

**Post-colonial Critique of Marxism**

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“Marx is all right, but we need to complete Marx” (Aimé Césaire 1972, 70).

The Eurocentrism of Marx’s materialist conception of historical progress has long been a serious bone of contention for many postcolonial theorists. By considering Western capitalist societies as more “advanced” than non-Western societies, Marx’s developmental model reinforces a Eurocentric mode of production narrative because it defines “primitive” forms of accumulation such as the “Asiatic mode of production” to be at a “lower” stage to the industrial capitalist economies of nineteenth-century Western Europe (Morton 2007, 74). Marx’s writings on British colonialism in India are a good example of his Eurocentric vision of world history: “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.” (Marx 1853).

While on the one hand Marx bemoans the dissolution of family communities and domestic industry in rural Indian villages, he also claims that the idyllic village

communities form the foundation of Oriental despotism (Morton 2007, 74). Edward Said accuses Marx of reproducing an image of Asia as “backward” and “despotic” and rebukes him as follows: “Marx’s economic analyses are perfectly fitted thus to a standard Orientalist undertaking, even though Marx’s humanity, his sympathy for the misery of people, are clearly engaged. Yet in the end it is the Romantic Orientalist vision that wins out.” (Said 1978, 153-4).

Contesting Marx’s claim that “advanced” modes of production simply replace more “primitive” ones, Gayatri Spivak suggests that the “Asiatic mode of production” does not completely disappear in the era of global capitalism (1999, 91). Spivak outlines how the conditions of industrial production and labour in nineteenth century Western Europe, which were the focus of Marx’s analysis, have been increasingly substituted by a flexible, non-unionized and casual form of gendered and racialised workforce in the global South (Morton 2007, 73). Spivak thereby rethinks Marx’s labour theory of value in terms of the geographical dynamics of the international division of labour to outline the enduring relevance of the “Asiatic mode of production” for the contemporary global economy. Indeed, Spivak (1999, 167) praises Marx for anticipating the increasing importance of women’s labour power in modern industry and highlights new forms of superexploitation of non-unionized, subcontracted, precarious female labour under contemporary global capitalism.

Along similar lines, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 93) questions Eurocentric historical narratives claiming unity and universality by contesting their assumption of subaltern labour as “primitive”. By focusing on disparate histories of subaltern labour, Chakrabarty thwarts the understanding of “pre-capitalism” as simply a “primitive” stage in the linear history of global capitalist accumulation (Morton 2007, 94). Spivak as well as Chakrabarty urge western Marxists and global justice activists to adopt a more critical vocabulary that considers heterogeneous registers of subaltern labour. Furthermore, Spivak’s focus on the reproductive bodies of subaltern women in the global South pluralizes and diversifies the narrow definition of productive labour proposed by Marx’s labour theory of value.

At the same time, although Spivak is invested in labour movements and the social redistribution of capital towards economic justice, she questions whether a programmatic socialist alternative to capitalism is feasible (Morton 2007, 89). Spivak rethinks socialism as the *différance* of capitalism as opposed to its overcoming or sublation. In contrast to Marx's belief that capitalism would inevitably give way to socialism because it contains the seeds of its own destruction, Spivak proposes socialism as the persistent and enduring ethical and political task of undoing capitalism: "a constant pushing away – a differing and a deferral – of the capital-ist harnessing of the social productivity of capital" (1999, 430). This moves away from an evolutionary linear narrative to a more indeterminate understanding of post-imperial futures.

## References

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## Precarias a la deriva

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Precarias a la deriva is a feminist initiative situated between research and activism, active in and around Madrid from 2002 onwards. In June 2002 Spanish unions organised a general strike in response to changes in the labour legislation. A group of women, most of them active in the feminist social centre *La Eskalera Karakola* in Madrid, were unsatisfied with the lack of representation for addressing concerns about their unstable, flexible and precarious working and living conditions, and doubted the effectiveness of strike mobilization as a resistance tool. With these considerations in mind the group spent the day of the general strike on the streets asking women if they were striking, and what were their views regarding the strike and their precarious conditions. The initiative *Precarias a la deriva* (literally: Precarious women adrift) arose from this experience and organised its first *deriva* (literally meaning 'drift') in October 2002. The method of *deriva* is appropriated from the Situationist International, a group of artists and activists active between 1957 and 1972 mainly in France, that used purposeless wandering in the city – *dérive* (French for 'drift') – as a performative and subversive technique for experiencing the urban space differently and to provoke social change. In *Precarias a la deriva*'s version the situationist *dérive* is released from its bourgeois and masculine connotation of the *flâneur* in order to be used as a situated, "open and multisensorial"<sup>1</sup> (*Precarias a la deriva* 2004a, 26) method in the regular everyday space of the