

Tearing asunder the pretty fancies of capitalism: Reflections on Marx and empire

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Abstract

This chapter argues for a recognition of the nuanced complexity of Marx's account of empire. In particular, I argue, that account came to be characterised by: (i) a recognition of the historical centrality of anticolonial resistance; (ii) a provincialisation of his own assessment of capitalism's development in Western Europe; (iii) an understanding of imperialism as a historically regressive force. In seeking to understand the history of European imperialism as a constitutive feature of the modern world we need recourse to a theory of capitalism. In that respect, as generations of writers from the colonised world have demonstrated, Marx's analysis remains powerfully salient.

Keywords

Colonialism, empire, Eurocentrism, Marxism, proletariat

At the heart of this extremely welcome, timely new study by Bhambra and Holmwood (2021) there is a two-fold claim. Firstly, that we cannot expect to arrive at an adequate understanding of contemporary societies, or of the world order more generally, unless we make the history of European imperialism and its consequences fundamental to that understanding. Secondly, that established traditions of European social theory are characterised by a failure to do just that. In some respects the authors see this failure as belonging to the accounts provided by classical social theorists themselves, although elsewhere the blame is attributed more to the accounts provided of their work by others (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 210). In either case, their point is that the resulting silence is not circumstantial but formative. The conceptual and methodological traditions bequeathed to us by this process have the shape they do by virtue of that silence. Amongst

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the consequences of this ‘structured inattention’ to empire, as Gayatri Spivak has called it, is a failure to acknowledge the centrality of racialised inequality as a feature of social arrangements both within societies and globally.

Anyone who has found themselves drawn into the growing number of institutionally-led initiatives around ‘decolonisation’ will know how quickly that challenge can be reduced to a question of ‘adding in’ additional texts or voices as if to ‘make up for’ the historical exclusions of empire. In that respect I am absolutely in sympathy with the authors’ central aim in this work and, in particular, with their insistence that the historical reality of empire needs to be treated, so far as many of the frameworks and epistemologies taught in our universities are concerned, not as a supplementary question but as a constitutive one. I agree also with the fact that this question needs to be asked of those frameworks and conceptions which form our own sociological ‘doxa’. Bhabra’s previous work, of course, has itself been crucial in breaking open the space for these debates in the context of British sociology.

The chapter to which I am specifically asked to respond here develops these claims in relation to Marx’s analysis of capitalism. As the authors acknowledge, Marx was consistent in his opposition to European imperialism, drawing repeated attention to the violence that accompanied it and to the economic self-interest which motivated it. Nonetheless, they argue, whilst his political sensibility was different from that of earlier writers whose work they consider, ‘the structure of his thought was similar’ (Bhabra and Holmwood, 2021: 83). On this account, his acceptance of a ‘stadial version’ of history leads him to a theory of capitalist development in which imperialism is understood as only ever preliminary to the extension of fully-formed capitalist relations: ‘Imperialism [. . .] derived from and was secondary to capitalism’s central social relationship, which could be expressed independently of it’ (2021: 98). Correspondingly, the fact that Marx conceives of that central social relationship as entailing the extraction of surplus value from ‘formally free’ labour gives us, they argue, a model of class which effectively excludes the practices of forced, enslaved and indentured labour characteristic of imperial economies. In consequence, those experiences are rendered extrinsic to capitalist modernity and our dominant paradigm for understanding class is tacitly racialised. To this extent, then, Bhabra and Holmwood are clearly in agreement with the long-standing accusation that Marx’s historical vision was Eurocentric although their account, with its welcome attention to the trajectory of his thought from his early writings, is much more fulsome and more nuanced than some of those offered in early postcolonial studies, where this charge-sheet was first drawn up.

In responding, it’s not my intention to offer an all-or-nothing defence of Marx’s ideas. To try to do so would be, it seems to me, against the spirit of his own account of how we come to make sense of the world. After all, the recognition with which Bhabra and Holmwood start out (‘Theorising [. . .] is historically located [. . .] It reflects its social circumstances, including the social relations in which it is produced’ (2021:1)) would have caused Marx not the slightest qualm given that it is a recognition which we owe, in significant part, to his critique of idealism. Our conceptual language, as he famously put it, is born of the ‘language of real life’ (Marx and Engels, 1998 [1845]: 42), born of the social interactions and relations of which we are a part: the path between our historical experience and our conception of that experience runs from ‘earth to heaven’, rather than

vice versa. To say so means acknowledging that Marx was necessarily shaped by the context in which he worked. There certainly are, for instance, parts of his writing which show the influence of those Lamarckian evolutionary frameworks that were prominent in the C19th and which concealed the despoliations of empire behind racialised typologies of social development (Paul, 1981). Yet, in general, he was consistent in his commitment to finding an explanation for social arrangements on the terrain of history, and this commitment was reflected, not least, in his own responsiveness to historical events.

A few things are, I think, worth recognising in this regard. To begin with, it seems to me to be a mistake to characterise Marx as a teleological thinker if by that we mean that he believed that there was a necessary course of historical development, or that he assumed that the history of one particular social context established a blueprint that others must follow perforce. This matters because it bears on Bhambra and Holmwood's (2021: 111) claims that the experiences – and the resistance – of the colonised were given no place in Marx's analyses, or that he saw them as fated to 'incorporat[ion] through a process of proletarianisation in which the European proletariat would be their vanguard' (2021: 87). As August Nimtz shows, even in writings preceding and during the political upheavals of 1848, Marx and Engels were clear that revolutionary struggle in any one context was dependent on the outcomes of a range of other struggles, taking different political forms, across a global terrain: 'waged in Canada as in Italy, in East Indies as in Prussia, in Africa as on the Danube' (cited in Nimtz, 2004: 67). That decentring of the historical agency of the European working class was reinforced by Marx's growing recognition of an issue that Bhambra and Holmwood accuse him of ignoring (2021: 95): that is, the extent to which imperialism created epistemological and material conditions in which European workers might come to be bound to a nationalistically framed self-interest. Thus, for example, in their writings on British imperialism in Ireland he and Engels moved from an analysis which saw social revolution in Britain as paving the road for Irish liberation, to one which reversed that relationship. It is in this vein that Marx writes in 1869 that the ending of the colonial domination of Ireland is a '*precondition to the emancipation of the English working class*' (cited in Nimtz, 2004: 73; emphasis in original). It is a point he reiterated in his assessment of the Irish question for the first International, where he insisted that the over-throwing of imperial domination in Ireland would have the crucial effect of weakening the 'moral authority' of the British ruling class precisely because that authority was symbolically bound up with their self-representation as the rulers of an empire (1974 [1870]: 258). Given this it seems to me to be rather too sweeping a judgement to say that, for Marx, 'resistance to colonialism and its forms of imposition [. . .] were considered external to the universal process of proletarianisation and its transcendence' (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 105).

In these writings, as in those on India, a significant part of what shaped Marx's understanding was precisely the agency of colonised peoples in resistance to imperial domination, as exemplified by the Fenian revolt of 1867 and the first war of Indian independence a decade earlier. His response to the latter event has been widely discussed, which may explain why Bhambra and Holmwood decide not to address it in their analysis. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that a similar conceptual shift is apparent in that context. Marx's essays on India from 1853 do, indeed, tend to treat British imperialism as an evil which does the work of history insofar as it creates the conditions for industrialisation

and a future social revolution. This much accords with the critique that Bhambra and Holmwood develop. But it is not his last word on the subject. The uprising of 1857, and the British retributions which followed, changed his view to a considerable degree. As Pranav Jani (2004) notes, in the face of these events, Marx gives up on the claim that imperialism is anything other than destructive and comes, increasingly, to treat anti-imperial resistance as historically progressive in its own right.

It may be objected, perhaps, that the discussion above rests on Marx's political, rather than his analytical, writings. How far such a distinction holds for Marx could be debated, but it is clear in any case, that as a matter of analysis, he did not assume that his account of capitalist development in Western Europe was definitive in respect of all other contexts, nor that the development of capitalism in any particular society could be analysed in a self-contained or 'endogenous' fashion. Christine Ward Gailey (2006) has considered these questions with a particular focus on Marx's late writings, and his view was laid out clearly in the letters he drafted and redrafted to Vera Zasulich in 1881, at a point at which he was beginning to think of political struggles in Russia, rather than those in Western Europe, as pivotal. In these letters he explicitly states that it was never his intention that the trajectory of capitalist development, as he described it for Western Europe, should be treated as 'historically inevitable' elsewhere (1983 [1881]: 100). This is so, he makes clear, because social change does not take place *tabula rasa* – rather it occurs in specific contexts already shaped by particular histories and by their interaction with other contexts. Thus, Marx (1983 [1881]: 110) imagines, Russia may not need to 'undergo a long Western-style incubation of mechanical industry' precisely because the unevenness of capitalist development means that the products and processes of industrial technology are already available to it. The implication for Marx is *not*, as a 'diffusionist' reading of him might imply, that Russia is 'historically backward', but rather that it is precisely out of this conjuncture that new and hitherto unforeseen political possibilities might emerge. Thus, he suggests, forms of social arrangement could arise there incorporating, dialectically, long-standing practices of communal solidarity with the latest technologies, thus 'build[ing] into the commune all the positive achievements of the capitalist system, without having to pass under its harsh tribute' (1983 [1881]: 111). Part of why this might be possible in Russia, Marx notes, is the fact that it has not 'fallen prey, like the East Indies, to a conquering foreign power' (1983 [1881]: 106). This is a passing comment, for sure, but it is one which underscores the fact that, in his mature writing, Marx understood imperialism as historically regressive rather than as some waypoint on an inevitable, pre-laid path.

A further implication of Marx's recognition of the unevenness of capitalism's globalisation is worth noting. Bhambra and Holmwood briefly discuss the short chapter which concludes the first volume of *Capital*. Here Marx reflects on the fact that, in the colonial context, capitalists had been required to resort to forms of (often violent) coercion in order to retain a workforce. Bhambra and Holmwood's assessment concludes that Marx understands these practices as a 'contingent aspect of the development of the capitalist mode of production' (2021: 101). It is certainly true that he does not develop here, as we might wish he had, a thorough-going analysis of the ways in which these different modalities of exploitation are bound together and bound also to the violent expropriation of Indigenous lands and resources. Nonetheless, it is

absolutely evident in that chapter that Marx is treating enforced labour as intrinsic rather than extrinsic to capitalism and that, moreover, he considers the experience of labour under unfree conditions as, in certain respects, exemplary. It thus matters that he chooses to end the first part of his major analytical study by stepping outside of Europe – away from what he calls ‘this ready-made world of capital’ (2010 [1887]: 752) – in order to understand how capitalism appears from the perspective of the colonised world. It matters because Marx’s (2010 [1887]: 756) argument is that, in crucial respects, the reality of that system is *more* accessible from that perspective: the ‘pretty fancy’ that characterises the account presented by classical political economists – the very fancy that *Capital* is dedicated to unveiling – in which the market appears as a place where free worker and free owner meet each other on equal terms, is ‘torn asunder’ (756) in the context of empire. Thus, far from presenting the colonial context as contingent, Marx pushes his readers here to think of it as an epistemological standpoint from which a fundamental moral and experiential truth about the nature of capitalist social relations may be grasped more easily than is possible in the metropolitan centres of power. He makes broader but equivalent statements repeatedly in his writing about European imperialism: ‘The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies where it goes naked’ (Marx, 1974 [1853]: 86).

It is certainly true that Marx saw capitalism as a globalising system. That is to say that, amongst other things, a market premised on exchange value would come to dominate economic relations organised by subjective or interpersonal factors, a capitalist rationality would increasingly impose itself on economic actors and commodified forms of labour would generally supplant those based on explicit coercion. As claims about the *tendential* development of capitalism it seems to me that we can hardly dispute that he was more right than wrong (in this respect, I’m not at all persuaded that it makes sense to argue that the emergence of welfare systems in Western Europe or elsewhere amounts to a ‘decommodification’ of labour (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 106; 214)). As I’ve tried to show, he was also attentive to the deep unevenness of these historical processes, and he went a considerable distance in ‘provincialising’ his analysis of the way in which they had taken place in Western Europe. There is no reason to assume that, for him, the practices of unfree or coerced labour which characterised the contexts of empire were to be understood as somehow lying ‘outside’ of capitalism. Indeed, as I have argued, he saw the resort to forms of coercion as expressive of a central truth about capitalist social relations not as a deviation from those relations. The market, Vivek Chibber (2013: 140) suggests, renders labour ‘abstract’ in the sense that it reduces the ‘dispersed, disparate labouring activities of producers and forces them onto a common metric’. But that does not mean, of course, that capitalists are not adept at developing or exploiting substantive inequalities faced by real workers in real contexts, or at making play of the substantive inequalities which that unevenness establishes between contexts, whether in pursuit of greater profit or for reasons of political strategy (Harvey, 2003). In short: I agree absolutely with Bhambra and Holmwood that we need to think of the histories of racialised, colonial – and, indeed, neo-colonial – exploitation as belonging to capitalism; my disagreement is with the suggestion that Marx points us away from such an analysis, rather than towards it.

As suggested already, I am also absolutely in sympathy with the authors' claim that the canon of sociological theory has tended to establish a version of modernity in which European imperialism and its consequences are side-lined. Saying so, however, should not mean displacing from view the vast body of social theory across the 20th century which *has* treated imperialism as central to capitalist modernity. To a very considerable extent, at least prior to the emergence of postcolonial approaches, such analyses derived from, or in conversation with, Marxist traditions. This work is not, of course, the focus of the study at hand, so there is no reason why Bhabra and Holmwood (2021: 95) should address it in detail, but it bears some acknowledgement because a number of the critical claims that they make owe a debt to those analyses. The idea that 'state action' might become an 'integral' factor in capitalist development, for example, such that the resilience of the system could depend on an increasingly close accommodation between state power and that of capital, has been a central point of discussion in Marxist theories of imperialism for more than a 100 years now, from Rudolf Hilferding and Rosa Luxemburg through to Ellen Meiksins Wood and beyond. Similarly, the concern to understand the articulation between different modes of exploitation in geographically disparate contexts has been the subject of any number of detailed theoretical and substantive analyses by well-known figures (e.g. Giovanni Arrighi, Samir Amin), as well as by many others who are less well-known such as the brilliant Nigerian Marxist sociologist Omafume Onoge (see e.g. Onoge, 1992).

Not all of the Marxist discussion of imperialism is helpful, of course, and some of it certainly endorses a stadial model of historical development which, I've argued, Marx himself gives us reason to question. Nonetheless, as Robert Young (2001: 7–11; 115–126) acknowledges in his historical survey, one of the somewhat forgotten – even disavowed – lineages of postcolonial critique is the work of those writers from the 'tricontinental' world who sought to apply, to bend or extend Marxist ideas in relation to colonial and postcolonial contexts, and who often did so by extrapolating from precisely those suggestive aspects of Marx's analysis which I've sought to emphasise here. The recognition that imperialism has regressive rather than developmental historical consequences is, for instance, central to the emergence of world systems theory and to scholars of underdevelopment such as Walter Rodney (1972). In the same way, Marx's growing recognition of the political centrality of struggles against empire is widely elaborated and substantiated in the traditions of Black radicalism. Bhabra and Holmwood refer to a number of exemplary texts in this respect, including C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*. Yet in so doing they side-step the extent to which a study like James' (and like much of Stuart Hall's work, later) developed in an explicit, questioning conversation with Marxism. Central to his analysis, after all, is his assertion that the revolutionary struggle in Haiti represented the cutting edge of a historical movement for freedom and equality. That interpretation is attributed here to Sibylle Fischer (2021: 72–73), but it is to James that it belongs. And it is, of course, an argument that emerges as a profoundly original application of the theory of uneven and combined development (which, in turn, took its cue from that awareness of the uneven, but interlinked, quality of capitalist development evident in Marx). In the same way, Bhabra and Holmwood (2021: 46) are surely right to argue that 'racialised difference itself depended on the wider significance of unfree labour in the development of modernity'. The path to that recognition is established for us by analyses such as Eric Williams' (1944: 7) *Capitalism and Slavery* with its famous claim that 'Slavery

was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery'. Williams was not a Marxist, as such, but his account in that study was certainly informed by his engagement with Marxist theorisations, not least of ideology. There are, of course, significant lacunae in Marx's theory. It is indisputable that, as Bhambra and Holmwood argue, he does not offer any worked-through analysis of the ways in which capitalist social relations are racialised. But my point is that there is an extensive body of historical and sociological theorising, decades deep, which has recognised and worked at that lacuna and others considered here. Much of it has been undertaken by writers from the formerly colonised world and, very often, in undertaking it, those writers understood themselves as moving with the grain of Marx's account rather than against it.

Near the beginning of their study Bhambra and Holmwood (2021: 8) argue, against the conservative historiography which treats European imperialism as just one more episode in a global progression of empires, that there was something qualitatively distinctive about that imperialism. Their account of that difference acknowledges the role of corporate power in that history, but it never directly names capitalism as the fundamental distinguishing factor between these modern empires and previous ones. A silence over empire has indeed been constitutive in European social theory. Yet, as Neil Lazarus (2011) has argued, a silence over capitalism has been equally constitutive in postcolonial theory. If one goal for a postcolonial sociology is to recentre imperialism not just at a descriptive level but also at an explanatory one, in the sense of seeking to understand how the global order comes to have the shape that it does, and the factors that subtended the emergence of the social relations characteristic of that order, then we cannot do without a theory of capitalism. Otherwise we are left with a choice between treating modern imperialism as a merely contingent, happenstance historical event, or we resort to explanations that refer back to cultural factors intrinsic to Europe – an argument that is no more sociologically persuasive in its negative form than in its celebratory, diffusionist form. In this respect there is still, as generations of writers from colonised and formerly colonised contexts have already shown, useful work yet to be done with Marx.

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