



## ARTÍCULOS

UTOPIA Y PRAXIS LATINOAMERICANA. AÑO: 28, n.º 101, 2023, e7768625  
REVISTA INTERNACIONAL DE FILOSOFÍA Y TEORÍA SOCIAL  
CESA-FCES-UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA. MARACAIBO-VENEZUELA  
ISSN 1316-5216 / ISSN-e: 2477-9555



### Marx, Marxism, and the problem of eurocentrism

*Marx, el marxismo y el problema del eurocentrismo*

Thomas Jeffrey MILEY

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4360-7446>

[thomas.j.miley@gmail.com](mailto:thomas.j.miley@gmail.com)

University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

Este trabajo está depositado en Zenodo:

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7768625>

#### ABSTRACT

This article sets out to review and evaluate the charge of Eurocentrism frequently levelled against Marx and Marxism. The essay begins with an assessment of Esteban Torres's recent attempt to at least partially acquit Marx and Marxism of this charge. It relates Torres's discussion of the problem to broader polemics surrounding the topic. It hones in on debates about Marx's evolving views on European colonialism, and its relationship to capitalism. It pays special attention to the postcolonial critiques advanced by Edward Said and Dipesh Chakrabarty, as well as to more recent decolonial critiques advanced by Walter Mignolo and Ramón Grosfoguel. It also considers Marxist responses to these. It concludes with a reinvigoration of the contributions of heterodox "Third World Marxists" such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, arguing that what is at work in such figures thinking from and for the Global South is not a logic of diffusion, imitation, and mimicry, but rather, can be more accurately portrayed as translation, reinvention, and creative appropriation.

**Keywords:** Marx, Marxism, Eurocentrism, Colonialism, Decoloniality.

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo se propone revisar y evaluar la acusación de eurocentrismo que a menudo se formula contra Marx y el marxismo. El ensayo comienza con una evaluación del reciente intento de Esteban Torres de exculpar, al menos parcialmente, a Marx y al marxismo de esta acusación. El texto relaciona la discusión de Torres sobre el problema con polémicas más amplias en torno al tema. Se centra en los debates sobre la evolución de las opiniones de Marx sobre el colonialismo europeo y su relación con el capitalismo. Presta especial atención a las críticas postcoloniales de Edward Said y Dipesh Chakrabarty, así como a las críticas decoloniales más recientes de Walter Mignolo y Ramón Grosfoguel. También considera las respuestas marxistas a las mismas. Concluye con una reivindicación de las contribuciones de los "marxistas del Tercer Mundo" heterodoxos, como Frantz Fanon y Aimé Césaire, argumentando que lo que está en juego en esas figuras que piensan desde y para el Sur Global no es una lógica de difusión, imitación y mimetismo, sino que puede describirse más exactamente como esfuerzos de traducción, reinención y apropiación creativa.

**Palabras clave:** Marx, marxismo, eurocentrismo, decolonialidad.

Recibido: 01-11-2022 • Aceptado: 14-02-2023



## INTRODUCTION

In an essay titled, “Marx, Eurocentrism and Structural Change in Latin America,”<sup>1</sup> originally presented as an intervention in a dialogue with Álvaro García Linera, Atilio Borón, and Elvira Concheiro Borquez on the occasion of the presentation of the book, *Marx at 200: Present, Past and Future*, and now included as a stand-alone chapter in the section on “Marx and the Lefts Facing the Regional Future” in *The Great Transformation of Sociology* (2021), Esteban Torres addresses the crucial question and charge of Eurocentrism in the work of Marx and in the tradition of Marxism.

On the surface, at least, Torres would seem to acquit Marx of the charge. He contends, instead, that “Marx offers a European vision of the world, not a Eurocentric vision.” And he goes on to argue that “Marx, or any other great author, no matter how internationalist their emancipatory interest may be, cannot be asked to think for us, nor to take charge of the situation, from the particularity of our own historical location, to recognize for us which are the most fundamental and urgent problems” (2021, pp. 363-364).

It is worth considering the substance and significance of Torres’s claim in some greater detail. Torres is clearly familiar with the too-often neglected Latin American contributions to the Marxist tradition – as is apparent from his reference to such emblematic, albeit “heterodox,” figures as José María Aricó, Mariátegui, Scalabrini Ortiz, Jorge Abelardo Ramos, and Zabaleta Mercado. Even so, he insists, such thinkers were well aware of the fact that “Marx’s theoretical framework was not created from Latin America, nor in the first instance for the region” (2021, p.364). To comprehend Marx, Torres contends, requires situating him within the European context from which his work emerged. In Torres’s words, “Marx cannot be delocalized” (2021, p.364). But this does not lead Torres to reject the prospect of a fruitful dialogue with Marx and with Marxism, from perspectives rooted in other world regions. To the contrary, he claims, such a dialogue is most urgent and necessary. This because, he argues, “[j]ust as the world is not the product of only one locality, a theory of world society cannot be either” (2021, pp.364-365).

Torres is insistent that “it cannot be demanded of Marx or of anybody that they supplant our work of substantive theoretical creation” (2021, p.366). Furthermore, he goes on to sketch what he takes to be one of the fundamental challenges for critical social sciences (in which he includes Marxism), as being the propagation and development “of new theories of world society, from and for Latin America, from which categories can be generated that allow us to explain, among other things, how in objective terms national and popular governments in the region and in the peripheral world more generally are functioning” (2021, p.366).

In sum, Torres thus champions the proliferation of theories of global society both from and for the global peripheries. To this end, he calls for a “paradigmatic renovation” of the social sciences, a renovation which consists in “the recreation of a ‘spirit’ that is at the same time *mundialista* and *autonomista*” (2021, p.368). He admits the possibility that these theories and this ‘spirit’ can take inspiration in the work of Marx and can indeed be situated within the Marxist tradition. And yet, he argues, “throughout history, in the few moments and countries of Latin America in which Marxist ideas prospered on a grand scale, these ideas were subjected to a process of autonomist theoretical creation, of ‘creative destruction’ in relation to Marx” (2021, p.367). Likewise, in the political terrain, Torres cites the examples of Castro’s Cuba, Allende’s Chile, and Evo Morales’s Bolivia as instances of national victories associated with the Marxist movement in the region, but at the same time he is careful to stress “the creative and irreverent theoretical force of its leaders and reference groups.” In all these cases, he contends, “the implementation of an autonomist theoretical and political practice implied discarding a good part of the Marxian postulates” (2021, p.367).

Nor is the link between the theoretical and the political levels that Torres makes tangential or incidental. To the contrary, it reflects his deeply held conviction of the necessity – indeed, the “existential imperative” – for left-wing social sciences to generate “institutional conditions to effectively influence the process of social change” (2021, p.369).

---

<sup>1</sup> Translations from the original Spanish are mine.

All this is fine and good, but where does this leave us with respect to the problematic of Eurocentrism? One might be tempted to say that, according to Torres, Marx generated a theory of global society from and for Europe.

Indeed, Torres would seem to substantially concur with the judgment of Salah Hassan, that “in spite of his visionary work and enduring legacy, Marx was a product of his time and of Europe as a rising colonial empire with ambitions of conquest and domination, and the larger framework of his analysis was bound by the evolutionary thinking of that time” (and place) (2012, p.3).

Moreover, like Hassan, Torres’s reflex response to help transcend this limitation is to center the contributions to the Marxist tradition made by organic intellectuals writing from and for the global south. In such a vein, both Hassan and Torres effectively follow Benita Parry’s strategy of attempting to correct the Eurocentric tendency within so-called Western Marxist thought that would ignore and exclude non-Metropolitan contributions to the tradition, by emphasizing the creativity and innovation of contributions to that tradition made by figures from the global south (Parry 2011). They likewise evoke the same pertinent question posed by Sarah Salem, namely, “what are we assuming to be the Marxist ‘canon’?” For, as Salem has argued, “[i]f we take seriously the work of Samir Amin, C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon and Claudia Jones, then the Marxist canon itself is not as stable as often imagined” (Salem 2019).

Even so, as we shall see, such a move, which Robinson (2019) has perhaps a bit unfairly caricatured as a strategy of “parading out images of ... revolutionaries of colour,” cannot ultimately put to rest the critique of Eurocentrism.

Nevertheless, Torres actually rejects the charge against not only Marxism in general but also against Marx himself of Eurocentrism, perhaps only because he sees such “centrism” to be inevitable, insofar as all universalizing theories inevitably bear the mark of the particular circumstances and local problematics to which the theorist is responding, not to mention the particular interlocutors with whom the theorist is corresponding. In a word, all theories, regardless of their universalizing aspirations, are theories elaborated from and for somewhere. As such, Torres would seem to suggest, the only way to approximate universality is through the proliferation of dialogue among theorists thinking both from and for a variety of different global regions, with an emphasis on the “conjunto” of the world peripheries, or global south.

But is the aspiration to approximate universality itself a reflection of a Eurocentric bias, as post-colonial critics have so often claimed? Or to put the point another way, is such an aspiration “inherently epistemically colonial” (Robinson 2019), as some latter-day decolonial champions of the “pluriverse” have argued? I think Torres is basically right to resist such a sweeping dismissal of universalizing aspirations per se, even if he is too quick to acquit Marx of the charge of Eurocentrism. Nevertheless, in order to more deftly navigate the terrain of such claims, it might prove worthwhile to take a closer look at the debate about Marx and Eurocentrism.

## **MARX ON IMPERIALISM**

There have been rivers of ink spilled over this question of Marx’s – and Marxism’s – alleged Eurocentrism. What is the nature of this accusation against Marx of which Torres seems all too quick to acquit him? For starters, what precisely does Eurocentrism entail? In one of the more persuasive recent interventions in the debate, in an article titled “Marx’s Eurocentrism. Postcolonial Studies and Marx Scholarship,” Kolja Lindner has provided an analytically incisive four-dimensional definition of the concept of Eurocentrism. According to Lindner, in its first dimension, Eurocentrism can be considered “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.” In its second dimension, Eurocentrism has to do with “[a]n ‘Orientalist’ way of looking at the non-Western world which has less to do with the real conditions prevailing there than with what [Edward] Said calls the ‘European Western Experience’. The world as whole is imagined from a regional standpoint.” Moreover, in its third dimension, Eurocentrism is reflected in “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'." And finally, in its fourth dimension, Eurocentrism is characterised by the "[e]ffacement of non-European history, or, more precisely, of its influence on European development" (2010, pp.2-3).

Rahul Rao has recently argued that blanket dismissals of Marxism as Eurocentric "fail to attend to the nuances embedded within Marx's position on imperialism" (as summarised by Salem 2019). There is, nevertheless, no doubt that Marx's own views on Imperialism and/or colonialism were decidedly more ambivalent and ambiguous than those of Lenin, much less those of Mao or Fanon. And in striking contrast to such later Marxists, Marx himself nowhere offers any "emancipatory programme specifically for colonial revolution" (Young 2016, p.102).

It is, nevertheless, also the case that, for Marx (and for Engels), colonial expansion constituted a necessary precondition for the subsequent rise of industrial capitalism. In Robert C. Young's words: "it was colonial expansion which enabled the bourgeoisie to accumulate enough capital to revolutionize the whole economic and social system on a global scale – an observation which would later be developed into world-system theory" (2016, p.102).

As Marx put the point most eloquently in Volume 1 of *Capital*, first published in 1867, towards the very end, in Chapter XXXI on the "Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist": "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation" (1867/2015, p.533).

As such, Marx saw capitalism and imperialism to be intimately intertwined. At the root of his ambivalence was his whole-hearted commitment to socialist revolution, coupled with his conviction that the path to socialism had necessarily to pass through the transition to industrial capitalism first. To the extent that colonial conquest could be viewed as clearing the way for the subsequent development of capitalism, in other words, to the extent that colonialism could be seen as "a necessary instrument for the introduction of modernity" (Young 2016, p.105), for Marx, colonialism could be considered as part of a dialectical unfolding. This despite the despicable brutality involved, which Marx was always careful to document in meticulous detail.

As Marx would infamously argue in an 1853 article written for the *New York Daily Tribune*, on "The British Rule in India": "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 destiny 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" (1853/2005).

As Young puts the point: "Colonialism therefore, for Marx, was fiercely dialectical: both a ruthless system of economic exploitation and a significant positive move towards a Utopian future" (2016, p.109).

If Marx's writings from the 1850's on India display a clear ambivalence towards European imperialism, his and Engels' treatment of Ireland would be more categorical in their condemnation of the phenomenon. This is because, as Kevin Anderson has emphasised, Marx saw Ireland "as an important source of opposition to Britain and to global capital" (2010, p.115), indeed, progressively so, and by 1870 he even came to consider Ireland potentially as "the lever" of the revolution (2010, p.144). By all means, as Lindner has highlighted, Marx's observations of colonized Ireland stand in rather stark contrast with those he made of colonized India: "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" (2010, p.12).

There is an evolution in Marx's thought, which bears rather directly on his attitude towards imperialism/colonialism. For as Anderson has perceptively elucidated, in his earlier writings, Marx "exhibited more of a sense of capitalism's progressiveness vis à vis earlier social forms, whether this concerned Western feudalism or non-Western societies. By the late 1850s and early 1860s, however, Marx's perspectives on non-Western societies began to evolve. This was true of India, where he attacked British colonialism far more sharply during the 1857 Sepoy Uprising than in his 1853 writings on that country ... It was also true of Russia, where by 1858 he began to consider the possibility of peasant-based upheaval in a society he had previously viewed as utterly conservative from top to bottom" (2010, pp.162-163).

The substantial differences between the first edition of Volume I of *Capital*, published in 1867, and the French edition, published serially between 1872 and 1875, which have been highlighted both by Anderson (2010, pp.171-180) and by the Latin American liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel (2000, p.9), are also worth noting in this regard. For in the latter version, Marx explicitly distances himself from a unilinear evolutionary narrative about the succession of social formations and the emergence of industrial capitalism, and embraces instead a more multilinear approach.

Intimately related to this, there is considerable evidence that, towards the end of his life, Marx had begun to contemplate the possibility that there could be multiple paths towards socialism, indeed, that in some circumstances, it might be possible to arrive at socialism without having to make the painful transition to industrial capitalism first. To this end, Anderson and Dussel have both emphasized that, "[i]n his correspondence with the Russian exile Vera Zasulich and elsewhere, Marx began to suggest that agrarian Russia's communal villages could be a starting point for a socialist transformation, one that might avoid the brutal process of the primitive accumulation of capital" (Anderson 2010, p.196; see also Dussel 2000, p.9). The consequences for his earlier ambivalence towards colonialism would seem clear – the notion of "dialectical necessity" need no longer be countenanced, much less maintained.

And yet, the considerable shifts in Marx's thought, his increasing scepticism towards the progressive features of capitalist modernity, and, correspondingly, his increasing appreciation of the virtues of a more multilinear evolutionary narrative, culminating in Marx's correspondence late in life with Vera Zasulich, would remain much less well known, much less influential, than the more mechanistic, developmentalist, and teleological line of argument that he and Engels had sketched in their early work, most emblematically, in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*. And so, the ambivalent chord that they struck towards colonialism would become an important part of the inheritance of the Marxist tradition, destined to be "fought out in the extended discussions of the Second International and left unresolved" (Young 2016, p.110).

It would be left unto Lenin to "inaugurate a major shift of emphasis" (Young 2016, p.110), to unequivocally condemn the course of imperialist aggression, and to decisively embrace the revolutionary repercussions of anti-colonial revolt.

## **EDWARD SAID'S CRITIQUE**

In his critically acclaimed and highly influential 1979 post-colonial classic, *Orientalism*, Edward Said levels perhaps the most famous critique of Marx for his Eurocentrism. Said accuses Marx of being guilty of the sin of orientalism, in particular in Marx's 1853 analyses of British rule in India, where Marx advances "the idea that even in destroying Asia, Britain was making possible there a real social revolution," that, indeed, the brutality of the violent transformations wrought by the British were, albeit repugnant, at the same time the expression of "historical necessity" (1979, p.153).

Said hones in on Marx's quotation of a famous passage from Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*, in which the renowned German poet writes: "Should this torture then torment us / Since it brings us greater pleasure? / Were not through the rule of Timur / Souls devoured without measure?" (1979, p.154). According to Said, Marx's recourse to Goethe is most revealing. It allegedly allows us to identify the "sources of Marx's conceptions about the Orient," to locate them in a "Romantic redemptive project," more specifically, in "the idea of regenerating a fundamentally lifeless Asia" (1979, p.154). Said here goes on to equate Marx with so

many other Orientalists and “early-nineteenth century thinkers,” who tended to “conceive of humanity in abstract generalities,” who were “neither interested nor capable of discussing individuals,” and for whom, “between Orient and Occident, as if in a self-fulfilling proclamation, only the vast anonymous collectivity mattered, or existed” (1979, pp.154-155).

The fact that Marx seemed able to express some sympathy for those who suffered so much at the hands of the British, the fact that he could “identify even a little with poor Asia,” Said contends, “suggests that something happened before the labels took over, before he was dispatched to Goethe as his source of wisdom on the Orient” (1979, p.155). Even so, Said concludes, “the very vocabulary [Marx] found himself forced to employ” worked “to stop and chase away the sympathy,” and his “sentiment therefore disappeared as it encountered the unshakeable definitions built up by Orientalist science, supported by ‘Oriental’ lore (e.g. the *Diwan*) supposed to be appropriate for it” (1979, p.155). Accordingly, “what finally occurs is that something forces [Marx] to scurry back to Goethe, there to stand in his protective Orientalized Orient” (1979, p.155).

Kevin Anderson has addressed Said’s charge at some length in a section titled “Marx, Goethe, and Edward Said’s Critique of Eurocentrism,” in his authoritative book, *Marx at the Margins. On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, in which he offers at least a partial defence of Marx against Said’s accusation. Anderson begins by conceding that Said is certainly “correct in pointing to elements of Eurocentrism in Marx’s ‘The British Rule in India’.” Nevertheless, he objects, Said “is surely mistaken ... when he has Marx relying on a poet, even one as brilliant as Goethe, as his ‘source of wisdom on the Orient’” (2010, p.17).

Anderson expresses surprise at Said’s failure to mention “the nineteenth-century context of the stanza from Goethe” in question – specifically, the link to Napoleon and the French Revolution. And he goes on to excavate a variety of different occasions on which Marx would make reference to the same stanza, but with respect to a context very different to that of India – namely, “the dehumanization of the industrial worker.” That in relation to this latter context, Marx cannot plausibly be seen to agree with the sentiments expressed in the lines of Goethe’s stanza, leads Anderson to wonder whether, in the former, Marx might not have also used it “to characterize the British colonialist perspective rather than his own” (2010, p.18)?

To this end, Anderson mentions the German critical theorist Irving Fletscher, who makes a similar point in relation to a passage from Marx’s 1861-1863 economic manuscripts where Marx again makes reference to Goethe’s stanza, again with respect to the brutal plight of English workers. Anderson goes on to insist, with Fletscher, that, “[o]bviously, there is nothing specifically Orientalist at work ... in Marx’s discussion of English workers, in which he does not mention any society outside capitalist England” (2010, p.19).

From all this, Anderson concludes, against Said, that Marx’s use of Goethe’s stanza on Timur in his 1853 article “On the British Rule in India” in no way implies a lack of sympathy for humans suffering from the brutal destruction of British colonialism. Anderson nevertheless admits that none of this “invalidate[s] Said’s more generalized attack on Marx’s uncritically modernist perspective of 1853, with its evocation of the ultimate progressiveness of British imperialism in India,” though he is quick to add that Marx later came to revise such an uncritical modernist perspective.

Anderson further cites the “spirited response” to Said’s attack on Marx penned by Aijaz Ahmad in his polemical 1992 book, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* – a book in which Ahmad excoriates Said’s brand of “postmodern postcolonialism” for ignoring “issues like caste oppression and the needed ‘transformation ... within Asian societies’ that Marx and progressive Indians have long supported” (2010, p.20).

Ahmad’s rejoinder to Said is certainly a “spirited” one, to say the least. Nevertheless, like Kevin Anderson after him, Ahmad concedes “that the writings of Marx and Engels are indeed contaminated in several places with the usual banalities of nineteenth-century Eurocentrism, and the general prognosis they offered about the social stagnation of our societies was often based on unexamined staples of conventional European histories” (p.229). Indeed, more specifically, Ahmad enumerates a host of inaccuracies to be found in Marx’s judgment and account. Among these, the fact that “it is obviously true that colonialism did not bring us a revolution,” as Marx seemed to suggest it would. “Likewise,” Ahmad continues, “it is doubtless true that the image of Asia as an unchanging, ‘vegetative’ place was part of the inherited world-view in nineteenth-century

Europe, and had been hallowed by such figures of the Enlightenment as Hobbes and Montesquieu.” So too, Ahmad adds, “though Said does not say so,” is it the case “that the image of the so-called self-sufficient Indian village community that we find in Marx was lifted, almost verbatim, out of Hegel. All of this,” Ahmad reminds the reader, “had been reiterated for the left, yet again, by Perry Anderson, in his *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, which had circulated widely while *Orientalism* was being drafted.” As such, Ahmad concludes, what was original about Said’s critique “was not that he pointed towards these facts ... but that he fashioned a rhetoric of dismissal” (1992, p.224).

A rhetoric of dismissal, grounded in a convenient use of a couple of quotations of “journalistic flourishes” from two of Marx’s dispatches on India for the *New York Daily Tribune* from 1853 – predictable enough, Ahmad contends, though “there is no evidence in *Orientalism* that [Said] has come to regard [these] as representative passage[s] after some considerable engagement with Marx’s many and highly complex writings on colonialism as such and on the encounter between non-capitalist and capitalist societies” (1992, p.222). This “combined in very curious ways with indifference to – possibly ignorance of – how the complex issues raised by Marx’s cryptic writings on India have actually been seen in the research of key Indian historians” (1992, p.222).

### CHAKRABARTY’S CRITIQUE

Be that as it may, Said’s critique, though perhaps the most famous, is far from the only influential critique of Marx for his alleged Eurocentrism that has emerged from post-colonial quarters. In the widely-touted book, *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty seeks to explore “the tension between the European roots of Marx’s thoughts and their global significance” (2007, p.xi). In so doing, he advances the accusation that Marx’s conception of time is Eurocentric, or at the very least that “Marxist” historical narratives tend to display a “historicist” bias. Such narratives, he argues, “turn around the theme of historical transition” (2007, p.31), and would appear to consign the third world to an “idea of history as a waiting room, a period which is needed for the transition to capitalism at any particular time and place” (2007, p.65). Chakrabarty attempts an alternative reading of Marx’s category of abstract labour – an interpretation blended with Heideggerian motifs, that is intended to be less hostile to difference, and less inflected with “developmental and stadia” (2007, p.xv), “historicist” presuppositions.

In the preface to the 2007 re-edition of his book, Chakrabarty recounts how the question that he addresses in the book first began to gestate. He recalls how, the more he “tried to imagine relations in Indian factories through categories made available by Marx and his followers,” the more he “became aware of a tension that arose from the profoundly—and one might say, parochially—European origins of Marx’s thoughts and their undoubted international significance.” He goes on to contend: “To call historical characters whose analogues I knew in everyday life as familiar types by names or categories derived from revolutions in Europe in 1789 or 1848 or 1871 or 1917 felt increasingly like a doubly distancing activity” (2007, p.x). At the same time, Chakrabarty expresses a sense of dissatisfaction he came increasingly to feel with the 1970’s Marxist milieu in Calcutta with which he was familiar, since there seemed to be, among them, “no room for thinking about Marx as someone belonging to certain European traditions of thought that he may have even shared with intellectuals who were not Marxists or who thought in a manner opposed to his” (2007, xi).

The main such European tradition of thought to which Marx is alleged to belong and upon which Chakrabarty seizes as the principle target of his critique is what he refers to as “historicism.” According to Chakrabarty, “[h]istoricism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century.” He characterizes this “-ism” as “one important form that the ideology of progress or ‘development’ took from the nineteenth century on.” He further contends, it “is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it.” It was, in other words, a “structure of global historical time,” conceived as “first in Europe, then elsewhere.” Such a conception, he insists, was what allowed Marx, in the preface to the first edition to Volume 1 of *Capital*, to declare that the “country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.” It correspondingly “posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West” and

“legitimated the idea of civilization,” while rendering “possible completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment.” Historical movement thereby took place inside of Europe, while “inhabitants of the colonies ... were assigned a place ‘elsewhere’ in the ‘first in Europe and then elsewhere’ structure of time.” It led, in sum, “to what Johannes Fabian has called ‘the denial of coevalness’” (2007, pp.7-8).

Chakrabarty is careful to address and judge as ultimately inadequate for overcoming the basic problems associated with “historicism” an array of “sophisticated strategies” employed by Marxist intellectuals “that allow them to acknowledge the evidence of “incompleteness” of capitalist transformation in Europe and other places while retaining the idea of a general historical movement from a premodern stage to that of modernity.” These strategies go beyond “the old and now discredited evolutionist paradigms of the nineteenth century — the language of ‘survivals’ and ‘remnants’ — sometimes found in Marx’s own prose,” but are all basically “variations on the theme of ‘uneven development’,” picked up from Marx’s use of the concept in his 1859 *Critique of Political Economy*, and from subsequent elaborations by Lenin and Trotsky. Chakrabarty singles out both Ernst Bloch’s notion of the “synchronicity of the non-synchronous” and Althusser’s reference to “structural causality” as two such instantiations of these strategies, accusing them of “retain[ing] elements of historicism in the direction of their thought (in spite of Althusser’s explicit opposition to historicism),” enabling them “to identify certain elements in the present as ‘anachronistic’” (2007, pp.11-12).

For Chakrabarty, at the core of “historicism” lies a fetishization of “the universal” at the expense of “the local.” Accordingly, Chakrabarty argues that the excessive valorization of the universalizing aspects of capitalism by Marxists leads them to be hostile to local differences. More specifically, he contends that “[c]ommon to their thinking is the idea that any sense of the ‘local’ is a surface phenomenon of social life; it is, in the ultimate analysis, some kind of an effect of capital,” and he therefore stresses how Marxists “emphasize the need to understand how one’s sense of the local is actually produced.” Yet, he continues, “these critics usually do not ask of themselves any questions about the place from where their own thinking comes. They presumably produce their criticisms from ‘nowhere’ or — what is the same thing — the ‘everywhere’ of a capitalism that always seems to be global in scope.” In so doing, they tend to “evacuate all lived sense of place by assigning it to what is assumed to be a deeper and a more determining level, the level at which the capitalist mode of production creates abstract space,” and thereby fail to do justice to “the heterotemporal horizons of innumerable ... singular and unique histories” (2007, pp.xvi-xvii).

In his extended polemic against postcolonial theory and in defence of what he fashions to be a rather orthodox version of Marxism, in *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, Vivek Chibber responds to Chakrabarty, addressing his charge of “historicism” at some length. He begins by complaining that “Chakrabarty not only fails to provide the reader with a clear understanding of historicism, but ... seems quite committed to preserving the concept’s opacity” (2013, p.18). Chibber goes on to dedicate an entire chapter to what he refers to as “the (non)problem of historicism.” In the chapter, he is at pains to demonstrate, *pace* Chakrabarty, that “[t]heories committed to the reality of capital’s universalization do not ... have to be blind to historical diversity” (2013, p.243). In the discussion, he emphasizes two main points – the first, “that capitalism is not only compatible with social difference, but systematically produces it;” the second, “that, insofar as a great deal of what we take to be social difference is in fact causally related to capitalist reproduction, it follows that the analysis of that diversity must, of necessity, draw on the universalizing categories of post-Enlightenment theories” (2013, p.243).

Slavoj Žižek, too, has taken aim at Chakrabarty’s critique of the alleged parochiality of the universal. In one of his more incisive recent contributions, *Living in the End Times*, the perhaps too ubiquitous Slovenian psycho-analytic Marxist would pose a version of Chakrabarty’s question – “Does the universal dimension to which we refer really exist?,” only to turn this question around, and ask instead, “But what if it is our particular identity which does not exist, that is, which is always already traversed by universalities, caught up in them?” Along the same lines, he would continue: “What if, in today’s global civilization, we are more universal than we think, and it is our particular identity which is a fragile ideological fantasy?” This before insisting that, “by taking particular lifeworld identities as his starting point, Chakrabarty ignores how universality manifests itself through the gaps, failures, and antagonisms at the heart of those very identities ...” (2010, pp.285-286).



Furthermore, in a line of argument similar to the one advanced by Ahmad in response to Said, Zizek presses ahead by countering “[t]he standard complaint about how global capitalism corrodes and destroys particular lifeworlds.” He instead insists, against the particular and in defence of the universal, “that such lifeworlds are invariably based on some form of domination and oppression, that to a greater or lesser extent they conceal hidden antagonisms, and that any emerging emancipatory universality therein is the universality of those who have no ‘proper place’ within their particular world, a universality that forms the lateral link between the excluded in each lifeworld” (2010, p.286).

## **DECOLONIAL CRITIQUES**

The sometimes, perhaps too often, vituperative debate between postcolonial theorists and Marxists over the question of Marx’s alleged Eurocentrism thus continues relatively unabated nearly four decades on, despite pleas by the likes of Rahul Rao to seek “reparative possibilities immanent within the theoretical formations being criticized” (2017, p.555). In the meantime, a new self-fashioned paradigm or tradition, that of “decoloniality,” has emerged, which has re-articulated many similar critiques of Marx and Marxism. Paradoxically enough, like its postcolonial predecessor, this new decolonial paradigm is again centered in the U.S. academy, albeit with more of a Latin American rather than South Asian, diasporic frame of reference.

According to Walter Dignolo, for example, Marxism is best conceived as but “an outgrowth of Western civilization.” For East and Southeast Asian Marxists, this means they must “deal with a system of ideas that came from afar.” They are forced to balance this foreign system with “local histories, languages, and systems of sacred and moral belief that conform to their subjectivities.” Though, he contends, “[i]t is always possible to suppress or repress feelings and to replace them with conceptual structures,” such suppression/repression is not necessary. To the contrary, he suggests, “it may be painful to be forced to inhabit memories that are not the ones inscribed in your body (the so-called colonial wound) since birth” (2011, p.51).

As an outgrowth and internal critique of the West, Dignolo insists, Marxism shares many of the same presuppositions and prejudices of its erstwhile adversaries. Invoking Anibal Quijano, he argues that Marxism remains within the so-called “colonial matrix of power” (Dignolo and Walsh 2018, p.222). Consequently, “in the disputes between (neo)liberalism and (neo) Marxism, both sides of the coin belong to the same bank: the disputes are entrenched within the same rules of the game, where the contenders defend different positions but do not question the terms of the conversation” (2011, p.92). Dignolo goes on to urge “a shift in the geo- and body-politics of knowledge that focuses on changing the rules of the game rather than its content.” He intends this shift to entail a definitive displacement of Descartes’ famous “I think, therefore I am,” with the alternative, “I am where I do and think” (2011, p.92).

This emphasis on place, on the particular provenance from which thought emerges, is certainly reminiscent of Chakrabarty’s concerns. As Ramón Grosfoguel has articulated the decolonial complaint against Marxism, “Marxists ... still tend to produce knowledge from the zero-point, that is, without questioning the place from which they speak and produce this knowledge” (2012, p.89). Likewise, linked to this preoccupation with the particular place from which a system of thought is originally enunciated, is the suggestion that the problems and methods central to Marxism are perhaps appropriate for the “First World,” but not the “Third.” As such, to transpose these problems and methods from the “First World” to the “Third” is to commit an act of epistemic violence. Dignolo provocatively puts the point thus: “in the Third World the problems are not the same as in the First, and therefore to transplant both the problems and methods from the First to the Third World is no less a colonial operation than transplanting armies or factories to satisfy the needs of the First World” (2011, p.129).

Grosfoguel has condensed and articulated a rather robust decolonial critique along such lines. He begins by arguing that “[w]hat Marx maintains in common with the Western Bourgeois philosophical tradition is that his universalism, despite having emerged from a particular location—in this case, the proletariat—does not problematize the fact that this subject is European, masculine, heterosexual, white, Judeo-Christian, etc.” Built into this articulation is thus an emphasis on what feminist theory has labelled “intersectionality.” Marx’s

lack of intersectional reflexivity is, in Grosfoguel's judgment, intimately linked to his Eurocentrism. He contends: "Marx's proletariat is a conflictive subject internal to Europe, which does not allow him to think outside the Eurocentric limits of Western thought." Grosfoguel goes further still, openly accusing Marx's "epistemic universalism" of "epistemic racism," too. "Just like the Western thinkers that preceded him," Grosfoguel insists, "Marx participates in the epistemic racism in which there only exists a single epistemology with access to universality: the Western tradition." In Marx, he concludes, "the subject of enunciation remains concealed, camouflaged, hidden beneath a new abstract universal that is no longer 'man', 'the transcendental subject', 'the ego', but instead 'the proletariat' and its universal political project, 'communism'."

Grosfoguel further elaborates on the charge of "epistemic racism" by advancing an argument again reminiscent of Chakrabarty's critique of Marx's "historicism." He thus writes: "Marx reproduces an epistemic racism much like that of Hegel, which does not allow him to grant to non-European peoples and societies either temporal coevalness or the capacity to produce thought worthy of being considered part of the philosophical legacy of humanity or world history. For Marx," he continues, "non-European peoples and societies were primitive, backwards, that is, Europe's past." Indeed, he contends, "Marx participated in the linearity of time characteristic of Western evolutionist thought," and "this economic evolutionism would lead 20th-century Marxists down a blind alley." As such, he concludes, "Marxist thought, despite being from the left, ended up trapped in the same problems of Eurocentrism and colonialism that had imprisoned Eurocentered thinkers of the right" (2012, pp.93-94).

In the process, Grosfoguel adds to the list of Marx's colonialist credentials not only his supposed support for the British conquest of India, making no mention even of Marx's oft-noted ambivalence in this regard; but he also accuses Marx of having supported the invasion by the United States of Mexico. There is of course some substance to this latter accusation, since Engels did write in 1848 that he "rejoiced" at the U.S. conquest of Mexico, believing it to be "an advance when a country which has hitherto been exclusively wrapped up in its own affairs, perpetually rent with civil wars, and completely hindered in its development, a country whose best prospect had been to become industrially subject to Britain – when such a country is forcibly drawn into the historical process" (*Workers' Vanguard* 2013). Even so, Grosfoguel leaves the reader with little sense of the ambiguities, much less the subsequent shifts, in Marx's and Engels' position(s).

There is, however, some tension in the decolonial account and prescription. On the one hand, decolonial thinkers argue for a strategy of "delinking" from Eurocentric theoretical inspirations such as those found in the Marxist tradition; but on the other, they revindicate figures such as Fanon and Césaire, who situated themselves within that tradition. Fanon famously argued, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that "Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem," adding that "[e]verything up to and including the very nature of pre-capitalist society, so well explained by Marx, must here be thought out again" (1963, p.40). But to stretch Marxism is a different prescription from "delinking," or breaking away, from it.

Likewise, when it comes to the revindication of the universal versus the "pluriversal" or particular, Césaire's formulation is most instructive. For Césaire argues for a third way of sorts, against both "narrow particularism" and "disembodied universalism," in favor of embracing a truer, more concretely-situated, less abstract and less Euro-centric universalism. In his words: "I'm not going to confine myself to some narrow particularism. But I don't intend either to become lost in a disembodied universalism ... I have a different idea of a universal. It is a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all" (in Kelley 2000, pp.25-26). Tellingly, in an exchange with René Depestre that would take place a decade after his resignation from the French Communist party, significantly, at the 1967 Cultural Congress in Havana, Césaire would emphasize: "Marx is all right, but we need to complete Marx ..." (Depestre 2000, pp.85-86).

## CONCLUSION

Which brings us back to the thought of Esteban Torres, with which we began this essay. Whereas the decolonial thinkers argue, perhaps somewhat disingenuously, for a thorough “delinking” from the Marxist tradition, Torres calls for an approach more consistent with the articulations of the likes of Fanon and Césaire, and other heterodox figures thinking *from* and *for* the Global South, but from within the Marxist tradition. For Torres calls not for “delinking” altogether, but for combining *autonomismo* with *mundialismo*.

Decolonial thinkers are concerned to reject logics of diffusion, imitation, and mimicry. But what is at work in such figures as Fanon and Césaire, and other heterodox Marxists thinking *from* and *for* particular locations within the Global South, is perhaps more accurately portrayed as translation, reinvention, and reappropriation. The recent book by Adom Getachew on *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* is quite illuminating in this regard. In it, she takes up David Scott’s notion of a “problem space” as a useful “conceptual tool for conceiving of the way in which political thought and practice are responses to specific, historically situated questions” (2019, p.77). The “tool” of the “problem space” allows us to “rethink the politics of appropriation as a creative intervention, responding to specific political questions and conditions” (2019, p.77), in a manner more subtle and receptive to agency than such notions as diffusion, imitation, or mimicry would suggest.

Torres’s call for a combination of *autonomismo* with *mundialismo* likewise resonates with Gary Wilder’s critique of Chakrabarty and his followers, in his book *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World*. Though Wilder acknowledges that “[u]nderstandable fears of totalizing explanation and Eurocentric evaluation have led a generation of scholars to insist on the singularity of black, African, and non-Western forms of thought,” he nevertheless goes on to contend that “we now need to be less concerned with unmasking universalisms as covert European particularisms than with challenging the assumption that the universal is European property” (pp.9-10).

The debate over Marx, Marxism and Eurocentrism is unlikely to abate anytime soon. Among the virtues of Torres’ articulation of the problem is his ability to sketch a position which points in a decidedly “reparative” (Rao 2017) direction. Moreover, to all sides engaged in this often rancorous debate, that nevertheless tends towards a version of radical scholasticism, Torres reminds us of the still urgent imperative entailed in Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, that the point is not merely to understand the world, but to change it. Let us hope that the dialogue initiated by his book can help generate momentum in such a direction, at both the theoretical and the praxiological levels.

## BIBLIOGRAFÍA

AHMAD, A. (1992). *In Theory. Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso).

ANDERSON, K. (2010). *Marx at the Margins. On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (The University of Chicago Press).

CHIBBER, V. (2013). *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso).

CHKRABARTY, D. (2007). *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

DEPESTRE, R. (2000). “An Interview with Aimé Césaire,” in A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press), pp.79-94.

- DUSSEL, E. (2000). "The Four Drafts of *Capital*. Towards a New Interpretation of the Dialectical Thought of Marx," <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~fmoseley/Dussel.pdf>
- FANON, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, NY: Grove Press).
- GETACHEW, A. (2019). *Worldmaking after Empire. The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019).
- GROSGOUEL, R. (2012). "Decolonizing Western Uni-versalisms. Decolonial Pluriversalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas," *Transmodernity*, pp.88-102.
- HASSAN, S. (2012). "How to Liberate Marx from his Eurocentrism: Notes on African/Black Marxism," *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts*, No. 91, pp.3-8.
- KELLEY, R. (2000). "A Poetics of Anticolonialism." Introduction to A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press), pp.7-28.
- LINDNER, K. (2010). "Marx's Eurocentrism. Postcolonial Studies and Marx Scholarship," *Radical Philosophy*, Vol. 161, pp.27-41.
- MARX, K. (1853/2005). "The British Rule in India," <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/06/25.htm>
- MARX, K. (1867/2015). *Capital. Volume One*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-1.pdf>
- MIGNOLO, W. (2011). *The Darker Side of Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
- MIGNOLO, W. and Walsh, C. eds. (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
- PARRY, B. (2011). "Liberation Theory: Variations on Themes of Marxism and Modernity," in C. Bartolovitch and N. Lazarus, *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge University Press), pp.125-149.
- RAO, R. (2017). "Recovering Reparative Readings of Postcolonialism and Marxism," *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 43, No. 4-5, pp.587-598.
- ROBINSON, R. (2019). "Decolonization, Decoloniality, Marxism," *Marxism, Coloniality, "Man", & Euromodern Science – Maehkōn Ahpāhtesewen* ([wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com))
- SAID, E. (1979). *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books).
- SALEM, S. (2019). "'Stretching' Marxism in the Postcolonial World. Egyptian Decolonization and the Contradictions of National Sovereignty," *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp.3-28.
- TORRES, E. (2021). *La gran transformación de la sociología* (1a ed. Córdoba: Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales; Buenos Aires: CLACSO).
- WILDER, G. (2015). *Freedom Time. Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press).

WORKERS' VANGUARD. (2013). "Reply to Letter on Marx, Maximilian, and Mexico," *WV*, No. 1015, 11 January. <https://www.icl-fi.org/english/wv/1015/let-mexico.html>

YOUNG, R. (2016). *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell).

ŽIŽEK, S. (2010). *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso).

## BIODATA

**Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley:** Is an Associate Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Cambridge. He is a member of the *Grupo de Trabajo CLACSO Teoría Social y Realidad Latinoamericana*, and a patron of Peace in Kurdistan. His work focuses on struggles for self-determination in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His most recent publications include "Lessons from Rojava for the Paradigm of Social Ecology," *Front. Pol. Sci.* (10 Jan 2022); "Representative Democracy and the Democratic Confederal Project: Reflections on the Transformation of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey, in C. Gunes, *The Political Representation of the Kurds in Turkey* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), pp.131-160; and "Conflict in Catalonia: A Sociological Approximation," *Genealogy* 3(4), 2019, pp.1-27.

Este es un verificador de tablas de contenidos. Previene a la revista y a los(as) autores(as) ante fraudes. Al hacer clic sobre el sello TOC checker se abrirá en su navegador un archivo preservado con la tabla de contenidos de la edición: **AÑO 28, N.º 101, 2023**. TOC checker, para garantizar la fiabilidad de su registro, no permite a los editores realizar cambio a las tablas de contenidos luego de ser depositadas. Compruebe que su trabajo esté presente en el registro.



User: uto101  
Pass: ut28pr1012023

Clic logo

