurocentrism. Reinhard Köbler has, moreover, rightly point out that, in Marx’s estimation, the rebellion was made possible in the first place by Britain’s creation of an indigenous army. Thus resistance to colonisation is supposed to have become possible only as a result ‘of innovations set in motion by the colonisation process, not as a prolongation of class struggles in the colonised countries themselves or thanks to specific structure forged by traditional social conditions and the revolutionary effects of the penetration of capitalism’.⁵⁶

It is difficult, in this light, to regard Marx’s texts on the Indian uprising as steps on the way to his break with Eurocentrism. However, I share Bipan Chandra’s view⁵⁷ that, by the 1860s at the latest, Marx (and Engels) had developed an awareness of the underdevelopment due to colonialism or the overall colonial context. They did so in connection with Ireland. Thus Marx depicts the suppression of industry in Ireland⁵⁸, the systematic elimination of markets for Irish agriculture, the outbreak of famines and rebellions, and Irish emigration to

⁵² See Said, *Orientalism*, p. 155.

⁵³ See Karl Marx, ‘Investigation of Tortures in India’, *NYDT*, 17 September 1857, *MECW*, vol. 15, p. 341; Marx, ‘The Indian Revolt’, *NYDT*, 16 September 1857, *MECW*, vol. 15, p. 353.

⁵⁴ See Jani Pranav, ‘Marx, Eurocentrism, and the 1857 Revolt in British India’, pp. 83ff.

⁵⁵ See Karl Marx, ‘The Revolt in the Indian Army’, *NYDT*, 15 July 1857, *MECW*, vol. 15, pp. 297–300; Marx, ‘The Revolt in India’, *NYDT*, 13 October 1857, *MECW*, vol. 15, pp. 365–8; Marx, ‘The Revolt in India’, *NYDT*, 23 October, 1857, *MECW*, vol. 15, pp. 369–73.

⁵⁶ Reinhard Köbler, *Dritte Internationale und Bauernrevolution. Die Herausbildung des sowjetischen Marxismus in der Debatte um die „asiatische“ Produktionsweise*, Campus, Frankfurt/Main/New York, 1982, p. 147.

⁵⁷ See Bipan Chandra, ‘Marx, his theories of Asian societies and colonial rule’, pp. 430ff.

⁵⁸ See Marx, ‘The Indian Question – Irish Tenant Right’, *NYDT*, 11 July 1853, *MECW*, vol. 12, pp. 157–62.

North America and Australia.⁵⁹ The emphasis on the British use of violence, however, influenced his shift of perspective less decisively than did his new assessment of the prospects for development opened up by colonialism. In the case of India, Marx observes that destruction and progress go hand-in-hand; this explains his ambivalent appreciation of England's 'double mission'. The example of Ireland, in contrast, shows him that colonialism ultimately brings the colonies asymmetrical integration into the world market, while actually throwing up barriers before the establishment of a capitalist mode of production, rather than promoting it. Ireland, says Marx, is the victim of murderous superexploitation – military, agricultural, and demographic.⁶⁰ Essential to the accumulation process in the 'motherland' is Ireland's colonial status, not its socio-economic development.

Interestingly, Marx draws political consequences from this insight; he concludes that, in order 'to accelerate the social development in Europe', social struggle will have to be waged in Ireland.⁶¹ He goes still further, positing that 'the decisive blow against the English ruling classes (and it will be decisive for the workers' movement all over the world) cannot be delivered in England, but *only in Ireland*'.⁶² It is true that Marx's perspective here is still partially marked by teleological notions of progress. Nevertheless, in contrast to India, said to be capable of throwing off the colonial yoke only if 'in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat'. Political upheaval is assigned, in the Irish case, decisive importance for revolutionary developments in the country of the colonisers itself. It is therefore no exaggeration, in my opinion, to speak of a 'revision' of Marx's positions on colonialism or national liberation by the latter half of the 1860s at the latest.⁶³ It is precisely this shift in Marx's position that leads to his first break with Eurocentrism.⁶⁴ He undoubtedly continues to regard England as a superior society, but he no longer credits Eng-

⁵⁹ See Marx, 'Ireland's Revenge', *Neue Oder-Zeitung*, 16 March, 1855, MECW, Vol. 14, p. 80. See also Marx, 'Outline of a Report on the Irish Question', 16 December, 1867, MECW, Vol. 21, pp. 194-206.

⁶⁰ See Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, MECW, vol. 35, pp. 688–703.

⁶¹ Karl Marx to Laura and Paul Larfargue, 5 March 1870, MECW, vol. 43, p. 449.

⁶² Karl Marx to Sigrid Meyer and August Vogt, 9 April 1870, MECW, vol. 43, p. 473.

⁶³ Torben Krings, 'Irische Frage', in Wolfgang F. Haug (Ed.), *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Vol. 6/II, Argument, Hamburg, 2004, pp. 1506-1517, here p. 1506.

⁶⁴ It may seem strange, at first glance, to associate Marx's break with Eurocentrism with Ireland, a country which, geographically at any rate, is part of Western Europe. However, as a result of the English colonisation of Ireland (1541-1922), Ireland and India were in structurally comparable situations: they were both non-capitalist societies under the colonial yoke of an (early) capitalist society. The Irish economy was heavily oriented toward the English market, or functionally integrated into English colonial expansion, and Ireland counted, in this period, as one of the most backward regions of Europe. It was, not least, for this reason that it was quite common to draw parallels between Ireland and India.

lish colonialism with initiating progressive developments in other regions of the world. Thus the universalisation of the 'Western social order' which the example of India was supposed to illustrate begins to crumble. Finally, Marx now conceives of the interaction between various areas of the world differently: it is no longer thought of in strictly economic or linear terms.

5. Orientalist Themes in Marx's Critique of Political Economy

Marx's critique of political economy is the most substantial and most fully elaborated part of his work. An examination of all four dimensions of Eurocentrism in the countless manuscripts and publications that make it up would constitute a research project in its own right. I shall here consider only the persistence of Orientalist themes in it.

Marx's relatively unsystematic reflections on pre-capitalist societies in *Grundrisse* (in the section on 'Forms which precede capitalist production'⁶⁵ are almost as well-known as his 1853 articles on India. Central assumptions of the 'Asiatic conception' are to be found here, notably, the idea that there is no private land ownership and that social stagnation is due to the 'unity of agriculture and manufactures'.⁶⁶ The latter factor is said to account for the fact that a transformation of property relations can be effected only 'by means of altogether external influences',⁶⁷ such as colonial rule. Furthermore, cities in Asia, 'where the monarch appears as the exclusive proprietor of the agricultural surplus product... [are] at bottom nothing more than wandering encampments' or 'royal camps'.⁶⁸ Not long after, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx formulated this 'Asiatic conception' still more sharply. Although this 1859 text contains no comparably detailed remarks on pre-capitalist societies, the Introduction deploys the much discussed concept of the 'Asiatic mode of production', which is here presented in terms that are anything but clear. In the early 1860s as well, in *Theories of Surplus-Value* or, more precisely, his debate with Richard Jones, Marx assumes that land was owned exclusively by the state in Asia⁶⁹ and that there was 'unity of agriculture and industry' in the 'Asian communal system'. Here, too, he makes a positive allusion to 'Dr. Bernier, who compares the Indian towns to army camps',⁷⁰. Finally, we find in *Capital* itself

⁶⁵ See Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1993, pp. 471-515.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 486.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 494.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 467 and 479.

⁶⁹ See Karl Marx, 'Economic Manuscript of 1861-63', *MECW*, vol. 33, p. 322.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 357.

comments about the ‘blending of agriculture and handicrafts’⁷¹, on which Marx blames the stagnation of Indian rural communes. Similarly, we find a passage about the state whose power is based on ‘the regulation of the water supply’⁷², in whose hands land ownership is supposedly concentrated. It therefore falls to England, Marx says, ‘to disrupt these small economic communities’⁷³ by expanding trade. In *Capital*, one also comes across the very naive notion, also already defended by Marx in 1853, that the railway technology introduced by the English in India had acquired a dynamic of its own, was being appropriated by Indians, and had set in motion the construction of modern industry and disintegration of the caste system.

Despite the persistence of Orientalist themes in the critique of political economy, two mitigating factors, it seems to me, should be stressed. *First*, Marx’s analysis of pre-capitalist societies within the framework of that economic critique is quite contradictory. He neither makes an unambiguous distinction between ‘primitive communism’ and the ‘Asiatic mode of production’, nor does he clearly define the latter.⁷⁴ Furthermore, it is impossible to situate the social relations Marx describes historically or geographically. *Second*, it is anything but obvious what influence these Orientalist themes have on the categories that Marx mobilises in his economic critique, categories supposed, after all, to depict ‘the inner organisation of the capitalist mode of production’, ‘its ideal average’.⁷⁵ No hasty conclusions should be drawn here – they would be just as inappropriate as the simplistic defence which has it that the critique of political economy evinces ‘a significant shift in the perception of tradition village communities’, ‘from a negative assessment of their isolation and stagnation to a positive appreciation of their socially integrative power and endurance’.⁷⁶ We would be better advised to maintain, with Amady A. Dieng, that Marx by no means possessed ‘sufficient knowledge about the colonies of Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Pacific Islands’.⁷⁷ It must, however, be pointed out that the ‘jackasses’ whose ‘wisdom’ Marx worked like a beaver to assimilate bear much of the blame for his, at best, ‘approximate understanding of the real conditions’ of non-Western societies.

⁷¹ See *Capital*, Chap. 14, Section 4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Chap. 16.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, Part 4, Chap. 20.

⁷⁴ See Daniel Thorner, ‘Marx on India and the Asiatic Mode of Production’, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, No. 9, December 1966, p. 33-66, here p. 53f.

⁷⁵ *Capital*, Chap. 48, part III.

⁷⁶ Bastian Wielenga, ‘Indische Frage’ in: Wolfgang F. Haug (Ed.), *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Vol. 6/II, Argument, Hamburg, 2004, pp. 903-918, here p. 911.

6. The Accelerating Turn from Eurocentrism in Marx's Late Work

Marx's late work represents a still largely unpublished and, in that sense, truncated corpus of writings. It has already been noted on diverse occasions, quite rightly, that his revision of the first volume of *Capital* for the French translation, which appeared between 1872 and 1875, already contains important revisions of the idea that Western European history can serve as a model for international development. Of pivotal importance to the transformation of Marx's view of non-Western societies were, above all, his studies of questions of land ownership from the later 1870s on (Part 6.1). They had a direct influence on his exchanges with the Russian Social Revolutionaries (Part 6.2).

6.1 Marx's Excerpts from 1879 On

Marx devoted considerable attention to the book *Communal Ownership of Land* by the Russian legal historian Maxim M. Kovalevskii immediately following its 1879 publication. Of the North American, Algerian, and Indian forms of property discussed in it, he took a special interest in the last-named. He excerpted Kovalevskii's book at length, commenting as he went, so that his excerpt as a whole 'essentially reflects Marx's own position'.⁷⁸ Marx noted the existence of 'archaic property forms' in pre-colonial Algeria, which the Western colonial powers refused to acknowledge because that was not in their interest: 'The French lust for loot makes obvious sense; if the government was and is the original proprietor of the entire country, then there is no need to acknowledge the claims of the Arab and Kabyl tribes to this or that concrete tract of land'.⁷⁹ We observe a similar shift in his position with respect to the Indian case. In his notes, Marx underscores 'the variety of forms of property relations'⁸⁰ and the fact that the disintegration of communal property forms was already well under way: 'arable fields and, often, threshing floors are the private property of different members of the commune, and only the "appurtenances" (*ugoda*) remain their common property'.⁸¹ About the Mongol Empire, Marx notes: 'Four centuries later, the principle of private property was so solidly anchored in Indian society that the only remaining demand was that such sales [of real

⁷⁷ Amady A. Dieng, *Le marxisme et l'Afrique noire*, p. 75.

⁷⁸ Hans-Peter Harstick, 'Einleitung', in Hans-Peter Harstick (Ed.), *Marx über Formen vorkapitalistischer Produktion. Vergleichende Studien zur Geschichte des Grundeigentums 1879-1880*, Campus, Frankfurt/Main/New York, 1977, pp. 2-20, here p. 11.

⁷⁹ Marx, 'Exzerpte aus M. M. Kovaleskij: Obščinnoe zemlevladienie (Der Gemeindelandbesitz)' (1879), in Hans-Peter Harstick, *Marx*, pp. 21-210, here p. 101.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

estate] take place publicly'.⁸² This accurate understanding of the property relations governing land ownership, as Marx's excerpts from Kovalevskii show, stemmed in part from knowledge of sources that were, for linguistic reasons, a closed book to Bernier and others: '*In the annals of certain Indian communities*, a source that was still essentially unavailable to historians ignorant of Sanskrit, we find evidence of the way private property suddenly sprang up, suddenly and *en masse*, as a result of measures taken by the Rajas and to the detriment of communal property'.⁸³ Marx not only takes his distance from his former positions, but, somewhat later in the same text, even lashes out at the 'miserable "Orientalists"' who had turned to the Koran for information on land ownership instead of analysing the historical realities of the situation.⁸⁴ It is true that Marx, in notes he assembled under the heading 'the English economy and its influence on India communal property', still lists, among his sources, the 'Letter to Colbert' found as a supplement in "*Voyages de François Bernier*". Amsterdam. 1699'. However, he immediately appends the following comment: 'Dupeyron (see Mill: *History of British India*, 1840 edition, Vol. 1, p. 310 etc.) Dupeyron (*priloženie*) was the first to realise that, in India, the Grand Mogul was not the sole property owner'.⁸⁵ In the light of this new information and these new sources, Marx's own judgement of colonialism in India is more carefully balanced. Unmistakably, the English had occasionally acknowledged the existence of communal property forms.⁸⁶ Where they had striven to abolish them, they had done so 'in fact in order to promote European colonisation'.⁸⁷ Even the 'modernising' effect of the crumbling of communal property forms was, in every case, open to question: although the English

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 46.

⁸² Ibid., p. 53.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 77. Said rightly situates Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron in the rising Orientalist tradition of the last third of the nineteenth century, which generally studied 'the Orient' from a scientific point of view, without abandoning the basic objective of co-opting it (See Said, *Orientalism*, p. 22). Anquetil-Duperron made a significant contribution to the expansion of Orientalism, helping to introduce the study of Avestan and Sanskrit in the discipline in the mid-nineteenth century (ibid., pp. 51 and 76ff.) and to ground the tradition that claimed its legitimacy from the peculiarly compelling fact of residence in, actual existential contact with, the Orient (ibid., p. 156). Thus Anquetil-Duperron is also a dubious source. He may be ranged, on Said's witness, among the French 'jackasses', although, in the final analysis, he 'arrived at an approximate understanding' of property relations, thanks, not least, to his linguistic competence: 'He argued that the idea of the absence of the rights of private property in Asia was a fiction employed by colonialists who favoured the confiscation of native estates' (Marian Sawyer, *Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic Mode of Production*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1977, p. 23). Because of his better grasp of historical reality, among other reasons, Anquetil-Duperron ultimately rejected the Western conception of 'oriental despotism' (See Valensi's essay in François Pouillon (Ed.), *Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française*, p. 21-23).

⁸⁶ See ibid., pp. 84ff.

portrayed it ‘as a mere result... of *economic progress*’, it was in fact actively promoted by the colonial authorities: ‘The inhabitants (peasants) are so attached to the soil that they prefer to remain on their former farms as mere rural labourers rather than seeking higher wages in the city’.⁸⁸

For present purposes, the chief interest of Marx’s 1880-1881 *Ethnological Notebooks* resides in that fact that he adopts Lewis H. Morgan’s standpoint in them: property is a historically transitory form, which he contrasts with ‘a higher stage of society’. Marx cites Morgan to the effect that this higher stage should represent ‘a resuscitation... in a superior form, of freedom, equality, and fraternity of the old Gentes’⁸⁹ that is, of communal property. According to a passage Marx excerpts from Henry S. Maine, ‘the form of private ownership in Land’ quite clearly enjoyed legal recognition – ‘yet the rights of private owners are limited by the controlling rights of a brotherhood of kinsmen, and the control is in some respects even more stringent than that exercised over separate property by an Indian village community’.⁹⁰ According to another passage excerpted by Marx, ‘property in its modern form [was] established’ when a man’s property was divided up by his direct descendants at his death, even if the family did not cease ‘to influence successions’. Marx comments: “‘property in its modern form’ is in no way established thereby: see the Russian communes f.i.’.⁹¹ The excerpts from Maine, then, confront us with a kaleidoscopic mix, in which property forms and actual enjoyment of property can diverge. These confused conditions, according to Marx’s critical commentary on Maine, cannot be grasped by way of the putative ‘English equivalent’: ‘This blockhead identifies the Roman form of absolute land ownership with the “English form of ownership”’.⁹²

With regard to the different dimensions of the concept of Eurocentrism that we distinguished in setting out, the excerpts Marx made late in life are significant in three respects. *First*, he now no longer considers England a superior society that, by means of colonisation,

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 93.

⁸⁹ Marx, *Die ethnologischen Exzerptheft*, Lawrence Krader (Ed.), Frankfurt-Main, 1976, p. 190. See also Marx, *The Ethnographical Notebooks of Marx*, ed. Lawrence Krader, Van Gorcum and Co., Assen, 1972 [Marx wrote these notebooks in a mix of English and German. The translator has relied on this extract, taking over Marx’s English, or the English in the passages he cites, as is, and has translated his German. The page references in the present text are to the 1976 Suhrkamp edition, entitled *Die ethnologischen Exzerptheft*, where everything, it seems, is in German; the English edition is no doubt paginated differently. *Trans.*]

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 425.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 455.

⁹² Ibid., p. 432.

initiates social progress in India. In support of his new position, Marx even makes his source say more than it actually does: thus Haruki Wada has shown that Marx's hostility to colonial land policy is much more emphatic than Kovalevskii's.⁹³

Second, in his finely shaded discussion of various forms of land ownership in the extra-European world, Marx breaks with Eurocentrism in a way consonant with Said's critique of Orientalism. We find, in his notes, such a broad range of distinctions in the approach to land ownership that these notes can hardly be mobilised in support of the view that he sticks to a monolithic 'Asiatic conception'. Moreover, he explicitly rejects approaches to non-Western regions of the world grounded on the European experience alone, and he expressly criticises the assumption (bound up with the thesis of the non-existence of private property) that the state holds a monopoly on land – formerly an integral part of his 'Asiatic conception' – as a 'legal fiction'.⁹⁴ Finally, he points to the fact 'that even in the earliest Indian class societies, if only formally, by way of "donations" by the Raja, "private property" suddenly came into existence "en masse"'.⁹⁵ In short, Eurocentrism no longer authorises a homogenising approach; Marx now recognises that the 'real conditions' are more complex than he had supposed.

Third, Marx breaks with the Eurocentric conception of development for which the patterns that led to the emergence of Western European societies are the measure of human history as such. Thus, although he points to the 'feudalisation' of India under Muslim rule, he is careful to emphasise that this process differs from the one observable in Europe because of the absence of hereditary rights in Indian law. Furthermore, he upbraids Kovalevskii for basing what he says on a conception of 'feudalism in the Western European sense' while ignoring the absence of serfdom.⁹⁶ Similarly, the *Ethnological Notebooks* vehemently criticise the authors they discuss for the historical analogies in which they indulge. John Phear, for example, is a 'jackass' who calls 'the structure of the villages "feudal"'.⁹⁷ Thus the late Marx regards 'the application of the category of feudalism to the Oriental polity' as a 'form of ethno-

⁹³ See Haruki Wada, 'Marx and revolutionary Russia', in Teodor Shanin (Ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road. Marx and 'the peripheries of capitalism'*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London/Melbourne/Henley, 1984, pp. 40-75, here pp. 61f.

⁹⁴ Marx, 'Exzerpte', p. 55.

⁹⁵ Klaus Weissgerber, 'Bemerkungen zu den Kovalevskij-Exzerpten von Marx', in *Ethnographisch-Archäologische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 21, 2/1980, pp. 193-219, here p. 209 (summarising and quoting Marx, 'Exzerpte', p. 55).

⁹⁶ Marx, 'Exzerpte', p. 76.

⁹⁷ Marx, *Die ethnologischen Exzerptheft*, p. 378.

centrism that presses world history into a European mould'.⁹⁸ He consequently opposes 'too stark a generalisation of the concept of feudalism, and, more generally, the straightforward extrapolation of concepts of structure developed on Western European models to Indian or Asiatic conditions'.⁹⁹

6.2 Marx's Exchanges with Revolutionary Movements in Russia

Thanks not least to the emergence of Russian revolutionary movements, for which, because of the agricultural structures that prevailed in Russia, the question of land ownership and the rural commune played a central role, Marx devoted particular attention to conditions there.¹⁰⁰ Late in 1869, he started learning Russian and took part in Russian debates about *Capital*, a Russian translation of which appeared in 1872. In what follows, I shall be using, above all, texts written in this context to show how, at the end of Marx's life, there materialised a break with the various dimensions of Eurocentrism that we began by sketching.

In connection with the Russian rural commune, Marx initially expresses what seem to be familiar ideas: 'the land in the hands of the Russian peasants has never been *their private property*'.¹⁰¹ However, he also notes the existence of the kind of communes which, he says, 'descended from a more archaic type', 'in Germany' as well.¹⁰² 'Go back to the origins of Western societies; and everywhere you will find communal ownership of the land'.¹⁰³ Marx regards this form of communal property, which he claims was widespread in Asia, as economically superior. There were, he affirms, different reasons for the dissolution of these archaic communes; in Western Europe, above all, it was 'an immense interval' that 'separated' it 'from the birth of capitalist production', that is seen 'embracing a whole series of successive economic revolutions and evolutions of which capitalistic production is merely the most recent'.¹⁰⁴ These characteristics of the rural commune provide the backdrop against which Marx projects a specific Russian form of development. Thus he affirms that his 'historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe' in the chapter on so-called primitive

⁹⁸ Krader's Introduction to Marx's *Die ethnologische Exzerptheft*, p. 63.

⁹⁹ Harstick 'Einleitung', p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ What we said earlier about Ireland holds for Russia and comparisons of Russian with India: the Czarist Empire was a pre-capitalist society with a markedly rural character, which, albeit never colonised, developed along colonial lines (see Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914*, p. 177).

¹⁰¹ Karl Marx, 'Drafts of the Letters to Vera Zasulich', *MECW*, vol. 24, pp. 346, 360.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 350-351

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

accumulation in *Capital*, Volume One must not be transformed into

a historic-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed, in order to eventually attain this economic formation which, with a tremendous leap of the productive forces of social labour, assures the most integral development of every individual producer.¹⁰⁵

It follows that the ‘historical inevitability’ of so-called primitive accumulation is ‘expressly limited ... to the countries of Western Europe’.¹⁰⁶ Because Russian peasants do not own their land, the movement that led to the triumph of capitalist property relations in Western Europe cannot simply be projected onto the Russian case. There ‘communist property’ would be transformed into ‘capitalist property’.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Russian agriculture would ‘try in vain’ to get out of the ‘*cul-de-sac*’ in which it found itself by means of ‘capitalist farming on the English model’, even judging matters ‘from the economic point of view alone’. The only way to overcome the problems besetting Russian agriculture leads through development of the Russian rural commune.¹⁰⁸

Thus Marx opposes hasty universalisation of historical development, insisting that, when it comes to social transformations, what is decisive is the historical surroundings in which they unfold. In the Russian case, those surroundings facilitate transformation of the rural commune into an ‘element of collective production on a nationwide scale’.¹⁰⁹ Without having to ‘first pass through the same process of dissolution as constitutes the historical development of the West’, the commune could ‘pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership’.¹¹⁰ ‘Thanks to its contemporaneity with capitalist production’, the Russian rural commune ‘is thus able to appropriate its fruits without subjecting itself to its *modus operandi*’.¹¹¹ Communal ownership land offers this rural commune

the basis for collective appropriation, its historical surroundings, its contemporaneity with capitalist production, lend it all the material conditions of communal labour on a vast scale. It is thus in a position to incorporate all the positive acquisitions devised by the capitalist system without passing through its Caudine Forks. It can gradually replace parcel farming with large-scale agriculture assisted by machines, which the physical lie of the land in Russia invites. It can thus become *the direct point of departure* for the economic system towards which modern society tends, and turn over a new leaf without beginning by

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 361.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Marx to *Otecestvenniye Zapisky*, 1877, *MECW*, vol. 24, p. 200.

¹⁰⁶ Marx, ‘Drafts of the Letters to Vera Zasulich’, p. 346.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 361.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 358.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 349.

¹¹⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the Manifesto of the Communist Party’, 1882, *MECW*, vol. 24, p. 426.

¹¹¹ Marx, ‘Drafts of the Letters to Vera Zasulich’, p. 353.

committing suicide.¹¹²

In sum, the Russian agricultural commune can, according to Marx, appropriate the fruits ‘of Western capitalist production’ ‘without subjecting itself to its modus operandi’.¹¹³ If it does, it will become the ‘fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia’¹¹⁴ or, rather, the ‘starting point for communist development’.¹¹⁵

Given the various questions that Marx’s view of non-Western societies in the 1850s and 1860s raises, three points in his exchanges with revolutionary movements in Russia should be emphasised. *First*, we should note the shift in Marx’s position on colonialism in India, which begins to materialise in the Kovalevskii excerpt. When Marx has occasion to discuss the Indian case in the 1880s, he observes that the English have managed only ‘to ruin native agriculture and double the number and severity of the famines’.¹¹⁶ He also notes ‘the suppression of communal landownership out there was nothing but an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people not forwards but backwards’.¹¹⁷ It can therefore hardly be asserted that Marx maintained, overall, his 1853 ‘assumption that social conditions would be homogenised throughout the world’ as a result of the expansion of the Western-capitalist mode of production, while making an exception for Russia. By the end of the 1860s, at the latest, Marx possessed an adequate understanding of colonialism; it helped shape, thereafter, his perception of the non-Western world.

Second, it is noteworthy that Marx now sees the need to criticise his sources. Only ‘Sir H[enry] Maine and others of his ilk’¹¹⁸, he remarks, remain blind to this ‘English vandalism’.

When reading the histories of primitive communities written by bourgeois writers it is necessary to be on one’s guard. They do not even shrink from falsehoods. Sir Henry Maine, for example, who was a keen collaborator of the British Government in carrying out the violent destruction of the Indian communes, hypocritically assures us that all the government’s noble efforts to support the communes were thwarted by the spontaneous forces of economic laws!¹¹⁹

Marx emphasises that ‘it is in the interest of the landed proprietors to set up the more or less well-off peasants as an intermediate agrarian class, and to turn the poor peasants – that is

¹¹² Ibid., p. 357-8.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 353

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 371.

¹¹⁵ Marx and Engels, ‘Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the Manifesto of the Communist Party’, p. 426.

¹¹⁶ Marx, ‘Drafts of the Letters to Vera Zasulich’, p. 368.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 365.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 359.

to say the majority – into simple wage earners’.¹²⁰ There exists, in other words, in Russia as well¹²¹, an interest in the dissolution of the rural communes that hold property in common. This interest is comparable to that of the Western colonial powers in Asia and North Africa.

Third, it must be admitted that, even in the Marx of the 1880s, we find features reminiscent of his ‘Asiatic conception’. Thus he considers the isolation of the Russian rural communes an obstacle to development, since it favours a ‘central despotism’. However, he adds that this obstacle could itself be overcome if the *volosts* (government bodies) were replaced by a peasant assembly.¹²²

The isolation of rural communes, the lack of connexion between the life of one and the life of another, this localised microcosm is not encountered everywhere as an immanent characteristic of the last of the primitive types, but everywhere it is found, it always gives rise to a central despotism. ... It seems to me an easy matter to do away with the primitive isolation imposed by the vast extent of the territory as soon as the government shackles have been cast off.¹²³

These continuities notwithstanding,¹²⁴ the texts that grew out of Marx’s exchanges with Russian revolutionary movements bear witness to a politically reinforced version of his break with dimensions of Eurocentrism. *First*, Marx no longer premises the one-sided superiority of Western societies, but, rather, confirms ‘the economic superiority of communal property’.¹²⁵ *Second*, his preoccupation with Russia cannot be dismissed as ‘imaginary investigation’ of a non-Western region of the world which only serves to buttress a European self-image. For

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 364.

¹²¹ Marx’s letters to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich, from which the passages we have been citing are in the main drawn, stand in a close relation to his studies of land ownership. Marx thus not only mentions Morgan and Maine, but also conceives of communist property as ‘a *higher form* of the archaic type of property’ (*MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 362). Haruki Wada has also noted the influence that Kovalevskii’s positions had on Marx’s letters.

¹²² See Marx, ‘Drafts of the Letters to Vera Zasulich’, p. 346.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 363.

¹²⁴ The importance of these continuities is considerably diminished, *first*, by the fact that Marx entertains the possibility that indigenous developments can overcome despotism. Thus he has come a great distance from his previous assumption that only exogenous factors (colonialism) can put an end to them. *Second*, central components of the ‘Asiatic conception’ have crumbled: ‘Marx treated the period between primitive society and capitalism as a formation with many types; that is to say, he no longer distinguished between the Asiatic mode of production, the social formation of Antiquity, and feudalism [as he does in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, K.L.], but, rather, considered them to be types of a formation that was preceded by many different variants of primitive society.... The inadequate conception of an “Asiatic” (or Oriental) mode of production based on the absence of private land ownership had given way to the insight that there were, “the primitive form of society” from “India to Ireland” subsumed many different forms of social structure grounded on “rural communes with common possession of the land”, as Engels affirms in the sole note correcting the Communist Manifesto’ (Burchard Brentjes, ‘Marx and Engels in ihrem Verhältnis zu Asien’, in Burchard Brentjes (Ed.), *Marx und Friedrich Engels zur Geschichte des Orients*, Wissenschaftliche Beiträge/Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle, 1983, pp. 3-30, here p. 19). *Third*, Marx’s political perspective changes. Symptomatic here is the idea that communist forces should seek a point of departure in rural communes, that is, the very structures that he perceived as obstacles to development in 1853.

behind Marx's efforts here lies a long, careful examination of the issue of property relations in the extra-European world, as well as an endeavour to articulate capitalist penetration and local social conflict. On this basis, Marx's appreciation of English colonialism in India undergoes sharp modification: what he once called the 'double mission' of destruction and renewal becomes, unambiguously, 'vandalism'. Third, Marx no longer conceives of modernisation as 'Westernisation', which is to say that he no longer regards European development as the sole valid historical measure. Rather, it would appear that Russia is in many respects treated as a model of development for the West. Thus Marx affirms that the crisis of the Western-capitalist world will only be overcome with the 'elimination' of capitalism and 'the return of modern societies' to a superior form of 'an "archaic" type of collective property'.¹²⁶ As we have seen, Marx's critical reception of authors such as Morgan, 'one of the few people of his time to have conceived of progress along a number of different lines'¹²⁷, stands behind these developments. Even if recent research has shown that Marx's 'analysis of the Russian rural commune [is based] on altogether erroneous premises', it does not follow that his 'conceptual approach to them' has lost all relevance: 'At bottom, it is a question of the construction of human history. Here, Marx sketch of several different paths of development for human societies stands in sharp contrast to unilinear, evolutionistic notions'.¹²⁸ *Fourth*, Marx meets the standards of global history. With his positive political attitude toward the Russian rural commune, he charts an explicitly non-Eurocentric orientation for a classless society: in communist perspective, Europe is reduced to a mere province. Marx does more than merely sketch a conception of communism that draws on many different experiences. He also conceives of an interaction between diverse areas of the world, one situated in the realm of the political: a revolution in Russia could become the 'signal for a proletarian revolution in the West', 'so that both complement each other'.¹²⁹

7. Marx Studies and Postcolonialism – Shaken, not Stirred

We began by pointing to the existence of two problems. In MS, one finds no systematic critical study of Marx's Eurocentrism. In PS, one finds a fully elaborated critique of Marx's

¹²⁵ Marx, 'Drafts of the Letters to Vera Zasulich', p. 363.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

¹²⁷ Krader's Introduction to Marx's *Die ethnologische Exzerptheft*, p. 37.

¹²⁸ Reinhart Kößler/Hans Wienold, *Gesellschaft bei Marx*, Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster, 2001, p. 177.

¹²⁹ Marx and Engels, 'Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the Manifesto of the Communist Party', pp. 350–51.

Eurocentrism that largely ignores the changes in his thinking that occurred after he wrote his articles on India in 1853, changes that have been brought to light by Marx scholarship, thanks notably to the project to publish a comprehensive edition of his writings. This situation can be overcome only if each of these fields of knowledge is willing to learn something from the other. Only if we take Marx's entire *œuvre* into account can we make a valid judgement of his Eurocentrism; only if we have a carefully worked out idea of just what Eurocentrism is can we say exactly what constitutes Marx's Eurocentrism.

Bart Moore-Gilbert has rightly pleaded for co-operation between MS and PS. Militating in favour of it, he argues, is the fact that both fields often have the same object of research, have been relegated to the margins of academia, and boast theoreticians such as C.L.R. James or Frantz Fanon, whose work cannot be confined to either of the two fields. Marx scholarship could learn something about 'the historical differences and cultural specificities of the non-Western world'.¹³⁰ On the other hand, Marxian studies could mark out the limits of various postcolonial projects, with analyses, for example, of the international division of labour. If such co-operation is to become a reality, however, both sides must abandon polemics, and must undertake 'more finely calibrated, attentive readings'.¹³¹

What has so far prevented PS from embarking on such a project, it seems to me, is the fact that Marx's study of Russia and the conclusions he drew from it have gone largely unknown. Thus a majority of those who have entered the debate see Marx as an optimistic believer in progress or a teleologically-minded Eurocentric. It is to be hoped that further publication of his work in the second *MEGA* – for example, release of the Marx manuscript known as the *Chronological Excerpts* [excerpts from world history] – together with studies of this less familiar material, will help to bring PS, as well, to make a more balanced assessment of his Eurocentrism. Further work on Marx's sources, of the kind exemplified by my discussion of Bernier's travel account, is also indispensable if old prejudices are to be shed.

MS need to co-operate with PS for three reasons. *First*, because they need to deepen their analysis of the contradictions and complexity of capitalism by adopting a global perspective. This should make it clear that capitalism's totalising claims have been only partially realised: certain social spaces remain beyond its reach.¹³² Capitalism would then appear, not as 'a self-

¹³⁰ Bart Moore-Gilbert, 'Marxisme et post-colonialisme: une liaison dangereuse?', in Jacques Bidet/Eustache Kouvélakis (Eds.), *Dictionnaire Marx contemporain*, PUF, Paris, 2001, pp. 307-317, here p. 315.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

¹³² Fernando Coronil, 'Beyond Occidentalism. Toward Nonimperial Geohistorical Categories', in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 1, February 1996, pp. 51-87, here p. 78.

identical system that emanates from the West and expands to the periphery, but as a changing ensemble of worldwide relations that assumes different forms in specific regional and national contexts'.¹³³ This would also make it possible to lay the foundations for an adequate understanding of colonialism, which was precisely not some 'local or marginal subplot in some larger history (for example, the transition from feudalism to capitalism in western Europe, the latter developing organically in the womb of the former)', but, rather, takes on, viewed from this standpoint, 'the place and the significance of a major, extended and ruptural world-historical event'.¹³⁴ Marxist discussion of international relations of domination, especially Marxist study of imperialism, has apparently not yet set out to acquire this kind of carefully differentiated understanding.¹³⁵

Second, MS have to acquire a new understanding of historical progress. Here, it seems to me, the potential of world systems theory has yet to be fully realised. Thus Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out that the traditional evolutionist conception of the emergence of capitalism as the replacement of a ruling feudal group is highly dubious:

Instead, the correct basic image is that historical capitalism was brought into existence by a landed aristocracy which transformed itself into a bourgeoisie because the old system was disintegrating. Rather than let the disintegration continue to uncertain ends, they engaged in radical structural surgery themselves in order to maintain *and significantly expand* their ability to exploit the direct producers.¹³⁶

Jettisoning evolutionist notions of progress would simultaneously call into question the idea that 'that capitalism as a historical system has represented progress over the various previous historical systems that it destroyed or transformed'¹³⁷, or would, at any rate, raise the crucial problem of the standard to be applied to measure progress. I think that the decisive criterion should be freedom from domination, not a specific concept of the form in which the productive forces are developed. The late Marx expressed this by raising the perspective of 'free equality' during his study of the Russian rural communes; it is a perspective which seeks to establish connections with already existing historical forms, without forcing them into the mould of one or another scheme of development. This perspective also implies, however, that progress is no inevitability, but must be achieved through struggle. This insight, too, is con-

¹³³ Moore-Gilbert, 'Marxisme et post-colonialisme', p. 317.

¹³⁴ Stuart Hall, 'When Was "the Post-colonial"? Thinking at the Limit', in Iain Chambers/Lidia Curti (Eds.), *The Post-colonial Question. Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, Routledge, London/New York, 1996, pp. 242-260, here p. 249.

¹³⁵ See Michael Heinrich, 'Imperialismstheorie', in Siegfried Schieder/Manuela Spindler (Eds.), *Theorien der Internationalen Beziehungen*, Leske + Budrich, Opladen, 2003, p. 279-307.

¹³⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1984, pp. 105f.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

tained in the late Marx's outline of a conception of communism rooted in a global history.

Third, MS must make theoretical room for contingency. Hauck, for example, has pointed out that 'historical contingency' was of decisive importance to the historical emergence of capitalism in Europe:

Commodity production, private property, and wage-labour, juridical freedom, and exploitation of labour-power based on economic constraint (lack of the means of production), legal security, and relative non-interference of the state in the economy (responsible, in large measure, for the separation of the economic from the political specific to capitalism), the existence of intermediary instances and the separation of religious and political power, the plundering of peripheral regions, and phases in which science and technology expand – all these are phenomena which, in defiance of all positions based on Eurocentric theories of modernisation, most modern societies have at some point experienced. In seventeenth and eighteenth century England, they operated in conjunction, making possible the historically unique emergence of capitalism.¹³⁸

The project of a non-teleological reading of Marx developed by Althusser's school also zeros in on this problem. It might provide a springboard for dialogue between MS and PS. As early as *Reading Capital*, Balibar pointed out that 'the history of society can be reduced to a discontinuous succession of modes of production'.¹³⁹ Althusser, in his late work, insists that we must conceive of the irruption of capitalism as a contingent 'encounter' of independent elements, the results of which endured only in Europe, that were by no means predestined to come together: money capital, labour-power, technological development, and a nascent domestic market.¹⁴⁰

Even if it took Marx 'an enormous amount of time' to arrive at 'an understanding of the real conditions' of extra-European development, he freed himself, at the end of his life, from the influence of the European 'jackasses' – which is what his twenty-first century readers would make of themselves if they failed to take up the challenge of bringing MS and PS into dialogue. The goal is not only to pave the way for the return of Marx, declared a dead dog in the wake of the events of 1989-1990. It is, no less, to produce a comprehensive anti-authoritarian analysis of society, which has as much to learn from Marx as from postcolonialism.

Translated by G. M. Goshgarian

¹³⁸ Gerhard Hauck, *Die Gesellschaftstheorie und ihr Anderes*, p. 134.

¹³⁹ Etienne Balibar, 'Sur les concepts fondamentaux du matérialisme historique' (1965), in Louis Althusser et al., *Lire le Capital*, PUF, Paris 1996, pp. 419-568, here p. 426.

¹⁴⁰ Louis Althusser, Louis (1982), 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' (1982), in Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings, 1978-1987*, Verso, London/New York, 2006, pp. 163-207, here p. 196ff.