

Midterm Paper

Q. II. Analyze a contemporary social issue of your choice within the framework of two theoretical traditions in relation to their suggested sites and modes of action for social change. Which tradition is theoretically more rigorous and/or offers a novel site and mode of action?

Q. VI. If you were to construct the next sociological theory, which elements would you incorporate from the theoretical perspectives we have covered in class? Briefly outline the principal parameters of this new theory.

I will not address these questions strictly distinctly, and will instead attempt to deal with them in a single critical response. I will conduct a critique of a theoretical tradition (per Q.II), then I will utilize the discussion presented and attempt to define principal parameters or concepts for a new sociological theory (per Q. VI).

Almost three years ago, the United States army invaded Iraq. It is estimated that more than 33,000 Iraqis have died as a result of the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.¹ This tragic context raises the need to inquire into the phenomenon of societal conquest - *imperialism* on the move, at large. Here, I will attempt to modestly (and in much truncated form) take a step towards addressing this effort by examining (and critiquing) Karl Marx's perspectives on imperialism.

I have chosen to examine Marx's thoughts on imperialism because his writings on the subject are instructive to us in two key ways. First, Marx demonstrates how imperialism came about as a system of global domination and the way in which it effects

¹ <http://www.iraqbodycount.net>

subjugated societies. And second, Marx *unwittingly* shows, through his writings on British rule in India, how arguments for imperialism as a means for emancipation are invariably flawed.

Marx and imperialism

Marx himself never uses the term *imperialism*, but implies the concept in many of his writings. Therefore, the majority of theorists of imperialism claim to be furthering his ideas (Wolfe 1997: 389).

Marx indicates that overseas expansion - the development of the world market and the conquest of cheap sources of raw materials - is a natural outgrowth of capitalism, of competition between the bourgeoisie:

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere (Marx and Engels 1967: 83).

Marx writes that bourgeois wealth in the more advanced capitalist countries of Europe, was accumulated through the plunder of the peoples of the New World, the profits of plantations based on slave labor, the looting of the colonies' treasures:

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 (Marx and Engels 1978: 435).

Capitalism shows its true colors in the conquered societies, he says:

The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, moving from its home, where it assumes respectable form, to the colonies, where it goes naked. (Marx and Engels 1978: 663)

Marx points out that the bourgeoisie use imperialism to stave off a proletariat revolution:

The veiled slavery of the wage-workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the New World (Marx and Engels 1978).

According to Marx, imperialism allows the levy of the most grotesque costs of capitalism on conquered societies, therefore allowing the bourgeoisie to lessen the burdens on the proletariat of their own societies. He reiterates this point in a letter to Engels dated 1858, suggesting that through imperialism the bourgeoisie could defeat a proletariat revolution at home:

The specific task of bourgeois society is the establishment of a world market, at least in outline, and of production based upon this world market. As the world is round, this seems to have been completed by the colonization of California and Australia and the opening of China and Japan. The difficult question for us is this: on the Continent the revolution is imminent and will immediately assume a socialist character. Is it not bound to be crushed in this little corner, considering that in a far greater territory the movement of bourgeois society is still in the ascendant?" (Marx and Engels 1978: 341)

It is in the light of the foregoing that Marx interprets the effects of British imperial rule on Ireland. First, Marx argues that Ireland's poverty and misery was caused by English oppression and exploitation. The following piece serves as a good example:

...Every time Ireland was about to develop industrially, she was crushed and reconverted into a purely agricultural

land...The people had now before them the choice between the occupation of land at any rent, or starvation (Marx and Engels 1978: 132).

Second, Marx notes the ameliorative effects for English workers of English rule on Ireland. He suggests that until Ireland gains its independence, English workers will be unable to progress towards a proletariat revolution:

...It is a precondition to the emancipation of the English working class to transform the present forced union [i.e. the enslavement of Ireland] into equal and free confederation if possible, into complete separation if need be... (Marx and Engels 1978: 161-163).

Marx was appalled at the suffering that British rule forced on the Irish, and thought that British rule in Ireland served only to preserve a supply of industrial labor for British factories. For Marx, the effect of British rule on Ireland was regressive.

Note that Marx sees imperialism as a natural consequence of capitalism. Imperialism performs the necessary function of providing the bourgeoisie with a world market for their products. Marx shows how through imperialism the bourgeoisie are able to improve living and working conditions for the proletariat in their home societies, and therefore, stave off revolution. These effects are made possible by the ruthless exploitation of the peoples of, and the expropriation of natural resources from, conquered societies.

As noted, Marx concludes that British rule had an entirely negative effect on Ireland. However, when his focus shifts to

India, his stance differs. For Marx, the ultimate effect of British rule in India was positive. It is here that Marx is unwittingly instructive to us by demonstrating how arguments for imperialism as a means to emancipation are fundamentally flawed.

Marx argues that in India, British imperialism was ultimately a good thing. The crucial building block in Marx's argument about British rule in India is his assertion about an "Asiatic" mode of production. He indicates that the Asiatic mode of production is a highly dubious form of social organization. In his time-line of social evolution, he illustrates the "Asiatic" mode of production as representing a primitive, or undeveloped stage of human society:

...In broad outline, the Asian, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois [capitalist] modes of production may be designated as progressive epochs of the socio-economic order (Marx and Engels 1978: 5).

Marx posits that the Asiatic mode of production does not develop in a way that leads to further stages, but tends to persist unless disrupted from outside. He sees British imperial rule in India as providing just the sort of disruption needed for Indian society to abandon its passivity and finally evolve:

England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating - the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia (Marx and Engels 1978: 659).

Marx sees British rule's "regenerating" impulses coming in the form of modernizing and integrating factors being introduced

in India, the foremost of which is capitalism, and which included:

[Political] unity, imposed by the British sword, will now be strengthened and perpetuated by the electric telegraph. The native army, organized and trained by the British drill-sergeant was the sine qua non of Indian self-emancipation.....The free press is a new and powerful agent of reconstruction.....private property in land - the great desideratum of Asiatic society. From the Indian natives.....a fresh class is springing up, endowed with the requirements for government, and imbued with European science (Marx and Engels 1978: 133).

Marx also speaks of the intense misery inflicted by the British in India, a result of their breaking down "the entire framework of Indian society" (Marx and Engels 1978: 658). Says Marx:

...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, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization, and their hereditary means of subsistence..." (Marx and Engels 1978: 657-658).

Yet, he still believes that British rule in India advantageously broke up the "undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life" of the passive existence of the inhabitants of India (Marx and Engels 1978: 658). It is in this context that Marx remarks:

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan 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 fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution (Marx and Engels 1978: 658).

In summary, Marx argues: British rule in India causes misery, but because India is a backward society, British rule is necessary in order to kick India forward. On closer examination, the planks of Marx's argument: a) India is a "backward" society, and b) England can kick India "forward," reveal themselves to be dogmatic abstractions.

Enter Critical Theory

For the victim, imperialism offers these alternatives: serve or be destroyed.

- Edward Said (1994: 168)

Writing within a tradition of critical humanism, which in many ways he himself develops, Edward Said provides a significant critique of Marx. Said writes in *Orientalism*,

I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature...that the Orient was created - or, as I call it, "Orientalized" (Said 2003: 5).

In other words, the sort of alterity that we notice in Marx's "Asiatic" mode of production is not natural or inherent, but produced.

Said asserts that Orientalism is not simply a scholarly project initiated to gain more accurate knowledge of a real object - the Orient - but rather a discourse that creates its own object in the unfolding of the discourse itself. He suggests that Marx had easy access to a massed body of writing - both internally consolidated by Orientalism and put forward by it beyond the field - that controlled any statement made about the Orient. The idea of a fundamentally lifeless Asia - a backward India - is a piece of Romantic Orientalism that Marx encounters

in this material. The idea works to confirm Marx's thesis about the inevitability of capitalism, and so Marx uses it and generates a justification for British imperialism in India (Said 2003: 153-156). What happened to Marx's lauded "kritik" during this intellectual process? One cannot say, except that it is notably absent, forcing Marx to produce an un-informed, ill-conceived, and ultimately destructive notion of a backward India.

In their book *Empire*, Hardt and Negri, deploy new-left critical theory to show how Marx's second plank - England will kick India "forward" - is based on Euro-centric dogma (2001: 118-120). Hardt and Negri note that for Marx, the only way forward for India is down the path that European society has already traveled, because for Marx all history is defined by European history - all that happened in Europe must happen everywhere (ibid.). And to the extent that the trajectory of European history is not repeated, it is not only acceptable but also necessary that tyranny - in the form of imperialism - bring it everywhere. Therefore, for Marx the only way India can progress is by being transformed into a Western society. Hardt and Negri note that this is a Euro-centric position, showing a lack of understanding of and appreciation for Indian society and its different potentials (ibid.).

A third strand of critical theorists - Dependency theorists - Andre Gunder Frank and Paul Baran prominent among them, further demonstrate how the second plank supporting Marx's stance on British rule in India - England will kick India "forward" - is

anchored in erroneous assumptions (Wolfe 1997: 394-397). They illustrate that the uni-linear theory of history that Marx posits, does not take into account that, when the West was undergoing its own momentous development, there had not been another "West" present (ibid.). Rather, there were colonies whose exploitation produced (and in changing ways continues to produce) the paramountcy of the West. They show that underdevelopment is not external to capitalism, i.e. it is not a condition that prevails in backward regions that have yet to develop, but that in fact, it is a result of capitalism. Therefore, they assert that regardless of Marx's ill-conceived "Asiatic" mode of production, the idea that India would develop (let alone progress) as a result of the modernization fostered by British rule is fundamentally implausible because development and underdevelopment are not two distinct states, but are bound together in a cause and effect relationship - the ascendancy of British capital was built on the subjugation of India (ibid.).

Therefore, we note that Marx's apologetic support for British rule in India is based on his belief that through British imperialism Indian society will achieve progress. Indeed, quite paradoxically, Marx's support for British rule in India stems from his desire to witness the emancipation of Indian society. In other words, Marx makes the "imperialism as means to emancipation" argument with regards to British rule in India. However, close examination of Marx's argument reveals that it is built upon un-informed and ill-conceived assumptions of the

backwardness of Indian society, and a doctrinaire, Euro-centric theoretical framework through which Marx invariably analyzes history. Therefore, Marx has been *unwittingly* instructive to us in illustrating the ease of falling into the trap of making the "imperialism as means to emancipation" argument, as well as highlighting its fundamental flaws - it is based on assumptions and notions that do not withstand the scrutiny of three significant strands of critical theory.

Learning lessons but posting the post-modern

An examination of Marx's thoughts on imperialism illustrates that his argument with respect to it is founded on an underlying notion of progress. Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that this notion of progress lies at the root of the narrative of "modernity." In *Habitations of Modernity*, Chakrabarty writes, "If modernity is to be a definable, delimited concept, we must identify some people or practices or concepts as *nonmodern*.....Western powers in their imperial mode saw modernity as coeval with the idea of progress." (2002, xix)

Post-modern theory, best embodied in the works of Foucault and Jameson, utilizes critiques like the one presented above (on Marx and imperialism) to teach us an important lesson about how this concept - progress - is problematic. And it then asks us to jettison "modernity."

But Dipesh Chakrabarty provides a crucial addendum. Chakrabarty first notes in *Provincializing Europe*,

"The European colonizer of the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and

at the same time denied it in practice. But the vision has been powerful in its effects. It has historically provided a strong foundation on which to erect - both in Europe and outside - critiques of socially unjust practices." (2000, 4)

In other words, there is a difference between holding up humanistic principles, and acting upon them, and one can critique someone who shows a discrepancy between these two. True, for the colonized, the tension between "humanism-as-history," and "humanism-as-ideality," is problematic. But he then points out that conflating the two and then rejecting the conflated bundle would be tantamount to the age-old cliché of "throwing the baby out with the bath water." Chakrabarty continues,

"Postcolonial scholarship is committed, almost by definition, to engaging the universals - such as the abstract figure of the human or that of Reason - that were forged in eighteenth century Europe and that underlie the human sciences.....Fanon's struggle to hold on to the Enlightenment idea of the human - even when he knew that European imperialism had reduced that idea to the figure of the settler-colonial white man - is now itself a part of the global heritage of all postcolonial thinkers. The struggle ensues because there is no easy way of dispensing with these universals in the condition of political modernity. Without them there would be no social science that addresses issues of modern social justice." (2000, 5)

Based on the foregoing discussion, I think that two principal parameters or concepts of a new sociological theory would be, a) *non-teleological, non-uni-linear progress*, and b) *mitigated agency*. The first allows us to differentiate between states of being and existence and note whether oppression or denial of justice is occurring, whilst at the same time allowing for differential patterns of evolution. And the second gives us

the cognitive room to escape, or change such situations and circumstances, whilst at the same time recognizing our limitations. Without the noted caveats on these concepts we run the risk of defeating our purposes by not being reflexive enough, but going without these concepts wholesale, we run the risk of abject apathy. This might be a treacherous and steep path to tread, but given the alternatives, it is, in my mind at least, a noble, worthy, indeed imperative one because it allows us to develop the contours of that other world which is better, and in so doing, make it all the more possible.

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