



Marx and Progress

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ABSTRACT

Marxism involves a much darker and more complex philosophy of progress than is often thought. According to it, historical development is a contradictory process that takes place through the action of negative as well positive forces. These ideas are traced in accounts by Marx and Engels of the development of capitalism, and discussed critically with particular focus on Marx's descriptions of the British rule in India. The charges that Marx's concept of progress ignores environmental issues, that it is eurocentric, and that it implies a unilinear theory of history are discussed.

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Marxism is a philosophy of progress. It is sometimes thought to involve the naïve and simple belief that a steady improvement in the conditions of human life is being brought about by continuous and cumulative economic and technological development. It has indeed at times been put forward in something like that form, particularly in the Soviet period, but when one looks at what Marx himself actually wrote one finds a much darker and more complex picture, according to which historical development is a paradoxical and contradictory process that takes place through the action of negative forces.

Perhaps the best-known expression of this is in the account of the impact of the growth of capitalism in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels [1848] 2010; hereafter cited as *Communist Manifesto*). There Marx and Engels give a vivid picture of its destructive effects on traditional society and the alien and inhuman relations that it puts in their place.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors,” and has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” (Marx and Engels [1848] 2010, 486–487)

However, they express surprisingly little regret about the damage and harm wrought by these changes. On the contrary, they celebrate capitalism as a “revolutionary” force. “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society” (Marx and Engels [1848] 2010, 487).

Indeed they go out of their way to stress that the impact of capitalism was not merely negative and destructive, but enormously productive and constructive.

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together . . . —what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour? (Marx and Engels [1848] 2010, 489)

Capitalism is portrayed as progressive relative to the feudal society it was replacing. However, it is also described as a contradictory phenomenon afflicted by increasingly severe economic crises that is in the process of creating the material conditions for its own supersession and the forces that will bring this about: its own “gravediggers,” the industrial working class.

The contradictory nature of the impact of capitalism and industry is expressed in striking and memorable terms by Marx in the brief “Speech at Anniversary of *The People’s Paper*” that he delivered (in English) in 1856.

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. (Marx [1856] 2010, 655)

However, there is no doubt that Marx believes that these contradictory processes will ultimately lead in a progressive and revolutionary direction. For, just as in the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels [1848] 2010), he maintains that they are creating the material conditions for a new society and for the growth of an organised and conscious working class which will emerge onto the political stage and eventually create it.

On our part, we do not mistake the shape of the shrewd spirit that continues to mark all these contradictions. We know that to work well the new-fangled forces of society, they only want to be mastered by new-fangled men—and such are the working men. They are as much the invention of modern time as machinery itself. (Marx [1856] 2010, 656)

The paradoxical character of this account comes through particularly clearly in Engels’s reports of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, written in 1844 a few years before the *Communist Manifesto* ([1848] 2010). The bulk of this pioneering book is taken up with Engels’s graphic description of the appalling living and working conditions of the industrial workers of the cotton mills of Manchester as he observed them in 1844. Engels precedes this with an account of the life of weavers and other textile workers before the industrial revolution. He portrays it in remarkably positive terms as an almost idyllic rural existence.¹

[They] vegetated throughout a passably comfortable existence . . . and their material position was far better than that of their successors. They did not need to overwork . . . and yet earned what they needed. . . . They were, for the most part, strong, well-built people . . . Their children grew up in the fresh country air, and, if they could help their parents at work, it was only occasionally; while of eight or twelve hours work for them there was no question. (Engels [1844] 2010, 308)

Engels then goes on to describe the devastating impact of capitalism and industry. These rural workers were driven out of their homes and villages, both by the coercive force of enclosures and by imperative economic pressures. They were herded into the factories

and mills and the squalid slums of new industrial cities like Manchester, which grew in a few short decades to be the centre of the world cotton industry.

Here workmen were forced to work, along with their wives and children, for appallingly long hours and for subsistence wages, just to survive—at least when work was available. Unemployment, which periodically threatened, meant even greater hardship: destitution and the threat of starvation. Conditions of life in the crowded and insanitary slums were atrocious.

The dwellings of the workers are everywhere badly planned, badly built, and kept in the worst condition, badly ventilated, damp, and unwholesome. . . . The clothing of the workers, too, is generally scanty, and that of great multitudes is in rags. The food is . . . often almost unfit for use. (Engels [1844] 2010, 373)

Many industrial towns were dangerously polluted. Rivers typically flow into the city “at one end clear and transparent” and flow out “at the other end thick, black, and foul, smelling of all possible refuse” (Engels [1844] 2010, 343). Bradford, for example, “lies upon the banks of a small, coal-black, foul-smelling stream. On weekdays the town is enveloped in a grey cloud of coal smoke” (343).

Engels goes on to describe in harrowing detail the harmful effects on the health of inhabitants and the destructive mental and moral impact of these conditions. And yet he insists that there is also a positive aspect to them. He stresses how, through their impact, people’s relations were extended, their consciousness expanded and their lives transformed. “Manufacture and the movement of civil society in general drew into the whirl of history the last classes which had remained sunk in apathetic indifference to the universal interests of mankind” (Engels [1844] 2010, 309). And he entirely rejects any romantic nostalgia or hankering for a return to the past. He is in no doubt that capitalism and the industrial revolution were ultimately progressive.

Should we therefore look backward longingly to . . . rural small-scale industry, which produced only servile souls, or to “the savages”? On the contrary. Only the proletariat created by modern large-scale industry, liberated from all inherited fetters including those which chained it to the land, and herded together in the big cities, is in a position to accomplish the great social transformation which will put an end to all class exploitation and all class rule. (Engels [1872] 2010, 324)

Marx is equally dismissive of any romanticism about the past. He talks dismissively of “craft-idiocy” (Marx [1847] 2010, 190), and of “the idiocy of rural life” (Marx and Engels [1848] 2010, 488).

The Concept of Progress

Marxism is a materialist philosophy. At the basis of the progress that industrialism brought about, it holds, lies the gigantic expansion of human productive powers it entailed. However, it would be wrong to think that Marxism values economic growth as an end in itself, or regards it as progressive and beneficial for purely material, utilitarian, or economic reasons. At least in the initial stages of industrialisation that Marx and Engels are talking about in these passages, they were convinced that the material benefits of economic growth did not go to the immediate producers.² Quite the reverse. Their wages, according to the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels [1848] 2010), were being driven

down to the subsistence minimum and conditions of work were dreadful. According to Engels, “That the situation of the workers has on the whole become materially worse since the introduction of capitalist production on a large scale is doubted only by the bourgeoisie” (Engels [1872] 2010, 324). The Marxist notion of progress is not a narrowly economic one. The human value of progress lies elsewhere and must be understood in other terms.

In a later work, Marx reflects on how capitalism is heedless of the welfare of individual workers.

15 men are KILLED every week in the English coal mines ON AN AVERAGE . . . MOSTLY BY THE SORDID AVARICE OF THE OWNERS OF THE COAL MINES . . . The capitalistic production is . . . most economical of *realised labour*, labour realised in commodities. It is a greater spendthrift than any other mode of production of man, of living labour, spendthrift not only of flesh and blood and muscles, but of brains and nerves. (Marx [1861–1863] 2010b, 168; Capitals and italics in the original)

However, Marx insists, the ultimate result of capitalism is progressive, and not simply in material terms. Although capitalism is heedless of the “individual development” of workers, Marx argues, in the longer run it leads to the creation of “general men,” and of a conscious and revolutionary working class (Anderson 2010, 18–19). “It is, in fact, only at the greatest waste of individual development that the development of general men is secured in those epochs of history which prelude to a socialist constitution of mankind” (Marx [1861–1863] 2010b, 168). And again, Marx writes,

although at first the development of the capacities of the *human* species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and whole human classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed, for the interests of the species in the human kingdom, as in the animal and plant kingdoms, always assert themselves at the cost of the interests of individuals. (Marx [1861–1863] 2010a, 348)³

Pre-industrial communities may have been tranquil, traditional and unchanging, as Engels describes, but life in them was confined and circumscribed within narrow limits. People were tied to the land and bound to a social hierarchy which was regarded as eternal, natural, and God given. Their horizons were restricted and seldom stretched beyond their local communities.⁴ Intellectually they were “dead,” says Engels.

The hand weaver who had his little house, garden and field along with his loom was a quiet, contented man . . . he doffed his cap to the rich, to the priest and to the officials of the state and inwardly was altogether a slave. (Engels [1872] 2010, 323)

[Such people] lived only for their petty, private interest, for their looms and gardens, and knew nothing of the mighty movement which, beyond their horizon, was sweeping through mankind. They were comfortable in their silent vegetation, and but for the industrial revolution they would never have emerged from this existence, which, cosily romantic as it was, was nevertheless not worthy of human beings. (Engels [1844] 2010, 309)

Capitalism and industry undermines and destroys this cosy and tranquil world. This is the negative side of its impact. But although Engels portrays this pre-industrial life in apparently idyllic terms, his contempt for it is also clear and he does not lament its destruction. For this cuts the bonds and breaks the relations and practices that tied the

workers to the land, kept them in small rural communities, and bound them to the prevailing social hierarchy.

In order to create the modern revolutionary class of the proletariat it was absolutely necessary to cut the umbilical cord which still bound the worker of the past to the land . . . It is precisely modern large-scale industry which has turned the worker, formerly chained to the land, into a completely propertyless proletarian, liberated from all traditional fetters, *a free outlaw*. (Engels [1872] 2010, 323; italics in the original)

By driving people into towns and cities, moreover, they are brought into a new and much larger network of connections and relations; their horizons are extended, their consciousness is expanded through education, and they are put into contact with the wider world. These are positive developments, and they are widely felt to be so despite all the dislocation and suffering they also involve: it is not just for economic reasons that so many people leave the countryside and move to the city. Moreover, Engels claims, “it is precisely this economic revolution which has created the sole conditions under which the exploitation of the working class in its final form, in capitalist production, can be overthrown” (Engels [1872] 2010, 323).

The Dialectic of Progress

This paradoxical and contradictory picture of progress runs through all the passages I have just been discussing. It is important to see that the negative aspects of progress, the destruction of traditional communities and relations, are not contingent and regrettable side effects in what is basically a desirable and positive course of development. On the contrary, they are essential and inescapable aspects of the process of progress and human liberation. It is only through the negative that the positive is realised. We must grasp “opposites in their unity or of the positive in the negative,” as Hegel (1969, 56) puts it if we are to understand the process.⁵

Jameson portrays the paradox involved in Marx’s account in stark terms. The description of the development of capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels [1848] 2010), he claims,

urges us to do the impossible, namely, to think this development positively and negatively all at once; to achieve, in other words, a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment. We are somehow to lift our minds to a point at which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst. [We must] think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together. (Jameson 1991, 47)

He calls this contradictory form of thinking “genuinely dialectical,” but what does he mean by that? Jameson does not explain. He leaves us with the bare assertion of contradiction. He makes it seem like a *Zen koan*. He does nothing to show how such a contradictory form of thought helps to illuminate these phenomena or why it is needed.

Jameson is right to insist that for Marx, progress is a contradictory process that involves both progress and catastrophe united together as essential and inseparable aspects of a single development. But he fails to explain how the negative aspect, the destruction of

traditional communities and relations, is an essential aspect of the process and how it is only through the negative that the positive is realised.

Similar themes are covered in two articles on the British rule in India that Marx wrote in 1853. These are deliberately controversial and provocative journalistic pieces. In a letter to Engels, Marx admits that when he described the impact of the British in India as “revolutionary” he was deliberately intended to be “shocking” (Marx [1853] 2010c, 346). But that is no reason to ignore these articles, they add important clarification of Marx’s ideas about the issues I have been discussing.

These were the first works that Marx wrote on non-Western societies. His ideas about India at this time were strongly influenced by Hegel’s description of Indian society and religion in his *Lectures on the philosophy of history* (Hegel 1956), and Marx has been criticised for adopting Hegel’s “Eurocentric” perspective (Löwy quoted in Anderson [2010, 14]). However, Marx does not rely only on Hegel or simply repeat his ideas, he was already studying reports from India and forming his own views (Anderson 2010, 11–17). I shall consider whether he is guilty of eurocentrism in due course; but if he is, it is on his own account, Hegel is not to blame.

Marx’s theme is the impact of the British in India.⁶ Before the British arrived, Indian society, as Marx describes it, was traditional and unchanging. The economy revolved around local small scale agriculture and handicraft industries, especially the spinning and weaving of cotton and jewellery-making. In the eighteenth century India was known as the “home of cotton” which it exported to Europe as fine finished goods. Marx treats India at this time as an example of the “Asiatic mode of production” in which there was a strong central government to maintain public works (particularly the irrigation system), combined with a plethora of small, separate, semi-autonomous villages which were poor, backward and unchanging.⁷

The effects of British imperialism were destructive in the extreme. This was partly because of the brutality and cruelty of the British soldiers and tax gatherers, but the main impact of the British, Marx maintains, was material and economic. Once the British were in control, India was flooded with cheap cotton goods produced in the cotton mills of Lancashire. These undercut local producers, undermined the local village economy, and destroyed the economic basis of Indian village life.

English interference . . . placed the spinner in Lancashire and the weaver in Bengal, or sweeping away both Hindoo spinner and weaver, dissolved these small semi-barbarian, semi-civilized communities, by blowing up their economical basis. (Marx [1853] 2010a, 131)

Similar processes are continuing to operate in the world today. Global economic forces are still destroying local economies and traditional ways of life all over world: not only in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, but now also in the West as well. The tables are being turned. The huge growth of industry in China and India is leading to the mass closure of factories in Lancashire and Detroit, in Wales and Pennsylvania, with similar destructive impacts on communities in these places.

One might expect Marx to focus mainly on the harmful effects of British imperialism but his response is more complex. Certainly, he condemns the appalling brutality and destructiveness of the British rule in India and its terrible human, economic and social cost. However, he insists that there was a positive as well as a negative aspect to the process. He sees the impact of the British as contradictory. He was convinced that it would

ultimately have a progressive as well as a purely destructive effect.⁸ “England has to fulfill 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”⁹ (Marx [1853] 2010b, 217–218).

According to Marx, traditional Indian society, as it was before the British arrived, was narrow, backward, and unchanging. The village system was the basis for a despotic political system, for the inequality and unfreedom of the caste system, and for the narrow horizons and superstitiousness of its people. Marx was well aware of the untold suffering its destruction caused. He quotes the Governor General of India reporting in 1834–1835 on the effects of English cotton machinery as follows: “The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India” (Marx [1867] 2010, 435). However, he sees another side to the picture as well.

Sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness those myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organizations disorganized and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes . . . we must not forget that these idyllic village-communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. (Marx [1853] 2010a, 132)

Destroying this traditional way of life meant freeing people from these constraints and creating the conditions in which the Indian people would be able to emancipate themselves from rural isolation, superstition and oppression.

Marx does not romanticise and idealise Indian religion as do so many contemporaries in the West, nor does he abstract it from the society in which it existed.¹⁰ He expresses no regret at seeing the traditional Indian way of life undermined and swept away. Perhaps the way he expresses himself is deliberately provocative, but his attitudes are not specific to India: he is similarly untroubled about the destruction of traditional European society and culture, as we have seen. Sympathetic as I am to his basic conception of progress, I cannot help but be distressed by the brutal and uncaring tone that he adopts.

In a subsequent article written shortly after, on “The Future Results of the British Rule in India,” he predicts that the growth of industry and commerce in India will in time require a transformation of its infrastructure, including the construction of railways and supporting industries. Better communications will lead eventually to greater political unity, to greater economic and social equality (including a weakening of the caste system), to the development of mass education, democracy and a free press—and ultimately to the awakening of the Indian people and to a movement for liberation by them. These are the changes that will flow eventually from economic and industrial development, Marx argues. It is for these social and human benefits, rather than for its material and economic effects, that Marx believes that the impact of the British would eventually be progressive.¹¹

Marx was writing before there were any concrete signs of a national liberation movement in India, but he was extraordinarily prescient. In 1857, just four years after these articles were written, the Indians began to fight back in what in Britain is still referred to as the “Indian Mutiny,” but which Indians call their “First War of Independence.” This long struggle led eventually to full national Independence in 1948. Now, India has become a major world economic power.

The Charge of Ethnocentrism

Marx's views in these articles have provoked an enormous storm of controversy and criticism. He appears to be contemptuous and dismissive of traditional Indian culture and society, and he expresses no misgivings about its destruction. He portrays it as primitive, stagnant, despotic, backward, conservative, and its people as superstitious and unfree. By contrast, he sees Western capitalism and industry, as superior and "higher." India, he argues, will ultimately benefit from the imposition of British rule and from being forced to take the Western, capitalist, path of development.

At times the language that Marx uses to describe Indian society is deplorable and unacceptable, but that should not be allowed to stand in the way of seeing the valid points that he is making. To describe a highly refined and sophisticated society—such as existed in many parts of India in the middle of the nineteenth century—as "backward" or "primitive," is clearly unjustifiable. Conversely, it would be wrong to think that Western, capitalist society provides an acceptable standard of "civilization," although that is not a fault that Marx can be accused of. When Gandhi was asked what he thought of "Western civilization," he replied, "It would be a good idea." Marx would have agreed. "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked" (Marx [1853] 2010b, 221).

Marx's assertion that Britain was a "superior" civilisation to that of India is regularly criticised as "ethnocentric," "Eurocentric" (Amin 2009) and "orientalist" (Said 1985)—in other words as chauvinist, even racist. Even Kevin Anderson, who gives a very sympathetic interpretation of Marx's ideas, accuses Marx of "lapsing into ethnocentrism, [when] he writes that unlike previous conquerors of India, who were themselves 'conquered by the superior civilization of their subjects,' the British were 'the first conquerors superior, and therefore, inaccessible to Hindoo civilization'" (Anderson 2010, 22).

Judgements of "higher" and "lower" are inescapable if one is to use the concept of progress; and there is a clear and valid basis for them. In modern times, Western "civilization" has been a crushingly powerful force that has invaded, dominated and often destroyed other cultures all around the world. In the encounter between Western "civilization" and other cultures, some have proved strong enough to defend and preserve their traditions and structures. Others, have not been able to prevail and some have even been wiped out altogether. These are undeniable facts. It is not "ethnocentric" to recognise them.

The charge of "orientalism" against what Marx wrote on India is equally misplaced (Said 1985, 153–156). It is wrong to see him as passing a specifically Western or European let alone racial judgement on an Oriental society. It is unhelpful to see his views through the lens of West versus East, it is wrong to criticise Marx in these terms. For the most part, Marx sees the impact of the British on India as a case of capitalist modernisation, similar to what happened in Britain during the industrial revolution. His disregard for the fate of traditional Indian communities is not due to their being Oriental. As we have seen, he adopts the same attitude towards traditional communities in Britain. He is contemptuous of precapitalist rural life whether in the West or in the Orient. He shows not a shred of romanticism about the past. He is an out and out moderniser.

Wherever traditional communities have experienced the disruptive and corrosive impact of capitalism, two contrasting sorts of response have typically arisen. Some in

these communities assert and defend the traditional values and culture that are being threatened by the impact of capitalism and by the invasion of western commercial values and cultural influences. Others, however, regard the tide of Western influence as inescapable and too strong to resist. They believe that they must learn from the West and modernise if they are to be able to defend their cultures and maintain their position in the world. Some others, like Lenin and the Bolsheviks on the whole, even positively welcome modernisation and Westernisation.

These conflicting responses can be seen in the disputes between the Slavophiles and Westernisers in Russia in the nineteenth century, portrayed in the novels of Turgenev (2009) and Dostoyevsky (2011) (see also Walicki 1979). They have been a feature of Chinese politics ever since the violent impact of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century. They are evident in the political divisions that have riven the Middle East in recent years, and in every other part of the world where the corrosive effects of capitalism have reached.¹²

Similar divisions between modernisers and traditionalists have been a feature of Indian politics too, from the time of Marx right down to the present day. At one pole stands Marx's unequivocal modernism. At the other, the celebration and defence of Indian traditions expressed by Gandhi in the following passage quoted by Ahmad.

The more we indulge in our emotions the more unbridled they become. Millions will always remain poor. Observing all this, our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures. We have managed with the same kind of plough as existed thousands of years ago. We have retained the same kind of cottages that we had in former times, and our indigenous education remains the same. It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre. They, therefore, after due deliberation, decided that we should do what we could with our hands and feet. They further reasoned that large cities were a snare and a useless encumbrance and people would not be happy in them, that there would be gangs of thieves and robbers, prostitution and vice flourishing in them, and that poor men would be robbed by rich men. They were therefore satisfied with small villages. (Ahmad 1992, 237)

As Ahmad notes, "whether or not Gandhi knew it, he seems to be refuting Marx on every count"; and yet, in doing so it is striking that he also endorses Marx's description of traditional Indian society in almost every detail: as village-based, sunk in tradition and unchanging.

Gandhi's views were more complex and contradictory than this passage suggests, as Ahmad goes on to say in his well-considered criticisms of Edward Said's attack on Marx for supposed "orientalism." Nevertheless, they well illustrate what Ahmad describes as,

a certain strand of obscurantist indigenism which unfortunately surfaced in Gandhi's thought much too frequently; which was radically opposed to the way Marx thought of these matters; and which still lives today, in many forms, under the insignia, always, of cultural nationalism and opposed, always, to strands of thought derived from Marxism. (Ahmad 1992, 238)

These are the opposite poles of this debate. As Ahmad says, Marxism, is firmly on the side of modernisation and entirely repudiates any romantic attachment to traditional ways. This is not because Marx was seeking to criticise Oriental practices by Western or European standards, but because modernisation, he believed—even under the brutal regime of the British—would lead ultimately to the self-development of the Indian people and to their growing consciousness and freedom.

Environmental Concerns

Marx's faith in economic progress is sometimes accused of implying a naïve "productivism," an unqualified confidence in the benefits of economic development that is blind to its destructive impact on the environment.¹³ The drive for industrial development in "actually existing" socialist countries like the USSR and China did indeed at times result in policies that ignored its environmental consequences with some terrible results.¹⁴ However, there is no inherent reason why Marxism should lead in this direction. On the contrary, with their strong central control over economic policy, socialist societies are potentially in a much better position to direct their development in ways that protect the environment than capitalist ones, where this is left to the mercy of the market.

Marx and Engels were both very conscious of the disastrous environmental impact of the uncontrolled industrial development unleashed by capitalism in the nineteenth century and very concerned about this, as a number of writers have documented in detail in recent years. Ecological issues, it has been convincingly shown, were at the very centre of Marx's critique of capitalism (Grundmann 1991; Burkett 1999; Foster 2000; Saitō 2017). It is simply false to suggest his conception of progress excludes recognition of the ecological dimension of economic development.

All this may be true, it will be said, but it doesn't go to the heart of the issue. How can industrial growth be regarded as progressive when it is so clearly leading to environmental catastrophe on a global scale? The very idea that material development is a benefit must be discarded, many now argue, belief in progress must be rejected. We are facing an environmental catastrophe. Economic development must be halted or even reversed. We must deindustrialise and return to a simpler and more rural way of life.

There is no doubt that the threat to our environment is real and urgent. No version of Marxism or socialism disputes that. Nevertheless, Marx does believe in the value of economic development and progress—but not at any price, not in an unqualified way. Development is not an end in itself. It is valued by Marx only in so far as it furthers the end of human social and individual development.

There are many forms of economic and industrial activity that do not do this. They are harmful and should be curbed. But a general rejection of economic development is not the answer. On the contrary, the development of our productive powers has a vital role to play in tackling these problems. Our technical, productive and social powers are not purely destructive, they are our skills and abilities. They can be used for either benefit or harm. They not only create these problems, they can be used to solve them, and Socialism is in much better position to do this than capitalism. It does not relinquish control over our productive powers to the market, but exercises social control over them, and thus possesses the capacity to respond far more effectively to such issues. This now needs to be done on a global scale.¹⁵

A Unilinear Conception of History?

Another common criticism of Marxism is that it is committed to a unilinear theory of historical development based on the European model: a single Eurocentric "grand narrative," which doesn't recognise the specificity of different societies or cultures.

It is true that, in some of the key statements of his views, Marx portrays society as proceeding through a fixed series of stages: Asiatic, ancient slave-based society, feudalism, capitalism, communism; and that this scheme is derived from European history. In places this is put forward by Marx as a universal pattern (Marx [1859] 2010, Preface; Marx and Engels [1845] 2010, Part I). At other times he is more cautious and presents it as an account of European development that was not intended as a universal theory. In his response to a Russian critic, for example, he rejects efforts “to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed” (Marx [1877] 2010, 200).

Nevertheless, subsequent Marxist thinkers often treated Marxism as laying down a universal pattern of historical development, and in this form it has framed a great deal of thought not only about Europe, but also about other parts of world, including India.

Some argue that Marx himself came to question this unilinear account when he studied other societies later in his life. As a result, it is said, he became more open to the idea that different paths of development might be possible in other societies. In the 1870s he studied the traditional Russian village commune, and he contemplated the idea that a transition to socialism in Russia might be possible without it having to go through a capitalist stage (Shanin 1983; White 1996; Anderson 2010, 224–236). Although he considered such views, however, it is doubtful that they persuaded him to abandon his previous theory of historical stages (Sayers 1999; Stedman Jones 2017).

What is at issue in these debates is whether Marx’s account of historical development, which was derived primarily from European history, applies more widely, or whether different paths of development are possible elsewhere. Here it is important to distinguish the general theoretical framework of historical materialism from the specific account that Marx gives of the particular stages of historical development.

The general theory is that societies develop through conflicts between the forces and relations of production. This is put forward as an account of historical development that applies to all societies, and it is used by Marx and Engels to comprehend non-European as well as European societies.¹⁶ However, the theory that all societies are destined to go through the same series of specific stages—Asiatic, slave, feudal and capitalist—may well be specific to European history. It may not be illuminating, for example, to think of pre-modern China or Russia as “feudal” societies on the European model; different categories may be needed to comprehend their specificities.

Nevertheless, thinking about Chinese and Russian history has been strongly affected by Marx’s account. The attempt to fit them into a rigid unilinear framework has arguably distorted understanding of these societies and their paths of development, since many Marxists have tried to impose on them the model of a transition from feudalism and capitalism to socialism that may not be appropriate.

This has been particularly important in the understanding of the history of modern China. Mao Tsetung (Mao Zedong) was notable for his deviations from the orthodox Marxist unilinear model in two major respects: first, for his recognition that traditional Chinese society differed from European feudalism and required a distinct analysis of the classes in the Chinese countryside (Mao 1967a); and second for his emphasis on the vital importance of the revolutionary role of the peasantry, and of the liberation movement in the countryside as opposed to the cities (Mao 1967b). This set China’s revolution

on a different path than was advocated by traditional Marxists based on the unilinear account. It has led to controversy about the character of China's revolution, and whether modern China is socialist or capitalist, or some new and different kind of society.

However, the question of whether all societies must go through the unilinear path of historical development laid down by traditional Marxism or whether alternative ways are possible may be becoming decreasingly less relevant in practice nowadays. This is what Kevin Anderson suggests on the grounds that global capitalism has penetrated everywhere and it is virtually impossible for any society, anywhere in the world, to escape it (Anderson 2010, 244–245). Even so, each has its own traditions, and particular social relations and history which play a role in influencing its development and forming its modern character. Moreover, it is difficult to predict what may be possible. The forces of global capitalism were powerfully present in Cuba in the 1960s when its revolution took place right next door to the USA in what was a predominantly agrarian society. The possibility of further socialist revolutions in such societies cannot be ruled out.

Justifying Progress

As we have seen, Marx analyses progress as a contradictory phenomenon. In stressing that there are positive as well as negative aspects to it, it may seem that he is arguing in a way that condones or even justifies colonialism and imperialism.

At the end of his article on “The British Rule in India,” Marx writes:

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny¹⁷ without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. Then, whatever bitterness the spectacle of the crumbling of an ancient world may have for our personal feelings, we have the right, in point of history, to exclaim with Goethe:

“Sollte these Qual uns quälen
Da sie unsre Lust vermehrt,
Hat nicht myriaden Seelen
Timur's Herrschaft aufgezehrt?”¹⁸ (Marx [1853] 2010a, 132–133)

Marx was particularly fond of these lines from Goethe, he quotes them on a number of occasions (Anderson 2010, 17–20). Some have thought that his use of them was intended to imply that colonial rule was justified because it resulted ultimately in development and progress (“greater pleasure”).

As we have seen, Marx does indeed argue that there were positive aspects to the impact of the British in India. As always, however, for him the ultimate benefit of capitalist development is not simply a matter of material and economic growth, but rather the social and human transformation that it brings about by creating the material conditions for a new social and economic order:

on the one hand universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind, and the means of that intercourse; on the other hand the development of the productive powers of man and the transformation of material production into a scientific domination of natural agencies. (Marx [1853] 2010b, 222)

The bourgeoisie was creating these conditions unintentionally and unconsciously, like geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth, and in the most brutal and violent fashion. “Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and people through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?” (Marx [1853] 2010b, 221).

Marx here is describing the way in which capitalism has actually operated, he is not trying to excuse or justify it. Nevertheless, his words inevitably raise the question of whether the picture of progress that he is presenting can validly be used to provide a justification for the violence and destruction it has involved.

It might do if no other form of progressive development was possible, but this is not the case. Even capitalism can take different, more or less brutal forms.¹⁹ The barbaric form that it took with the British in India, although by no means unique, is not inevitable or justifiable.

More importantly, however, capitalism is not the only possibility. Another and better form of economic and social organisation, Marx believed, will be created “when a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples” (Marx [1853] 2010b, 222), and when capitalism is superseded. Then it will be possible to bring the process of development much more fully under human control and for progress to be achieved in a more benign way.

The record of “actually existing” socialist societies, like the USSR and China, can provide some evidence about this, but I have neither the space nor the expertise to assess this adequately. In any case, even if there is a gentler way, the question of the value of progress as such remains. There are real problems and dilemmas here, and they are not raised only by capitalism. Modernisation is a contradictory process. It inevitably involves destruction as well as construction. Even if a gentler way is possible—and surely it is—the contradictory character of the process and of the result are the same—the traditional must largely be destroyed in order to create the material and social conditions necessary for the modern to be created, and the loss of traditional ways of life must ultimately be judged against the benefits of the new. Marxism is a modernising philosophy, on the side of development and progress. I have great sympathy for that view. However, I am also distressed about the destruction of many aspects of traditional cultures and practices, and disturbed by Marx’s apparent indifference to this.

Notes

1. Cohen (1988, 189n186) says that Marx and Engels later break with this “idealized conception of pre-industrial life,” but he is mistaken on that point in what is otherwise a very instructive article on these themes: Engels repeats very similar views later in his pamphlet on “The Housing Question” (Engels [1872] 2010) as we shall see below.
2. There has been much dispute about this. For a recent account of the arguments, see Griffin (2010, chapter 9).
3. Cf. Kant’s insistence that the idea of historical progress applies not to individuals but to the “species” as a whole (Kant 1970, 44).
4. I remember visiting peasant farms in China, and seeing how horizons barely stretched to the local city, let alone further afield. In 1985, I visited Guangzhou near the start of China’s industrial revolution, just as the impact of Deng Xiaoping’s policies were beginning to be felt. The main slogan at the time was “enrich yourself!” With a party of foreign visitors, I was taken on a tour to a village on the outskirts of the city that was rapidly being engulfed by it. We were

introduced to a farmer who had proudly added an extra storey to his house as a mark of his success. One of our party asked if he had ever been abroad (a naïve question, foreign travel was all but impossible for Chinese at the time, even to Hong Kong which was only a couple of hours away). The farmer thought a bit and replied that he had once been to Guangzhou, which was barely over the horizon.

5. This is what Marx ([1844] 2010, 332) refers to approvingly as Hegel's "dialectic of negativity." There are similar interpretations of Marx's account of progress in Cohen (1988) and Chattopadhyay (2006).
6. Or in "Hindostan," as he sometimes calls it, i.e., the whole sub-continent before Partition.
7. Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production is widely criticised. See Anderson (1979, 462–550), for a full discussion of these controversies. However, the precise nature of traditional Indian society and Marx's account of it is not relevant to the larger themes on which I am focusing so I will not discuss it here.
8. Marx has been criticised for not recognising that there might be systematic obstacles to economic development (Amin 1976; Alavi and Shanin 1989), but discussion of this controversy is beyond my present scope.
9. The way in which Marx contrasts East and West in these articles has contributed to the charge of "orientalism" which I discuss below.
10. In this respect he is following Hegel (1975, 140–145).
11. That is to say, like Hegel, Marx values progress for what Hegel calls the "spiritual" rather than for the purely material development that it brings.
12. There is a more extended discussion of these issues in Sayers (2007).
13. Such charges have been made even by writers sympathetic to Marxism, such as Benton (1989) and Gorz (1994).
14. Of course, this is not peculiar to socialism, the same is true of capitalism.
15. I recognise that a great deal more needs to be said about this crucial issue.
16. E.g., in Marx's ethnological notes (1972), and Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* ([1884] 2010), which is based on them. See also Anderson (2010).
17. A phrase with what may appear to be questionable teleological implications.
- 18.

"Should this torture then torment us
 Since it brings us greater pleasure?
 Were not through the rule of Timur
 Souls devoured without measure?"
 From Goethe's "An Suleika," *Westöstlicher*
 Diwan.—Ed.

19. "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked" (Marx [1853] 2010b, 221).

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