

Don't Dismiss Marx. His Critique Of Colonialism Is More Relevant Than Ever



*Marcello Musto -
Photo: York
University*

12-15-2023 Contrary to liberal misinterpretations, Marx was a fierce critic of colonialism, says Marxist scholar Marcello Musto.

During the last couple of decades, we have been witnessing a resurgence of interest in the thought and work of Karl Marx, author of major philosophical, historical, political and economic works — and of course, of *The Communist Manifesto*, which is perhaps the most popular political manifesto in the history of the world. This resurgence is largely due to the devastating consequences of neoliberalism around the world — unprecedented levels of economic inequality, social decay and popular discontent, as well as intensifying environmental degradation bringing the planet ever closer to a climate precipice — and the inability of the formal institutions of liberal democracy to solve this growing list of societal problems. But is Marx still relevant to the socio-economic and political landscape that characterizes today's capitalist world? And what about the argument that Marx was Eurocentric and had little or nothing to say about colonialism?

Marcello Musto, a leading Marxist scholar, and professor of sociology at York University in Toronto, Canada, who has been a part of the revival of interest in Marx, contends in an exclusive interview for *Truthout* that Marx is still very much

relevant today and debunks the claim that he was Eurocentric. In the interview that follows, Musto argues that Marx was, in fact, intensely critical of the impact of colonialism.

C.J. Polychroniou: In the last decade or so there has been renewed interest in Karl Marx's critique of capitalism among leftist public intellectuals. Yet, capitalism has changed dramatically since Marx's time and the idea that capitalism is fated to self-destruct because of contradictions that arise from the workings of its own logic no longer commands intellectual credibility. Moreover, the working class today is not only much more complex and diverse than the working class of the industrial revolution but has also not fulfilled the worldwide historical mission envisioned by Marx. In fact, it was such considerations that gave rise to post-Marxism, a fashionable intellectual posture from the 1970s to the 1990s, which attacks the Marxist notion of class analysis and underplays the material causes for radical political action. But now, it seems, there is a return once again to the fundamental ideas of Marx. How should we explain the renewed interest in Marx? Indeed, is Marx still relevant today?

*Marcello Musto: The fall of the Berlin Wall was followed by two decades of conspiracy of silence on Marx's work. In the 1990s and 2000s, the attention toward Marx was extremely scarce and the same can be said for the publication, and discussion, of his writing. Marx's work — no longer identified with the odious function of *instrumentum regni* of the Soviet Union — became the focus of a renewed global interest in 2008, after one of the biggest economic crises in the history of capitalism. Prestigious newspapers, as well as journals with wide readerships, described the author of *Capital* as a farsighted theorist, whose topicality received confirmation one more time. Marx became, almost everywhere, the theme of university courses and international conferences. His writings reappeared on bookshop shelves, and his interpretation of capitalism gathered increasing momentum.*

In the last few years, there has also been a reconsideration of Marx as a political theorist and many authors with progressive views maintain that his ideas continue to be indispensable for anyone who believes it is necessary to build an alternative to the society in which we live. The contemporary "Marx revival" is not confined only to Marx's critique of political economy, but also open to rediscovering his political ideas and sociological interpretations. In the meantime, many post-Marxist theories have demonstrated all their fallacies and ended up

accepting the foundations of the existing society — even though the inequalities that tear it apart and thoroughly undermine its democratic coexistence are growing in increasingly dramatic forms.

Certainly, Marx's analysis of the working class needs to be reframed, as it was developed on the observation of a different form of capitalism. If the answers to many of our contemporary problems cannot be found in Marx, he does, however, center the essential questions. I think this is his greatest contribution today: he helps us to ask the right questions, to identify the main contradictions. That seems to me to be no small thing. Marx still has so much to teach us. His elaboration helps us better understand how indispensable he is in rethinking an alternative to capitalism — today, even more urgently than in his time.

Marx's writings include discussions of issues, such as nature, migration and borders, which recently have received renewed attention. Can you briefly discuss Marx's approach to nature and his take on migration and borders?

Marx studied many subjects — in the past often underestimated, or even ignored, by his scholars — which are of crucial importance for the political agenda of our times. The relevance that Marx assigned to the ecological question is the focus of some of the major studies devoted to his work over the past two decades. In contrast to interpretations that reduced Marx's conception of socialism to the mere development of productive forces (labor, instruments and raw material), he displayed great interest in what we today call the ecological question. On repeated occasions, Marx argued that the expansion of the capitalist mode of production increases not only the exploitation of the working class, but also the pillage of natural resources. He denounced that "all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker but of robbing the soil." In *Capital*, Marx observed that the private ownership of the earth by individuals is as absurd as the private ownership of one human being by another human being.

Marx was also very interested in migration and among his last studies are notes on the pogrom that occurred in San Francisco in 1877 against Chinese migrants. Marx railed against anti-Chinese demagogues who claimed that the migrants would starve the white proletarians, and against those who tried to persuade the working class to support xenophobic positions. On the contrary, Marx showed that the forced movement of labor generated by capitalism was a very important

component of bourgeois exploitation and that the key to combating it was class solidarity among workers, regardless of their origins or any distinction between local and imported labor.

One of the most frequently heard objections to Marx is that he was Eurocentric and that he even justified colonialism as necessary for modernity. Yet, while Marx never developed [his theory of colonialism](#) as extensively as his critique of political economy, he condemned British rule in India in the most unequivocal terms, for instance, and criticized those who failed to see the destructive consequences of colonialism. How do you assess Marx on these matters?

The habit of using decontextualized quotations from Marx's work dates much before Edward Said's *Orientalism*, an influential book that contributed to the myth of Marx's alleged Eurocentrism. Today, I often read reconstructions of Marx's analyses of very complex historical processes that are outright fabrications.

Already in the early 1850s, in his articles (contested by Said) for the *New-York Tribune* — a newspaper with which he collaborated for more than a decade — Marx had been under no illusion about the basic characteristics of capitalism. He well knew that the bourgeoisie had never “effected a progress without dragging individuals and people through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation.” But he had also been convinced that, through world trade, development of the productive forces and the transformation of production into something scientifically capable of dominating the forces of nature, “bourgeois industry and commerce [would create] these material conditions of a new world.” These considerations reflected no more than a partial, ingenuous vision of colonialism held by a man writing a journalistic piece at barely 35 years of age.

Later, Marx undertook extensive investigations of non-European societies and his fierce anti-colonialism was even more evident. These considerations are all too obvious to anyone who has read Marx, despite skepticism in some academic circles that represent a bizarre form of decoloniality and assimilate Marx to liberal thinkers. When Marx wrote about the domination of England in India, he asserted that the British had only been able to “destroy native agriculture and double the number and intensity of famines.” For Marx, the suppression of communal landownership in India was nothing but an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people backwards, certainly not forwards.

Nowhere in Marx's works is there the suggestion of an essentialist distinction between the societies of the East and the West. And, in fact, Marx's anti-colonialism — particularly his ability to understand the true roots of this phenomenon — contributes to the new contemporary wave of interest in his theories, from Brazil to Asia.

The last journey that Karl Marx undertook before he died was in Algiers. Can you highlight his reflections on the Arab world and what he thought of the French occupation of Algeria?

I have told this story — so little known — in my recent book, *The Last Years of Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography*. In the winter of 1882, during the last year of his life, Marx had a severe bronchitis and his doctor recommended him a period of rest in a warm place like Algiers, in order to escape the rigors of winter. It was the only time in his life that he spent outside Europe.

Owing to his ill health, Marx was unable to study Algerian society as he would have liked. In 1879, he had already examined the French occupation of Algeria and had argued that the transfer of landownership from the hands of the natives into those of the colonists' had a central aim: "the destruction of the indigenous collective property and its transformation into an object of free purchase and sale." Marx had noted that this expropriation had two purposes: to provide the French as much land as possible; and to tear away the Arabs from their natural bonds to the soil, which meant to break any danger of rebellion. Marx commented that this type of individualization of landownership had not only secured huge economic benefits for the invaders but also achieved a political aim: "to destroy the foundation of the society."

Although Marx could not pursue this research further, he made a number of interesting observations on the Arab world when he was in Algiers. He attacked, with outrage, the violent abuse from the French, their repeated provocative acts, their shameless arrogance, presumption and obsession with taking revenge — like Moloch in the face of every act of rebellion by the local Arab population.

In his letters from Algiers, Marx reported that when a murder is committed by an Arab gang, usually with robbery in view, and the actual miscreants are in the course of time duly apprehended, tried and executed, this is not regarded as sufficient atonement by the injured colonist family. They demand into the bargain

the “pulling in” of at least half a dozen innocent Arabs: “A kind of torture is applied by the police, to force the Arabs to ‘confess,’ just as the British do in India.” Marx wrote that when a European colonist dwells among those who are considered the “lesser breeds,” either as a settler or simply on business, he generally regards himself as even more inviolable than the king. And Marx also emphasized that, in the comparative history of colonial occupation, “the British and Dutch outdo the French.”

Do these reflections shed any light on Marx’s general perspective on colonialism?

Marx always expressed himself unambiguously against the ravages of colonialism. It is a mistake to suggest otherwise, despite the instrumental scepticism so fashionable nowadays in certain liberal academic quarters. During his life, Marx closely observed the main events in international politics and, as we can see from his writings and letters, he expressed firm opposition to British colonial oppression in India, to French colonialism in Algeria, and to all the other forms of colonial domination. He was anything but Eurocentric and fixated only on class conflict. Marx thought the study of new political conflicts and peripheral geographical areas to be fundamental for his critique of the capitalist system. Most importantly, he always took the side of the oppressed against the oppressors.

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