

Marx and Colonialism

Jack Woddis

We print below the first of two articles based on the Marx Memorial Lecture delivered by Jack Woddis on March 16th, 1965, under the auspices of the Marx Memorial Library. The second article will deal with Marx and National Liberation.

MARX was born in 1818 and died in 1883. In 1823, when he was only five, 12,000 slaves on fifty plantations in British Guiana revolted. In 1850, two years after the *Communist Manifesto* appeared—the Taiping Uprising in China began. In 1857, two years before the publication of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), the Indian "Mutiny" took place. In 1865, slavery was officially abolished in the United States, and in 1867—the year when the first volume of *Capital* was published—the Fenian armed uprising took place in Ireland.

Two years after the death of Marx the Western powers met at the Berlin Conference of 1885 in order to agree on a division of Africa.

Relation of "East" to "West"

Thus the span of Marx's life—most of the nineteenth century—witnessed not only the growth of industrial capitalism, the growth of the European working class, the development of sharp battles for democracy and working class advance, highlighted by the Paris Commune in 1871, but saw the spread of capitalism to the whole globe.

This process was only completed at the end of the century, after the death of Marx, but the young Marx and Engels had already glimpsed its effects in 1848, when they described in the *Communist Manifesto*, the way in which modern industry, by its cheap commodities and development of communications "batters down all Chinese walls", "compels all nations . . . to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves", and thus, in the process make "nations of peasants" dependent on "nations of bourgeois", or "the East on the West".

This whole problem of the relation of "the East" to "the West"—in essence the relationship of the colonial world to the advanced capitalist countries—was to become a dominating pre-occupation of Marx's thought and activity right up to his death.

In *Capital*, in his articles for the *New York Daily Tribune* on India and China, in his letters, Marx constantly returns to this question. Engels, too, was much occupied with this problem. The fate of the revolution in England, in Europe, and the fate of the revolution in the colonial world, they saw as part of a single process, in which there was a con-

stant inter-reaction of the one revolution on the other.

Marx died before the imperialist epoch, but at the time of his death, its outlines were beginning to take shape. The expansion of capitalism from its original homelands to Asia, and Australia and across the Atlantic, was, he understood, to have a profound effect on the course of the revolution in the West, and especially on Britain.

Marx's International View

It is impossible here to give full justice to the great wealth of ideas, of analysis, of examination undertaken by Marx—and Engels, too—of the struggles of peoples for national independence and against colonialism, and national oppression. Their writings on India, China and Ireland—and on which I shall touch in more detail later—are perhaps more familiar. But they kept a most careful watch on all developments in the colonial sphere.

On July 30th, 1853, Marx writes an article for the *New York Daily Tribune* on the war in Burma. On October 30th, 1856, he writes for the same paper on the Anglo-Persian war. On December 17th, 1858, he contributes an article on the Question of the Ionian Islands. A letter to Engels on June 14th, 1853, touches on the form of landed property in Java—a subject to which Engels returns in letters to Bebel (January 18th, 1884) and to Kautsky (February 16th, 1884). In November and December 1865, Marx and Engels exchange letters on the rising of Negroes in Jamaica against the British planters.

A letter from Engels to Kautsky on September 12th, 1882, touches on the prospects of revolution in Egypt and Algeria.

Six days later, Engels writes to Kautsky again, referring to France's colonisation of Tunisia and Tonkin, and to "the attempted annexation of New Guinea," which he considered was "designed directly for the slave trade".

In some circles these days it is fashionable to write about Marx and his ideas and activity as if he were solely concerned with European questions, and narrowly preoccupied with the struggles of the European working class. The life and work of Marx—and of Engels, too—are a complete refuta-

tion of this myth. They were both internationalists—not simply in that they were concerned with what was happening everywhere, but that they understood the relationship of events throughout the world, and were therefore able to develop ideas and concepts that had a universal validity.

Primitive Accumulation of Capital

In the studies he did in preparation for his work on *Capital*, Marx examined the methods by which the capitalist class carried through its initial accumulation of capital which was to make possible its development as an industrial class.

In one of his finest and most characteristic passages, Marx explained how the slave trade, and then the “Christian colonial system” based, as he wrote, on “brute force”, was to provide the booty and the stimulus for capitalist industrial development.

“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 momenta of primitive accumulation.”
(*Capital*: Vol. 1, Chapter 31)

Marx drew special attention to the role of slavery, emphasising the particular role which it played in the development of British capitalism.

“Liverpool waxed fat on the slave trade”, he wrote, adding, “This was its method of primitive accumulation.”
(*Ibid*)

In 1730, Liverpool was employing fifteen ships in the slave-trade; by 1792 the figure was 132. In 1795 Liverpool was doing three-sevenths of the whole European slave trade. Great as was the slave traffic carried on by the Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese, it was as nothing compared with the slave trade of Britain. In his book *They Came in Chains*, published in New York in 1950, J. S. Redding has noted that “Nearly four times as many African slaves were transported in British bottoms as in all the ships of all other nations combined”. In his remarkable work, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Dr. Eric Williams has followed up this thought of Marx on the link between slavery and the growth of capitalism, and has shown in considerable detail, how many British cities and industries, “waxed fat on the slave trade”.

The basis of this growth in wealth was what came to be known as the triangular trade. British slave ships sailed from British ports, with cargoes of British manufactured goods. These were exchanged, at a profit, on the coast of Africa for slaves. These, in turn, were traded to plantations across the

Atlantic, for a further profit, in exchange for colonial produce based on slave labour, such as cotton, or sugar, which then yielded a further profit when sold back in England or other markets.

By 1750, says Dr. Williams, “there was hardly a trading or manufacturing town in England which was not in some way connected with the triangular or direct colonial trade”. Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow grew rapidly under this system as centres of shipping, shipbuilding and trade. At the same time, the creation of the cotton industry in the United States, based on slave labour from Africa, was to give a direct stimulus to other spheres of British manufacture, and thus to the growth of Manchester.

Slavery and Profit

Marx explained that the cotton industry of England was based on child-slavery here, and on full chattel slavery in the United States. “The veiled slavery of the wage-worker in Europe”, he wrote in *Capital*, “needed for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world.”

Writing elsewhere (*The Poverty of Philosophy*) he explained: “Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry.”

While, in the words of that great Negro scholar and anti-imperialist, Dr. Dubois, “whole regions (of Africa) were depopulated, and whole tribes disappeared” in “the rape of a continent seldom if ever paralleled in ancient or modern history”, a process, which, incidentally, cost Africa between 50 and 100 million of its sons and daughters between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, British capitalism expanded more and more.

Liverpool “waxed fat” from shipping. Bristol “waxed fat” from refining the slave-produced sugar. Glasgow “waxed fat” from slave-produced sugar and slave-produced tobacco. Manchester “waxed fat” from slave-produced cotton. And Birmingham “waxed fat” from manufacturing fetters, chains and padlocks to fasten the Negroes securely in the slave ships, from producing irons to brand the slaves, and guns to hunt them with, and from making iron collars and handcuffs to maintain them in slavery once they were delivered across the Atlantic.

No wonder Marx, in his righteous indignation, declared that capitalism came into the world “dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt”. (*Capital*, Vol. 1. *ibid.*) No wonder, too, that Marx hailed so enthusiastically the ending of slavery in the United States, though he warned, with amazing foresight and in words that have a

most significant relevancy for today, that unless slavery were to be followed by real equality in the United States, the cause of the whole people would suffer.

Thus, in the address to Abraham Lincoln which he drew up for the First International, and which was adopted unanimously by the Council on November 29th, 1864, he welcomed the "Death to Slavery" which was expressed by Lincoln's election victory over the "oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders", but he emphasised that the "white-skinned labourers" would be "unable to attain the true freedom of labour" while they "allowed slavery to defile their own republic".

This idea was carried forward, in the address from the General Council of the First International to "The People of the United States of America" in September 1865, in which the General Council combined expressions of sympathy, encouragement and congratulations with "a word of counsel for the future". "Let your citizens of today," they urged, "be declared free and equal without reserve. If you fail to give them citizens' rights, while you demand citizens' duties, there will yet remain a struggle for the future which may again stain your country with your people's blood."

What is happening in the United States today fully confirms the correctness of that wise counsel.

Other Methods of Primitive Accumulation

But slavery was not the only form of primitive accumulation to which Marx drew attention. In India, explains Marx, the East India Company obtained "the exclusive monopoly of the tea trade, as well as of the Chinese trade in general, and of the transport of goods to and from Europe". The higher employees of the Company robbed the Indian people right and left to amass huge fortunes for themselves:

"The monopolies of salt, opium, betel and other commodities, were inexhaustible mines of wealth."
(*Capital*, Vol. I)

The employees themselves fixed the price and plundered the Indians at will, the Governor-General himself taking part in this scandalous traffic. In India, writes Marx (*ibid*), "Great fortunes sprang up like mushrooms in a day; primitive accumulation went on without the advance of a shilling."

In other territories, too, the treatment of indigenous peoples, noted Marx, was "most frightful", especially, as we have seen, in Africa, as well as in the West Indies, "and in rich and well-populated countries such as Mexico and India, that were given over to plunder" (*ibid*). Prices were fixed in New England for every Indian scalp, £100 for a male scalp, £50 for the scalp of women and children. In India, noted Marx, between 1769 and 1770, "the

English manufactured a famine by buying up all the rice and refusing to sell it again, except at fabulous prices" (*ibid*).

It was in such ways that the colonial system was born, a system which, says Marx:

"ripened, like a hot-house, trade and navigation
"The colonies secured a market for the budding manufactures, and, through the monopoly of the market, an increased accumulation. The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement and murder, floated back to the mother-country, and were there turned into capital."

Who Gained?

But Marx understood that it was not the working people who were the beneficiaries of this system which had "proclaimed surplus-value as the sole end and aim of humanity". He cites the example of Holland, which first developed the colonial system, and which, by 1648 "stood already in the acme of its commercial greatness". The total capital of Holland was, at that time probably more than that of all the rest of Europe put together, but Marx points out "the *people* of Holland were more over-worked, poorer and more brutally oppressed than those of all the rest of Europe put together".

In the same way, he noted that the expansion of primitive accumulation in Britain was accompanied by "a great slaughter of the innocents"—the press-ganging of workers for factories, the introduction of child-stealing for exploitation in the factories, where, in the words of John Fielden, capitalism inflicted "cruelties (of) the most heart-rending" kind upon "the unoffending and friendless creatures" who had been put to work, and who were "harassed to the brink of death by excess of labour . . . flogged, fettered and tortured in the most exquisite refinement of cruelty . . . starved to the bone while flogged to their work . . . even in some instances driven to commit suicide".

Precise Examination of Robbery

Marx did not limit himself to a pitiless exposure and denunciation of the methods used by capitalism, and especially British capitalism, to rob the peoples of other territories and of Britain in order to lay the basis for capitalist growth in the metropolis. He, and Engels as well, made a most careful and detailed examination of the *precise forms* in which the robbery took place in different countries. They were quick to detect the variation in the *forms* of exploitation, and the consequences of this on the victims and their society—whether it be India, China, or Ireland. This led them, too, to make a most careful analysis of these societies which, in their different ways, were under attack from British capitalism.

The meticulous and objective way in which Marx went about this work is a remarkable example to all who would follow in his footsteps.

Anyone who wishes to understand today what is happening in South Africa, Rhodesia, British Guiana, Nigeria or Malaysia will be able to learn from Marx and his methods. General denunciations were of no value to him. What interested him was what was the form of society before the European incursions? What system of landownership prevailed? What was the basis of the economy, of the form of government, of the philosophy, culture, religion and character of the people?

Nothing escaped his attention, for he was anxious to unravel and understand what were, and what would be in the future, the effects, the economic, social and political effects, of the onslaught of British capitalism on the peoples of India, China, Ireland and other countries.

Exploitation of India

Let us take the example of India. In 1853 Marx wrote a remarkable series of articles on India for the *New York Daily Tribune*. In these he was not concerned simply to expose the cruelty and avarice of the British capitalist class—much as he hated and detested what he termed this “swinish rule”. What was more to his purpose was to examine the forms of British exploitation of India, the effects of this on Indian society, and the results which were likely to follow from the break-up of the old Indian society. This led him, too, to make a profound analysis of that society itself.

With passion and indignation, Marx described how the British ruling class, in its greed for wealth, had brought about the ruination of India, this “Ireland of the East”, as he called it.

“The misery inflicted by the British on Hindustan,” he wrote (June 10th, 1853, for the *New York Daily Tribune*, “is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindustan had to suffer before.”

“. . . England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindu, and separates Hindustan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history.” (ibid)

This profound thought—which has a validity for many aspects of British rule in Africa—Marx supports by a detailed examination of the effects of this rule in India. Traditional Indian society, he explains, rested on the Indian village system, which was based on the “domestic union of agricultural and manufacturing pursuits”. Indian agriculture,

as in many parts of ancient Asia, was dependent on artificial irrigation which, in its turn, depended on the “interference of the centralising power of Government”.

In Asia, Marx explained, “There have been . . . generally, from immemorial times, but three departments of Government: that of Finance, or the plunder of the interior; that of War, or the plunder of the exterior; and, finally, the department of Public Works,” which was responsible for artificial irrigation.

But the British in India, he pointed out:

“had accepted from their predecessor the department of finance and of war, but they have neglected entirely that of public works. Hence the deterioration of an agriculture which is not capable of being conducted on the British principle of free competition.” (ibid)

But this was not the only blow to Indian agriculture. Britain introduced two systems of landholding into India—the zemindari system, which Marx called a caricature of the English landlord system, and the ryotwari, which he termed a caricature of French peasant proprietorship.

The zemindar was a combination of landlord and tax-gatherer. He kept only one tenth of the rent he collected from the Indian peasant—the other nine-tenths went to the Government as tax. The ryot was “a curious form of French peasant” who likewise paid heavy taxes to the government. The result in both cases was the heavy robbery of the Indian peasantry.

Writing for the *New York Daily Tribune* on July 19th, 1853, Marx noted that at that time “three-fifths of the whole net revenue in India are derived from land”. Yet the oppression and neglect of agriculture, he wrote, was not “the final blow dealt to Indian society by the British intruder”. It was only in the nineteenth century, with the development of industrial capitalism, with factory production in Britain, that the decisive wrecking of Indian society took place.

It was, said Marx, the hand-loom and the spinning wheel, which had been “the pivots of the structure of that society”. But British manufactures were to “break up the Indian hand-loom and destroy the spinning wheel”. England, he said, began with “driving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist into Hindustan, and in the end inundated the very mother country of cottons with cotton”. With devastating facts and figures Marx describes the terrible havoc which this process brought about.

The export of British twist to India, between 1818 and 1836, rose in the proportion of 1 to 5,200. At the same time, the population of Dacca decreased from 150,000 inhabitants to a mere 20,000. In

Capital (Vol. 1, Ch. xv, section 5), Marx quotes an 1834-35 report of the Governor-General, in which this official, explaining the terrible effect of the invasion of British textiles into India, comments: "The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India."

The result was not only the destruction of the old manufactures of India, and the driving of people from manufacturing centres to crowd the villages, but a breakdown in the balance of economic life in the villages, and a consequent desperate overcrowding on the land and in agriculture, which was to reach its most acute phase in the twentieth century.

Exploitation of China

In China, too, noted Marx and Engels, the country was "flooded with cheap British and American machine-made goods", with the result that Chinese industry, "reposing as it did on hand labour, succumbed to the competition of the machine". (*First International Review*: 1850.)

"In China," wrote Marx in 1853 (*New York Daily Tribune*), "the spinners and weavers have suffered greatly under this foreign competition." At the same time, he understood that Britain's robbery of China and the consequent weakening of the traditional economy would not proceed as fast or as far as in India.

"In India, the English lost no time in exercising their direct political and economic power, as rulers and landlords, to disrupt these small economic communities." (*Capital*, Vol. 3, Chap. xx.)

But in China, he said, it would proceed more slowly since here Britain did not enjoy "direct political power".

He takes up this theme, too, in an article he wrote for the *New York Daily Tribune* on December 3rd, 1859, in which he contrasts the position of Britain in India with that in China. In the former, he says, the British, "as the supreme landlords of the country, had it in their power to undermine, and thus forcibly convert part of the Hindu self-sustaining communities into mere farms, producing opium, cotton, indigo, hemp, and other raw materials, in exchange for British stuffs". But in China, "the English have not yet wielded this power, nor are they likely ever to do so".

Hatred of Capitalism

One cannot read Marx's writings on the birth of capitalism, on the primitive accumulation of capital, on the operation of this system overseas in India or China, without sensing his intense loathing and hatred for the rottenness of capitalism. He understood that bad as it was in its homestead, it was still worse in the colonies.

In a critique of Dutch colonialism he said it showed "what the bourgeoisie makes of itself and of the labourer, wherever it can, without restraint, model the world after its own image". (*Capital*, Vol. 1, Ch. 31.) "At home," he wrote, "the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation . . . assumes respectable forms", whereas in the colonies, it "goes naked".

Striking as the contrast was when Marx wrote, it is still more so today, in the declining years of imperialism, when the more "respectable forms" of British parliamentary politics have to be seen against the grim reality of the massacres and tortures in the Congo and Vietnam, in which British capitalism is so deeply involved.

"Tool of History"

But Marx was not concerned solely to denounce capitalism, or to chart the course of capitalist robbery and exploitation. His main purpose was to contribute to its overthrow. For that reason, he was concerned to examine the results of the British colonial system from the standpoint of the future of the revolution. It was a merit of his greatness that he saw the process as a whole—that he was able to trace out and project the path to revolution in Europe and in Asia as a related process.

Notwithstanding the terrible havoc which British capitalism brought to India and China, Marx understood the revolutionary significance of the changes which were being brought about by capitalism's destruction of the old, traditional, closed village system of Asia.

Passionate supporter, as he was, of China's struggle against Britain in the Opium wars, he recognised that this "giant empire" was "vegetating in the teeth of time, insulated by the forced exclusion of general intercourse". (*New York Daily Tribune*: September 20th, 1858.)

"Complete isolation," he wrote (*New York Daily Tribune*) on June 14th, 1853, in an article significantly entitled "Revolution in China and in Europe", "was the prime condition of the preservation of Old China. That isolation having come to a violent end by the medium of England, dissolution must follow as surely as that of any mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin, whenever it is brought into contact with the open air."

It is interesting to trace here how Marx, increasingly from about 1850 onwards, turned his attention to the development of capitalism as a world phenomenon, and the significance of this for the prospects of the socialist revolution.

It was in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (January 31st, 1850) writing on China that he commented that "the bales of calico of the English bourgeoisie have in eight years brought the oldest and most imper-

turbable empire on earth to the threshold of a social upheaval, one that will in any case hold most significant consequences for civilisation”.

And he then added his famous prophecy that the reactionaries of Europe, in flight from the advancing peoples, and seeking refuge in China, that “stronghold of arch-reaction and arch-conservatism”, might find inscribed on the Great Wall of China the inscription: “REPUBLIC OF CHINA—LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY”.

In an article in the *New York Daily Tribune* of June 5th, 1857, he wrote:

“One thing is certain, that the death-hour of Old China is rapidly drawing nigh . . . before many years pass away we shall have to witness the death struggles of the oldest empire in the world, and the opening day of a new era for all Asia.”

In India, too, Marx saw that notwithstanding the terrible havoc caused to that ancient society and to its people, the inevitable outcome would be an advance of the revolution. He understood that the Indian 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.” (*The British Rule in India: New York Daily Tribune*, June 25th, 1853.)

This “stagnatory, undignified and vegetative life” had to go. And it was to be the rule of British capitalism (and later imperialism) in India which was to be, in Marx’s words, “the unconscious tool of history”. British rule broke up the old “vegetative life”, but in so doing it laid the basis for social change.

In order to develop India as a market for British goods, it would, Marx saw, be necessary to ensure “the transformation of India into a reproductive country”, producing raw materials in exchange for the imported manufactured goods, which in its turn required the development of railways, roads and

irrigation.

But this, he stressed, would mean the development of other branches of industry. The total effect, he said, would be the dissolution of “the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power”.

Marx, however, never saw Britain’s role in India and China as a consciously progressive one, which would bring about the revolutionary changes in those countries. “England,” he said, “was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them.” (*New York Daily Tribune*, June 25th, 1853.) She was only an “unconscious tool” in laying the basis for change.

The British ruling class, he said, had only an accidental and transitory interest in the progress of India. “The aristocracy wanted to conquer it, the moneyocracy to plunder it, and the millocracy to undersell it.” (*Future Results of British Rule in India, New York Daily Tribune*, August 8th, 1853.) “All the English bourgeoisie may be forced to do,” he wrote, “will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social condition of the mass of the people.”

(*ibid*)

For that to come about, he said, there must be not only the development of the productive powers, but also their taking over by the people. The British bourgeoisie would only “lay down the material premises for both”.

But, he declares:

“has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and peoples through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?” (*ibid*).

And he draws the conclusion that

“The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether.” (*ibid*).