

Marxism and Native Americans Revisited

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Marxism and Native Americans, which was published by South End Press in 1983, presents an important encounter between writers representing two theoretical and political perspectives associated with two very different emancipatory social movements.¹ Edited by Ward Churchill, the book includes essays by several Native American contributors and several contributors representing various tendencies in the U.S. Left. The publication of this book was an especially welcome development for academics and activists who recognize and respect the profound differences between these perspectives and movements, but also hope that some common ground can be found—in theory and in practice—for the mutual benefit of Native Americans and the working class.

As this book's engaging essays reveal, both Native American and Leftist contributors are concerned with oppression and injustice, and developing a larger, more powerful struggle against them. And the writers representing both perspectives are clearly committed to articulating and achieving the kind of radical social change that would be required to end oppression and injustice. But *Marxism and Native Americans* makes clear that there are substantial differences in the respective theoretical frameworks, political aims, and sensibilities of Native American activists and Left activists. At times, what appear to be deep antagonisms between the two perspectives surface in the pages of this book.

Marxism and Native Americans may not have sparked a new era of sustained intellectual engagement between these two traditions, but some of the issues raised here have been explored in other literatures. And the relatively limited dialogue on these vital issues may well be explained by the relative weakness of both Native American and Leftist movements in the context of resurgent conservatism in the U.S. during the past two decades, and not because of any theoretical or political impasse reached in the book. Indeed, this volume arguably represented an essential first step toward the critical analysis of the differences between Native American and Marxist perspectives on emancipatory social change *and* the articulation of potential common ground for activists from both traditions.

This paper has three aims: to review some of the most important criticisms of Marxism advanced by Native Americans in this book; to assess these criticisms from a Marxist perspective which draws not only on the original Leftist contributions to the book, but also the broader Marxist tradition; and to discuss the potential theoretical and practical basis for a principled, enduring alliance between Native American activists and Marxist activists. In the spirit of *Marxism and Native Americans*, this paper is intended as a contribution to a renewed critical discussion of potential common ground and progress

¹ Ward Churchill, ed., *Marxism and Native Americans* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

for both of these emancipatory social movements. This paper will suggest that continuing differences on important issues between Native American activists and Leftist activists need not constitute an insurmountable obstacle to reaching common ground.

One of the most fundamental criticisms of Marxism by Native American writers in this book is the charge that Marxism is Eurocentric. Summarizing the contributions of Vine Deloria, Jr. and Frank Black Elk, Churchill argues,

Marxism, for all its possible good intentions and grandiloquent pronouncements on behalf of humanity, remains as it has always been: an ethnocentric dogma expressing eternal variations on a given theme and possessing little conceptual utility beyond its original European cultural paradigm.²

Several Native American contributors to this volume present various arguments in support of this charge. One of the most prominent indictments concerns the Marxist theory of the stages of historical development of society. Churchill and Dora-Lee Larson contend that Marx and Engels and subsequent generations of Marxists have erred in believing that all peoples and cultures must inevitably undergo capitalist development and all the violence and oppression associated with it.³

Churchill and Larson write, “No culture other than Europe has ever undergone the progression of material development experienced in Europe ... to presume that non-European cultures would inevitably have followed a trajectory from primitive to precapitalist to capitalist is sublimely speculative.”⁴ In their view, because Marxism views production and industrialization “as the measure by which all human advancement can be calculated,” only Europe can “lay claim to ultimate leadership in terms of ultimate progress and development” and “establishing the intellectual basis of planetary thought.”⁵ For Churchill and Larson, “Terms such as ‘primitive,’ ‘precapitalist,’ ‘underdeveloped,’ etc. ... are racist and arrogant terms, unsupported by fact.”⁶ Churchill and Larson reject what they see as the assumption in Marxism that “In essence, Europe must be the ideal against which all people and all things are measured, the source of all ‘valid’ and ‘advanced’ inspiration.”⁷

Other Native American contributors echo Churchill and Larson’s view that Marxism’s failure to learn from the experience and knowledge of non-European cultures renders it yet another European intellectual import, another species of “faith, not science,” another kind of Messianic religion much like Christianity, with a “dangerous” universalism and a wanton disregard for non-European peoples, including Native

² Ward Churchill, “Introduction: Journeying Toward a Debate,” in *Marxism and Native Americans*, 14.

³ Ward Churchill with Dora-Lee Larson, “The Same Old Song in Sad Refrain,” in *Marxism and Native Americans*, 75.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

Americans.⁸ Black Elk argues that Native American society is much more democratic and humane than contemporary industrial society, and he raises the important question: who is primitive, and who is advanced?⁹ Black Elk also claims that Marxists are just like Christians or other Europeans, who simply want to use Native Americans as “fodder material” for another European power group.¹⁰ Deloria submits that Marxism cannot adequately explain human personality, especially in the context of widely different social and historical contexts. He insists that Native Americans are not alienated from nature, as Marxists suggest all individuals in contemporary society are, and he suggests that Native Americans and other tribal peoples are the sole example of true humanism because they best understand the essential attributes of human beings.¹¹

Another central criticism of Marxism by several Native American contributors centers on the question of industrialization. A close reading reveals some differences on this question among these writers, but most of their essays suggest that it may be industrialization itself—not the socio-economic system we call capitalism—which is at the root of the crises facing not only Native Americans but the population as a whole. In her “Preface,” Winona LaDuke suggests that the “highly rich and diversified” indigenous societies were “natural in the sense that they functioned in accord with, literally as a part of, nature and the natural environs.”¹² She submits that indigenous people’s relationship to the land embodied a natural norm, and that European colonization and industrialization brought about “a new economic order...forged *on* the land, not *with* the land.”¹³ For LaDuke, “The developing technological society became ever more divorced from nature, ever more ‘synthetic.’”¹⁴ And for LaDuke, priority in emancipatory theory and practice must be afforded to the question of ‘what must be done’ in overcoming the synthetic by returning it to the natural.”¹⁵

Deloria has a rather different view on this issue. Deloria has his own strong criticisms of Marxism, but he writes, “In this paper I do not wish to debate the effects of industrialization. It seems to me that the Marxist analysis is superior at this point to the hopeless defense which Christianity seems to offer on behalf of various forms of capitalism and to the Indian refusal to take seriously the presence of industrial society on the planet.”¹⁶ In contrast, Russell Means and other Native Americans explore the extent of the devastation of the land and the natural environment wrought by industrialization and submit that it is modern machine-based production itself that must be overcome in order to protect and live in harmony with nature.¹⁷ Churchill and Larson argue that

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75, and Vine Deloria, Jr., “Circling the Same Old Rock,” in *Marxism and Native Americans*, 135-136.

⁹ Frank Black Elk, “Observations on Marxism and Lakota Tradition,” in *Marxism and Native Americans*, 141-142.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹¹ Deloria, 135-136.

¹² Winona LaDuke, “Preface: Natural to Synthetic and Back Again,” in *Marxism and Native Americans*, ii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, iii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁶ Deloria, 114.

¹⁷ Means, 22-25.

“Industry—the European production process” is “without doubt the most energy consumptive process ever conceived by the human mind and produces the most waste energy as well as waste materials.”¹⁸ Means contends that contemporary industrial society inevitably leads to the primacy of gaining material wealth and consumption of goods among the general population.¹⁹ In Means’ view, people in industrial societies have become “despiritualized” by industrialization and its European philosophical advocates to the point that “There is no satisfaction (for them) to be gained in simply observing the wonder of a mountain or a lake or a people *in being*.”²⁰

Several Native American writers argue that Marxism offers no solutions to the problem of industrialization. Deloria contends that for Marxists as well as for capitalists, nature is to be struggled against, and overcome, for the sake of production and consumption.²¹ Black Elk suggests that Marxists have the same view of progress and development as capitalists—more industrialization.²² Churchill and Larson criticize the Revolutionary Communist Party’s contribution to this volume for upholding the “theme of the ultimate sanctity of industrialization as *the* advanced form of human social organization” and the ethic of “maximum production and industrial efficiency,” which Churchill and Larson consider “ultimately the destructive element of humanity.”²³ The extraordinary and tragic human costs of early Soviet industrialization are viewed as evidence that the “dangerous” logic of production and efficiency is found in both capitalist and socialist societies.²⁴ Moreover, Means suggests that the experience of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries confirms that Marxists would continue to mine and use uranium until it runs out, and have no better regard for the earth than the capitalists do.²⁵

Black Elk submits that history has confirmed the existence of centralization, rationalization, and alienation not only in capitalist societies, but in socialist societies as well. Hence, the underlying problem must be industrialization.²⁶ Means argues,

I do not believe that capitalism itself is really responsible for the situation in which we [Native Americans] have been declared a national sacrifice. No, it is the European tradition; European culture itself is responsible. Marxism is just the latest continuation of this tradition, not a solution to it.²⁷

¹⁸ Churchill with Larson, 72.

¹⁹ Means, 21-22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

²¹ Deloria, 114-115.

²² Black Elk, 141.

²³ Churchill with Larson, 71-72.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

²⁵ Means, 25-27.

²⁶ Black Elk, 150-152.

²⁷ Means, 28.

And Churchill asserts,

Marxism is predicated upon capitalism for its very existence, and it believes in the same things at base. It can only continue, it can never truly renounce its industrial heritage...Hence it must insist on the ultimate negation of all that is non-industrial as the final signification of its sanctity, its 'scientific correctness.'²⁸

Churchill and Larson conclude, "What is needed at this historical juncture is an abandonment of faith in the fundamental role of production."²⁹

The various Leftist contributors to *Marxism and Native Americans* respond to these important criticisms of Marxism in different ways. The essay by the Revolutionary Communist Party, written in response to a speech by Means, unfortunately includes numerous *ad hominem* attacks that obscure some otherwise insightful arguments.³⁰ Essays by Elisabeth Lloyd, Robert Sipe, Bill Tabb, and Phil Heiple take up the issues in a less antagonistic and more productive manner. To varying degrees, these contributors acknowledge the truth of some Native American criticisms and agree that Marxists can learn much from Native Americans while defending the relevance and explanatory power of Marxism. The question of whether these essays adequately answer the challenges posed by Native American writers will undoubtedly be answered in different ways by different readers. But a critical assessment which draws on both the Leftist essays in this book and the broader Marxist tradition may well lead to the conclusion that Marxism continues to provide an indispensable critique of capitalism and vision of postcapitalist society *and* has the potential for further development and improvement as the result of the kind of dialogue found in this book.

The charge that Marxism is Eurocentric has been categorically rejected by some contemporary writers on the Left.³¹ Others have acknowledged that some elements of Eurocentrism may be found in the work of Marx and Engels, but emphasize that in the course of their lives, their research, and their political activities, the founders of modern communism increasingly abandoned any Eurocentric tendencies.³² Still others have argued that while some elements of Eurocentrism are found in Marxism, they can be "identified, analyzed, and eliminated."³³ The preponderance of evidence reviewed by the present author suggests that while Marx and Engels were definitely creatures of their time—and as such, occasionally made remarks which were arguably Eurocentric—the heart of their critique of capitalism and their vision of postcapitalist society are not Eurocentric or racist, and the elements of Eurocentrism which do appear in their work or the work of their successors may be criticized and transcended.

²⁸ Ward Churchill, "Marxism and the Native American," in *Marxism and Native Americans*, 189.

²⁹ Churchill with Larson, 76.

³⁰ The RCP, "Searching for a Second Harvest," in *Marxism and Native Americans*, 35-58.

³¹ "Is Marxism Relevant in the Third World?" *Socialist Worker* (May 3, 2002), 8.

³² Michael Handelman, "Marx, Imperialism, and the Question of Capitalist Progress," *Common Voice* 3 (Summer 2005), 1-13.

³³ J.M. Blaut, "Marxism and Economic Diffusionism," in *The Political Economy of Imperialism: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Ronald Chilcote (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 127-140.

Churchill's claim that Marxism possesses "little conceptual utility beyond its original European cultural paradigm" appears unpersuasive in the light of the history of the past one hundred and fifty years. As Lewis Feuer wrote in 1959:

The magnetic power of Marxism, unparalleled in the history of mankind, has drawn into its ideological orbit peoples of different continents and races, from China to Burma to Ghana, Moscow to Belgrade to Djakarta.³⁴

Although Marxism originated in Europe, hundreds of millions of people from diverse countries and cultures have supported Marxist-led movements for national liberation, socialist revolution, and the construction of new societies informed by the insights of Marxism. The Soviet Union, the first socialist country, was a Eurasian state which included more than one hundred and twenty different national and ethnic groups. And the majority of peoples who lived in countries attempting to build socialism in the middle of the twentieth century were Asians, not Europeans. Today, the Soviet Union no longer exists and China's rulers are imposing so-called free-market reforms on the population. But new struggles against capitalism are being waged by workers, small farmers, progressive intellectuals, and—yes—indigenous peoples, too—in countries such as Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Mexico, and Nepal. Apparently, a great many non-Europeans have found more than a little "conceptual utility" in Marxism. And with the present corporate-led globalization process, that is, the globalization of capitalism, Marxism is arguably more relevant than ever before.

As various writers on the Left have pointed out, Marx and Engels focused their studies on Europe because it was the geographical location of the origins of capitalism, not because of any innate or inherent superiority of the people or ideology or culture of Europe. In this important respect, Marx and Engels were not Eurocentric or racist.³⁵ Moreover, Churchill and Larson go too far when they argue that Marxism views production and industrialization "as the measure by which all human advancement can be calculated." For Marx and Engels, capitalist industrialization led to historically unprecedented production and scientific advances, and the extraordinary productive forces unleashed by capitalism contained the potential for the historically unprecedented satisfaction of human needs once capitalism could be abolished. But Marx and Engels also recognized that capitalist industrialization, colonialism, and what later Marxists would call imperialism, also produced historically unprecedented levels of death, destruction, degradation, and misery for the masses of people both at home and abroad.

Awareness of Marx and Engels' views on the contradictory nature of capitalist development should make clear that the founders of modern Communism did not view Europe as "an ideal against which all people and all things are measured" or the rightful source of "ultimate leadership" and hegemony in the world. Marx and Engels understood

³⁴ Lewis S. Feuer, "Introduction," in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959), ix.

³⁵ "Is Marxism Relevant in the Third World?" 8, and Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Eurocentric Anti-Eurocentrism," *Against the Current* (May-June 2001).

that this most “advanced” stage of capitalist production was based on “barbarism,” that is, on genocidal violence and plunder. In *Capital*, Marx wrote,

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, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.³⁶

In an article published in the *New York Daily Tribune* on August 8, 1853, Marx wrote, “The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, moving from its home, to the colonies, where it goes naked.”³⁷ Also in *Capital*, Marx quotes approvingly from the book *Colonization and Christianity* by William Howett:

The barbarities and desperate outrages of the so-called Christian race, throughout every region of the world, and upon every people they have been able to subdue, are not to be paralleled by those of any other race, however fierce, however untaught, and however reckless or merciful and of shame, in any age of the earth.³⁸

For Marx and Engels, this most “advanced” kind of society fortunately contained the seeds of its own destruction.

Marx and Engels developed a theoretical overview of the historical development of societies based on the dialectical relations—and contradictions—between the development of productive forces and the social relations of production. It is true that Marx and Engels used terms like “primitive” and “barbarian” to refer to societies which had relatively limited productive capacity and social relations of production associated with such productive forces.³⁹ Contemporary analysts are understandably sensitive to the possible pejorative connotations of such labels, and it may well be that some of the nineteenth-century Eurocentrism prevalent among European historians and social scientists of that era finds occasional expression in Marx and Engels, especially in their earlier work. Nonetheless, Churchill and Larson’s claim that such terms are inevitably “racist and arrogant terms, unsupported by fact” is far from convincing. As we have just noted, Marx and Engels clearly believed that the rise of European capitalist development brought with it a historically unprecedented level of barbarism, along with the most advanced productive forces yet known to humankind. Moreover, as J.M. Blaut has argued, Marx and Engels did not use terms like “primitive” and “barbarian” to refer to any innate or inherent inferiority of non-European peoples, ideologies, or cultures.⁴⁰

³⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 915.

³⁷ Karl Marx, “The Future Results of British Rule in India,” *New York Daily Tribune* (August 8, 1853), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm>.

³⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, 916.

³⁹ See, for example, Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

⁴⁰ Blaut, 127-140.

The Native American critics of Marxism present a stronger challenge to the Marxist theory of historical development when they criticize the notion that all human societies throughout the world inevitably pass through the same stages of social evolution and must inevitably undergo all the horrors and travails of capitalism. Notwithstanding the objection of Churchill and Larson, it was not “sublimely speculative” for Marx and Engels to suggest that different societies across the planet would evolve from “primitive to precapitalist to capitalist” modes of production. Indeed, contemporary anthropological and historical evidence confirms different versions of this trajectory in many different societies.⁴¹ However, the Native American criticism retains considerable power insofar as it challenges the view that *all* societies must follow this trajectory and *all* societies must undergo capitalist development.

It is true that Marx and Engels, especially in their earlier work, sometimes embraced a notion of historic inevitability that can be reasonably criticized. Bill Tabb agrees with some of the Native American contributors to this book and acknowledges that indigenous peoples rightly resist the notion that their main role in world history is to be transformed into impoverished wage-workers, who can then join with other proletarians in revolting against capitalism.⁴² However, neither Tabb nor the Native American contributors appear to recognize that Marx and Engels’ theory of historical development evolved over time. While maintaining their critique of capitalism as an increasingly global phenomenon, Marx and Engels increasingly abandoned the view that all or most societies will undergo the same sequence of historical stages. They came to more deeply understand what David Bedford and Danielle Irving call “the tragedy of progress” inherent in capitalist development.⁴³ Marx and Engels also increasingly supported non-European peoples’ resistance to European colonialism and developed a greater appreciation of the right of oppressed nations to self-determination.

As Michael Handelman, V.G. Kiernan, and other scholars have pointed out, Marx and Engels’ views on the stages of historical development underwent significant change between the 1850s and the 1880s.⁴⁴ *The German Ideology*, written in 1845 and focusing on European history, identified the main stages of historical development as communal or tribal society, ancient or classical society based on slavery, feudal society, and capitalist society.⁴⁵ In the years that followed, Marx recognized much of the world had not undergone this sequence of historical stages, and he developed a conception of the “Asiatic mode of production” based on his research in the history of Asia. Still later, by the late 1850s, Marx abandoned this conception when he recognized that the diverse historical developments of different parts of Asia could not be explained in terms of a single

⁴¹ Eleanor Burke Leacock, “Introduction,” in Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 7-67.

⁴² Bill Tabb, “Marx Versus Marxism,” in *Marxism and Native Americans*, 160.

⁴³ David Bedford and Danielle Irving, *The Tragedy of Progress: Marxism, Modernity, and the Aboriginal Question* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2000), especially 102-117.

⁴⁴ Handelman, 1-13, and V.G. Kiernan, “Stages of Development,” in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, Ed. Tom Bottomore, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 458-460.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1981).

“Asiatic mode of production.”⁴⁶ As Handelman explains, “This is very important because it indicates that Marx and Engels had begun to abandon Eurocentric notions [and] started to realize the essential plurality (and non-static) nature of non-European societies and not conceive of them in such a monolithic and unchanging way.”⁴⁷

As Handelman, Kiernan, and others have emphasized, Marx and Engels increasingly repudiated the view that all peoples and all countries must inevitably pass through the same sequence of historical stages. In a famous letter to a Russian publication in 1877, Marx reminded readers that the chapter on primitive accumulation in *Capital*, Vol. I, published a decade before, “does not pretend to do more than trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist order of economy emerged from the womb of the feudal order of society.”⁴⁸ Marx insisted here that it would be wrong to

metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophical theory of the *marche generale* (general path) imposed by fate on every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself.⁴⁹

Comparing the expropriation of ancient Roman peasants and the expropriation of European peasants many centuries later, Marx concluded that “events strikingly analogous but taking place in different historical surroundings” can lead to “totally different results.”⁵⁰ And he insisted that only comparative research on different “forms of evolution” could lead to historical understanding, concluding that “One will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general historic-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical.”⁵¹ Interestingly, in his later years after doing a great deal of research on Russia, Marx reached the conclusion that it might be possible for that country to forego the lengthy process of capitalist development and instead create a new social order based on the ancient peasant communities, as Alexander Herzen and other Russian populists had argued.⁵²

Many contemporary Marxists can agree that some of Marx and Engels’ earlier writings tend to emphasize the progressive effects of capitalist development and its spread to non-European peoples even while acknowledging the enormous harms associated with it, as noted above. Some of Marx’s articles in the *New York Daily Tribune* emphasize the positive aspects of the capitalist revolution Britain forced on India.⁵³ And, as Tabb acknowledges, Engels initially viewed the French conquest of Algeria as “an important and fortunate fact for the progress of civilization.”⁵⁴ However, as numerous

⁴⁶ Handelman, 3, and 10, n. 15, and Kiernan, “Stages of Development,” 458-460.

⁴⁷ Handelman, 10, n. 15.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, Letter to *Ostyecestvenniye Zapisky* (November 1877), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/Marx/works/1877/11/Russia.htm>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Neil Harding, “Russian Commune,” in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 432-433.

⁵³ Bedford and Irving, 105.

⁵⁴ Cited by Tabb, 161.

Left writers have pointed out, Marx and Engels increasingly abandoned these arguably Eurocentric views as they—and their intellectual work—matured. Bedford and Irving have argued that, as Marx and Engels gained a greater understanding of how capitalism and colonialism were ravaging the non-European world, they grew increasingly aware of the human “tragedy” associated with the “progress” of productive forces. As Bedford and Irving note, Marx acknowledged that the spread of capitalism was destroying ancient communal societies whose social relations, if not productive forces, were “superior” to that of modern capitalism. And Engels recognized that the destruction of these societies entailed “a fall from the simple moral grandeur of the ancient gentile society.”⁵⁵

Although Marx and Engels believed that European colonialism was introducing the economic and social basis for capitalist transformation—and beyond this, socialist transformation—in other parts of the world, it cannot be said that they “generally rooted for the colonialist powers.”⁵⁶ Indeed, as Marx and Engels learned more about the horrors of colonialism and the growing resistance to it by non-European peoples, they came to back these struggles, and they came to understand that the oppressed peoples of the world would rightly insist on the right to national self-determination. When the people of India revolted against the British in 1857, Marx and Engels supported these uprisings and expressed the hope that the people of India could be an ally to the European working class movement.⁵⁷ Engels came to believe that anti-colonial revolutions in India, Algeria, and Egypt would be the “best thing for us.”⁵⁸ And Engels suggested that if the European working class came to power, it would have to renounce any attempts to recolonize countries in which such revolutions were developing.⁵⁹ Indeed, Engels argued that one of the responsibilities of the European working would be leading the colonized countries toward independence as soon as possible.⁶⁰

While the notion of anyone, even communist workers, from the colonialist powers leading oppressed nations to freedom may be problematic in some ways, it should be recognized that Marx and Engels’ views here are remarkably different, and much more progressive, than the views of their European contemporaries who staunchly defended colonialism. Engels in particular rejected speculation about the future historical stages through which the colonized countries may pass as “rather idle hypotheses.”⁶¹ Marx and Engels expected the peoples of these countries to follow the example of the working class revolution in Europe “of their own accord,” primarily for the sake of meeting their own economic needs.⁶² Engels emphasized that “the victorious proletariat can force no blessings of any kind upon any foreign nation without undermining its own victory by so doing.”⁶³ In his “Confidential Communication on Bakunin” to the International Working-

⁵⁵ Cited by Bedford and Irving, 107.

⁵⁶ Tabb, 161.

⁵⁷ “Is Marxism Relevant in the Third World?” 8.

⁵⁸ Friedrich Engels, Letter to Karl Kautsky, (November 11, 1882), in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, 452.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

men's Association in 1870, Marx declared, "A nation that enslaves others forges its own chains."⁶⁴ And in his "Polish Proclamation" in 1874, Engels emphasized that "No nation can be free if it oppresses other nations."⁶⁵ Such affirmations hardly seem Eurocentric. And, as we will see below, the incipient recognition by Marx and Engels of oppressed nations' right to self-determination would be further developed by Lenin as the potential basis for common ground between workers in the European capitalist countries and the peoples of the colonized countries.

The view of most of the Native American contributors to *Marxism and Native Americans* that the fundamental problem facing the contemporary world is industrialization itself, not capitalism, also warrants critical scrutiny. As noted above, Marx and Engels were well aware of the contradictory nature of capitalist development, and while they recognized and praised the historically unprecedented expansion of productive forces and their potential for improving the human condition in postcapitalist society, Marx and Engels were arguably the harshest critics of capitalist industrialization in their time. They criticized the expropriation of the masses of European peasants from the land as part of the primitive accumulation of capitalism; the exploitation, alienation, and dehumanization of the majority of people in capitalist society; the creation of vast wealth for a relative few through the immiseration of the masses of people; the "fetishism" of commodities; the reduction of value or worth to exchange value or money; the effect of capitalism on families; and much more.⁶⁶ Interestingly, Marx and Engels also had a deeper awareness of the environmental devastation brought about by capitalist industrialization than their critics in this book allow. As John Bellamy Foster has found, Marx was quite concerned with the harm done to the land by industrialization, especially with the general crisis of soil fertility in Europe between 1830 and 1870.⁶⁷

Some of the Native American contributors to this book acknowledge that Marx and Engels were harshly critical of industrialization but, as we have seen, they then proceed to criticize Marxism for its support of continued industrial development in postcapitalist society. However, there are some solid grounds for disagreeing with the wholesale dismissal of modern industry as a "synthetic" order that must be overcome and returned to "the natural." And while some of the criticisms of industrialization in the Soviet Union may be accurate and insightful, there are solid grounds for affirming that the Marxist perspective on industrialization is, in many important ways, quite different than the perspective of the capitalists they are committed to overthrowing. For many on the Left, the historical experiences and vision of Native Americans may have much to say to contemporary Marxism, but the development of industry within a radically new social order, a democratic and cooperative social order, need not be dehumanizing or dangerous.

⁶⁴ Karl Marx, "Confidential Communication on Bakunin," The International Workingmen's Association (March 28, 1870), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/03/28.htm>.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Engels, "Polish Proclamation," cited in Bill Grantham, "Brilliant Mischief," *World Policy Journal* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2003).

⁶⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Verso, 1998).

⁶⁷ John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (September 1999), 366-405.

Winona LaDuke's view that the indigenous societies of the Americas were "natural" and her view that their relationship to the land and the environment embodied a natural norm invite many questions, and there is a growing, and increasingly divergent, literature on these issues.⁶⁸ While this paper cannot even begin to address these issues and questions, the grounds on which Marxists may object to the dismissal of modern industry as "synthetic" rather than "natural" are not difficult to identify. It seems clear that Marx and Engels and Marxism in general would agree with LaDuke that under capitalism "the developing technological society became ever more divorced from nature." But Marxists may plausibly argue that the worst features of industrialization and environmental devastation are caused by capitalists' control of the means of production, the production process, and the state. And while some Native American critics of Marxism can rightly point to the persistence of the official values of maximum production and industrial efficiency in postcapitalist society, it may be argued that the "forced march to industrialization" in the Soviet Union was reluctantly undertaken by workers' states that were very much under siege by the major imperialist powers. And many Marxists today strive to make clear that these cannot and should not be the official values of socialism.

Although modern industry is certainly "synthetic" in the sense that it has been produced by human beings, Marxists may well reject LaDuke's juxtaposition of "synthetic" and "natural." For Marx and Engels, and for the Marxist tradition, as well as for Native American traditions, individual human beings and humanity as a whole are part of nature. And one of Marxism's most important contributions is the recognition of labor, the capacity for productive work, as one of the essential, defining characteristics of the human species.⁶⁹ From the Marxist perspective, the rise of modern industry—even in its perverted, capitalist form—embodies the development of human productive powers that are, in this sense, an expression of human nature. And with the development of advanced productive forces comes the possibility of enormous improvements in human society and human life. As Engels wrote in *Anti-Duhring*,

The possibility of securing for every member of society, through social production, an existence which is not only fully sufficient from a material standpoint and becoming richer day to day, but also guarantees to them the completely unrestricted development of their physical and mental faculties—this possibility now exists for the first time, but it does exist.⁷⁰

Contemporary Marxists can agree that the horrendous human, social, and environmental degradation inherent in capitalist forms of industrialization should be recognized and rejected, but still affirm that people in a postcapitalist society have the potential to create

⁶⁸ See, for example, Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton, 1999); Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999); and Kimberly TallBear, "Shepard Krech's *The Ecological Indian*: One Indian's Perspective," International Institute for Indigenous Resource Management Publications (September 2000).

⁶⁹ Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. Dirk Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1973).

⁷⁰ Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, ed. C.P. Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 309.

a radically different kind of industrialization under democratic and cooperative control. On this view, Churchill errs in arguing “What is needed at this historical juncture is the abandonment of faith in the fundamental role of production.” Instead, Marxists may agree that faith in capitalism and in capitalist-led industrialization should surely be repudiated, but also insist that human beings’ capacity to transform nature and create advanced productive forces is integral to the development of a society without material want, exploitation, repression, or war.

For contemporary Marxists, industrial development in postcapitalist society should *not* be guided by “maximum production” and “industrial efficiency” as those phrases as normally used. Although Marx and Engels themselves sometimes assumed that continually increasing industrial production in postcapitalist society would be needed to satisfy the needs of the global population, more than a century after their deaths, most contemporary Marxists reach different conclusions. In addition, many contemporary Marxists have demonstrated increasing awareness of the need for economic development in postcapitalist society to be environmentally sound and sustainable. It seems difficult to deny that for Marx and Engels, and for the broader Marxist tradition, the aim of production in postcapitalist society is to promote the well-being of the society as a whole, instead of enriching and empowering a small ruling class. As Engels wrote in *Anti-Duhring*, this new society would feature “the replacement of the anarchy of social production by the socially planned regulation of production in accordance with the needs both of society as a whole and of each individual.”⁷¹ As noted above, Engels anticipated that in such a society not only would people’s material needs be met, but the level of economic development would also make possible the “completely unrestricted development of their physical and mental faculties.”

Marx and Engels also believed that continued advances in the productive forces in postcapitalist society would make possible the reduction of time people have to engage in socially necessary production, the attenuation and eventual abolition of an oppressive division of labor, and the expansion of time in which individuals can pursue the kinds of labor that provide meaning and joy in their lives. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels had offered a glimpse of a communist society of the distant future as a society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”⁷² In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels elaborated this idea further:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critics.⁷³

⁷¹ Ibid., 305-306.

⁷² Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 62.

⁷³ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 53.

On this view, then, bringing production and economic activity under the democratic, cooperative control of the people as a whole in postcapitalist society offers the potential for abolishing the worst social and environmental features of capitalist industrialization, and providing the material basis for the radical improvement of life for both the individual human being and society as a whole.

Although this paper has called into question both the dismissal of Marxism as just another Eurocentric ideology and the wholesale rejection of modern industrialization, the persistence of differences on these issues between Native American activists and Marxist activists need not pose an insuperable barrier to reaching common ground. Arguably the single most persuasive argument presented by the Native American contributors to this book centers on the right of Native Americans to control their own destiny and to decide for themselves how they will relate not only to the present capitalist order, but also to the struggle for revolutionary change and a new social order. As several of these contributors eloquently point out, Native Americans must have the freedom to speak for themselves; no one else can speak for them. And if Marxists want to forge common ground with Native Americans, this fundamental principle is an indispensable, non-negotiable starting point. Signally, there is a solid basis in Marxist theory for accepting this fundamental principle. As David Bedford and Danielle Irving, among others, have pointed out, the potential theoretical and practical basis for a principled, enduring alliance between Native American activists and Marxist activists is the recognition of the right of Native American nations to sovereignty and self-determination.

As noted above, the incipient recognition by Marx and Engels of oppressed nations' right to self-determination was further developed by Lenin. In "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination" and other writings, Lenin insisted that the European working class movement must recognize and respect the right of oppressed nations to full sovereignty and even secession from the empires in which they are geographically located.⁷⁴ And Lenin took this matter so seriously that he modified the traditional Marxist slogan, "Workers of the world, unite!" preferring the slogan, "Workers and oppressed of the world, unite!"⁷⁵ As Phil Heiple acknowledges in his essay in this book, it may be rightly pointed out that the record of the Soviet Union and other postcapitalist societies on national self-determination has not been entirely positive.⁷⁶ But the rather mixed record of twentieth-century socialist countries on this issue arguably stands in marked contrast with the almost uniformly horrendous historical experience of oppressed nations under capitalism.⁷⁷ And even if some observers reach harsher conclusions about "the national question" in socialist societies, it seems clear that Marxism theory provides the basis for the rectification of shortcomings and mistakes on this essential matter in practice.

⁷⁴ V.I. Lenin, "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination," in *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1975), 153-180.

⁷⁵ This new slogan was adopted by the First Congress of the Communist International in 1919. See Pat Chin, "USSR's Impact on National Liberation," *Workers World* (January 15, 2004).

⁷⁶ Phil Heiple, "Reds Versus Redskins," in *Marxism and Native Americans*, 180-181.

⁷⁷ See Albert Szymanski, *Human Rights in the Soviet Union* (London: Zed Press, 1984).

As Bedford and Irving have argued, “the starting point” for Marxists who want to develop a theoretical understanding of, and practical relationship with, indigenous people is recognition of, and respect for, “the national question.”⁷⁸ To be sure, contemporary Marxists must do more than offer rhetorical support for this principle. And Churchill and Larson are right when they observe that the RCP’s support for autonomy for the Native nations stipulates that these nations must remain “within the larger socialist state.”⁷⁹ This is arguably unacceptable not only from the vantage point of Native Americans but also from the perspective of Marxists who are truly committed to the right of nations to self-determination, including full sovereignty and secession. Furthermore, Marxists are undoubtedly obligated to answer the concrete questions raised by Russell Means. Would revolutionary Marxists abandon the extraction of uranium? Would they guarantee the Native nations “real control over the land and resources they have left”? Would they be committed to Native Americans’ right “to maintain our values and traditions”?⁸⁰ Contemporary Marxists must answer these questions—in theory and in practice—in the affirmative.

If twenty-first century Marxists in North America can demonstrate a principled, sustained commitment to support for the Native nations’ right to sovereignty and self-determination—in deeds as well as words—an alliance between Native American activists and Marxist activists may indeed be possible. As David Muga emphasizes, capitalism and imperialism threaten both Native Americans and the working class. And both self-determination for indigenous peoples *and* the emancipation of workers must be achieved.⁸¹ Of course, the extraordinary obstacles facing the struggle for revolutionary change should not be underestimated, and solidarity between Native American activists and Marxist activists must be actively forged and carefully nourished on a continuing basis. But the potential for common ground is there.

⁷⁸ Bedford and Irving, 108.

⁷⁹ Churchill with Larson, 73-74.

⁸⁰ Means, 25.

⁸¹ David Muga, “Native Americans and the Nationalities Question,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 16, no. 1 (1988), 31-51.