

## **Marx, Romanticism and the Importance of Superstructure in Evaluating Progress**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Marx's development and deployment of a teleological account of history derived, in part, from Hegelian tenets has been central to modern notions of progress. This stands in contrast to Rousseau's romanticism, which holds that human well-being declines as technology advances. In this article, I challenge these two positions through engagement with the case of Aboriginal Australian societies. I explore the possibility that an appreciation of the intricacies of societies demeaned as "primitive," can lead Marxian and Rousseauian tenets to affirm those societies, but for reasons that Marx and Rousseau may not have originally appreciated. In light of the cultural or superstructural problems caused by modes of production, there may be grounds to appreciate the achievements of societies which have actively rejected apparently essential means of progress, such as agriculture.

### **KEYWORDS**

Marx; romanticism; progress; development

### **Introduction**

Marx's development and deployment of a teleological account of history derived from Hegelian tenets has been central to modern notions of progress. Holding that society, driven by technological development and class conflict, progresses through a range of socio-economic stages, Marx combined belief in the importance of human flourishing and the almost inevitable realization of that flourishing within a condition of communism. In that condition, class conflict is eliminated and human beings are free to use advanced technologies to satisfy their needs with the least effort necessary, permitting the development of higher functioning capabilities.

This places Marx firmly at odds with Rousseau, whose affirmation of "primitive" societies over modern ones, has formed the basis for romantic accounts of the good (Rousseau 1973, 71). Living in accordance with their nature, humans in this prior state live lives of egalitarian plenty, eschewing property and pursuing only that which is necessary, which they achieve with ease due to the development of their physical and mental capacities (Rousseau 1973, 53–54, 57–59, 120). Humans in this condition are empathic and disavow competition and its consequences—hierarchy and oppression (Rousseau 1973, 75–77, 80–82, 120). In modernity, artificial wants develop, creating unnatural vices and harmful natural and social environments (Rousseau 1973, 118). This evaluation of human history stands in obvious apparent contrast to Marx's own. In what follows, I re-examine Marx's account of progress and his evaluation of societies in light of two divergent real world cases: Aboriginal Australian societies that upheld hunter-gatherer and rejected shifts towards agricultural modes of production and contemporary neoliberal societies. By examining the examples and using the work of Jared Diamond and Peter Singer to highlight the challenges faced by those who seek to realize communism in the modern world, I wish to show that there are ways in which Marx's and Rousseau's commitments to well-being mean that their stances can appear more complementary than might be assumed.

Throughout, I quote terms, such as "primitive," and examine ideas, such as "progress," which many people from Indigenous societies find deeply offensive and regard as the intellectual basis for their domination (see Bedford 1994). The likes of Kevin Anderson (2010) and Shlomo Avineri (1969) have examined Marx's writings on non-Western societies in depth, highlighting both Marx's concern for and affirmation of the people and elements of such societies, as well as his ethno- and Eurocentrism. This article is an attempt to challenge ethnocentric features of Marx's approach to societies which seem to have achieved goods that, in an era of environmental disaster, international conflict, grinding poverty and fading hope of communism's being achieved, appear presently elusive. However, in doing this, I acknowledge that the article indirectly validates colonial forms of knowledge, since it uses anthropological accounts of Aboriginal society and cites those societies as an instrument by which to examine a broader intellectual problem. This does little to challenge the passive way in which academia has, in various cases, treated such societies. However, by using sources embedded within the academy, I wish to show that even those accounts do much to unsettle and challenge Marx's and Rousseau's positions and bring us to a renewed focus on well-being. This, emphatically, is not an attempt to appraise non-capitalist societies or to endorse regressive policies and politics. We can rightly

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welcome the overthrow of exploitative, hierarchical and stultifying orders on their individual merits. We should not welcome the overthrow of societies simply because they have not realized advanced forms of technology, especially where the goods achieved seem realistically to be unparalleled in alternative orders. This is a stance compatible with Marx's *eudaimonic* commitments and should be seen as part of an internal, rather than external, post-colonial or other, discussion of Marxist approaches to progress.

I begin by outlining the "stagist" account of history.

### **Marx and History**

There are numerous interpretations of Marx's account of history. In the stagist view, Marx holds that the human desire to satisfy needs rationally and "with the least expenditure of nature" (Marx 1981, 959) leads people to overcome natural environmental constraints and to "distinguish themselves from animals" by developing technological "means of production" (Marx and Engels 1974, 42). As these technologies develop, humans encounter new problems and have to find new solutions, including "a division of material and mental labour" (Marx and Engels 1974, 51) emerging according to physical differences (Marx 1976, 471–72). This leads those in mental labour to appropriate resources and create class relations within the substructure of society. In order to consolidate their position, those in mental labour create "morality, religion, metaphysics" or, more perniciously, "ideology" (Marx and Engels 1974, 47) to distort people's perceptions of production and to accept the particular, subjective interests of the appropriators as universal and objective. This is the superstructure of society. However, the drive for increased efficiency and profits leads to increased population and new needs requiring new technologies for their satisfaction. Such technologies can be operated by those outside the appropriative class. As dependence on these new means of production increases, their owners and operators gain power and overthrow the previous appropriative class, changing the superstructure and creating new social relations (McLellan 2000, 210, 425–26; Johnston 1986, 51). As such, there is a clear relationship between the ways in which people satisfy their basic needs and the form that their society takes (see McLellan 2000, 219–20).

This dialectical process drives society forward through particular stages. In Europe, people have passed through hunter-gatherer "primitive" communism, ancient slave society, feudalism and capitalism (McLellan 2000, 425). In each stage, humans have exercised greater control over nature, coming to dominate it in the present. By creating an international market, industrial capital "presupposes the universal development of the productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with communism" (Marx and Engels 1974, 56), leading to the eventual overthrow of the market and the realization of, first, state-directed socialism and, ultimately, universal communism. For Marx, it is in communism that humans "bring their 'existence' into harmony with their 'essence'" (Marx and Engels 1974, 61) in a condition of freedom from natural and social constraints. This is achieved superstructurally by workers acting collectively "to integrate and harmonize the work of the factory and the energies of the whole economic order" (Bloom 1946, 120). In "a typically Hegelian paradox" (Miliband 1979, 147), in order to secure a world free from class conflict, the majority have to deploy the most concerted form of collective, centralized political action to eradicate private property and pernicious interests (Bender 1981, 548; Adamiak 1970, 9). "Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ imposed upon society, to one completely subordinate to it" (Marx 1972, 26; see Hoffman 1995, 131). This requires a significant degree, ultimately, of cultural, superstructural work in order to reshape people's understandings of relationships, values and their place in the world.

By bringing their "existence" into harmony with their "essence," humans are able, finally, to satisfy basic needs and realize capabilities for love, reason, thought and aesthetics:

Only through the objectively unfolded wealth of human nature can the wealth of subjective *human* sensitivity—a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form—be either cultivated or created. . . . *Sense* which is a prisoner of crude practical need has only a *restricted* sense. For a man who is starving the human form of food does not exist, only its abstract form exists; it could just as well be present in its crudest form, and it would be hard to say how this way of eating differs from that of *animals*. The man who is burdened with worries and needs has no *sense* for the finest of plays; . . . thus the objectification of the human essence, in a theoretical as well as a practical respect, is necessary both in order to make man's *senses human* and to create an appropriate *human sense* for the whole of the wealth of humanity and of nature. (Marx 1992, 353–54; italics in the original)

This Aristotelian account of well-being rests on belief in the relationship between being and doing: as humans work with one another to develop innate higher capabilities, they do things which are human and become better at being human (see Robeyns 2006, 95). Martha Nussbaum outlines this principle in relation to her own capabilities approach:

The core idea is that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life in cooperation and reciprocity with others, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around by the world in the manner of a “flock” or “herd” animal. (Nussbaum 2001, 72)

Contra Rousseau, for Marx, as we progress, we become less animal and more human.

### **Progress and Coercion**

This account of history as one of humans seeking to satisfy needs through increasingly complex modes of production creates the basis for a crude means of evaluating according to the extent to which they have the *potential* to satisfy needs and enable humans to develop their species-specific capabilities (Nordahl 1986, 11). Society improves as the potential increases for humans to shape the natural world according to human interests, even if, in reality, humans realize fewer capabilities by virtue of restrictive, exploitative social arrangements (see Marx 1973, 706). As a consequence, Marx affirms the instrumental value of capitalism in breaking down less advanced modes of production and drawing people together internationally (Marx 1976, 488). He also controversially labels certain non-capitalist societies “barbarian,” “backward,” “stagnatory” and “vegetative” (Marx and Engels 1967, 222–24), claiming, again contra Rousseau, that less advanced modes of production are associated with cultural belief in “natural” hierarchies (Marx and Engels 1967, 222). Capitalism, though often even more pernicious in reality, holds the capacity for liberation from class conflict by opening people’s eyes to appropriation and the possibility for ending history (see Marx and Engels 1967, 222; Marx and Engels 1974, 82–86; McLellan 2000, 127–32).

This approach has, of course, been rejected as ethnocentric (see Hardt and Negri’s [2001, 120, 137] non-post-colonial critique), but, in Marx’s eyes, the nature of different societies’ modes of production is dependent on the specific natural resources and constraints in their particular places (Marx 1976, 472). Different areas offer different possibilities for progress (Lichtheim 1963, 38), though Marx also claims that some extremely restrictive superstructures can impede change through human action.

Where progress is limited, Marx seems, at various times, to endorse the infliction of change from without. In his consequentialist writings on colonialism for the *New York Daily Tribune* in the 1850s, he suggests, as Avineri puts it, that non-Western society is “non-dialectical and stagnant,” meaning that “the only impetus for change has to come from the outside. . . . European bourgeois civilisation is thus the external agent of change in non-European societies” (Avineri 1969, 19). Capitalism’s constant need for expansion in search of new capital means that it permeates non-capitalist societies, draws people into cities and introduces modern forms of thought to populations previously adherent to “the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism” (Marx and Engels 1967, 222). Even where capitalist colonialism creates forms of radical inequality between societies, it provides the benefit of “break[ing] up old nationalities and push[ing] the antagonism of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the extreme point,” hastening “the social revolution” (McLellan 2000, 295). In a sense, capitalism creates the preconditions of communism globally and reduces the effort needed by socialist governments to instil change themselves in non-capitalist societies (Avineri 1969, 21–22, 473; Warren 1980, 44–45).

As a consequence of this thinking, Marx endorses forms of imperial domination, with regard to British imperialism in India, now regarded as wholly unacceptable to many on the left:

Now, 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 civilisation, and their hereditary means of subsistence, we must not forget that these idyllic 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. We must not forget the barbarian egotism which, concentrating on some miserable patch of land, had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties, the massacre of the population of large towns, with no other consideration bestowed upon them than on natural events, itself the helpless prey of any aggressor who deigned to notice at all. We must not forget that this undignified, stagnatory and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction and rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindostan. We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalising worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down

on his knees in adoration of *Hanuman*, the monkey, and *Sabbala*, the cow. 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. (Avineri 1969, 93–94)

British imperialism, though reprehensible, was dragging Indian society towards modernity through the introduction of capitalism, mass communication and centralization (Avineri 1969, 90, 131–35; see also, Marx 1976, 477–79). Of course, the vast majority of Indians were denied the benefits of these goods and could only attain them through socialist revolution, but the *potential* for humans to realize their higher essence remained (Avineri 1969, 131–35).

### **Imperialism and Progress**

There is, though, an alternative, more conservative strain of thought which emerges in his later work. In particular cases, Marx argues that forms of imperialism are not conducive to progress. British action failed to achieve progress in Ireland and undermined progress in England, with Irish workers seen to threaten jobs in England and Irish landholdings entrenching the English aristocracy (McLellan 2000, 638–40). In parts of the Indian sub-continent, conservative social structures prevented Indians from realizing the benefits of capital, even after local modes of production had been seriously undermined (Marx 1981, 451–52). This has led the likes of Shanin (1983) and Anderson (2010) to suggest that Marx did not adhere to the linear, deterministic account of progress highlighted above. They cite Marx's late claim that his "historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe" cannot be transformed

into a historico-philosophic theory of the general path every people is fated to tread, whatever the historical circumstances in which it finds itself, in order that it may ultimately arrive at the form of economy which ensures, together with the greatest expansion of productive powers of social labour, the most complete development of man. (Avineri 1969, 469–70)

In different historical and geographical contexts, different directions of progress are pursued, such that peasant societies, which have existed in many different places and times, have only transformed into capitalist societies in some (Avineri 1969, 470).

This suggests that history provides humans with a range of options in pursuing their collective lives. This "multilinear" account of development leads the later Marx to suggest that the specific social conditions of rural "obshchina" communities in 19th century Russia might enable a revolutionary society to develop modern modes of production, while preserving elements of the commune compatible with socialism and avoiding the harm of capitalist destruction (Shanin 1983, 105–06). In this case, the specific traits of a particular pre-/non-capitalist social organization might permit the goods of modernity to be adopted and advanced more effectively than under models imposed through revolution.

While this "multilinear" account in Marx might suggest that societies can develop socialism in any or a large number of forms, it is apparent that he retains belief in the necessity of modern technology and internationalism to progress, such that, even in the Russian case, the point of importance is that there are pre-existing features which enable elements of society to accommodate those goods without the capitalist excesses (Shanin 1983, 110). Moreover, Marx's concern is not to conserve the commune, but to find the best means of realizing modern goods capable of contributing to communism (Shanin 1983, 117). This is demonstrated by his broadly contemporaneous claim that attempts to preserve the "good" bits of feudalism merely inhibit the work of the "bad" bits in enabling capitalism to emerge. In effect, "One would have set oneself the absurd problem of eliminating history" (McLellan 2000, 227).

His endorsement of "progressive" forces is apparent in his support of co-operation with the German "petty bourgeoisie" in abolishing "so many relics of the Middle Ages" and "so much local and provincial obstinacy" (McLellan 2000, 310). Alliances can be made with progressives and progressives can be turned into revolutionaries (311), because "One may declare oneself an enemy of the constitutional regime without declaring oneself a friend of the ancient regime" (296).

This rejection of the ancient regime has, though, been overlooked by anti-imperialists in the 20th and 21st centuries. In the first instance, Lenin (1939) believed that imperialism entrenches capitalism in developed societies and can only be overcome through action in the periphery to sap capitalists of the new markets on which they depend. This view was strengthened by Guevara in Latin America, who argued that the fight

against imperialism, for liberation from colonial or neo-colonial shackles . . . is not separate from the struggle against backwardness and poverty. If the imperialist enemy, the United States or any other, carries out its attack against the underdeveloped peoples and the socialist countries, elementary logic determines the need for an alliance between the underdeveloped peoples and the socialist countries. (Guevara and Castro 2002, 17)

This view of progress has, though, been replaced with a more pervasive view of the value of non-capitalist societies (see discussions in Warren 1980, 4–6, 47–83; Boron 2005, 16–17). It has led the likes of Alex Callinicos to advocate alliances with “politically diverse,” and often conservative, “forces in action around a limited common objective” in order “to radicalize the anti-capitalist movement by giving it an anti-imperialist edge” and advance “a movement that targets not just the Bush administration and its war drive but the imperialist system itself, with its roots in the capitalist logic of exploitation and accumulation” (Callinicos 2002b). The problem, though, is that, as Halliday (2002, 85) has argued, the groups with which Callinicos’ Socialist Workers Party has sought to engage are often opposed to “progress.” This is especially problematic for Callinicos, whose desire for universal and egalitarian communism bereft of national, ethnic, communitarian, cultural and geographical boundaries appears threatened by alliances which may forfeit “the genuine gains that the technologically dynamic and globally integrated capitalism of the present day has brought with it” and tend “to idealize petty forms of capitalism that . . . can be more exploitative than the large-scale version” (Callinicos 2001, 398). He emphasizes that “any alternative to capitalism in its present form should, as far as possible, meet the requirements of (at least) justice, efficiency, democracy, and sustainability” (Callinicos 2003, 107), but it is not clear that some “anti-imperialist” allies can offer this.

The point, then, is that Marx’s unilinear account seems to wish the destruction of societies endorsed by Rousseau, while his multilinear account has led anti-imperialists to endorse movements which seem antithetical to the goods associated with both Rousseau’s romanticism and Marx’s Aristotelianism. In light of the apparent shift to the right, not only in Europe, but also in the Middle East and elsewhere, and the attendant diminution of human capabilities, might there be scope to reassess the contradiction between Marx and Rousseau with regard to examples of societies which have eschewed progress?

### **Aboriginal Society**

Aboriginal settlement of Australia stems back at least 60,000 years (Adcock et al. 2001, 537), with people arriving over land bridges and sea to create interdependent communities across the landmass (Butlin 1993, 9). There was internal diversity, with “barriers of language, geography, mythology or blood which divided the land into hundreds of fluid republics” (Blainey 1983, 30–31), but only periodic interaction with Micronesian peoples, Macassan traders, settlers from the Indian sub-continent, and, eventually, European colonialists (see Swain 1993, 69–159).

Over the course of millennia, Aboriginal groups engaged with natural environments that differed greatly throughout the continent, engineering sustainable forms of production grounded in hunting and gathering (e.g., Keen 2004, 28–77). Although some have wrongly assumed that people were in the thrall of nature, groups believed themselves to be engaged in a custodial relationship with the land (Maddison 2009, 74–79), conducting a precise and efficient form of production. People engineered the environment through “the digging of tanks for conservation of water, building of dams and canals for catching eels,” “the use of fire to clear land of dense scrub or forest or the burning of dry grass to provide fresh green pastures to attract animals” and “firestick farming” (Rose 1987, 48), favouring certain forms of flora and fauna over others (Rose 1987, 45), contributing to the extinction of certain animals (Diamond 1998, 42–44). People developed “containers, tools, and facilities (e.g., fish-traps);” “chemical processes such as the use of plant-poisons and the reduction of toxicity by leaching”; “hand tools and implements stone tool-making technology (in conjunction with shell knives, bone, etc.), and human power rather than animal power or fossil fuels” (Keen 2004, 83).

Each group had a custodial relationship with a particular tract of land established through specific dreaming narratives. These narratives created a link through “law” (Swain 1993, 24) or “a coherent and all-encapsulating body of truths which govern the whole of life” (Dodson 1988, 1), marking the way in which land “took shape” (Swain 1993, 32) out of the materials already existing in the world (Maddock 1971, 85). As Kolig explains:

In traditional Aboriginal belief, the cosmos exists in perfect and eternal shapes and modes. Through the semi-creative processes of the Dreamtime—a cosmogenic phase of unspecified time-depth and duration—the universe as Aboriginal man traditionally knows it became ordered into everlasting, unchanging forms. Ever since, Aboriginal man has found himself living in a perfectly ordered world.

If it were not for his traditional inability to conceive of possible existential alternatives, one might say that he saw it, in an almost Leibnizian sense, as the best of all possible worlds. (Kolig 1982, 19)

This creates the basis for an inherent conservatism in Aboriginal society which recognizes the priority of reproducing a society regarded as being the best possible for those within it (Rose 1987, 194, 47) and as having been in existence “from the beginning” (Arthur 1996, 40): “to the extent that they become inseparable: preserving the order of the natural world and maintaining the social-political *status quo* are virtually identical” (Kolig 1982, 19).

In terms of a view of history, it is not possible to “fix’ the *D*reaming *in* time: it was, and is, everywhen” (Stanner 1956, 225; italics in the original). People are linked eternally to a place which has agency, acting to shape lives in various ways (Swain 1993, 23). Dreaming narratives can change through a range of human experiences (Myers 1982, 103), but these changes are unimportant in comparison to the broader truths embodied within the dreaming about the relationship between a particular people and a particular place. This solidity in thought enabled coherent, long-term, planned productive activities to be developed (Rose 1987, xii–xiii; Godwin and Weiner 2006, 126–27). The consequence was that people were, by and large, able to satisfy basic needs and pursue a whole range of lives grounded in advanced capabilities of thought and action.

Aboriginal people preserved this way of life, even when possibilities for more advanced or all-encompassing agricultural modes presented themselves, in part because of their superstructural commitment to upholding their custodial relationship with the land (Swain 1993, 76). Although this meant that people were unable to access the sorts of surpluses seen in other societies, this also prevented, as Marx’s and Rousseau’s positions suggest, the development of inequalities and class conflict. While there were stark gender differences in roles, particularly with regard to productive activities (Hiatt 1996, 64), these differences did not translate into inequalities. Men and women had different but balanced places in society, each occupying their own realms with their own responsibilities and entitlements (Rose 1987, xiv). The different productive roles had different challenges and benefits, but neither could be regarded as being better or worse by any commensurate measure (Hiatt 1996, 64). People were made interdependent, having to rely upon one another for resources and goods which were held by specific groups within societies, but without an overarching, hierarchical order seen in agricultural and post-agricultural societies (Swain 1993, 52, 53). In general, social units were relatively small, with kin units interacting within “ranges,” collectively constituting a community of people in custodial relationship with a particular land (Keen 1984, 25). These bands would interact across lands to exchange goods, creating a network of trading countries across the continent (Flood 1989, 250–51) without the presence of money (Sykes 1989, 19) and the attendant possibility of class conflict.

Although the precedence of law meant that parts of people’s lives would be governed in ways antecedent to choice—particularly with regard to familial responsibilities and marriages—duties of reciprocity meant that there were few sources of interpersonal domination and autonomy could be asserted within each person’s realm, particularly with regard to desire, meaning that individuals were “expected to assert themselves to gain their needs” (Folds 2001, 95) and often pursued innovative strategies in order to avoid constrictive commitments (Pierson 1982, 198).

The key means of avoiding hierarchy and class conflict lay in the way in which authority was constrained spatially within the superstructure, denying the possibility of transcendental law found in capitalist societies. In effect, although there was a soft hierarchy of older, experienced people who had demonstrated their capacity to fulfil obligations and who exercised authority through their knowledge of traditional, non-transcendental law and their command of others’ respect (see Kolig 1982, 23), this authority did not extend outside their contextual realms and they were not “chiefs” or “bosses” (see Hiatt 1996, 82). Where decisions had to be made, they would be informed meritocratically by those who demonstrated particular capacity in dealing with the specific issue (Graham 1999, 116).

The absence of transcendental authority did, though, leave open the possibility of conflict emerging between groups, as society often lacked a mediating or adjudicating force to resolve disputes without violence (Rose 1987, 200–201). In the absence of that authority, individuals or groups would take “self-help” action, calling on the support of kin to redress grievances, often through violence (see Keen 2004, 245). This creates scope for long-lasting conflicts and feuds, emphasizing that we should not romanticize pre-colonial Aboriginal life. People did have to deal with difficulties that contemporary, middle-class Australians do not have to address. There could be scarcity in food, people could have to work hard for their sustenance and individuals would have to take part in painful or uncomfortable initiation rites (Kolig 1982, 21). However, by and large, people survived and had lives that were, in key respects, free from alienation, with individuals advancing their capabilities in concert with others under conditions of non-domination. While his notes on Aboriginal Australian societies are

brief, Marx comments on “the communal social relations” found in a range of non-European orders (Anderson 2010, 204, 242). These relations were to be challenged by colonialism.

### **Colonial Change and Rethinking Marx’s and Rousseau’s Positions**

Through European colonialism, the very bedrock of Aboriginal society was misappropriated and destroyed (Beckett 1988, 14; Mercer 1997, 190; Agamben 1998, 8; Butlin 1993, 129). As Europeans conquered Australia, they dislocated people from their traditional relationships with the land with disastrous consequences (see Butlin 1993, 129). In some places, particularly on the coasts, societies were destroyed completely through massacre and disease, whereas in others, particularly in the Red Centre, Aboriginal people remained, but had the flora and fauna upon which their lives depended eradicated and replaced with European forms for agricultural production (Reynolds 2001, 130). Aboriginal people were displaced and herded into missions (Bell 2002, 69), settlements and prisons (see McGrath 1995, 27; Evans 2004, 78–81) with the express aim of dislocating relationships (see Folds 2001, 65), disempowering groups (Keeffe 2003, 96–99) and eradicating Aboriginal society (see Rowley 1972, e.g., 86–103). In these new settlements, people were drawn into forms of wage labour (often without wages), becoming a sub-class of proletarian workers with the attendant forms of alienation such status confers (Folds 2001, 57). More recently, while many have entered mainstream employment, a large number of Aboriginal people have been excluded from the workforce and consigned to forms of welfare which have brought little by way of well-being (see Broome 2002, 151). This, combined with colonial trauma, has left huge numbers of people destitute, disempowered and dislocated, with associated levels of social ills and “lifestyle” diseases (see Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008, 5).

In Marx’s stagist writings, in particular, we see these sorts of processes and their consequences justified in teleological terms: it is only through the liberating forces of the market imposed from without that people can be freed from heavenly illusions and, through the immiserating effect of capital, exposed to the possibility of communism. In revised views of his “multi-linear” account of development in Russia, communities are able to uphold forms of social organization capable of absorbing the technological advances of capitalism and deploying them for collectivist ends. Yet, there are various different obstacles to our considering Aboriginal society capable of those movements. In one clear sense, Aboriginal society is inherently conservative and grounded in personal, rather than cosmopolitan, approaches. Many people remain located within networks of kin, connected to particular traditional “countries.” The problem is that Marx’s teleological view of history is entwined with his Aristotelian view of well-being and grounded in an assertion that, without material progress, any human potential developed is settled on ground beholden to the threat either of natural disaster or class exploitation. Humans free themselves only by achieving self- and collective mastery.

Counter-intuitively, though, it is precisely Aboriginal people’s superstructural commitment to managing an engineered natural environment and refusal to develop advanced forms of agriculture which leads them to avoid the formation of classes. In addition, it is their refusal to dominate nature through advanced technologies which ensured a relatively consistent natural environment, eliminating the threat of environmental disaster faced today. Although life could be hard, it cannot be disputed that many people developed in more supportive contexts and achieved greater levels of well-being than those who suffer today. However, this, combined with their relative isolation from other continents, also left them prey to contingencies that, within settled, long-lasting *modus vivendi*, they could not possibly predict, such as the arrival of people from the other side of the planet with advanced technologies intent on conquering the entire land mass and eliminating Aboriginal society. As Marx noted with regard to Indian society, Aboriginal people were “prey to outsiders” who did not respect established territories and the fixed relationships between people and land, despite their own Westphalian commitments to territorially stable nation states. What, then, can we take from Marx in light of such suffering?

Both Marx and Rousseau suggest that “primitive communist” societies contain the lowest levels of inter-personal forms of domination precisely by virtue of their rejection of advanced forms of technology. An Aristotelian evaluation on account of well-being endorses those societies, but a teleological one does not. The tragedy of Aboriginal Australia leaves us with an account which appears, in its particular context, to support the work of Jared Diamond. For Diamond, agriculture is the “Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race,” since it creates a whole range of miseries, such as illness, reliance on foods inferior to those consumed by our pre-historic ancestors and dependence on technologies: “Hunter-gatherers practiced the most successful and longest-lasting life style in human history. In contrast, we’re still struggling with the mess into which agriculture has tumbled us, and it’s unclear whether we can solve it” (Diamond 1987, 66). The optimism which underpins Marx’s teleological account is undone by experience of the fecklessness with which humans have consistently



undermined the well-being at the heart of his Aristotelian account. If we want to endorse any established form of human society, we must likely join the romantics in endorsing specific examples of hunter gathering societies. The superstructural work needed to constrain greed, envy and selfishness in technologically advanced societies and convert them into states of communism has thus far proven elusive.

## Conclusion

While the pessimism such thinking induces threatens to undermine key elements of Marx's contribution to understandings of the mechanics and possibilities of progress, there are features of Aboriginal society which also offer forms of endorsement. In effect, there is a recognition of the serious work highlighted by Singer as being needed to shape "unsociable" elements of human nature towards collectivist ends (Singer 1999, 60–63). In that sense, contra Rousseau, it is not that humans are perverted, as in the doctrine of The Fall, once they access modern technologies, it is that the conditions of "primitive" communism present humans with challenges which are manageable. Once additional contingencies enter the equation, humans struggle to achieve the egalitarian conditions secured by societies like those in Aboriginal Australia. In this respect, both Marx and Rousseau neglect the achievements of such forms of "communism," presenting them as natural, when they are anything but. Such examples give us reason to appraise the importance of superstructural endeavours in dealing with the hand dealt by means of production.

If our primary concern is human well-being, there are good reasons to set aside teleological concerns where such calculations are grounded in speculative assessments of the prospects of communism. While it is certainly the case that no intrinsic value should be attached to particular societies independent of the goods that they offer members, and that the demise of a great many oppressive, hierarchical non-capitalist societies need not be lamented, there is good reason to affirm societies which have realized important human ends in non-agricultural, small-scale, networked orders. Where these orders exist, it seems difficult to assert the value of their having "progress" inflicted from without where such progress decreases the ability and, in light of Diamond's and Singer's contributions, possibility of well-being being achieved on a similar scale. This stance, emphatically, is not grounds for regressive praxis—it merely recommends caution when advancing the value of progress for Marxist ends.

## Notes on contributor

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